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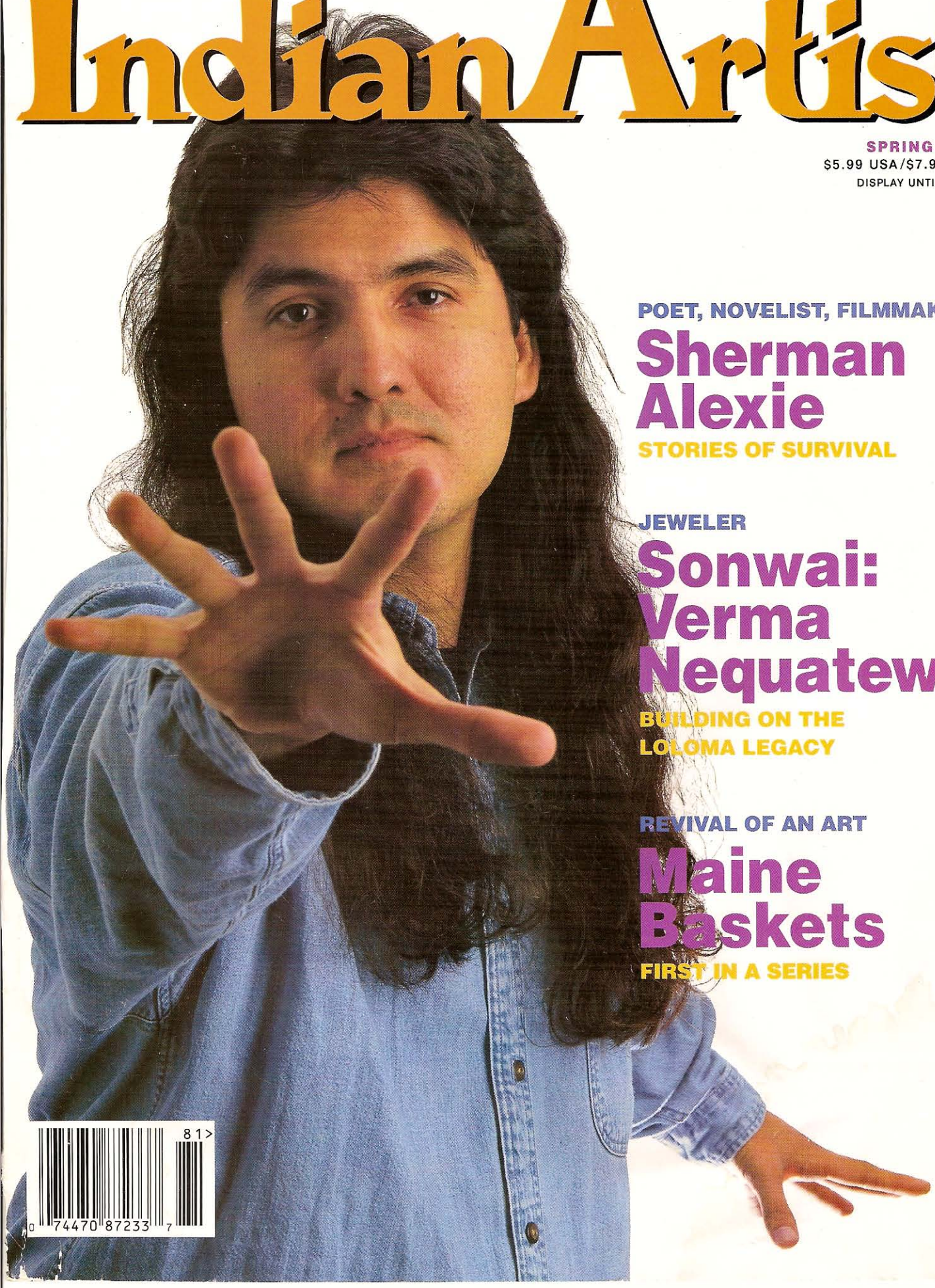

POET, NOVELIST, FILMMAKER

Sherman Alexie

STORIES OF SURVIVAL

JEWELER

Sonwai: Verma Nequatewa

BUILDING ON THE LOLOMA LEGACY

REVIVAL OF AN ART

Maine Baskets

FIRST IN A SERIES

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jeweler

verma nequatewa (sonwai)

hopi

by **annie osburn**

photography by **owen seumptewa** hopi

Each one of my pieces begins with a flat sheet of gold and turns into something that suddenly comes alive.

Right: Nequatewa at the Polacca airstrip near First Mesa, Arizona, on the Hopi Reservation, with her Piper Turbo Lance and Jaguar XJ6

Below: left, Charles Loloma, gold sand-cast bracelet, ca. 1975, turquoise, inside cuff inlay of lapis lazuli, Lone Mountain turquoise, and coral, 2 1/8" x 2 5/8" x 1"; right, Sonwai, silver sand-cast bracelet, 1990, gold overlay, inlay of lapis lazuli, Lone Mountain turquoise, coral, and gold, 2 5/8" x 2" x 1"

Beyond the never-ending horizon, in a world ruled by ancient clans, the cycles of nature, and ceremonial dances, Verma Nequatewa peacefully grinds and cuts lapis, coral, and sugilite for her extraordinary stone inlay jewelry. In her small Hopi village of Hotevilla, she works in an open studio perched atop an island mesa in the sky.

A room with a view, Nequatewa's studio is an outgrowth of her rambling home and offers a breath-taking vista of these sacred lands as it hangs on the edge of Third Mesa like an eagle's nest knitted to a sandstone crevice. It is here on this ledge that Nequatewa carves rectangular stone shapes that reflect the vertical, stacked-rock landscape around her.

"Be happy with yourself," Nequatewa says. "You have to be when you're working to create a major happy piece. You just smile when it's finished. This kind of work—the whole design phase of jewelry—stems from all of that. A lot of my inspiration comes from within me."

One of eight children, Nequatewa was raised on Third Mesa among a family of artists steeped in traditional Hopi arts. Inside her studio are display cabinets filled with award-winning kachina dolls carved and painted by her brothers, Wilmer and Wilfred Kaye. Her mother, Peggy Kaye, makes baskets using the wicker method. Her son, Bryson, sculpts and makes kachinas as well. Bryson's wife, Jan Katoney, is an oil painter, and her mother, Alice Katoney, is a weaver.

Perhaps the most profound influence on Nequatewa's artistic designs came in the late 1960s when, as a teenager, she began apprenticing with her uncle, the renowned Hopi jewelry designer Charles Loloma (see "Roots" on page 42). "Charles was an inspirational teacher," she says. "He always encouraged me to be daring and try my own designs. He let me know when I'd done a good job. And when something wasn't right, he suggested how I could make it better."

You might say that Nequatewa knows the meaning of art imitating life. As her uncle Loloma used to say, "Hopi is art." Similarly for Nequatewa, the natural environment fuses with the constant rhythm of her life. And out of this constant essence and purity of form she creates her sensuous jewelry.

Nequatewa's master craftsmanship is an example of how she has managed to both embrace and transcend her Hopi heritage. Her extraordinary jewelry is the embodiment of perfection, quality, and elegant simplicity. Yet, except for a modicum of modern conveniences—and a few outstanding ones—she and her family live within the natural rhythms of their small Hopi village. Her husband, Robert Rhodes, who originally came to Hopi as a teacher, serves as her manager and has a deep respect for Hopi tradition.

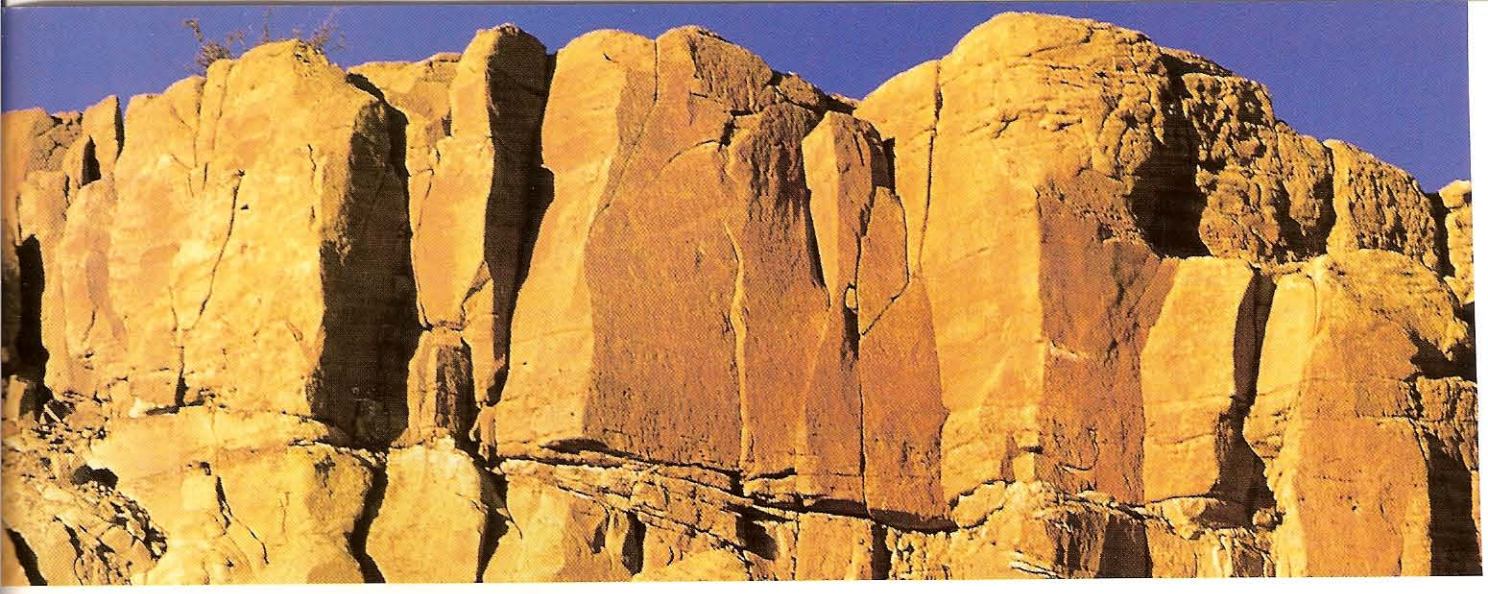
Among Nequatewa's outstanding conveniences are a sporty Jaguar and a single-engine Piper Turbo Lance airplane. "There's always a goal or some kind of direction that I am working towards," she says. "Our plane was one of those. Charles had so many planes—six or so—at one time. He used them to get to shows and back and forth to Phoenix and Santa Fe. We use our plane to fly around Hopi and places like Canyon de Chelly to look at the rock formations. The stones on the mesas are how our inlay designs came about. It's really nice from the plane. It's a bird's-eye view."

Nequatewa says her Jaguar, like her artistic achievements, represents her philosophy of setting her sights on a dream and attaining it through patience and perseverance. "I focused on my dream car," she says. "I wanted to own a Jag some day. Just like Charles used to say, 'If you want something in life, keep it in your head.' I have a Jag now."

More than the pleasure of attaining conveniences in life, Loloma impressed upon his niece the importance of working with the finest materials money can buy. Using Mediterranean coral, Lone Mountain and Bisbee spiderweb turquoise, lapis from Afghanistan, fossilized ivory, Australian opal, sugilite from South Africa's Kalahari Desert, ebony, ironwood, Russian charoite, 14- and 18-karat gold, and precious gems, Nequatewa creates unique stone inlay for her award-winning jewelry. But she doesn't sacrifice quality for quantity.

"Doing your own lapidary work requires so much time and dedication," she says. "I see a lot of jewelers mass producing and always trying to sell more. I want to stick with just doing my own construction instead of doing wax molds and reproductions. Each one of my pieces begins with a flat sheet of gold and turns into something that suddenly comes alive, like creating children. When I worked with Charles, he never

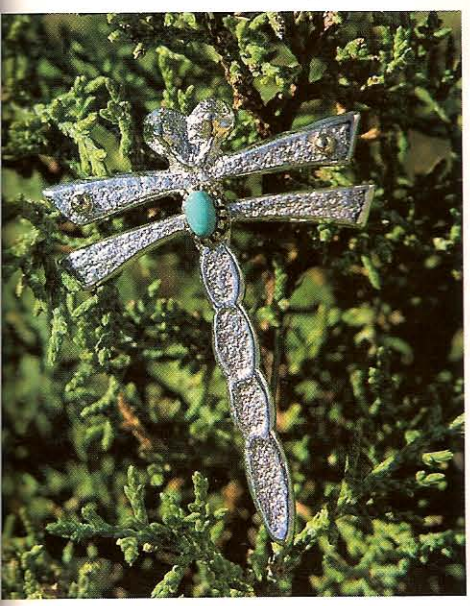
Sonwai, five-strand necklace, 1997, Chinese turquoise, accents of lapis lazuli, coral, sugilite, gold, silver, 23"



Rock formations such as these near Old Oraibi have served as inspiration to Nequatewa in her stone cutting and setting.

wanted to make copies or mass produce pieces just to fill in with different stones. That won't ever happen with my work, either."

Famous for putting sculptural stone inlay on the map of contemporary Native American jewelry, Loloma began his career as a mural painter and potter using textural surfaces and designs that reflected much of the rugged Hopi landscape. While Nequatewa continues the legacy of her uncle's teachings, her work stands by itself. Transcending the masculine metalwork and cobblestone stacked inlay of Loloma's designs, Nequatewa devotes herself to lapidary elegance using refined, cut-stone inlay that stems from her own rich world of color and expression. Her designs are sold under the name Sonwai, which in Hopi is the feminine word for "beautiful."



Sonwai, Dragonfly pin, 1997, tufa-cast silver with gold overlay, turquoise, 3" x 2"

Nequatewa continued to assist Loloma until his retirement from the art world in the late 1980s (he died in 1991). During that time, much of Loloma's work reflected Nequatewa's original lapidary contributions and art direction. During the two decades she worked with her uncle, Nequatewa was responsible for many design choices and the incorporation of colorful, cut-stone selections and combinations. Loloma would be one of the first to credit her artistic ingenuity, agreeing that she had "a good teacher." Nequatewa jokes, "Charles always said I'd never learn what he was teaching me in any school—especially with the opportunity to work with such high-quality materials."

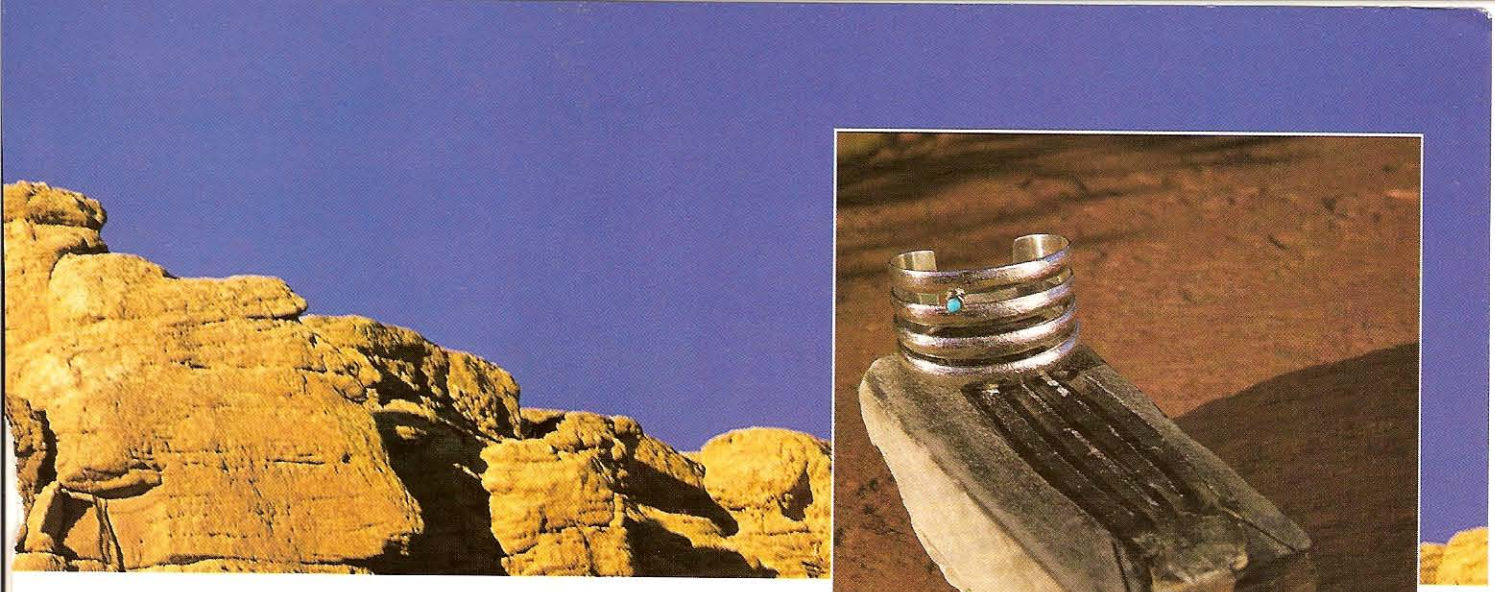
In 1995, Nequatewa won first place in the jewelry division at the Santa Fe Indian Market. Following Loloma's philosophy of using only the finest materials, Nequatewa never cuts corners. "Charles always told me to use the best materials money can buy," she recalls. "It gets expensive, but I've gotten spoiled. I use the best because time is so important; you've got to make the most of it. Using the highest quality changes how you treat jewelry, too. When something's so precious, like life, you treat it that way."

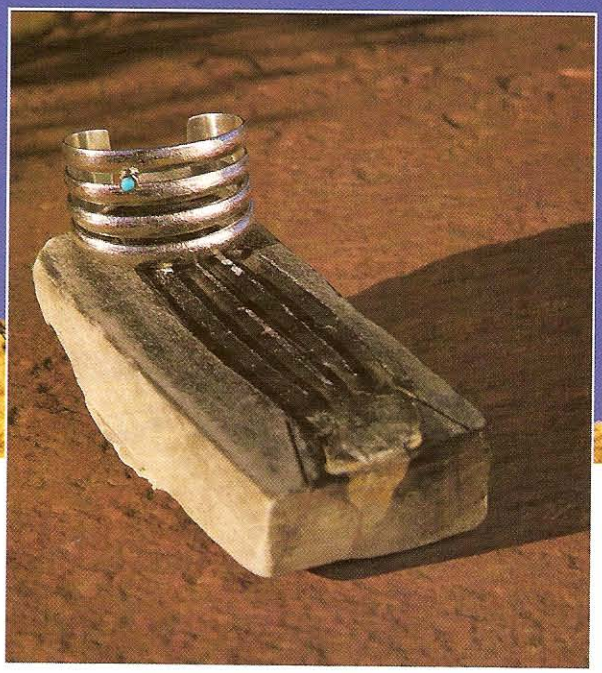
Now, as then, each original jewelry design is made by hand. "When I first started with Charles, all we had were a couple of grinders and no electricity, so we'd take the stones outside and use a portable generator for the grinding," Nequatewa recalls. One of Loloma's favorite trademarks was texturing his metals by tufa casting, using cut stone molds of hardened lava rock into which he poured molten silver or gold. This technique continues to be an important facet of Nequatewa's designs.

Although an individual bracelet can take up to two weeks to complete, Nequatewa refuses to compromise her work by farming out mass-production items. Instead, she does all the work herself—cutting stones, grinding, polishing, and soldering—and supplies a very limited number of galleries in order to keep up with the demands of private clients. Although she occasionally makes a small piece in sterling silver, almost everything is set in 14- or 18-karat gold. Be they bracelets, bolo ties, earrings, pendants, rings, or belt buckles, Nequatewa's Sonwai creations are all collector's items.

Gentle and soft-spoken, Nequatewa gradually reveals the inspiration behind her designs. "Every day is a learning experience when you're making a piece of jewelry," she says. "It takes a lot of years of practice to listen to your inner voice."

Respecting the traditional values of Hopi life, Nequatewa and her extended family live as close to the earth as possible. A member of the Badger Clan, she adheres to the legends of her people, which is evidenced by badger imagery scattered about her house. She also wears an 18-karat gold badger-paw



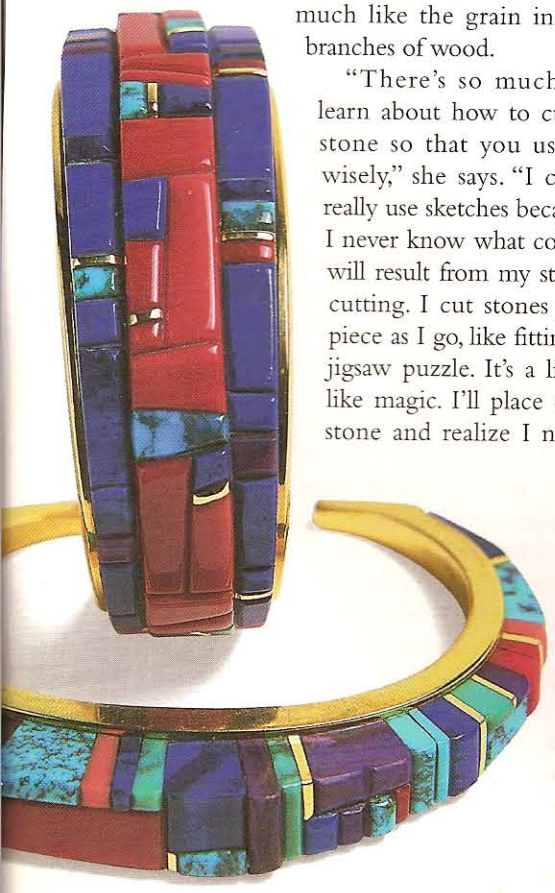


Tufa mold used for casting with finished four-band silver bracelet by Sonwai, 1997, turquoise in gold bezel, 2 1/2" x 2" x 1 5/8"

pendant with a diamond setting, the same ring once worn by her uncle Loloma. Diamonds are used sparingly, however.

"My ceremony and religion are part of things," says Nequatewa. "I feel like I need to keep my tradition. Instead of putting a bunch of diamonds into something, I keep it contemporary so it still looks like it belongs on a Hopi spirit. You can put a lot of diamonds in a piece of jewelry, and it doesn't have any feeling.

"Everything I work with is rough, even the opals I buy," she continues. "Some of the people I buy stones from save the really choice pieces for me. They know I'll use them. When I cut stone, I'm very precise. I try not to waste anything. Almost everything is useable." Nequatewa has even become proficient at cutting delicate branches of coral to reveal inner patterns, much like the grain inside branches of wood.



"There's so much to learn about how to cut a stone so that you use it wisely," she says. "I can't really use sketches because I never know what colors will result from my stone cutting. I cut stones per piece as I go, like fitting a jigsaw puzzle. It's a little like magic. I'll place one stone and realize I need another in a particular color or shape, and then there it is.

"Like this," she says pointing to a thin piece of sugilite that lies next to a larger piece of heavily matrixed turquoise. "This is very elegant looking. But it needs a little line here the other way," she continues, placing another piece of stone inlay to create a subtle geometric design. "Finally, it needs just enough space. Space and the balance of space is very important within the stones."

Balancing cut stones in vertical fashion, Nequatewa echoes the naturally occurring forms of the rocks and mesas outside her studio window. "I guess that's how it all started," she says, recalling her uncle Loloma's use of similar imagery. "We use different heights and depths just like how the mesas are shaped out there.

A lot of artists use a much higher polish for their stones." Nequatewa's inlay glows with a delicate satin finish. "I don't like a shiny, glassy finish," she says. "It doesn't wear very well. If you scratched one of the stones while wearing it, you'd have to keep rebuffing your jewelry to make it look nice."

Hidden treasures emerge from Nequatewa's work as well. On the underside of bracelets or rings, she often inlays a thin band of "inner gems," as she calls them. Such designs are meant to be symbolic expressions of the wearer's own inner beauty and desires and are only revealed to others at the wearer's discretion.

In the end, Nequatewa admits that her achievements do not come easily—especially because each creation is unique. "I'll work very hard for many days and finally I look at a finished piece and say, 'It's here!' With reproductions and cast pieces, what comes out of a mold is lifeless. That type of work is the same all the time. That's not me. Nothing I make can ever be reproduced exactly the same."

Left, upright: Sonwai, gold bracelet, 1991, with inlay of lapis lazuli, coral, Lone Mountain turquoise, sugilite, and gold, 2" x 2 1/4" x 1"

Left, flat: Charles Loloma, gold bracelet, ca. 1985, with inlay of Lone Mountain turquoise, coral, lapis lazuli, sugilite, and gold, 2 1/4" x 2 1/4"x 1/2"