

Navajo silversmithing stamps

Date : January 22, 2007

Peter Oakley, MA student in Material Culture, UCL

Stamps such as the ones illustrated are used by Navajo smiths to impress images or repeat patterns onto jewellery or silverwork. The earliest Navajo stamps from the 1880s carried similar designs which copied those found on contemporary Mexican ironwork and leather. Stamped Navajo silverwork became an important tourist art during the early 20th century, and traders encouraged the use of additional stamped motifs relating to stereotypical Western perceptions of the American Indian: arrows, stone arrowheads, the thunderbird, and the swastika (the traders subsequently discouraged the use of the swastika after it acquired Nazi associations). The Navajo have always been dependant on Western industrial technology for their silversmithing tools and materials, either buying industrially made tools, or recycling industrially produced steel to make their own. The contemporary tools illustrated are recycled piston rods, used because their toughened steel can withstand repeated hammering.

[View image](#)

Today the creation of silver jewellery is considered an important Navajo cultural expression, as well as an important economic resource; recognising this the U.S. government has enacted protectionist legislation whilst federal and state run heritage sites exclusively sell 'Indian-made' silverwork in attempts to support its production. But such a definition does not acknowledge the multicultural aspects of this body of artwork. How far should such pieces be defined as specifically 'Indian' when much of the decoration has been derived from Hispanic designs, whilst its production is heavily dependant on Western industrial tools and materials?