Jemez Pueblo Sculptor

Cliff Fragua

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

LIFF FRAGUA is a New Mexico-based sculptor working in glass, bronze, and stone. Fragua attended the Institute for American Indian Arts from 1973 to 1975 and studied under the direction of Chiricahua Apache sculptor Allan Houser in 1974. On his own, Fragua studied at the San Francisco Art Institute in the summer of 1974. In 1986, after leaving school, he attended a stone-carving workshop in Pietrasanta, Italy. Sixteen years later, Fragua was awarded a major commission by the State of New Mexico to create a sculpture of Po’pay, the celebrated Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo leader who took up arms against Spanish colonizers in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. The resulting ten-foot-high marble statue was installed in the National Statuary Hall in the US Capitol in Washington, DC, and remains the only statue executed by an Indigenous person in the hall.

Fragua has earned numerous awards, grants, and bursaries, including the Indian Arts and Crafts Association’s Indian Artist of the Year Award in 2005. He served as president of the Indigenous Sculptor Society in 2004 and 2005, and is currently the founder and owner of Singing Stone Studio in Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico.

Fragua’s body of work combines customary Pueblo materials with marble, alabaster, granite, bronze, and glass. He draws from the sacred and the sublime for his iconography; consequently, his approach to making art is steeped in the spiritual relationship between his hands and the material. I had the opportunity to discuss past works and upcoming projects with Fragua.

I’d like to begin by discussing your family, which is made up of artists. How did their dedication to art making influence you?

Yes, my mother is a potter, and my sisters are potters as well. I come from a family of potters. Now there are six generations of potters in my family, starting from my great-grandmother to my daughters and granddaughters. However, I took another path… I became a painter then, but during my second year I decided to take three-dimensional art to help with my two-dimensional form. So I took jewelry, ceramics, and traditional techniques, and I also took sculpture classes. Sculpture is the one that held my interest above all the other arts I studied.

What kind of paintings were you making initially?

They were a mix of watercolor, acrylic, and oil, but I just wasn’t finding the right approach. Personally, I just wasn’t getting it right. That’s why I took three-dimensional art. Sculpture was [what] I felt more comfortable with and had more of a connection with.

I’m wondering if you could talk a little about how each institution approached art making—was one more theoretical than another, one more classical than another, one more experimental than another?

At IAIA I wanted to study more about the Native arts, and being in a class with mostly Native American students helped me to understand what other perspectives were out there among Native people. I felt very good about being among Native people who saw the conflict in the European approach to art as opposed to the Native approach to art. There is no [Jemez language] word for “art.” So, the identity of the Native artists becomes stronger and more concrete when they’re among other Native artists who have the same feeling and approach to their work.

Arguably, your most well-known work is the ten-foot-tall marble sculpture of Po’pay permanently installed in the National Statuary Hall in the US Capitol in Washington, DC.

I was contacted by one of the commission members, and he suggested that I apply, and so I got the information and sent in photographs of the artwork, my résumé, etc. Then the commission selected me as one of the artists—I think they selected four others. They asked to see what our sculptures would look like, so I went ahead and did a sculpture of Po’pay out of alabaster. Out of the five proposals, mine was selected. This process was approved by the state legislature; however, the money had to be raised privately. So the commission had to do all the fundraising, and they didn’t receive any money from the state. So about 2002, 2003, we were able to raise enough money to purchase the block of stone, which came from

There is a big difference. When I was at IAIA, they didn’t have a full curriculum dedicated to the Native perspective. European approaches to the arts were taught, yet there was a move to change this while I was there, to offer an art curriculum through a Native perspective. They were able to change it, but during the time I was there, that movement was only starting.

Was this the time that you started to shift focus to stone?

Yes, I was studying painting when I first arrived there, but during my second year I decided to take three-dimensional art to help with my two-dimensional form. So I took jewelry, ceramics, and traditional techniques, and I also took sculpture classes. Sculpture is the one that held my interest above all the other arts I studied.

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Eastern Tennessee. The reason why I chose the marble was because it had a color that was actually closer to Native skin color. When you go to National Statuary Hall, the sculptures are mostly made out of bronze or marble, and all the marble in the collection is white marble. I didn’t see any other colored marble.

That’s a very important point you make. To me, there is something to be said for not only including a marble statue of a Native person in the National Statuary Hall, but also having this sculpture display Indigenous skin tone as well. This can be seen as a symbolic gesture that inserts Native forms of representation and identity into this predominantly white, and white marble, hall. It’s a subtle reclamation of space through form and color; it’s political. What is it like to be the only Indigenous sculptor to have a work in that hall?

It is quite an honor to be selected for this prestigious commission. I was surprised that there were no Native artists represented in the entire collection of the Capitol, whether it’s sculpture or painting. But it was due time that Native artists be included, and it took the State of New Mexico to do that.

I’m interested in your process—from the beginning of a sculpture to its end. You’ve mentioned that the sound and color of a particular stone often determines how it will be sculpted. Can you discuss this process?

Yes, generally when I select stone, I like to tap it. If it rings, it tells me that the stone is solid. If it doesn’t, there are imperfections that may cause problems later on. I knew that Tennessee marble [for the statue of Po’pay] was good and for the most part solid. It’s a hard marble. When I received it in the studio, it took at least a year just to plan how to carve the piece. When I decided how to do this, I just went ahead and started cutting straight through the stone.

You have to remember that this is a spiritual process. Not only did I request a blessing of the stone, there was also a ceremony that involved the receiving of the stone, a blessing for beginning work on the stone, and another blessing to send it on its road to final installation. And in fact, there were two blessings for that; not only in my community of Jemez Pueblo, but also when it was delivered to Okhaya Owignush where Po’pay was from. Then, when it was finally delivered to the US Capitol, there was another blessing during the unveiling. It was full of blessings; it was just a thing that the Pueblo people here in New Mexico would do to ensure that the sculpture arrived safely and that no harm would come to it. Everybody involved also received a blessing, so we could all take pride and feel that there’s good fortune in this whole project. Everybody benefits.

When I was carving the stone, it took about two years to carve the entire piece. Towards the end, it was winter, late winter, nearly early spring. The weather at that time was really fierce, a lot of rain, a lot of snow, a lot of sleet, a lot of wind. I thought it was really powerful. I felt like there was a connection with the carving of Po’pay and with Po’pay himself, and with the spirit that goes with the environment. It all came together to make a real powerful statement. Even that which occurred in 1680 still continues, that spirit still remains. I felt that there was a lot of power behind it.

I’m wondering if I could talk about your smaller sculptural works. What kinds of themes are you interested in exploring with these?

I carve stone out of my own inspiration. My inspiration comes from my own encounters that I have in my life. Whether it’s that which has occurred in my life or even just looking at a piece of stone and seeing an image in it. When I carve, I generally look at the stone, and if I perceive an image, I go ahead and release that image. Other times I have ideas in my head, and I attempt to create a sculpture from that idea. When I carve it, it can either come out as abstract or representational. I generally don’t know what it will be when I first begin. I compromise with the stone. We give and take. I suggest an idea, and if the stone likes it, it will accept it, and I will continue working with it. If it decides on its own that it wants to be something else, then it will tell me. Generally it’s something that’s distracting that will show up in the stone, and then I make changes or alterations or modifications. I like working that way. I look at stone as being here long before us. I regard the stone as a teacher, and I am just a student.

As I understand it, IAIA developed a student exchange program with the Rhode Island School of Design in 1975. RISD constructed a glass studio on the grounds of IAIA, which offered you your first foray into glassblowing. You returned to glassblowing in the spring of 2009. What has this experience been like? And what kinds of glass are you producing?

During the time RISD was at IAIA, I was just exposed to glassblowing—I didn’t participate in any of the process, but it held my interest. I decided at that point I would work with glass, but it wasn’t until many years later that I had the opportunity to do so. I met Adam Frus, a glass artist in Phoenix.

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We talked about our work and exchanged ideas. We both agreed that we would teach each other our practice—he would teach me glass, and I would teach him stone—and that’s how I was able to get into a glass studio. So I relied on him to get me through the basics of glassblowing.

How is your approach to glass different than sculpture? Is there a difference between the two media?

Oh yes, Glass involves fire, and fire is sacred among Native people. So when I go into the glass studio and the kilns and the furnaces are going, I say a prayer to the fire out of respect and to ensure that no harm comes to me. I’m also asking the fire spirit to help me in achieving what I wish to achieve. With stone, I know that fire has a lot to do with the forming of stone, and the ways that stone is made through the earth. I also say a prayer to the stone, because we believe that when you take the stone out of the earth and create an image, you not only create the image itself, but you create the spirit of the stone. You’re helping it to bring the spirit out of the stone. The elders always told me to be careful and protect myself to make sure no harm or misfortune falls upon me, so I would request medicine men to create prayer feathers for me or do blessings to make sure that everything goes well.

You are the owner and operator of Singing Stone Studio. How did the studio come about?

When I left IAIA, I went back to Jemez Pueblo. I was young, and I had also become a father, so there was a responsibility for caring for my family and supporting them, being responsible. But I didn’t have a job. I had to find work, but at the same time I didn’t want to forsake my art, so I continued to work with sculpture. I remember one time an elderly man walked by when I was working outside. He asked me what I was doing, and I told him I was making sculptures. He asked me, “What are sculptures?” I tried to explain to him what sculpture was about. I don’t think he fully understood it. For him, the only carving he knew about sculpture, he didn’t understand how you can take a thing from nature and turn it into artwork. When he tried to understand this process, it gave me clarity of what I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to approach my art.

I bounced around from location to location, trying to find a good working studio. During that time around 1980, 1981, I had a really good opening and made good sales. With that money, I was able to begin construction on my studio. With the help of my father, we laid the foundation and put up the walls. We completed a studio. It was small, about 40 feet by 20 feet with a 10-by-10-foot office area, but it’s expanded over the years. Now my studio not only includes an area for stone carving and clay work, but also for gallery space.

How do cultural practices, specifically Pueblo tradition, affect your current work, and how do you bridge ancestral conventions with the present day?

Well, I like to create sculpture that has a Pueblo feel, but I will not create any sacred images. I will not exploit sacred images. I know where to draw the line. I encourage other artists to do this. We can use other forms and approaches that still touch and express our views, as opposed to exploiting what’s sacred to us to try to make money. Sometimes it just causes a lot of misrepresentation, it gets confusing, and it also encourages stereotypes. I have to be careful about how I want to express myself, because I don’t want people to get the wrong idea and think this is the way that all Native people are. I’m trying to express myself as an individual artist.

I’m curious to know what your major influences are, your inspirations? Artists? Books? People? Films?

In the beginning, it was the works of the Aztecs and Maya peoples, and then as I started studying more about sculpture, it was Art Deco and the Art Nouveau periods. Then I started looking at the work of Antonio Canova and Gian Lorenzo Bernini and other European sculptors; later, more contemporary forms such as Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore. I liked those artists’ approach; I could really identify with them. Of course, there are other cultures, too; Japanese culture, some of the Aboriginal people in Australia, as well as Indigenous cultures. I started looking at some of the carvings and sculptures that came from Native America.

Finally, what can we expect from you in the near future?

Right now, I’m just an artist who makes a living off his artwork. I do keep my eyes open for any calls for artists or any commissions that may be out there. For the most part, I just want to make my work and progress in it. A reason why I make different work and don’t stay in one genre is I feel artists need to open their eyes to other things out there. One of the things that I’m looking toward understanding better is the use of mosaics in Native culture; also, the use of shell work. In my art I’ve developed a process called lamination, which is basically the gluing together of stones. There’s a lamination process in wood where woodcarvers glue pieces of wood together and make works out of that. I’m doing the same thing in stone. I’m starting to see how it also ties in with early Indigenous techniques, so I want to learn more about it and develop a genre of lamina- tion with a Pueblo approach.