Contributor: Penny Morrill

**Spratling, William**

Born: Sonyea, New York, September 22, 1900; Died: Taxco el Viejo, Guerrero, Mexico, August 7, 1967

North American architect, artist, and author William Spratling left an active artists' community in New Orleans' French Quarter in 1928 to join a circle of intellectuals in Mexico City. Spratling’s desire to stay in Mexico coupled with the cultural and economic changes that were taking place as a result of the Mexican 1910 revolution led Spratling to establish a small silver workshop in Taxco. From his perspective, this small mountain town had been producing silver for hundreds of years without benefiting its own people. This tiny workshop, the Taller de Las Delicias, in which craftsmen produced silver jewelry and decorative objects, tinware, and woven textiles, rapidly developed into a large-scale handwrought industry. Spratling’s success was dependent on five key ingredients: the presence of a designer/director; the workshop setting in which advancement was based on accomplishment; the use of traditional materials that were locally available; designs based on pre-Columbian art and contemporary folk crafts; and the development of a market for Mexican silver. His lasting contributions are his powerful works in silver, his donation of hundreds of pre-Columbian objects to museums in Mexico, and the training of silversmiths and *maestros*, many of whom established their own workshops based on his model.

Born in Sonyea, New York, Spratling was the son of epileptologist, William P. Spratling. He studied architecture at Auburn University, Alabama and, in 1921, became an instructor in Tulane University’s School of Architecture. He was active in the Arts and Crafts Club and taught at the New Orleans Art School. In 1926, William Faulkner and Spratling collaborated on *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles*, a series of caricatures depicting the artists and writers in the French Quarter. Spratling illustrated Natalie Scott’s *Old Plantation Houses in Louisiana* in 1927. The balanced interaction between illustration and text was characteristic of Spratling’s published work.

During the summers of 1926-1928, Spratling lectured on colonial architecture at the National University of Mexico’s summer school. He resigned his teaching position at Tulane in 1928 to write about the villagers of Taxco. The result, *Little Mexico* (1932), is considered his most significant literary work.

Spratling established the Taller de Las Delicias in 1931 when he hired Artemio Navarrete, a goldsmith, to train a small group of young men. Spratling developed a hierarchy of ability within the workshop, from the apprentices to the *maestros* who supervised the work of groups of silversmiths. These talented *maestros* also shared in a creative dialogue with Spratling, transforming his design drawings into prototypes used by the silversmiths to produce jewelry and decorative objects.

Beyond the workshop, the men who learned to speak English had direct contact with the clients in the store. Those who had an inclination for business were in the front office. Thus, Las Delicias developed into an interdependent community in which young men of modest means with rudimentary educations could be trained and excel. Among the silversmiths who established successful workshops were Héctor Aguilar, Antonio Castillo, Reveriano Castillo, Salvador Terán, and Antonio Pineda.

Spratling's use of an aesthetic vocabulary based on pre-Columbian art can be compared to the murals of **Diego Rivera**, in that both artists were involved in the creation of a new cultural identity for Mexico. Spratling’s early work can be characterized as inspired expressions in silver, resembling the power of the reliefs on the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Xochicalco or the pre-Columbian clay stamps he collected. These designs incorporate deeply carved sinuous lines with strong light and shadow contrasts. The inspiration from pre-Columbian models could be direct, as in the repoussé jaguar brooch, based on a painted gourd bowl in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, or indirect, like the silver pitcher with the eagle handle in carved wood. The forms that evolved in silver at Las Delicias were admired by visitors who purchased the objects as talismans of a culture they viewed as exotic.

Spratling expanded into a wholesale business, employing over 500 artisans to meet the demand in the United States for luxury goods during World War II. His silver designs sold through the Montgomery Ward catalog and in exclusive shops like Neiman Marcus.

Spratling had received considerable notoriety as a result of his development of what many considered a model handwrought industry. In 1945, Spratling was asked by Alaska’s Territorial Governor Ernest Gruening, and the Director of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board René d’Harnoncourt to replicate his success in Alaska. In 1948, Alaskan World War II veterans were sent to Taxco for instruction in silversmithing. Spratling produced 200 prototypes as future inspiration for the Alaskans. Congress did not allocate funds and the project was not implemented.

Spratling’s later work is more linear and refined and reveals inspiration from the Alaska experience. The emphasis is on abstraction of form combined with spiraling movement, as in the croissant necklace or the entwined double serpent pendants. In the 1960s, Spratling began producing jewelry in gold with pre-Columbian stones. Each piece is unique, with the ancient stone as a central feature.

Spratling died tragically in an automobile accident in 1967. He had amassed a large collection of pre-Columbian figurines from Remojadas, Veracruz, which he donated to the National Autonomous University of Mexico’s museum in 1959. Photographed by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, several of these works were published in *More Human Than Divine.* Spratling also donated hundreds of pre-Columbian objects to a museum in Taxco that today bears his name. For those who wish to see outstanding examples of Spratling’s design genius, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s permanent collection of modern Mexican silver is on exhibit in the museum’s Latin American wing.

**Sources and Further Reading:**

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