The Squash Blossom Necklace and the Concho Belt

To complete a Martha of Taos outfit, the customer needed Native American accessories. A squash blossom necklace and a concho belt, in particular, were favored. The first phase of Southwest Indian jewelry begins in 1868, following the release of the Navajo from Bosque Redondo after a five-year internment. At this time, Navajo artisans began to develop their skill as silversmiths and started to create new types of silver jewelry for everyday wear that would show the skill of the artisans and the wealth and status of the wearer. Around 1880, Navajo silversmiths created the first “squash blossom” necklace, composed of round silver beads and a silver headdeer decorated with petal-like forms that resemble the blossoms of a squash or pomegranate. This flower-like form was probably introduced into the Americas by the Spanish and then later used by Navajo artisans to create the squash blossom necklace. A key element of the necklace is the “naja,” [Navajo najahe, “crescent”], which is the pendant featured at the bottom center of a squash blossom necklace. This crescent-shaped form recalls ornaments on Spanish horse bridles and may be Near Eastern in origin.

The first concho belts were created by Navajo silversmiths around 1870. The oval-shaped silver disks that are the belt’s primary ornament are called “conchos,” based on “concha,” the Spanish word for shell. Early examples were fairly simple; a leather belt was decorated with conchos, which were created by hammering Mexican and American silver dollar coins and cutting a opening for the belt to pass through. The shape of the concho appears to have been inspired by the silver work on Mexican horse bridles and ornaments of the Plains Indians. Later developments in concho belt design occurred around 1900, when artisans began to solder loops to the back of the conchos, allowing for more decorations on the front of the disk. Additional embellishments included turquoise stones set into the conchos and oxpales, often in the shape of a butterfly.

In the 1920s, hotel and restaurant entrepreneur Fred Harvey launched his highly successful Indian Detours, which allowed westward-bound railroad travelers to take a few days off from their trips to tour key Southwestern locations, such as Taos Pueblo. Harvey set up venues for the sale of Native American jewelry, including squash blossom necklaces and concho belts, which became very popular among the tourists. As a result, Navajo silversmiths began to experiment with designs and ornamentation intended to appeal to this market. Like squash blossoms, necklaces, concho belts are unisex; they may be worn by men with jeans or by women with jeans or skirts. Both concho belts and squash blossom necklaces are staples of Southwestern fashion.
Martha of Taos (1955-1993)

Martha Reed was introduced to New Mexico by her father, well-known painter and master printmaker Doel Reed (1895-1985), who was head of the Art Department at Oklahoma A&M College (later Oklahoma State University) from 1914-1959. In 1955, Doel Reed established a summer studio in Questa, New Mexico: a village near Taos, moving permanently to the area in 1959. The beauty of the location and the artistic environment also attracted East Coast fashion and design icon Millicent Rogers (1902-1953) and her popularization of the Southwestern style allowed for a high level of versatility. They were loose and free-flowing, and many wrapped on the body. Her timeless “Popover” dress, for example, adopted an asymmetrical sash: the material was wrapped instead of tailored. The waist was tied with a sash, which allowed for additional flexibility and movement.

The Southwestern Style

The Southwestern style, exemplified by Martha Reed, became another version of a general fashion trend known as the Like McCardell’s “Popover” dress. Southwestern-style garments allowed for a high level of versatility. They were loose and free-flowing, and many wrapped on the body. Her timeless “Popover” dress, for example, adopted an asymmetrical sash: the material was wrapped instead of tailored. The waist was tied with a sash, which allowed for additional flexibility and movement.

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