

BEHIND THE DOOR: The Poeh Cultural Center & Museum

Writer and Photographer: Jennifer Cross Gans



Entrance to the Poeh Museum's workshop

For lovers of Indian jewelry an uncomfortable thought comes to mind: how does anyone know what is real, made by a Navajo, Zuni or Santo Domingo person; made in turquoise that hasn't been altered in any way; and isn't genuine sterling or other metal? The issue came up again during the annual Indian Market (August 20-21), said to be "The largest and Most Prestigious Native Arts Event in the World." Behind the scenes is another critical question: how does anyone truly learn the basics of any particular style – from one's family, or a relatively unknown teacher?

In 1988 the Poeh Cultural Center and Museum started with the idea of maintaining traditional cultures, and skills particularly sculpture, pottery and jewelry. Located between Los Alamos and Santa Fe in a community called Pojoaque, the museum was rebuilt in 2005, thanks to grants from the Federal Government, private individuals and (wink! nod!) from the Cities of Gold casino. For the last 10 years the metals program has been headed by Fritz Casuse, one of the most distinguished contemporary jewelers, and in a class by himself.



Teacher Fritz Casuse



The jewelry workshop

The building at the rear, in the traditional Santa Fe style, opens with a small front door. Then – bam! Alan Revere's school would nicely fit into one big room. Back to back are 20 modern metalsmiths' benches, with equipment in part funded by eight Northern Indian Pueblo Councils, with spaces for fabrication, finishing, and a separate room for casting.

Students pay only a modest \$65 per semester, and range in age from new beginners to retirees who want a change of life and new career, away from the traditional teaching of their families. All are from one of the 163 Native American tribes, coming mostly from the area but as far away as Canada. To quote Rachael, "I never learned from my mother in Albuquerque, but want to learn now. We are very interested in our lifestyle – you can't escape that."

Newcomers must first prepare a drawing of the piece they want to start. Then they work with Fritz Casuse, on the basic skills (fabrication, chasing and repoussé, casting), with additional visits from guest speakers. They have frequent critiques, where they not only discuss the quality and style of the piece but (accompanied by food and drink) the way of life back at the pueblo, forming a network of friendship that was welcome and unknown by recent “emigrants.”

Casuse coaches starters on the rules for the many craft shows – ranging from the Heard Museum, the annual Indian Market to smaller episodic ones such as Native Treasures. He’s had considerable success, with 10 up and comers in shows last year, and another 10 this year. He’s very careful not to teach anyone to work in his own particular style, saying “I only teach the basic metalworking techniques.”

As Bruce Bernstein, CEO of SWAIA (the nonprofit organization behind the Indian Market) told me, after dealing with a disgruntled Native American applicant, “judging is very difficult!” There is a constant juggling of the show judges, plus a review of the market’s rules. Let’s hope the Poeh Center candidates keep pace with their other 1,000 compadres in the Indian Market. At least they have been well taught!



Traditional “ketoh” made by Ebran Natay



Ebran Natay Jr. at work

Editor’s note: for more information on how to shop for authentic Native American jewelry contact the Indian Arts and Crafts Board at www.iacb.doi.gov. There is also a brochure from the U.S. Department of the Interior on the Indian Arts & Crafts Act.