

Jewelry of Oaxaca, Mexico

Carmen Armstrong

The region of Oaxaca, in Mexico, has been known for jewelry production since pre-Hispanic times. The area had an abundance of gold deposits easily accessible to the indigenous people of the country. Speculation has been that the ability to work gold was brought to this region from South and Central America via maritime trade routes. Areas in Mexico where jewelry production reached a zenith during the pre-Hispanic era were located typically along the country's coastline and included Oaxaca, Michoacan and Guerrero. The metal smiths produced works in both gold and silver, which was principally utilized for religious ceremonies. Gold was associated with the sun and silver with the moon. Techniques utilized included the lost wax method, lamination, repousse, mosaics with stone and shell inlay, stamping, and chasing. The jewelry was of superior quality and is not easily reproduced today to the same quality levels utilizing modern production tools. When the Spanish colonized Mexico, the native jewelry industry was rapidly dismantled to prevent veneration of native gods.

The gold jewelry produced by pre-Hispanic jewelers was melted down and shipped to Spain. Techniques that were centuries old were forgotten over time. Recently, there has been a revival of pre-Hispanic jewelry in Oaxaca by the studio "Oro de Monte Alban". The jewelry created by this studio is made from molds discovered in tomb 7, at Monte Alban, in 1932.

This tomb was not looted by the Spanish during the conquest and has provided some of the finest pre-Hispanic jewelry



Filigree "gusano" or "worm" earrings embellished with tiny coral beads. Photos: Carmen Armstrong.

seen in recent times.

The Spanish initially created religious jewelry and church vestments in Mexico. The friars and priests instructed the indigenous Mexicans in the Spanish techniques of working gold and silver. Over time, personal embellishment became more prominent. Jewelry was created in gold and embellished with diamonds, pearls and coral. The style was colonial baroque and copied from Spain.

Colonial baroque jewelry with diamonds was "fibre del oro amarillo con diamantes" or "fiber of yellow gold with diamonds". Some artists added pearls to this style, which were brought from the Mexican coast. The jewelry had a face of silver with a yellow gold backing. This was prior to the invention of white gold in the 1920s. The fashion in Europe was to display the diamonds in a white metal setting. Finally, in the 1940s and 1950s, this style was produced with a silver face, yellow gold back and "white sapphires" or "marquesitas" substituted for the diamonds. The aesthetics of the pieces produced in the 1940s and 1950s sadly do not compare to the jewelry produced prior to the 1930s in this baroque style.

The Spanish also introduced filigree to Mexico. The Spanish had learned the technique of filigree from the Moors during their occupation of Spain. Filigree utilized a wire frame for the basic design and fine hand drawn wire to fill in the open spaces with design embellishment. Pearls and stones were also added to contribute to the baroque flavor of these pieces. Popular designs for filigree earrings included the "Eme or M", "El Ramo or The Branch", "El Jardin or The Garden", "El Gusano or The Worm" and "El Arracada or The Crescent". Filigree jewelry produced in Oaxaca may also feature carved leaves and flowers in different gold colors, which are attached to a gold filigree framework with pearls to accent the design. In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Juchitan, the filigree is embellished with gold coins that were either Mexican or American in origin.

Native women from the town of Yalalag, in Oaxaca, wear
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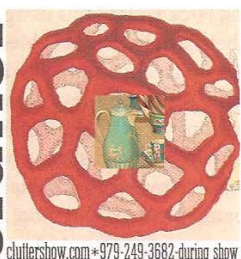


These earrings are fashioned with old "milagros," which are religious charms commonly used in Mexico asking for a prayer to be answered, or a "miracle".




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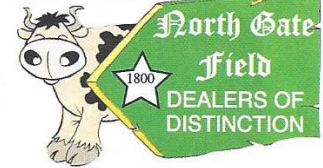
OAXACA, from page 24

a distinctive "Yalalag" cross necklace. The Yalalag cross may be either gold or silver and features a large central cross and three smaller crosses which dangle beneath the large one. The origin of the cross is attributed to the Dominican order who settled in this area of Mexico. The design is thought to be from Salamanca, Spain and was copied by an indigenous metal smith and, over time, assumed a distinctive Mexican character. Young women from the village of Yalalag wear earrings prior to marriage and when married begin to wear the cross necklace.

Milagros are another jewelry item of religious nature produced in Oaxaca. Originally milagros were produced in the Mediterranean basin by many different cultures. The Spanish brought them to Mexico during colonial times. These charms are physical representations of a prayer request and typically are left at the church as an offering. In past times, milagro charms were produced in silver or gold, but are now typically produced in pot metal with either a silver or gold wash.

Oaxaca has been a fertile ground for jewelry production since pre-Hispanic times. Currently, artisans producing jewelry in the traditional manner have felt pressure from overseas. Much of the jewelry sold in Oaxaca currently is produced in China. To preserve this art, value must be

assigned to the craft and the time required for production of jewelry in this style. It is our hope that this generation and others to come will seek out traditional Oaxaca jewelry to keep this beautiful art alive and flourishing. □



Above: A contemporary "Yalalag" cross, named after the Oaxacan village Yalalag.



Left: Gold "cascabel" from the pre-Hispanic Temple Mayor.

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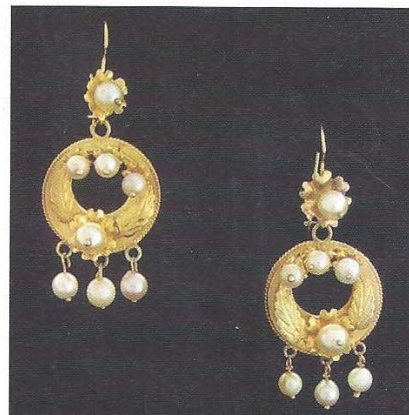
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Editor's note: Carmen Armstrong specializes in fine, vintage sterling and gold jewelry from Mexico and enjoys sharing her knowledge with others interested in this art. For more information, visit her at Cole's Antiques Show in Warrenton during the shows, or at www.adornmentsunlimited.net



These large, delicately woven gold filigree earrings with pearls from the Mexican state of Oaxaca are still fashionable today. The Spanish introduced the art of filigree work to Mexico in colonial times. Photos: Carmen Armstrong.