

Simply Stunning

CONTEMPORARY AND TRADITIONAL JEWELRY MADE BY LOCAL ARTISANS IS THE EMBODIMENT OF BEAUTY AND GRACE.

By Sara Ford

Discover a treasure trove of jewelry in New Mexico, where innovative, contemporary jewelers create wearable art. Whether it's a bold, clean design in a silver belt buckle, the graceful contours in an exquisite coral necklace or a 22-karat gold ring that mixes the brilliance of diamonds and rubies, the jewelry created here surpasses mere ornamentation.

Since the 1990s, contemporary jewelers have been creating jewelry in a charged and inspired atmosphere, where individual artistry and not the demands of the marketplace motivate designers. Many pieces are one-of-a-kind with asymmetrical shapes. New stones and metals, unheard of 30 years ago, are more common. The artistry of New Mexico's contemporary jewelers has also advanced the technical aspect of the art.

Although silver is the traditional Southwest metal, contemporary jewelers often use gold or platinum. Some jewelers alloy their own metals, using silver, zinc, copper or nickel, to form pieces made of red, green or white gold.

Turquoise, "The Sky Stone," believed to be a gift from the gods, is still widely used. But today's jewelers are using more nontraditional precious and semiprecious stones, such as coral, lapis lazuli, opal, tanzanite, South Sea pearls and sugilite in new ways.

The popularity of Native American jewelry in the 1970s led to the rise in contemporary jewelry in the area.

Jewelry making still remains a source of income for many Indians as it was in ancient times when Pueblo Indians traded turquoise from Cerrillos with the Aztecs and Mayans in Mexico, for exotic shells and brightly colored feathers. *Heishi*, pieces of shell that are ground, drilled and strung into necklaces, are still created at the Santa Domingo Pueblo.

Different tribes, along with today's jewelers, learned from one another, integrating styles and techniques. Navajos learned how to work with silver from Mexicans. The squash blossom necklace, with its fluted beads and a silver crescent shaped pendant, may have been inspired by Mexican and Spanish decorations, possibly from the Moorish and Mediterranean cultures.

The Zunis learned from the Navajos, while adding their inlaying skills to popular designs. Hopi designer Charles Loloma inspired jewelers with his brilliant designs using stones not associated with Native American jewelry.

Shopping for jewelry in New Mexico is a wonderful experience. Fine jewelry stores and studios are in shops and plazas throughout the state. Native vendors sell their work under the portal of the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, in Old Town Albuquerque, at Pueblo feast days, the Inter-Tribal Ceremonial held in August in Gallup and at Indian Market in Santa Fe. The Turquoise Trail towns of Cerrillos and Madrid are also fascinating stops. The pawn shops of Gallup have attracted jewelry connoisseurs for years.

