

The Story Behind Zuni Channel Inlay



Long before silver jewelry arrived in the American Southwest, the Zuni people were master lapidaries, shaping turquoise, shell, jet, and coral into ceremonial objects, trade items, and sacred carvings. Each material carried meaning, reflecting elements of the natural world such as sky, water, clouds, earth, and protection.

Central to Zuni design is the concept of a sacred center.

Like many Pueblo peoples, the Zuni traditionally organize their understanding of the world around a central point, making the idea of "center" fundamental to prayer, ceremony, and artistic expression. This inward-moving, or centripetal, worldview emphasizes balance, harmony, and unity. It is reflected in the work of Zuni lapidaries, who often establish the outer boundaries of a design before working inward toward a focal center, creating compositions that visually express order and interconnectedness.



When silversmithing was introduced to Zuni Pueblo in the late nineteenth century, Zuni artists embraced the new medium while remaining true to their longstanding tradition of working with stone, creating intricate designs through precise cutting. The emery wheel revolutionized Zuni channel inlay by allowing stones to be shaped with the precision and efficiency needed for intricate, tightly fitted designs. This eventually led to the development of channel inlay, a technique in which thin silver walls form compartments that are meticulously filled with hand-cut pieces of stone, then smoothing the stones to an even level with the silver. The result is a seamless mosaic that resembles a painting created from the colors of the earth.

The rise of channel inlay in the early twentieth century is closely associated with innovative artists such as Teddy Weahkee, whose Rainbow God and Knifewing designs demonstrated the artistic possibilities of the technique. Through channel inlay, Zuni jewelers could depict sacred figures, animals, rain clouds, feathers, and other cultural symbols with remarkable detail and vibrant color.

What makes channel inlay uniquely Zuni is the way it reflects the tribe's design philosophy. Balance, symmetry, and harmony are woven into each piece.

Channel inlay became more than ornamentation. It evolved into a visual language that carries forward Zuni values of interconnectedness, gratitude, and respect for the natural world. Each carefully fitted stone serves as a reminder that beauty is not separate from daily life—it is a reflection of living in harmony with the world around us.



Source: North American Jewelry and Adornment From Prehistory to the Present. By Lois Sherr Dubin

Sources: Dexter Cirillo, Southwest Indian Jewelry (Museum of New Mexico Press, 1998); The Southwest (National Geographic Society); and materials from the Indian Arts Research Center, School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe.

Source: The Navajo and Pueblo Silversmiths by John Adair

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