NATIVE SCULPTORS

by Patty Talahongva

There is no doubt that the European masters Michelangelo, Donatello, and Bernini all influenced Zarco Guerrero. In fact, they inspired him to also recognize the art of his indigenous roots. "I had to go to Europe and look back and see the value of what lay literally in the dirt in my own back yard," he explains. Born in 1952, and growing up in Mesa, Arizona, he often saw construction projects halted when Native American graves and ruins were unearthed.

"I'm Native American but I'm also Chicano. To me I'm simultaneously both. Just the term 'Chicano' itself means pride in your Native heritage," says Guerrero, and his art reflects his Juaneno Mission Indian Acjachemem roots. Early in his career he worked in bronze, depicting the various stages of life and the circle of protection and unity between Native people and animals.

In his late teens, street murals were the galleries of choice among his peers. "Very few of us aspired to be in galleries or aspired to be in museums!" he says. In 1971, at the age of eighteen, Guerrero saw an exhibit of Francisco Zúñiga's work at the Phoenix Art Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. It changed his mind and turned his art in a new direction. "I was totally blown away. I had already been to Europe and seen all the great sculpture of Europe, but when I saw Zúñiga's exhibition, it was like seeing sculpture for the first time."

Guerrero also saw how indigenous art could influence social conscience. In the 1960s, many European Americans were involved in racial battles with Black Americans. Members of the American Indian Movement were capturing the country's attention with the takeover at Wounded Knee in South Dakota. Other Native Americans stormed Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay in 1969, reclaiming it in the name of "Indians of all tribes."

During this turbulent time, Guerrero left San Francisco for Tepozelan, Mexico, to study sculpture and came across the art of masks. "The ancient Olmec masks in the museums were just as elegant, just as sophisticated as any sculpture I had seen in Europe! It dawned on me that these ancient Mexican sculptors were at the same level as Michelangelo."

In 1986, Guerrero expanded his knowledge of mask-making by going to Japan on a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He spent a year studying Japanese Noh masks. Like Native American masks, historically these Asian masks had been seen as demonic by Christian Europeans.

"The mask is really the only art form that incorporates the human voice, it incorporates the human body. It moves, it breathes, it dances. For me the mask is the ultimate art."

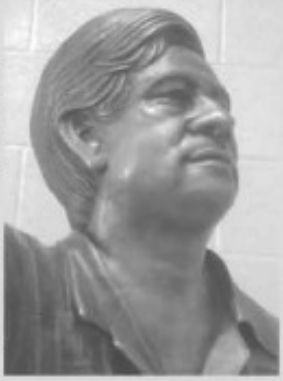
Occasionally, Guerrero returns to his roots in bronze. Most recently, he was commissioned by the César E. Chávez Foundation to make a bronze statue of the famed labor movement leader. This will be his second statue of Chávez and will be erected in the leader's hometown. His first Chávez statue is an eight-foot bronze that stands in César Chávez Park in Phoenix, Arizona.

With more than thirty years of art behind him now, he still has yet to sculpt figures of Europeans or Caucasians. And he wonders about the fascination European American artists have with Native Americans. "They love to make Indians. They probably make more Indians than Indian artists. And

Photos: Courtesy of the artist.

Indian artists—they make Indians but they don't do white people. If we were to be true innovators as Indian artists we would not be painting or sculpting Indians, we would be painting white people like they paint Indians."

"How come Indians aren't painting the U.S. Cavalry with their guns and their medals and all that? How come we don't do that? I don't know?" he shrugs.



Doug Hyde knows why he doesn't depict European Americans in his works. The Nez Perce, Assiniboine, and Chippewa artist says there's a big difference in the viewpoint of the artist. To be able to capture the essence of a Native person or image, one must have these roots and the historical memory to create the art. "I think I'm a sculptor who happens to be Native American," he says.

He ponders the idea of sculpting General George Armstrong Custer. "I would have some serious reservations about it," he says. Hyde is a Vietnam veteran. His war experience has influenced his art by making him shy away from warrior figures, Indian or otherwise.

And his art has helped heal his battle-scarred memory.

"It's really been a lifesaver. I think it would help a lot of the other veterans, too, who are suffering from posttraumatic stress and stuff, if they can really get into their art—it's just very healing."

In 1963–1964, while in high school, Hyde attended the then emerging Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. There he learned sculpture from the late Allan Houser. "When I went to the Institute I actually went there to paint. Sculpting was new—I never considered it." But he was hooked and studied the tools, the stones, and the craft.

Hyde enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1967, and served two tours of duty in Vietnam from 1967 to 1969. After being discharged from the Army in 1969, he plunged into sculpting.

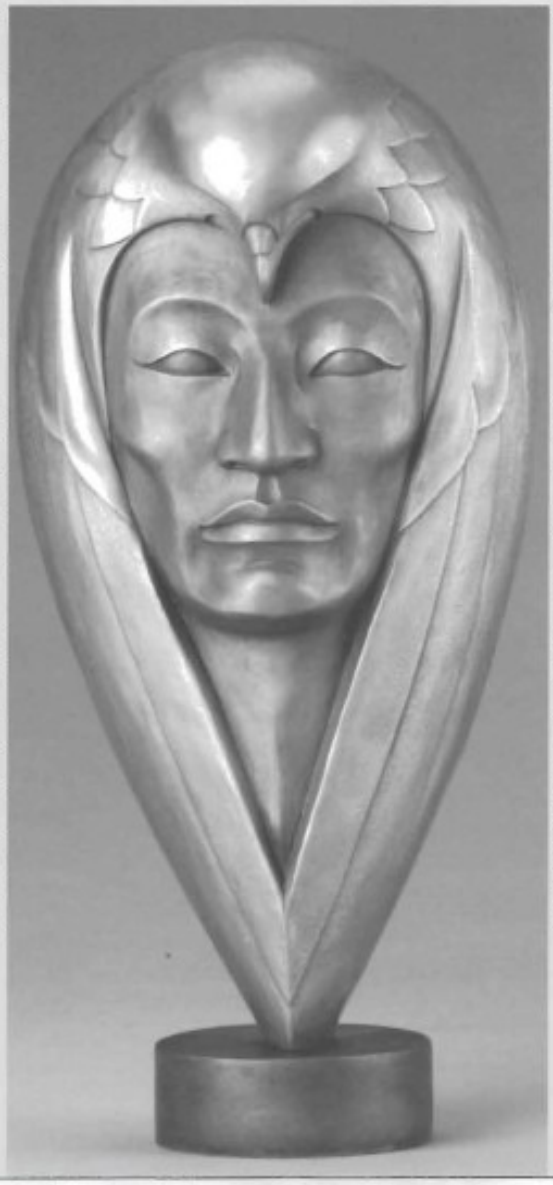
Sculptors like José De Creeft and Francisco Zúñiga are his inspirations. "I'm talking about people who just carve from the shape of the stone."

Hyde loves monumental pieces. When he started out, he was forced to use smaller stones and ones of lesser quality because that's what he could afford. It motivated him. "What I really wanted to do was to be able to work with bigger and better stones. I think that was my driving force. I set my goals to [work with] more expensive stones."

"I'm not quite up to doing a Rushmore or anything like that." Hyde says it would take too long and since he'll turn 61 this year he figures, "I probably only have another thirty years of carving left in me." Therefore, he sets a deadline for his projects. "I like to see a piece progress. I think working on something for about a year is probably my limit."

Hyde has carved a wide variety of stones, including alabaster from Colorado and Utah, limestone from Indiana, and soapstone from Virginia, as well as marble from Italy and Spain.

His statue *All for the Children* is a piece he made for the Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico. It shows a mother, father, and child standing near cornstalks. The piece was made for the tribe's new cultural center and was dedicated last summer. "To have people from the village say 'thank you very much for doing this for our people,' that's just... you can't ask for anything better than that," he says.



Opposite page: *Tortuga by Zarco Guerrero (2006), bronze, 20 inches high.*

On this page, top: *César Chávez by Zarco Guerrero (2007), bronze, 28 inches high;* ***bottom:*** *Eagle Warrior by Zarco Guerrero (2004), bronze, lifesize.*

He shares his art with others who show an interest in sculpting. "When I have a bigger project I like to get younger people, especially from the tribe or the region, to come and work on the pieces. It's the kind of experience I never really got a chance to do. I never got a chance to work on somebody else's large monumental piece."

The only chance Michael Naranjo had to work on sculptures was as a child playing with his mother's clay. He would make small animal figures that are common in his Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico.

Like Hyde, Naranjo is a Vietnam veteran. And he was blinded by a grenade explosion that also left him with only partial use of his right hand. While still recovering in the hospital, he asked for some clay and proved to himself that he could still shape and create—even with just one good hand.

"When I first started, I told people I was going to be a sculptor. Folks at the VA rehab center were trying to talk me into going to college," he laughs at the memory. He won his first sculpting contest while at a center for the blind in California. It was for a fire prevention contest, and his sculpture of Smokey Bear won him first place in the 3D category. It was the first time he'd competed against sighted artists.

His art has taken him to the Vatican. He gave Pope John Paul II a crucifix he sculpted, and he received special permission to touch, feel, and explore Michelangelo's David. He had seen works by Michelangelo, Bernini, and Donatello before he was blinded and had that reference when he found himself literally crawling all over the statues of Moses and David.

"Amazing!" is how he describes the feeling of David. "His mouth is really full. And his eyes are just incredible. They're huge. They're several inches across from one corner to the other and the pupils are hearts. There are tear ducts way in there. It was really magical to be able to look at it like that from head to toe."

His visit to the White House to meet President Richard Nixon resulted in the president crawling on the floor of the Oval Office with him. Naranjo was presenting a bronze of an Eagle Dancer to Nixon, and had just finished explaining the significance of the eagle to his Santa Clara people. The president then shared the significance of the presidential seal with Naranjo.

"Nixon was talking and he said, 'Here, let me show you,' and I felt his voice go down and I got the feeling he was on his knees. Then he again said, 'Here, let me show you,' and he kind of tugged my hand. So I got down on my knees." Together they explored the dimensions of the eagle and the seal as they crawled on the floor of the Oval Office.

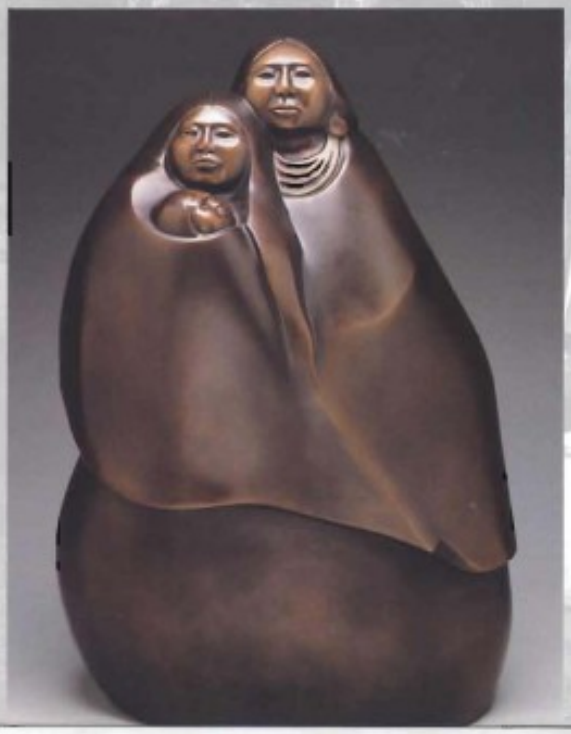
Naranjo is comfortable creating art that reflects more than his Native American heritage.

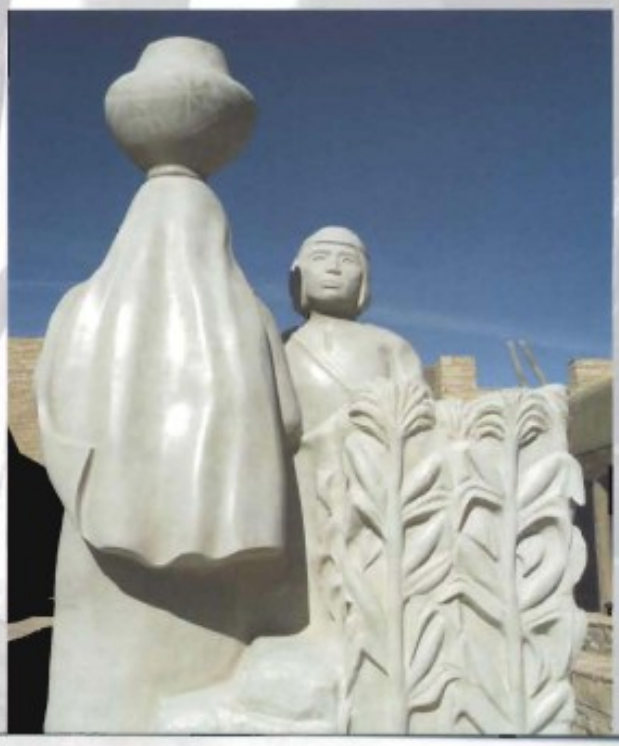
"I don't want to be categorized. I happen to be Indian. I happen to be blind. What I really am is a sculptor."

He likes detail but also appreciates simplicity. He removed the dress he had started to carve over one female figure because it covered up too much. He describes his sculpture, *Torso*, of another female figure. "It's simple and it's twisted and it's moving. It's kind of round and soft. The human body is the most beautiful form."

His ability to show motion in stone is captured in his piece titled *Geronimo*. While most people might expect to see the

Left photos: Courtesy of Nedra Matteucci Galleries; right photo: Courtesy of the artist.



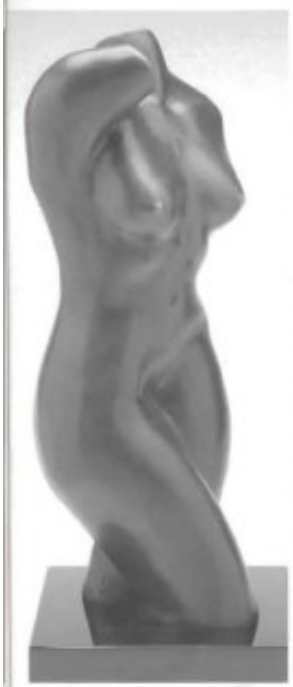


famed Apache warrior, Naranjo's Geronimo is a buffalo caught in the act of running and turning. "[Maybe] some Indians are chasing him and he's spinning backwards to cut the other way or something to meet whatever is disturbing him, maybe Indians or a grizzly bear," he explains.

His philosophy on art is also simple. "You love it like anything else. You nourish it, take care of it, feed it, give it energy and then it grows. We all deal with negative situations. If you like it, you deal with it; if you don't, a half-hearted attempt probably shows."

His hope is that more art will be made for touching. He keeps an artist copy of nearly every piece he's sculpted throughout the years. These pieces he lends to museums for special touchable art exhibits.

"At this point in my life, you know, my world now is touch and sound. And I have absolutely no desire to see. I'm happy being blind. I'm a happy boy!" he declares.



The world of three-dimensional art also captured Cliff Fragua's attention. He also attended the IAIA in New Mexico in 1973, and, like Hyde, had wanted to study painting, but a few courses in sculpting changed his mind. "With the 2D form you create illusions. With the 3D form you are creating and manipulating space so there is that difference," he says. "I gave up painting and started pursuing the three-dimensional arts."

Fragua is from the Pueblo of Jemez in New Mexico. Large-scale sculpting is not a tradition among his people, and early on he was cautioned by his elders.

"Some of the spiritual leaders would tell me to just be careful because stone is a powerful spirit and the images you create can turn on you," so he says he took certain measures to take care of that by having his studio and materials blessed to protect both him and his art.

Fragua doesn't think the idea of spirituality and sculpting is unique to Native American artists. "Actually, Michelangelo said that there was always the form in the stone and all you had to do was to take away everything that wasn't supposed to be there. So I feel like those Italian carvers knew there is a spirit that dwells in the stone. I feel it's very universal among sculptors where they feel, they sense there is a spirit within the stone, that it is a living entity."

Consequently, his work reflects the spirit of the stone and the emotion of the human spirit. And he admires artists who recognize those qualities. "I love the work by Frederick Hart," he says. Hart's Three Soldiers, Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., shows the human emotion of the troops. "One of the things that Frederick Hart said is that sculptors should learn their craft," says Fragua. "This is what I convey to students. Learn your skill. You have to put your whole emotions, your feelings into your work. I'm still learning. And as a student of life you learn until the day you die."

When he first started out, Fragua kept company with a handful of other Native Americans who also sculpted. They shared information on new tools because, as he recalls, tools were limited thirty years ago. "Back then some of us started out using hammers and screwdrivers!" he laughs, and adds this: "What if Michelangelo had access to power tools, pneumatic tools, diamonds? Would he use them? And we all agreed, yes, he would have! He would have produced a lot more work. It would allow him that freedom to pursue his ideals in the quickest amount of time. He was very prolific even with the limited use of tools that he had."

While he respects the European masters, Fragua wants people to understand that Native sculpture is a viable part of the sculpture world. "I think a lot of times people don't take Native art seriously. They tend to look at it as just craft, that it doesn't make significant contributions to the history of art. I think a lot of that tends to be controlled by academia. But when you see the dynamics of Native art and [in] what direction it's going, it has a lot of profound contributions."

His own contribution sits in the National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. It's a statue of Po'pay, an Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo man and leader of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Historians have noted it as the first true American Revolution. Under Po'pay's leadership the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and Arizona drove the Spaniards out of the region and reclaimed their cultures and religions. They remained free of Spanish rule for twelve years, and when the Spanish returned to the region, the Pueblos were able to continue practicing their cultures and religions. Fragua is the only Native American artist whose work appears in the

Left photos: Courtesy of Nedra Matteucci Galleries; right: Courtesy of the artist.

National Statuary Hall.

This era of Puebloan history was sad and violent, and Fragua says the climate he worked in while creating the Po'pay statue mirrored that time. "Oh man, the weather was fierce! It was like Po'pay, his spirit was real powerful. What he had accomplished, it took that kind of power. And so with the wind, and the rain, the snow, and the sleet, it was challenging to be working outdoors at that time. But it adds a lot of character to that process, what I [went] through to finish up the statue. I had that appreciation. If things were nice and pleasant it wouldn't have that meaning. For Po'pay to emerge from the stone—it had that much more meaning."

Another meaningful note about the Po'pay statue is that it is carved from Tennessee marble, a stone with a colored tint. "When I visited the National Statuary Hall in D.C., I noticed all the statues were either bronze or marble, and if it was marble it was white marble. I wondered why white was the preferred color. And so, I thought Po'pay will be different, he will have some color."

Fragua's creations come to him in many forms. He went through a phase where he sculpted Japanese kimonos. He liked the similarity of that culture to his own and the idea that all things have spirit.

"Today I might feel like carving something in abstract form. The next day I might do something more classical," he says. "You just do what you feel and whatever the stone dictates to you."

He likes the human emotion that Bernini and Canova captured in their pieces and learns from their works.

He also remains involved with fellow Native sculptors through the Indigenous Sculptor Society. It is an effort to be role models and mentors to the youth in Native communities. "It's more important that the youth in a Native community can see the success of someone from their tribe," he says. "That's what we want to convey."

Bronze and marble have been good to him, but he's looking to the future and to other materials to sculpt. "I definitely would like to learn the glass process and also the Lucite resin process. I'm also looking to produce something steel, stainless steel particularly."

Every one of these artists hopes their work makes a lasting impression. As Zarco Guerrero puts it, "I want my art to make the world a better place. That may seem a little bit corny, but that's what I'm trying to do with my art. A lot of great artists, we're decorating the world."

Patty Talahongva is Hopi from Polacca, Arizona. Following the custom of her people, she has inherited her mother's clan which is Corn and she is named for her father's clan which is Spider. Hence, her Hopi name, translated into English, is White Spider Girl. As a youngster, she spent many hours sculpting pottery with her mother. Today, her art is writing and speaking. She is a freelance journalist and has published and broadcast nationally.

On page 28, left: Nez Perce Family *by Doug Hyde (2002), bronze, 28 inches high; right:* All for the Children *by Doug Hyde (2006), Indiana limestone, 105 inches high. On page 29:* Autumn Hunter *by Doug Hyde (1982), alabaster, 32 inches high. Opposite page, background:* Up and Away*(2003) by Michael Naranjo, bronze, 34 inches high; top:* Geronimo *by Michael Naranjo (2004), bronze, 12-1/2 inches high; bottom:* Torso *by Michael Naranjo (2006), bronze, 16-1/2 inches high. On this page, left:* Po'pay *by Clifford Fragua (2005), Tennessee marble, 7 feet high. Above:* Voices of the Ancestors *by Clifford Fragua, Tennessee marble, 42 inches high.*