



## COBRE HAND-HAMMERED COPPER

# The Art of Centuries Past

BY JOHN LUKE

**I**N 1989, WHEN SHE FIRST VISITED the village of Santa Clara del Cobre in central Mexico, Susan Hebert was a marketing person with a long-standing personal interest in Mexico that had led her to travel to the country on cultural, historical and folk-art excursions since the early 1970s.

Located in the state of Michoacán, the village had been a center for the production of copper objects by the Purepecha people during the Pre-Columbian era. Neighboring villages had specialized in other arts and crafts—ceramics, textiles, basketry—and together they formed a regional collective, of sorts, that made Michoacán famous for its crafts and folk art. It is said that after the Spanish conquest in 1521, Santa Clara became the most prolific source of copperware in Spain's



American colonies. Not until it was severely damaged by fires in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did its preeminence decline, leaving its industry dormant and its people impoverished.

But the coppersmithing heritage wasn't extinguished. As the regional copper mines had been depleted and closed down, workers had turned to used electrical wiring and other sources of discarded copper for their raw material. By the 1960s, efforts over the previous two decades to revive the industry—and with it the local economy—by staging competitions and awarding prizes had begun to have an effect. In 1971 the local Santa Clara del Cobre Copper Festival went national.

By the time Susan made her visit 18 years later, scores of artisans were producing work whose extraordinary beauty she recognized immediately. It took some time for her to discover that despite its apparent quality, it was not widely known or available outside Mexico.





In 1994, Susan's long-time partner, Roger Collins, encouraged her to evaluate a possible business venture involving the copper from Santa Clara. Together they visited the village to meet coppersmiths and understand the process of transforming copper from scrap metal into gleaming hand-forged bowls, platters and vases. She bought an assortment of several dozen pieces produced by 18 workshops, had them shipped to a warehouse in Portland, Ore., and took the first step in executing her plan: creating a portfolio to present to Rejuvenation Hardware, the local Stickley Furniture dealer.

The Rejuvenation buyer she met with quickly saw the affinity the pieces had with the revered copperware of the Arts and Crafts era and bought them. This success was followed by others as Susan introduced an expanding inventory of Cobre Copper bowls, vases, trays, plates and other pieces to Stickley dealers and other furnishings suppliers catering to the rapidly reviving interest in the Arts and Crafts aesthetic.

As a marketer, Susan recognized that Mexican crafts had a less-than-golden reputation for quality, so she also sought, successfully, to place Cobre Copper in high-end museum stores, like those at the De Young in San Francisco and the Art Institute in Chicago, and to have pieces included in important shows around the country. Eventually, the names Susan Hebert Imports and Cobre Copper became synonymous with the unique copperware, made just as it was centuries ago, that could take its place without embarrassment among the finest works of the Arts and Crafts movement. And Susan found herself in the gratifying but slightly odd position of having achieved success as a marketing person in a craftsman's world.



Even that, though, has had its special rewards, considering who her craftspeople are. In 1995 she joined the Fair Trade Federation, which has allowed her to foster economic partnerships with eight Santa Clara workshops that empower them rather than exploit them, ensuring that they receive fair wages and assisting them with such benefits as interest-free loans, medical aid, tools and product development. This, she says, is an aspect of the Cobre Copper enterprise that she is especially proud of.

Those partnerships, and the pleasure the copperware itself sparks in her customers, sustain her commitment to Santa Clara del Cobre after 15 years. It's one she hopes to maintain for many years to come.

**Cobre Hand-Hammered Copper**  
Susan Hebert Imports  
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