



This *Pascola* mask carved by Louis David Valenzuela represents life and death.

At the age of 10, Yaqui artist Louis David Valenzuela met painter and sculptor Arturo Montoya. Although Montoya was not a Yaqui, their relationship quickly became one of apprentice and teacher. One day in Montoya's studio Valenzuela saw a bright shaft of light falling on a painting of a Yaqui deer dancer. The sight was a revelation for the aspiring young artist. "It was a sign of what my people wanted," explains Valenzuela, who is renowned today for his carvings of Yaqui masks and figures.

That light has never stopped shining on Valenzuela's creative

"I'm living the culture more now than ever before."

spirit. Born in Eloy and raised in Tucson, he is doing everything he can to keep the Yaqui culture alive through his art. Although he attended the Chicago Art Institute in the mid-1980s, Valenzuela's roots called him back to Tucson. "I'm living the culture more now than ever before," he says. For 15 years, Valenzuela has been working as a woodcarver, capturing the intricacies and cultural language of the Yaqui in his enchanted images. "The wood speaks to me," he says.

And it speaks to others: In 2003, the Arizona State Museum on The University of Arizona campus held an exhibit of Valenzuela's work featuring the masks that have won him the greatest acclaim. Inspired by the intricate ceremony of the deer dancers, Valenzuela uses willow and cottonwood for many of his mask carvings. They are embellished with horsehair and brilliant designs in white, red, and black.

The deer dancer reflects a unique blend of ancient Yaqui beliefs and the religion taught to them by the Jesuits in the 1500s. The masks' imagery reveals a language of symbols that includes ancient figures, especially those appearing on the *Pascola* (or "Old Man of the Fiesta") animal masks. Dots appearing on the masks, for example, signify deceased relatives. "These dots represent respect for the elders," says Valenzuela, "for all who pass away daily." A lizard on the mask symbolizes nature, and a cross represents the four directions of the Earth and blesses the dancers during the ceremony. Flowers reflect not only the power of that image in Yaqui culture but also its association with the figure of Christ.

One of the legacies left to Valenzuela from his mentor Montoya

was the wish that his pupil would one day teach. Valenzuela recently taught a summer art program at one of Tucson's public middle schools, and that experience cast its own light into his life. "We worked with pottery, flutes, and gourds," he says. "It was an honor—and one of the most important events in my life."

Valenzuela says he would like to see more Yaqui artists. "I would also like to see more respect and understanding for Yaqui culture," he adds. "I was born a Yaqui and I'm going to die a Yaqui." Through his art, Valenzuela's beloved Yaqui traditions undoubtedly will live on. ▶

Louis David Valenzuela's studio is open to the public and located at 3217 E. 28th St. Call ahead for hours, 795-3489.



Deer dancer made of clay (above); depiction of the Virgin painted on plaster (below)



*Louis David Valenzuela*

Louis David Valenzuela