

# Kim Obrzut

ONE OF THE FEW NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN SCULPTORS,  
OBRZUT CASTS MATRIARCHAL VALUES IN BRONZE.



**K**IM OBRZUT'S BRONZE SCULPTURES OF HOPI women have no eyes, noses, mouths, or ears. Yet they effectively represent the female form with stomachs exuding a rotund femininity, graceful coverings draped over their shoulders, and beads or heishi shells hanging off their necks.

Splitting her time between Flagstaff and Phoenix, Obrzut takes her artistic inspiration almost entirely from her Indian heritage, which is half-Hopi on her mother's side. "I talk with my hands," she says, as one of her latest creations, a piece that will sell for some \$4,000, rests in her palms. "While my work is very contemporary, it is also steeped in spiritual and symbolic content. The forms, the design, were never planned. All of it is original; it was given to me."

Obrzut began working as an art student in clay, primarily utilizing the scrape-and-smooth method that Hopi potters have used for thousands of years. Then, at Northern Arizona University, where she earned a degree in fine arts some 17 years ago, she took a lasting interest in bronze and began casting using the lost-wax

method made famous by the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians.

"I know the metal. I know what has to be done," she says. "That gives me the foresight while I'm working on the piece. I know what the metal is going to do. Every once in a while, I'll be surprised with the outcome. The metal has its own spirit. I like that."

As she points out, Obrzut was the first Native American woman to work in bronze, though now a cadre of others have followed her lead. "It is a field that is wide open to women, and I encourage and support each and every one," she says.

Obrzut's works sell for \$950 to \$22,000 apiece—the latter for a 6-foot bronze of a Hopi woman—and she creates about five pieces a year. "I work slowly, deliberately," she says. She also abides by strict regulations and rules of integrity; as an artist who shows at the Santa Fe Indian Market, she is permitted to create an edition of 50 for any piece that is less than 12 inches tall, an edition of 40 for anything up to three feet, and an edition of 20 for pieces up to six feet.

She does not use a gallery



ABOVE: *Matriarch* (detail). OPPOSITE (from left): *Kneeling Butterfly*, *Seed Corn*.

to represent her work — “I really want to meet the people for whom I’m sculpting,” she says. Her pieces have been acquired by some of the world’s most prestigious Western art museums: the Heard Museum in Phoenix, the San Diego Museum of Man, the Eiteljorg American Indian and Western Museum in Indianapolis, and the St. George Art Museum in St. George, Utah.

As a young child, she longed to be an artist as she watched her grandfather carve wooden kachina dolls. But carving is traditionally off-limits to females in the Hopi culture.

“I could only watch him,” she says. “I really wanted to do something myself, so I just watched and watched. But I never dreamed in a million years that I’d be a sculptor.”

The ideas for her work just come to her, she says. “Or, let me say, I let them come from my dreams or simply from within. Something I saw or experienced will wait its time to come to fruition. You start with something you have in the back of your

mind,” she adds. “I do a lot of standing back and looking to understand the light and shadow, and then I just let it happen. This is why I like working late at night.”

She sculpts what she knows best, and by her own account that is women. “That’s the way of my culture—the strength and wisdom of being matriarchal. We work together to celebrate our blessings, and we share our world. The women own the home. We own the seeds that are planted. We trace the family line through our mothers. With this, our

lineage continues throughout time. The women play a very important role.” She tries to exemplify these matriarchal values through her work. “My art is a teaching tool. Hopi tradition isn’t written; it’s oral. Through my work, I try to teach people that this is why things are.”

On every piece Obrzut creates, she exaggerates some feature. For a piece called *Seed Corn*, for instance, the viewer’s eye is

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**Red Lullaby**

drawn to the seed pot bearing a small hole to accept seeds. “That’s the first thing I want you to see,” she says. According to a Hopi legend, a woman, hungry and tired, appeared in the local village one day. The Hopi people took her in, fed her, and gave her a place to sleep. One morning, everyone awakened and noticed the woman had left, but a pot filled with dried corn remained — the seeds the Hopi plant today. “*Seed Corn* is meant to evoke that story,” Obrzut says. A cape or shawl on another work, *Juniper*, brings to mind the image of a young Hopi girl dancing. “I think the second thing people notice about my work is its feeling of quality and simplicity, which is the key to life, all life. Simplicity.”

Obrzut’s works are cast by professionals, largely around Arizona, in Sedona, Chino Valley, and Prescott. She first creates the piece in clay, and the casters then go to work. The colors on the bronze come from the metal finishes that, when melded with heat and chemicals, leave the patina of blues, browns, greens, and even reds.

Her latest creative turn is to stainless steel—a metal conventionally off-limits to Hopi women. “Stainless is this incredible avenue,” she says. “It’s something for me to master again. I will always need the chance to prove anew that I am a constantly evolving artist, always changing, always growing.”

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For more information on Kim Obrzut, visit: [www.kimobrzut.com](http://www.kimobrzut.com).