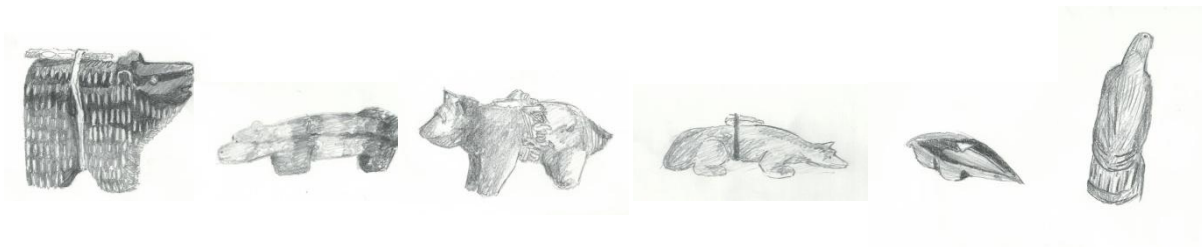


MALACHITE HORSE



One trader's guide to Zuni Fetishes
by Fiona Venter



Introduction

I first saw a small collection of fetishes in a store in a Washington Shopping Mall in Christmas 1990. I was fascinated and fell in love with a small malachite horse with turquoise eyes. I remember thinking it was quite expensive for such a small carving and was stunned when, minutes later, I was outside the store with the horse in my possession.

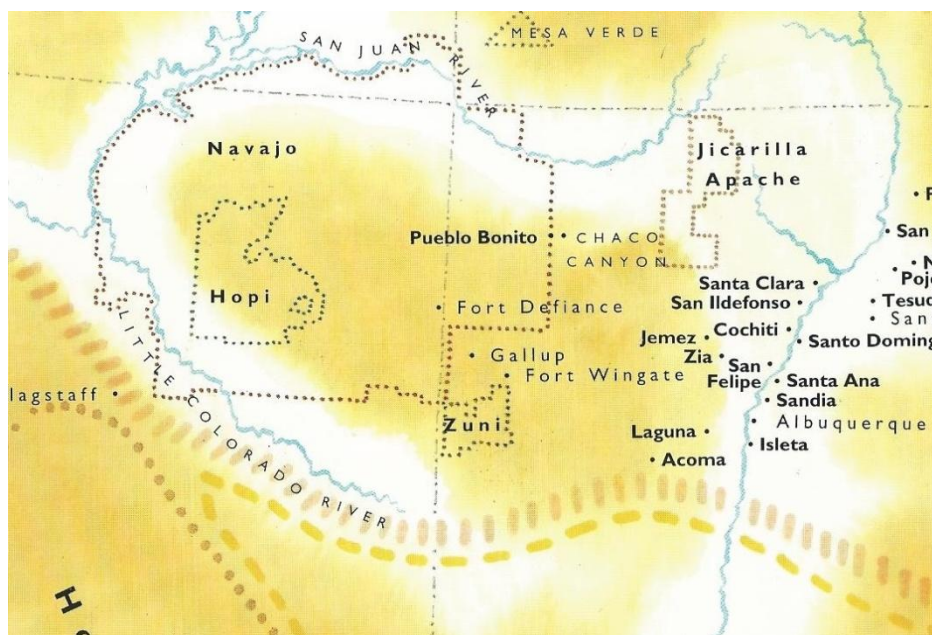
I had recently opened a shop in Edinburgh that specialised in selling gifts from around the world, especially traditionally inspired crafts from tribal origins such as African masks, Bushman thumb pianos, Akha beads from Northern Thailand, Mexican rugs and blankets. I had always been fascinated in ancient petroglyphs and the similarities of art forms and symbols from ancient civilisations across the world having studied Mayan and African tribal art at university. I became determined to track down the origin of these carvings at source and endeavour to find out more about them. A week later I creaked open the door of Turquoise Village in the Zuni Pueblo and purchased a box full of beautiful carvings to bring home to Britain to sell.

From these two impulsive moves began something that changed my life, the nature and fortune of my business and developed my love and respect for the Native American people, culture and beliefs.

I consider myself to be an essentially practical person, yet I also firmly believe that, that little malachite horse has helped me find the strength to persevere through a recession and has guided me emotionally through some very dark moments.

Zuni

On the western border of New Mexico lies the village of Zuni with a population of some 9,000 people on mostly desert lands of about 400,000 acres. Within this community also resides some of the most talented silversmiths and jewellery designers in the Southwest and most specifically the Zunis have achieved world renown for the art of fetish carving.



The term fetish is derived from the Portuguese feitico, suggesting a “charm or sorcery” introduced at the time of the Spanish conquest, and retained to this day. A fetish is essentially an object believed to have a power greater than the object itself would naturally possess. In Zuni, their culture and religion, prior to the Spanish invasion, was based around their ceremonially blessed, collective stone carvings, which is why Zuni carved fetishes are considered to have more value or power, to those made by other tribes such as the Navajo. Although strictly speaking only a fetish that has been ceremonially blessed by a priest or shaman should be considered a “true” fetish, I have found ample reasons, over the years of trading in them, to believe in the magical powers that all these carvings possess.

So what is the endearing appeal of Zuni fetishes. Firstly they have an aesthetic appeal as beautiful, stand alone sculptures, secondly the stone they are carved in can have intrinsic strength and force and thirdly the animal represented in the stone can represent a spirit guardian – combining all three, for a collector, is powerful but essentially personal. There is something about the way tradition is maintained, amongst the families of carvers in Zuni, to preserve that each fetish holds some special meaning for the right owner.

In ancient Zuni Myth

“Long ago the Sun Father sent 2 of his children (Shinwani and Shiwanokia) to earth because fierce animals were killing people. The two children turned the animals to stone, and told the animals that from thereon, by using the magic in their hearts, the animals would serve as mediators between the human and spirit worlds. “



Twin Sodalite bears by Ed Lementino

Many carvers bind 2 fetishes together to represent the twin founding fathers of the Nation.

In effect this is the essence of the fetish’s power. They are believed to be actual petrifications of animals that had once lived and therefore to contain the potential or spirit of the animals they physically resemble.

Zuni religious belief is based on their great affinity and respect for nature – AHAI – that there is a life force in all beings, humans, plants, animals, rocks – that the forces of nature are all expressions of AWONANILONA that form the whole cosmos. Yet while all things belong to a single system of interrelated life, they are not all equal. In fact humans are the lowest form because they are the most dependent on nature and natural forces and are the least mysterious. Animals are in the next strata, because although close to humans they are more mysterious and have additional

powers, so they are therefore closer to the deities. Forces of nature, such as lightning or thunder, are considered even more mysterious and powerful and therefore even closer to the deities.

This, then is how the animal acts as an intermediary. For example the snake resembles lightning because of its zig-zag motion and its ability to strike quickly with fearful repercussions,



Russell Shack - Snake

it is thus a good connector between man – the furthest from the gods, by being an animal, yet one with characteristics of a natural force that is considered closest to the gods. Similarly bear is considered to be one of the most powerful mediators, because of his ability to stand on two legs like humans, but his extra strength and power enables him to communicate with the higher beings.

Zuni believe that through the fetish, one can consult with the legendary attributes that the animal possesses. They believe that if you hold a fetish eagle, for example, you are touched by the spirit of that bird and its capabilities – to soar high on the winds and look down on things from a great height, observe the tiniest of things and find harmony between sky and earth. When in possession of an eagle fetish, therefore you can share eagle's power.

In this respect fetishes are similar to other ancient talismans such as Celtic Runes and IChing because they can help one explore the collective unconscious, and put one in touch with a sympathy for all things that is associated with ancient or primitive cultures. The fetish is not an idol, but a representation of a spirit or force, not the actual deity. Their power relates solely to what that animal would possess either in real life or in mythology.

History

The first fetishes or 'concretion fetishes' were naturally formed, animal-shaped, stones or shells. Archaeological sites show that the Zuni were using fetishes as early as AD650. By AD1250 Zuni villages had become centres of intertribal trade and Zuni carvings were among the trade items that made their way throughout the Western trade routes of California, Mexico and the Great Plains in exchange for copper, parrot feathers, shells, coral and buffalo hides. The most prized, altar top, ceremonial Zuni fetishes that were used for religious purposes, were suppressed by the Spanish invasion in the mid sixteenth century, which is when smaller palm-sized fetishes were invented that could be easily hidden.



Early fetishes were primarily carved from the plentiful Zuni stone in the area, although sometimes clay figures were made, sometimes painted the appropriate colour for the figure or direction represented. A leather deer sinew would encircle the middle and feathers from select species of birds added enhanced power and turquoise and shell pieces showed appreciation.

Fetishes can protect and assist individuals or groups. They can be stored communally as in tribal or Kiva fetishes, which are generally stored in a guarded location in the kiva – an underground ceremonial house – which serves as a sacred chamber for rituals and ceremonies.

Individual fetishes can be stored in medicine bags or in a specially selected place in the home. Fetishes that have been in tribal or individual possession for centuries are considered the most holy and valuable.

Fetishes are normally stored within a fetish jar – a clay pot sometimes covered with crushed turquoise containing 3-7 fetishes with a hole in the side through which the fetishes could be fed.

Each jar would have a special purpose – initiation, birth, healing disease or successful harvest and a daily or ritual prayer would be offered to the fetishes to evoke their spirit or power. Typical offerings would include, corn meal for the fetishes to receive nourishment from the spirit of the food, shells to invoke the value of water or turquoise to represent awe of the sky or pollen for fertility.



Many of the fetish carvings have a **heartline** in the shape of an arrow to represent the early petrification, by the twins, of that actual animal, to illustrate that it is a living, breathing image. Similarly many will be adorned with an arrowhead, either above the fetish, forward facing to help it find its target, or below the fetish, backward facing to confuse its' tracks when alluding predators.

In Zuni, tribal use of fetishes is as important today as in the past, they are still used for hunting and healing and worn for protection. They may be buried in fields to encourage crops or hidden in walls of homes to protect the inhabitants. Before World War 2 priests revived war ceremonies to protect the Zuni men going to the front. Ritual purifications were also carried out on the troops who returned to the village.

Spirit Animals



Many of us have an affinity with a particular animal – for me it is squirrel only because my childhood was spent chasing them in the Botanic Gardens or watching them flit from tree to tree from my bedroom window. I also slightly resemble a squirrel with my bushy hair and thin face, but I am certainly not good at saving for tomorrow, which is what you would expect a squirrel to be. However, I have just recently read a book by Lucy Harmer on Spirit Animals, and her take on squirrel is that “he is a good communicator, has the ability to see the funny side and is hard working and thoughtful”.

Spirit animals appear to all of us at various stages of our life – it could be your Chinese star sign, or like my daughter obsessed with wolves from the age of 2. My husband was always prone to impetuous accidents and minor misfortunes, and we discovered that he had a Native American star sign of the Red Hawk – “whilst known for their leadership and intuitive skills also suffer from impulsive moments like flying into telegraph wires”– it so captured

him. From then on if we walked into a messy kitchen we would say Red Hawk has been here..or if he burnt his arm... another red hawk moment... He felt better that Red Hawk, a beautiful bird, was also prone to mishaps.

No matter where you have found your totem animal from, or if you do not have one, you can still use a fetish to help you to focus and centre on the power of the animal in question and receive answers.

Zuni Fetish animals and their meanings

Discerning which animal can help you best, although fundamentally based on the observation of nature, is often open to widely different interpretations according to different tribes or cultures. For example the Thunderbird can mean eternal happiness or among Plains Indians powerful storms and havoc. I have listed here some of the most commonly accepted meanings for the Zuni Carvings:

Bear - inner strength, wisdom, Mountain Lion - strength, leadership, Wolf - pathfinder, Badger - healing, tenacity, Eagle - Vision, higher truths, Mole - earthly ties, Fox - protection, Horse - power, success, Coyote - laughter, humour, Turtle - mother earth, Beaver - builder, Snake - primeval forces, rabbit - good luck, Frog - cleansing, fertility, Owl - magical transformation, Raven - mysticism, clairvoyance.

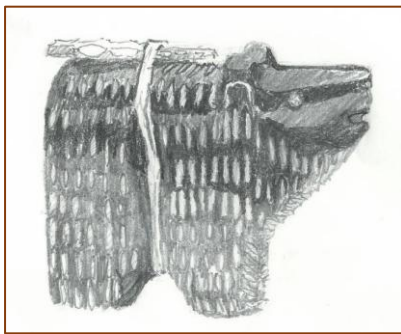


*The six main guardian fetishes are assigned colours and direction.
Some carvers still make full directional sets such as this one by Daisy Natewa.*

This table acts as a guide as to how an animal's characteristics can be interpreted.

Colour, essence	Direction	Character of animal	Character of direction
Yellow, wisdom	North	Mountain Lion Stout of heart, quick mind	Cope with cold wind of the north
White, illumination	East	Wolf - instinct Intelligence, pathfinder	Where new day starts
Red, passion, human drive	South	Badger Singular focus, healing	Heat of the south
Blue, inner strength	West	Bear Ability to hibernate, wisdom	Direction day ends
Rainbow, pursue the heights	Sky	Eagle Strength of flight, vision	Freedom of the Sky
Black, burrows within	Underground	Mole Burrower, earth grounding	Ancient deities of below the earth

The colours are important because, for example a red bear could also possess attributes of the South.

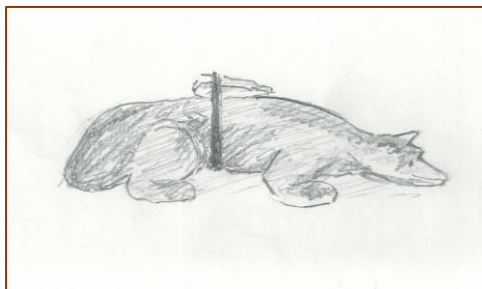
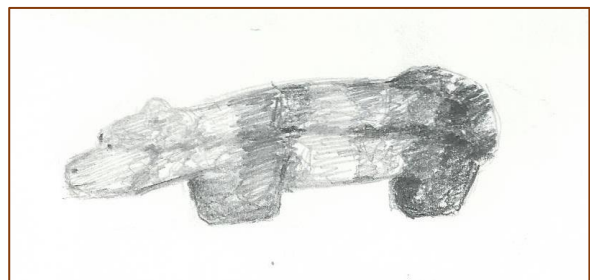


Bear - inner strength and wisdom.

Bear is perhaps the most important of the fetish animals and is certainly one of the most carved. Bear is credited with wisdom because he hibernates and has time for great thought. All bears have strong medicinal and curative powers, in particular white bears. A turquoise bear has the strongest power as his directional colour is blue.

Mountain Lion - strength, leadership.

Mountain Lion was esteemed as the Master Hunter and known for its high intelligence, physical prowess and intuitive ability. Mountain Lion is believed to protect travellers on their journeys. He is normally depicted with his tail curving up his back.



Badger - healing, tenacity.

Badger is considered to have strong medicinal powers because he helps medicine men and shamans dig the roots and herbs need in healing. Badgers are normally carved low to the ground with bushy tail and pointed noses.

Wolf – Pathfinder, loyalty.

Wolf is guardian of the East from whence each new day comes. He, therefore, embraces sunrise, new ideas and learning. Wolf is also highly intelligent and good at problem solving. Wolf is normally depicted with a thick full hanging tail.



Eagle – Vision, higher truth.

Soaring effortlessly and tirelessly at great heights grants Eagle the ability to see “the big picture” and offer insight and balance. Eagle is considered all-seeing and all-powerful and is a good mediator with the Spirit World. A gift of an eagle feather is considered a great honour.



Mole – Earthly ties.

Mole helps protect growing crops by hunting mice and other rodents and he is believed to have cunning and an ironical sense of humour. Mole’s smallness can assist with making small changes that can make a great difference.

Fetish Carvings

The best known carvers of fetishes come from families that have been making fetishes for the last century or more and these are big family names that also carry traditions in style and personality. The Quandalacy bear for example, is perhaps the most iconic of these.



Andres Quandelacy



Georgina Quandelacy

Leekya Deyuse was possibly the most famous fetish carver in the history of Zuni. He was born in 1889 and became world renowned for his beautiful carvings and outstanding fetish necklaces. He died in 1966 but his work lives on through his children and grandchildren today and is well represented in museums. I once had the privilege to commission for an avid collector, a stunningly, powerful bird in turquoise by his daughter Sarah which was about 6 inches in size but similar to this one carved by his grandson Delvin.



Delvin Leekya

Mostly the carvings fall into categories such as traditional, abstract, whimsical or very detailed.

As the carving is dictated by the shape of the stone to carve, so family style will play an influence on the design of that carving. Kent McManis has written extensively of the individual carvers and their extended family trees. As a student I studied primitive and modern art, and the influence primitive art had on modern artists, particularly around the turn of this century. This causes me to be most interested in the traditional carvings, such as this frog



by Daisy Natewa which resembles the ancient Mogollan carving found at Chaco Canyon.



And I love Rodney Laiwakete's modern, clean abstract work.



Some of the most humorous carvings are made from members of the Haloo family, such as these dancing bears by Claudia Peina.

Choosing fetishes

I hope that this article has given some pointers to help select the fetish that suits the appropriate occasion or event. Just bear in mind that when choosing the right fetish for yourself or as a gift, it is also important to keep in mind that the fetish also chooses you. I have had experience of fetishes jumping out of the hand of a potential buyer for no explicable reason. The most memorable was with a lady who was wearing a large Navajo bear claw pendant and tried to purchase a smiling, dolomite bear and he just kept disappearing from her hand. My first sale when I brought the fetishes back to Britain was to a man, who loved the carving but wasn't particularly interested in its potential talisman qualities. The next Saturday, however, he was back in my shop saying "where are those lucky carvings?" He had found £20 in the street straight after purchasing his fetish. Needless to say he encouraged many of the rest of the customers in my shop, at the time, to invest in such magic.

Many stories abound of people who have had mysterious, instant cures, struck fortune or avoided natural disaster after purchasing or being given a fetish, but it is important to realise those are incidental, the fetish's sole purpose is to assist the owner to find the true path or through his owner's abilities find his fortune. Whilst prayers can be made to the fetishes, the outcome of the event prayed for, if it fails, is never the fault of the fetish. A fetish can never be blamed for any failure to perform. Any power the fetish possesses actually comes from the power inside the owner, the fetish just helps to unleash those strengths that are within you and help you to focus on current problems to then help solve them.

Yet..



My husband found this wolf fetish in the pocket of his cardigan that he hadn't worn for ages, on the day that we were to hear if we had bid successfully for our new house. Immediately I knew that our bid would be successful - and of course it was. Wolf had chosen the right path for us.

The fun of selling fetishes

Above all else, trading in fetishes is always entertaining, they can take on personalities, create amusing incidents and can provide captivating stories. Once at a trade show someone unpacking the fetishes exclaimed "ooh here is a llama" much to the bemusement of some new customers who had thought they were in a jewellery hall not a menagerie! The llama then became such a focal point throughout our four day show, she was christened Lily and customers still ask after her some years later, needless to say she has never been sold and sits above my photo box in the office.



Lily the Llama

One crystal shop buyer last year picked up an ammonite bear and was immediately so overcome with emotion, holding it, that her husband had to buy it for her and she left with it tucked into her bra



Bernard Laiwakete ammonite bear

for safe keeping.

I once had a directional set attached to an arrowhead and we opened the fetish cabinet and they all jumped out and released themselves from the arrowhead. They were all intact but separated in their own directions. Never underestimate the extraordinary coincidences that can evolve from fetish ownership.

Conclusion

I was asked the other day "will the popularity of fetishes lead to imitations" which is a very real concern if you consider the huge market in Philippine and Chinese imports of Native American jewellery. Already Philippine fetish necklaces have inundated the market but a necklace is a look, and can easily serve merely as a fashion item. A stand alone fetish is something entirely different and always will be. As I see it a fetish is something special that can be, for its owner, life enhancing or even life empowering but it is entirely up to the individual owner. Carving fetishes does not necessarily have to be the sole preserve of the Zuni nation, it is just that the families of carvers in Zuni, carve the very best and, in time-honoured tradition. And that will always remain the case.

The popularity of fetishes has increased dramatically over the years that I have been trading with them, and never more so, today as I write, has their appeal seemed more essential and life affirming. Regardless of their potential powers, their universal attraction lies in the mystery of that potential, as large and as real as the Zuni's affinity with the great mysteries of life, that is contained within such a small, beautifully carved stone animal.

FURTHER READING

Native American Fetishes, A Schiffer Book for Collectors - Kay Whittle

Zuni Fetishes and Carvings - Kent McManis

Zuni Fetishes - Using Native American Objects for Meditation, Reflection and Insight - Hal Zina Bennett

Spirit in the Stone, A handbook of Southwest Indian Carvings and Beliefs - Mark Bahti

Illustrations by Max de Sales La Terriere

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