

HOPI KATSINA FIGURES

WHEN THE FIRST OUTSIDERS ventured upon three barren mesas in north-eastern Arizona, they encountered a gracious pueblo-dwelling tribe known as the Hopis. These new visitors learned that the self-sufficient Hopis relied not upon irrigation for the growth of their crops, but upon prayers offered to a group of supernatural beings known as *Katsinam*. The Katsinam not only bestowed their blessings upon those Hopis who lived the Right Way, but came annually from their sacred home on the San Francisco Peaks high above Flagstaff, Arizona, in order to communicate directly with the Hopis through dance and song.

Outsiders must have been intrigued to witness members of the Hopi Katsina cult don colorful, non-human masks and be taken over by the spirits of Katsinam in their presentations at the villages. Venerated and loved, the Katsina dancers were no less respected than the spirits they represented, and villages eagerly awaited their visitations beginning with the Bean Dance or Powamuya in February and continuing through the Niman or Home Dance (return to the sacred Peaks) in July.

The Katsina dancers' emergence from the underground

chambers known as kivas, represented in every village, is as spectacular today as it was a hundred years ago. Appearing alone and in groups, the Katsina dancers, accompanied by the music of drums, rattles and song, perform ritualistically in all weather as the fragrances of burning sage, piñon and traditional foods drift across ancient rooftops. Offerings are made to the dancers and the dancers in turn present gifts galore to the respectful gatherings of children and elders. The experience of attending a Hopi Katsina dance is an incomparable one of magic and wonder, little changed by time.

Equally intriguing to outsiders is the Hopi crafting of Katsina figures from cottonwood root, known as *katsin-tihu* or, until recently, "kachina dolls". Only the *putsqatihu* or flat carvings are dolls in the traditional sense, given to baby girls when they're born. But even the more finely carved pieces, made theoretically by the Katsinas themselves, are presented to Hopi visitors at Katsina dances. Magnificent carvings have even been known to



Hilili by Ernie Moore, Hopi Mr Moore has been designated an Arizona State Living Treasure



Hototo by Ernie Moore, Hopi

Continues at #135

pass to the hands of outsiders or “Pahanas”—but only if those individuals have proven themselves worthy.

Although the origins of katsin-tihu are not known, ancient representations of spirits exist in most North American cultures. Quite possibly what we know as katsin-tihu were inspired by Spanish religious carvings, introduced to the Hopis as early as the 16th century.

Katsin-tihu represent many of the spirits the Hopi people venerate, from those of humans and animals to mythical beings and plants. The Katsinam themselves can be divided into roughly five categories: spirit beings, guards, racers, ogres and clowns. The spirit beings encompass virtually every living thing in the Hopis’ world. The guards appear at the dances to protect Katsinam from those whose behavior is inappropriate to these religious occasions. The racers reflect the Hopis’ ability to run from village to distant village, communicating with friends and foes alike. The ogres with great clacking jaws enforce positive behavior in children. The clowns entertain, to keep humor in the often somber dances.

Originally katsin-tihu adorned Hopi kivas and homes, hanging on walls or rafters in the latter. Early visitors from outside, with their typical love of religious and folk arts, often misappropriated these carvings from even the sacred kivas. Later, realizing that katsin-tihus were desired by outsiders and could increase the otherwise nominal income of the Hopi people, carvers began making cottonwood root figures for sale, carefully depicting the Katsinam inaccurately so as to not anger the spirits themselves.

Katsina carvings were so well received

that artists began changing their works to meet the growing demand of the non-Hopi market, producing increasingly intricate *tihu-tui* (plural of tihu). Soon katsina dancers were captured in motion by carvers, rendered sculpturally with sophisticated tools such as dremels and grinders and painted with acrylics to preserve their colors indefinitely.

In the 1970s, artists became concerned that they had strayed too far from the original purpose of katsin-tihu, which was to capture not the dancers as much as the spirits they represented. Led by a visionary named Manfred Susenkewa, they began reverting to earlier styles of Katsina carving, using simple tools, grinding and applying natural pigments and creating static pieces meant once again to hang on walls. Prayers were given during the carving and the tihu once again carried blessings. These traditional-style figures were enthusiastically greeted by the Hopi people and soon found homes among non-Hopi collectors as well.

Since the Hopis believe that rain and all good things come to those who live respectful, decent lives, it’s no surprise that their conservative views are spectacularly reflected in their artworks. Traditional dolls, far less expensive than intricate, lifelike contemporary carvings, are gaining the respect and adulation of collectors all over the world. It can only be hoped that in time, the Hopi veneration for mankind’s responsibility to the earth itself will manifest itself in the way outsiders live as well. Then the Katsinam will have reached beyond the mesas to bring blessings to us all.



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