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Indian jewelry gaining popularity

By Rebecca Brite

American Indian jewelry, long considered souvenir material, has come into vogue in the last two years, according to retailers of turquoise and silver jewelry in the Lincoln area.

Owners and employees of five Lincoln stores and one Omaha store disagreed somewhat on the reasons for the trend, and all said the market in turquoise can be confusing at times.

Abe Lutfiyya, owner of two Lincoln import shops, said he thinks the recent popularity of Southwest American Indian turquoise and silver jewelry may only be a fad, but he added he believes many people may be buying the jewelry for its investment value.

Bob Campbell, a merchandise manager for Miller and Paine's downtown Lincoln department store, agreed that the jewelry could be considered a good investment.

Rise in prices

He said prices for silver and turquoise have risen steadily in the last few years, and show no sign of decreasing. The price rise nationwide is higher than the rate of inflation, he said.

He added, however, that Miller and Paine probably never will promote the sale of the jewelry as an inflation hedge, as he believes the handcrafted articles are bought more for enjoyment and for their beauty.

The operations manager of a Lincoln jewelry store echoed Campbell's view.

Tom Wright of Sartor Hamann Jewelry said he thinks most buyers of Indian jewelry are more concerned with the appearance of the articles than with their investment value.

"You can't really consider jewelry an investment," he said. "Gold or silver bullion is an investment, but not jewelry. People buy it to wear, not to sell again."

National awareness

Don Ruch, manager of Omaha's American Indian Store, attributed the jewelry's popularity to increased national awareness of American Indian handicrafts.

Ruch, whose store also sells the jewelry wholesale, said most of the authentic Indian silverwork sold in the Midwest is made by the Navaho, Zuni, Hopi and Santa Domingo tribes of the American Southwest.

The American Indian Store's buyers deal directly with the native American artisans, Ruch said, and often are present while the jewelry is being made.

This may be the only way to insure the authenticity of the pieces, he said, as the market currently is "flooded with fakes."

"Some stores that buy through a middleman are getting 'American Indian' jewelry that's made by hippies in Colorado," he said.

Not the real thing

"But worse than that is the junk some dealers are passing off as stones. They're melting down phonograph records and calling it jet (a black volcanic stone), and using blue plastic instead of turquoise."

Ruch said many imitation stones are so skillfully done that only a reputable dealer or a geologist could tell the consumer that he hasn't bought the real thing.

Wright said some dealers may also use a plastic coating on low quality turquoise to make it look like a finer grade.

Ruch said it can be a full-time business "just keeping up with the fakes."

All the retailers said buyers of turquoise jewelry represent a cross section of age groups and social classes, including American Indians.

Wright said Sartor Hamann is closing out its line of Indian jewelry, however, despite its popularity. He said more people who buy the jewelry seem more interested in less expensive pieces than the store carries.

Not enough interest

"We had some of the finest turquoise and silver work around, and the price was good for the quality, but there wasn't enough interest in it. We had customers standing in line when we put the works on sale, though," he said.

He added that, in some cases, lower quality turquoise may make better Indian jewelry than do higher grades of stones.

Judging the quality of silver and turquoise jewelry appears to be a confusing business in itself. Very hard, pure blue stones, with no green tint or matrices (patterns made by other minerals when the turquoise is formed), generally are considered the highest quality.

But Wright said the matrices of some stones add variety to the appearance of the jewelry in the eyes of many buyers. In addition, he said, most American shoppers are unused to seeing pure, unmatrixed turquoise, and so think it looks fake.

Ruch said the matrix of a stone makes no difference in the quality, that he grades turquoise by its hardness. The most durable turquoise stones have a hardness of five or six, compared to diamond, the hardest mineral, which has a hardness of nine.

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