The Squash Blossom Necklace and the Concho Belt

8

To complete a Martha of Taos outfit, the customer needed Native American accessories. A squash blossom necklace and a concho belt, in particular, were favored.

The first phase of Southwest Indian jewelry begins in 1868, following the release of the Navajo from Bosque Redondo after a five-year internment. At this time, Navajo artisans began to develop their skill as silversmiths and started to create new types of silver jewelry for everyday wear that would show the skill of the artisan and the wealth and status of the wearer. Around 1880, Navajo silversmiths created the first "squash blossom" necklace, composed of round silver beads and silver beads decorated with petal-like forms that resemble the blossoms of a squash or pomegranate. This flower-like form was probably introduced into the Americas by the Spanish and then later used by Navajo artisans to create the squash blossom necklace. A key element of the necklace is the "naja," [Navajo najahe, "crescent"], which is the pendant featured at the bottom center of a squash blossom necklace. This crescent-shaped form recalls ornaments on Spanish horse bridles and may be Near Eastern in origin.

The first concho belts were created by Navajo silversmiths around 1870. The oval-shaped silver disks that are the belts' primary ornament are called "conchos," based on "concha," the Spanish word for shell. Early examples were fairly simple; a leather belt was decorated with conchos, which were created by hammering Mexican and American silver dollar coins and cutting an opening for the belt to pass through. The shape of the concho appears to have been inspired by the silver work on Mexican horse bridles and ornaments of the Plains Indians. Later developments in concho belt design occurred around 1900, when artisans began to solder loops to the back of the conchos, allowing for more decorations on the front of the disk. Additional embellishments included turquoise stones set into the conchos and spacers, often in the shape of a butterfly.

In the 1920s, hotel and restaurant entrepreneur Fred Harvey launched his highly successful Indian Detours, which allowed westward bound railroad travelers to take a few days off from their trips to tour key Southwestern locations, such as Taos Pueblo. Harvey set up venues for the sale of Native American jewelry, including squash blossom necklaces and concho belts, which became very popular among the tourists. As a result, Navajo silversmiths began to experiment with designs and ornamentation intended to appeal to this market. Like squash blossom necklaces, concho belts are unisex; they may be worn by men with jeans or by women with jeans or skirts. Both concho belts and squash blossom necklaces are staples of Southwestern fashion.

9

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
MUSEUM of ART

Museum Hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 11 am – 4 pm
Free Admission
720 S. Husband Street, Stillwater, OK 74074
t. 405-744-2780

Illustrations

[Cover] Artist Unknown, Portrait of Martha Reed, n.d., Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.

[1] E. Irving Couse (American, 1866-1936), *Contentment*, 1918, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Vaughn D. Vennerberg II, Dallas, Texas, OSU '76. Photography by Phil Shockley.

[2] Dan Reid, Martha Reed and Lucy Mirabel [Archuletta] from Taos Pueblo Working on a Pattern in Martha of Taos Shop, 1971, black-and-white photograph. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.

[3] Martha of Taos, Dress Order Form with Fabric Swatches for Lynda Levin, 1981. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.

[4] Photographer Unknown, Martha Reed in a Spanish-style squaw dress, c. 1960, black-and-white photograph. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.

[5] Photographer Unknown, Model Judy McCabe in a Martha of Taos dress, c. 1990, black-and-white photograph. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.

[6] Photographer Unknown, Martha Reed in a Martha of Taos dress and squash blossom necklace, c. 1990, color photograph. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.

[7] Martha of Taos fashion on display in the exhibition. Fashions from the collections of Lora and Neal Buck and the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. Photography by Phil Shockley.

[8] Photographer Unknown, Martha Reed in a Martha of Taos dress and squash blossom necklace (detail), c. 1990, color photograph. Collection of Oklahoma State University Museum of Art.

[9] Artist Unknown, Concho Belt, n.d., silver and leather. Courtesy of Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, New Mexico. Photography by Phil Shockley.

Select Bibliography

Frank, Larry. *Indian Silver Jewelry of the Southwest*, 1868-1930. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Co., 1990.

Leavitt, Virginia Couse. "Contentment," Coeur d'Alene Auction Catalog, January 23, 2009.

Porter, Dean, Teresa Hayes Edie and Suzan Campbell. *Taos Artists and Their Patrons*, 1898-1950. University of Notre Dame: Snite Museum of Art, 1999.

Tisdale, Shelby. *Fine Indian Jewelry of the Southwest: the Millicent Rogers Museum Collection*. Taos, NM: Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, NM, 2006.

Strassel, Annemarie. "Designing Women: Feminist Methodologies in American Fashion." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1/2 (2012): 35-59.

Support for this brochure has been provided by Nigel Jones. Exhibitions and programs at the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art are supported by OSU/A&M Board of Regents, OSUMA Art Advocates, and the Oklahoma Arts Council. Additional support for the exhibition is provided by Linda and Jim Burke, Deb and Dave Engle, the Chi Omega Alumnae Club, Stillwater, OK, and the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Special thanks go to Vaughn Vennerberg II for loaning us his E. Irving Couse painting *Contentment* and to the Millicent Rogers Museum for their loan of a concho belt. Special thanks to Lora and Neal Buck, who generously shared their knowledge with OSU students and lent items from their collection. Technical support was provided by Visual Resources Director Sally Schuh and her staff. We also thank Jessica Provencher, Research Assistant for the Doel and Martha Reed Research Project, for her invaluable assistance throughout the project.

This exhibition is organized by the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art and serves as the culmination of the Museum Exhibition class taught by Dr. Rebecca Brienen in Spring 2016. The exhibition is curated by the following students: Savannah Barrington, Laura Burns, Tyler Davis, Joy Farris, Candace Gilstrap, and Tiffany Sides.

Design by Candace Gilstrap

Martha of Taos:
Broomstick Skirts, Concho Belts, and the History of Southwestern Fashion

May 31 - September 3, 2016

Taos: A Destination for Artists

Described by one historian as "the most mythic region of the nation," the American Southwest has been a destination for thousands of tourists and hundreds of artists since the early twentieth century. Taos in particular has been a center of creativity for a variety of talented people including Oklahoma native, artist, and fashion designer Martha Jane Reed (1922 – 2010). This exhibition is the first to focus on Reed and her contribution to America's ongoing romance with the Southwest.

When Martha Reed moved to Taos, New Mexico, in 1953, she joined a long line of artistically inclined individuals drawn to this remote village in the mountains. Although Cincinnati artist Joseph H. Sharp (1859-1953) had already achieved success with his Taos-themed paintings in 1894, the story of the artists' colony generally begins with the painters E. L. Blumenschein (1874-1960) and Bert E. Phillips (1868-1956), who were traveling around the southwestern United States and "discovered" Taos in 1898. In 1915, Blumenschein and Phillips, along with E. Irving Couse (1866-1936) and Sharp, were founding members of the Taos Society of Artists. These artists, all male, white, and well-trained products of European and American art academies, were attracted to the natural beauty of Taos, as well as to its Hispanic and especially Native American communities. They specialized in images of Native Americans in traditional dress, and many of the artists created illustrations for railroad advertising campaigns. Continually inhabited for about 700 years, Taos Pueblo is a world heritage site. Since the late nineteenth century, it has been an important tourist destination and many of the models employed by Taos Society artists, including Ben Luhan, were from Taos Pueblo. Artists continue to visit and settle in Taos today because of its natural beauty, fascinating history, and reputation for supporting the arts.

E. Irving Couse: Taos Society Painter

Eanger Irving Couse (1866-1936) is an American painter best known for his romantic but sensitive paintings of Native Americans. Couse was born in Saginaw, Michigan, where he developed an interest in Native American culture very early in his life. Couse studied at both the Art Institute of Chicago and at the National Academy of Design in New York City before moving to Paris in 1886 to complete his training at the Académie Julian. In the spring of 1902, Couse visited Taos on the recommendation of his friend and fellow artist Ernest L. Blumenschein, and in 1915 he became the first president of the Taos Society of Artists. For the rest of his life Couse created works that featured Native Americans, which established his reputation as a Southwestern artist. Couse's paintings were reproduced on calendars for the Santa Fe Railroad Company, bringing great fame to the artist and additional tourists to the Southwest. *Contentment*, painted in 1918, features Couse's favorite model Ben Luhan of Taos Pueblo and is an excellent example of Couse's tonalist work from this period, in which he explored the effects of light, both natural and artificial. In *Contentment*, a peaceful, contemplative Native American man stares into a fire. The painter shows great sensitivity in rendering the warm, glowing light from the fire, as it illuminates the man's body and the interior of the room. The frame on this work is original and was designed by Couse.

1

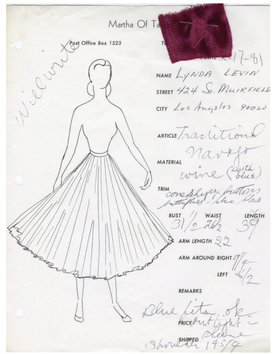
Martha of Taos (1955-1993)

2

Martha Reed was introduced to New Mexico by her father, well-known painter and master printmaker Doel Reed (1895-1985), who was head of the Art Department at Oklahoma A&M College (later Oklahoma State University) from 1924-1959. In 1946, Doel Reed established a summer studio in Questa, New Mexico, a village near Taos, moving permanently to the area in 1959. The beauty of the location and the artistic environment also attracted East Coast heiress and fashion icon Millicent Rogers (1902-1953), who moved to Taos in 1947 and quickly began to wear Navajo-style clothing and jewelry. Although Rogers died in 1953, her popularization of Southwestern style may have influenced Martha Reed.

After completing her degree in Art at Oklahoma A&M in 1944, studying jewelry making in Texas, and working at both the Philbrook Museum in Tulsa and the Dallas Art Museum, Martha Reed moved permanently to Taos in 1953. Reed established her clothing shop Martha of Taos in 1955, which was a Taos institution until it closed in 1993. Reed initially specialized in "squaw dresses," which were popular throughout the United States in the mid-1950s. Reed designed the clothing, her mother Elizabeth Jane Reed created the patterns, and skilled seamstresses from Taos Pueblo such as Lucy [Maribel] Archuletta, granddaughter of artist model Ben Luhan, created the finished product. By the 1980s, Reed's most commercially successful period, she sold a wide array of dress, blouse, and skirt styles, although the broomstick skirt and the Navajo-inspired velvet dresses remained favorites among her customers.

Martha Reed created many different styles of blouses, dresses, and skirts based on Mexican, Spanish, and Navajo fashions, from the fitted Pyrenees blouse to traditional velvet Navajo-style skirts and shirts in jewel-like tones, to the full-sleeved, scoop-necked Old Mexico style blouses. Her creations blended the different cultures of the Southwest with the new American ideals to provide stylish but comfortable clothing to her clients.



3

4

The Southwestern Style

National pride following WWII made the creation of an original American style essential. The fashion designs of Claire McCardell (1905-1958) are of special importance in this context. She believed women's clothes should be versatile, comfortable, flattering, and easy to care for. She approached her designs with a focus on the body. Her timeless "Popover" dress, for example, adopted menswear shirting; the material was wrapped instead of tailored. The waist was tied with a sash, which allowed for additional flexibility and movement.

5

The Southwestern style, as exemplified by Martha Reed, became another version of a genuinely American fashion. Like McCardell's "Popover" dress, Southwestern-style garments allowed for a high level of versatility. They were loose and free-flowing, and many wrapped at the waist. Examples by Martha Reed in this exhibition, such as the broomstick skirt and Old Mexico style blouse, exemplify both the comfort and authenticity American designers were seeking. Southwestern fashion quickly became a nationwide trend with the popularization of the "squaw dress" (also called patio or fiesta dress) in the 1950s. This dress featured a fitted bodice and a full, often brightly colored, broomstick skirt. These dresses were casual but attractive everyday wear appropriate for hosting cocktail parties and cookouts in the new ethnically homogenous suburban communities like Levittown, New Jersey. Women today continue to wear Southwestern fashion because it is comfortable, attractive, and authentically American.

6

7