



History of Navajo silversmithing 1880 to the present

History and current affairs inform the work of **McKee Platero**, a young Navajo silversmith whom many of his peers consider one of the most technically proficient and imaginative silversmiths working today. His silver has the characteristic heft of ingot-cast silver, to which he adds meticulous stamp work with his handmade stamps and dies. In addition to silver and gold, Platero works in red brass and iron as well as doing all his own lapidary. Platero says his inspiration comes from 'all of nature' and from seeing 'Navajo people beautifully dressed in silver, turquoise and red coral.'

Norbert Peshlaki, a direct descendant of Slender Maker of Silver (died c. 1916) is another silversmith whose multifaceted work is strikingly modern yet firmly grounded in his Navajo heritage. In 1977, Peshlaki made his first silver pot. The challenge of making that pot, he says, dramatically changed the direction of his jewellery because he became fascinated with the infinite possibilities inherent in hammering and stamp work.

In all of his pots, he hollows out the shape with a hammer, much the same as making silver beads, he next textures the surface with a hammer and applies designs with his own handmade dies and stamps.

Cody Sanderson (Navajo/Hopi/Pima/Nambe) creates metalwork forms that are experimental with unique designs. He likes to create 'mechanical things that move, twist and turn.' These articulated works, usually executed in silver, are a distinguishing element of his jewellery.

Sanderson is a first-generation self-taught jeweller who learned by reading books, asking questions of other jewellers and experimenting. Sanderson describes his jewellery and metalwork as 'fun – not fathomable – visually digestible.' His inspirations include a wide range of tangibles, resulting in his Lego bracelet and the BMW tyre ring, both derived from children's toys and his recent years revolving around his role as father of his sons and daughter. Sanderson says of jewellery making, 'It is a labour of love. You have to enjoy what you're doing.'

Barely 100 years since the commencement of Navajo silversmithing, silver is synonymous with south-western Native American jewellery. Silver is a perfect counterpoint to turquoise – the sacred stone of all the south-western tribes – and it is a 'tabula rasa' upon which artists may express their creativity.

As the Navajo demonstrated so skilfully just over a century ago, silver could be

transformed into the most beautiful of adornments with the least sophisticated of tools. That hands-on relationship has changed very little over time. Soldering techniques have advanced and silver is available in various forms, but the basic process of decoration still demands hammers, chisels, saws and stamps.

Distinctive styles of silverwork continue to be associated with particular tribes. The Hopi are the acknowledged experts of the overlay style. Zuni artists are noted for their channel inlay and their superb lapidary skills in setting multiple small stones. The Navajo remain the masters of stamp and chisel work.

These techniques emerged through a century of silversmithing in the south-west and are the techniques that artists continue to use to create their designs of the future.

Navajo silversmithing in the late 19th century

An 1880-81 report by Dr Washington Matthews is the only first-hand account of silversmithing during the formative 19th century period. Matthews studied a Navajo smith after persuading him to set up his forge at Fort Wingate to pursue his art, while under scientific observation to catalogue the silversmith's tools and techniques.

The bellows of the typical Navajo smith consisted of a bag of goatskins about 3.65 m long and 3 m in diameter, tied at one end to a nozzle and nailed at the other end to a circular disc of wood in which was the valve. The forge was made from a few straight sticks becoming the frame, next filling the frame with mud and inserting the nozzle end of the bellows into the mud, which had a circular piece of wood running from the nozzle end to the fire.

When the mud work was finished, the long circular stick between the nozzle and fire was removed. Then a flat rock about 1.2 m deep was laid at the head of the forge forming a back to the fire. Lastly, the bellows and nozzle were tied together. Even though this type of forge was widely used, not even one exists today.

A survey of the historical development of Navajo silver deduced that the technical refinement of the silver was in direct proportion to the types of tools employed. Matthews reported the tools indicative of the silversmith's art in 1880 that indicated tremendous progress in silversmithing since first practised by Native Americans.

Navajo silversmith tools included sandstone, ingot moulds, pliers, hammers and

