



Cuff Bracelet Care and Fit Guide

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In our more than 20 years as dealers of authentic American Indian handmade jewelry, the most popular item, hands down, is the cuff bracelet. As an example of the beauty of American Indian design and craftsmanship, a beautiful cuff is un-equalled, and a joy to own for a lifetime. Even inexpensive, well-made items can be expected to give many, many years of wear if a few guidelines are followed in their fitting, use and care. We've learned these tips and suggestions through trial and error, from older, much wiser traders and from the silversmiths themselves, and it's our pleasure to pass them on to you. To begin, let's start at the beginning: Fit.

How a Cuff Should Fit

It seems a little odd that we have actually had to learn how to put a cuff bracelet on, but it's true! Over the years, we've watched hundreds of people struggle when trying on a cuff, reddening their wrists, and even trying to pull them over their outstretched hands! The easiest technique involves finding the "sweet spot" on your own arm. This spot lies, just above the jutting wrist bone, where the softer flesh of the lower arm begins. It is generally much narrower here, top-to-bottom, than the wrist, even if it seems wider, because the flesh here is softer, more resilient, not just skin over bone and cartilage as in the joint itself. A cuff should be pushed over this spot, from the inside of the wrist, the cuff opening pointing away from the wearer, until the cuff rests against the inside of the arm. It should then be rolled over the arm's outer bone. If it can't be rolled comfortably, then the size is not right for the wearer's wrist. Resizing will be covered later, but for now, a well fitting cuff will then slide down to rest against the turn of the hand at the bottom of the wrist joint, with a little loose-ness for comfort, but with enough similarity in shape, that it doesn't have the tendency to roll over.

The basic shape of the inside of a cuff comes from the shape of the steel mandrel used as a form to bend it to size. There are two basic shapes: a flattened, tapered cone; and a rounder tapered cone. Some wrists are of the former shape: wider and flatter in cross-section, while others' wrists have a more rounded shape. Generally speaking, a round-wrist person should look for a round-wrist cuff and vice-versa, but there are ways to get around those limitations. One thing about fit that needs to be stated is that no cuff is made to defy gravity by clinging to a portion of the lower arm ABOVE the wrist, during wear. The natural tendency is to slip down to lie comfortably just above the hand. If you need a cuff to hang upon your arm itself, try purchasing a bracelet manufactured from a springy metal that will grip your arm, or use liberal glue

application, other wise, if you need to squeeze a cuff into a position, it will eventually fail. A cuff is a rigid piece of jewelry, and is not made to be repeatedly opened and squeezed to wear. This will shorten its life considerably.

Sterling silver is a soft metal alloy that although malleable, also becomes brittle when bent repeatedly in the same place. A cuff's shape and settings will determine where the weakest point is, and that will undoubtedly be where it is bent. Try it yourself with a pair of pliers and a coat hanger -- the hanger wire is soft steel, but if it is bent back and forth enough times, it will snap like a twig -- silver will do the same. It's called "work-hardening" and is something to be avoided if you want your cuff to last. We've seen cuffs with broken shanks brought in for repair regularly. These repairs -- even if they are possible -- are notoriously expensive, and usually less than perfect. The better course of action is to prevent the break by training yourself to resist the temptation to squeeze your cuff tighter.

Resizing a Cuff

We have seen an amazing range of broken bracelets over the years, from row-settings to three-stone specimen stones, to full Zuni inlay! There is a simple basic test that you can use when trying on a new cuff -- first, if it is row-set, multiple stone set or set with a very wide specimen stone, be sure that the set area (stones, bezels, applique components, etc.) is no wider than the top of your wrist. This will give you a few more options if the fit needs to be adjusted. The areas where stones and applique work are set and soldered into position are stiffer, and also more brittle than the rest of the cuff. There should be very little movement of the metal here, to insure a cuff's longevity. If this area is bent, in re-shaping, even carefully, at the very least, the bezel cups that hold the stones will change their shape as well, effectively loosening the stones. Possibly cracking or loosening solder joints as well, leading to lost stones and applied component failure.

To safely resize a cuff, making sure that the set area is unchanged, the remaining length of the cuff shank, leading to the opening, is carefully shaped, a little at a time, over the remaining length. If the opening becomes too small to push on -- generally smaller than 1" to 1 1/4" or so -- then the ends will need to be shortened and re-finished. The ends should be carefully rounded and all burrs from the cutting operation should be removed. We recommend that a competent silver smith be used for this type of re-sizing. In your case, you may find that the opening is still usable. Just be sure that the cuff can be re-sized to the right size, and resist the urge to squeeze afterwards!

Traditional Stone Setting and Re-setting

A word is in order here, regarding the techniques used in traditional stone setting by Navajo and other Southwestern artists. Specimen stones, either regular shaped cabochons, or free-form cabochons, are held in place by the tightness of the bezel metal itself -- they are never glued in. The stones are nestled in a light bed of sawdust -- to provide a resilient setting surface beneath

the stone - within the bezel cup. The stone is compressed into the bezel cup and setting surface and the setting is formed by burnishing the edges of the bezel tightly around the perimeter of the stone and downwards, holding the stone down into the cup. A polished burnishing tool is used, and the resulting setting protects the stone from occasional impact damage as the sawdust bed can absorb gentle impact.

The traditional manner of setting is very effective, but there is one thing that must be considered an enemy of this kind of technique: water! The low-humidity of the US Southwest is legend, and it insures, for cuffs that remain there, that the sawdust beneath the stone will keep its volume for many years. It will shrink over time, and the cuff will need to have the bezels re-tightened from time-to-time, but for cuffs that move to more humid climates, they should be checked more frequently – especially if your cuff has become soaked or submerged in water. In these cases, dry the cuff thoroughly, and allow a few days before re-checking the tightness of the stone – if you detect movement of the stone within the bezel, then it should be re-tightened.

Re-tightening a bezel-set stone is easily accomplished by holding the stone between your thumb and forefinger, and pressing it into the bezel firmly while using a burnishing tool to re-shape the bezel tightly around the stone. If a burnisher is not available, we have had equally good results with the rounded, polished tip of a pair of needle-nosed pliers. We never use adhesives on a bezel-set stone unless the stone has cracked or separated from its backing – usually a dark grey epoxy, which is used to hold the stone during lapidary cutting and polishing. If the stone has sustained a crack, then it should be stabilized by first removing it from the bezel – carefully using an x-acto knife to gently pry the bezel open around the stone’s perimeter, then dropping it and the sawdust beneath it into your hand.

Cracked stones can be repaired

– actually stabilized, so the crack will not get larger, or cause the stone to fall out of the bezel using a fresh, high-quality thin viscosity Cyano-Acrylate glue – “Crazy Glue” is a trade name we have used successfully. The stone should be laid over waxed paper or polyethylene sheeting so that the adhesive won’t adhere, and the edges of the crack lined up. With a thin layer of glue on each edge, the pieces should be held together firmly until the glue sets – can be 2 or more minutes, depending on the size of the surface. Blowing upon the stone helps, as CA glues set up by the absorption of moisture. Move onto another section only after the first has thoroughly dried at least ½ hour or so. When the stone has set, and the glue is completely cured – overnight is best, it can be cleaned of glue squeeze-out with the x-acto knife, then re-polished over the crack using mild pressure and the polishing surface of a 4-way nail emery board until the crack blend into the surface finish. As you work, let light play across the surface so you can see the irregularity of reflection caused by the crack. Sometimes it’s easier to work with the stone re-set into the bezel cup.

Re-setting a stone involves determining the correct setting depth within the bezel cup. The proper depth is the one which shows the stone off best, by setting it as high as possible, while

making sure that any backing material is below the edge of the bezel, and that the bezel metal will have good “purchase” on the actual stone surface all the way around the perimeter. Sometimes, brand new work – especially if the artist was in a hurry to finish the item – will show the parting line between a stone and the backing above the bezel. This is an invitation to losing the stone, as sometimes the most insignificant impact can detach the stone from its backing. Unless the stone itself is held securely by the bezel, it may be lost, as the backing to stone adhesion is not very strong, especially with turquoise and other soft stones. Another consideration of depth of setting involves the degree of protection a stone is afforded by a deeper setting, with the bezel working well over the curve of the cabochon surface. Turquoise is a relatively soft stone, as are malachite, calcites and any organics like mother of pearl, coral or shell. They need to be protected from impact to insure a lifetime of enjoyment from the cuff. Stones may sometimes be replaced, but an exact color match - especially with a specimen stone – is rarely possible. It is much better to protect the original stones than to try to replace them after a careless drop or impact.

Inlay

Inlaid stone settings are a major attraction of much Southwestern American Indian jewelry. They present their own needs regarding care and maintenance. Fit is also much more critical, with an inlaid cuff than with a specimen or, bezel-set row cuff. As each stone or shell piece is shaped to lie alongside an adjoining stone, the geometry of each stone, around its perimeter and cross section, is determined by trial and error until a secure fit is achieved. This is especially true in inlay settings that go around the circumference of a cuff. In bezel cup set inlay, the stone are often cut carefully for side-to-side fit, then set into an epoxy backing before being finished flush and to the shape of the bezel. Since the bezel and setting provide the protection and support, they are not usually as subject to dislodged stones – except from impact – as are circumference set inlay. Also, since the cuff shanks are added beneath the setting, careful movement to size will not always be detrimental to inlay security. On the other hand, if a cuff is inlayed over its surface and along the circumference, then it will be taking its support from the shape of the underlying metal as much as the sides of the cuff into which it has been set. Whether it is set with silver channels between the stones, or not, bending a cuff inlayed in this manner is strictly off limits! We have seen well-made Zuni channel inlaid cuffs literally snapped in two when they were “squeezed” to close up a fit. It is never, never to be done. If an inlaid cuff doesn’t fit, it will never fit, and any attempt to make it fit will usually loosen and damage the stone settings if not the whole cuff. Repair to inlay is usually quite a bit more costly, and may not be possible at all.

Fitting inlaid cuffs is a very delicate operation, usually only attempted on cuffs whose inlay area is no wider than the top of the wearer’s wrist. The remaining shanks may be closed in, but only if the set area is completely immobilized to prevent stones loosening or the inlay cracking. If a cuff is only slightly too big, we prefer to use a simple, amazingly effective solution. Most Home Centers and Hardware stores as well as frame shops carry a range of clear vinyl peel-n-stick, self-adhesive “bumpers” which are used to protect surfaces, from ashtrays and other objects. They can be square, oblong, pill-shaped and hemispherical. The ones we like to use are the

hemispherical ones.

The inside of the ends of the cuff are cleaned and de-greased from skin oils, then one or two of the bumpers are adhered just inside the ends of the shank, near the opening gap. They will stick on contact, but we recommend that they be secured with spring clothespins or folder clips for several hours to give the adhesive ample time to accommodate itself to the surface. In use, they take up some of the extra room, and can effectively keep a slightly sloppy fitting cuff from turning and falling off. Depending on the amount of looseness, the wearer can experiment with different numbers of bumpers, or different thicknesses – they come in a few different sizes, etc. – until the degree of stability is reached. Of course, no amount of material applied beneath will keep a cuff securely on the arm above the wrist, but we have seen quite a number of customers quite pleased with the results using these simple little stick-ons.

Maintaining The Finish

Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo and Zuni silversmiths use a variety of finishes in their jewelry, from bright, shiny polished surfaces to oxidized, antiqued and dull surfaces, depending on the look they are trying to achieve. Stones too, are often finished in different ways. Generally speaking, if a cuff carries a lot of surface detail, whether it's tooled or applique or overlaid, the background of the metal will be darkened by oxidizing. Through the use of various chemicals, the silver can be darkened almost to jet black, with many shades in between possible and desirable, depending on the design. This is usually done before any stones – if used – are set. Then the cuff will be brushed and maybe also buffed off using differing polishing agents, rouges and types of wheels; leaving the darkness remaining in the tooling and detail, while the surface is brought back to bright or brushed. This increases the contrast and shows off the work, and is the intent of the artist. A cuff can be carefully maintained like the artist intended by refraining from the use of silver polishes, dipping liquids and toothpaste as a polishing agent. These attack the oxidation and eliminate the enhanced contrast the artist created. In the case of dipping liquids like "Tarnex" and creme silver polishes, they will also damage any set stones – often changing their color or dulling their finish. In addition, sterling surfaces that have been dipped, are actually being chemically etched. The process leaves microscopic pits in the surface, and the result is the surface, not as refined, now tarnishes faster!

We recommend the use of a jeweler's polishing cloth only, on fine handmade jewelry. The degree of brightness can be safely controlled by the amount of rubbing, and regular use will actually further refine the surface, making it less susceptible to the tarnish inducing oxidants in the air! Stones, too, can be brightened by the use of one of these cloths.

Polishing Cloths, like the Sunshine Polishing Cloths we use and sell in our Ebay Store, are a soft fabric impregnated with a very mild abrasive powder. Used dry, they will refine the surface and pick up the tarnish and other impurities, turning black in the process. Eventually, with a lot of use, they will need to be replaced. Using one daily, many times, during the course of a day's business in our gallery, we get about three weeks from one. We use exactly the same cloths we

sell, and in our experience, there are none better. A final, inexpensive way to maintain your silver jewelry is to keep your pieces in individual zip-lock poly bags. This keeps outside air off of them, and since it is the oxidants – especially sulfur from automotive exhausts and salt from seaside environments – that cause tarnishing, they will keep between polishing much, much better. All of our jewelry items are shipped in zip-lock poly bags that are also treated with an anti-corrosive agent inside, for better protection.

We hope that this information will help you select and maintain the cuff(s) of your dreams for a lifetime of wearing pleasure. Properly maintained, even lightweight silver cuff bracelets can be expected to last through many generations of proud owners.

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