

Local artist's silver work is a family affair

Written by By Andy Gibbons III Sun Correspondent
Friday, 02 September 2016 03:16



You don't have to live in Gallup long to notice the important role art plays in the community. Whether it's the monthly second-Saturday "Arts Crawl" or the frequent dances and performances outside the courthouse, there's always art to be appreciated by locals and tourists alike.

Ira Custer is a local artist who makes silver jewelry out of his home in Gallup. He runs a business known as Custer Designs and works with other local artists, among which are members of his own family.

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For Custer, working with silver has been a family affair since he began as a small child. His father casted silver jewelry, and eventually trained his son in the art.

"I'm only going to show you once, and if you can't learn it once, then you have no business doing it," Custer's father told the young Custer, who quickly learned the traditional way to make silver jewelry.

Tradition and art seem to run in Custer's family. One of his grandfathers was a silversmith, and his other grandparents were, respectively, a medicine man and rug weaver.

Custer is quick to express gratitude for those grandparents, Frank and Annie Apache, who helped raise him and teach him Navajo while he lived in a Hogan during his formative years.

Growing up in the area and graduating from Gallup High School in 1984 has deeply connected Custer to his community.

"Gallup is a lot like Mayberry [in the *Andy Griffith Show*], you can't turn a corner without shaking someone's hand," he said.

At the age of 10, Custer had his first run with silverwork, which ended in a burn after he had been told to not go near the work area.

A small wound, though, could not burn up Custer's curiosity for the art. He soon grew competent in both sand-casting and tufa-casting silver.

Tufa casting may well be the more difficult method. It involves making a mold out of hand-picked volcanic rock that goes through a process of sawing, cutting, grinding, and then finely carving details. The hot liquid silver is poured into the mold, and takes its shape. The silver can be further decorated with inlaid turquoise, coral, and other materials at the artist's discretion.

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When silverwork became a career in the late '80s and '90s, Custer made many connections at art shows throughout the Southwest.

"Cellphones weren't as popular back then," the artist said, referring to the difficulty of building a network of art-buying connections.

Nevertheless, Custer now has a suitcase full of prize ribbons from art shows, and he's even been a judge at competitions.

Custer continues his work locally and travels to art shows like the upcoming Kewa Pueblo (formerly Santa Domingo) Annual Arts & Crafts Market held Sep. 3-5.

Custer is also passing his torch to the next generation, as the tradition of silver work continues in his immediate family. He's proud, he said, of his daughters — and even one of his daughters' boyfriend's is making beautiful silver creations.

"Unfortunately, there is a lot of youth out there waiting for their parents or grandparents to get their next check instead of going out and working," Custer said. "I knew of a blind older man that made broomsticks because he found a way to work and provide."

Custer hopes others will, like him, find creative ways to provide for themselves. Still, he said, the required travel and tight schedules of artists are demanding.

"I was fortunate to be able raise my family with this career," Custer said.

If you are interested in purchasing Custer's work, you can reach him by email at: custerdesigns@yahoo.com.

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