



Fetishes - objects with magic properties

The earliest fetishes, found in archaeological excavations dating from the 7th century, were natural occurrences of stones that resembled certain animals. These natural concretions may have added adornments such as fibre or sinew wrappings with shells and stones. Most of these existing true fetishes are in museum collections. Later, fetishes were hewn from stone with simple tools and similarly adorned.

According to Zuni belief, all true fetishes are petrifications of the animals they represent. It is believed that the spirit of the animal resides in the fetish and, if properly nurtured, can assist its possessor in accomplishing certain tasks and feats.

The earliest of fetishes are called *ahlashiwe* or stone ancients by the Zuni Indians. They are naturally formed stones that resemble people or animals, sometimes made more realistic with the features accentuated by a carver. They are considered very powerful and were formerly thought to be ancient animals or people turned to stone.

The Zuni believe that the world was once covered with floodwaters, which left it swampy. The Sun Father, revered by the Zuni as the giver of life and light, created twin sons. The twins realised the world was too wet for mankind to survive and needed to be dried. The Sun Father had given his sons a magic shield, a bow (the rainbow), and arrows (lightning). The twins placed their shield on

the earth, crossed the rainbow and lightning arrows on top of it and shot an arrow into the point where they crossed. Lightning flew out in every direction, causing a tremendous fire. Although this dried the earth, it made it too easy for predators to catch and eat people. To save humanity, the twins struck these animals with their lightning, burning and shrivelling them into stone. The animals' hearts were kept alive, with instructions to help humankind with the magic captured in their hearts.

When a Zuni finds a stone that naturally resembles an animal, he believes it is one of these ancient stone beasts. While most Zuni fetishes made today look considerably different from the simply formed fetishes of the past, the core beliefs surrounding them remain.

The Zuni use fetishes for many purposes. Some enable hunters to catch game, some make game more plentiful. Fetishes can also play an integral part in healing ceremonies and were not only for an individual but used by the whole community. Abundance, fertility, rain and bountiful crops are blessings a fetish can ensure.

Native American traditions have always recognised a special connection to nature. The belief that all things have a spirit is an integral part of their religions. The Zuni believe that animals are more like the Zuni deities than are humans. They also believe that powers, both practical and spiritual, reside in their fetishes.

There are two major groups of animal fetishes, the protective or healing and the hunting or prey. Protective and healing animals include the mountain lion, bear, badger, wolf, eagle and mole. Each of the four compass points plus the sky and the underground, has a protective animal associated with it. The north is protected by the mountain lion, west by the bear, south by the badger, east by the wolf, the sky by the eagle, and the underground by the mole. Each direction also has its own specially related colour. North is yellow, west is blue, south is red, east is white, the sky is all colours and the underground is black.

Hunting and prey animals include the mountain lion, coyote, bobcat, wolf, eagle, and mole. Their hierarchy follows the protective and healing animals' pattern, except that the coyote replaces the bear as the west animal, and the bobcat replaces the badger as the south animal.

Some fetishes are created with special features. An inlaid, carved, or painted 'heart line' represents the breath path leading to the magical power in the fetish's heart. For example, hearts of hunting animals are believed to have magical power over the hearts of their prey, the game animals. The hunting animals' breath is thought to overpower the game. There are other explanations for the heart line; one is that it represents the lightning bolt that the twins fired that turned all man-eating animals into stone.

Another special feature is a bundle consisting of various stones, shells and or arrow heads which is sometimes tied on to a fetish. The bundle serves as an offering that empowers the fetish to aid the user better. Belief is that all the medicine and magical abilities are contained within the bundle.

Personal fetishes were often worn or carried in pouches, but now they can also be found on people's mantelpieces, in cabinets, some people even keep them in their cars and purses or wallets.

Consumer interest and demand may be attributed to the uniqueness of Zuni fetish carvings. They are made by native peoples and affordable for any buyer. Simply made fetishes can sell for around \$50. There are intricate ones or those carved from semi-precious gems can range above several hundred dollars to thousands of dollars.

Collectors now abound throughout the United States and in Japan, Germany, France and other countries. Interest has grown beyond the collector of Native American crafts to include crystal and gem enthusiasts as well as spiritualists who imbue animals with special powers.

Stringing fetishes

Long before the current interest in Zuni fetish carving as collectables, very small fetishes were carved and incorporated into other forms of art most notably fetish necklaces. Current carvers who specialise in stringing fetishes include Pete and Dinah Gasper, Faye Quandelacy and Lavina Tsikewa Kaskalla.

Zuni fetish necklaces can be grouped into two distinct types. The first type is composed of fetishes by a single carver or family of carvers. These necklaces are usually strung with simple shell *heishi* (flat beads) separating the carvings.

The other type is designed necklaces. These may feature fetishes from more than one carving family. They are fashioned and co-ordinated around themes such as fetish texture, colour and size, often highlighted with turquoise, coral or other stones and gems. These compositions are strung on a variety of textures, types and sizes of *heishi* to enhance the overall design.

Although Zuni and non-Zuni use fetishes for religious purposes the American public has become interested in the carvings as folk art. There has been a change in the tastes of American collectors in favour of small carved

It is believed that the spirit of the animal resides in the fetish and, if properly nurtured, can assist its possessor in accomplishing certain tasks and feats

