

How to

DEAL

Local artwork isn't hard to find. Throughout Arizona, Native Americans can be found selling their jewelry, paintings and pottery at roadside stands, trading posts, powwows, pueblos and galleries. It's accessible, which might be why the general public perceives Indian art like Mexican art, where bartering is a part of the equation. In the Southwest, that's not the case. Here, haggling can be either a time-honored tradition or a minefield of cultural insensitivity.



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he bus kicks up puffs of red dust before disgorging its passengers from New York, Ohio, Florida and Oregon onto the reservation ground. Mostly middle-aged and white, they're tentative and curious, plucking handcrafted pieces from wooden tables, gesturing excitedly and comparing items. There's a buzz of discovery and pending acquisition among the would-be buyers. Several tourists offer words of appreciation to the artist, a young woman who stands silently behind the table, ready to sell her creations. Then one man simultaneously brandishes an item and reaches for his wallet before declaring in a too-loud voice: "I'll give you \$40 for this." There's an uncomfortable silence. The vendor simply ignores the man, making change for others who have paid full price. I wince as this scene unfolds. Is my reaction justified?



When we travel, many of us want to buy a memento, something unique and handmade, a touchstone of our experience that we can proudly show off to friends and family. But often in our enthusiasm to procure such treasures, we unwittingly trample on unspoken customs and cause unintended grief. Haggling can be a time-honored tradition or a minefield of cultural insensitivity. Can dickering ever be a win-win? Do the rules change when you're dealing directly with the artist versus a gallery? Is it possible to bargain with respect?

"This can become quite a sensitive issue," says Wendy Weston, director of American Indian relations at the Heard Museum in Phoenix. "I think the most important point to remember is to treat these people with the same respect you'd treat a small-business owner. I personally don't practice bargaining with artists, nor would I go to the jewelry counter in a large department store and expect to bargain. Native entrepreneurs operate these cottage industries and support families with their sales. I lived life as an artist for some time, and I priced my wares reasonably. Because of this, whenever someone attempted to bargain with me, I wouldn't participate."

Heard Museum's Annual Indian Fair & Market offers Indian artists a venue to sell their work, such as Santa Clara pottery.

According to the University of Arizona's Economic Development Research Program, Arizona is home to more than 250,000 Native Americans on 23 reservations representing 21 tribes — more than any other state. Potential buyers will encounter Native American crafts at roadside stands, state fairs, trading posts, powwows, pueblos, reservations and galleries. There are also multiple classes of artists. They run the gamut from top-of-the-line artisans who produce one-of-a-

By Suzanne Wright ❁ Photographs by Jeff Kida



ABOVE: Native American flutist Travis Terry demonstrates his hand-carved flutes in Canyon de Chelly.

LEFT: Effie Yazzie carries on the Navajo beadwork tradition by showcasing her turquoise and bead jewelry, which she creates at her Monument Valley home.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Evalena Henry, of the San Carlos Apache Tribe, creates a hand-woven basket.

kind collectibles worth thousands of dollars to mass-produced pieces that might include components from Asia or the local Kmart. And, bargaining is not as culturally embraced among all Native Americans — there are differing attitudes among various tribes.

Emerson Quannie, a Hopi and owner of Southwest Native American Promotions, promotes art shows in the Southwest and personally knows more than 1,800 traditional and contemporary artists.

“In some ways, the general public has perceived Indian art like Mexican art, where they barter all the time,” he says. “True artists won’t barter, and you won’t see very many good artists selling out of their homes. I tell them to set a price and stick with it. You don’t go to the grocery store or department store and barter.”

He acknowledges that a lot of artists face limitations — they don’t have the skills to market their artwork or the means for a booth at a show or a car to get to a gallery — and may be more apt to bargain. Quannie concedes that purchasing art can be awkward if you don’t

approach — appreciating the artwork, asking questions about who made it, seeing the value the artist put into it, giving the salesperson the idea that they would really like to own it — that encourages us to share what the piece is all about. In the spirit of educating, we explain the symbols, which are part of the work’s appeal, tradition and artistry. I find a lot of the Western world has forgotten about storytelling, and we share that with the buyer.”

In Peshlakai’s experience, about 50 percent of Americans try to negotiate, while the other half buy the item at the quoted price. Some customers recognize something as “worth every penny,” while others lack a point of reference for pricing, undervaluing how time-consuming beadwork or quilting can be.

“The best buyers are other artists,” she says. “Those with the deepest pockets often have the least understanding.”

What about art — especially jewelry — that is unmarked? Does it have a fixed price or is it fair game for bargaining? Peshlakai says that

know the rules of engagement.

“Start by showing interest, talking with the artist and asking questions,” he says.

Tina Peshlakai is an artist’s representative who helps potters, jewelers, silversmiths, beadworkers, doll makers, basket makers, weavers and moccasin makers to market their works. She’s aware of the cultural differences between artist and patron, and knows how that can contribute to misunderstandings during a transaction. Her advice echoes that of Quannie.

“The first impression of how someone looks at the art is everything, in terms of how the negotiation will unfold,” she says. “When [the buyer] has a certain

jewelry has a “high turnover rate,” and many pieces are priced with a felt-tipped marker. With handling, repolishing and buffing, the price often rubs off, but artisans “know the cost off the tops of their heads.”

So is bartering ever acceptable?

Yes, within reason, she says.

“I’d like to be approached by someone who says, ‘I love this piece and would like to take it home. Can you give me a 10 percent discount

for cash?’ Or, if I’ve carried an item for two or three years, I’ll talk business. But anything beyond 25 percent off the marked price is not reasonable. The artist will feel insulted.”

Bruce McGee, director of retail sales for the Heard Museum and bookstore, believes it hurts the integrity of artists when you start bargaining from established prices. He counsels would-be buyers to understand the artist, the price structure and short-term gains versus long-term consequences before they bargain.

“An artist has worked long and hard on a piece, so [if you bargain], you undercut his or her efforts,” he says. “And you’ve devalued the pieces of previous buyers. A lot of people do so out of greed. They want to say, ‘I bought it at this price.’ It’s nothing to brag about when you take away an artist’s established income.”

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But integrity is a two-way street between artist and patron.

McGee says a buyer should do his or her homework — “education is everything” — and ensure the artist’s work hasn’t slipped in quality, that it is, indeed, worth the asking price.

Another consideration in bargaining is whether your purchase is a one-time transaction or one of several as an avid collector of a particular artist.

“Down the road, the artist won’t give you their best piece if you’ve haggled,” McGee says. “They’ll give you something they want to get rid of. At the Heard, we maintain relationships with the artists and their families. All successful galleries and collectors operate the same way.”

Peshlakai agrees that both artist and patron benefit from a successful deal.

“It’s ultimately about making a decent living. I think what we do in the Southwest as Native Americans is pretty unique.” ■

Bartering Basics

Bartering requires balance. It’s the art of playing fair without getting scammed. It’s not easy, but there are a few tips that’ll help you through the process.

- ❖ **Do your research.** It pays — both psychologically and economically — to understand the fair market value of the artwork you’re interested in. Consult guidebooks, tourism offices, the Internet, museums and libraries to become a knowledgeable buyer.

- ❖ **Establish rapport.** Express curiosity, maintain a positive attitude and ask thoughtful questions. The seller will appreciate genuine interest.

- ❖ **Barter only when you’re serious.** In order to avoid bruised feelings, only bargain if you’re sincere about purchasing the piece. Otherwise, don’t waste your time or the merchant’s.

- ❖ **Exercise restraint.** Don’t offer 10 percent of a stated price; this will insult the seller. Make polite inquiries about possible cash or volume discounts, then let the seller respond. Be patient and persistent but low-key.

- ❖ **Consider the source.** Negotiating with an affluent gallery owner is different than haggling with an artist who is barely making ends meet. Small savings to buyers are often consequential to sellers.

- ❖ **Enlist your travel guide.** If you’re traveling with a local guide who understands the culture, ask him or her to help you reach a fair price.

- ❖ **Trust your gut.** If you love something and can afford it, buy it and avoid the gut-wrenching agony of “the one that got away.”

