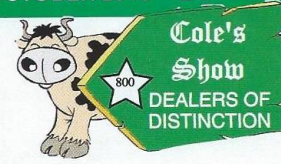


Meet Carmen Armstrong: Traveling the wilds of Mexico in search of vintage silver

by Lou Christine



It was over 20 years ago when Carmen Armstrong's husband, Forrest, inherited some antique and vintage Mexican silver jewelry from his aunt. After examining the quality of the pieces, Carmen became curious and soon the nice looking, affable woman started researching the history of Mexican sterling jewelry.

Residing in Houston, the *gringa* joined *Los Amigos de Art Popular* folk art club in 1995, enabling her to further appreciate the arts of Mexican along with many of the finer customs of our neighbor to the South. Carmen soon began her own collection and enjoyed taking adventurous jaunts south of the border. She began to scrutinize the authenticity, attention to detail and marveled



Carmen Armstrong with a collection of vintage southwest and Mexican jewelry.

at the imagination of the smiths who produced such work. Thus began her love affair with the techniques and styling of Mexican silver jewelry.

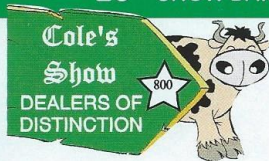
Carmen parlayed that love into an enterprise by creating Plata de Carmen, Armstrong's trade name. Now living in Fredericksburg, Texas she currently spends part of her time attending shows in places like Santa Fe, Phoenix and Fort Worth. Carmen is a familiar and friendly face inside the Cole Building in Warrenton twice a

year for the biannual shows as well. Other times she is busy orchestrating private shows or traveling the near, the far and over the wilds of Mexico in a constant Quixotic search for the smart and unusual. She beats her way to Taxco, often using

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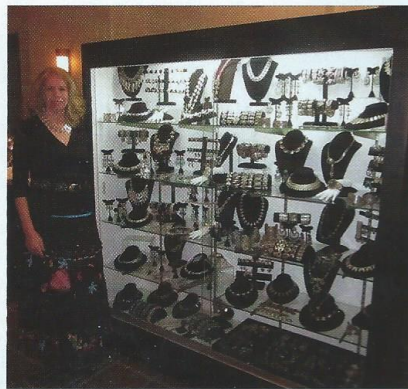
IN SEARCH OF MEXICAN SILVER, from page 25

the old *pueblo* as a base of operation. With Forrest, they also frequent Oaxaca, Mexico City, Guanajuato and Merida.

Taxco, in the southern Mexican State of Guerrero, could be construed as the Mecca of Mexico's silver jewelry industry.

American illustrator and designer William Sprattling took Taxco from a nothing of a sleepy mining town to a bustling silver jewelry center. With that distinction comes mass interest, mass exposure and sorry to say, mass duplication.

Legend is that a local silversmith could show a buyer a unique, Taxco-made piece they just designed and assembled as an absolute one-of-a-kind. If admired, it's said by the time that the shopper gets to the other side of Taxco, after just a day of shopping, they might see the very same piece then mass produced. That's the pirated underbelly of the business these days, with the old town notorious for quickly copying any piece of jewelry creating interest.



Many of the pieces Armstrong deals in are museum quality.

Carmen, well aware of such, sets the bar high with lofty standards when it comes to including any silver ornament in her collection. Her astute and discriminating taste has her only choosing the most authentic pieces, many of museum-grade with workmanship that's unlikely to be easily copied.

Armstrong takes great pride in seeking out extraordinary silversmiths and jewelry designers throughout Mexico. Carmen embraces the subtle nuances of the Meso-American culture - from the mining aspects all the way to the finished product and often writes for publications to the trade. When speaking with her, it's not hard to read how she fully appreciates the traditions, the dedication, patience and pains taken in the workmanship that goes into every piece she showcases.

For more information on Mexican silver designs, go to her website at <http://www.platadelcarmen.com> or stop by Cole's Antique Show on the north end of Warrenton during the shows for a one-on-one personal visit. □

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