

ELEGANT VESSELS

A Century of Southwest Silver Boxes

From its very earliest days, Southwest Indigenous silverwork was sought after by both Native and non-Native admirers. The types and numbers of silver objects, made as early as 1850, began to increase as more Navajo and Pueblo people gained the necessary metalworking skills. By the late 1800s, silver jewelry predominated, but other silverwork forms included functional items such as tobacco canteens and powder chargers. Silver boxes were a later addition, with the earliest known box created around 1908. Within five years, pocket-sized boxes were being made to hold pills or as small paper clip containers for desk furniture. The majority of early silver boxes were aimed at the smoking market and included cigarette cases and matchbook covers.

As the artform developed, artisans began fashioning boxes in various shapes and sizes. Some box lids were embellished with stampwork, repoussé (pushing the silver from the reverse side to create a design) and turquoise settings, or a combination of those techniques. Other box lids featured elaborate inlaid patterns in stones and shell. Over the past century, Indigenous artists brought silver boxes to a new level of expertise. While maintaining their utilitarian aspect as a secondary function, boxes have become a venue for social commentary and personal expression through sculptural and artistic excellence.

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Photographs by Evan Sanders.

SOUTHWEST SILVER BOXES

In addition to jewelry, early silver forms included spoons, watch fobs and miniature silver versions of the water canteens that were used to carry tobacco. One silversmith who was recorded making these various silver items also delivered the mail and was known as Jake the Mail Carrier. Early traders noticed that travelers to the Southwest, eager for a memento of their trip, purchased items including those made in silver. Traders C.N. Cotton, J.B. Moore, Juan Lorenzo Hubbell and others printed catalogues promoting silverwork. Their businesses, and others such as Fred Harvey's at the Alvarado Hotel in Albuquerque and Hopi House at the Grand Canyon, sold silver jewelry and accessories.

Boxes, made and sold as early as 1908, were mainly constructed from commercially produced sheet silver. Initially, they were small and utilitarian. In the 1920s, Charles Garrett Wallace established himself as a trader at Zuni Pueblo, and boxes were one item that he sold. Noting Navajo proficiency with silver and Zuni facility with stones, he hired Navajo silversmiths to make the box shapes and Zuni artisans to fashion figurative and complex patterns in stone and shell inlay that were set into the box lids.

Through the years, individual artists have worked creatively to express their design concepts through silver boxes. Artists have taken the idea of a simple rectangular box form and transformed that into myriad shapes and sizes. Box lids have been used as blank canvases to showcase artistic inspiration in silverwork, stone and shell.

Elegant Vessels: A Century of Southwest Silver Boxes expands upon fabrication techniques demonstrated in the related exhibition *Southwest Silverwork, 1850-1940*, currently on view in the nearby Lovena Ohl Gallery. Navajo silver workers and Zuni lapidary artists employed repoussé, stampwork, intricate inlay and carving techniques to adorn vessels of silver.

