

## **The Question of Authenticity in Native American Art - A Focus on Navajo Jewelry**

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### **Abstract**

Ever since the colonization of North America, European settlers and then American citizens have been fascinated with Native American artifacts. When it comes to collecting practices, a set of criteria was and continues to be used to evaluate objects as “authentically” Native American. Objects favored are those perceived to be culturally pure, reflecting aesthetics and cultural practices dating from the pre-contact period. Yet Native American cultures have always been connected to outside influences, even in the pre-contact period. A rich exchange between American tribes as well as with neighboring regions such as Mesoamerica long contributed to the diversity of Native American art. The practice of incorporating new materials, motifs, or art-making techniques continued after contact with Spanish, French, British and American communities. This paper considers one art form, Navajo jewelry, as an example of the complex exchanges and influences typical of much Native American art. The paper asks the question: What are the criteria used to authenticate Navajo jewelry, by whom, and to what ends? The history of Navajo jewelry is here developed using sources written by and about Navajo metalsmiths. The paper will test various definitions of authenticity as applied to Navajo jewelry with the goal of highlighting a need to rethink art market and art historical value systems.

**Keywords:** Navajo, Authenticity, Native American Art, Jewelry, Art History

### **1. Body of Paper**

The question of authenticity is an important one and is a criteria used by Western institutions such as museums, as well as by art collectors, to distinguish the valuable from the worthless. But the practice of establishing the worth and authenticity of non-Western objects is a problematic one, often entailing the application of criteria not reflecting indigenous value systems. The question of authenticity arose after the colonization of North America and in tandem with cultural change in the context of American colonialism and the collection of Native American art that fit Western ideas of an ‘untainted’ Native art. The typical criteria for authenticity utilized by Western collectors did not consider either the history and patterns of interaction between native American groups, nor the influences and effects of colonization on them, not to mention determining authenticity based on indigenous criteria.

This paper considers one art form, Navajo jewelry, as an example of the complex issues surrounding authenticity that is typical of much Native American art. The paper asks the question: What are the criteria used to authenticate Navajo jewelry, by whom, and to what ends? These questions are considered through a discussion of the history of Navajo jewelry developed here using sources written by and about Navajo metalsmiths. The paper will test various definitions of authenticity as applied to Navajo jewelry with the goal of highlighting a need to rethink art market and art historical value systems. The three dominant theories under consideration are: 1. Authentic art embodies an original

idea with no outside influence; 2. Authentic Native-American art dates to the pre-colonial period; 3. Authentic Native-American art is traditional and made for cultural insiders only. After discussing these three theories of authenticity as applied to Navajo silver jewelry, I propose a need to embrace culturally relevant self-definitions of authenticity as held by Navajo artists themselves.

When looking up the word “authentic” in a dictionary, it is defined as “of undisputed origin and not a copy; genuine,” and as “made or done in the traditional or original way, or in a way that faithfully resembles an original.” An “original”, according to Oxford’s dictionary, is something that is “present or existing from the beginning; first or earliest,” “created directly and personally by a particular artist; not a copy or imitation”, and “not dependent on other people’s ideas; inventive or novel.” Using both definitions, authentic and original, it can be stated that something authentic can be understood as an original creation without the influence of outside sources and without precedent.<sup>1</sup>

If the dictionary definition of ‘authentic’ were to be applied to Navajo jewelry, a problem presents itself since Navajo jewelry was greatly influenced by outside sources including Spanish, Mexican and American. This becomes apparent through a discussion of the historical circumstances surrounding the development of Navajo silver jewelry at a time of considerable social, economic and political change. Furthermore, the jewelry-making techniques and designs are heavily influenced by non-Navajo sources.

The Navajo, the second largest Native American tribe, migrated south from Alaska through Canada sometime between 1200 and 1600, and settled near the Ancient Puebloan in what is known today as the Four - Corners - Region.<sup>2</sup> The Navajo call themselves *Diné*, meaning “the people”, and their land is called *Diné Bikéyah*, “Navajoland,” in their language.<sup>3</sup> The Ancestral Puebloans taught weaving and farming to the Navajo, and after the Spanish introduced horses into the Americas, the lifestyle of the Navajo changed from a focus on farming to horse riding and warfare.<sup>4</sup>

Since the mounted Navajo warrior posed a threat to the newly emerging government of the United States, it was decided that they needed to be pacified. The Navajo War (1863-64) was a major turning point in Navajo history, not only were they defeated on their own homelands, but survivors were sent on a 400-mile march to Fort Sumner, New Mexico. 500 of the approximately 8500 remaining Navajo died along the route in what is known today as the Long Walk. In 1868 an agreement was made between the tribe and the government which led to the creation of a reservation, allowing Navajo families to relocate to the newly created Navajo reservation. Upon return to *Diné Bikéyah*, former warriors were forced to return to farming and herding. This more sedentary lifestyle paved the way for the development of weaving and jewelry-making that became characteristic Navajo art forms.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1830 — 1840 several Navajo men learned blacksmithing from Spanish smiths and started creating simple bracelets made of copper and brass. Then, in 1853 a Navajo smith named Atsidi Sani learned the art of silver smithing from a Mexican silversmith, one Cassillio. Mexican smiths had themselves learned silversmithing from Spanish smiths. After completing his training, Atsidi Sani taught the art of silversmithing to members of his community, as well as to members of neighboring Zuni tribes, who in turn passed it on to Hopi communities.<sup>6</sup> While silver jewelry became a new form of production during the early reservation era, jewelry wearing had long been an important part of Navajo life prior to the reservation era. Navajo men and women work jewelry made of natural materials including fibers, stone, clay, and grass.<sup>7</sup> Pendants, bracelets, rings, etc., created by other tribes were traded with the Navajo, possibly for blankets. In addition, metal jewelry played an important part in Navajo life. For example, a report from 1795 describes a Navajo fondness for shimmering jewelry (which may explain why silver jewelry subsequently became so popular), likely acquired by trade with other tribes, and emphasizes its importance as part of their attire.<sup>8</sup>

While Navajo jewelers make a wide range of objects, this paper will focus on a select group of jewelry types that have come to be considered the more traditional or “authentic” forms. Here I will consider the horse bridle, the Naja, silver bead necklaces, the pomegranate design, the ketoh, and the concho belt. Ironically, while considered authentic, a discussion of the history these art forms reveal that they violate two notions of authenticity, namely that authentic art must be original and date to pre-contact eras.

Horse bridles are one of the first silver objects produced by Navajo silver smiths.<sup>9</sup> The bridles, which we can think of as functional jewelry, were a sought-after item for functionality and the adornment of horses. Elements of Navajo bridle design were strongly influenced by designs seen on Spanish horse bridles, as for example the motif known as the Naja and the concho which in turn were eventually incorporated in to Navajo jewelry itself.

The Naja, an “inverted crescent moon,” is also a prominent feature on Navajo jewelry (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Naja, Navajo, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Accessed May 17, 2018. [http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_38559884](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_38559884))

The upside down crescent moon design has an ancient origin and was first mentioned “among the ‘ornaments on camels’ necks’ in the Old Testaments Book of Judges.” The Moors, Muslims living in Spain between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, attributed protective powers to the symbol and used it to protect their horses and themselves from evil spirits. The Spanish in turn adopted the design from the Moors. The Navajo then took on the design from the Spanish for their own horse bridles, but also turned it in to a center piece for necklaces worn by women.<sup>10</sup> According to Navajo jewelers, the Naja does not possess any powers or specific meanings, indicating that it has been removed from its Spanish and Moorish origins as a symbol of protection and reinvented by the Navajo as not only a bridle ornament, but as a design in human jewelry.<sup>11</sup>

Najas are often attached to Navajo silver bead necklaces (Figure 2). These necklaces, which are shaped and soldered by hand, were first produced around 1870. Since silver is not a naturally occurring mineral in the area, Navajo smiths originally created the beads using U.S. coins. The silver coins were beaten into a half dome and then soldered together to create a bead. Multiple beads were then strung to create a necklace, often with the addition of the Naja along with squash blossoms motifs.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 2: handmade silver beads, Navajo, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Accessed May 17, 2018. [http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_38559988](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_38559988).)

Like the Naja, the Squash blossom design, which is probably one of the most well-known Navajo jewelry forms, also finds its origins with the Spanish (Figure 3). It was a common design worn on clothing by the Spanish around 1880 and is said to represent a pomegranate.<sup>13</sup> But the earliest use of the pomegranate motif in jewelry predates its Spanish use, coming from the Caspian Sea area and dating back to about 1200 B.C. illustrating that object forms and images endure over long periods of time and travel from culture to culture.<sup>14</sup> While Navajo smith incorporated the pomegranate design in to jewelry, it was renamed “squash blossom,” illustrating the reinvention of the motif.



Figure 3: Squash blossoms, Navajo, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Accessed May 17, 2018. [http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_38559884](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_38559884).)

Other decorative elements of Navajo attire are the ketoh, buttons, and concho belt buckles. The ketoh, also known as a bow guard, is a piece of leather or metal which protects the wrist from the sting of the bowstring and is a common accessory for any people using the bow and arrow (Figure 4). Early ketohs were made of simple leather straps with the occasional adornment. After the acquisition of silversmithing skills, Navajo smiths created ketohs made of silver instead of leather.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 4: Ketoh, Navajo, Portland Art Museum, The Elizabeth Cole Butler Collection. (Accessed May 17, 2018. [http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_30938779](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_30938779).)

Buttons, which were not common amongst Native American dress before 1830, were introduced by the Spanish as well (Figure 5). Buttons were one of the first items Navajo created out of silver and could also be used as form of payment.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 5: Buttons, Navajo or Apache, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Accessed May 17, 2018. [http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_38763219](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_38763219).)

Lastly, Concho belts buckles are another prominent piece of adornment for which Navajo smiths are known (Figure 6). Long before learning the craft of silversmithing, Navajo wore Concho belts, acquired through warfare or by trading with Plains Indian tribes. Various Plains Indian tribes in turn were introduced to belt buckles by European settlers. After the introduction of silversmithing Navajo artists started creating their own Concho belts. The buckles were usually hammered out of a silver coin and oval in shape. A diamond shaped hole in the middle of the oval allowed for the belt to be attached, and a scalloped edge was a commonly favored design. Due to the visual similarity with shell ornaments from earlier eras, the buckle was called “concho” — which translates to ‘shell’ in Spanish.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 6: Concho Belt, Navajo or Apache, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Accessed May 17, 2018. [http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_28271852](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_28271852).)

Yet, the Naja, squash blossom, buttons, and concho belt buckles were directly taken from cultural outsiders and adapted into the Navajo canon. While the ketoh was an already existing design within Native American culture, the use of silver, a material not naturally occurring in the Southwest, would exempt it from being considered truly ‘authentic.’ The same would apply to the silver bead necklaces. Does that mean that Navajo jewelry is not authentic? The answer is: Not necessarily and it depends on how one defines authentic.

When thinking about the authenticity of an object, it is important to consider who is defining and using the term. In the case of any Native American arts the label ‘authentic,’ or on the flip side ‘inauthentic,’ is generally applied by cultural outsiders who often use a ‘before and after effect,’ deeming everything ‘before’ colonization as authentic, whereas anything produced after, inauthentic. Although scholars have worked on correcting this point of view, it is still widely accepted by institutions, collectors and the market.<sup>18</sup>

Considering a ‘before and after effect’ in itself is very risky. Sidney L. Kasfir, stated in her essay *African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow*, that “there are innumerable before and afters in this history, and to select the eve of European colonialism as the unbridgeable chasm between traditional, authentic art and an aftermath polluted by

foreign contact is arbitrary in the extreme.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, we are still accepting this timeline as a fact. We do not consider that before the colonization of Native American tribes, they were in constant contact with each other; trading with, teaching, and influencing each other. As mentioned earlier, the Navajo used to be a nomadic tribe until they settled in the Four—Corners—Region. There they were taught by the Puebloan how to weave. After Atsidi Sani learned the silversmithing craft from the Mexican Cassillio, he went and taught it to the Zuni; the Zuni taught it to the Hopi; and so on. The Navajo were trading with other tribes way before the Europeans invaded their lands, thus, incorporating ideas from other tribes is a natural and enduring way of Navajo life.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of Navajo jewelry, the colonial and problematic definition of ‘authenticity,’ including the ‘before and after effect’ as well as the originality aspect, would exclude any and all jewelry created by Navajo after the colonization of North America. Not only do jewelry forms stem from Spanish influence, but Navajo silversmithing also altered their designs in order to appeal to European tourists. How do we evaluate that material?

The turn of the century introduced more and more European settlers to the American Southwest with the completion of the Santa Fe railroad through the Four—Corners—Region. Traders became increasingly interested in Native American jewelry and started supplying silver, tools, and other materials to Native Artists. Silver and turquoise Navajo jewelry became a favorite of European buyers, but it was too big and heavy for American taste. As a result, Navajo and other tribes adapted the size and weight to that preferred by American buyers — thus altering the dimensions of the jewelry and moving away from its original form. By doing so, Navajo moved further into the field commercial art which is often deemed ‘inauthentic.’<sup>21</sup> It needs to be noted here that “the words ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic,’ [...] become shorthand designations for ‘good,’ and their negations ‘nontraditional’ and ‘inauthentic,’ [...] become synonymous with ‘bad.’ Items created for tourists are often seen as “cheap, crude, and mass-produced.”<sup>22</sup> However, artists have always adapted their products to fulfill their economic needs and “without Western patronage [tourist art] would not exist” to begin with.<sup>23</sup> Tourist trade also helped spread Navajo design throughout the United States and it can now be found in multiple places. One such places is the arts and crafts retailer Hobby Lobby where I work. Their jewelry section shows a significant amount of Navajo style jewelry items, especially the epitome of Navajo jewelry: the silver and turquoise combination (Figure 7, Figure 8).



Figure 7: Jewelry selection, Hobby Lobby, 2018, Photograph: Maria Shah





Figure 8: Jewelry selection, Hobby Lobby, 2018, Photograph: Maria Shah

While the items sold at Hobby Lobby are cheaply mass produced, and thus ‘inauthentic,’ they are clearly inspired by jewelry created by Navajo silversmiths. Mass production and the involvement of Native artists in the creation process is often a deciding factor in determining authenticity today: If the work is made by a native artist it is considered authentic, if it is not made by a native artist it is inauthentic.

This aspect is an important one: if the artists is native the work is authentic because the artist is the bearer of his or her peoples traditions. By shifting the focus from the object to the maker one can also account for the ever-changing art and culture of Native people, a point made by Berlo and Phillips in *Native North American Art*: “in more recent studies of Native North American art, the definition of authenticity has been reevaluated in relation to the commodification of native art and issues of stylistic hybridity [...]”<sup>24</sup> Natives consider their artworks authentic despite using materials and techniques introduced to them by Europeans - because they made them. Contrary to the belief of collectors during the colonial era, Native artists did not toss aside their own traditions, but instead incorporated new ideas into already existing art forms. This way of life has endured. Perhaps McBrinn et al put it best: “Contemporary jewelers in the South West are honoring their ancestors while at the same time adapting the old ways to new jewelry forms.”<sup>25</sup>

Another factor to consider is the incorporation of turquoise in to Spanish-derived silversmith techniques and motifs. The American Southwest is one of only three regions in the world in which turquoise naturally occurs. Navajo link turquoise to the water and sky realm, as well as to “health, safety, and protection.” The use of turquoise in adornment in Native American cultures dates back to precolonial times. Turquoise earrings, which were small, rectangular shapes with rounded corners, as well as necklaces made entirely of the precious stone, were some of the earliest forms of jewelry worn by the Navajo. Turquoise also played, and still plays, an important part in Navajo life. The precious stone is thought to be imbued with religious and secular meaning. The Spanish had initially no interest in the mining of turquoise but were instead interested in precious metals. Over time Navajo jewelers incorporated turquoise into their jewelry which fundamentally changes the character of said jewelry. It no longer is a simple appropriation of ideas and techniques learned from outside sources and instead became an original in its own right. By overly fixating on, for example, the pomegranate motif one only looks at a small fragment of Navajo art. Instead, by acknowledging the whole corpus of silver jewelry and by acknowledging the incorporation of turquoise, a material predating the colonial era, one truly defines an original authentic Navajo aesthetic. Today, silver and turquoise jewelry is one of the hallmarks defining what the market considers to be authentic Navajo jewelry (Figure 9) and marks a distinctive innovation to the technique of silver work adopted from the Spanish along with Spanish-derived motifs such as the Naja and squash-blossom motif.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 9: Squash Blossom Necklace with Naja, Squash Blossoms, and lapidary inlay. Portland Art Museum, The Elizabeth Cole Butler Collection. (Accessed May 17, 2018.  
[http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953\\_35953\\_30938687](http://library.artstor.org.proxy.kennesaw.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_30938687).)

Clearly then, to move beyond a colonial mindset we must draw on definitions of authenticity that include the perspective, artistic innovations and the values of indigenous artists, in this case the Native American tribes of North America. Given the active exchange and interacting of different tribes throughout the American continent, ‘authenticity’ should exclude the notion that outside influences are a detrimental factor. The assumption that tribes where isolated from each other and kept ideas and techniques guarded is as preposterous as it is false. In fact, communication and exchange were vital to the survival of tribes. The one-sided and excluding definition of ‘authenticity’ which insists on denying outside influences “while at the same time requiring it” from artists is very problematic indeed. Equally problematic is the notion that “no important changes occurred in artistic production during the period of early contact” or afterwards.<sup>27</sup>

Instead, it would be a step forward to move away from the colonially-inspired definitions of authenticity towards a more inclusive definition. An inclusive definition should acknowledge outside influences, allow for “stylistic hybridity,” and acknowledge arts produced for cultural outsiders as potentially authentic.<sup>28</sup>

The misconception of ‘authentic art’ was created during the 19th and 20th century in an attempt to ‘preserve’ Native American art and craft, while ignoring the rich history of exchange among Native American communities. Along with that label came the notion of an item being either ‘worthy’, or ‘worthless.’ As Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, put it so eloquently in their book *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, this mindset “reveals, in the end, far more about those who collect objects than those who produced them.”<sup>29</sup>

Navajo jewelry-making crafts have persisted and flourished since the acquisition of silversmithing in 1853. The authenticity of Navajo jewelry is rarely questioned, yet ironically as this paper finds, Navajo jewelry is inauthentic based on colonial criteria. By moving away from outdated definitions and towards more inclusive and culturally relevant self-definitions, we can revise the existing biases and prejudices, and allow Native art to be called authentic based on the values of those who make and own the rights to their designs.

## 2. Acknowledgements

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### 4. Endnotes

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  - 4 Culley, "Navajo"; Bedinger, "THE NAVAJOS", 3.
  - 5 Dubin, *Glittering World*, 22.; Bedinger, "THE NAVAJOS", 11, 15.
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  - 8 Bedinger, "THE NAVAJOS", 22, 26, 79.
  - 9 An Image can be found on page 14 in *Glittering World: Navajo Jewelry of the Yazzie Family*, by Lois S. Dubin.
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  - 11 Maxine McBrinn, Ross E. Altshuler, and Blair Clark, *Turquoise, Water, Sky: Meaning and Beauty in Southwest Native Arts* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2015), 111.
  - 12 Dubin, *Glittering World*, 29.; Bedinger, "THE NAVAJOS," 35.
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