Encounter, Engagement, and Exchange

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Indigenous Influences in The Arts
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Modern Mexican silver is a renewed tradition, originating in the influence and application of diverse concepts and trends that has led to something entirely new. Based on the Arts and Crafts movement, pre-Columbian art, Modernism, and Art Deco, this art form has remained uniquely Mexican.

William Spratling, an architect from New Orleans, initiated the twentieth-century silver industry in Taxco, Mexico.

This paper will provide a brief history of Spratling’s grand experiment, while shedding light on the elements of its success. It will discuss the development of a stylistic identity that contributed to and allowed for the continuous flow of new ideas.¹

Spratling’s arrival in Mexico was perfectly timed. An explosion of art and intellectual discourse in the late 1920s was drawing scholars, artists, and poets, all hopeful participants in a remarkable experiment. Mexicans were rewriting their country’s history and placing art at the service of humanity. Spratling was teaching architecture at Tulane University in New Orleans when he was given a contract to write a book about Mexico. In 1929, he bought a house in Taxco and immersed himself in the life of this mountainside village south of the capital. Little Mexico debuted in 1932 to rave reviews. Almost simultaneously, the publisher went bankrupt and the author was forced to search for another way to make a living.²
“I decided to bring some goldsmiths up from Iguala, and put them to work in Taxco making silver…The first epoch, of say 15 years or so of making silver, was simply terrific. The thing increased with such leaps and bounds that we could hardly hold it down.”

In developing a modern industry in a remote mountain village, William Spratling can be viewed as a pragmatic visionary. His workshop, Taller de las Delicias, started modestly with a maestro and a half-dozen young men. Expansion took place at a rapid pace.

In less than ten years, Spratling had over 150 employees, producing tinware, woven rugs and blankets, furniture, silver jewelry and decorative objects. While silver had been mined for centuries in Taxco, the local people were now given the opportunity to benefit from the new industry.

The initial vision for Las Delicias was defined by several revolutionary concepts: an organizational hierarchy based on ability; a stylistic approach inspired by historical and regional art; the application of local traditional handicraft techniques; and the use of local, accessible, and inexpensive materials. Then Spratling added one final ingredient. This addition, as surprising as it may seem, was indispensable to the success he enjoyed. For the rest of his life, Spratling expended much energy in the creation of a marketplace.

The workshop organized by Spratling was born out of the communal village taller, with its emphasis on shared participation.
Spratling merged this tradition with his experience as an instructor at the Arts and Crafts Club in the French Quarter. The artisans began as young men, working at simple tasks under the guidance of a *maestro*. Once a silversmith showed promise and an enthusiasm for learning, he was given increasingly complex work to perform. As the young man acquired technical skills, he gained greater responsibility in the workplace.

Spratling’s designs expressed the mystical exoticism of remote times.

![Figure 4: William Spratling. Quetzalcoatl brooch, 980 silver. c. 1940. Private Collection. Photograph by Luisa di Pietro](image)

His work is reflective of his own life-long fascination with the pre-Conquest aesthetic: “I felt myself drawn with great force to pre-Columbian art. It is one of my passions.” Architectural aspects of pre-Columbian motifs predominate in Spratling’s designs—the projections into space, pyramids and spirals, parallel lines, dynamic torques and twists, massive sculptural forms that become pins and pendants. For the young men who were employed in the workshop, the pre-Hispanic motifs originated in the art of their ancestors.

![Figure 5: Temple of Quetzalcoatl, Teotihuacan. c. 1940. Postcard. Penny Morrill Collection](image)

The images that influenced modern silverwork were the ancient representations of the gods their forebears had worshipped. The interpretation of natural phenomena was through the filter of Mexico’s past.
William Spratling directed his stylistic vocabulary at those who thought the way he did, the “cultural pilgrims” who came to Mexico in those early years after the Revolution of 1910. Many were intellectuals and among them were communists, all looking to discover the social and economic impact of the Revolution and to participate in change. They also brought with them a respect for the artisan.

In the early years, Spratling sold only on a retail basis in the store below the workshop. The late 1930s brought an expansion into the wholesale market. While Spratling’s more commercial line of silver jewelry and hollowware was offered in the Montgomery Ward catalogue, his jewelry, tea sets, and sauce boats were available at Neiman Marcus in Dallas and at Gumps in San Francisco. In 1949, Spratling made the astonishing statement that, by 1945, he was selling to twenty-six outlets in Mexico and one hundred-forty in the United States. It is possible that he may have also been selling his silver designs in commissaries on U.S. Army bases.

Spratling’s success bred more success as workshops sprouted up all over the little town just before the war. One of the earliest and the longest-lived was the Taller de Los Castillo. Since 1939, the four Castillo brothers—Antonio, Jorge (Chato), Justo (Coco), and Miguel—Antonio’s wife Margot, cousin Salvador Terán, and now Antonio’s children Emilia, Lily, and Wolmar have produced some of the most inventive and beautiful pieces that have come out of Mexico.
From five-hundred craftsmen employed at the height of production during the war, Spratling, in 1948-49, relocated a much reduced workshop to his ranch in Taxco el Viejo. A commission from the U. S. government to create a handcraft industry in Alaska and a partnership with the silver company, Conquistador, were opportunities that enthralled and consumed him. Although the Alaska project was never implemented, the creative process of studying Alaskan indigenous art and responding to its inspiration were the catalysts that resulted in what many consider Spratling’s best work.

The more successful silver designers in Taxco acknowledged and adopted another of Spratling’s innovations—his insistence on the use of traditional materials. As in so many other choices he made, Spratling’s emphasis on local materials originated in his sensitivity to indigenous cultural manifestations. Stones were chosen not for their preciousness, but for the contribution they made to the ultimate impact of the piece. For most of the silver maestros, the idea of incorporating common stones, tortoise-shell, rosewood, ebony, and copper was anything but limiting. Antonio Castillo recalled traveling to Oaxaca to view the gold that had been recovered from the Mixtec tomb at Monte Alban,
with the intent of studying and replicating pre-Columbian techniques and use of materials.

The decade of the fifties in Taxco was one of great experimentation and change. Margot van Voorhies Carr had her own workshop after 1948 and developed two lines, one in silver, the other in enamel on silver. She had come to Mexico from San Francisco, so it is not surprising to find influences from Japan and China in her work.

Figure 9: Margot Van Voorhies Carr design drawings for Chrysanthemum ensemble. c. 1950-55. Spratling-Taxco Collection, Tulane University Latin American Library

Margot used color expressively and imparted qualities of preciousness and femininity at a time when most designers were hammering out muscular, darkly oxidized, large-scale silver jewelry.

Figure 10: Margot Van Voorhies Carr design drawings for Spiraling Colors ensemble. c. 1950-55. Spratling-Taxco Collection, Tulane University Latin American Library

A number of Mexican designers looked to international trends in fine and decorative art for inspiration. Well known for his experimentation with the language of organic modernism, Sigi Pineda is thought to have broken away from Taxco’s stylistic tradition. However, in retrospect, Sigi continued
along the path of the other great silver designers of Taxco, like Margot van Voorhies Carr, Hubert Harmon, Valentín Vidaurreta, and Chato Castillo, whose approach to form and use of materials has resulted in the unique and unexpected qualities in their work that have made them so admired. Whereas William Spratling founded an industry and established a market for Mexican silver, success would have been elusive had it not been for the continuous flow of fine work from gifted Mexican designers. It is important to remember that many of these artists were not followers of trends, but were talented and enthusiastic innovators.

The appeal of Mexican silver is in the quality of the interpretation of indigenous pre-Columbian, colonial, and contemporary folk art. Spratling and the others resisted slavish imitation and moved, instead, to subtle and suggestive borrowings, all the while retaining symbolic references. The resonance of these works reveals the fascination with indigenous culture, which was shared by those who made the silver and by those who bought it. The best of the silver designs are not cliché-ridden and, for this reason, they remain powerful in their sensual impact and as artistic statements.
What brought about this remarkable achievement? Spratling’s organizational, marketing, and design experiments were prototypical, and easy for the silversmiths who had started out at Las Delicias and then set out on their own to replicate. Paramount was the insistence on the work of the hand and on experimentation, the beating heart of Mexican silver. Spratling’s belief in the merits of a hand-wrought industry, based on good design and technical mastery, persisted in spite of high labor costs. This one aspect, the insistence on the touch of the hand, resulted in the employment over the years of incalculable numbers of artisans to meet demand for the product.

Today, there are almost 200,000 people living in Taxco. Few workshops exist and most of the silverwork is done at the behest of the wholesale market. The mayoristas [wholesalers] both in Taxco and outside of the city demand jewelry that is inexpensive and in a form that possesses already proven marketability. Therefore, tiny family workshops all over Taxco are given small amounts of silver to hammer into Mickey Mouse pendants, which then get attached to lightweight machine-made chains. Worse, this material is sold by the gram—as one silver designer commented, “like fish in the market.” An even more dangerous development is the importation of cheap jewelry from Thailand and China, sold as if produced in Taxco. This has led to joblessness and the lure of the drug market.

It is now essential to foster and bring great design to the marketplace. Over the last five years, this effort has been a priority for those who care about Mexican silver.

Several bright new designers are getting attention in the marketplace, with the assistance of dealers and storeowners in the United States and Mexico. Agnes Seebass, whose workshop is in Taxco, and Martha Vargas of Michoacán are two talented contemporary designers.
In light of lower standards, negative market forces, the environmental impact of the industry, and the lack of governmental support for good design and technically superior handwork, the Spratling-Taxco Collection at Tulane University’s Latin American Library takes on greater significance. The modern Mexican silver industry has become almost parenthetical, with a beginning and an end in sight. The collection will allow scholars to consider what went right and wrong in the development of this industry as they study these preserved materials, accessible now in a public collection. How wonderful it would be if these efforts could provide support and an incentive for great design and thus insure a bright future for Mexican silver!

NOTES


2. File on Spratling: An Autobiography (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Co., 1967). See the third chapter in Spratling’s autobiography (ghost-written by Gerald R. Kelly) concerning his years in New Orleans, as well as the fourth and fifth chapters on the early years in Taxco. Spratling’s Little Mexico (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1932), is a good read.


