# Traditions Of Guatemala 3

Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala
Centro de Estudios Folklóricos Magazine

UNIVERSIDAD DE SAN CARLOS DE GUATEMALA
**CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS FOLKLÓRICOS**

**TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA**

# 3

Editorial Universitaria
Guatemala, Central America
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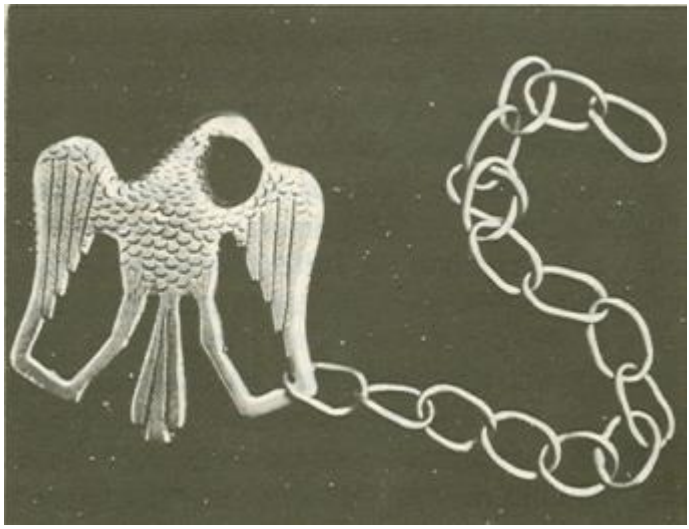
# ESSAYS



KEYCHAIN (POPULAR SILVERWARE)

## REGARDING POPULAR SILVERSMITHING IN GUATEMALA

*Guillermo Fortín Gularte*

Considered either as a craft or as a "minor" art, Guatemalan silversmithing is comparable, due to its high artistic quality, to wood sculpture or colonial religious imagery. This is recognized by numerous foreign scholars.[1]

However, the existing bibliographic sources for the study of Guatemalan silversmithing are unfortunately scarce.[2]

1 Diego Angulo Iñiguez, Frontales de plata de Guatemala; Manuel Romero de Terreros, Las artes industriales de la Nueva España; and Laurence Anderson, The Art of Silversmith in Mexico. México: Editorial Porrúa, 1956.

2 See Héctor Humberto Samayoa Guevara, Los gremios de artesanos en la ciudad de Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1962, 410 pp. Other references mainly directed to mining and numismatics can be found in Ignacio Solís Memorias de la Casa de la Moneda de Guatemala y del desarrollo económico del país (manuscrito inédito, 1897)

## Colonial Silversmithing

Unlike in the pre-Hispanic era, the extractive industry of silver gained considerable importance during the colonial period. By the 16th century, silver was being processed in some mines in the Cuchumatanes using the "chimbo" furnace, which appeared to be quite rudimentary. During this time, the silver deposits of Pichiquil, located between Nebaj and Chajul in the department of Quiché, were also exploited. Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, deposits in Concepción Las Minas, in the department of Chiquimula, were developed. (Subsequently, during the republican period, the mines of Torlón in Huehuetenango produced the material used to mint the coin created by Rafael Carrera [3]).

Shortly after the discovery of America, around 1504, the Spanish crown authorized discoverers and conquerors to benefit from mining operations, provided they paid fees such as the "royal fifth," the "tithe," or occasionally the "twentieth." This policy prompted many silversmiths to travel to America as part of the first expeditions. The passenger lists to the Indies confirm this, although it is known that these silversmiths were never Spain's most skilled artisans. Over time, the silversmiths established in America formed their own guilds.

It is known that the regulations governing silversmithing in Guatemala originated from the Mexican ordinances of 1524 and 1527. These ordinances set rules for examining candidates aspiring to the title of master silversmith, conducting inspections of silversmithing workshops aimed at uncovering and reporting counterfeiting and tax fraud, and formalizing the techniques and procedures used to mark silver. However, it was not until 1683 that the guild organization of silversmiths in New Spain was officially regulated, and these ordinances appear to have had significant influence in Guatemala.

The municipal ordinances of Guatemala City, recorded in the Libro Viejo of the city council, mention silversmithing. However, specific ordinances to regulate this aspect of production emerged

3 Guatemalan politician who was president of the country between 1839 and 1865.

much later, on March 27, 1743, during the administration of Captain General Don Tomás de Rivera y Santa Cruz.

Since these latest provisions lacked the approval of the Guatemalan Audience, their enforcement was authorized on November 8, 1771. On October 12, 1776, in accordance with the royal decree issued in San Ildefonso, they were ratified by His Majesty.

In various regions of the kingdom, some interest in silversmithing work arose. This was the case in Antigua Guatemala, where the formation of a guild of silversmiths and tinworkers was requested (1779); in Chiapas, where a similar request was made (1798); and in Quetzaltenango, where authorization for exams for tinsmiths was sought (1801).

San Eloy was designated the patron saint of the silversmiths' guild by virtue of the first ordinance issued. Subsequently, a confraternity was established in his honor, and positions such as overseer, stewards, and deputies were created for its service. The holders of these positions were elected and served terms of one or two years.

The responsibilities of these officials included religious duties dedicated to the patron saint, as well as administrative ones: inspecting shops, workshops, or the workspaces of silversmiths and tinworkers.

The guild's overseer was generally the chief assayer of the Royal Mint. Inspectors, in turn, examined journeymen and apprentices who were advancing to master status.

To learn the art of silversmithing, the master and the apprentice appeared before a notary to formalize an agreement whereby the master would take on the apprentice for a set period. This agreement considered the apprentice's skill and dedication more than the duration of training.

After completing the apprenticeship, the apprentice underwent an examination before the inspectors and was awarded the title of journeyman. Before opening their workshop, they were subjected to another exam and finally received the title of master.

Here is a list of the most notable silversmith masters:

1. Agustín de Aguilar (1699)
2. Sebastián de Aba (1719)
3. Bernardo de Andino (1705)
4. José María Argueta (1892)
5. Manuel Antonio Ávila
6. Baltasar de Bosarraez (1604) —Custodian of Santo Domingo—
7. Antonio de Castro (1732)
8. Jerónimo Cervantes (1640)
9. Juan de Coruña
10. Juan Ventura Chavarría
11. Manuel de Díaz
12. Pedro Esteban
13. José de Estrada (1706)
14. Antonio Fernández de Figueroa
15. Antonio de Gálvez
16. Francisco Gaytán
17. Juan González
18. Salvador Hernández
19. Pedro Hernández
20. Cornelio Lara (1778)
21. Simón Lázaro (1604)
22. Cristóbal Martín Lobato (1672)
23. Jerónimo de Lucio
24. Felipe Maldonado
25. Francisco Mancano de Galarzo (1620)
26. Ramón María
27. Diego de Mendoza

## The Popular Aspect of Guatemalan Silversmithing

It is important to note that despite the strict royal ordinances that prohibited people of "color" from engaging in the noble art of silversmithing, both Indigenous people and mestizos were able to establish workshops and public studios. [4]

This situation gave rise to a type of silversmithing distinct from the "classical" or "refined" style, no longer inspired by European traditions—especially Spanish ones—but rather characterized by a distinctly popular flavor. This category of silversmithing includes items such as alms collection plates, chachales (necklaces made of pearls and coins), confraternity insignias, ceremonial and common rings, and many other objects that were neither taxed under the "royal fifth" nor subject to the control of official markers.

The Baroque style, which enabled personal freedom in all fields of the plastic arts, extended its influence to both "refined" and popular silversmithing. Thus, despite the strict oversight later exercised by the drawing academy and the neoclassical style over these arts, the vigor of tradition endured.

Within the context of colonial arts, silversmithing also had a marked religious character and was therefore considered "refined" or "scholarly." However, many representative pieces of silversmithing from this period, crafted by renowned artists, reveal traces of popular influences.

Religious silversmithing works include altars, altar steps, frontals, tabernacle doors, sacred vessels, frames, jewelry, images, and decorative articles for these images. Likewise, it encompasses

3 In the third ordinance, it is stated: "That no one may set up a workshop unless they are Spanish and meet the qualifications required for such a trusted profession; and for now, those who have shops are permitted to appeal to this superior government within ten days to obtain the necessary licenses or permits, as anyone who fails to comply within this period will have their shop closed and will not be allowed to set up a workshop..." In the decree that amended it, there is a clear acknowledgment of the artistic skill of the popular sectors: "That it be strictly observed, limiting the third ordinance in the part excluding the faculty of setting up workshops to Indigenous people, mestizos, and mulattos (of whose class are almost all the most skilled in the guild)."

paraliturgical objects, processional items, and votive offerings or miracles,

In the central highlands of Guatemala such as Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango, and Totonicapán, it is still possible to admire altars made by professional silversmiths that nevertheless display popular influences. Perhaps due to the fact that Indigenous populations predominate in this region of the country, images made entirely or partially of silver are abundant in churches and confraternity spaces.

It is worth noting, regarding these images, that many of them are very old and were later covered by the silversmith with smooth or engraved silver sheets. Alternatively, some figures are completely made of silver, requiring no collaboration with a sculptor for their creation.

On the other hand, the rich variety of processional insignias enriches popular silversmithing: crucifixes, confraternity banners, staffs for banners and canopies, and gonfalons. These items reflect the Indigenous people's appreciation for processions while also serving as eloquent testimonies to the fusion of pagan worship and Catholic faith evident in the religious practices of Guatemalan Indigenous communities.

Perhaps the most popular expressions of this religious silversmithing are the ex-votos or miracles, whose shapes allow for the following classification: a) anthropomorphic, which can be total (when the figure is complete) and partial (a hand, an arm, a leg); b) zoomorphic (the most well-known are bulls, cows, birds, horses, the grasshopper or locust—perhaps made to thank for successes in the fight against pests and the protection of crops); and c) objects (prisons with the prisoner inside, huts, sickbeds, fruits—especially corn cobs—and others). Among these varied objects, rectangular plaques with small texts engraved on their surface and heart-shaped plaques should also be mentioned. All of these pieces are found in pilgrimage sanctuaries (Esquipulas, San Felipe), alongside the revered images within them

There are also, among the forms of Guatemalan silversmithing, nativity figurines: the complete nativity scene (very rare), birds, and other animals, angels, and shepherds.

Charms and amulets, some with undoubted magical content and others as ornamental complements for bracelets, leontines, and chachales, also help to diversify traditional silversmithing.

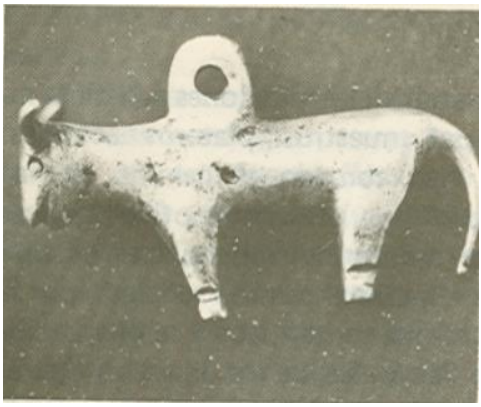
**Domestic Use Pieces**

Colonial silversmithing was very prolific in this area: dishware, cabinets, washbasins, chamber pots, pots, chocolate pots, water heaters; accessories and trimmings for images, sheets, tabernacles, altars, mirrors, and dressers; locks, nails for chapines, jewelry, necklaces, belts, bracelets, brooches, chokers, chains, covers, bands, buttons, rings, etc., all came from the hands of the silversmiths of that time.

For their part, with equal creative ability, popular silversmiths have produced numerous domestic-use pieces.

**Final Comment**

It is unfortunate that such an important wealth of artistic concepts is not intelligently utilized by our current silversmiths. Many of them, mistakenly, have taken the path of "souvenirs" or "Guatemala's curiosities," using "remade" or poorly made Mayan motifs, then mounting them on pieces of classic Western style. Thus, the path marked by tradition is abandoned; they turn their backs on authentic patterns and forget the aesthetic attributes of the Sacapulas crucifixes, the charms with zoomorphic figures, and the beautiful pieces that characterize the silversmithing of Cobán.



**Ex-voto (popular silversmithing)**
Photograph: Mauro Calanchina

**Ex-voto (popular silversmithing)**
Photograph: Mauro Calanchina

**Necklace from Sacapulas, El Quiché (popular silversmithing)**
Photograph: María A. Ramírez

**Ex-voto (popular silversmithing)**
Photograph: Mauro Calanchina

**Saint Joseph and Silver Ex-Votos**
**(Popular silversmithing)**
Photograph: María A. Ramírez

**Candleholder**
**Colonial non-popular silversmithing**
**(cultured)**
Photograph: María A. Ramírez

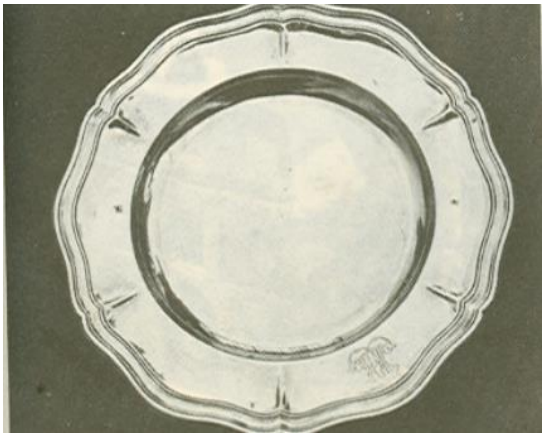


**Plate**
**Colonial non-popular silversmithing**
**(cultured)**
Photograph: Mauro Calanchina

**Gourd and Silver Stand**
**Colonial non-popular silversmithing**
**(cultured)**
Photograph: María A. Ramírez

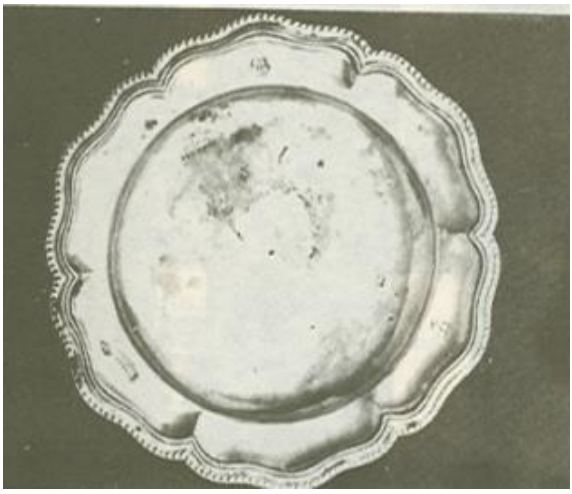


**Plate (Popular Silversmithing)**
Photograph: Mauro Calanchina

**Ex-voto (popular silversmithing)**
Photograph: María A. Ramírez

**Necklace (Popular silversmithing)**
Photograph: María A. Ramírez

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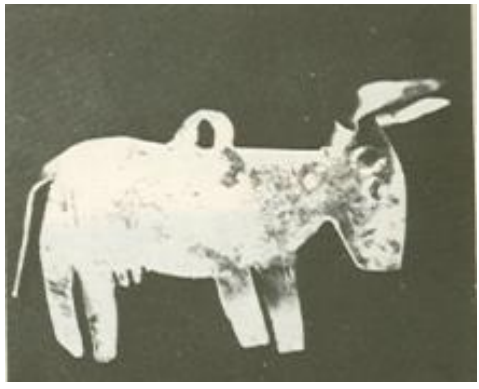

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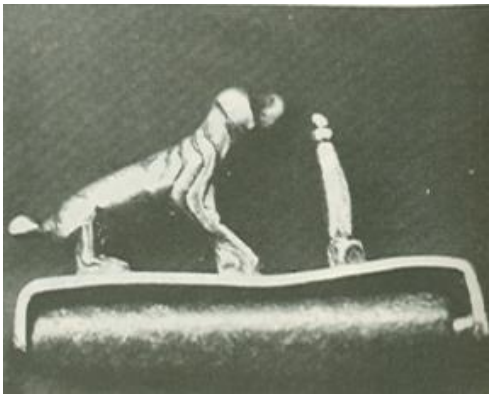

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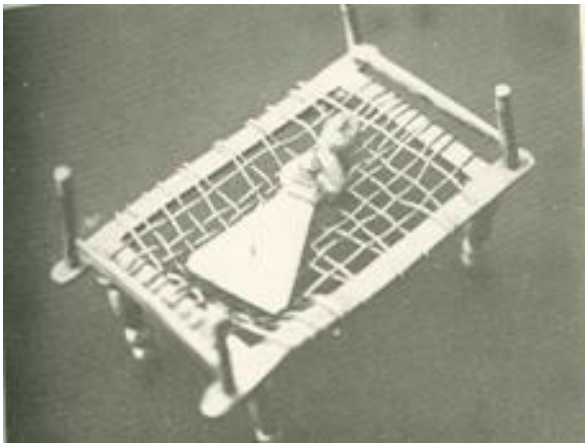

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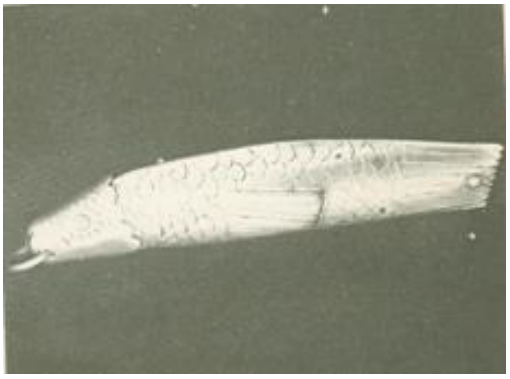

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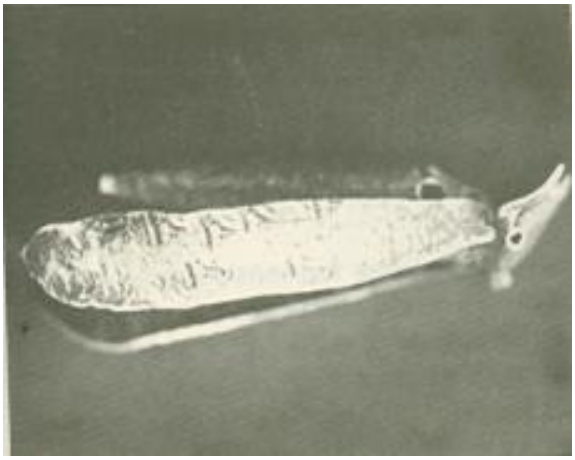

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