

Victoria Adams

KEEPER OF THE FLAME

Clarity of one's purpose in life is something most folks aspire to. For Victoria Adams, it was as if she was chosen generations earlier in her Southern Cheyenne heritage to be what she is—an exceptional jeweler and artisan.

Her dedication to her craft has enabled her to navigate a diverse life journey that has brought her to prominence in numerous gallery and museum exhibitions.

From her early childhood in Northern California, Victoria was part of a creative, hands-on family life. “My family was very outgoing, and my mother and father did everything with their hands,” she says. “My father was a ‘don’t buy it, let’s build it’ kind of person. He was a cabinetmaker and a metal-smith and did different types of mechanical engineering, including working on the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos. He was very inventive and raised me to be independent and self-reliant with tools. I’ve never had any kind of fear of tools or doing anything physical.”

With a metal-smithing background, Victoria was drawn to the world of fine metals and their forming and studied at the San Francisco Art Institute and

the Revere Academy of Goldsmithing in San Francisco and later apprenticed with goldsmith William Burke in Mill Valley, California.

Her Western roots called her as she gained prominence with Westerners and collectors in the 1980s with her intricately engraved and individual buckle sets. It was a time of the cowboy craft renaissance, and Adams’ work was unique. “I think I was such an oddball then because I was a woman engraver and I didn’t care what kind of egos the men had. I just wanted to learn,” she says. “It was a great time in my life—I was treated so well by people like Chuck Stormes and Mark Drain and Mark Dahl and the late Dan Murray.”



Adams’ work was highly sought after and admired by artisans and customers alike—at the time lots of cowboy-types but, as her work became more widely known, customers were coming from all over, including Hollywood and Nashville, with a diverse audience ranging from Peter Coyote to Fred LaTour to Too Slim from the music group Riders in the Sky.

It was a time of transition for Adams. “I was raised with a lot of knowledge about my background, but I was not raised around the reservation. So that was my big treat to myself, starting in my 30s, to hang out with my relatives and learn more about my Native background,” she says. “I started becoming involved in a really different way. My aunts taught me how to do beadwork. I started dancing. I danced competitively at powwows and have done fully hand-tanned buckskin dresses. So when I started going to the reservation and becoming involved in traditional religion, it was very centering and releasing for me. It’s like I lost a lot of fear. And that’s when I could really transition into different work.”

Her transition was partially interrupted when she married a Montana rancher and immersed herself in ranching. “There was a side

of my family that was very Western. I found myself literally giving myself to the ranch,” says Adams. “Because of where we were in Montana, I ultimately felt too removed from everything. Along with that, my Native side was conflicting with my Western side, and, finally, I left. When they say Montana is hard on horses and women, they’re right. Now I don’t have to go chop ice in the stock tanks at 20 below. I don’t have to work cattle for my husband. I don’t have to cook for a branding crew, and now, living in Santa Fe, I’m able to progress with my own life story.”

Today, Victoria Adams has moved into a new realm of her jewelry work—and a new home in Santa Fe. Her work carries a sense of pride and inclusiveness. Her consistent awards and successes at the Santa Fe Indian Market held each summer attest to that, as do her customers. It is her honesty and devotion of heritage that spur her on to new skill levels. Having immersed herself in her Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho heritage, she had early on taken a traditional tribal name. “Lights the Pipe is my business name,” she says. “I kind of used it for good luck because it’s off of my traditional name given to me by a dear friend who’s like a great aunt to me. My full name means ‘Woman Who Lights the Pipe.’ It’s a woman who’s invited into a ceremony to light pipes for men, and the ceremony is a position of honor for a woman.”

Adams takes her heritage very seriously, as she does her craft and its roots in the history of Cheyenne tribal art. According to Adams, “Creating items of personal adornment from metals became a Cheyenne art form just prior to the Civil War. Traders venturing to the central and southern plains introduced German silver (nickel) from the northeastern states, hence the flourishing of metal arts among the peoples of the Great Plains.”

On inspiration for her work, Adams is equally clear: “When designing and building my jewelry, I incorporate the

natural forms I observe. Sightings of deer, antelope, birds, bugs, berries, and my own horses can set one day completely apart from another. Cheyenne religious ceremonies are not complete without inclusion of animals and plants. We honor them. They governed our survival in ancient times, and today they are still an integral part of our traditional and contemporary cultures. For me there is no dividing line between a fine diamond set in gold and a beautiful pair of

graceful silver Southern Plains style of earrings. Depending upon one’s cultural tradition, the value is similar. When I dress for a fine evening in New York or for a night of dancing at a traditional powwow, the glint of my silver earrings, like the sparkle of a diamond, makes me feel elegant and proud.”

For Victoria Adams, tradition is not a static concept.

Adams’ work can be found at Blue Rain Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

