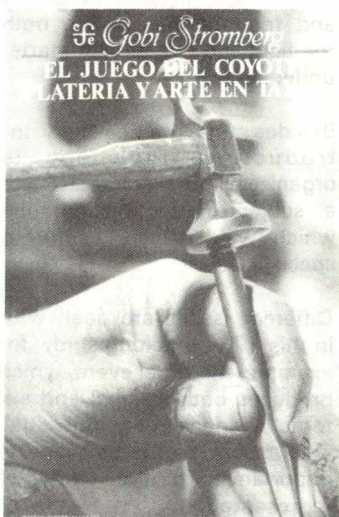


## For Whom Does Silver Shine?

**The Coyote's Game: Silverworks and Art in Mexico** Gobi Stromberg Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986.

Gobi Stromberg's rigor and insight shine through in her new book, *The Coyote's Game: Silverworks and Art in Mexico (El Juego del Coyote. Platería y Arte en México)*, making it of



interest for both the amateur and the initiated on the subject. Her contribution is to examine a commercial phenomenon—artisan production in Taxco—within an anthropological framework. She delves into the evolution of an industry that was quite marginal 50 years ago, but now employs some ten thousand silversmiths, who transform close to four tons of silver every month into jewelry and other objects.

As the 1930s drew to a close, the town of Taxco had fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. Mining was virtually a lost tradition, and silverworks were an insignificant factor in the local economy. The Mexican Revolution, the decay of the old economic and social order and the development of new structures, more appropriate to the industrialized society that was emerging from those changes all contributed to the destruction of the town's traditional crafts production. Even in the best of times, however, silversmithing had been limited to

\*In Mexico the term "coyote" refers to middle-men or scalpers, who monopolize the marketing of a given item, buying cheap and selling high.

the production of religious pieces for churches and the adornments used on the leather goods and clothing associated with cattle ranching.

Within this context, the efforts of a few "pioneer's" in the field and the fortunate discovery of new veins of silver, served as the basis for the development of an industry which is now the driving-force for a city of 60,000. Thus, a "tradition", aimed at reaching a broad and diverse market, was born and grew at a dizzying pace, within a society with deeply rooted cultural characteristics. "It was soon necessary to undertake the search for esthetic elements and to develop a style that would be unequivocally *taxqueño*. In order to do that, prehispanic popular art motifs were incorporated, as well as esthetic concepts from both Mexican and international contemporary art," explains Ms. Stromberg in her book.

Thus, the case of Taxco's silver industry poses a series of problems from an anthropological point of view, which range from the transformation of social structures, relationships, kinship, etc. in a community that grew from 2,000 inhabitants to several tens of thousands in a very short period of time, to a variety of issues related to the question of what is "popular" in Mexican society, to the changes in an artisan-type activity that has seen its market, horizons and objectives expand so dramatically.

According to the author's prologue, research for the book was actually begun in 1972 and originally presented as a doctoral dissertation for the anthropology department at the University of California at Berkeley in 1976. The material was brought up-to-date during a second period of field research in 1979. The study had two objectives: to analyze the factors that influence artisan production processes and to develop a protocol for research on artisanry.

In order to determine the effects of the market on the popular art studied, the author used the following questions as the starting point for her investigation:

1. What are the dynamics of the relationship between the organization of production and commerce? What are the role

## odds and ends

and function of design and innovation in this context?

2. What conditions encourage the rise of specific forms of marketing, and what factors determine the ways in which intermediaries and marketers operate?

3. In what way are consumer tastes communicated to the artisan and how are they manifested in production?

4. What is the role of intermediaries and wholesalers in this process? To what degree do they really transmit consumer tastes, or to what degree are their requests for certain kinds of production modified by priorities based on price and volume?

5. What role does the silversmith play in the process; is he an innovator or a mass producer?

6. What are the conditions that encourage or inhibit the growth and expansion of artisan industries?

The book has an Introduction and five chapters that deal with the following: I. The Origins of Silversmithing in Taxco; II. The Transformation of Production and the Family Workshop; III. The Commercial Market and Scalpers; IV. Market vs. Art: Creativity and Market Demands; V. Artisan Policy: Development Economy or Hangman's Trap? Thus, Stromberg successively analyzes the rise of large workshops, changes in the relations of production, repercussions on the family and women's situation, the growing importance of marketing and financial factors on artisan-type production, the influence of a market that reaches beyond local limits and the importance of tourism, technical and esthetic aspects, new forms of collective organization related to the experienced changes and the fluctuating relationship of artisans to official institutions.

A section of Conclusions, a Methodological Appendix with the main questionnaire used in the study and the responses obtained, a Bibliography, a set of sixteen photos illustrating different aspects of silverwork production and two maps showing the location of Taxco and nearby villages in the state of Guerrero complete the book.

Written with reason and passion for Taxco's silver work, the book provides a detailed examination of the diverse conditions that influence the quality

of silver products, and of the changes in those conditions through time, in relation to distinct economic, political and cultural moments in Mexican history.

The author, Gobi Stromberg-Pellizi, resides in Mexico.★

**Pedro Sondereguer**