



**above:** Modeled by Shanna Downey and designed by Virginia Yazzie Ballenger. The Buckskin dress was created for the Journey in Navajo Fashion show at the historic El Morro Theatre in 2003. This dress is reminiscent of what would have been worn by Navajo women before the rug dresses and velvet.

**right:** Model Shanna Downey and Virginia Yazzie Ballenger. Iridescent velvet suit is designed with the modern day businesswoman in mind. Two-piece suit is accented with sterling silver and turquoise cast buttons.



# The Art of Design

Written by Gaye Brown de Alvarez | Photography by Lisa Rodriquez

She didn't start out as a fashion designer, but now Virginia Yazzie-Ballenger is Gallup's most famous designer. She works out of her business Navajo Spirit at 815 West Coal.

"I didn't sew in high school," Virginia said. "My mom and my auntie made my clothes when I was in pageants."

The first time she sat behind a sewing machine to make something was around 1978. She sewed a two-piece rust-colored velvet set, which she entered in the Navajo Nation fair and received a blue ribbon for it. It was not a traditional style, she said. "it had satin ribbon trim, silver buttons and a asymmetrical hemline." A woman who was a singer in a local band from Gallup ordered one. "She was my first customer," Virginia said.

In the early 1980's, Virginia was at a book store and saw the book "Native American Fashion : Modern Adaptations of Traditional Designs" by Margaret Wood, (Navajo/Seminole) and bought it.

"That book inspired me," she said. "What inspired me about her is how she can take traditional designs and create contemporary garments."

Wood mostly did contemporary Navajo rug dresses in cotton, trimmed in satin. Virginia met Margaret Wood at the Heard Museum in the early 1990s when she was just starting the fashion business. "She does good work," Virginia said.

When she and her husband moved to Topeka, Kansas, they both worked for the Santa Fe Railroad and she sewed in the evenings, "just for the love of it." She said she put together an inventory and started selling items at the Santa Fe Indian Market and the Colorado Indian Market. Since 1987 she has received about 100 awards and ribbons from different shows and contests for her designs. She has also traveled to Moscow, Russia and Johannesburg, South Africa to show her designs.

She met Ardina Moore (Osage) of Buffalo Sun at the Red Earth festival in Oklahoma City. "Ardina had a lot of information on how to run a business and she wasn't guarded or suspicious. She was willing to share her knowledge." They have remained friends over the years.

Internationally, Virginia is inspired by the work of Ralph Lauren. "I admire the way Ralph Lauren has always incorporated turquoise and Southwest style into his lines. He's done it for years."

Navajo Spirit is also doing alterations, a new business that was her husband Carl's idea. "He said 'we have the machines, and we have slow times,' so now it brings in a different clientele and we sell more of our inventory also. It's called 'Seams Fit,' and we received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help us do marketing and public relations."

She is a busy woman with four daughters, two businesses and a head full of design ideas. But when her pastor asked her "what are you doing with your talent?" she realized she needed to do more.

"I am now mentoring a young man from my church," she said. He is pursuing a career in fashion.

She explained one of the things that drives her to design fashion. "I have a love of sewing. It's relaxing to me." ◀

**below:** Coral and Silver handmade Purse. By Artist, Tanya June Rafael



**above:** Modeled Shanna Downey and designed by Virginia Yazzie Ballenger. Design based on a traditional blouse style from the 1930's. Multiple pin tucks on bodice and sleeves, iridescent velvet was used and trimmed with hand stamped sterling silver buttons. This garment won First Place at both the 2009 Gallup Inter-Tribal Ceremonial and Santa Fe Indian Market in the clothing categories.



**above:** Zuni Inlay Kashare Pin by Virgil and Shirley Benn. Courtesy of Joe Milo's White Water Trading Co.



**right:** Stoneweaver's Red Coral strands and Red Coral Inlaid Channel Bracelet. Courtesy of Gallup Trading Co.