

To Native Americans, fetish is a good thing

BY PAM PHILLIPS
Times Correspondent

In Native American beliefs fetishes are animal carvings that have specific roles or functions. They may assist in healing, protection or hunting. Certain animals represent the four cardinal directions, the zenith (above), and the nadir (below).

Under healing animals, the North is the mountain lion, East is the wolf, South is the badger, West is the bear, the zenith is the eagle, and the nadir is the mole. Protection animals are the same with the bobcat replacing the badger in the South.

Hunting animals always are prey animals and vary with the type of game being hunted. For example, the mountain lion is a hunting fetish for deer or elk. The bear or coyote is a fetish for hunting big horn sheep, a bobcat or wolf for hunting antelope, and an eagle for hunting rabbit, squirrels or other small above-ground game. The mole is used for underground or burrowing animals.

Unlike most hunters today, Native American hunters' very lives and those of their family depended directly on the ability of the hunter to find game, thus the use of fetishes and their associated prayers played an important role in the everyday life of the people.

Healing fetishes were used in ceremonies to carry prayers for the sick and to provide protection from evil and harm. These beliefs were common to Pueblo people as well as other tribes and often Pueblo carvings were used by other tribes in their ceremonies.

In recent times fetishes have become a collectible art form prized by many non-Native American people for their beauty as well as for the ideas and cultures they represent. Fetishes commonly are carved out of antler, wood, shell and stone. Many beautiful semi-precious materials are used, including turquoise, coral, alabaster, marble, crystal, jet, spiny oyster shell, mussel shell, fluorite, malachite, lapis lazuli and others. Many carvers can tell by the shape, color or texture of the material what animal form the fetish should represent.

Today all kinds of animal forms are seen, even dinosaurs! Zuni fetishes are the ones to collect as they are the traditional fetish carvers and many families are known by name for their fetishes.

As with any other collectible, buy authentic and get the artist's name and tribe in writing and your purchase will hold its value and appreciate in the years ahead.

