



Mexican Jewelry

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with drawings by Mary L. Davis

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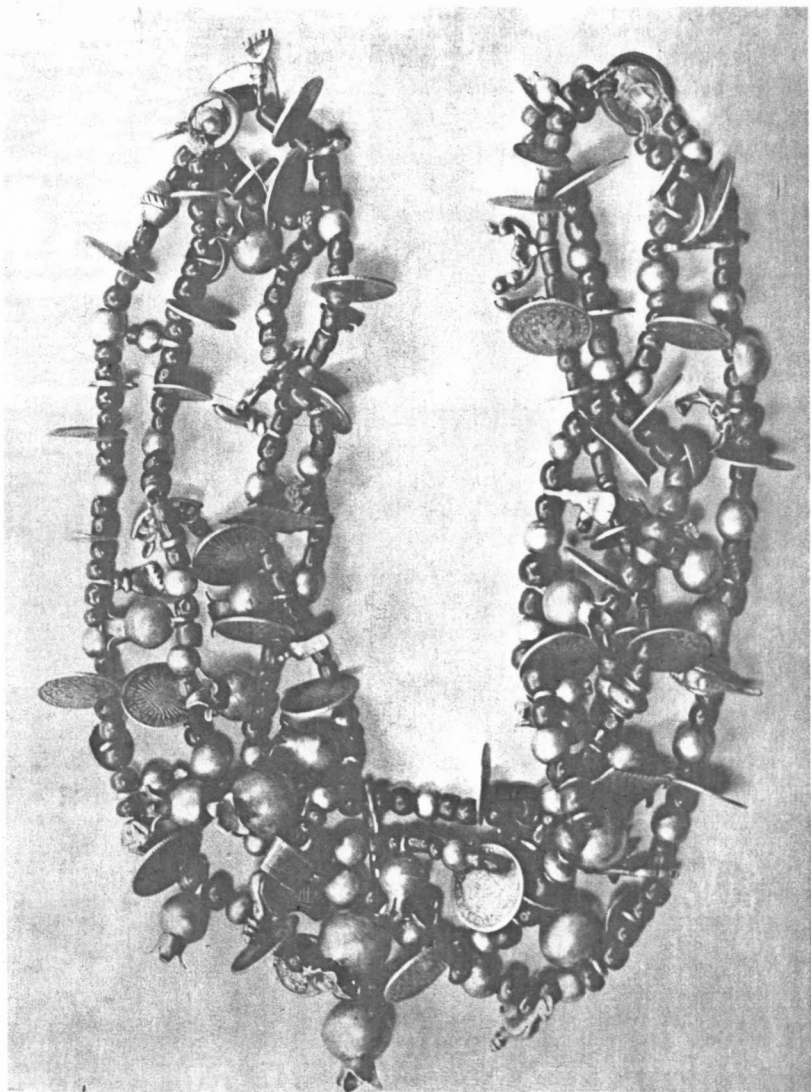
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Dutch articles in gift shops from New York to Hollywood. Certainly it is no longer a regional style. Navajo jewelry, so handsome in its own environment, now is worn in flimsy imitations all over the country.

In New England a clever village woman figures out some new crochet patterns. She does not take her lace to the cross-roads store for her neighbors to buy. No, she sells her patterns to a national women's magazine and within a month thousands of women, from Maine to Oregon, are busy with their crochet hooks turning out identical pieces.

In Mexico each town and village has its own crafts and its own style of decoration, influenced by the materials available and the traditions of the place. So, if you want the kind of necklace made in Pátzcuaro, for instance, you will have to go to Pátzcuaro and find the local silversmith because he is the only man in Mexico who makes that kind of a necklace. (An exception is The Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares which gathers the best work from all over the country for sale in its shop.)

This regional individuality has several causes. Some of the Indian villages were craft centers when the Spaniards found them and their crafts were fostered by the missionary fathers, the most notable of whom was Don Vasco de Quiroga, Bishop of Michoacán, who left an indelible mark on Mexican culture by establishing, in 1540, the first college on the American continent, the College of San Nicolás in Pátzcuaro, still a flourishing institution in Morelia, to which city it was later moved. Don Vasco recognized the artistic skills of the Indians and started schools to teach and improve the crafts, designating one craft for each village in his diocese: lacquer for Uruapan, the making of musical instruments for Paracho, copper working for Santa Clara, and a different kind of pottery for each village. In many of these villages the same crafts are being produced after more than four hundred years. Among the first subjects taught in the College of San Nicolás were painting and sculpture, the casting of bells and mak-



ANTONIO GARDUNO G.

PLATE 42. A necklace of old red trade beads, silver beads, cast ornaments, and old coins. The typical castings, the Guatemalan coins, and the use of trade beads all suggest that the necklace came from the Oaxaca mountains. It is in the Frederick Davis Collection.

trade at his father's workbench and, at the same bench following the same designs, he makes jewelry for the village women, while beside him sits his seven-year-old son tempering a little piece of silver, learning to be his father's helper. A village jeweler has a small group to please and his customers all want the same sort of things their mothers have worn with perhaps, occasionally, a little change. City craftsmen have a larger, more varied group to please and their work may not have the individual quality so often seen in the village product.

One is baffled in trying to trace the origin and development of some of the regional styles. A piece may look Moorish, Chinese, or Indian, but as far as the villagers know it has always been like that. It may have originated from a little detail in a church ornament or on a Spanish saddle, or from the lock on an old box which has long since disappeared.

Beads

Among the more isolated and primitive Indians practically the only ornaments are strands of dried berries and seed pods, small shells, or the cheap glass beads brought in by the traders. Even so a great variety of personal and regional taste exists. Often among the beads are little old coins, small silver figures of animals, birds, or people, flowers, religious symbols, bells or thimbles which look like bells, shells, buttons, anything that appeals to the wearer as ornamental or sentimental.

The Huicholes of the western mountains wear many strands of small beads twisted into fat ropes, their favorite colors being white and light sky blue. They are famous weavers, are

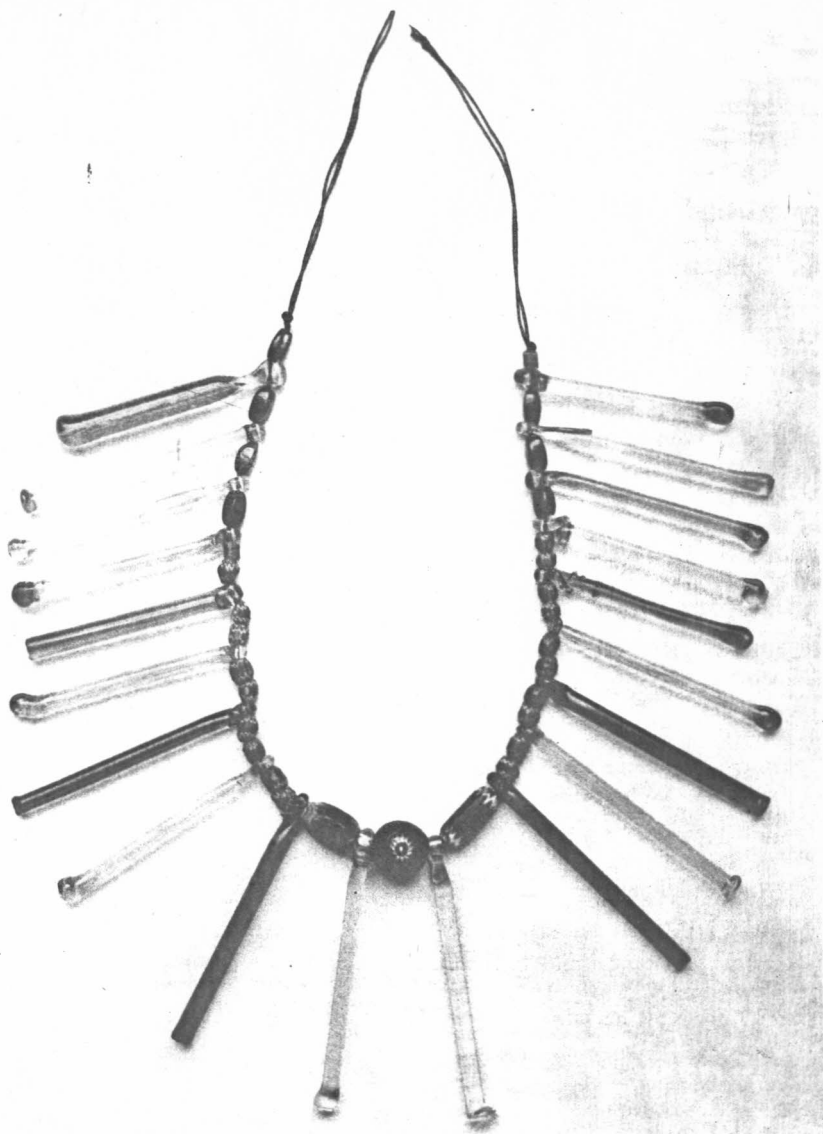
PLATE 45. The kind of necklaces worn by the country people. The two shorter ones are from near Puebla; the center one is a Tarascan Indian design from Michoacán.



very inventive, and have fine taste in color and design. They weave little squares of black (or dark blue) and white beads in lively geometric patterns which they make into earrings or necklaces by stringing them on yarn. For these woven squares they use the small beads from France. Their fanciest ornaments are for the men, small woven bags to hang around their belts, bracelets, anklets, and head-bands. The Tarascans of Michoacán, who used to wear red branch coral, now wear plastic imitation corals. The Zoques of Chiapas wear either coral or amber, often interspersed with gold beads. And everywhere one sees the little old coins on the bead necklaces, many of them several hundred years old, which must have been passed along as ornaments for generations.

Ever since the country was opened to foreigners, from Cortés to the present day, beads have been a standard article of trade. In remote parts of the country the Indians wear beads from Germany and Czechoslovakia, and the plastic, imitation coral has almost altogether replaced real coral. Many of the very old necklaces were made of red glass beads with clear or white glass centers, made in Italy in the 16th century and brought to Mexico by the early traders. These red beads as well as the "star beads" from Venice have been found from Guatemala to as far north as Oklahoma, but in Mexico they are seen mostly in the southern part of the country.

In San Pedro Quiatoni, a small town south of Oaxaca, the women wear unusual beads of 16th century glass, rods about two and a half inches long, looped at one end so that they can be strung with other beads to radiate from the neck. Quiatoni had no road until recently and the beads stayed in the town and were handed down for generations until the daughters of this generation began to travel to the larger towns and to sell the old necklaces, which are now occasionally seen in Oaxaca. The one on Plate 46 is of alternating green and white rods with a few other old Venetian beads between them.



BARBER

PLATE 46. A necklace of sixteenth-century trade beads from San Pedro Quiatoni, Oaxaca.