

The rebirth of Inlay

By David Federman



Native American silver artisans are using traditional methods of stone setting to speak in non-traditional ways. The end result is a distinctly Southwestern modernism that is extending silver's appeal around the world.

Sylvie (she's French) Waldman is a collector who rarely wanders too far afield from her main interest: Art Deco. Her home on Philadelphia's Main Line is as much museum as domicile and she often fantasises about playing host to the ghosts of 1920s and 30s modernist interior design giants like Donald Deskey, who designed the furniture for Rockefeller Center, and architect Eero Saarinen. So it is curious to see that the one deviation from Art Deco she has permitted herself over the past 30 years of "tireless acquisition" is a large jewellery cabinet filled with post-war Native American jewellery.

To her, the sometimes futurist Zuni and Navajo artifacts that she frequently buys in galleries and museum shops are "kindred in spirit" to Art Deco. "The best American Indian craftsmen do more than repeat the past," Waldman says, "They re-invent it." And she compares the transformed borrowings of ancient motifs and symbols to what the best Art Deco craftsmen did with ancient African and Egyptian symbols.

There is also another reason for Waldman's love of Southwest Indian jewellery: its frequent use of inlay for both naturalistic and abstract design purposes. Waldman is not

alone in her association of inlay with Native American arts and crafts. It is a signature element of this work. "I don't know if the Zuni invented inlay, but they sure perfected it," she says.

That perfection is evident in the work of Navajo silversmith and lapidary Darryl Dean Begay, who lives in Gallup, New Mexico, one of America's best-known Native American arts and crafts centres. Begay and his wife Rebecca are inlay masters who come highly recommended by instructors at San Francisco's famous Revere Academy of Jewelry Making. Incredibly, at 38, Darryl is a latecomer to but a fast learner of this art, having practised it for only 13 years. Maybe the fact that family members have been jewellery makers for generations gave him a hereditary disposition to silver work. It also helps that he was a student of a recognised jewellery master, Raymond Yazzie.

Nevertheless, Begay doesn't want to be classified as a Native American craftsman. Although he is thoroughly schooled in Navajo metalsmithing and Zuni inlay techniques, he uses these traditional means for very contemporary ends – "treading old ground in order to break new ground," as Waldman puts it while describing contemporary Native American artistry.

Pictures courtesy of Darryl Dean Begay



Traditionalism revisited

There are two essential ingredients in Begay's work: inlay and silver granulation. To master them, he has immersed himself in traditional techniques. Indeed, from a standpoint of construction, Begay would probably be very much at home in an early 20th century Zuni workshop. But one wonders what the elders might think about his tendency to modernise ancient symbols and motifs so that, in his words, "they have a universality that speaks to everyone."

Typical of Begay's modernism is the folsom point bola tie inlaid with turquoise and coral shaped like a spear head with very intricate undulations in the silver rim that surrounds the main free-form gemstone mosaic.

At least 80 percent of Begay's work is in silver – most of it cast, much of it using a silver-granulation technique called "tufa casting" which imparts an oxidised, weather-beaten texture to surfaces. Of these tufa-cast pieces, half or more contain inlay – a gem-decoration technique that Zunis have been using since the late 19th century.

Essentially, inlay jewellery involves a two-stage process. The first stage involves creating a dual-layer silver housing for gems whose two parts are soldered together. Into the top

layer, the artisan carves a channel that will serve as a receptacle for gems and other materials like fossils, shell and wood.

Although Begay uses black jade, lapis, opal and sugilite, he prefers high-grade Southwest turquoise and Mediterranean coral. Despite the fact that some nice material comes from turquoise-rich China, he wants to stay local. Furthermore, he doesn't use uniformly robin's-egg blue stones in his work. Their gleaming, enamel-like surfaces remind him too much of plastic. He loves more earthen turquoise marbled with matrix (sections of host-rock material veining the stones). The copper mines of the Southwest where turquoise is found excel in matrix material, but demand for high-grade pieces have forced Begay to pay up to US\$350 per carat for some specimens.

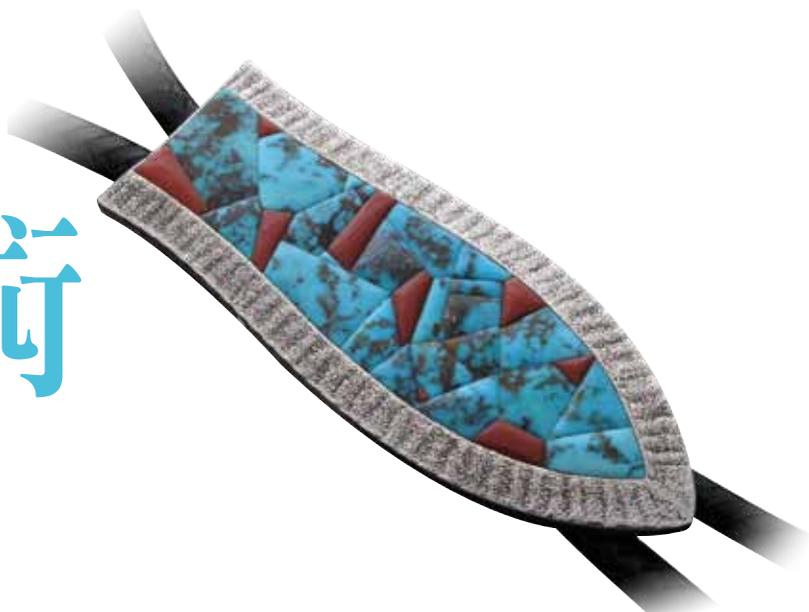
Like many inlay artists, Begay does

not take the easy way when setting stones. He carves and polishes each by hand, then sets them in the floor of the channel, using epoxy, as if they were "pieces in a puzzle." No wonder the final assemblage of stones has a mosaic-like quality. He calls these contoured, cobblestone-like arrangements "cornrow," as opposed to "flat," inlay. He often compliments the multi-leveled stone inlays with rolling, textured silver surfaces that give them more of a sculptured, handcrafted quality.

Since a big emerging market for native American Indian jewellery exists in Japan, Begay doesn't think his pieces need to evoke specific Indian culture or identity. Nevertheless, his pieces pay homage to his Southwestern origins by using Indian symbols as points of departure. "I want my work to speak as much to New York apartment dwellers as New Mexico desert dwellers," he says.



鑲嵌技術 的重生



美國印第安族原住民採用傳統的寶石鑲嵌方法來表達不傳統的意念，成品充滿西南部現代主義特色，令銀飾以另一形態吸引世人的目光。

法籍的Sylvie Waldman是一位鍾情裝飾藝術(Art Deco)的收藏家，其位於費城Main Line的安樂窩彷彿博物館一般。她經常幻想自己能款待來自1920與1930年代的鬼魅，包括曾為紐約洛克菲勒中心設計傢俱的現代主義室內設計巨人Donald Deskey、名設計師Eero Saarinen等。教人意想不到的是，Waldman於過去三十年間竟然收藏著一批戰後印第安珠寶。

Waldman經常搜購富未來主義的蘇尼族和那瓦荷族工藝品，她表示：「最出色的印第安工藝師不會只是模仿前人的作品。他們會重塑舊作，做出全新效果。」在她眼中，印第安工藝師借用古代圖案和符號的做法，就好像裝飾藝術工藝師取材於古非洲與埃及符號一樣。

Waldman特別喜愛西南部印第安珠寶，皆因這些首飾經常採用鑲嵌的方式來表達自然與抽象的設計。事實上，鑲嵌正是這類創作的招牌元素。她續指：「我不清楚首飾鑲嵌是否蘇尼族人發明的，但蘇尼族人肯定已令該技術更趨完美。」

最能印證這些完美技術的，除了那瓦荷族銀匠的作品外，還有寶石工藝師Darryl Dean Begay。Begay居於新墨西哥州Gallup，這裡是全美國其中一個最為人熟悉的印第安工藝中心。他與妻子Rebecca都是珠寶鑲嵌製作的大師級人馬，技藝備受三藩市著名的Revere Academy of Jewelry Making高度讚揚。現年38歲的Darryl出身珠寶世家，而且師承珠寶大師Raymond Yazzie，

因此他雖然只是花了13年來學習鑲嵌技術，但卻進步神速。

不過，Begay並不想被歸類為印第安工藝師。雖然他曾經接受那瓦荷族鑄金技術和蘇尼族鑲嵌技巧的全面訓練，他使用這些傳統手藝時卻往往以別具現代感的方式呈現。對於當代印第安風格首飾技術，Waldman亦作出了這樣的描述：「走在舊有的路上尋求突破。」

回歸傳統

Begay的作品中有兩項主要元素：鑲嵌與銀面造粒。為令自己在這兩項技術上做到爐火純青，他讓自己浸淫於各種傳統的技巧中——老實說，可能20世紀初的蘇尼族工作間會讓他更得心應手。他希望自己的設計「擁有世人都看得懂的特質」，然而老一輩對這種重塑傳統的做法有何感想，卻是不得而知。

形狀有如茅頭的福爾森銳器(folsom point)牛仔配飾，上面鑲有綠松石和珊瑚，充滿現代感，是典型的Begay設計。上面的純銀外圈上刻有極之細緻的波紋，用來襯出飾物中央帶不規則線條的寶石馬賽克。

Begay的作品中最少有八成是銀器。這些作品的熔模，大部份了採用一種名為「熔模鑄造技術」的銀面造粒技巧，能在成品表面上做出氧化、因氣候形成侵蝕的紋理效果。在這些經熔模鑄造技術製作的成品中，超過一半包括了鑲嵌的部份：一種蘇尼族自19世紀後期已開始使用的寶石裝飾技巧。

鑲嵌首飾主要涉及兩個步驟。在第一個步驟中，技師需要為寶石製作一個雙層的純銀鑲套，鑲套的兩個部份採用錫焊接合。工匠會在頂層刻出一個凹槽，作為寶石與其他物料如化石、貝殼和木材的托座。雖然現在推出的首飾多使用黑色翡翠、青金石、蛋白石和舒俱徠石這類石材，但他更鍾情於高品質的西南綠松石和來自地中海的珊瑚。中國無疑盛產綠松石等品質優良的石材，他卻依然忠於美國本地材料。此外，他的作品也不會採用知更鳥蛋殼藍色寶石，原因是他認為這種有如瑤瑤一樣的反光表面跟塑膠太過相像。他喜愛較為踏實、表面有其他脈石紋理的綠松石。這些綠松石可於西南部的銅礦中找到，不過也索價不菲：Begay便曾試過以每卡350美元的價錢購入一些綠松石精品。

正如許多鑲嵌工匠一樣，Begay在嵌入寶石時並不捨難取易。每件作品他都會親手雕刻與打磨，再利用樹脂把寶石鑲妥在凹槽底，有如拼合砌圖一樣，成品足以媲美精緻的馬賽克。他把這些具有線條美、鵝卵石一樣的組合稱為「玉米編髮」，以別於「平面」的鑲嵌技術。很多時候，他會以帶有迴旋紋理的銀面配襯多層次的寶石鑲嵌，令作品更具雕塑、手工精製的質感。由於印第安風格的首飾在日本方興未艾，Begay不認為自己的設計需要冠上印第安文化或特色作為宣傳重點。儘管如此，他的作品意念源自多種印第安符號，可以說是向他自身的西南傳承致敬。他表示：「我希望我的作品所能帶出的感覺，可以像提起紐約便令人聯想到公寓、提及新墨西哥便想到沙漠的居住文化一樣。」