

historical masters



charles lomona

1914-1991



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One thing that is always important to keep in mind when purchasing art of any kind, is whether or not what you are purchasing is indeed the real thing. Forgeries have been around basically as long as the arts have, and they are a fantastic way to lose a good amount of cash quickly — especially if the artist is famous or in style at that very moment. More often than not, a signature is worth more than its weight in gold, which is usually the case when it comes to forged jewelry.

One particular artist whose work is so widely replicated is Charles Loloma. His stunning and often one-of-a-kind works can be worth up to \$25,000. With price tags such as that, it should come as no surprise that he has become counterfeited by scam

artists. The reproductions were even mentioned by appraisers when two of his bracelets made an appearance on “Antique Roadshow.”

Charles Loloma was born on January 7, 1921, to the Badger

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Clan of the Hopi tribe in the village of Hotevilla which is located on the Third Mesa Hopi reservation in Arizona. His parents, Rex and Rachel Loloma, were both textile weavers who also wove baskets, which got their son interested in the arts. However, textile was not his first medium of choice. Charles Loloma actually started his career as a mural artist, getting his big break in 1939 when he was seventeen. He was one of four Hopi artists who were chosen to create murals for the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. It was estimated that 1.5 million people were exposed to his work while the Exposition's doors were open. He would also work on recreations of Awatovi murals for the New York Museum of Modern Art.

During Loloma's painting career, and a little over a year before his enlistment in the United States Military in 1943, just in time to fight in World War II, he married Otellie Pasiyava, a Hopi sculptor and potter.

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Otellie became famous as an artist in her own right later in life.

Loloma was stationed for two years on the Aleutian Islands and upon his return used the G.I. Bill to attend the School of American Craftsmen at Alfred University in New York City, studying ceramics along with his wife, Otellie. They both graduated in 1949 and returned to the reservation to open a school and teach for a few years.

During this time working with ceramics, Loloma would perfect his iconic signature. In his earliest works his signature is made of large block letters; but moving into 1953 his signature begins to morph into his iconic look - clean but hard, slashed lines that would form a minimalistic but oddly elegant print of his last name. However,

even though Loloma's signature appeared simplistic it would take eleven strokes to fully form his name every time he decided to carve it. He would manage to get it so even that many believed that he was stamping it on each piece of pottery.

This is not to say that he never used a stamp but this was mostly used for the few printed works that Loloma would circle back to from time to time; otherwise it was engraved physically into the work itself or he carved it into a tufa stone when he was casting



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the metal for his jewelry.

In 1956 he was growing restless and would end up moving to Scottsdale to make and sell pottery at the Kiva Craft Center—the very place that his jewelry career would begin to kick off. In fact, in 1959, Heard Museum Fair & Market was having Loloma demonstrate pottery-making, but the newspaper promoting his demonstration included an accompanying photograph that showed him holding a carved tufa stone, a type of volcanic stone used for casting silver or gold. In retrospect, this was a signal that his time in ceramics would be over soon and he would not return to it.



From almost the moment he started creating jewelry he was getting push back from some of the village elders, and was even turned away from several Native American art shows for his work being too untraditional. While his Native American contemporaries were following the tradition of stone inlay being smooth

and flush set, the work that made

Loloma famous seems to stretch beyond the body of the wearer. Loloma's pieces were shocking to those expecting traditional Native American jewelry. This rejection would cut him deeply, as he saw himself as interpreting the depth of Native American art work while many saw him as straddling the traditional and untraditional.

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Even his choice of materials was untraditional. Most jewelry created by the Hopi were primarily made of turquoise, red coral, and sterling silver, however Charles mostly used turquoise as an accent. His preferred materials were sugilite, agate, charoite, jasper, malachite, lapis lazuli, fossilized ivory, and wood. He also mixed metals, such as silver and gold. The mixing of silver and gold was uncommon because fashion for that period dictated that one would only wear one type of metal at a time. Towards the end of his career Loloma would begin using diamonds and pearls in his pieces but these would only be featured during his last decade of work and were still rarely used.

Loloma cast most of his metal work — at first using sand casting, and lost-wax casting, before moving to his preferred method of pour casting, which was using tufa stone. His style became more sculptural in appearance.



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To achieve this new style, he would cut each gem stone into a rectangular block, varying the sizes before setting them together. Each gem would be a slightly different size and height, giving the piece a bit of dimension. These very geometric but slightly tactical patterns created a tiny landscape to be worn on the wrist or finger.



Eventually though he would take this dimension to the extreme as seen in one gold bracelet. The band itself is a beautiful solid gold cuff set with a single row of bezel set turquoise, coral, malachite, lapis lazuli, ivory, and wood. Each gemstone extends off the cuff vertically at least an inch, with some expanding out in a triangle shape to become almost an inch wide, in a dramatic fashion, interpreting sun rays in cool colors. Loloma cut the tops of the most prominent stones in the piece, the turquoise and the largest piece of lapis, to interrupt the rectangular aspect of the pattern and create a visual interest.

When feeling a little more subtle Loloma also excelled at creating pieces that he labeled "inner gems." These pieces had gems hidden on the inside. Normally these pieces were plain, such as a gold tufa cast ring that only

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hints to its true beauty with a small peek-a-boo cut out that shows a small piece of lapis lazuli—at least until you look inside the ring. It is then that you are met with a treat of vibrant turquoise, jasper, and lapis lazuli. Even when these “inner gems” featured decorations on the outside, the truly precious materials were always hidden on the inside, a little surprise that just the owner is aware of. He described these pieces as being “(...) like a woman who takes off her gown to reveal her beauty”.

In Loloma’s work with singularly set stones, such as the gold ring featuring a large piece of lapis, he would interpret the bold geometric patterns of the Hopi in an artistic way which keeps the eye moving throughout the design. His use of uneven prongs seems to be very reminiscent of the Arizona desert. Other prong styles he used were often deep set and almost resembled bear claws.

He would weave in important symbolism in his works such as his clan symbol of the badger, represented by the paw, along with corn maiden, serpents, lizards, and Chakwaina representations. What was also very interesting about Loloma’s work was that he rarely made necklaces. He made bracelets and rings, bolo ties and belt buckles, but would often push away from necklaces and



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hair ornamentation. In fact over his entire career and of all his commissions he would receive, he only made three hair pieces to cinch a pony tail.

Unsurprisingly, his duality in his jewelry caught the eyes of many people. Throughout the 1960s Charles Loloma would win first prize at the Scottsdale National Indian Arts Exhibition for seven years in a row. He won seats on American Indian Historical Society of Princeton University, and of the American Indian Center for Living Arts in New York, for his talents and knowledge. The wives of the influential would often be seen wearing his works, such as First Lady Mamie Eisenhower and Olgivanna Lloyd Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright's wife. President Lyndon B. Johnson had pieces commissioned to be gifts not only for the Queen of Denmark, Margrethe II, but also for the wife of the Philippine president, Imelda

Marcos. He ended up opening galleries in Chicago, New York, and Paris. He went on several journeys to promote his works in Egypt, Japan, and Columbia. However, in 1965, at the height of his career, he and Otellie divorced and he would never remarry.



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This duality of coming from a very traditional background but constantly being told his work was too untraditional would actually end up reflecting in his personal life. In fact, "People" magazine described him as being "the world's most sophisticated primitive artist or vice versa."



Loloma maintained a deep reverence for his Hopi beliefs. He served as a religious leader in his community, and he lived by the Hopi calendar, its cycles of birth, death, and regeneration. The Hopi were a matriarchal society and he honored that more than most

other men in the village. He kept his home, which he built completely by hand, on the Third Mesa. This home had no running water, only sporadic electricity, and his phone had to be pointed towards Flagstaff if he wanted to make a call. He grew corn and melons in a sacred garden he inherited from his father.



Yet, this was not the only side to Loloma. He also had a resort-like house in Scottsdale which included a

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pool, hot tub, and several fireplaces. He was described as being a very Hollywood personality by many. He owned an \$8,500 Philippe Patek watch, a twin-engine Beechcraft Air Queen, wore Ultrasuede jackets, drove a Jag XK-E with a gear shift studded with silver and turquoise nuggets. His cat Spunky even had gold



Shortly thereafter, he moved to a nursing home in Phoenix and ultimately passed on June 9, 1991. ■

capped teeth, due to an accident where she fell out of Loloma's Jeep. Many people weren't sure exactly which side of Charles was the true side, although he attempted to explain by saying that his place was with his people — he just enjoyed the finer things in life.

After suffering a bad car accident in 1986, which required rehabilitation at Barrows Neurological Institute in Phoenix, he recovered and returned to his studio. However, two years later he began to decline due to complications and in 1988 closed his studio.

