

NATIVE AMERICAN ARTS AND CRAFTS

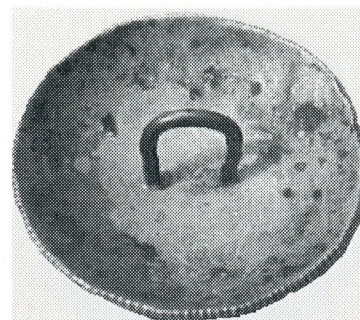
PART I: SILVER

*By Vicky Mayhall
(aka Ms. Mayhem from the Flying
Button Ranch, Surprise, Arizona)*

I was born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona and was lucky to have a Grandmother born and raised in Clifton, Arizona. She also loved and collected Native American jewelry. She bought most of it from the local Native American tribes in Phoenix, who sat in front of Woolworth's dime store on spread out blankets, offering their silver work for sale. Grandmother passed away when I was only 6 months old, and my mother inherited her jewelry. My Grandfather fostered my love of silver and turquoise by giving me a miniature Zuni squash blossom necklace, complete with tiny Naja all set with petit point turquoise at age three. Along with this gift came a matching ring and bracelet, all child sized. I still wear the tiny squash blossom necklace today as a choker.

I played dress-up in my mother's "squaw" dresses, trimmed with metallic silver rickrack and instead of high heels, clomped about in her suede leather ankle moccasin boots with shining silver buttons. No dress-up outfit was complete without a load of the jewelry that my grandmother and mother collected. As a teenager, it was a privilege to be allowed to wear Grandmother's large silver squash blossom necklace and sand cast concho belt on special occasions.

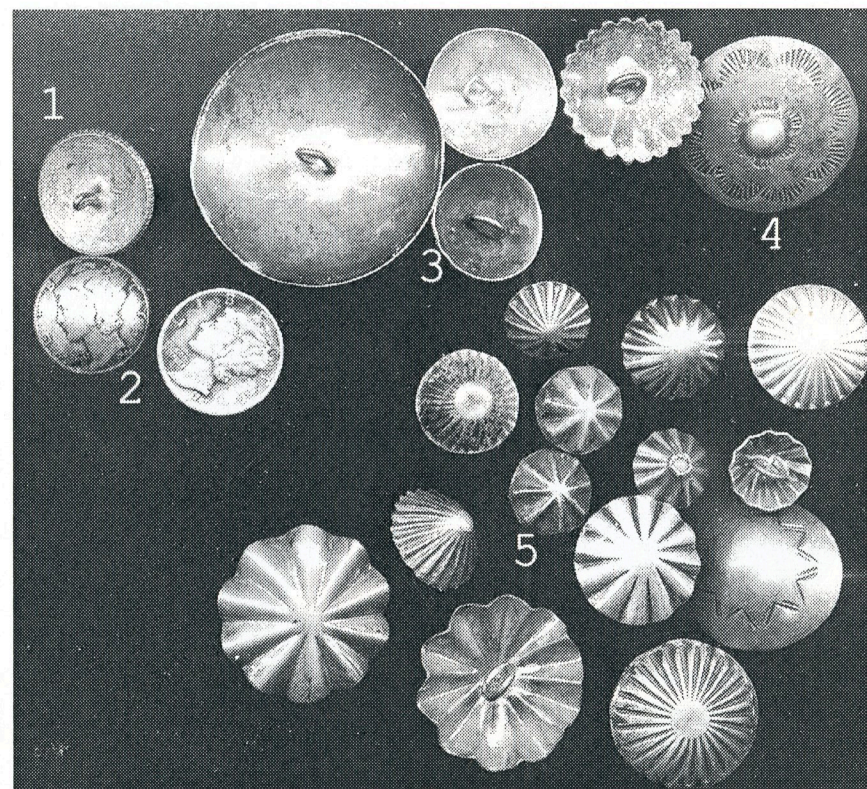
This early appreciation of Native American jewelry was probably the reason one of my first purchases at my first National convention in Scottsdale in 1998 was a "sand cast" button. My first complete mounted button card was of Native American Silver. These buttons can still be found for sale in the Southwest from dealers who carry old pawn silver and estate pieces and are still affordable when found through button dealers.



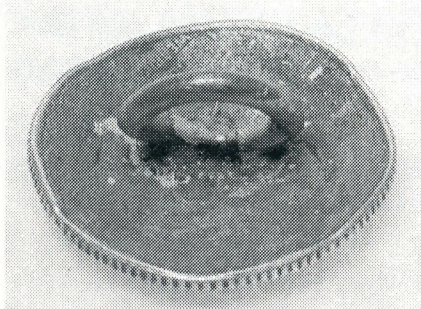
Early button made from a coin, identified by the still visible edge

Native American silver buttons appear in early photographs in the 1860s. Historians indicate that tribes were taught to silversmith by Mexicans while they were in captivity. The silversmiths copied the look of the Spaniards' large silver "button" clothing ornamentation.

These earliest silver buttons were made from Mexican silver pesos, and



- #1— Back of Mexican coin (note edge of coin is still visible and the back shows the coin).
- #2 — Two 1940's Dime buttons.
- #3 — Four back pictures showing applied wire loop shanks.
- #4 — Thin silver hammered button with a crack to the top where the reverse hammering stressed the silver.
- #5 — Small domed and fluted buttons (most common) and front/back view of fluted copper.



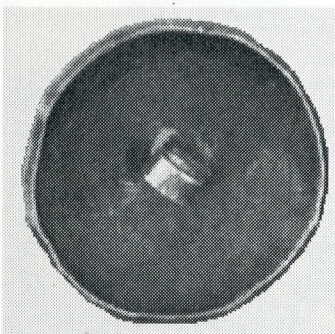
Coin back. Note we can read "WE TRUST" on the button back.



Front of coin button pictured on left.

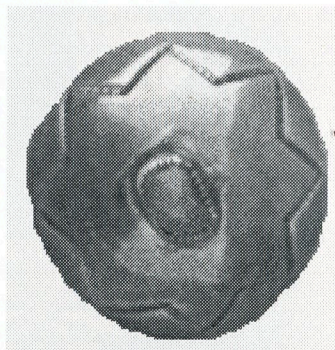
later from American silver coins. The coins were hammered out and shanks were applied to the backs. If you see evidence of an old coin (usually on the button back) you can potentially date the button. If you can read the date, you can be sure the button was made no earlier than that date, although it could have been made later.

Around 1900 the use of U.S. coinage for purposes other than tender (money) was declared illegal. About this same time Mexico

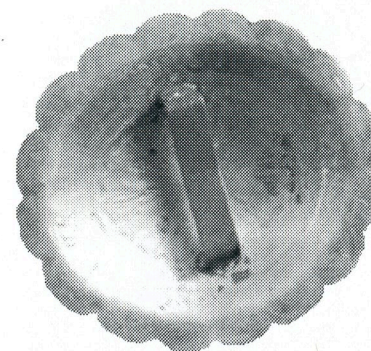
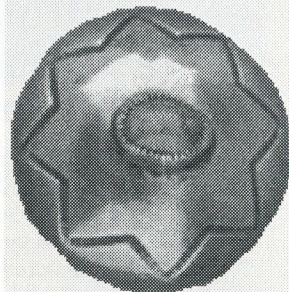
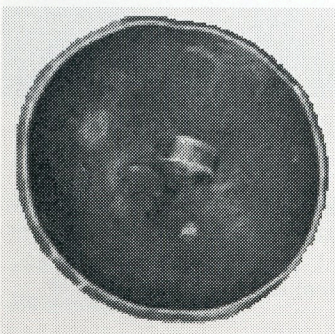


Old flat silver wire back

Old flat wire front view.



Eight point star with oval bezel set turquoise center.



Flat metal strap on a Concho (this is not a button, but is in the NBS Trim section) used on leather straps for hat bands, belts, etc.

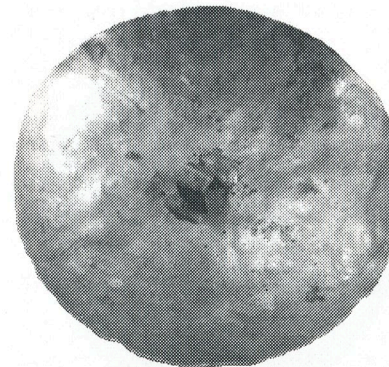
stopped exporting pesos. Coins were still used for jewelry and button making, as the law was fairly unenforceable. Clever artisans traded for silver items (teapots, candlesticks, tableware) and cut them up or melted them down.

Copper and brass shanks are found on both early and modern Native American silver buttons, as well as silver wire shanks. Shank construction can help to date these buttons.



Early hammered marks

The oldest shanks are a handmade, cut metal thin strap, wire loop or U type. It appears that older buttons have a longer U-type shank rather than a jump-ring type round wire. Later buttons have a machined eye shank, often purchased from jewelry making suppliers. However, even though a button sports a simple wire shank, this is no guarantee of its age since machined wire has been around a long time.



Back view of the hammered button

As commercial and military buttons were traded to the Indians, they soon refined the shank construction imitating the construction of the soldered shanks of the buttons they received in trade.

When dating these buttons, many visible clues should be considered. Additional knowledge about metal forming techniques and design are

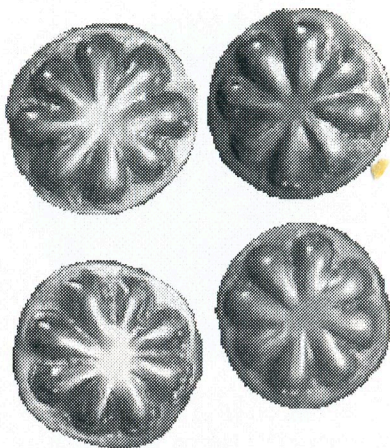
necessary when determining the approximate age and to distinguish if the button is, in fact, from an indigenous tribe. Buttons from another country will probably be marked on the face or shank with a number hallmark indicating the silver content and other marks which determine country of origin. This, of course, would exclude them from being considered being Native American Silverwork.

Older Indian jewelry and buttons (1860-1900) may appear crude by today's standards. Collectors should look for raised designs created with crude files and chisels. **Repousse** (hammering the back of the silver with a hammer or stamp to make a raised, rounded surface) is a technique found on later, Division III buttons.

TURQUOISE AND OTHER GEMSTONES

As early as 1900, the Navajo are reported to have been setting large, single turquoise stones in jewelry. Records are not definitive about this technique being immediately applied to buttons. Buttons with a cluster of stones would probably be best entered in competition as Division III.

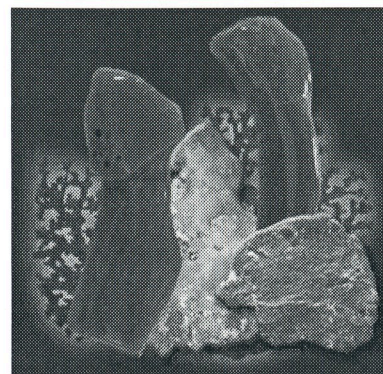
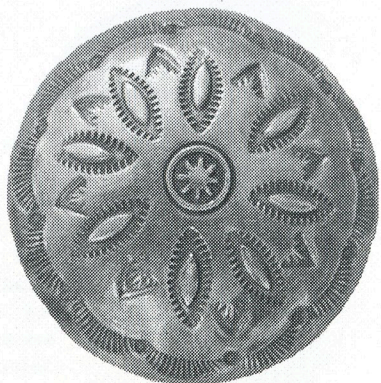
The Navajo introduced silver craft to the Zuni, who used lots of turquoise due to their developed lapidary skills. We know the Zunis began making



Repousse work



Navajo stamped silver 1-3/8"



Natural coral and turquoise

these buttons in the 1920s and soon taught other tribes the technique and it was copied by still more artisans.

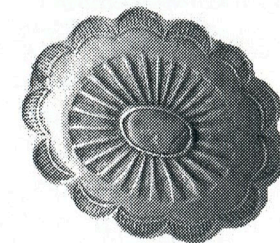
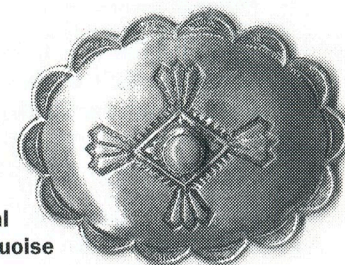
Many Indian civilizations believed their minds would become one with the universe when wearing turquoise. To the prehistoric Indian, turquoise was a divining symbol which signified the God of the sky being alive in the earth.

Indian tribes of Mexico and the Southwestern United States often used turquoise to guard burial sites.

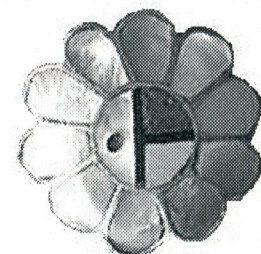
Coral — This branching skeleton-like structure produced by small marine animals is found in deposits along the coasts of the Western Mediterranean, Bay of Biscay, Japan, and numerous Pacific island chains. Coral is hand harvested by divers to prevent damage, thus making it expensive. The cost and scarcity are rising due to environmental laws controlling harvest. Coral has become a coveted gemstone and ranges in color from black, white, pink to light reds and ox blood red.

Shell — Pink Mussel shell (the pink areas from the iridescent interior of fresh water mussels) is a popular setting for silver

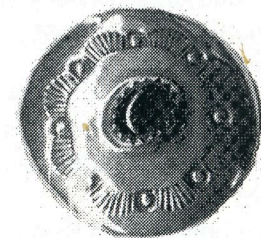
Modern silver oval with turquoise stone



Modern silver oval with gemstone



Zuni silver with inlaid pearl, onyx, turquoise & other gemstones depicting a sun face in the center of a flower design 15/16"



Hammered silver with gemstone

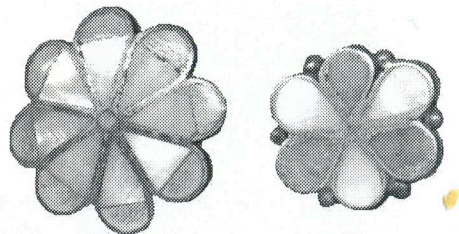
work. Mussel shells were so popular, they were used as currency. Mother of pearl comes from the inner layer of mollusk and snail shells which produce an iridescent play of color on white. Paua Shell ("Abalone" comes from the Spanish word *aulone*—the name of the animal) is prized for its beautiful blues and greens.

Crystal healers use Abalone for many purposes. It is thought to be helpful in disorders involving joints, bones, and muscles. It is believed that wearing it protects against uncooperative attitudes (I should have had this on when the kids were teenagers!), stimulates creativity, and promotes calm.

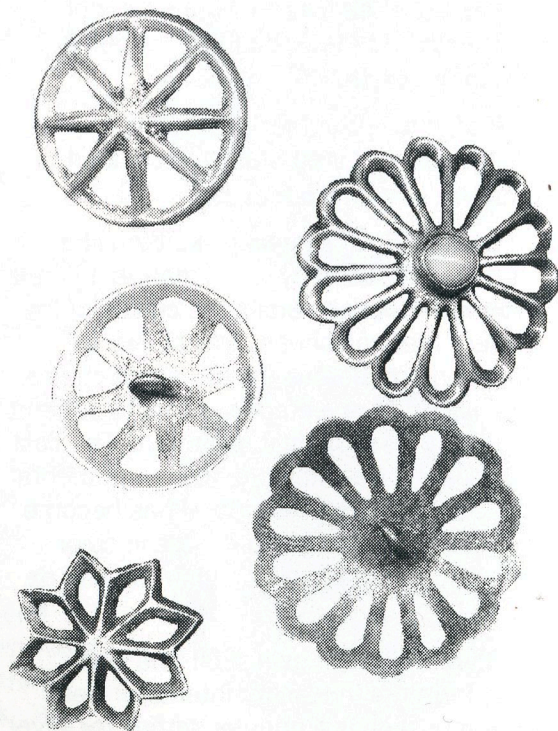
Other Gemstones — The love of color and gems have prompted silversmiths to incorporate Onyx, Amethyst, Malachite, Garnet, Opal and a host of other stones into Native American jewelry.

SAND CAST SILVER

The sand casting process is thought to have been in use as early as 1870 by the Navajo. Early button casts were formed in hard sand stone or Tufa (compacted volcanic ash) or adobe block. Today's "sand cast" is most likely done in wet concrete molds which are oiled or by the lost wax process. I have not found documentation that relates the sand cast method specifically to



Zuni turquoise and mother of pearl inlay



Sand cast buttons with copper wire shanks

button manufacture, so we cannot definitively place the application of this technique on a button timeline. However, the buttons are harder to come by and are quite desirable.

OVERLAY SILVER

The Hopi style of silver overlay cutout (a metal top design was cut out, then laid/soldered to the top of another silver sheet) was copied from jewelry sold by the Zuni tribes. Today, both the Hopi and Navajo do shadowbox overlay work.

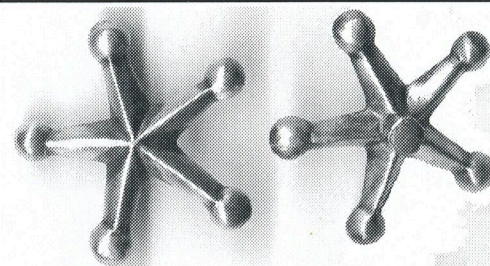
In Flagstaff AZ, silver classes began for the Hopi tribes in 1938. The classes stopped during WWII but resumed in 1947. The classes remain popular today. Hopi work generally is back marked with a hallmark, initials of the artist, or a clan symbol.

Navajo jewelry is also signed, usually with initials but sometimes a symbol. Unfortunately, most silversmiths would rather make one large item to sell, so don't make buttons anymore. This is another reason to collect them, regardless of their age!

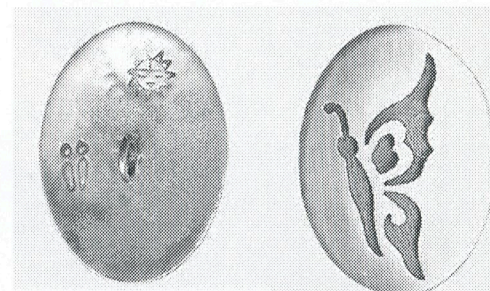
NEW BUTTONS FOR COLLECTORS, IMITATION, FAKES AND CONVERSIONS

A few button dealers are having Native Americans apply shanks to what would have otherwise been intended by the artist as an earring, hat tack or pendant. Some are quite lovely and **are**

Casting is a process by which a material is introduced into a mold while it is liquid, allowed to solidify in the shape inside the mold. Casting is often used for creating one or more copies of an original piece. The process, particularly when performed with molten metals, is also called **founding**. **Sand casting** is a means of producing rough metal castings that are further refined by any or all of hammer peening, polishing, forging, plating, grinding or machining. Sand castings not further refined are readily recognized by the sand-like texture imparted by the mold.



Cast silver stars, right with turquoise stone



Modern oval butterfly.
Hopi 2nd Mesa, Arizona. Overlay



Copper, fronts and backs. (Right to Left)

Top Row: (1) Arizona Copper Tax Token, flat "strip" copper shank. (2) Reverse repousse and "zig" engraved. (3) Two piece "Shadow Box" with Mediterranean Coral center and spider stamping border.

Bottom Row: (1) Arizona Copper Tax Token, round wire loop shank, hammer marks to front border. (2) Heavy copper, flat "strip" copper shank. (3) Five point star motif, copper loop shank.

intended to be buttons for collectors. Of course, artisans are encouraged by dealers to make subjects that appeal to us and will fit into our button classification so there are some wonderful modern, Indian-made buttons to be found at shows.

A collector needs to be aware of old pins and earrings that have been converted. The most popular conversion that I have seen several of is a large silver and turquoise Butterfly pin. If you look closely, you can usually see where pin clasps have been unsoldered or cut off, ground down and polished. I feel it is best to Inform dealers when you find these offered for sale.

When silver was not available, brass and copper was used in early jewelry/button making. I have a few buttons of these metals that I believe are earlier Native American work. It can often be hard to distinguish between Mexican and Native American metal work, as both can have the same "Southwest" design motif. Most copper buttons you find are not Native American made. While they were been manufactured for the tourist trade, they come in interesting shapes and designs and as a



Above: Nickel silver buttons with ground turquoise and polymer "stones." (Not made by Native Americans). Below: A close up of the above.





metal material, can still be fun to collect.

Because of the popularity of the Southwest "style", manufacturers started making "Indian" jewelry for tourists. The copper and brass buttons you will find the most of are machine stamped, which show no signs of hand work, and, if you really don't know the old stuff, it will fool you.

The "turquoise" in the machine stamped tourist buttons consists of ground and dyed junk stone which is crushed and mixed with binding glue or polymers. Under examination you won't see signs of the stone's natural matrix, and under a loupe you can see it looks more like plastic. These are seen often on eBay, are represented as authentic, and unfortunately, unsuspecting button collectors pay excessive prices for these buttons.

Much of this imitation Native American work is nickel, which will polish up to look like silver, but shows a grey-toned color when left unpolished. Another common base is "German Silver," an alloy of copper-nickel-zinc, which looks more like silver.

Another machined button you will find is marked "Sterling" and Bell. **Bell Trading Post** was founded in 1935 by Jack Michelson in Albuquerque, New Mexico operating as a branch of the Sunbell Corporation located in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It was named 'Bell' after Jack's wife. The name was changed to Sunbell Corporation in 1972. They employed Native American artists and sold Indian jewelry to tourist locations throughout the western U.S. The majority of jewelry was made from sterling silver and turquoise. The firm specializes in the production of copper, mixed metal, and silver jewelry and silver beads, some set with turquoise with Southwestern influence. At least three types of trademarks can be found on the jewelry and silver beads: "BELL," the image of a bell, and a bell hanging from a post. Based on the author's experience, the non-silver buttons are more common (if silver they will be marked Sterling). What I have seen appears to be machine stamped and is not truly hand made by silversmiths. The firm was out of business in the late 1980s.

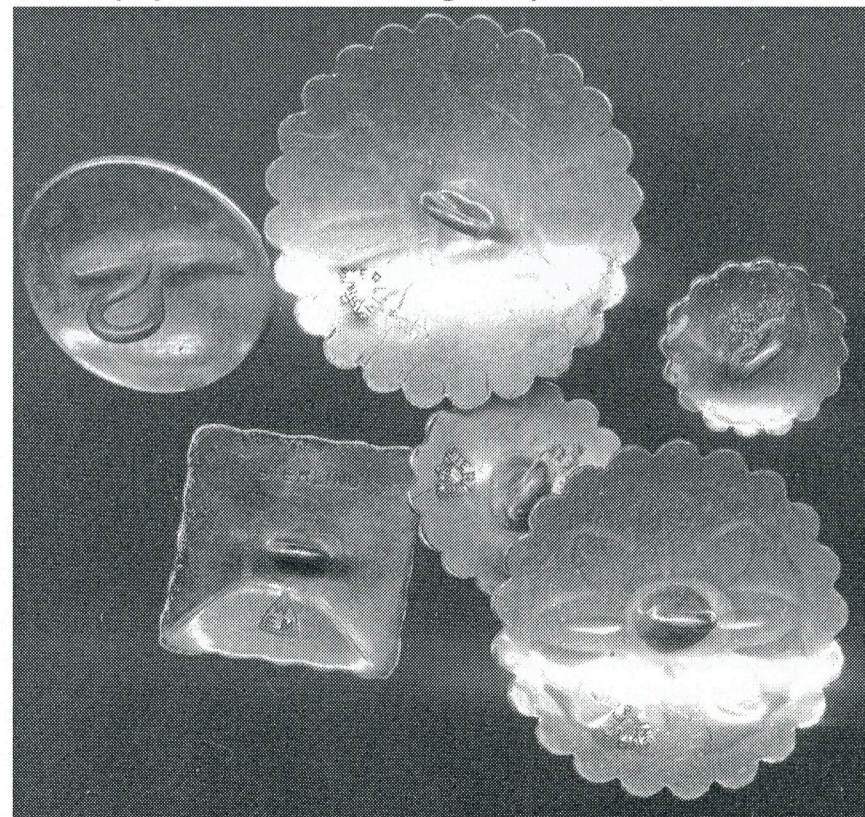
In the USA, The National Gold and Silver Marketing Act does not require precious metals to be marked with quality. Unfortunately,

only nitric acid testing will give you information on whether you have silver or not. To determine if you have silver you must scratch through any possible plating. If you are going to test, find a place on the back, near the shank. Silver plated brass, Nickel Silver or low quality silver alloys will turn green when a drop of Nitric acid is applied. Sterling will turn a creamy color. When testing suspect goods a file can be used to cut through any plating or lacquer in an unobtrusive part of the item. It's best to allow a jeweler to do this to avoid damaging a piece.

Other button manufacturers have designed buttons for western wear of pewter and other white metals. Usually you can spot these easily,



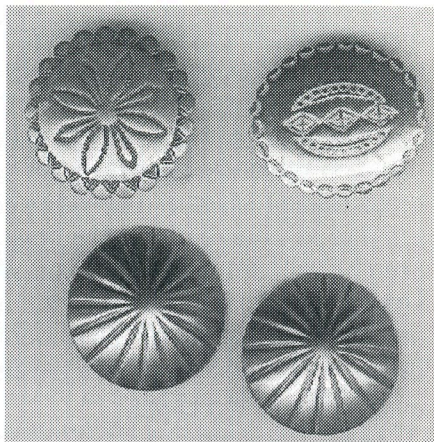
Bell Company Backmarks. WEM in Triangle on square button, odd shank



looking carefully at the face and back of the button (i.e., self shanks, mold marks and evenly stamped designs).

DESIGN – OLD AND NEW

The traditional old design is generally balanced and repetitive. Early design stamping was worked on the silver from the inside out (repousse). Later the stamps used for leather work in Mexico were copied for silver work. Look at the placement of the stamps from the edge of the button. On hand work, the distance from each punch/stamp design will be slightly different.



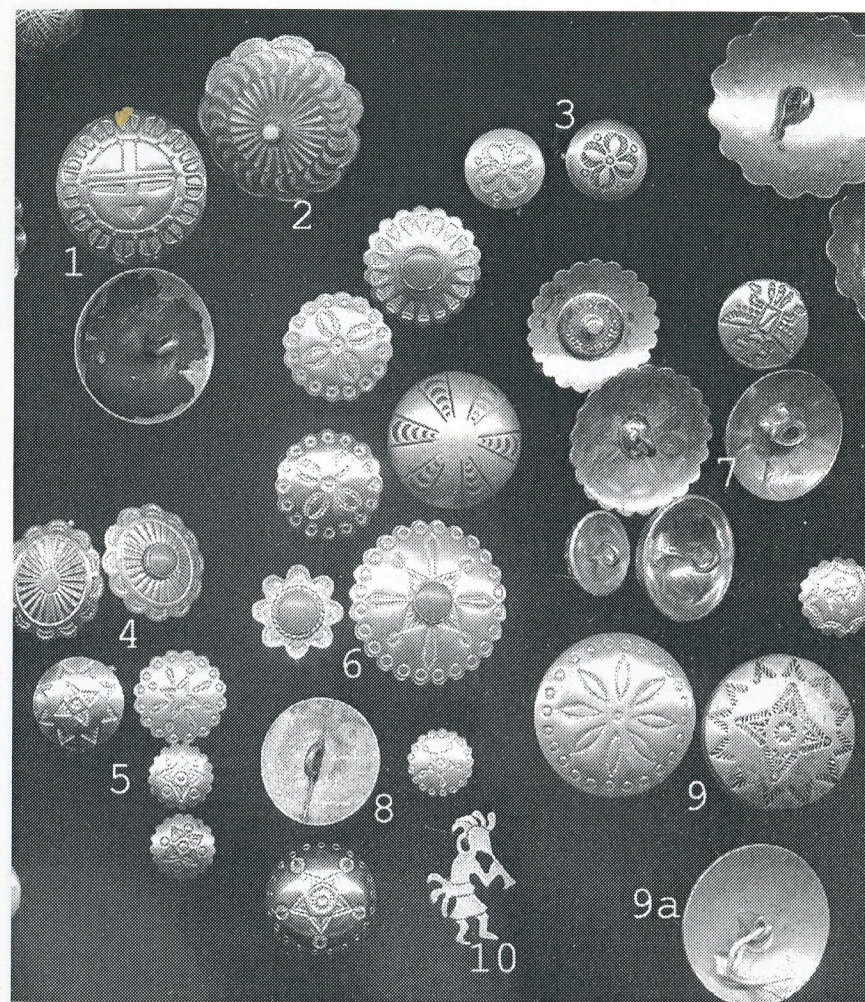
Copper buttons with stamped designs

As artists in metal work, American Indian design styles have changed their design in favor of popular designs which appealed to a greater audience. One clue that a button is not old will be the decorative motif (clouds, arrows, Indian heads, snakes, lizards). Tourists thought the designs had special symbolism, when in fact most were selected for market appeal. If you find a set of buttons, compare the stamping. If all the button designs are identical in placement, then it's a machine-stamped button.

The adaptation of design features through the years now makes it difficult to determine which tribe created a specific button. The "style" of one tribe may be incorporated into another as the artisan's expression evolves and fashion/design/taste changes in the marketplace. Most of my Native American silver can "probably" be considered Navajo in origin, but it cannot be definitively authenticated.

Study the back and the craftsmanship, but be aware that even if the button is stamped on the back there is not guarantee of its authenticity. The U.S. government got involved in the 1930s to regulate for authenticity, but deception was still prevalent. In fact, the Japanese even named a town "Reservation" so they could stamp items for the tourist trade and mark sales cards "Reservation Made."

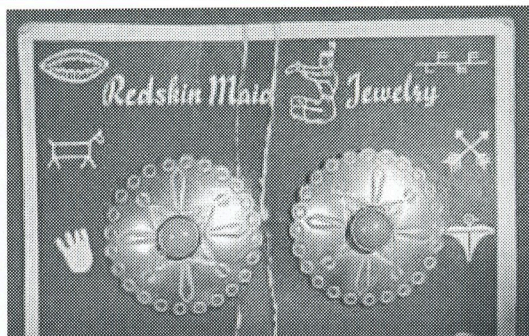
Even if a card says "Indian Made" it really may be an intentional



- #1—Kachina front/back (paint highlights depressions in machine stamping)
- #2—Silvered brass with small turquoise setting.
- #3—Nickel Silver (L) – Sterling Silver (R) with same design stamping
- #4—Two identical oval stampings with a ground "stone" center in the button on the right.
- #5—Similar designs in different sizes and different metals (nickel and copper)
- #6—Ground turquoise filled settings
- #7—Various shanks including a drilled key type, snap (for a moccasin), applied copper and white metal loop shanks
- #8—Mold line on white metal with Southwest design
- #9—Two larger Medium size nickel buttons from moccasins
- #9a—Back view of button above it
- #10—Kokopelli (flute player) realistic – Pewter button sold at Walmart and other fabric shops recently.

misrepresentation. An acquaintance of mine was paid for piece-work at home by "setting" dyed quartz "turquoise" with glue into chromed pot metal stamped bases for a company in the 1980s. The mounting cards were stamped "Indian made." She's Jewish and Hispanic!

Cards of buttons are found today with the words "Indian Maid" and "Redskin Maid" which depicted an Indian maiden drawing. These cards of buttons were sold in tourist shops in the 1950-70's and are a nickel alloy.



Redskin Maid Jewelry – Buttons of Nickel Silver and Turquoise composition or plastic.
NOT made by Native Americans.



Silver buttons: Shapes

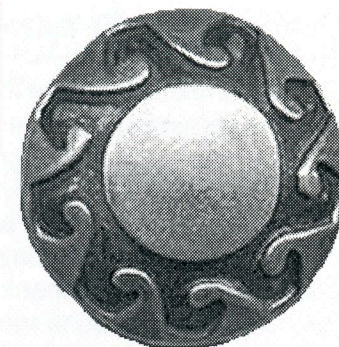
chi-a-ro-scu-ro

n. (1) Technique of using light and shade in pictorial representation; (2) Arrangement of light and dark elements in a work of art.

CLEANING SILVER

The oxidation or "**chiaroscuro**" found on some silver buttons was often an intentional part of the design, so don't over-polish old silver! I advise against the use of polishing liquids like Tarnex®. I use and recommend Nevrdull®, a cotton wadding impregnated with a metal cleaner (which can be purchased at most auto or motorcycle shops. You can also use a tiny bit of toothpaste and a soft cloth or soft toothbrush. Carefully wash and thoroughly dry the button afterward. Tarnex® is never recommended by collectors, dealers or those who value their gold or silver. The dark oxidation in the stamped impressions was intentional by design. I lightly surface polish mine with a soft cloth only if it's going on an entry tray. A scrap of carpeting is a good buffer for silver buttons (and other metals). Be careful not to snag any bezel setting for stones. Take care not to get cleaning chemicals or polishes on the stones, as they are porous and you will probably stain them.

If you want to keep a



Above: Old Indian silver.
Below: Stamped silver



Modern Sterling, machine stamped (1970-2000)

shine on buttons, try the following. Clean, mount and put the card of buttons in a plastic zip-lock bag, forcing the air out, then seal closed. The silver reacts to gases in the air, causing the tarnish. Silver may be the only button material you'd want to seal up this way!

BUTTON SHOPPING TODAY

Since buttons haven't been popular, ingenious artisans are now using the button form today as a hair ornament (with an elastic hair band attached to the shank). The rubber band is wrapped around the hair, and secured to the button. These can be found in shops selling Indian Silver (I spotted one in Gilbert Ortega's silver shop in Carefree, Arizona last week). I have been told this is how they are using up the buttons that they couldn't sell. Gilbert Ortega's said they haven't had buttons in over a year.

Don't be discouraged when you ask for buttons in Silver Jewelry or Antique shops and they say they don't have any, or show you button covers. While shopping in Carefree in a popular tourist area, I asked about buttons in a shop that carried new silver, but had one case full of old, estate and "pawn" pieces. The shop owner told me she never gets in buttons and that all she had in stock were button covers. From experience, I know to look for myself, and **sure enough**, sitting in the corner with five button covers, was an old turquoise-set button. Fifty percent off items in that case made it a good button day!

Wishing you the same luck as this great white button hunter!

Watch for Native American Arts & Crafts Part II: Pottery & Beaded Buttons in a future WRBA issue!

Buttons illustrating this article are from the collection of the Author and Deb Hanson & Jane Quimby.

*Special thanks to Deb & Jane for sharing their buttons.
See them at www.bysonbuttons.com.*



Native American silver buttons