



The Silver Center Of Zacatecas

Master craftsmanship is back in all its glory among the teachers, apprentices and students of the Silver Center of Zacatecas. Original, exclusive designs with local animal and plant motifs, as well as typical Zacatecas wrought-iron products and facades, are the trademarks of a school that is reviving the tradition of training first class craftsmen, specialists in jewelry making and silversmithing.



The Silver Center

A LITTLE HISTORY

The school occupies the Bernárdez ore-processing ex-hacienda in the eastern part of the city of Zacatecas. Captain Ignacio de Bernárdez, a prominent miner in the early eighteenth century, had the building constructed at the mouth of the shaft of the La Cantera mine to process silver ore. The outdoor amalgamation process used required water to



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separate out the metal, so a dam and a series of canals were also built to store and transport the water.

Bernárdez' nephew, a very pious Catholic, had a church built on the spot, with an altar covered in gold. Later, the property fell into the hands of an ambitious Spaniard named Zarachago, who, convinced there was a treasure buried in the walls, had the building destroyed and the altar melted down for the gold. The building, a ruin no longer used for its original purpose, was then forgotten for many decades.

It was not until 1981 that the state government began to remodel it. Only two columns on one end of the building survived, and they were used as the guide for reconstruction. In 1988, the building was loaned to the Silver Miners Foundation to house what is now the Silver Center.

A PROJECT WITH A FUTURE

Zacatecas' first mine was discovered in 1546. Shortly thereafter, the area's great

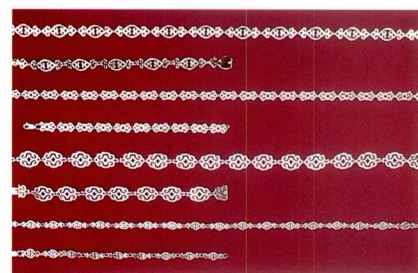
underground riches would attract large numbers of people and begin to produce vast earnings for the Spanish Crown. Only three years later, 34 mining companies were already operating in the city and their owners became "the silver aristocracy."

A swift jump in the population, enormous riches and the establishment of important religious orders who did widespread missionary work and accumulated many books in their convent libraries, helped make the city—dubbed "The Civilizer of the North"—the second most important in New Spain.¹



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Several centuries later, Zacatecas continues to be Mexico's foremost silver producer and some of its mines are among the world's most productive, part of why the investment in the Silver Center was decided on. The school has three main objectives: 1) to create jobs in a region that is today one of the main starting points for migrants to the United States; 2) to offer training in a skill rapidly being lost; and 3) to make use of raw materials abundantly available locally.

The Silver Center opened with an initial investment of nearly U.S.\$1 million from a private foundation and the state government.² The foundation was created to monitor the center's operations and raise funds for it until it can be economically self-sufficient.

Students with interest, creativity and ability in metal working are recruited for training. After finishing their studies, they are encouraged to open their own workshops to provide work for family members or other craftsmen. This at the same time helps rekindle the silversmith tradition with all the quality and value of small-scale production.

The pilot project was to train five smiths with year-long scholarships to work in the Mexico City Tane silver workshops. These five then became the center's teaching staff. The 20 artisans of the school's 1990 first graduating class along with the 70 more that make up for the following generations have already managed to set up 15 workshops throughout the state. Increasingly well known, the Silver Center now has students from other parts of Mexico, as well as several other Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Two items of note about the center: Since it is a non-profit institution, the only

entrance requirements are ability and creativity, regardless of ability to pay. Secondly, it has continuously focused on experimenting with ways for the students to really take full advantage of their training.

Initially, the center accepted students completely tuition-free, provided them with their tools and made a gift of the tools at the end of the course. However,



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since many ended up doing something else for a living and selling their tools, a symbolic tuition fee is now charged and the students provide their own tools.

Today the center has completely equipped jewelry and silversmith workshops where the students learn everything from wax casting to final polishing techniques. The jewelry-making course is 15 months long and the more complex silversmith course lasts 24 months. The two workshops cannot be taken simultaneously.

The center has no subsidies and supports itself by selling the items the students make. Producing articles with strict quality control is a permanent educational goal, and therefore no defective item of any kind is ever put up for sale. This guarantees the buyer quality wares, not only because they are exclusive, original designs, but also because they have undergone rigorous quality control inspections, unlike other places in Mexico where silver goods are produced in large quantities.

The Silver Center markets its stock exclusively at its own stores located at the school itself, in the city of Zacatecas and at the local airport. On your next visit to Zacatecas, don't miss the Silver Center. You may well contribute to its support by buying one of its original creations. We're sure you won't be sorry. **MM**

Elsie Montiel
Managing Editor

NOTES

¹ Manuel González Ramírez, "450 años de Zacatecas," *Artes de México* no. 34 (1996), pp. 18-19.

² The foundation includes the following institutions: the Zacatecas state government, Gutsa Construcciones, Industrias Peñoles, Minera Real de Angeles, Tane Orfebres, Probrusa and the Friends of Zacatecas Association.