

METTLE TO METAL

Native Women Sculptors Reign and Pour

By RoseMary Diaz



ABOVE Evelyn Fredericks (Hopi), *Harmony*, 2018, bronze. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE Estella Loretto (Jemez), *The Peaceful Warrior's Prayer*, 2004, bronze, 156 × 90 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

THE STORY OF BRONZE CASTING began more than 5,000 years ago. Like most new technologies, the alloy traveled across vast territories to inspire and sustain its own intricate systems of trade and commerce. Bronze brought significant advancements in tools and weaponry and was used in the minting of coins—anchoring it, quite literally, to the value of the currency itself. Cast bronze rings, pendants, and other objects of wearable art have been unearthed from millennia-old sites across the intersections of Asia, Africa, and Europe, suggesting it to be among the world's first bling.

Recipes for bronze have been reinvented over time, solidifying in today's standardized formula, composed of 88 percent copper and 12 percent tin. This compound, with slight variations possible from artist to artist, is employed for *cire perdue*, or lost-wax casting, the most widely used method of casting bronze.

Though there are some examples of statuary works in bronze that date to 2500 BCE, including the oldest surviving specimen, *Dancing Girl*, attributed to an artist from the Indus Valley city of Mohenjo-daro, in modern-day Pakistan (that sculpture presently resides in the National Museum in New Delhi, and her rightful national ownership is the subject of long debate). Metalsmiths worked arsenic bronze and tin bronze in the pre-Columbian Andes,¹ but the medium did not experience its fruitful bloom, artistically speaking, until bronze poured into Florence, Italy, during the Renaissance. Thereafter, the alloy cooled as a means for creative expression until the Industrial Revolution, when bronze works became greatly respected as a stately and enduring art form. A number of American artists certainly contributed to this mastery of metal, though few among them were women, or Native.

Here, the epic tale of bronze continues with a look at some of the Indigenous women who have brought the art form closer to the center of Native America's creative possibilities. Their stories are presented in sections that observe their individual pursuits within the shared field of endeavor in some chronological order, rather than implying a hierarchy. In their own words,

1. Heather Lechtman, "Issues in Andean Metallurgy," in *Pre-Columbian Metallurgy of South America. A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 18th and 19th*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1975), 23.

these artists offer personal reflections on what led them to metal, why they stayed, and their plans for the continuing journey.

GROUNDBREAKERS

EVELYN FREDERICKS (HOPI): I started my life in a pretty conventional way for a Hopi kid. We were surrounded by relatives in a small village, so our world was limited, but we were given free reign. We, my sisters and I, mostly played outside in the sand, building make-believe houses and villages. Our toys were small bones called *mo mo ye*, or "small children" in Hopi, that were saved for us from the mutton stew we ate on occasion. What I cherish most was being close to my grandparents and being with them when they rested between farming: my *so-os* with her basketry, and *quaah* making his rattles, bows, and arrows.

When I decided that making sculpture was what I wanted to do in this life, it was not a conscious choice. Creating meaningful objects is a continuation of the experience I had as a child, led by the example of my grandparents' creativity.

Most of my bronze work is cast from an image of what I first carve in stone. For me, choosing a stone to carve follows these steps: cleaning the stone; studying it for a design or idea; cutting and sculpting and teasing out the final image as it presents itself. This is the rewarding part because the final result may not be what I had envisioned, but what the stone wanted to be. I'm just the person who let its spirit free. Sometimes this process can take months.

When I decide to have an image cast in bronze, I imagine its potential life in color. I love all the possible colorations, and [using] emphasis of color on specific areas of a work. I work with Petersen Creations, in Prescott, Arizona. They take the work from initial molding to patina but are always mindful to keep the original feel from beginning to final finish.

Working in bronze presents the artist with more possibilities for expressing an idea. The image can be small and delicate, or monumental. Though I haven't done monumental work, I applaud women who do. At this point in my life, my work has to be of manageable size. As



a woman of a certain age, I have chosen to slow down and exhibit selectively. I think I've finally learned to enjoy my life and work as I choose. I am extremely grateful for a life of making art. And, at heart, I'm still the kid making mud houses and playing with bones.

ESTELLA LORETTO (JEMEZ PUEBLO): I was drawn to sculpture. It's relaxing, but mostly I enjoy the process: creating the armature, visualizing the position of the statue, then packing on warm clay to bring it to life. It is a labor of love, as some of my pieces take over a year, sometimes two, to create. *Peaceful Warrior* took three years. Working in oil clay gives me a chance to take a break, rest, and start again, and gives me time to change the

form. It's very flexible and forgiving, and very sensuous to touch, so smooth and warm. Another thing I really appreciate about working in bronze is that I can do small, limited editions and replicate [my original].

In the beginning, I felt like there was a prejudice about women working in metal, like we didn't belong in the foundry. Bronze sculpting is not considered a traditional art form, but I remember waking up at my grandmother's and my mother would be sculpting in water[-based] clay.

It's quite a long process, the sculpting time, the mold-making, the lost wax, the casting, the chasing, the patina. It expands you, stretches you emotionally, physically, spiritually, and financially, but in the end it's very rewarding when your



ABOVE Roxanne Swentzell (Santa Clara Pueblo), *All Directions Covered*, bronze, edition of 25, 15¾ × 11 ½ × 14 in. Image courtesy of the Rozanne Swentzell Tower Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.

BELOW Tammy Garcia (Santa Clara Pueblo), *Seeded Woman II* (front and back views), bronze, 4¼ × 4 in., edition of 35. Image courtesy of King Galleries, Santa Fe, NM.

OPPOSITE Kim Seyesnem Obrzut (Hopi), *Morning Song*, 2015, bronze, 28 × 12 × 10 in., edition of 75.



masterpiece is standing there looking at you and greeting the world.

The teacher who influenced me the most was Allan Houser. He talked me into working in bronze. He said “There’s Michelangelo, Henry Moore, Glenna Goodacre, but there are [very few] Native American women working in bronze. I want to help you. I can teach you. I know you can do it! We can start tomorrow.” And we did. The exposure to working with [him] was very moving. With his encouragement and direction, I welcomed the opportunity to work in bronze.

My inspiration is always to create beauty, something that honors nature. If I’m having a block, I go take a walk on Canyon Road or go to a Pueblo ceremony. Or pray. If I’m procrastinating, I do feng shui or cook. I hope my creative legacy will be as a pioneer: the first Native American monumental sculptor who did beautiful, serene work—peaceful yet strong—and created healing environments. My sculptures are like my children and I do get attached to them. What I give birth to in bronze will live eternally and will be around to tell my stories, our stories, long after I’m gone. My children, my daughter, my granddaughter, and the world will always have a part of what I [created] as a Native woman.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL (SANTA CLARA PUEBLO): I started sculpting [in clay] at the age of four. It was my first

language, and I used it to communicate with my mother. When I first thought of the idea of turning my clay sculptures into bronzes [almost thirty years later], I thought it was distasteful because it was a kind of mass production. But during the renaissance of the Indian art market, I couldn’t make my work fast enough for the demand. So, after being convinced by those around me that it would help me not to have to make so many pieces in clay, I decided to create a small piece to have cast. Peter Wright, a bronze publisher, agreed to handle the production and upfront costs. I hesitantly agreed. But when that first little clay woman came back with that familiar dark-bronze patina and surprisingly soft glow, I was excited. I held her and felt the weight and the soft finish, turning her around and around in awe of how beautiful she was. I thought bronzing her would cheapen her, but it actually added something the clay lost once hand-polishing it made it “fragile.” The bronze had a touchable quality that was permanent: I loved it!

As I learned more about the process and the work and skill it takes to even get a [finished] bronze, I was humbled. It wasn’t mass production at all. Each piece, even of the same image, is handled individually, and each one is different because it has its own wax, its own casting and chasing [process], and its own grinding. And, after welding the individual pieces together, each is individually patinaed. Mike Massie has done all my finishing work for the last 25 years.

Bronze opened up a new world of possibilities for me. I could work as big as I wanted to and not worry about firing as [we] could make molds of unfired clay pieces. Brad [Lancaster] could make molds of anything and not break the originals. There’s something wonderful about the large, outdoor pieces. I’ve watched my grandchildren play on them, birds take baths in them, and snow pile high on them, and that is very satisfying. They’re an all-season, all-ages, all-species kind of art.

Every artist who ventures into bronze has their own reasons for opening that door. As Native women artists, it’s been less available as a possibility only because our identities as “professional anything” are still breaking through the barriers of the human psyche, as far as what women can do. Lucky for me, I was one of those naïve little girls who thought I could do anything, so I did. Later, I realized I was an oddity. I felt the stab of gender inequality as I watched male artists receive commissions that I knew I could do, possibly better, but they got because the mainstream mindset still saw men as more capable than women. Things are changing, though, and [now] the men at the hardware stores don’t always assume I’m running an errand for my husband.

The Native woman’s voice is one of survival, hardship, and endurance. It speaks of love and loss, of children and grandchildren, of relationships of every kind. Our work speaks of her-story, not his-story, of our joys, sorrows, and journeys. I’m not young any more, but in this time that I’ve had, I’ve never seen anyone as strong as a Native woman. If we survive these times to look back on this part of the human journey, I think we will see the voice of the Native woman rising up to become one of the wisest and most needed. Some of that voice will stand timeless in bronze. I hope to be part of this.

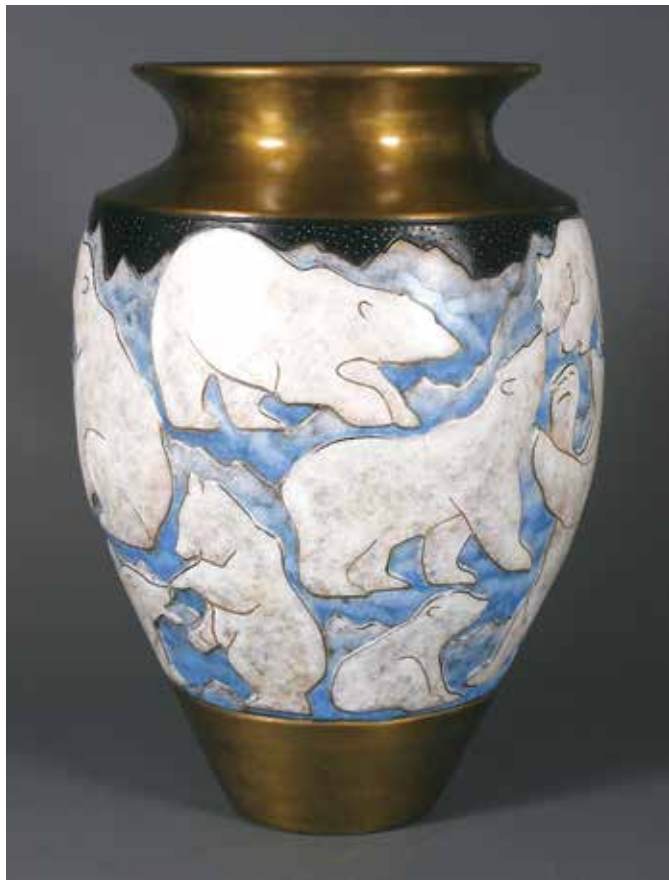


THE VISIONARIES

TAMMY GARCIA (SANTA CLARA PUEBLO): I have been working in bronze for almost 19 years. I was first attracted to it because of its shine and its strength, and I’m drawn to the iridescent gold and the warm tones of ferric. The colors used for the patinas can be layered and combined, making the choices virtually endless. The choices available definitely keep me interested.

My sister [Autumn Borts-Medlock] and I learned to make coil-built pottery as young girls; it has been a tradition in our family for hundreds of years. We made animal figurines and small bowls alongside our mom. She showed us how. And it was inspiring to see our grandmother [Mary Cain] fire her pottery. We had a very special kind of education—the kind you have to be born into.

Working with an oil-based clay offers the luxury of time when sculpting because it never dries. And it adheres to almost



me, the little things in everyday life are worth looking at: a child in the arms of a new mother; the moment a young woman realizes she looks forward to motherhood; the skilled potter who looks to sell her wares; the grace of an elderly matriarch.

The technical term for my work is “smooth skin.” I describe it as organic in form, strong on line, and symbolic in nature. There’s maybe even a softness about it. I don’t want my work to be perfect, like it was machine made. I believe there is innate beauty in things made by hand— hands that allow the spirit to flow through. There have been many lessons in realizing this. It sounds like an easy task, but it’s taken a lot of training within myself to acknowledge and respect this part of my work. In many ways, it knows more than I do.

PAHPONEE (KICKAPOO-POTAWATOMI): I was standing in my booth at Santa Fe Indian Market in 2002, when the owner of a foundry approached me and asked me if I had considered creating any of my original pottery designs in bronze. I like the fact that bronze has historic longevity, so I decided to try it.

I have created art my entire life. I always knew it was one of my strengths, but it was when I saw the two white buffalo that I began to get clear and precise ideas for pottery and bronze. Most of my ideas, which I call assignments, come from the natural world. Maybe it’s because I love nature and have purposefully created my lifestyle to spend as much time as possible in it.

Personally, I like the use of bright colors combined with the polished metal. I like to arrange the colors to supplement the storytelling. My ideas also come from personal life experiences, so I try to stay very open and neutral and wait for the assignments to come.

One element that is absolutely necessary for me to create art is being in harmony with myself, which feels like peacefulness, happiness. Through failure I’ve learned that haste makes waste, and not every art form has a long life.

That I followed my heart, my own inspiration and personal vision without regard to others’ expectations, that is what I hope my creative legacy will be.

THE STORYTELLERS

CAROLINE CARPIO (ISLETA PUEBLO): I’ve worked with clay for more than 36 years. Two decades ago I started casting my clay work in bronze. Some of my sculptures can be time consuming to create, and special pieces are few and far between. Those are usually the pieces that end up being bronzed, which, though they are limited editions, allows more than one person to own and enjoy [the sculpture]. Multiple castings can retain a delicate design, and still be durable.

My artwork is a balance of honoring my Pueblo culture and being mindful in giving it a contemporary voice. My art reflects the hardships, journeys, and stories that we have encountered, both independently and collectively, as members of the Native community.

Creativeness is within everyone. As Native people, we’ve always had to be creative and resourceful to adapt to life. I’ve had this saying from early on: “I have a great idea!” And it still carries me to this day.

The first time I entered a pot-shaped bronze into a competition, they didn’t know what category to put it in. It wasn’t a clay pot, so they put it in the sculpture category. These days, more Native women artists are working in bronze. That will add to the larger narrative, that as Native women we challenged ourselves and made a mark.

I hope the legacy I leave behind through my art will be a valuable representation of who we are as Native people in this time period. I also want my legacy to reflect my contemporary creativeness, and that I honored my Pueblo culture in a respectful way. I’m honored because future generations can say “one of our people made that.”

HOLLY WILSON (DELAWARE NATION-CHEROKEE): Art has always been the only thing I’ve wanted to do. I used to draw with my dad when I was young. I would create visual representations of stories in my mind. I still do that. My original medium was clay, but I found bronze to be a much sturdier material. It allows me versatility and flexibility to manipulate my figures in a way I couldn’t with clay. This is especially important because many of them are very small. Bronze is also extremely enduring. I like the idea of it lasting essentially forever.

I work directly in wax and pour my own bronze. I don’t use molds to make editions; each is a one-of-a-kind piece. Bronze is malleable but also hard. Even when it’s finished, you can still make changes. There are so many materials that have limitations to what you can do after a certain point. If I use a patina I don’t like, I can just sandblast it off. If a leg doesn’t look right, I can manipulate or replace it without much difficulty. Sometimes what you want isn’t what you get, but I don’t know if I believe in failure. One work, *Frayed*, was a total accident. I overheated the metal and the result destroyed the original, but I love how she turned out.

A lot of people like to say [my work] is “whimsical,” but I actually hate that term. Whimsy nullifies anything I’m trying to say through my work. It tells the viewer that my work is about sentiment and not substance: I don’t believe that. Every work I create is about a subject or situation we as a people are facing on a daily basis. *With We Need a Hero*, I’m thinking about the responsibility being forced upon our children, where they face the fear of school shootings and are taking up the charge to enact real change in gun laws. So, if you ask me what sort of words I want my work to be described as, it would be “universal,” “narrative,” and “emotional.” I want to remind people that we are more alike than different.

My biggest creative inspiration is watching my children. I like working around them, hearing them, and being close to what they’re doing. My work completely changed when I had my kids, and their influence continues to this day.

My work is inherently embedded with my Native identity and past, but that’s because it’s a reflection of myself. I think successful Native art acknowledges the past but is focused on the present and the future. Native art can be whatever it needs to be, and Native artists should not feel restricted by mediums, subjects, or people’s preconceived ideas of what Native art should look like. That’s what I hope my work gives to the larger narrative of Native art.



ABOVE Caroline L. Carpio (Isleta Pueblo), *Keeper of Hope*, 2004, bronze, cupric nitrate, titanium dioxide patina with a hot wax finish, 23 × 10 × 7 in. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Norman Johnson.

OPPOSITE Pahponee (Kickapoo-Potawatomi), *Wawatso*, bronze, edition of 25. Image courtesy of the artist.

any surface, so form and size don’t matter. It’s different compared to the water-based clay that I use for making coil-built, one-of-a-kind ceramics. Working with both types of clays, I have more choices and fewer limits.

Historic Pueblo pottery remains a source of inspiration, while my passion for metals continues.

KIM OBRZUT (HOPI): My career in bronze began when I started learning how to cast in the ’80s, at Northern Arizona University (NAU). I enrolled late, after having my second child, and sculpture was the only class still open. I soaked up any kind of knowledge or experience I could on the lost-wax process, sensing one day [bronze] would become my material of choice. At the time, I was sculpting in stoneware clay, using the traditional scrape-and-smooth coil method [for building], and firing my small pieces in a kiln. Bronze casting required mastering a new method, working with a different kind of clay.

It can sometimes be close to a year of sculpting and casting before a clay piece is transformed into a bronze, a result well worth waiting for. Predicting what something will be like in metal is a long way from my grandfather carving katsina. Unlike making a katsina, I can exaggerate or minimize particles of my piece with the intent of directing the eye to something specific. I can simplify. I can defy space. In the old days, I did worry about blocks, but now I understand them as stopping points and allow the process to work for me, not against me. Just like there are four seasons, there are times to work, times to study and research, times to rest, and times to greet the public with your results.

Every artist [creates] a story, a moment in time they would like the audience to ponder. With sculpture, it’s tactile, and, for



ABOVE Holly Wilson (Delaware-Cherokee), *I'm Still Here*, bronze, patina, flex cord, 29 x 27 x 24 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT Melanie Yazzie (Diné), *Stormy and Highway Hit the Road to Denver*, 2014, bronze, 15 x 10 x 16 in., edition of 15. Image courtesy of Glenn Green Galleries, Santa Fe, NM.

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT Autumn Borts-Medlock (Santa Clara Pueblo), *Chaco Parrot*, bronze, 12 x 9½ in. Image courtesy of Desert Moon, Taos/Santa Fe, NM.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT Rochelle Medlock (Santa Clara Pueblo), *Wee Dogs* series, bronze.

MELANIE YAZZIE (DINÉ): For most of my undergraduate and graduate years, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I worked in hand-building ceramics. When I formed the relationship with Glenn Green Galleries, I was able to make the leap into [sculpting]. Their focus is sculpture, so their support and encouragement meant that I could give myself permission to make the journey into bronze. It was a good path.

Working with molds and with waxes really got me excited about pushing my work in ways that I never expected. The ceramic works were so fragile and would

get damaged so easily in moving them from exhibit to exhibit, no matter how careful I was. It was stressful working in clay.

I'm inspired by the songs and stories of my people. So, I would say my work is thought provoking and grounded in bringing animals into a place of importance. It is my hope that when someone sees my work, they will be open to another way to treat and live with animals, and realize they are souls just like us.

Socially, the world sees bronze in a way that I have come to understand as the artist having arrived at a place of coming into [their own]. Regular people somehow understand the importance of the material, and there is not a lot an artist must do to explain the importance of a work in bronze. I wish all art forms carried the same respect. I often find with other art forms there is a huge learning curve. I must work at explaining the value of a drawing, a fine art print, or a watercolor ... but bronze has a history that comes with it that people somehow understand.

Bronze is [an] old material but has brought a new respect for my animals that I was not given when working in clay. It's nice to see more [Native women] working in metal. I see us making paths for others to follow. It's exciting to look back at the past 20 years and see how each of us have grown as artists. We are telling stories about our history and our people and that is valued by many. I feel honored to work in this medium because of the history it carries.

NEW CASTINGS

AUTUMN BORTS-MEDLOCK (SANTA CLARA PUEBLO): When I started working in bronze about five years ago, it was out of my desire to have one of my clay vessels cast. The transformation from clay to metal was meant to be: bronze is nearly as ancient an art and utilitarian form as pottery is, and they almost seem to [have] evolved hand in hand.

I grew up in a family that has been working with clay for generations, and I've been making pottery since I was a child. I will continue to nurture my relationship with the clay, but as an artist I envisioned myself working in bronze. It has allowed me to show another side of my creativity, and I'm able to experiment with a much broader color palette. The colored patinas enhance the design on the metal's surface



and give character to the shape. A blowtorch is used to heat the metal, and mineral oxides are applied with paint brushes. My husband [Jeremy Medlock], who is also a bronze sculptor, does that part of the process for me. He also does the patina work for our daughter, Rochelle, who's 13 and has been sculpting for almost six years.

Another great element to working in bronze is having the capability to cast an edition of the original and being able to invest in the metal more than once. With the editions, I make every piece unique by giving them variations in the patinas. Branching out into this medium has inspired three-dimensional, free-form sculpting, and experimentation with some different clays. With my native clay, I use a hand-coiling approach to a sculptural form; with the alternative clays, it's sculpting by forming in a solid manner, pushing the clay in a different way.

My sister [Tammy Garcia] has been an inspiration to me. She started her journey into bronze much earlier in her career. I think of her as a trailblazer in this medium. She has [helped lead] the way for Native artists venturing into nontraditional forms and mediums.

ROCHELLE MEDLOCK (SANTA CLARA PUEBLO): I've been doing bronze work since I was eight years old. I was inspired to become an artist by my mom [Autumn Borts-Medlock] and my grandmother [Linda Cain], because when they were children they both made art. Now it's just something I love to do.

I describe my work as small, simple, cute ... with personality. Most of my creative ideas come to me at random: I don't ever really prepare to be creative, it just sort of happens.

As I'm getting older and learning more, my work is getting bigger and more complex, with more detail and more refined shapes. I'd like to collaborate with my mom on a big [piece] with cartoony designs. I think that would be so cool.



THESE WOMEN have taken bronze sculpture and made it their own. The enduring nature of bronze has allowed many of these artists to enter the arena of public art and share their visions with audiences who might never enter a gallery or museum.

"Using our designs with bronze as a canvas, we Native women have taken this sculptural medium to a whole new level," says Autumn Borts-Medlock. "We take our visions, apply them onto sculptural surfaces, and [document] them in bronze. Our work tells the story of our cultural life, both past and present, in a new way and on a grander scale. It demonstrates our creative strength and perseverance as artists."