

Bedazzling Jewels

TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY JEWELRY DESIGNS REFLECT THE CHARACTER OF THE REGION.

By Sara Ford

Some of the most innovative, contemporary jewelers today are located in New Mexico, the inspiration of so much wearable art. Whether it's a bold, clean design in a silver belt buckle, the graceful contours in an exquisitely designed coral necklace, or a 22K gold ring bedazzled in diamonds and rubies, New Mexican jewelry — contemporary or traditional — surpasses mere ornamentation.

Since the 1990s, contemporary jewelers — both native and newcomer — have designed and crafted jewelry in an atmosphere where individual artistry, not marketplace demands, inspire designs. Many are one-of-a-kind pieces featuring free-form or asymmetrical shapes. Some use stones and metals unheard of 30 years ago. Different categories of gems, once believed to clash, now exist harmoniously with stunning effects.

Although the Southwest is traditionally known for silver jewelry, contemporary jewelers are fashioning new designs from 14K, 18K, and 22K gold granulation. Many alloy their own metals, using silver, zinc, copper, or nickel. As a result, consumers find red, green, and white gold jewelry. Platinum is also in demand.

Turquoise is plentiful and widely used. In addition, a wider variety of stones not found here — coral, lapis lazuli, opal, and sugilite — now surface in contemporary pieces. An array of fascinating gems, including South Sea pearls, fancy colored diamonds, and tanzanite, a blue-violet stone from Africa, are also featured. Rubies, sapphires, and diamonds often combine with other precious stones or are crafted separately.

Shopping for jewelry in the Land of Enchantment is a wonderful experience. Stores and studios are located in shops and plazas all over New Mexico. Native vendors sell their work under the portal of the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, in Old Town in Albuquerque, at pueblo feast days, the Inter-Tribal Ceremonial held each August in Gallup, and at Indian Market in Santa Fe. Pawn shops in Gallup have attracted jewelry connoisseurs for years. The Turquoise Trail towns of Cerrillos and Madrid are also fascinating stops. ■

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Contemporary turquoise, coral, and silver pendant by R. Gorman.