A Tradition of Change

Modern Native American Jewelry in the Southwest

by Lane Coulter

Long recognized for the ubiquitous turquoise and silver squash-blossom necklaces and concho belts, the traditional metalwork of the Southwest has been in flux for well over half a century. Jewelry and metal objects have been produced for both an Indian and a tourist market since the beginning of the twentieth century, and their popularity has witnessed the vagaries of travel, fashion, and the economy. During this same period, the cultures of those who produce this jewelry and those who consume it have changed.

Artists from the tribes indigenous to the Southwest have produced jewelry work primarily in Arizona and New Mexico. The biggest tribe with the longest history of metalworking, the Navajo, live on a large reservation in the Four Corners area of Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. The Pueblo tribes remain in their traditional communities, mostly in New Mexico, where there are different pueblos speaking four distinct languages. Hopi, another Pueblo tribe, is located on three mesas in northern Arizona. Acoma Pueblo in western New Mexico was built a thousand years ago and is certainly the oldest continually inhabited village in the country. Well known for their lapidary skills, the major jewelry-making pueblos are the Zuni in far western New Mexico and Santo Domingo Pueblo south of Santa Fe. Many of today’s contemporary jewelers have migrated to urban areas or the art centers of Phoenix, Albuquerque, or Santa Fe.

Beginning about 1870, the Navajos began to create filed and stamped silver jewelry based on technology acquired from Spanish-American silversmiths (plateros). Twenty years later they began to bezel set native cut turquoise stones in their pieces. The Pueblo people learned their metalsmithing skills from the Navajos around the turn of the nineteenth century and produced the same style of work. Starting about 1900, reservation traders and curio dealers throughout the Southwest began to promote Navajo and Pueblo turquoise and silver jewelry and metalwork, including souvenir spoons, to their tourist clientele.
Over the past 100 years, native jewelry has experienced several boom markets. The 1970s were a peak market period and the popularity of the style created such a tremendous demand that imported copies and reproductions became rampant, giving the jewelry a bad name for being inexpensive and poorly made. Fortunately, a collector base developed for the most sophisticated and creative work that encouraged a younger generation of smiths to pursue their vision of native jewelry.

Some of the silverwork that first demonstrated a departure from the traditional designs in the Southwest was that promoted by Ambrose Roanhorse, a Navajo silversmith teaching at the government Indian School in Santa Fe during the late 1930s. Roanhorse espoused a return to traditional methods such as using sheet silver laboriously hammered from cast ingots.

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silver laboriously hammered from cast ingots. His newly interpreted designs demanded strong, simple forms of bold lines enhanced with minimal stamping. Turquoise, if used, generally consisted of single, high quality stones. The public perceived these less decorative designs as artfully inspired and representative of a Modernist aesthetic that flourished in the booming post-War II years. Two pioneering artists, Navajo Kenneth Begay (1913-1977), in the late 1940s, and Charles Loloma (1921-1991) in the late 1950s, developed their own modernist work in the resort town of Scottsdale, Arizona. With Frank Lloyd Wright's Arizona Biltmore hotel nearby and his Taliesen Studios north of town, the sophisticated audience for their contemporary native metalwork was readily available and highly receptive.

Traditionally trained but known for his elegant modern designs, Begay produced holloware commissions and flatware sets, along with silver jewelry embellished with polished desert ironwood or quality turquoise, out of his retail shop in Scottsdale. Loloma, at first a painter and ceramist, had studied at the School for American Craftsmen at Alfred University before he began working in metal. Loloma's innovations included the use of new materials, fossilized ivory, natural tufa stone cast textures, diamonds, gold, rosewood, and raised and exaggerated chunk inlays. These new materials, in combination with his novel use of form, gave rise to a whole genre embraced by younger native jewelers.

Preston Monongye (1927-1987) became the third pioneer in the mid-1960s working in tufa stone casting that retained its coarse, sandy texture detailed with raised line drawings. His work featured highly unusual organic forms, often inlaid or overlaid with turquoise beads or polished multi-colored stone on stone inlays. These three mid-century metal smiths provided the impetus and freedom for other Native jewelers to experiment with a new repertoire of stones, shells, and textures. Several Native jewelers with familial or other ties to these three groundbreaking smiths are currently working in the Southwest. Norma Negutewa, Charles Loloma's niece, worked with him for nearly 20 years. Today she produces beautifully crafted inlaid pieces of jewelry under her Hopi name, Sunwai. Her pieces are somewhat derivative of Loloma's chunk inlay work of the late 1970s, but display a different palette. Harvey Begay, son of Kenneth Begay and trained by him, has made a vigorous effort as to
base his imagery on his father's designs. He has, however, retained a strong sense of form and is adept at working with the traditional tufa stone casting, in this case in 14k gold. The textured surfaces and the color of the gold contrast with the multiple coral cabochon sets.

Jesse Monongye, who worked with his father Preston, has developed his own personal design niche. One of the few Native jewelers to create true pictorial stone inlays, he has focused on remarkable night sky images that often include the planet Saturn with its rings, shooting stars, and a crescent moon. His landscape belt buckle uses fire opal to beautifully simulate the snowy peaks of his laps mountain range. The perfection he brings to these extremely difficult inlays is nothing short of amazing.

Some Native American smiths have been influenced by various aspects of historic Southwestern silverwork and find it a challenging resource. Other jewelers have ties to their family heritage of jewelry making and look to longstanding family traditions for inspiration. Mike Bird Romero of San Juan Pueblo has long had an interest in Southwestern jewelry and metalwork, even trying his hand at reproducing some of the more challenging early works and designing innumerable variations on nineteenth-century Pueblo silver crosses. In a single instance he fabricated a bracelet in the classic revival style promoted by Ambrose Rainhorse, but chose to set it with an exaggerated long opal matrix stone.

Edison Cummings, an accomplished Navajo silversmith, often produces bolloware and flatware along with his jewelry designs. His awareness of the work of his predecessors is evident in the flatware set that is a modern variation of a set commissioned by the Elks family in 1931 and made by Navajo smiths Frank Charley and Eckley Yazzie, now in the collection of the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. Cummings features the same yehechei stamp on the handles but also includes chevron-stamping in the style of Kenneth Begay.

Veronica Poblano is the daughter of Leo Poblano (1905-1959), a famed Zuni Pueblo lapidary from a pueblo known more for its stone carving than for metalwork. Her Torque Necklace (2001), an ornate line drawing in commercial silver wire, is mounted with 10 hand-cut cabochons. It reflects the relative importance traditionally given to the gemstones by this pueblo, although here they are set in a contemporary format.

The world of Native American art is replete with family lineages—artists who learned their craft from family members, a trait no longer common in the dominant culture. Generations of Navajo, Pueblo, and Hopi silversmiths who were trained at an early age continue to ply their trade throughout the Southwest. Today, many Native metalmiths from the Southwest have attended the Institute of American Indian Arts or taken a course or two at the Navajo Community College. Others have pursued BFA and MFA degrees at universities throughout the United States and have been exposed to and adopted such non-traditional techniques as mokume, rolled printing, reticulation, and raising into their repertoires.

Can these non-traditional techniques be used to express Native American imagery? How are these cultural expressions exemplified? A difficult problem. One that has these talented smiths working in tightrope every day in the studio. Of course, all artists work with internal personal memories or images that may elude the viewer, but some Native American images or symbols are quite overt, if not hackneyed, such as the feather, the buffalo, and the arrow, among others. Most contemporary Native metalmiths have rejected these stereotypical images, unless of course they use them for cultural commentary. So, what is fresh in the world of Indian jewelry in the Southwest? How do they connect with their cultures in the twenty-first century? Some of these artists rely on traditional techniques but use a new approach to the graphic content, while others utilize traditional images with contemporary techniques. Other Native smiths find that working with traditional techniques in fresh ways gives them the opportunity to explore changes within a recognizable boundary.

Ric: Charlie is an excellent example of an artist who updates a traditional technique. He uses the old form of casting into locally mined tufa stone, a compressed volcanic pumice rock. Traditionally, the technique was a means of producing multiple copies of a form
by carving a triangular cross section or half round shape that was readily separated from the stone mold. Instead, Ric Charlie carves the stone mold in perfect right angles like a milling machine in order to create his crisp angular, raised, linear designs. As a result, the mold breaks when removing the casting, creating a one-of-a-kind object that he then inlays or colors with chemical patinas. In addition to retaining the natural texture of the stone mold, he often uses abstracted mask images or more realistic landscapes in his work.

Charlene Sanchez Reano utilizes the traditional lapidary techniques and materials common to her husband’s home village of Santa Domingo Pueblo in New Mexico. By overlaying patterns of bits of colored stones and shells cemented to shell backing plates, Ms. Reano has developed striking linear forms that, when strung as a necklace, create additional new shapes. Her use of these traditional techniques alludes to the economic and cultural heritage of the Pueblo and references age-old trading routes to the Gulf of California.

Norbert Peshlakai’s small silver box is almost completely covered in deeply stamped hieroglyphics and the lid displays a delightful line of jackrabbits. The technique, stamping, reflects Peshlakai’s Navajo heritage but is far removed from the conventional surface designs of serrated crescents, triangles, and leaf forms. The L-shaped malachite knob is a modern touch as well. Incidentally, Peshlakai is the Navajo word for silversmith!

These traditional techniques are used in a fresh way to express two ideas simultaneously. First, they give cultural respect to the past...the old way...the way of the elders and teachers, and secondly, they convey to the informed viewer the heritage of the maker, regardless of the modern image that may be depicted. Another way contemporary Southwestern jewelers have approached cultural expression is through:

reinterpreting traditional images in novel ways. Charles Suppipe references his Hopi roots with remarkable lapidary renditions of corn combined with contemporary metalwork in gold. Navajo jewelers Carl and Irene Clark use thousands of pieces of stone to create their microscopic inlay images of traditional yeibechai figures. What an over-the-top lapidary tour de force!

Myron Pantrala’s Improved Clown is a shallow vessel in silver that represents a wonderful Zuni kiva or religious space with its traditional ladder that enables emergence into the world. The surface is decorated with piercings of Zuni pottery water symbols—the dragonfly and tadpoles—along with bear tracks and deer. The humorous dance clown is also a removable brooch.

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Charlene L. Reano, from a jewelry making family at Santa Domingo Pueblo, has taken the image of a popular Depression-era thunderbird necklace from her tribal home—one that was initially crafted of inexpensive recycled materials. The original was made from various colored plastic detergents along with turquoise chips left over from grinding beads, all cemented to pieces of old black phonograph records or car battery cases to create a cheap saleable jewelry piece that remained popular through the 1950s. Reano has carefully recreated the form in silver and a variegated mokume-gane pattern. The results speak of the history of jewelry in her Pueblo as well as her skills as a metal smith and designer. All of these artists have found an amazing variety of ways to incorporate traditional native...
images into their metalwork. The objects communicate to us about the culture that they represent while the materials and/or techniques often reflect twenty-first-century innovation. We are fortunate that they can find their way through the complex quarter of Then and Now. Other Southwestern metalsmiths who reference native imagery in their work include Linda Lou Metoxin, Cheyenne Harris, and the team of Gail Bird and Yazzie Johnson. Metoxin, in her magnificent Deer Hunter Coffee Service, utilizes hunter figures with abstracted hollow-formed deer for handles. They are quite similar in proportion and detail to the traditional "hearthline deer" often found painted on Zuni Pueblo pottery. Few native silversmiths have learned the skills required to create holloware, although Kenneth Begay was commissioned to make several tea and coffee sets in the 1950s and 1960s. Cheyenne Harris’s Oogagdapi (Baby) Spoon, created in silver and gold, carries depictions of six Longhouses that symbolize the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy.

Although Harris is Navajo, her knowledge of native symbolism from other tribes allows her to recognize the design possibilities. The spoon was made as a gift for the child of an Iroquois couple.

Gail Bird and Yazzie Johnson, a Pueblo and Navajo collaboration, have worked together designing and fabricating elegant jewelry for at least 25 years. Utilizing their carefully selected and beaded cache of unique picture jasper cabochons, they have created three beautiful buckles with integral southwestern landscapes or landmark images. This exemplifies their reverence for the landscape that has often provided them with design concepts throughout their careers. The buckles are further enhanced for the wearer by the intriguing, secret drawings pierced on the silver backing plates.

Four Native American artists whose work is revered from other traditional techniques or images are Richard Chavez, Preston Dwayneene, Eugene Nelson, and Dylan Poblanito Chavez. From San Felipe Pueblo, north of Albuquerque, has worked with clean, spare motifs during most of his long career as a jeweler. His bracelet is carefully inlaid in a stone-on-stone technique in as many as six colors. Even so, it has a very minimalistic, painterly quality. The unusual white dolomite stones replicate the vast openness of a plain gessoed canvas, allowing the subtle gradations of the coral to enliven the form.

Preston Dwayneene, of Hopi decent, is known both as a jeweler and ceramic artist. For nearly 10 years he has been combining these skills primarily in graceful pottery forms enhanced with textured silver insertions. A set of three elegant pottery vases features different subtle clay slips in cream, burnished white, and a sparkling black micaceous surface. The addition of the textured silver cuttlefish-cast stoppers shaped like the head ornaments, called tabetas, traditionally worn by Hopi women dancers, gives the vessels an anthropomorphic quality.

Dylan Poblanito is the grandson of esteemed Zuni carver Leo Poblanito and a remarkable young designer. His "Mondrian" Steckable Ring (2001), may represent the antithesis of Zuni jewelry, which is typically set with dozens of clustered turquoise stones. In this piece, only the balanced cube of turquoise connects the piece to Poblanito’s native Southwest.

In these times of rapid change and globalization, the values associated with cultural identity become increasingly important. As artists, culture matters, and these Native American jewelers have found a place for their heritage in the designing and fabrication of their art. Years ago, outsiders searched for authenticity and primitivism in the art of tribal people. Today there is a fresh perspective, a respect for the cross-cultural challenges that inform the work of contemporary Native metalsmiths. The work simultaneouslyvalues the heritage of the artists and accepts their innovative ideas and exceptional skills.

The more you know about the Southwest and the cultures of the artists that produce its metalwork, the more intriguing, complex, and meaningful the work becomes. Their continuing pursuit of thoughtful, inventive designs will bring greater depth to our understanding of the Modern in Native American jewelry.

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