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**Profiles: David Cook
Rebecca and Jean-Paul Valette**

**Mysteries of Zuni Jewelry
Ike and Austin Wilson:
Oral Folklore Gone Astray**

August in Santa Fe



Dedicated to the Highest Standards of Dealing and Collecting Antique Tribal Art

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MEMBER CLOSE-UP

David Cook

David Cook has been exhibiting at Indian art shows for almost 30 years. Now, his booth is usually right up front and is stocked with American Indian items and paintings by (among others) Taos, Santa Fe, and Colorado artists, all of which he displays and sells at David Cook Galleries, a must-see in Denver.



David Cook with "The Cross" by Emil Bistram
All photos courtesy David Cook

David Cook grew up in Houston, Texas, and attended Sam Houston State University for three years before he dropped out. "I was just a hippie," he says now. But he was a hippie who loved art. "I've loved art all my life," he says. "My brother tells the story of the two of us getting on a bus on weekends when I was his babysitter to go to the Houston Art Museum. For some people, one of their senses is more developed than the others. I am visually oriented, and have always been intrigued by art."

In 1972, after SHSU, David went to Italy for two weeks and stayed for three years. "Italy was the center of art. When I was living in Florence, it was easy to see why this area was at the heart of the Renaissance." He moved back to the United States, to Denver, in 1978.

Why Denver? "I spent the year between high school and college in Boulder, and fell in love. We didn't have mountains in Texas. I went to Denver to start a business with someone I had worked with." That opportunity didn't pan out, but David stayed in Denver. "I realized being in the center of the country was a big advantage in selling art. I was close to Santa Fe and Taos. I noticed that people on the East Coast didn't seem to do a lot of business with people on the West Coast. I could easily jump in a car or hop on a plane and gain the advantage of being the first to see material."

Which had just happened in early September, when David spoke to the ATADA News. "When I got a call about two great paintings in Chicago, I got right on a plane." In fact, David believes that he is better off selling art in Denver where he is removed from the Santa Fe-Scottsdale axis. "In the major art centers, there are considerably more dealers competing to buy and sell an object than there are in Denver."

David bought his first American Indian piece in 1978, a fragment of a Navajo woman's dress. "I still have it. Some stores frame their first dollar. I framed that fragment and have it hanging at the gallery." David describes the material he bought that first year as "inexpensive, but the only stuff I could afford in the late 1970s."

But then came what he describes as "two instances of good fortune." He became close friends with Richard Conn, American Indian art curator at the Denver Art Museum, "the first museum in America to display American Indian art as fine art. He liked me, and saw that I had a real love for the material. Through him, I met Dr. Joe Ben Wheat. Whenever I found an interesting Navajo weaving, I'd show it to Dr. Wheat. He was very generous with time and information. I think he liked my enthusiasm. So I had two wonderful mentors.

"After starting at the very bottom of the art business in 1979," David says, "by 1982 I decided to start a gallery. It was actually more shop than gallery, quite humble. I had Navajo rugs, moccasins that cost \$100. I split the space with two other people. One of them sold contemporary Indian art, R.C. Gorman, etc., and the other sold antiques." David left that gallery in 1986, when he opened his own antique-only American Indian art gallery on South Broadway, Denver's Antiques Row.

"By then, I'd been doing shows for a few years. The first show I went to was Don Bennett's show at the Santa Fe Hilton, and I went as an observer. I started meeting dealers, and got really interested in American Indian art as a business. I loved the stuff, and had the fire in my belly. And it is the same way today. To this day, I still get excited each time I go to see a new collection. For me, American Indian art is still a honeymoon experience.

"By 1989, I knew that this was to be a lifetime career choice. After 10 years of doing this, I was finally getting better at it. I knew that American Indian art was my life's passion. So I started looking for a building to buy. In the 1980s, there were quite a few American Indian art galleries on the street level around the Plaza in Santa Fe. By the 1990s, many of those galleries had to move to the second floor or to other areas of town. That's what prompted me to buy my own space, and the only thing I could afford was an old warehouse in a run-down neighborhood.

"With a partner, I bought a building in what is now called LoDo, lower downtown Denver. It was a seedy area then, mostly empty parking lots. There were winos living in the building I bought, which was near the train station and next door to the Oxford Hotel, the oldest and once one of the best hotels in Denver, now thriving after a major rehab and once again one of the best hotels in town.

My partner was one of the hotel's managing partners. 'My' building had been boarded up, and was used to store antique

cars. There was talk of redevelopment in the area. There were two other business there then, Wazee Deco and an antiques shop. I thought the area had the bones to become the popular destination it has now become.

"It took two years to get the building in shape. We did a lot of the work ourselves. I leased out half the building to a fine arts print shop, and they had all their equipment in the basement

with a street-level space adjacent to my Indian gallery. In 1997, my tenant negotiated with me to buy his lease, and his portion of the building became my paintings gallery. I had always had one or two paintings in the Indian gallery. At that point, business was good and I was optimistic that I would be able to make more selling paintings than what I had collected in rent."

Having a second specialty is also a hedge against the dwindling supply of antique American Indian art. "I was doing well with American Indian art, but by the mid-

1990s, I saw a lot less older material being offered, and by the late 1990s, you could see a drastic reduction in the amount of classic period American Indian art."

David describes his neighborhood now as "tony and bustling. I got very lucky. I saw the potential, but I didn't know they would build a baseball stadium three block away and a

basketball arena three blocks away in the other direction. And there is a plan to build a high-speed train from the airport to Union Station, one block away."

David says there is cross-over between clients who buy paintings and Indian material. One of those cross-over clients is Scottsdale collector Dennis Lyon, "who combines great modern paintings with a great American Indian art collection." The combination, David says, "is a natural thing to see."

When he started selling paintings, he started with regional paintings: California plein air, the New Hope [Pennsylvania] School, the Broadmoor [Colorado] School. Now he exhibits



Coat, Naskapi (Innu) coat, Quebec, (1785-1800), now part of the Eugene and Clare Thaw Collection of American Indian Art at the Fenimore Museum in Cooperstown, NY



Olla, Acomita, circa 1810, 10.25 x 11.25 inches

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paintings by all those as well as paintings by the Taos Ten and Santa Fe painters. "The painting gallery was a natural evolution/ progression. When I started, I specialized in the Broadmoor School because I recognized the quality of the plein air and Modernist paintings and the opportunity it presented to introduce collectors to a fantastic body of regional art, something which Colorado buyers had been lacking. The works from this school were not well known and were affordable. After all, I started with Navajo rugs and \$100 moccasins. The classic blankets came years later."

When asked about his colleagues in the Indian art business, he remarked that he has enjoyed being surrounded by a "colorful cast of characters who continue to make me laugh after 30 years." He names some of the people "it is fun to do business with." That list includes Mac Grimmer, John Molloy, Don Ellis, Henry (Chick) Monahan, Mike Haskell, Danny Verrier, Ted Trotta and Anna Bono, Michael Bradford, James Flury, Gary Hornsby, and Lew Bobrick. Of Gary and Lew, David's regular lunch companions, he says, "They are more like family than dealers."

Talking about some of his memorable sales, David mentions some great Navajo classic blankets, including one with a depiction of four hands that he sold to San Francisco advertising mogul/Navajo blanket collector Hal Riney. "I've had five Ute first phases over the years," he says, "several great serapes, a Crow quill-wrapped horse hair war shirt, five pony- beaded pipe bags, two outstanding, and the greatest Laguna pot in existence." He mentions pieces that he sold that are now in the Diker Collection, including a "great" Sioux dress, an Arapaho box and border robe, a No Two Horns shield, a Choctaw sash, and a child's Cheyenne dress, and a red and white pony beaded pipe bag in Alan Hirshfield's collection, and a Naskapi coat that David sold to Eugene Thaw. "After 35 years, there have been so many great things," he says. He met George Lucas at a Marin show and calls him "an early and wonderful client."

He does have a private collection at home that he doesn't plan to sell, "but I can't say never. I've had some things for 25-30 years." They include some mementos of his early years in the Indian art business. "All I could afford then were small things, beaded puberty balls, fetishes, awl cases, whetstone cases, and paint bags. I have a very mature collection of those, 20 deep in each category." He also has "a few 'best of its kind,' " including a Late Classic wedgeweave with cochineal bayeta and indigo, "the best ever woven," and three great Saltillo serapes, "two of which are off-limits." He also has a small collection -- "10-12 pieces" -- of Plains Indian sculpture.



Detail from David Cook's own collection: a Late Classic wedgeweave, "the best ever woven," with two reds -- raveled cochineal-dyed bayeta and raveled American flannel -- plus indigo, and hand-spun, hand-carded natural yarns and yarns dyed with cochineal in "a lot of subtle colors"

The future of the gallery? David says he plans to stay in business "until I hang up my spurs. I love the material like on Day One. When I see something great I get as excited now as I did when I first started. I recently acquired a peyote rattle that is the best one I've seen along with a great engraved and painted Kiowa hair-parter. A great thing doesn't have to be a major thing."

David says of selling Indian art, "You make the seller very happy and the buyer very happy. You are in the middle of sharing beauty, and you make money doing it. Of everything I see in life, I can't imagine anything commercial being more rewarding."

Beaded panel, Choctaw, last quarter of the 18th century (1780-1800) wool, glass beads, cordage 56.5 x 3.5 inches. Illustrated: *First American Art: The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection of American Indian Art*, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, University of Washington Press, 2004

