

ED NATIYA

# Talent and Tradition

*By Joe Tougas*





*Bearly Awake, bronze, 14" by 8" by 9"*

*"This piece is just pure joy and fun. For Native peoples, the bear can symbolize both strength and power, but they are also known for their playful nature. And so here the little bee wakes up this slumbering giant. No doubt the bee is nature's alarm clock."*

**E**d Natiya's Indigenous and Native American sculptures and monuments have earned him a reputation as one of the best scul-

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*(Left) Tatanka Iyotake—Sitting Bull, bronze, 25" by 22" by 20"*

*"How do you capture, not just a likeness but the emotions and thoughts of the living man who was considered one of the greatest chiefs of the late 1800s? He carried within him the weight of his people and those he loved. His glance would give you just a glimpse of his wisdom, strength, courage, and concern he had for his people."*

tors of his kind. In 2016, for instance, he won the top prize in sculpture at the Southwestern Association for Indian Art (SWAIA) Indian Market—the largest Native American art show in the world, attended by 100,000 at its annual gathering in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

In March, he'll have one of his larger-than-life monuments on display at the Briscoe Western Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas. The Briscoe doesn't ordinarily take large pieces but, in Natiya's case, it made an exception.

The passion and personal history Natiya injects into his sculptures show a deep relationship between

the artist and his art, a relationship that is grounded in talent and tradition. Yet it's quite possible that none of his stunning works in bronze and other forms would exist today had he not approached a Santa Fe gallery that didn't want his paintings.

It was 2001 and, while working at an arts supply store in Santa Fe and creating paintings almost exclusively, Natiya was looking for more exposure for his work. A friend pointed him in the direction of a local gallery, and he met with the owner, who offered bad news.

"He said, 'I have my walls full of paintings; what I need is a good sculptor.'" recalls Natiya. "If you



*Shared Memories, bronze, 30" by 16" by 8"*

*"The traditions of weaving, beading, silversmithing, and clothes making are all passed down from generation to generation. For this piece, I imagine my grandmother in the late 1930s, greeting the morning sun as she wraps herself in her grandmother's weaving blanket from the early 1900s. As I created this piece, I was personally reminded of the Diné philosophy of walking the Beauty Way. In part it goes, 'In beauty I happily walk. With beauty before me I walk. With beauty behind me I walk. With beauty below me I walk. With beauty above me I walk. With beauty all around me I walk.'"*

could sculpt, I could probably find a place for you."

Natiya laughs, as he recalls his response. "So, not knowing how to technically sculpt, I said 'Sure, I could do that!'"

That bit of moxie turned everything around and began what has been a rewarding, decades-long career creating sculptures that depict Native American history, tradition, and inspiration. Before he walked



into that gallery, Natiya had been immersed in art. Half Diné (Navajo) and half Anglo, he was raised by a mother, Mary Ah-so-bah Saxon, who created pottery and sold it at flea markets in and around Albuquerque, New Mexico. As time went on, Natiya also created and sold pottery alongside his mother.

Her instruction and influence were vital to his work as an artist today, he says. "[She taught] me the basics of pottery work, and then encouraged me to continue to pursue my career and my art.

"It wasn't a technical thing where I had to do it a certain way. There were certain fundamental principles she would teach about the pottery work so it didn't explode in the kiln or something. But, as far as creating, she just let me be creative."

As he got older, Natiya continued to do what his mother had taught him, what would become the fundamentals of his life as a sculptor. His teachers in high school and, later, in college, took note of his proficiency and encouraged him to continue what he was doing. Pursuing the bachelor's degree he would get at the University of New Mexico, he supported himself by creating and selling pottery.

Following his graduation, Natiya married and started a family, prompting the need for a steadier job than pottery could provide. He accepted a job at Artisan Santa Fe,



*Where the Wild Ones Go, bronze, 24" by 11 ½" by 5 ½"*

*"As I was driving between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico, I looked over toward the Placitas, when I saw a beautiful sight. A group of wild horses was racing across the mesa as the rain began to fall. It was an incredibly moving sight, such a blessing to see the beauty, power, and freedom of this family of wild ones."*

a well-known arts supply store, and soon became the store's manager. Given the environment and the clientele it attracted, he was never far from artistic energy.

"I was always doing art at that time, because [the store] was involved in the community, and other artists were coming in, inspiring me and motivating me," he says. "So I would do little shows in Albuquerque and at the New Mexico State Fair, just trying to show my work." By that time, Natiya had moved from creating pottery to painting and drawing.

Then, in 2001, at his friend's encouragement, he took that fateful walk into a Santa Fe gallery. When he told the gallery owner that he

could sculpt some work, he did so with a working knowledge of what it would technically involve. Natiya returned two or three weeks later with his first piece—a little Navajo girl holding a baby lamb.

He recalls bringing it in and the owner looking at it, visually taking it in from a number of angles for what seemed a silent eternity. "He didn't say anything to me," he says. "Then

he said, 'You know what? I'm going to front the money on the casting of this piece. You

need to work on another piece.' That was the start; that was the beginning."

Natiya knew he was onto something. "I remember doing that first piece and feeling good about it but

still didn't have a complete understanding of what I was doing," he says.

The following 10 years provided that understanding as Natiya essentially worked as a contractor, producing works the gallery owner would then sell. It provided a comfortable living for the artist, who would eventually find himself raising his children as a single parent.

"It took years to build a body of work," he says. "Like any young artist, I'm sitting there struggling to balance these things, and the owner of the gallery said, 'Well, hey, why don't you just let me put you on contract? You can sculpt, and I'll give you a regular check.' It was good money but, at the same time, I didn't own my own stuff for many years. It was good in the sense that I was able to raise my kids, and I had a lot

*"It took years to build a body of work."*



*Stories of Our People, bronze, 64" by 48" by 36"*

*"Here, a Blackfoot elder shares his wisdom with his people. I remember fondly when my grandfather and grandmother used to share the stories of our people over the years. For all tribes, the passing on of traditions, knowledge, and history through words and gestures is fundamental to our way of life. Each generation must interpret that wisdom and then make it new again."*

more free time to do that. It taught me what I needed to know." Natiya no longer is under contract with that gallery and now sells his work through galleries throughout the United States.

An important step in his career came about in 2016 when a client in Wisconsin commissioned Natiya to create a series of bronze monuments depicting eight Indian chiefs. The task took six years but, when it was finished, he had an expanded understanding of what he could do and who he could reach with his art.

"I think that's when I really got to show my skill set at a larger size," Natiya says. That series helped to define him in the Western art world as a sculptor of large works, the models of which range from photos to imagination.

"For a lot of the chiefs' series, of course, you're dealing with grainy 1800's photos if there are photos of the chief," he says. "I did one of Crazy Horse, and there is technically no photo of Crazy Horse; you have to go with descriptions that are written of him, so it just depends on the circumstance."

For the past 20 years, Natiya has been making a solid living with his art. His two now-grown children, Ivory and Avonlee, and Jayme, his wife of five years, are all onboard.

"[Jayme] has helped me expand my career in the sense of what galleries to approach or maybe a show like the Briscoe," he says. "By nature, I'm very private and very quiet, and I don't go out trying to blow my own horn or anything like that. I don't like that or even want to do that. But she's been adamant about me being on social media. That's why you're able to see some of the things on there [where I] share some of these stories with people so they know what's behind the work and what's involved."

Natiya still does a few paintings, sketches, and drawings, and his work isn't entirely Native American—he also occasionally does wildlife sculptures—but that is the source of what he does, and it's the why of what he does.

"It's what I love," he says. "I've

(Top right) Manuelito—Man of the Four Corners, bronze, 25" by 18" by 9"

"This is a special piece for me; it is a depiction of my great-great-grandfather Chief Manuelito. He holds in his left hand four feathers symbolizing the last four chiefs of the Dine' (Navajo). In the other, he holds his bow, symbolizing his time as a war leader for his people. He also has with him his first phase chief's blanket representing the Dinétah (the land of the Navajo). Each corner of the blanket represents one of the four sacred mountains that border the Dinétah."


(Bottom right) Quanah—Lord of the Plains, bronze, 23" by 26" by 10"

"Quanah was a formidable war leader of the Comanche. The Comanche themselves were renowned for their horsemanship and fearless bravery throughout the Southern Plains. In this piece, I wanted to capture that sense of dynamic energy within a moment, encompassing both the skill and focus of the horse and his well-known rider."

tried to do other pieces and, yeah, they're alright; they're well sculpted but you can feel it when it's there. It's just inside you, and that love comes out through your hands.

"I always tell people I can usually feel when something's wrong rather than see it. I can run my hands across a figure and go, 'Oh, I need to change that' or 'This feels right.' It's internal and you have to listen to that internal voice."

Natiya remains fascinated at the relationship between artist and viewer, at how he might create a piece with a solid vision of what he's doing and what it means, only to have a viewer see or feel something entirely different.

"They tell you stories, and it means something different to them and you allow for that," he says. "It's very much a Native American 'passing-down-the-stories,' and with each generation it becomes their own story. They pass it on, and it becomes something new. It's a constant cycle and rebirth." 

Joe Tougas lives in North Mankato, Minnesota.

