



Maria Samora (Taos Pueblo): Lace and Guilloche collection



Guilloche pendant, 18K gold

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEVIN REBHOLTZ

SIMPLY ELEGANT

BY SUZANNE FRICKE

Innovation has always been an integral part of Native American art, whether the work is historic or contemporary. Native American artists demonstrate great creativity in techniques, materials and images, as seen in the work of jeweler Maria Samora and glass artist Ira Lujan. Both have spent their careers learning, growing and challenging themselves to create the new and the unexpected.

MARIA SAMORA (Taos Pueblo)

Samora is known for her elegant, geometric aesthetic. Working in silver, gold and precious stones, she employs both historic and contemporary jewelry-making techniques. The artist sees the challenge in simplicity, noting, "I've always believed in the idea that less is more. If you use clean, simple lines, they have to be perfect." Her work has been honored at Santa Fe Indian Market, at the Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market in Phoenix and elsewhere.

After growing up in Taos, Samora attended the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and Pitzer College in Claremont, California, where she studied fine art, photography and Spanish. "After two and a half years, I didn't have clarity on what I wanted," she said. "I was tired of being in a classroom, so I took my camera and traveled through South America with friends."

Back in New Mexico, she took her first jewelry classes at the University of New Mexico in Taos, followed by a weeklong intensive at the now defunct Taos Institute of Arts. The



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latter introduced her to master goldsmith Phil Poirier, who astounded her with the possibilities for creating different objects. Over the next two decades, she continued to train with Poirier. "I had the great fortune to have a mentor in my life. I still call on him regularly. He owns a machine shop, so I have had access to high-end technology and have tools made for me specifically. There are not many jewelers who take this approach." For example, she uses a CNC (computer numerical control) milling machine to make precision cuts to remove metal rather than casting it in molds.

Samora approaches her work organically, sitting at her bench and allowing the materials to suggest three-dimensional objects, shapes, patterns and textures. She often starts by hand-cutting pieces and playing around to create the look she wants. Samora frequently works with sterling silver and 24 karat royal yellow gold nuggets. For her *Strata* series, Samora creates crisp, precise lines with a CNC laser cutter and then hand finishes the lines to slightly blur them, so the final artwork doesn't look too machined. The artist approached her *Diamond Pyramid* series through a process of cutting away, starting with a thick piece of silver and cutting out a series of triangular shapes.

The COVID-19 lockdown provided Samora the chance to reassess her priorities. More than 10 years ago, she opened a workshop with her husband, a photographer, who handles the photography and social media end of the business. But she had to close the showroom in front of the studio during the pandemic. Although for now Samora doesn't have a space to show her work, she sees an upside: "I did have to shut down and lost a few employees, but it made me rethink my approach — to focus on what is important. People want quality over quantity. I've been lucky to have clients who supported me."

She continued, "What resonates with me is to focus on



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making beautiful things that make people happy. I tried to step back and make items that are true to me. [The pandemic] gave me more time to sit at my bench and play with new designs and techniques." For example, she experimented with a 19-century guilloche machine — originally used by watchmakers to create complex, ornamental designs on metal — which was a gift from a mentor. She explained, "The machine is beautiful, a work of art itself. I've had it in my shop for years. [Guilloche is] a decorative technique for making intricate patterns that are engraved into silver or gold. . . . During the lockdown, I had time to play around with it."

Samora continues to challenge herself, creating new designs and patterns. "I'm not [always] sure what it will look like," she said. "With jewelry, there's always a new technique to learn and play with. I've been a jeweler for more than 20 years, and I feel like I'm just starting."