

Roxanne Swentzell



Roxanne and her mother Rina Swentzell.
Photo by Amy Archer; Western Art & Architecture

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Roxanne Swentzell, born into a family of artists on December 9, 1962, in Taos, New Mexico, blossomed into an artist during her childhood. Her father, Ralph, a teacher of German descent, introduced her to Rubens’ paintings and Michelangelo’s sculptures and her mother, Rina, a potter, writer, and scholar, instilled in her the Santa Clara Pueblo culture and traditions.

Swentzell’s art first began as a means to communicate due to a speech impediment. When spending time with her mother, she formed clay into figures to express how she felt. She discovered, at an early age, that creating these figures was an effective form of communication.

While in high school, Swentzell studied for two years at the Institute for American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, where she had access to lots of clay and huge kilns. She moved on to the Portland Museum of Art School to study sculpture. She did not expect nor understand the concept of “art for art’s sake;” to her, these artworks made by her classmates lacked any personal meaning or connection to life. She returned to New Mexico and eventually settled in the Santa Clara Pueblo where, while living in a tent with her two children, she constructed an adobe brick house.

This immediate connection to the land led Swentzell to develop her own creative style which includes full-length clay figures representing the “human spirit” and a complete scope of emotions. Her focus on the female figure is her way of balancing the power between males and females found in her culture, while maintaining a strong sense of Pueblo identity. Swentzell typically creates a mask as she creates the figure.

She works in Tower Studio at the Poeh Center, an art complex, on Pojoaque tribal land. Rather than processing her clay she buys it from a box to save time, but she feels it is still important to experience digging and mixing clay, as she did alongside her mother. Swentzell knows no matter from where it comes, it is still from the earth - making it all “special.”

Using the traditional Santa Clara Pueblo coil method, Swentzell developed her own style of creating clay figures. Clay is formed into ropes, coiled, stacked, and shaped/smoothed into the desired vessel. Figures are normally hollow, with insets for the eyes, and separate pieces for the appendages. After they are fired in a kiln, she applies paint.

Roxanne Swentzell at work. Photo by Phil Karshis



In her book *How I Make My Sculptures* she describes her process starting at the beginning:

*First I feel something that I want to show. I feel how this feeling or thought would best be shown in a human body. This may happen very suddenly in the middle of something I am doing or when I am drifting off to sleep. Usually it has something to do with where I am in my life.**

Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian commissioned her to create a wall sculpture representing the indigenous peoples of America. Referring to the bronze sculpture she remarked, “It’s bigger than indigenous people – it’s everyone, so I call it *E-wah-Nee-nee* – for ‘life in all directions for all of us.’”

Swentzell’s passions also include preserving the earth, which resulted in her founding Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute “a research and education organization that relates to permaculture...a way of looking at the world based on the laws of nature.”

As her figures enchant viewers, Swentzell shares her culture through clay sculptures that are reflections of the human spirit. She declares a common humanity — she invites us to “Come, sit down, we aren’t that different, let me tell you something about us.”



Roxanne Swentzell, K’apovi, *For Life in All Directions*, bronze, pottery & paint, 2004, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (26/4546). Photo by NMAI Photo Services.

A letter from Roxanne Swentzell to Joslyn Art Museum, July 25, 2000:

The piece I would like to create for the Joslyn Museum consists of four separate figures, which go together as a whole. The four figures will be made in my style and technique in clay. They will be fired fairly high in order to create maximum strength. I estimate each single figure being 10” w. x 12” d. x 21” h. in size, approximately taking up about a three foot square space on the floor.

The topic of this piece has its origins in our pueblo [sic] cultural beliefs. The title, “Transformation,” helps to explain the piece. As Pueblo people we believe that we can and do, at times, transform or take on qualities of other entities such as animals, places, or spirit-beings. One such time of transformation is during our dances or ceremonies in which drums and singers sing songs of prayers to the entities of the cosmos, asking for life, but also acting as transmitters to give life. One of these such dances is our most common and well-known dance, our corn or harvest dance. This is done in celebration of the year’s harvest, but at a deeper level, it is about life...the coming together of all the forces around us that create and make life possible.

We live in a world of patterns and symbols. Everything has a meaning and is a part of the story of life. At the point that a dancer has gathered the different forces around and within him or her, which are symbolized by the different dance articles he or she wears, that person is no longer an individual but has transformed into a spiritual being connected to the greater whole. At this point much life force is flowing through this being in every breath and as the breath is released...the breath itself is a blessing of life going out to the places and beings who are there.

I chose to create four pueblo [sic] women corn dancers. They will be in the different stages of transformation. As they are tying the pieces of their dance clothing on, they are also transforming into corn maidens (spirit beings of the female gender, bringers of corn, life, caretakers of the people). One figure has completed the transformation and is truly a corn maiden entity. The other three figures are in different stages of change...a simple but capturing moment of the essence of the pueblo [sic] world. I would like to have this piece done by the end of the month of September 2000. Thank you.

Discussion Questions

- Why did Roxanne Swentzell struggle with her formal education at Portland Museum of Art School?
- What do you see when studying Swentzell’s *Transformation*?
- Why did Swentzell call it *Transformation*? What story is she telling?
- Discuss why Swentzell states that “we live in a world of patterns and symbols.”

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster’s academic standards and related lesson plans.

Poem to Her Sculptures from *How I Make My Sculptures* by Roxanne Swentzell ©1993



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Roxanne Swentzell, *Imprisoned Clown*, ca 1999, pottery, paint, 43.7 x 26 x 45 cm, gift of R.E. Mansfield, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (26/4272). Photo by NMAI Photo Services; Roxanne Swentzell, *Making Babies for Indian Market*, 2004, clay, pigment, 23 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 17 in., Gift in memory of Helen Thomas Kennedy, Brooklyn Museum, 2004.80

*You clay people
who dance through
my soul
dance right on
through
me.
My eyes
look upon you
out there
I know you
in here. Like
children
out in the world
I send you
and
hope
you find love
out there.*



Roxanne Swentzell

Santa Clara Pueblo, born 1962

Transformation
2000

ceramic, 23 in. high, dimensions variable
Museum purchase, 2000.26.a-n

Roxanne Swentzell describes herself as a sculptor of emotions, and these are evident in *Transformation*. There are four women, who are Corn Maidens in the Santa Clara Pueblo tradition, who will dance to please the gods. Three are intently engaged in preparing themselves for the important ritual of the Corn Dance. One is very self-focused, pulling on her moccasins. Another assists her fellow dancer by reverentially placing a tableta on her head. The fourth stands completely transformed; she has become a Corn Maiden, as her ancestors became Corn Maidens for generations before, and as her daughters will for generations after. They wished for a bountiful harvest and their dance must have pleased the gods for they were gifted with a great harvest. For their great service, the first Corn Maidens were taken to the stars and the four women in *Transformation* are channeling their spirits to help with the ceremony they are about to perform. Swentzell’s sculpture is meant to be a process – as if the viewers are simultaneously preparing with the women – while also telling the traditions of the harvest culture.

Photos show *Transformation* in progress.



Timeline

1960

1962 Roxanne Swentzell is born on December 9 in Taos, NM

1965

ca. 1967 Creates her first artwork, a clay dog, at the age of four

1970

1971 Apprentices in printing with Frank Flinn

1975

1976 Apprentices in sculpting with Michael Naranjo

1980

1978–80 Studies at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, NM

1985

1988 Exhibits in *Four Generations of the Naranjo Family* at Gorman Museum - UC Davis, Davis CA

1990

1989 Co-founds Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute with Joel Glanzberg, and Brett Bakker in Santa Fe, NM

1995

1995–98 Participates in the traveling exhibition *Indian Humor* sponsored by American Indian Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, CA

2000

1999 Won Best of Sculpture at the Santa Fe Indian Market show

2005

2004 Commissioned to create a wall sculpture for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian

2010

2011 Receives Native Treasures’ Living Treasure award; commissioned to create “Mud Woman” for Denver Art Museum



Roxanne Swentzell, *Mud Woman Rolls On*, 2011, 10 x 11 feet, Native arts acquisition fund, 2010.570, Photograph © Denver Art Museum 2011

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Roxanne Swentzell, *Making Babies for Indian Market*, 2004, clay, pigment, 23 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 17 in., Gift in memory of Helen Thomas Kennedy, Brooklyn Museum, 2004.80



ROXANNE SWENTZELL
SANTA CLARA PUEBLO, born 1962

TRANSFORMATION
2000, CERAMIC

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase, 2000.26.a-n