

THESIS

ALLEGORY AND METAPHOR IN TABLEWARE

**Submitted by
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY SUSAN AMADOR ENTITLED ALLEGORY AND METAPHOR IN TABLEWARE BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ART.

Committee on Graduate Work

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
ALLEGORY AND METAPHOR IN TABLEWARE

Silver tableware contains the surfaces and familiar cognitive references ripe for story telling with relief, developed by chasing and repousse. The elitist connotations present in the material attract the viewer into close proximity to the work and functionality fosters an intimate relationship. The human tendency towards rituals surrounding ingesting ceremonial food and spiritually elevating drugs devise ingenious accouterments that signal entry into the ritual space, tableware being one of indicators of access.

The tableware in this thesis work present allegories with diverse content, from direct, intimate function to paradox. Personal experiences, widespread in their commonality, embody a narrative significance that relates to the holloware form chosen for the particular relief images. As John Keats said “ A man’s life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the mystery of his life...”

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I would like to applaud Chris, Tara and Karen, without whose support I wouldn't have realized this achievement.

ALLEGORY AND METAPHOR IN TABLEWARE

Using tableware with definitive Western cognitive functions, I have built personal allegories and anecdotes through relief images that reference the pragmatic purpose of the tableware objects. Traditional techniques and presentations of relief on vessels narrate culture and for my purposes, relate distinctly to the Latin American background I grew up with.

Fine and sterling silver are materials that connote a certain value and stature, especially when presented in large amounts as tableware, silver is associated with wealth and upper classes. The functionality of the pieces allow the possibility of occupying a place of intimacy as they are used for ritualized eating and drinking. These objectives serve my intentions to draw the viewer in, only to have them discover a depth of narrative imagery.

In Ancient art, relief served as dramatized, didactic representation of culture. Political, technologic and spiritual subjects were depicted on prominent architecture and vessels, especially those that had marked importance in the observance of a society's rituals. These rituals were the societal glue of the civilization and the emotive power of the reliefs and their placement on buildings, doors, and ceremonial vessels was crucial to the strength of the ritual's cohesive influence on the community.

Some examples of ancient and non-Western relief that influence my work are the Roman Column of Trajan, AD 113 (see Fig. 1), The Dying Lioness of Ninevah, c.

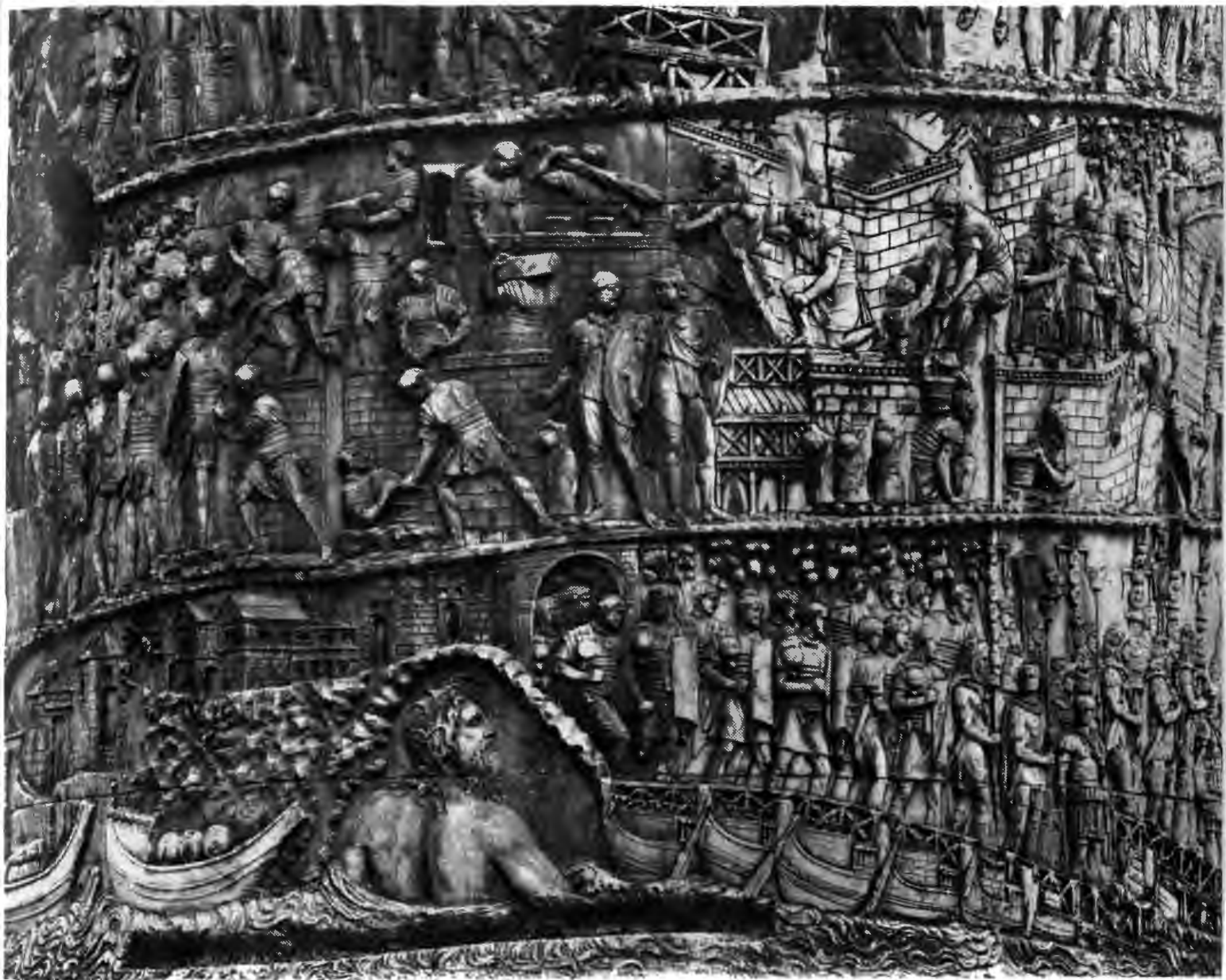


Fig. 1. Detail of Trajan's Column, Apollodorus of Damascus. Marble, , AD 113. Rpt. from Helen Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, 6th Ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975) 231.

650 BC (see Fig. 2), the African Yoruba Doors by Areogun of Osi (see Fig. 3) and Benin Bronzes (see Fig. 4), Pre-Columbian Mayan, Aztec and Incan architectural and vessel reliefs. The Column of Trajan and the Dying Lioness are architectural reliefs that tell stories of political figures and also have religious significance because leaders were considered heads of state and souls. Trajan's Column spirals 128 feet into the air telling a literal story of his adventures of war and conquest and contains references to the spiritual world looking at Roman technical achievement in awe. Trajan's Column inspired me to tell stories with my work and elevated personal experiences to a more significant level. The Dying Lioness is a powerhouse of intense emotion in shallow relief. The lioness' posture, facial expression and musculature communicate the final battle with death, as part of Ashurbanipal's lion hunt, in alabaster. The lioness encourages my tendency to passion and emotion. Benin Bronzes are compelling allegories of divine relationship, symbolized by size, convention of representation, and cultural meaning portrayed with the figure, animals, patterns and symbols. These bronzes taught me to use size, convention, and traditional symbolic meaning to enhance the content of the stories told with relief. Yoruba relief carving on the doors to the king's palace at Ikerre augment the divine status and nobility of the king. They were carved by master sculptor, Areogun of Osi, and denote an account of the British Colonial arrival in Yoruba. The carvings tell anecdotes with allegorical meanings particular to Yoruba culture as well. The spiritual strength of visual, representational allegory is cross cultural and deserves continuation.

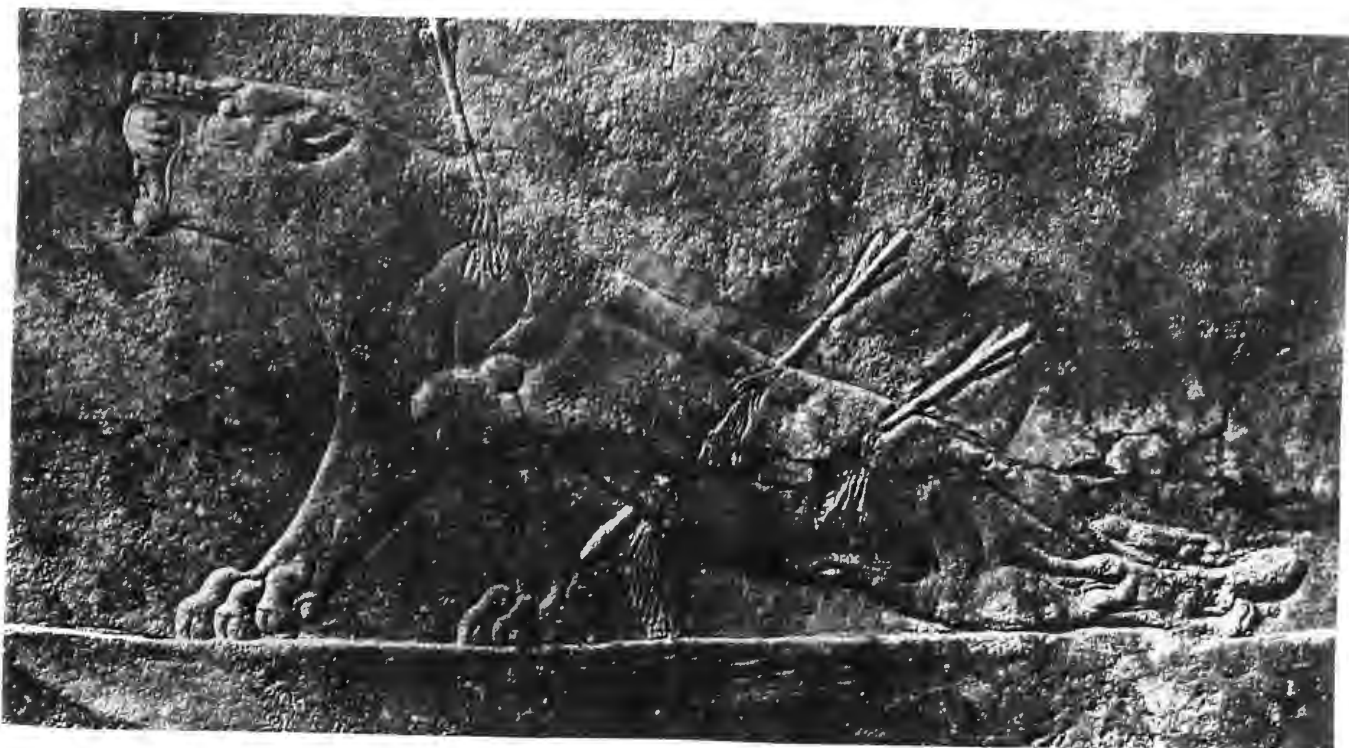


Fig. 2. Dying Lioness, Ninevah. c. 650 BC. Limestone, approx. 23" high. British Museum, London. Rpt. from Helen Gardener's *Art Through the Ages*, 6th Ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975) 65.



Fig. 3. Door from the palace at Ikerre, Yoruba, Areogun. Wood, approx.6' high, British Museum, London. Helen Gardener's *Art Through the Ages*, 6th Ed. (New York:Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975) 894.



Fig. 4. Altar of the Hand, Benin. Bronze, 1' 51/2" high. British Museum, London. Rpt. from Helen Gardener's *Art Through the Ages* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975) 893.

Pre-Columbian gold and silver vessels and ritual objects from the area that is now northwestern Colombia, Ecuador and Peru have the most impact on my work. The Incas believed gold was the “sweat of the sun” and silver the “tears of the moon.” The metals represent divinity and nobility, while the objects fashioned from them often were used in the ritual use of coca and other plants that altered the spiritual state of officials and priests according to the shamanic practices prevalent at the time. Two such pieces, figures 5 and 6, are lime vials whose contents were used to accelerate the effects of coca. Gold and silver functional, ritual objects were also made to delineate eminent people and significant social acts. Metal beaten into sheets and repoussed into relief images was utilized for ceremonial purposes, such as this Vicus region repoussed bowl (see Fig. 7), La Tolita area Pectoral (see Fig. 8), Chavin crown (see Fig. 9), Chimu cup, raised and chased (see Fig. 10) and the two raised and chased Chimu gold ritual cups (see Fig. 11 and 12). Incorporating the traditional techniques of raising and chasing/repousse allow me to feel a venerated connection to my heritage and the spirit of timelessness. The architectural reliefs of the Teotihuacan culture (see Fig. 13) and Pedestal of the Plumed Serpent, Xochicalco (see Fig. 14) are among the innumerable Mesoamerican examples that inspire my work. Symbolic patterns, designs, hieroglyphics, deities and demons press into every format edge and become an indigenous or “Latin” horror vacui. In Martha Egan’s Metalsmith Magazine article, Bolivian art historian Teresa Gisbert calls this “*mestizo* baroque” for the style of Native American, European, Black African and Moorish design influences on the area, although long before the ornate Euro-baroque influence, indigenous South American work had this flavor (25).

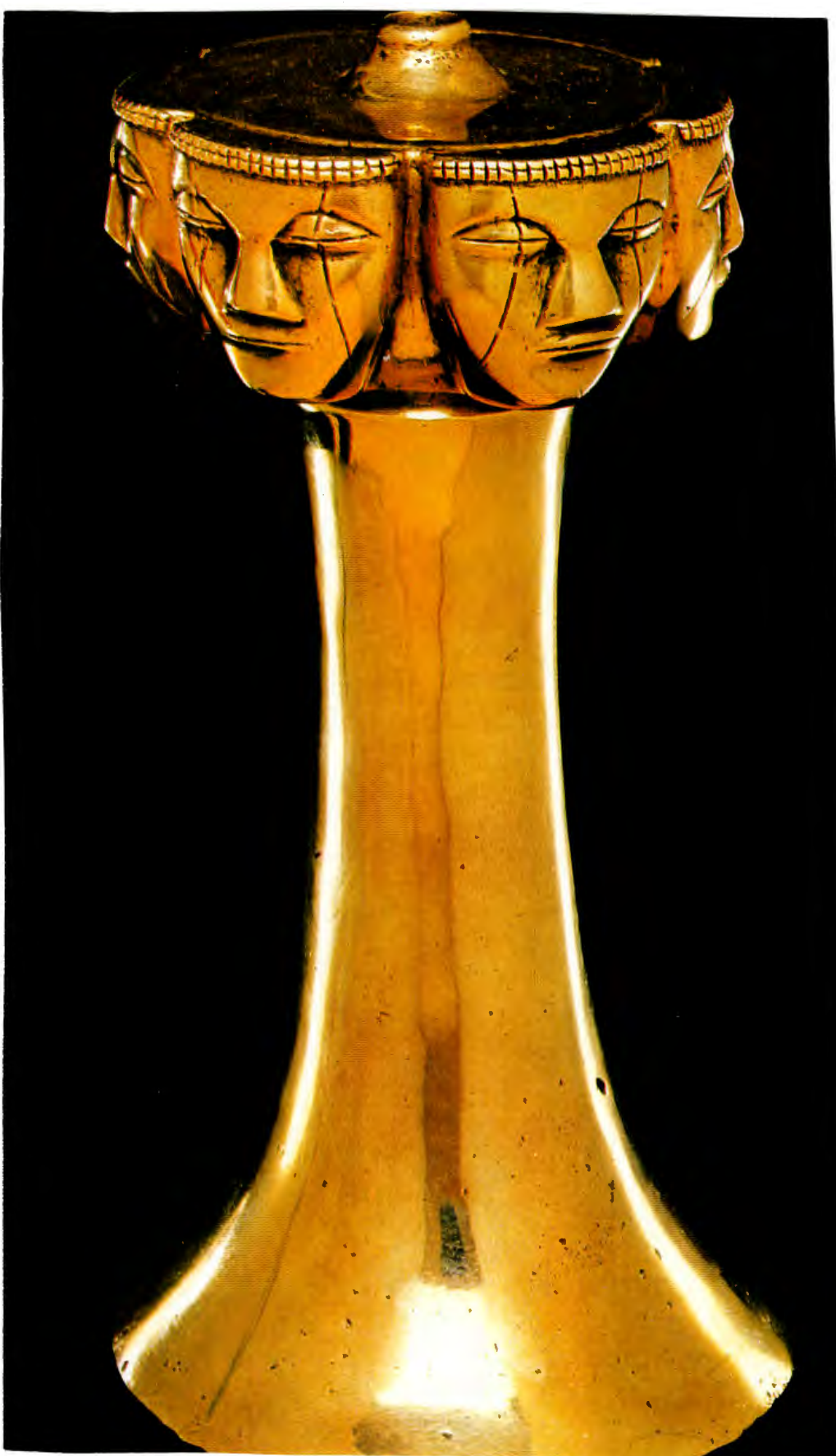


Fig. 5. Lime powder vessel, Quimbaya. Gold, 1000 AD. Rpt. from Thomas Dickey's King's of El Dorado, (Stonehenge Press Inc., 1982) 123.



Fig. 6. Lime powder vessel, Quimbaya. Gold, 1000 AD. Rpt. from Thomas Dickey's *Kings of El Dorado*. (Stonehenge Press Inc., 1982) 132.



Fig. 7. Vicus region hammered bowl, Incan. Gold-copper alloy, AD 600. Rpt. from Henri Stierlin's *Art of the Incas*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1983) 93.



Fig. 8. Chavin style pectoral from La Tolita. Gold, 29 cm. wide, 2nd or 1st century BC. Rpt. from Henri Stierlin's *Art of the Incas*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1983) 101.



Fig. 9. Chavin chieftain's crown, Peru. Gold, 9" tall, 400 BC. Rpt. from John Hemming's *Machu Picchu*. (New York: Newsweek, 1981) 72.



Fig. 10. Ceremonial cup, Chimu, Peru. Gold, 100-200 AD. Rpt. from John Hemming's *Machu Picchu*, (New York: Newsweek, 1981) 85.



Figs. 11 and 12. Inverted vase, Chimu, Peru. Gold, height 24 cm. Museo Oro del Peru (left). Gold vase with stones (right). Picture from Henri Stierlin's *Art of the Incas*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1984) 163.



Fig. 13. Palace of Quetzalpapalotl, Teotihuacan culture, Mexico. Stone, 300-650 AD. Picture from Paul Westheim's *Prehispanic Mexican Art*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972) 275.



Fig. 14. Pedestal of the Plumed Serpent, Xochicalco, Mexico. Stone, 700-900 AD. Rpt from Westheim, et al, *Prehispanic Mexican Art*, (New York: G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1972) 279.

Eating can be as perfunctory as a granola bar on the run, or as ceremonial as Thanksgiving, Christmas or Hanukkah. It's the ritual eating I'm concerned with; people and families coming together, special foods concocted only for that day, served on special dishes used only for that purpose. The experience of ritual ingestion can be as reductive as a favorite coffee cup. Throughout history all cultures have created rituals around the consumption of foods, chemicals that alter reality and spiritual experiences. The intimate relationship established with the contrivance of preparation and consumption of ritualized substances is unique. Ritual devices are conceptually embellished, like tea and coffee pots and cups, or on the darker side-drug and alcohol paraphernalia. Most of the time they are ornamented with comfortable imagery, evoking pleasant associations with partaking of the substance.

My objective is to develop the familiar forms of silverware, plate, tea service and martini set, as a place setting, to deeper metaphoric and sometimes paradoxical purpose. Utilizing chased and repoussed relief images, in Latin horror vacui manner, a tenebrous, baroque narrative unfolds on warm, inviting silver vessel surfaces. This began with the tea service, The Jaguar's Dream (see fig. 15), by applying the surface treatment according to the intended contents of the piece, with textures and imagery referencing function. This process evolved into a close investigation of function and relevance to my life and its issues. The Western psyche is familiar with the plate and silverware as the conduit of nourishment for the body, the tea service is the vehicle of ritualized caffeine and the pitcher, shaker, cocktail spoon and strainer are recognizable accouterments for alcohol consumption. A personal dichotomy arises with examination of the paradigms of tableware form, function and comfort. For example, the plate as source of nourishment becomes the original familial source, and by exploiting the attracting capabilities of silver holloware, the viewer is drawn into the relief. An illustration of this is the Plate (see Fig. 17), a serving vessel not entirely



Fig. 15. Jaguar's Dream, Susan Amador. Fine and sterling silver with pronghorn antelope horn handles. Raised, chased, Aquaplast formed and constructed, 1997.

wholesome and the imagery not entirely comfortable upon closer inspection of the piece.

Dynamic familial perspectives that form part of the conceptual basis for my work are distilled from my father's vision of our Colombian heritage. He had a stereotypical *machismo* pride for his heritage, the accomplishments of his ancestors and the Amador name. These he taught his children to the exclusion of my mother's side of the family and with great emphasis on the males in the family. From this I gleaned a interesting mixture of regard and irreverence for my family.

Growing up in upper middle class New Jersey was entirely devoid of people of color, but our home was filled with Latin American artifacts, most of which were metal. Great emphasis was placed on these objects as a source of our identity. Wrought silver holloware and tableware, tin work, huge brass and copper trays, tables and candlesticks, all intensely textural, patterned surfaces, crammed with images of indigenous and Catholic religious symbols and icons that were most times the only connection I had with the person of my father. My pieces connote family relationships based on objects and materialism, not closeness or nurturing. This liaison through spiritually elevated art objects continues as my intention for the work is to occupy an intimate place of ritual use for the viewer.

The baroque surfaces of the metalwork in our house impressed me with an appreciation of a very specific cultural art form. George Kubler, a contemporary Latin American art historian, compares European to South American colonial period metalsmithing in M. Egan's *Metalsmith Magazine* article. Kubler aptly states that what distinguishes the two is the South American "strong surface... generously measured out from the marvelous abundance of raw materials in America.' In Kubler's opinion, European silver of the period, while technically superb, presents a deliberately weak surface. Silversmiths strived for delicacy and fineness in their work. By contrast, even

small silver and gold objects of the colonial period in South America are weighty and prepossessing” (25). The distinctions between European and South American silver work serves to elaborate the issues of assimilation and discrimination by recognizing the imperious history of European supremacy and depredation in Latin America, while at the same time, the divergence in aesthetic principles allowed cultivation of the Eurocentric hierarchy in art. Disparate elements among European and South American silverwork indicate the continued aesthetic hierarchy and imbalanced attention given to Western and European art as well as the personal effects of prejudice in the United States for Latinos.

The inheritable property of our family was lost when my father died of cancer. Along with all the metal work, the estate was sold to cover medical bills. After his death, I was apprenticed, at age 16, to a MFA metalsmith in an art crafts community for 3 years. There I discovered a penchant for metal and began a journey of discovery for identity and self. The personal issues I deal with- childhood abuse, domestic violence, family alcoholism and disability- are shared by many. As I express these issues in the pieces, my wish is to communicate the essences of these matters, while achieving catharsis in the process.

Foremost is the spirit of irony, duality and transformation as the subject for relief and the work in process. These ideas express humanity and the ability to observe oneself with humorous resolve. Transformation takes place as the flat disk of metal is hammered into the imposed form; the molecules are rearranged, slowly, to become the refined shape, reflecting the development of self-discovery. The technical processes I used to make the holloware are as much a part of the work as the concepts and imagery. Raising is a repetitive hammering procedure that begins with a flat disk of metal, worked over an anvil specifically for raising and annealed repeatedly as a round of raising is completed. Planishing is another hammering process that

gives uniformity to the work in progress and at the end in final surface preparation. After the final planishing, the design is engraved on the piece. The piece is filled with melted pitch and allowed to cool to room temperature, then the design is worked with chasing tools and a chasing hammer to lay the initial areas to be developed. The pitch is melted out, the piece is annealed and the entire process is repeated at least four times, until the desired depth and detail is reached. A patina is then chosen for the work.

Achieving an intimate space with the patron and realizing the ritual properties of the piece is accomplished through functionality. Through ritual, intimate usage, aesthetic and material value, the work becomes an heirloom. When heirloom pieces are used, the generations before are called to mind and emotion, while identity is cemented through stories and memories. A person's likes, dislikes and what they choose to surround themselves with and place in their environment help define them. Art objects chosen as heirlooms come to represent their spirit.

The story telling relief on holloware started with the fine silver teapot, The Jaguar's Dream. Referencing the fluid tea to be served from the pot, I developed a chased texture that represented water emanating from the spout area, along with symbols describing personally important aspects of Colombian/Amazonian cultures like the jaguar, plant forms, indigenous signs for male (motivational) energy and a shaman's stool from my childhood home.

The creamer was fashioned next, utilizing the same fluid texture and marks for journey. The creamer's spout was raised out of the vessel's side with the aid of Aquaplast, a formable plastic. In this manner, I dealt with the design and visual difficulties additive spouts presented. While designing the sugar bowl, I reference the contents by chasing ants into the vessel and forming a spoon with ants crawling out of several places. The relief is laid out in a band around the vessel and accentuates the

cantilevered form.

The tea service vessel form is cantilevered to one side as I altered the symmetrical basis of the raising technique. Exploring alternatives to symmetry became another fascination as the work progressed. Absinthe Tea (Fig. 16) became an advanced experiment over the course of a semester. The form developed from spontaneous decisions, divorced from conscious associations, representational subjects or the usual pre-concieved drawings. This led to a synthesis of planned and spontaneous decisions, and new boldness towards asymmetrical raised form.

For my thesis presentation, I have explored personal issues in an autobiographical format. Conceptually, this opened the floodgates to apply metaphor to the individual purposes and functions of pieces of tableware. At the same time I worked on Absinthe Tea, I began a 12" sterling silver plate (see Fig. 17) that dealt with the origins of nourishment in the family. Because I was physically, verbally and spiritually abused as a young person, all was not nourishing in my early home. For this plate, I created a pattern of imagery that on first glance is attractive, organic and has some almost recognizable figures, but upon closer examination is an uncomfortably odd arrangement of a fish with chelae and grasping tentacle-like swirls, surrounding a cruciform and female genitalia. Brilliant silver beguiles the viewer into close "psychical distance" as E. Bullough discusses in his article, "Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle." He states, "He (the artist) will prove artistically most effective in the formulation of an intensely *personal* experience...what is therefore, both in appreciation and production, most desirable is the *utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance.*" By drawing the viewer into close examination through the rich surfaces, form, functionality and value of materials, a cryptic and stimulating story is exposed.



Fig. 16. Absinthe Tea, Susan Amador. Fine and sterling silver. Raised, chased, Aquaplast formed, collapsed tubing and constructed, 1997.



Fig. 17. Plate, Susan Amador. Sterling silver, raised, chased and repoussé, 1998.

Escape from the family conundrum took the form of daily flight to the woods around our home and meticulously probing the fauna. Like the woods, fork, knife and spoon are the implements that select food from the plate and become the instruments of choice and empowerment to establish personal boundaries, therefore more individually particular in their subject matter. Silverware (see fig. 18) for the plate takes a more playful approach evincing a profound, life-long involvement with animals and nature.

Martin's Assimilation (see Fig. 19 and 20) is a complex piece, not only because of its multiple elements, but because it contains multifaceted perspectives about my father, Martin Amador. He indoctrinated us into our history and ancestry as Colombians, Spaniards and Latin Americans, while striving to attain the American Dream. This required him to embrace and promote a Eurocentric, Westernized life style, devoid of his culture, except in his own home. His militant advocacy of personal privacy was evidence of his desire to keep a bastion of culture for his family. An icon of Martin's generational Americana was the martini, with its accouterments: the formal cocktail hour and class distinctions. The martini easily represents striving for upper class status and the Melting Pot mentality that told immigrants and people of color they could attain the American Dream of wealth and security if they adopted white Western values and gave up all vestiges of culture. Martin assimilated well into Martini Society. The glass ceiling held him in place, while he consumed many martinis and manhattans. So many, in fact, it killed him while he was still quite young.

The fine and sterling silver martini set, Martin's Assimilation uses the form of the martini shaker and pitcher to present images of indigenous Latin American monsters and deities, some Pre-Columbian, some of my own creation that reference Martin's origins. One deity on the shaker has the body of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, responsible for transformation and spiritual evolution, usually for the better.



Fig. 18. Silverware, Susan Amador. Sterling silver, chased and repoussé, 1998.



Fig. 19. Martin's Assimilation Martini Set, Susan Amador. Fine and sterling silver, raised, chased, Aquaplast formed and constructed, 1998.

This particular deity has the head of a demon, reversing the spiritually uplifting possibilities for the alcoholic martini drinker. Another monster portrayed is the Mayan Earth Goddess, she demands blood sacrifice spilled on the earth in order for life cycles to continue and is consuming the symbol for human duality, a head with half skull and half a live face. The last monster is one of consumption and contains the drinker inside itself as a prisoner. The American Dream's haunting by the spirit of cultures, sacrificed for survival in the United States, is aptly portrayed by the relief beasts and creatures demanding blood spilled on the earth for restitution and rebirth. On a more personal note, my father's alcoholism tore through our family and towards me, singularly, pushed him to violence. The worm winding up the martini pitcher (stirred not shaken) and out the spout becomes the ice catcher with the head of a Mayan butterfly. Some species of Amazon butterfly are associated with decomposing matter as they often feed and drink from decaying animals and plants. The nexus here is the character of cryptic morbidity of problem drinking. The visual beauty of a butterfly with a worm's body is a metaphor for the alcoholic's attempt at a double life.

The silver martini glasses' (see Fig. 20) images can be seen inside and out, through the nebulous liquid of the martini. The openness of the mouth of the vessel allows the textures and forms to be viewed as the martini is swallowed. The first glass' gaping-mouthed demon embraces the form of the vessel. Its body and arm have exposed bone revealing an underlying spiritual structure overlooked by materialism. Exposed bone traditionally indicates the presence of a generative life force in Latin American Art. In this martini glass, it symbolizes transcendence from the ordinary realm of perception. The second glass represents an interpretation of the Aztec god Xipe Totec. Xipe Totec's haunting images depict the enactment of archetypal concerns of the spiritual versus the material realms; the inner and the outer man by way of the grisly practice of human sacrifice, flayed of its skin, then ceremonially worn

by a live person. Jaguar marking texture relates to the indigenous Latin American population's beliefs in a shamanic relationship with the jaguar. This glass and its images suggest the origins of culture and the intensity of non-Western belief systems. The relevance to my family and its difficulties regulating inner and outer in a material world are evident.

The third glass illustrates the place of my mother and the other females in our family. My mother, who gave up her cultural identity to be an Amador, was diminished to parts of sexual anatomy, by the machismo of the male Amadors and the 1950's. The female children were relegated to inferior positions educationally and pertaining to serious recognition as humans. The cup addressing these issues utilizes symbols of the Jewish Seder, four goblets and thorny vine, that establish my mother's ancestry and her propensity towards extreme martyrdom and self-righteousness that borders on narcissism. The female anatomy is objectified through repetition, while the base uses symbols of life to express the reproductive female qualities.

The group of pieces as a place setting tell a story about identity and existence in a family, held together with ritual, where alcoholism played a major part in defining the relationships. The presence of *mestizo* baroque style elements reference a Latin American cultural source, with rich surfaces and magnetic visual weight dominating the work. Cognitive references to the value, function and elitism of masses of silver draw the viewer into intimate involvement with the work only to be confronted with paradox and metaphor. Tableware, with augmented meaning through relief, chronicle emotive and spiritual experiences that drive past the comfortable historical display associated with holloware, into a suggestive realm of thought.



Figure 20. Martini Glasses. Susan Amador. Fine and Sterling Silver. Raised, Chased and Repoussé. 1998.



Figure 21. Rosary- Susan Amador. Fine and sterling silver with found objects. Wrapped wire beads and engraved, chased and reppoussed elements. 1999.

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