



*Hopi Jeweler*  
Duane Tawahongva



# Hopi Corn

## *Gift of the Rain*



### DUSTY SUNLIGHT STREAMED IN THROUGH HIS WORKSHOP WINDOWS.

Living on Second Mesa tucked away in northeastern Arizona, Hopi artist Duane Tawahongva was showing us his award-winning, silver jewelry. Symbols of water, storm clouds, rainbows, the sun, moon, and revered corn plants are used on many of his pieces. Ancient petroglyphs and pictographs

appear on others. Each symbol holds sacred meaning and stories for the Hopi.

Duane sells his handcrafted earrings, bracelets, belt buckles, and pendants at art shows across the country. His workshop is located on the outskirts of Mishongnovi, the pueblo village where he was born.



On the hot afternoon that we first met, Duane crafted a silver overlay pendant, as I photographed him for an *Arizona Highways* assignment about Hopi artists.

In his workshop near the edge of tall white cliffs, I captured him cutting a tiny design from sheet silver using a delicate wire saw, soldering the overlay to a silver base, and then soaking it in oxidizing solution.

He moved to a polishing wheel, and carefully buffed the blackened silver to shine again, and then hammered the design into a convex curve on an old wooden block. He polished it one last time, and seeing that it was finished handed me the small pendant, a detailed Bighorn sheep symbolizing prosperity, as a gift.

Now, years later, I wear the wedding ring he offered to make when he heard I was marrying Wendy. He crafted two silver

overlay snakes intertwined around the band on our matching rings. Snakes are said to carry prayers in Hopi tradition.

On a warm spring day Duane phoned, as he occasionally does, to tell us that a ceremonial Katsina Dance was scheduled. That weekend we drove from our home in Sedona up Oak Creek Canyon and through Flagstaff toward the small town of Leupp. From there we headed up Highway 2 until we reached the remote Hopi mesas nearly three hours later.

We found Bacavi, the village on Third Mesa holding the dance, and made our way into their crowded plaza under the baking, high desert sun.

A deep, steady, resonate drum filled the centuries-old plaza as katsina dancers rhythmically circled inside. The katsinas

*He crafted two silver overlay snakes intertwined around the band on our matching rings.*



wore elemental pigments painted on bare skin, adorned in a variety of buffalo fur, deer horns, horsetail hair, leather, and feathers. Katsinas, I was told, represent different spiritual aspects of life in the very complex and secretive Hopi cosmology.

Sensing the connection this ceremonial dance brought to the village, I was struck with the reverence and friendliness of these descendants of the Ancient Ones. Between dances the katsinas generously included everyone. They brought out boxes of food and tossed apples, oranges, bananas and cookies to the kids, grandparents, uncles, sisters, and the rest of us watching.

I felt a depth of community that I yearn to feel in my own world.

Last July, Duane let us know about a Home Dance. On this occasion, more than sixty katsina dancers wore similar bold ochre and black stripes painted on their bare chests, arms, and legs with identical



hand-woven white kilts, a turquoise-colored sash that held a dangling fox pelt, and a turtle shell rattle tied to one leg.

The sun backlit a tall orange or green parrot feather wavering on their head with downy feathers fluttering below like clouds in the breeze, and long horsetail hair falling

like curtains of rain. With each haunting step, they chanted in guttural unison. The repetition created a powerful scene.

Between dances the katsinas presented young Hopi boys a small bow and arrows, and girls a hand-carved katsina doll tied to

a tall, green cattail stalk visible above the crowd. Young maidens stood watching from a distance gathered in groups wearing hand-woven white dresses and traditional hair whorls.

Many of the moving prayers of these ceremonies ask for rain to water their corn in this dry land, and at the end of the hot day, we felt rain begin to magically sprinkle down. The gift of rain from the deep twilight sky could not be ignored; it came as their blessing. On the drive home, a steady rain fell watering their hidden cornfields.

It was early September when Duane invited us to come up to the Hopi mesas for a harvest and corn roast. Recognizing the intricate and sacred relationship Hopis have with corn, we felt honored, and eagerly said yes.

He had invited us to meet at his house, so he could take us to his field. At the top of Second Mesa, we took a long side road and



just past a stone retaining wall turned again to descend the steep dirt driveway. Duane came out of his workshop and greeted us with a smile and warm hug of friendship.

We gave him gifts from our garden, tomatoes, basil, and mint picked fresh that morning. He had sandwiches ready, and we brought snacks for our day in the field. We loaded into his Silverado pickup, and towing his empty flatbed trailer down Highway 87, we soon turned onto a bumpy

dirt road, and headed into the boonies he warned us.

Duane explained about the nearby clan fields, and that his field was further out on no-man's land where he had found an uncultivated wash and cleared the brush. Today was a harvest for the corn he had planted months earlier. Bouncing onward toward more and more open space, we finally arrived.

He parked alongside his cornfield, and we carried our lunch walking between

rows of diligently weeded soil that he tends alone. Duane's crop grew tall, and held deep, healthy green in every leaf, radiating with vibrancy.

"We care for the plants like children," he told us.

On the far side of the field we set down our things. Duane took off his shirt, and told me to take mine off and go wild. I shed my T-shirt, and let my skin feel the sun and wind as we began collecting sticks of driftwood for a fire.



*“We care for the plants  
like children.”*



As the woodpile grew, Wendy and I became more familiar with the land.

Lighting our fire the wet wood smoked and sputtered taking slowly to the flames.

We added some dry tumbleweed and in a flash bright orange flames erupted, the scent of our fire mixing with the aroma of tilled soil.

Duane began picking corn, and walking the rows he taught us to find husks with the silk drying to red-brown.

“Squeeze the end of the ear and if it feels full and tight within the husk its ripe,” he said.

With a quick wrist snap he harvested a ripe ear without damaging the mother plant and dropped the husk into the large cloth bag that I carried. We filled the bag until it

bulged like Santa’s sack of toys, emptied it by the fire, and filled it again.

When we returned to the fiery bed of coals we began arranging the husks in a

single layer over the coals. Smoke billowed into a cloud, flames popped out, quickly disappeared, and the smell of sweet corn roasting on the fire slowly filled the air. Wendy commented

that the aroma was one of the best she’d ever smelled. Duane proudly smiled.

Broken clouds wallowed in and out across the sun, rain curtains bent to the horizon surrounding us as they had all day, moving in separate storms. Wind seemed to foretell an approaching downpour, yet the sky above our gathering remained friendly and calm.





*The smell of sweet corn roasting on the fire slowly filled the air.*

We kept moving husks, rotating the uncooked side onto the heat using sticks for tongs, and the blanket of once-green corn seared to brown and black. When the corn was roasted to perfection we began pulling

it off the fire to cool, bits of burnt husk floating away in the wind.

With his long black hair flowing over his shoulders, the sun shone down on a farmer familiar with shirtless days in the





field, and he taught us the Hopi word *naalöyö* meaning four, explaining how many years he had planted in this wash. When a rainbow briefly appeared, he gave us the word for rainbow.

Duane finally pulled the blackened husk off a roasted corn and radiated with an inner sense of accomplishment as he chewed into the juicy, smoky-flavored, plump white kernels. We joined the feast, sitting on the ground next to the fire, all

the elements present and in harmony. Soil and rain, sunshine and fire, and the ancient traditions passed down from father to son held their stories inside each bite.

What stayed with me during our conversation was his mentioning the need of a strong will to survive. Tending the land shows the will to survive, and giving back to the land shows reverence for life. Hopi people are survivors. Practice and continuity flow through their generations. Working in the field keeps knowledge alive.

Duane shared, “After my father’s stroke he can’t visit the fields, but I keep living our tradition of growing corn, with his respect for the land, and a good heart.”

He follows his father’s way and had planted beans to replenish the soil that the corn would deplete. He grows squash and melons in another field and the white, yellow, and blue corn he tends daily is full of life. He takes care of the land and it takes care of him.





After our corn feast, Duane quietly left the fire, started his John Deere tractor, and spent the next hour digging out new weeds and brush.

When he finished the work he asked me to drive his truck until we got to firmer ground before loading the tractor. Watching him in the rearview mirror, I saw blue-gray rain curtains trailing him down the road from the east.

A dark cloud to the west hung to the ground where the bumpy dirt road was aiming. We got the tractor onto the trailer, and Duane climbed inside the truck with miraculous timing. A fierce rain caught us from both directions pelting the windshield, while purple lightning ripped into the ground below the mesas.

We cautiously reached the highway and climbed the mesa to Mishungovi where the streets of his village glistened like polished stones after the storm. Golden afternoon sunlight slowly emerged. The storm clouds

moved silently across the expansive valley below his jewelry workshop. He parked and then, like another good omen, a bright rainbow floated down connecting sky and earth as rosy clouds passed under the rising moon.

We stood quietly in the glow of twilight. Our friend Duane handed us two bags of roasted corn to take home, to remember, savor, and share. Saying our good-byes, Wendy and I headed down the mesa steeped in fresh memories of rain



and rainbows, earth and sky, corn and fire,  
clouds and the moon.

We had witnessed the living elements  
that Duane instills as powerful sacred  
symbols in his jewelry. Their meaning is

still beyond our full knowing, yet in the  
generosity that Duane shows us, these gifts  
of participating, he offers a glimpse into a  
deeper understanding that we carry home.

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