

THE ARTS AND CRAFTS OF NEW MEXICO INDIANS

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GREAT BEAUTY AND DISTINCTION MARK THE WORK OF NEW MEXICO INDIAN ARTISTS

Hundreds of years before the first Spanish conquerors set foot in New Mexico, the Indians of the region had developed beautiful and distinctive arts of their own.

Today, of course, most Americans are familiar with the colorful works of art and craft that modern Indians produce—the bright, finely-woven blankets, the exquisite hand-wrought silver jewelry, the wonderfully-made pottery and baskets, the brilliantly-colored paintings.

Artists and art-collectors of international fame value the work of the New Mexico Indians as living art, the art of skilled professionals with centuries of tradition and training behind them.

From where do the traditions come? Why is Indian art so easily recognized, and yet so hard to imitate? Why, among a small population, are there so many excellent painters, potters, weavers and silversmiths? The answers go back more than a thousand years.

THE EARLIEST ARTISTS

Dotted about the varied New Mexico landscape, by riverbanks, on plains and in caves and crumbled ruins, the artistic remains of prehistoric cultures have been found. There are stones daubed with faded red stains, rude drawings of men and animals sketched on flat rocks with colored clays, or laboriously scratched in with sharp stone "gravers." The meaning, and sometimes the form, of these pictures is blurred by the centuries.

Among the earliest artisans of New Mexico was a group of Indians known to archaeologists as the Basketmakers. Little concrete evidence of these people remains except for samples of their outstanding basket work, made of snail-like coils of reed, yucca hemp or other stringy plants. The baskets were useful objects for carrying or storing food—some woven so tightly that they would

hold water.

The Basketmakers decorated their vessels, crudely at first, and then with increasing skill. Some of the designs were apparently just for decoration, geometric patterns to make the baskets more attractive. The outer surfaces of these early baskets are adorned with squares, triangles, terrace patterns, zig-zags, half-circles and loops, all gracefully done and pleasing to the eye.

But some of the designs were more than simple decoration. Patterns recurred frequently, became fixed and highly stylized. The same patterns may be seen on the Indian artifacts of the last thousand years, and often on the commercial "modern" Indian art of today. These designs were actually prayers.

ART AND RELIGION

The Pueblo Indians of New Mexico had a strong, well-organized religion long before their conversion to Christianity, and they still retain much of it today. Their faith is bound strongly to their life and their major problem, which is to have enough rain for their crops to grow and the game animals to survive. For the Indians, when there is no rain there is no life, and their religion reflects their need for fertile surroundings.

As Indians often dance for rain, asking the gods of rain and thunder and lightning to send water to the earth, so they also make pictures for the gods, and by imitating the forms of rain and water and clouds, try to bring moisture.

As the Indians' religion developed, their "prayer pictures" became more significant. Baskets and pottery, their everyday utensils, were decorated with clouds, jagged forks of lightning, earth and corn, trees and streams. The little drawings were not realistic; they were, instead, shorthand sketches of the important elements, more prop-

