

THE ARTIST'S

# men for



LEFT, RIGHT: WENDY MEAHERN

## VICTORIA ADAMS



JEWELRY PHOTOS: VICTORIA ADAMS

BY MICHAEL HICE



Top right and far right: Adams's meticulous work and reverence for traditional themes may be what led her to be the first contemporary artist to exhibit in Morning Star Gallery, known primarily for Native antiquities. Right: *We Travel Above Them*. Above: *Buffalo Man Attends the Sun Dance*.

My childhood was not spent growing up on the res," Victoria Adams admits. This is surprising; at first glance, Adams's jewelry strikes one as very traditional. However, her work is traditional only in its expression of cultural symbols, while also being a consummate blend of contemporary technique with traditional imagery.

Adams is Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho. She was born in Oklahoma, raised in northern California, and lived a substantial time in Montana before coming to work and live in Santa Fe. Today, her award-winning jewelry is full of Cheyenne design—animals, cultural symbols, stylized figures of her family or other significant individuals—all of which she thinks about as she works.

"Describing my jewelry is difficult because it's like painting," she explains. "The design comes from stories of my personal experiences within and out of Cheyenne culture, concerning people I know and stories I have heard or lived. The stories and figures give my jewelry life and power. I tell the wearer the piece's story, and she passes it on...like powerful oral history."

A graphic example of one of Adams's story pieces is her recent *Bird Rattle Steals Horses from the Crow*, based on the life of the grandfather of her adopted Blackfeet mother. He was the last of the breed who entered the United States from Canada and stole horses from the Crow, and in later decades conducted business dealings with the same man from whom he had once stolen horses. They would talk and laugh about the old horse-stealing days.

Adams also loves and produces a lot of traditional beadwork. She talks with elders about the symbols she finds in old handiwork of this traditional art form. These symbols and their makers provide her with thoughtful inspiration.

Adams's work did not always display such Native expression. Her early efforts were as a Western engraver, and it was at an auction of the works of Charles Russell, the 19th-century Western artist, that she met her mentor, Paul Raczka. Surprisingly, he, a non-Indian, would guide her to her own culture for inspiration, a culture about which, despite her birth into its heritage, she still had much to learn.

Raczka, from Buffalo, New York, was interested in anthropology. He attended the

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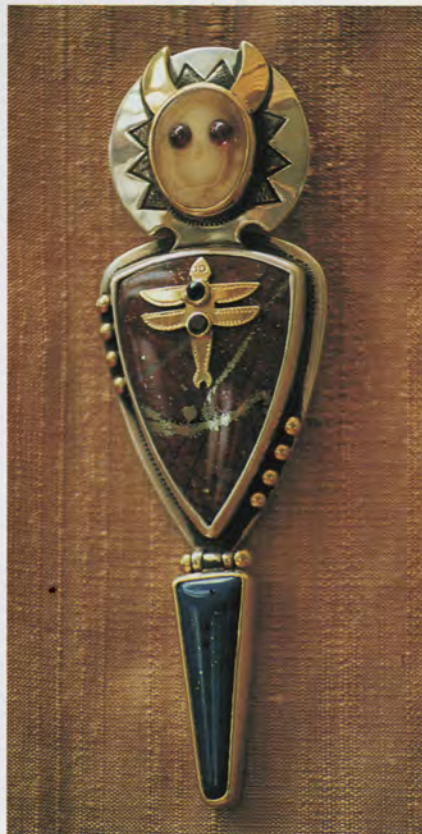
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## Victoria Adams



VICTORIA ADAMS

Native lore permeates Adams's work, as in *Buffalo Man is Guided by the Dragonfly*.

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University of New Mexico, was a student of Tony Hillerman's, and fell in love with Native American culture. He consequently spent a great deal of time with and was adopted by the Blackfeet in northern Montana and across the border in Canada. The two Native cultures are similar in many ways.

Raczka was a professor of Native American studies, later owned a trading post for 10 years between two Blackfeet reserves, and became ensnared in Native culture. He sang and danced at powwows where he was often the only non-Indian, and, other than his wife and children, his companions and family were mostly Native American.

When Adams complained to her new friend that custom Western engraving no longer inspired her and that its client base was limited, he introduced her to his adopted Indian family and friends, where she was also adopted and discovered new inspiration. He presented her and her

work to a successful gallery owner in Sun Valley, Idaho, and invited important collectors to view her new achievements. This essentially launched the career of jewelry artisan that Adams enjoys today.

Inspired creatively by beadwork, nature, people, and stories, Adams learned the technical aspects of making jewelry from others—a continual process. She is involved with Pueblo V Design in Santa Fe, headed by renowned Hopi-Laguna jeweler Duane Maktima. "Mentoring didn't include as much instruction about technique as about my artistic mental process—how to view, select, and value my designs," Adams says.

Without belittling her own participation in her growth, Adams gives much credit to Paul Raczka for the status she enjoys now: living the life of the artist she is, and well on her way to becoming the artist she strives to be. She explains that a mentor's specific attributes—race and other characteristics—prove not as important as recognizing the struggling artist's desire and combining it with the mentor's own commitment to playing whatever role he or she can in the process of improving the artist's undertakings.

"My mentor caused me to look at design in a whole new way," she says. "He instilled a curiosity in me, taking me to museums, showing me slides of Native symbols, and encouraging me to research my own culture. Because of him, I design with meaning and substance, not just because something is pretty. He introduced me to Native people who were not my blood relatives but who adopted me—big in Native American cultures—and I had opportunities to hear history and stories firsthand.

"Because he cares, he doesn't let me slip by with anything. He always observes carefully and gives me honest feedback, one reason I feel increasingly confident in my direction. Having a mentor helps an artist find the right direction and stay on track."

Because of her experience with Paul Raczka, Adams is committed to mentoring younger people. "I mentor others naturally," she states. "Without my own biological children, I am driven to help other young artists." **SF**