

A Look at American Indian Jewelry

STEPPING off the train on my first visit to the southwestern United States, I immediately got a look at the people known as “the first Americans.”

Sitting in line, with backs to the wall, were several Navajo Indian women. Most of them were dressed in black velvet blouses and long full-pleated skirts. But it was something else that held my attention.

All these women were richly bedecked with turquoise and silver jewelry. They had both arms strung with varieties of bracelets. Around their waists were leather belts embellished with a sequence of large oval silver pieces. From their necks hung ornate necklaces, so numerous as nearly to obscure the fronts of their blouses. Before each woman was a blanket bearing further specimens of Navajo jewelry.

Curiosity aroused, I determined to learn something about American Indian jewelry. Let me share with you some results of my research, including interviews with Indian craftsmen.

The “Squash Blossom” Necklace

A typical item of American Indian jewelry is the “squash blossom” necklace. Attached to certain ones of its beads are petallike pieces of silver that curve up and out to resemble flowers. The origin of this design evidently goes back to Spanish conquistadores who visited this area centuries ago. As ornaments for trousers and jackets, the Spaniards used silver representations of pomegranates. Indians, who knew nothing about pomegranates, saw in the decoration a resemblance to the squash blossom and thereafter called it by that name.

A prominent feature of the squash blossom necklace is its horseshoe- or crescent-shaped pendant. The Navajo name for this is *naja*, their word for “crescent.” At times representations of hands appear at the ends of the horseshoe.

Many believe that the crescent too came to the Navajo from the Spaniards, though it has roots much farther back in history. Notes the book *The Navajo and Pueblo Silversmiths*: “This emblem was old when Columbus crossed the ocean to the new world. . . . In short, it was an Old World amulet fastened to horse trappings, preferably the bridle, to ward off the evil eye from the animal.”

Does this necklace with its *naja* have religious significance in modern times? Opinions differ. Certain persons believe that it symbolizes fertility. Another opinion has it that “bad luck” flees out of the ends of the crescent. Some view the hands that occasionally appear at the ends of a *naja* as indicating that the object can protect its possessor. All in all, though, these are merely private opinions of individuals. Today, general agreement is lacking as to religious significance for the squash blossom necklace.

“Fetish” Jewelry

Another type of Indian jewelry is marketed in the style of “fetishes.” A fetish is a material object in which a god or spirit is believed to dwell, giving it a sort of magical power. Recognized as especially skilled at producing fetishes are Indians of the Zuñi Pueblo in western New Mexico.

Popular is a fetish necklace of hand-carved shell birds interspaced with drilled turquoise or shell beads. Other fetishes take the form of individually carved animals. Beads, feathers or an arrowhead may be attached to a fetish to increase its power or as an offering in return for favors granted.

People in general view most of these fetishes merely as art objects. However, the Zuñi got their reputation and skill as fetish carvers by making them for religious purposes. The Zuñi believe that fetishes can assist humans with their problems. Each fetish is thought to be a living thing that requires particular care. This includes keeping it in a special jar and “feeding” it ceremonially with cornmeal.

The Kachinas

Another group of Pueblo Indians known for distinctive jewelry are the Hopi. Their jewelry often lacks stones. Sometimes the pieces present a unique three-dimensional effect. Designs include birds, clouds and rain, feathers and bear paws.

At times Hopi jewelry may display the figure of a “kachina.” The Hopi look upon kachinas as supernatural beings that can act as go-betweens for humans and certain deities. This is roughly equivalent to the function of “saints” in some churches of Christendom. The Hopi also produce a wide variety of kachina dolls.

Some Deception Involved

During the early days of Indian silversmithing the middlemen between craftsmen and buyers were white traders. Greedy for commercial gain, these traders influenced the smiths to produce designs that white people would believe to be “Indian.” “Without the suggestion of our own [white] race as to what . . . is ‘Indian,’” writes a specialist on Indian jewelry, “he would be about as apt to use an arrow for decoration on silver as a farmer would be to use a plow share as a symbol or decoration on his curtains or carpets.”

When the railroad and the automobile began to bring more and more souvenir-hunting tourists to the Southwest, shops near reservations were set up to fabricate silver jewelry. Employers hired Indians to put pieces together assembly-line fashion, so that the jewelry could be labeled "Indian made." Even a foreign country got into the market by naming one of its towns "Reservation" and stamping its product "Reservation made." Lately, however, there has been a return to the arrangement of having individual craftsmen laboring over their own creations.

Close inspection of Indian crafts reveals a wealth of symbols and designs in addition to the ones already mentioned. Many feel compelled to search for "meaning" in all this symbolism. Some traders have gone so far as to invent explanations as a means of enticing buyers to purchase items. Pointing to deception in this regard, the publication *Southwestern Indian Arts and Crafts* declares: "The mass of printed material which 'interprets' Indian designs has no basis in fact." - Awake