

## INTRODUCTION

The foundation of Indian jewelry today by Navajo, Zuni, Hopi, and Santo Domingo artists in many ways links to centuries of jewelry work in the Southwest.

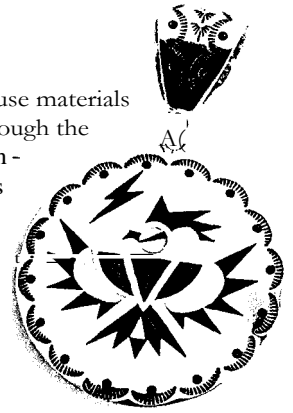
Long before silver appeared in the area, stones such as turquoise and shells-traded into the area-comprised the core materials for jewelry work. In the 1920s Neil Judd, curator of archeology for the United States National Museum (now part of the Smithsonian) uncovered a four-strand, 2,500-bead turquoise necklace at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. The beauty of the piece impressed Judd for the rest of his life.

The descendants of the people who created this early piece-and others like it-now reside in villages along the Rio Grande in New Mexico; the village of Zuni, New Mexico; and the mesas of the Hopi Nation in Arizona.

Later arrivals to the Southwest, the Navajo played an integral role in the transformation of Indian jewelry by learning silverworking techniques in the 1850s, which they subsequently passed on to the Zuni and Hopi people.

Today, greater varieties of metals and stones have increased the possible styles and interpretations of

earlier work. Silversmiths use materials from all over the world, though the most coveted turquoise continues to come from mines in the Southwest. Artists also use quality Chinese and Persian turquoise because of the accessibility of these stones. Other stones frequently found in contemporary Indian jewelry include lapis lazuli and *chiaroite*.



*Albert Banteah,  
1997, pendant*

Whether you buy from artists or dealers, be certain of their reputation. Make sure they guarantee their work. Unfortunately, imitations have flooded the Indian art market. Ask questions. When making a purchase, ask for a certificate of authenticity. An honest artist or dealer will put it in writing.

Most important, keep an open mind. Indian jewelry, like any artwork, is subjective. If you see a piece you like, buy it. Just as each piece expresses the individuality of the artist who created it, so does it express the individuality of the person who wears it.

## EARLY NAVAJO JEWELRY

A Mexican man living near Mt. Taylor, New Mexico, around 1850 first introduced blacksmithing to a Navajo man, Atsidi Sani ("Old Smith"). It is not clear if Atsidi Sani was the first Navajo metalworker, but he was certainly the most prominent of his time. After returning from the Navajo's internment at Fort Sumner in New Mexico and the Long Walk in 1868, Atsidi Sani started working with silver. He taught his four sons, who in turn taught others on the newly formed Navajo Nation.

Early jewelry pieces consisted of simple earrings, ketohs (bowguards), belt fasteners, and bracelets.

Traders provided tools and supplies such as silver coins and *slugs*. More important, traders gave Indian silversmiths a place to trade and sell their work. In the 1920s, sheet silver replaced silver slugs, allowing artists to work more quickly since they no longer needed to melt and pound the slugs flat. A Navajo style evolved, typified by heavy silverwork, sometimes worked around stones.



*Artist unknown, bowguard*

## CONTEMPORARY NAVAJO JEWELRY

Using a number of techniques, contemporary Navajo artists continue to focus on hammering, bending, and molding metals. Artists choose shapes and designs that display the natural beauty of metals such as silver, gold, and platinum.

Other enhancements to pieces include permanent darkening through *oxidation* or texturing to create a variety of surfaces. Stonework has shifted to become the focal point of many pieces by Navajo artists.

## APPLIQUE

Applique, which is often identified with Navajo silverwork, includes shapes such as leaves, feathers, and flowers cut from sheet or wire silver and then *soldered* onto an underlying piece. Artists may also twist the wire into various forms and attach them as decoration. One contemporary adaptation in this style includes jewelry appliqued with gold rather than silver.

## HAND HAMMERED AND STAMPED

Early silversmithing originated from blacksmithing techniques that required the heating and softening of metal interspersed with hammering to work the metal into desired shapes. Great skill is required to balance these opposite forces. Too much heating and hammering causes the piece to become "work-hardened" and it may become brittle and crack. Too little force can lead to a poorly shaped piece with shallow, inconsistent design work.

After shaping the piece, the silversmith uses a *graver* or *die* stamps to inscribe designs into the metal. Many artists create their own carved metal stamps to add design elements such as lines or swirls to their jewelry. The artist places the designed end on the desired spot of the jewelry piece then strikes, stamping the design into the metal surface. A good silversmith strikes the stamp evenly each time, producing a consistent design.

## CAST WORK

One early technique still used by Navajo silversmiths is making silver castings in sand or stone molds. The artist carves a design into damp sand or tuff—a porous volcanic stone—and then secures a second flat stone on top to complete the mold. Using a crucible, he or she then pours melted silver into the mold through a carved channel. Air vents allow strain to escape, preventing air bubbles from forming in the cooling silver.

After the silver has cooled and hardened, the artist removes the piece from the mold. Any silver not part of the overall design is cut off and the edges are filed smooth. All surfaces of the jewelry are ground and polished. Sometimes, artists acid stones as a final accent.

