

Stitched



to the Soul

Anchored by Native and Anglo roots, ceremonial and contemporary art, Teri Greeves stretches even further, blending roles as a preservationist, an innovator, and an important social critic.

Once upon a time, in a trading post on Wyoming's Wind River Indian Reservation, a bored eight-year-old asked a local beadworker for a lesson. The woman gave the child baby moccasins, and only when the girl had finished with the first one's seemingly simple triangles and lines did her teacher tell her to turn it around and look at it as though it were on her own foot. The little girl, one Teri Greeves, followed her teacher's instructions. Soon, the beads faded. In the negative space bordered by the triangles and lines, the girl saw the hoof of a deer, the animal figuratively sewn to the soul of the baby whose foot might someday fill it.

"From the very first object I ever made, I was being told to look at the negative space," says Greeves. Today, she is one of the nation's preeminent Native beadworkers, celebrated for her exacting traditional designs, unconventional applications, and biting commentaries on contemporary culture. "You can't just look at the design. You have to see the whole thing."

She never tackled the second moccasin, and the first disappeared—lost or somehow swallowed into the massive collections of her mother, the trading post owner, Jeri Ah-be-hill. Greeves often wondered if it still existed, that emblem of her first step on a path toward not only artistic innovation, but scholarly studies of clothing, identity, and Native women's unsung roles in their importance.

"Literally, everything has a meaning and purpose when you're dressing for your community," Greeves says. Tribal clothing's designs, colors, how they're worn, and when they're worn add up to a nomenclature that reveals the wearer's place in the

world—their tribes, their clans, the animals they carry within them. Greeves steeped herself so deeply in those stories from her mother and the other Natives she encountered that when she attended her first New Mexico powwow, after moving from Wyoming in 1986, she could tell her friends where most of the dancers came from—even what season they were born in, based on the construction of their moccasins' tongues.

Even with that immersion into her Native heritage, Greeves has long felt split between two or even more worlds. A Kiowa/Comanche who was raised amid Shoshone and Arapahoe, she has an Anglo father and an Ottawa husband. "Hands and feet in both places," she says. As she developed as a Native artist, she made ceremonial objects with extraordinary precision, plus delightfully modern mash-ups of Converse shoes beaded with familiar icons, cartoon imagery, and personal commentary. Blue ribbons, commissions, and museum purchases stacked up (along with New Mexico institutions, the British Museum, New York's Museum of Art and Design, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Portland Art Museum, and Washington DC's National Museum of the American Indian, to name a few).

Her traditional moccasins found early favor with collectors and helped her make a living from her artwork. Her career, one

Opposite: Teri Greeves, *Cheyenne Mona Lisa*, 2012. Size 13 Czech cut beads, brain-tanned deer hide, Czech glass beads, cotton cloth. 17 × 14 in. Courtesy of a private collector. Photograph by Carol Franco.

that encompassed the binary of keeping the faith and pushing the boundaries, might have continued unabated until one day ten years ago when, while visiting a cherished collector, she saw a pair of her traditional moccasins on display. Never worn, never danced in, never meshed with a human spirit, they had grown so stiff that she feared they had no use beyond art—and that she was complicit in the deed.

In that moment, Greeves' origin story reached a fork in the road. One represented creativity, the other responsibility. Hands and feet in both places, could she travel two ways?

"I realized I couldn't sell objects we use in ceremonial life to non-Native or non-Kiowa people," Greeves says. "In my mind, I separated. As an artist, you're like, oh, I'm going to push the boundaries. But there's this one, traditional way of making things, and there's this market way of doing things. That's the place where I can do whatever."

Her vocation was also a diversion from an earlier goal. Greeves, daughter of Ah-be-hill and Italian-American sculptor Richard Greeves, intended to become a lawyer. She has the mind for it, with a steely take on the many costs of injustice, and a fighter's instinct for pulling all but the most necessary punches. In the late 1980s, she worked her way through the University of California at Santa Cruz by beading small items that her mother, by then divorced and relocated, could sell in her trading post off Old Santa Fe Trail. Mostly, she applied traditional designs to mainstream accessories, like powwow earrings, for example. One day, Ah-be-hill suggested she try beading a pair of Converse All-Stars. Years before, such a pair had come into the Wind River shop, dazzling both Teri and her sister, jewelry artist Keri Ataumbi. "We thought they were crazy cool," Greeves says. "My mother set a really high price on them. I think she didn't want to sell them."

Ah-be-hill sent Greeves a new pair. To her delight, she found that the tongues on these iconic kicks lift all the way out, so that she could slip a beading hand into the tip of the toe. She began with simple designs, but soon realized that, besides using various parts of the shoe to tell an intricate story, she could also let each shoe tell a different episode. She covered her new canvases with horses, tipis, superheroes, and representations of "Rez Pride" that often drew on powwow imagery. She took finished pairs to Santa Fe Indian Market and the Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Arts and Crafts Show. "Every time I put them on the table, people would come up, laughing and smiling," she recalls. "The first couple times, I was offended. But then I real-



ized that all they saw were beaded Converse All-Stars, and they were walking into the story that I wanted to tell with a smile and their heart open. This is a vehicle I am using to tell very complicated stories."

The stories blend past with present—a loincloth-clad Indian karate-kicking the word KAPOW, powwow-perfect dancers in Ray-Bans—and celebrate iconography like deer, turtles, lightning, and whirlwinds.

She continued making other objects as well—bracelets, vessels, leggings, and traditional moccasins. In 1990, as she prepared to head to law school, she entered Indian Market with a deer-hide umbrella embellished with beads, shells, and coins. It fit no category, yet *Indian Parade Umbrella* took home best-of-show honors, and remade Greeves' career plan. The more she examined the abstract images on the many objects her mother collected and those she herself encountered, the more she believed that she could become the standard-bearer for the unknown women she believes crafted at least half of all recognized Native art. They were, to her eyes, the forgotten inventors of a modern American art form.

"Long before Georgia O'Keeffe ever set foot in New Mexico, the first abstract eye was a female eye, and she was a Native eye," Greeves says. "The pottery, the beadwork, the parfleches. All



of those abstract designs are women's work, and white abstract painters of America were seeing this when they came west."

Perhaps nowhere does her eye for imposing abstraction on the everyday reveal itself better than her high-heeled sneakers. Manufactured by the Steve Madden company in the Converse All-Star style as a cheeky riff on high-fashion stilettos, they take on extra oomph when coated with Greeves' designs. One pair delineates the difference between "rez girls" (softball players) and "ndn girls" (powwow princesses). Another analyzes luck through the traditional lens of Deer Woman on one shoe, a tribal casino on the other. Perhaps there's a person out there who would dare tie any of them onto their feet—her earliest examples were meant to be worn—but Greeves elevates shoe to sculpture, as seen in the pair she created for the Museum of



Opposite: Teri Greeves in her studio, holding a photograph of her mother, Jeri Ah-be-hill, 2017. Photograph by Terrance Clifford.

Left, top: Teri Greeves, *NDN Art*, 2008. Size 13 Czech cut beads, brain-tanned deer hide, Czech glass beads, cotton cloth. 13 ½ × 10 ¾ in. Courtesy of a private collector. Photograph by Carol Franco.

Left, bottom: Teri Greeves, *Sunboyz*, 2009. Converse All-Star basketball shoes, glass beads, rhinestones. New Mexico Arts Permanent Collection. Photograph by Blair Clark.

Indian Arts and Culture's permanent collection and now on exhibit in *Stepping Out: 10,000 Years of Walking the West*.

Kiowa Ladies depicts two women, one for each shoe, plus two sets of abstract designs that Greeves pulled from a weathered bonnet-case parfleche made long ago by an unknown Kiowa woman. For her, the shoes hold a place in third-wave feminism, marrying the Kiowa tradition of men creating pictorial images and women inventing the abstractions in a way that elevates those women into a long-denied spotlight.

Imagine them on your feet. Those pure abstractions, long the design domain of women, speak directly to each other, left foot to right, gliding down to the earth and up to the shins. Staring out on either side, the women whose faces never graced their works watch each step you might take, see what you might see. Their unadorned faces appear beautiful, daring, serene.

"They're two different women, Kiowa women, and not a specific woman. It's the Kiowa female eye, that genius eye," she says of the shoes. "It's recognizing there were these master artists in Native America and, in paint first, they were creating an abstracted world and then were introduced to this new medium of beads."

The shoes carry extra importance: They are the final pair of high-heeled high-tops Greeves may ever create. Steve Madden discontinued the style. Greeves has hunted the web, finding only sorely abused second-hand versions of the medium that put extra pop into her art. "I can't get them anymore," she says. The path ends. Others, she knows, await.

Stacks of deer, buffalo, and moose hides occupy one corner of Greeves' home studio south of Santa Fe. Part of another

wall holds bins filled with beads, tin cones, mirrors, elk teeth, shells. Old moccasins, including her mother's, stand on a rolltop desk. Pictures of Greeves' forebears hang above her work desk, along with a decorated stick representing a mystical snake of Kiowa lore. Stuffed bookshelves share space with projects in the making, including Indian Market projects and Ottawa-style leggings and moccasins for her youngest son's naming ceremony. "I don't know how to make the pucker-toe moccasins that are specific to those Great Lakes people," she frets. "I think he's not going to have proper moccasins."

Greeves' concentrated study of tribal designs and their evolutions have won the admiration of curators across the nation. She has access to the collections vaults at the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of Natural History, where she pulls inspiration from "the intentionality of the old work"—how earlier artisans did what they did when time and materials were dear and cultural identity was key. In 2019, she'll co-curate a yet-to-be-titled exhibit at the Minneapolis Institute of Art exploring Native women's creativity from prehistory to today.

Kiowa women are particularly adept at beadwork, and use the skill to tell stories about where their people come from, stitch by stitch retelling their roots. "I was brought home from the hospital in beadwork," Greeves says. "My mom had a beaded diaper bag. Beaded objects were around me. I was enveloped in beadwork. It's identity. You grow up hearing, 'Don't do it that way. That's not the way we do it.' The value of my existence is I can be some sort of cross-cultural conduit. I live in both worlds, so I can talk about what I see and try to interpret it into some kind of story that makes sense."

On commission and often as gifts, Greeves continues to make ceremonial clothing and footwear, but only if she knows the people who will use them and can then concentrate upon how they will do so as she works. Although she limited a line of her commercial offerings, she solidified her ability to critique the present with techniques from the past. Lauded for her expertise in crafting fancy footwear, she herself prefers flip-flops or Doc Martens most days of the week. And she understands those people who might blend the artifacts of various tribal cultures in the name of the new—especially when the earned value comes from the "pan-Indianism" of powwows at which she sometimes pokes gentle fun.

"You see the crowns, leggings, belts, everything matchy-matchy. That's nothing like what Kiowa women wore 20 years ago, 50, or 100," she says. "But it's not bad. It's alive, and it

Opposite: Teri Greeves, *Kiowa Ladies*, 2017. Beaded Steve Madden shoes, 2017. Commercial shoes, glass beads. 11 × 3 ½ × 9 in. Gift of the Friends of Indian Arts, MIAC 59896/12. Photograph by Stephen Lang.

keeps reinventing itself. But that style of dress is in response to competition, not ceremonial."

For that, she draws lines around her ability to borrow from any other tribal tradition while still speaking out on behalf of all tribal peoples. She rails against the National Museum of Natural History for holding football fields' worth of artifacts precious to individual identities—and for combining them in collections of dinosaur bones and mineral samples. She charges that lapses in the institutional archiving process make it difficult to research them. (The National Museum of the American Indian, she says, operates more orderly and ethically.) She mourns the loss of traditional lifeways that complicates her access to properly tanned hides. She makes a theme song of the need to recognize more Native art as women's art. And she sighs at being asked to once again answer her most-often-asked question: Is your beadwork an art or a craft?

"Craft is art, and art is craft," she says. "In the end-all, be-all, I'm a shoemaker. In the zombie apocalypse, I can make shoes. What I say is this: I am a beadworker. In my community, that means something. Almost all Native art is women's work and it's considered crafts by the larger art world. They don't know what they're looking at. They don't know that it's a deer hoofprint."

The photographed gazes of her ancestors and the array of artifacts surrounding Greeves assures that she walks confidently on all the paths she's chosen. Many of the pieces in her studio came from her mother, the family's true fashionista, who died in March 2015, leaving behind packed storage sheds. Greeves and her sister put off cleaning them out. "Hantavirus central," Greeves jokes. But finally they went in, and there, in the very last of the sheds, Greeves found the baby moccasin. Sitting in her hand, it weighs but grams. No baby ever wore it, set its soul within it, marveled at the deer that guided its feet. Yet it means the world. A young Kiowa girl on a faraway reservation threaded her intent into it, speaking for the first time with the women who came before her and with those yet to arrive. One foot done, she was on her way. ■

Author of the artist biography, *Helen Hardin: A Straight Line Curved*, **Kate Nelson** is *New Mexico Magazine's* interim editor who loves immersing herself in the state's arts, culture, history, and mountains. She also wrote "Into the Light" (page 61) in this issue.

