

COLLECTING VINTAGE
MEXICAN JEWELLERY

WITH
Heleen Bossi

An encounter with an enamel reptile necklace led this collector on a 12-year-long hunt for South American silver

popular themes and many of the pieces have a certain playfulness that I enjoy," she says.

She began buying up pieces until

eventually she'd collected more than 250 items – brooches, bracelets, earrings, necklaces, belt buckles and even tiny mirrors.

"I was very selective and tried to find signed pieces by well-known designers," she explains. "Vintage is usually 25 years and older and I tried to keep to that time frame. I also looked for hallmarked items with good craftsmanship, strong designs and beautiful combinations of stones. The more I learnt and the more I handled the pieces, the easier it became to identify Mexican silver and specific designers, even from a few metres away.

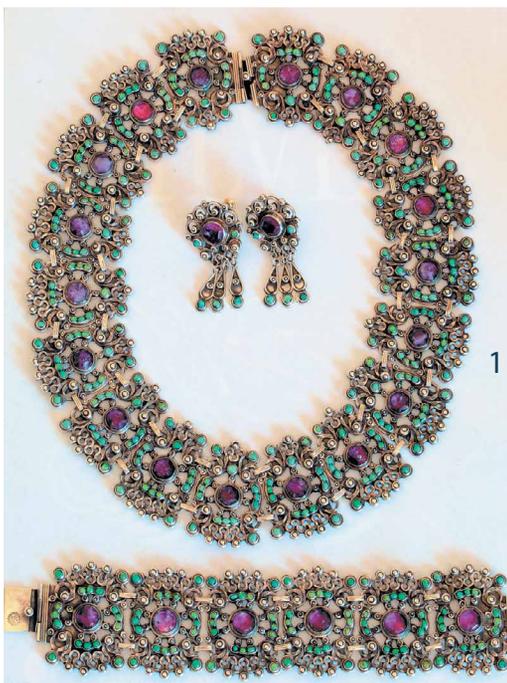
"As I set pieces aside, I became more and more convinced the collection was worth exhibiting, so I approached the Mexican Embassy here in South Africa who enthusiastically endorsed the idea and kindly agreed to open the exhibition at the Slee Gallery in Stellenbosch in September 2012," she says.

Last year she visited Mexico for the first time on a research tour, but sadly, few of the original silver workshops in Taxco remain. Then on a subsequent trip to London, she finally found another green snake necklace by Margo de Taxco – a hunt that took 12 years.

“Designed by Margot von Voorhies Carr (Margot de Taxco), the green enamelled silver, articulated snake necklace sold almost the minute I put it on display and I regretted selling it straightaway,” says Heleen Bossi of Paisley’s Antique Jewellery in the Cape. “I was determined to find another like it, so whenever I travelled, I looked out for one at antique fairs, auctions and in antique shops,” she adds, explaining the origins of her fascination with the silver jewellery produced in the Mexican village of Taxco from the 1930s to the 1970s.

Heleen’s passion for travel began when she worked as an air hostess for SAA. This in turn sparked her interest in buying vintage clothing and jewellery from stores around the globe, to the point that when she stopped working for the airline in 1985, she’d amassed enough stock to open her first shop.

As she continued her search for that elusive snake choker in far-flung places like Berlin, New York and Paris, she became more appreciative of the designs and the clever use of different stones in vintage Mexican jewellery. “Flowers, snakes, frogs, birds and fish were



A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEXICAN SILVER JEWELLERY FROM TAXCO

In 1930, American architect William Spratling went to Taxco, a small historic town between Mexico City and Acapulco, to research a book on colonial architecture. With silver mined in the vicinity and the skill of the townspeople, he started a silver jewellery industry there, eventually employing more than 400 craftsmen.

Designers such as Los Castillo, Margot von Voorhies Carr and Antonio Pineda played an important role in the local industry which was characterised by handcraftsmanship and bold designs.

Stylistically the jewellery is quite varied with styles ranging from the bold pre-Colombian to the more ornate Byzantine with small inlay work. There are even some strong Scandinavian influences to be found in some of the pieces. The peak period of manufacture was between 1930 and 1970.

TIPS FOR ASPIRING COLLECTORS

- Carefully check the condition of a piece before you decide to purchase it. Minor repairs are not a problem but it's sometimes difficult to find matching gemstones if these are chipped or broken.
- Buy a jewellery loupe (a special magnifier) that will enable you to examine pieces up close. Also invest in books which will help you identify pieces and provide useful background information.
- Most vintage silver Mexican jewellery is marked 'Mexico', 'Hecho en Mexico' or 'Made in Mexico'. Pieces from the town of Taxco usually have a mark that includes the word 'Taxco'.
- Various silver marks were used. The most common was silver, 900, 925, 970 or 980. In 1979, the new T-marking system was introduced so any piece with this mark would have been made after this date.
- Although pieces made by the well-known designers have become scarce and expensive, there are still some beautiful vintage pieces made by unknown makers to be found. Designers that have become highly regarded are William Spratling, Los Castillo, Margot von Voorhies Carr (Margot de Taxco), Matilda Poulat, Sigi and Antonio Pineda, Los Ballesteros, Enrique Ledesma and Fred Davis.

TIPS ON CARING FOR VINTAGE SILVER JEWELLERY

- Don't over clean your collection as it's important to retain some of the patina. Avoid any chemical cleaning liquids; use soapy water.
- Store your pieces separately to prevent them from scratching and damaging each other.
- Check the condition of your pieces regularly and have items restored by a jeweller who specialises in restoring antique jewellery.
- Keep photographs of your collection for insurance purposes. 

OPPOSITE PAGE FROM LEFT: ● Collector Heleen Bossi.

● The green enamelled snake choker designed by Margo von Voorhies Carr that started Heleen's collection.

THIS PAGE: 1. Silver, amethyst and turquoise necklace, bracelet and earrings in the Byzantine style by JGD, Mexico City c 1940.

2 and 3. Silver brooches each with a cabochon amethyst by William Spratling, Taxco, c 1940 – 1944. 4. Silver flower repoussé brooch with Mexican jade by Doval, pre-1947. 5. Silver and amethyst grape brooch c 1930 – 1940. 6. Byzantine-style crucifix designed by Morales. 7. Silver and amethyst flower brooch c 1930 – 1940. 8. Columbian-designed silver bracelet with round cabochon amethysts, c 1930 – 1940s.

SOURCE Paisley's Antique Jewellery 083 453 4360, paisleys@mweb.co.za or paisleys.mahoonas.co.za