

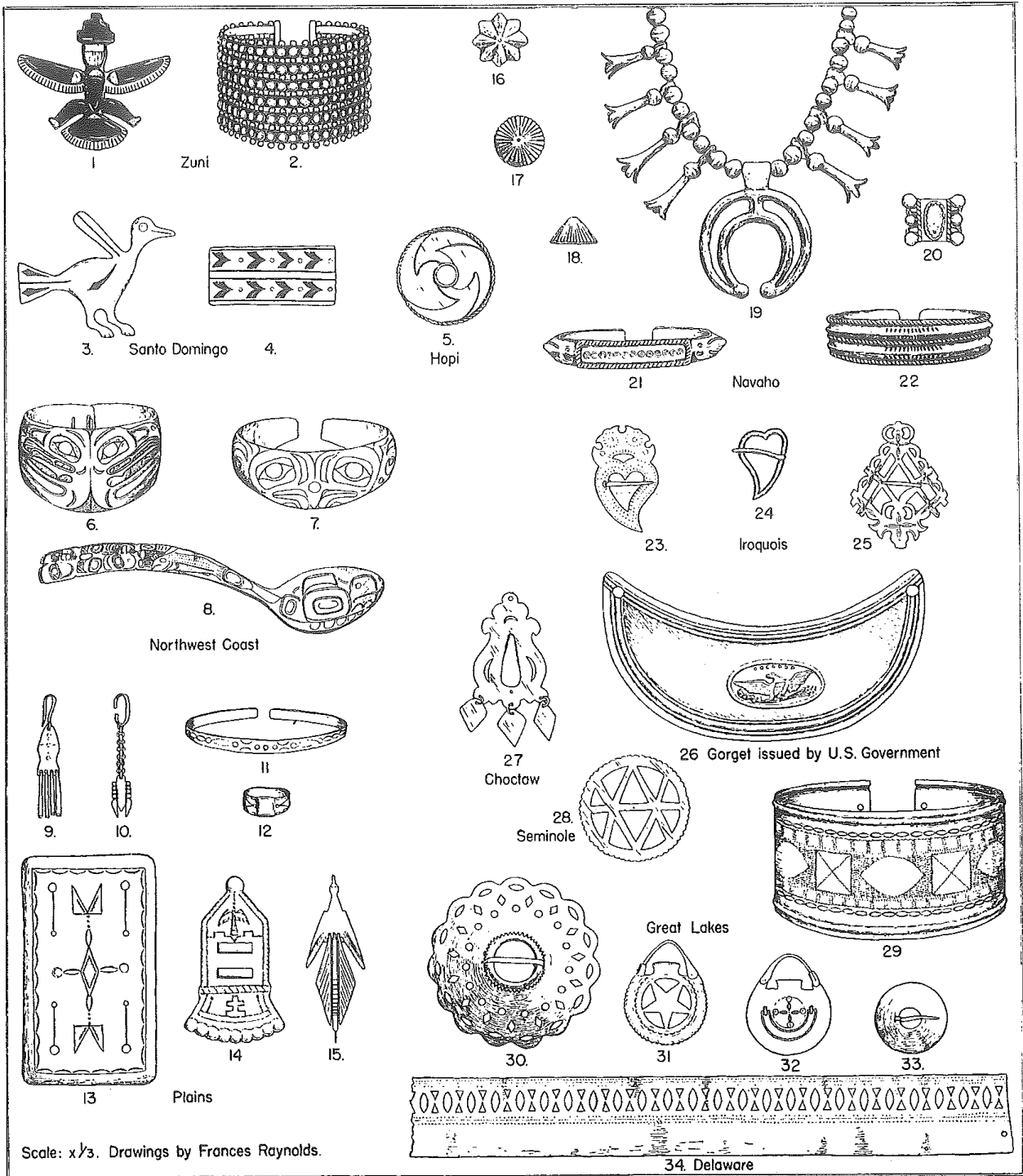
DENVER ART MUSEUM

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Main Types of Indian Metal Jewelry

LEAFLET 104

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1. INTRODUCTORY. This leaflet is designed to give a broad outline of metal ornament making by Indians north of Mexico in the last 150 years or so. Further details about each type will be given in future numbers of this series. Navaho work is covered by Leaflet 15. In the case of several types future numbers must await the completion of investigations now going on, since these types have been hardly more than mentioned in the literature.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND. Though the custom of making metal ornaments by Indians is not due to white influence, those types of silver, German silver, copper and brass ornaments discussed in this leaflet are entirely due to that influence. The ornaments which are purely Indian in origin are those made of native copper by various groups of Middle western and southern Indians in the prehistoric and early historic periods. This early copper industry is discussed in Leaflet 75-76. Though some of these copper ornaments now appear to have been made after white men had explored parts of the country there is no evidence to date that the ornaments are other than purely aboriginal in conception and execution.

Metal jewelry of the types with which this leaflet deals is the result of white influence first brought to bear on the Indians in the latter half of the 18th century. The general procedure was for Europeans or Americans to introduce trade jewelry to a tribe and then for some members of the group to learn how to make it themselves. The political situation after the end of the American Revolution gave a great impetus to this procedure. Both British and Americans were anxious to win the favor of the Indians and deluged them with all kinds of silver jewelry. References 4-6 give many details. As the Whites moved westward they drove many of the tribes ahead of them and thus brought the idea of metal jewelry to the Indians of the Southwest and Plains. The latest development of silversmithing was among the coast tribes of British Columbia and southeastern Alaska since this was the last major group of Indians to be strongly influenced by Whites. Silverwork did not begin in that region, called the Northwest Coast, until about 1865.

3. TECHNICS were about the same everywhere. To make brass and copper trinkets the Indians hammered out wire, cartridge cases and kettles. The use of these metals generally preceded that of silver. Silver objects were made from coins until quite recent times when ingot or sheet silver has become available. German silver—an alloy of copper, zinc and nickel—comes in sheets from which the shapes desired are cut.

Among the Navaho casting is done as well as hammering. Engraving is the old basic method of decoration. Among the Navaho almost entirely and to some extent on the Plains it has been replaced by stamping with dies. Stamping began in the latter region about 1870. Until very recent times tools were of the simplest nature, odds and ends obtained from the Whites and adapted by the Indians to their needs. Nowadays in the Southwest a good many commercial metalworking tools are used.

4. IROQUOIS silverwork began sometime toward the end of the 18th century and has been carried on to some extent ever since, though recent pieces are the products of a government-backed revival. The most characteristic pieces are brooches modeled on European forms. Hearts (23, 24), square-and-compass patterns inspired by Masonic emblems (25), and various round shapes are the most common. Bracelets, earrings, headbands, combs and rings were also made. The rings frequently have a low block of metal instead of a stone setting. (12) shows this, though it is not an Iroquois piece. Many Iroquois ornaments are pierced with open work designs and the metal tends to be quite thin. The nearby Delaware made silver jewelry of a similar kind.

(34) illustrates a Delaware headband made about 1830. Other eastern headbands are of the same general type.

5. GREAT LAKES AND MISSISSIPPI DRAINAGE. Silverwork appears to have begun in this immense area in the years around 1800. Until the introduction of German silver, sometime around 1850, silver was the metal used. The common shapes were convex round brooches of many types (30, 33), broad armbands (29) and earrings (31, 32). Headbands, large combs for women and various other ornaments were also made. The metal is thin, and when decorated is engraved with both abstract and more or less realistic designs: angular figures, scrolls, loops and such things as hearts and flowers. Plain pieces are common, as are openwork designs (30), especially in the brooches. These range in size from one half to four or five inches in diameter. All have a central hole crossed by a movable tongue. Gorgets (26) based on European military ornaments were common in the area and in the South.

6. SOUTH. Relatively little information is available about metalwork in this area. The Florida Seminole of today make silver ornaments (28) and the Cherokee, Choctaw, Alabama and Koasati are known to have done so. Brooches, earrings (27), armbands, headbands, pendants, rings, and gorgets were made. The art seems to have begun in the mid-18th century, reached full development about 1800 and come to an end by 1830.

7. OKLAHOMA AND THE PLAINS. A number of the Plains tribes now resident in Oklahoma have been making metal jewelry since about 1830. The earliest records refer to round plates beaten out of silver dollars and worn as hair ornaments. In the mid-19th century German silver—invented about 1825—became available in quantity and has been popular ever since. The metal workers of this early period were much influenced by the ornaments of eastern tribes which were being moved into Oklahoma at the time, and made arm bands, brooches and earrings of eastern types. Pairs of very narrow bracelets were and are typical (11).

About 50 years ago the rise of a religious cult based on the use of the peyote, a cactus-like plant in the succulent group, began to have a great effect on Oklahoma jewelry making. Today this school of metalwork is highly productive. The large majority of its forms, if not all, are based on symbols and ideas of the cult. The peyote itself, the snake-bird or water turkey (the smoke bird of the ritual), the feather fan, abstract geometric designs symbolizing the "path of life" and color visions, the cross, either Christian or as a symbol of world quarters or the logs in a fire, the tipi, and the tomahawk as a symbol of "Indianness" are the common design elements. The pieces are small, flat and thin, and are either plain or decorated by engraving. Tie slides (14) pins (15) and earrings (9, 10) are the common forms. Rings (11) of the common eastern type are made.

On the central and northern Plains metalworking hardly existed. Wide, corrugated brass arm bands, big plain round brooches for women's belts or men's hair ornaments and a few other trinkets were made in very small quantities. Even trade jewelry was limited in quantity and range of shape.

The Cheyenne were an exception. Even before they settled in Oklahoma they were making round brooches used on belts, buckles (13), bridle trimmings and smaller pieces, all engraved with geometric designs. The art still exists among them.

8. NAVAHO silversmithing is too well known to demand much attention here. It began in or about 1853 as a result of Mexican influence, developed very slowly till toward the end of the 19th century and since then has ex-

panded with ever increasing rapidity. Now its sales run into the millions, and hundreds of workers toil steadily at the craft. Like every success it has been trailed by a host of fakers and imitators. Both hammered and cast pieces are made. The well known rings (20), bracelets (21, 22), necklaces (19), buttons (16, 17, 18) and other forms are due some to Mexican, some to American influences. For a long time the decoration has been applied with die stamps bearing Spanish and Mexican leather designs, all lacking symbolic implications. Setting with turquoise has been a prominent feature of the art for the last 40 odd years. For further details see Leaflet 15 and the publications referred to in it.

9. PUEBLO silver jewelry has long been made in a number of villages, but because it closely resembles Navaho work it is not recognized as Pueblo by most people. Many pieces of Pueblo work are indistinguishable from those of the Navaho. Some identifying features do exist, however, for Zuni work, especially that of the modern period. The use of a great deal of turquoise, most frequently in small pieces (2); a certain somewhat delicate elaborateness; the presence of flat or round wire trimming; and inlaying in large masses of several colors (1) are typical. Except for two very modern types, to be discussed below, other Pueblo silver is too little known to permit remarks about identifying features. The modern types mentioned are those produced by one Hopi man and by certain young men at Santo Domingo. The former (5) may be recognized by its use of typical Hopi pottery designs. The pieces look like highly individual modern costume jewelry ornaments and such they are. The Santo Domingo silver, first made in 1938, also uses the pottery designs of the town. This silverwork is very smooth and beautifully finished (3, 4).

In technics and shapes Pueblo jewelry follows Navaho practices.

10. NORTHWEST COAST. This is the youngest of the great regional types, having been started about 1865. It is easily recognizable because of the presence on the pieces of the highly conventionalized animal designs so typical of Northwest Coast art. These designs are most familiar through their use on totem poles and the like. The pieces are made from silver coins and decorated by engraving. The bracelet (6, 7) is by far the most common form. Its peculiar convex shape and springy quality would make it identifiable even without the distinctive designs. After bracelets the most common shape is the spoon (8). A few earrings and shawl clasps have been made as well as some pieces bearing White designs. Some work has been done in gold, the only use of this metal by Indians north of Mexico. Gilding of silver has been done also. There are tribal variations in bracelet shapes.

Compiled by F. H. Douglas from studies in museum collections and from the following publications:

MUSEUM OF NORTHERN ARIZONA

1. A brief history of Navajo silversmithing—Arthur Woodward. Bulletin 14, 1938. Contains considerable data on eastern silver.
2. Hopi silversmithing—its background and future—M.-R. F. Colton. Plateau, vol. 12, no. 1, July 1939.

MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO

3. Silver work of the Florida Seminole—John M. Goggin. El Palacio, vol. 47, no. 2, February, 1940.

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

4. Indian silver ornaments—Harrold E. Gillingham. The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, vol. 58, no. 2 April, 1934.

MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN, HEYE FOUNDATION

5. Indian ornaments made by Philadelphia silversmiths—Harrold E. Gillingham. 1936.

MICHIGAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE, ARTS AND LETTERS

6. Notes on Indian trade silver ornaments in Michigan—George I. Quimby, Jr. Papers, vol. 22, 1937.

THE OLD WEST SERIES, DENVER

7. Navajo Indian silver-work—Margery Bedinger. No. 8, 1936.

THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF CANADA

8. Indian silversmiths of the Pacific Coast—Marius Barbeau. Transactions, 3rd series, vol. 33, section 2, p 23.

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