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FAITH, HOPE AND *Love*

Tammy Garcia's rise to prominence is rooted in new ideas and timeless ideals.

By Christy A. Vezolles, AM

It is, first of all, a love story—the love of one woman for Pueblo traditions and a big-hearted man—and the unwavering faith he had that gave her the freedom to take risks, to challenge herself and the clay, and gave wings to the hope of her becoming one of the foremost Pueblo artists of our time.

That's the story of Santa Clara Pueblo potter Tammy Garcia's career.

In her home studio in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Garcia presses her sharp tool gently and confidently into the leather-hard clay vessel, assuredly carving an array of refined patterns into its rich brown colored surface.

She speaks in the same way—gently, confidently, assuredly—as she shares her ideas for future creations. Photos, sketches, and collages are on the walls; on every shelf and table are stacks of sketchpads and art books—all evidence of the thought process that takes



place as she develops her ideas for new works of pottery, glass art and bronze sculpture.

Pointing toward variations of a familiar-looking turtle motif, she tells of the inspiration she draws from the legendary San Ildefonso potter, Tony Da. Gesturing toward a series of other designs, she excitedly confides some of her new innovative creations (including perfume bottles!) that will be revealed at Blue Rain Gallery during Santa Fe Indian Market.

Several pieces of pottery are clustered under wraps on the table in various stages of finish. She works quickly as she converses, aware of the time constraints imposed by the drying of the clay, as she carves a flower among koi.

"This area here, that I've cut away, will be inset with turquoise," she says intently.

Her husband Leroy, their daughters and the family dogs come and go at various intervals. She readily provides both the attention they desire and the attention the hardening clay vessel demands. She is a picture of serenity. It is evident that all is in balance in her world.

It wasn't always so for Garcia. She was born into a renowned Santa Clara Pueblo



Koi, natural clay and turquoise, 7 (h) x 9" (d)

family in 1969. Descending from Serafina Tafoya, one of the earliest great matriarchs of pottery, one might assume she was preordained to be a potter. At 16, she was selling her own wares to wholesalers that would come to her grandmother Mary Cain's home. However, like many adolescents of all cultures, Garcia rebelled against the pressure of continuing the family enterprise. Hoping to break away from traditional Pueblo life, she worked briefly as a dishwasher in a nearby town and enrolled in cosmetology school.

Those experiences quickly led her to realize that making pottery wasn't such a bad option after all. She moved to Taos at 18, resumed her pottery-making and began working in an art gallery, which gave her a broader perspective on marketing her own work. Eventually she was selling her pottery consistently enough that she was able to devote herself full time to her craft.

As demand increased for Tammy's work so did the pressure from the galleries and wholesalers. They were reluctant for potters to break the bounds of traditional Pueblo forms for fear that anything different would not sell.

She met a native Taoseño, Leroy Garcia, who

Collaboration with Shelley Muzyłowski Allen, *Da Tribute*, blown and sand-carved glass, turquoise & hishi, 10 (h) x 14 x 9"

Tammy Garcia carves clay in her Taos studio using an assortment of tools of various sizes and shapes.





Leah, bronze, 37 x 15 x 11"

was studying business, psychology and law at the University of New Mexico. The following year, at age 21, they married. Gregarious and business savvy, Leroy complemented Tammy's quiet, introspective nature. He enthusiastically assisted her in her endeavors. He not only helped to dig the clay and assist in the firing process, but most importantly, he recognized her tremendous talent.

Moreover, he sensed her creative restlessness and urged her to take risks and explore the more innovative direction that her artistic nature hoped to take. "In the early years of marriage, Leroy was the risk taker and I was the one to play it safe." But, relying on his instincts, she took a chance. "It's easier to take risks when you are going into it with someone," she explains.

With his support and encouragement, she followed her heart. She experimented with new shapes and worked designs over the entire form, rather than confining the carving to bands at the shoulder of the vessels. The young couple's faith in Tammy's vision and their hope for acceptance of the new work by her collectors was rewarded. Connoisseurs loved her new innovations. Exhibiting at the Santa Fe Indian Market, she was consistently winning awards and selling out within the first hour. Soon the pair secured a prominent progressive gallery to represent her—Gallery 10 in Santa Fe.

Leroy gained experience working at a Taos gallery before launching his own in 1992. He named it Blue Rain—the English translation of Tammy's grandmother's Tewa name—Kwang Tsaewae-i. Realizing he needed to build his own reputation and base before handling someone of his wife's stature, he astutely signed on painter Tony Abeyta early in his career, along with a variety of other quality artists and potters.

Soon the gallery had become a force to be reckoned with. In 1998, when Lee Cohen—owner of Gallery 10—passed away, Tammy joined Blue Rain's impressive stable of artists. The Garcias' calculated leap of faith had paid off. Before long they opened another location in Santa Fe (now the main gallery, with a second in Scottsdale, Arizona).

Her pottery vessels—growing ever larger and more complex in imagery—required so much time that Garcia found it impossible to meet the demand for her highly sought-after work, creating only 15 to 20 pieces a year. Her husband suggested that she try her hand at sculpture as a means to create multiple editions. Her 1999 first attempt, a 14-inch piece depicting a Pueblo



Untitled, natural clay, 8½ x 7"

dancer in relief—initially formed of oil-based clay, then cast in bronze—proved successful. She challenged herself further by creating a 6-foot columnar form decorated with Pueblo motifs as a follow-up foray into sculpture. The limited editions sold out in months. Since that time she has created a stunning array of forms and themes in bronze, both figurative and abstract, many monumental in size. She has particularly enjoyed having the opportunity to work with a vast assortment of colored patinas—a much more painterly approach—and at a scale not possible with Pueblo clay.

Garcia remarks that creating sculptures in oil-based clay has led her to discover additional tools. She continues talking; working on her Pueblo jar with a wire loop tool of European design. "Artists are always on the lookout for new tools," she says. "When building clay,

potters still use very basic tools like gourd scrapers—primarily, we use our hands. When carving clay I use a wide assortment of tools of various sizes and shapes."

Motioning toward a simple, deep carved, blackware bowl holding her clay-working tools, she explains that it was made by her grandmother Christina Naranjo. She goes on to say, "I took the very simple design that's on it, enlarged it and created a 3-D sculptural form from it." She nods toward a frosted, cast lead crystal sculpture of the same angular motif. "I experimented for years with lead crystal. It's hard to do 90° angles. Risk was huge—of four cast, I lost three." She has also experimented with clear and frosted architectural glass: "I used designs I had used dozens of times on pottery—got to see them in a whole different way. Done that—loved exploring. What's next?"



Leroy and Tammy in Taos.



Collaboration with Preston Singletary, *Tomahawks*, blown and sand-carved glass, 7¾ x 11" (d)



Sisters, bronze,
74 x 17 x 17" (with base)

A natural progression was her 2003 collaboration with the renowned Tlingit artist Preston Singletary, who has garnered acclaim for his masterful interpretations in glass of Northwest native imagery. Based on Garcia's scale drawings, the glassblower created large pottery-inspired forms. Expanding upon her versatile visual vocabulary, she found inspiration in the extensive color palette and the potential to creatively use light and reflection in the forms that were at once familiar yet distinctly unique.

She drew and cut her designs in a latex mask to shield key areas of the glistening glass. Her stylized motifs were dramatically brought to life on the vessels using a sandblaster. The results proved to be spectacular—embraced by a new and even broader range of collectors—resulting in successive collaborations between the pair.

Whether working in clay, glass or bronze, Garcia has a unique ability for narrative. She tells a story with each of her creations. Some are cryptic, others elaborately articulated and embellished. She often blurs the distinction between traditional and contemporary, between abstraction and realism. Her impeccable sense of design and proportion combine with innovative creativity, refined execution and boundless imagination—the resulting artworks inspire wonder.

Garcia's virtuoso technical skills allow her to push the limits of the media and of her own creativity. Her enthusiasm for exploring new ideas has propelled her to a new level. Her masterful artworks bridge the divide that too often separates the indigenous from fine art.

In addition to her partnership with Singletary, Garcia's intense curiosity and compelling drive for exploration of new materials and techniques has led to successful collaborations with a variety of prestigious artists in a range of media—including Tony Abeyta and Shelley Muzykowski Allen. But the twinkle in her eye tells you, Tammy Garcia's most fulfilling collaboration is with her husband Leroy. And the greatest rewards have come from the faith, hope and love that form the basis of the bonds and the success they share. 🍷

Christy Vezolles, founder of Art Value LLC, is an accredited member of the American Society of Appraisers. She specializes in American and European fine art and is a recognized expert in American Indian art. She serves on the board of the Western Art Associates at the Phoenix Art Museum. Christy has traveled nationally and internationally to appraise client collections. She is a member of ArtTable, a national organization for professional women in the arts. Christy has served many times as a judge at the Heard Museum Indian Fair and Market in Phoenix and at the SWAIA Indian Market in Santa Fe.

