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PRECIOUS METALWORK OF OAXACA



Any visit to Oaxaca can bring surprises. One very pleasant element is the Oaxacan precious metalwork. In the national context, Oaxaca, Mexico's fifth largest state, is particularly important because of its climate, landscape, culture, and its material and human resources.

The state's cultural manifestations go back, easily, 10 thousand years. Its territory has always been on the route for all types of migrations and cultural passages, since, geographically, Oaxaca is, after Veracruz, the most important area in the Central America isthmus.

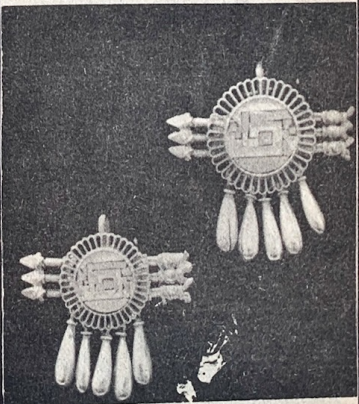
In the context of Oaxacan culture, Monte Alban holds a primary position. Located at the top of a mountain ridge that overlooks the junction of the three central Oaxacan valleys, it began as a small settlement but became in less than 300 years the first place in Central America with a drainage system for rain-water. By then, the surface area of the settlement had tripled, and work had begun to level the mountain crest.

At its moment of greatest splendor (550 years later, and after the removal of many thousands of cubic yards of earth and stone) Monte Alban occupied a platform approximately sixtenths of a mile long and 490 yards wide, surrounded by a productive and habitational zone of more than 3,300 terraces, more than a dozen subsidiary centers, a symbolic rampart, and several hydraulic works that guaranteed a drinking water supply for the ruling sector of the population. This dominant class undoubtedly exceeded 5,000 people, and they ruled over another 70 thousand, who were distributed in a radius of no more than four and a half

miles. That great city, with such immense potential, culturally dominated the Oaxaca region for more than 1,000 years and was a source of pride for all the Zapotec population.

Years later the Zapotec tombs were chosen by Mixtec noblemen for their own burials, as was shown when Dr. Alfonso Caso Andrade discovered Tomb Number 7, in 1932. Originally, a Zapotec person had been buried in it, but several centuries later when the tomb was opened to inter a high-ranking Mixtec- the original occupant was laid aside and the clay urns which accompanied him were rearranged. The Mixtec in turn, was interred with some of his servants and with a truly extraordinary offering composed of objects made of gold, tecali (a very white, translucent marble), rock crystal, jade, silver, copper, obsidian, sea shells, bones worked in the form of jaguars and other animals, etc.

Although gold pieces which point to the existence of precious metal work in Central America had already appeared in some private collections among them those of the American Indian Museum and the Smithsonian Institute (both located in the United States), it was the find of tomb seven that allowed the real



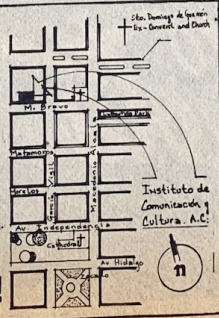
importance of that work in the pre-Columbian era to be evaluated. Although works in gold had turned up earlier in explorations of other tombs, the treasure discovered in number 7 continues to provide the most examples of precious metalwork for study. We now know that in pre-hispanic times, gold and silver were worked in two basic ways: through lamination, which results in thin sheets with a hammered, embossed look; and by the technique of "lost wax" which

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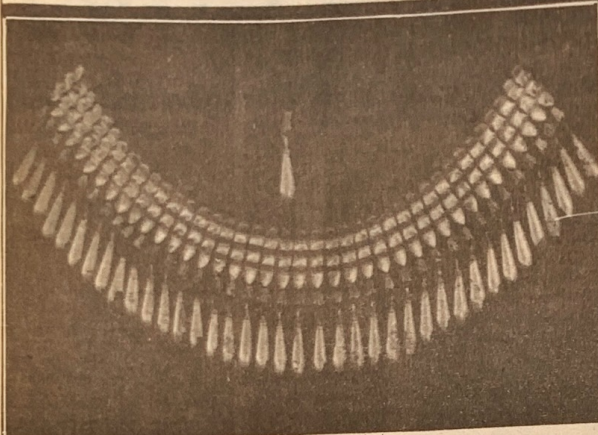
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PRECIOUS ...



involves making molds of baked clay hardened with carbon. The form of the piece is obtained by putting hot wax inside the mold, so that later molten gold can penetrate and display the wax, which either runs out or volatilizes.

This leaves the piece integrated by fusion (given that no solder has been used).

At the dawning of the colonial era, people who knew how to work precious metals were to be found in Oaxaca. We know that for regional art, the colonial centuries in Oaxaca meant the introduction of new elements and concepts. This led to the creation of what we might call schools, in architecture as well as in sculpture. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that there was a Oaxacan school of silver and gold working.

This can be seen by the fact that the jewels which adorn various religious images throughout the area are not like the styles found in other regions of the country. Furthermore, the jewels that the women of Oaxaca have worn during the last two centuries are different from other jewelry in the country and distinct from the Spanish as well. The gold and silver smiths who presently live in Oaxaca remember the names of the masters who worked at the end of the last century, among the master mentioned are Don Urbano (maker of chalices, crowns and incense burners, which he donated

to various churches in the state) Don Agustin Moreno, (maker of family jewels and engraved works) and Nahum Munoz Cano, Manuel Velasco and Eduardo Robles.

Important artisans of this century in Oaxaca have been don Carlos Ortiz (creator of the crown of the Virgin of Solitude and of the first reproductions of the jewels from Tomb number 7 in Monte Alban, and several of his apprentices. Outstanding among these have been his brothers Jose Ortiz, Fausto Vargas, Saul Pasos, Jorge Cortez and brothers, Francisco and Alfonso Vargas, most of whom, regrettably, are deceased.

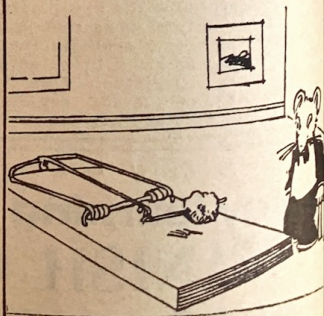
Since shortly before the decade of the 20's, there have been commercial establishments of silversmith families in Oaxaca. After the 30s, Santo Tomas jewelers, owned by Mrs. Catalina Cortes de Rueda, was established; her sons and grandchildren run the family business on the 8th St. of Hidalgo. Mrs. Rosa Quevedo de Calvo founded her jewelry shop which is located on Valdivieso St. just few steps from the Zocalo. Many more have been established more recently, but the increase in prices for raw material-gold silver and precious stones- has made this type of work less and less affordable, and many jewelers have had to go out of business. That makes the work of the establishment Oro de Monte Alban that much more important. It is the sole

surviving business that still uses the traditional techniques. Its reproductions are made under the authority of the National Institute of Anthropology and history. Its shops are located on the St. Adolfo C. Gurrion on Macedonio Alcala St. at 407- shop #15 and they also have other two in Puerto Escondido and Huatulco.

One of the last survivors of the previous generation, Mr. Saul Pasos student and son in law of Carlos Ortiz has reproduced many times the jewels of Monte Alban, for presentation to Queen Elizabeth II of England Queen Juliana of Holland Mrs. Kennedy, Mrs. Gandhi, he has produced many of his own designs which are in various private collections; regrettably, vision loss has kept him from continuing his activities. After a visit to the jewelry shops of Oaxaca you will undoubtedly agree, this beautiful tradition should be preserved.

WHY OAXACA ? TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE

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REALLY?

(OF...I don't think Edward T. Hall ever visited Oaxaca:
NOTES FROM A FELLOW TOURIST)

Some years ago, Edward T. Hall wrote The Silent Language, a fascinating book about the unspoken (and generally unconscious) cultural assumptions that various societies make about what's real and what's true and what's good and what's not. For instance, in some countries, it's considered not only bad form, but a nasty threat to look someone directly in the eye. If you're from a culture that assumes it's rude NOT to look into someone's eyes when speaking to them, you'd be receiving strange and hostile reactions and you might not be able to figure out why.

In other societies, merely touching a stranger is considered taboo. Hall's point was that not only beauty, but faux pas of considerable consequence are in the mind of the beholder.

Hall also writes about the cultural conceptual differences inherent in certain languages. Not so many years ago, U.S. diplomats apparently had no end of problems in their attempts to convince one Middle Eastern power that the U.S. desired to "compromise" with them. The Middle Eastern diplomats were outraged, since, to them, the verb "to compromise" meant "to take advantage of" (as in the sentence: "His status as an honorable man was severely compromised."). No one told the U.S. diplomats until it was too late. No one had told them because no one (except Edward T. Hall and a very few other people) knew.

These sorts of cultural assumptions are unspoken rules... behaviors taken for granted... and every culture has them. Like it or not, they're there.

If you're a tourist, you brought yours to Oaxaca with you. PLUS, you brought your own PERSONAL assumptions about what's what. One of the biggest pieces of baggage an individual carries is his collection of personal assumptions about himself; his "image" of who he is and who he's not.

For the most part, it's one's own assumptions about oneself that are tested when traveling. At home, one may lead a relatively stable existence. It's when one leaves the familiar nest that one's limitations (or lack of them) arise like a phoenix (or a reluctant ostrich, depending on your point of view) from the ashes of conventionality.

For an in-depth look into your own and other cultural assumptions Hall's book is highly recommended.

In the meantime, here are a few lightweight personal assumption offerings which, though not comprehensive, may serve as interim help:

PERSONAL ASSUMPTION GUIDE TO OAXACA

(Not in order of importance, alphabetical, chronological, or in any other orderly kind of order)

1. DO ASSUME that your preconceptions will be challenged.
2. DO NOT ASSUME you will be the same person in Oaxaca that you are at home. Not only aspects of one's personality, but one's physical attributes can change as well. Many tourists claim, for example, that their hair, fingernails and toenails grow at a different rate.
3. When you ask a Oaxaqueño whether something or other is possible, DO NOT ASSUME that the response, "Todo es posible en el mundo," is a joke or a metaphor, or even an over-generalization. Everything IS possible here and if you don't believe it, you haven't been here long enough. Return to "Go" and reread Carlos Castenada.
4. DO NOT ASSUME that you aren't the sort of person who couldn't possibly dance in the streets with a witch or a devil (especially in October).
5. ...or get stranded and spend the night at the Pemex refinery with the night watchman...
6. ...or get yourself set on fire by an errant firework...
7. ...or fall out your hotel window.
8. DO NOT ASSUME that just because: "turismo" means "tourism", "minuto" means "minute", & "curioso" means "curious", that "compromiso" means "compromise". It doesn't... and this sort of extrapolation can be hazardous. If you say, "¿Quiere un compromiso?", you will be asking the listener if he or she wants an obligation or engagement (including the matrimonial variety). This kind of exchange has, as you might imagine, a wide variety of potentially interesting consequences.
9. a) Do assume that oaxaqueños are some of the friendliest and most generous people in the world.
b) Even the so-called "zocalo boys" and their female counter parts try to be generous in their own way. DO NOT ASSUME these charmerd will always be generous in a manner that would in any way please your mother.
c DO NOT ASSUME anyone will contact your mother.
10. DO ASSUME that you very possibly ARE just the sort of person who might find it necessary to walk 4 miles back to Oaxaca from the salsa place on the road to Mitla, at 2 o'clock in the morning.
11. DO ASSUME that one can live through, learn from, and even enjoy (especially in retrospect) experiences like the ones listed above.
12. DO NOT ASSUME that Edward T. Hall, or anyone else, has the answers.

That's what you're here for... to discover them yourself.



Todo es posible en Oaxaca.

- S. Johns



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