

The Golden Sun Of Guayaquil: A True Copycat

Written by Karen O. Bruhns, Nancy L. Kelker

Wednesday, 26 May 2010 03:17 - Last Updated Wednesday, 26 May 2010 08:30

{rokbox}/images/stories/apachita/Apachita16_sol_de_oro1.jpg{/rokbox}

Specialized artisan production for a specific collector is still extremely common; witness the case of the Ica stones or the sad case of Golden Sun Number 2 in Ecuador. The latter is particularly problematic, not only because it is a fake, but because a lot of Ecuadorians seem incensed that they were taken in and insist that it has to be real. Well, it isn't, and no amount of foot stamping or pouting will change that fact. It is, in fact, a more or less faithful copy of Golden Sun Number 1.

This first golden sun has a well-known provenance. In 1940, on a landholding called Chunucari near the town of Sigsig in the southern highlands of Ecuador, huaqueros uncovered what they called a pelota, a ball, of crumpled gold. They sold the pelota, untouched, to a local man who bought and sold antiquities, and this man sold the ball to Max Konanz, a Cuenca collector. Over the next few months, Konanz and his wife painstakingly unrolled the ball and revealed it to be a large (ca. 44 cm tall) hammered golden sun face in a provincial Huari-Pachacamac style. Konanz exhibited the sun in his private museum for some years and then sold his collection to the new Museo del Banco Central. The golden sun, arguably one of the flashiest pieces of ancient Ecuadorian metalwork known, has become the logo for the museum and for the Banco Central del Ecuador. Somewhere along the line, however, its provenience was changed on its record -from Chunucari to La Tolita, a culture located on the coast up by the border with Colombia. Just why this radical change was made in the provenience without any further information on the piece is not known, although apparently a family quarrel, involving the director of the Museo del Banco Central (a Cuenca man too) and the original owners, was part of the problem. There are some extremely good reasons for believing the original provenience and no good ones for believing the changed one, but that is another story and a different battle (Bruhns 1998, 2004). What concerns us here is that along the way, the golden sun gained a twin.

One of the major collectors and aficionados of archaeology in Ecuador in the mid-twentieth century was the wealthy businessman Emilio Estrada. Estrada had a very large and choice collection, virtually all coastal materials, among which elaborate gold objects were well represented. But he didn't have a golden sun. In 1953 the Quito sun was published in a photograph for the first time, on the cover of the *Boletín de la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana*. Estrada, of course, got this and other publications on Ecuadorian archaeology. Apparently he dwelled upon his lack of a golden sun, and he bought various fake golden suns in the process of trying to get a real one for his very own. But after the publication of the photograph, within a year he had a golden sun that was virtually the twin of the Chunucari sun. Although Estrada usually was very vocal about where things came from and how he got them, this time he wasn't.

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A man named Julio Viteri usually bought antiquities for Estrada, but this time Estrada bought the sun himself, and then he hid his purchase from everyone, including Viteri, for nearly six months. Unlike the Chunucari sun, about which there is a wealth of anecdote from local people concerning its finding and travels, there isn't a peep from anyone concerning the circumstances of Estrada's sun discovery, although far later several extremely unlikely proveniences got attached to it. When one looks closely at the Estrada sun, one sees both its uncanny resemblance to the Chunucari piece and some strange little details that are different. They are both about the same height, one 40 cm and the other 44 cm. The Quito sun has 46 rays, Estrada's 44; but in both, the rays are distributed in a bunch on each side of the face and in a panache at the top. There are some differences between the two in the distribution of rays, but not a lot. The Chunucari sun has a little design of two dragon figures in antithesis on the stem of the panache; the Estrada sun does not. The rays on Estrada's sun are a lot simpler than those on the Chunucari one; the latter end in snakes' heads with human trophy-heads in their mouths. Estrada's sun's rays are simply serpents' heads, and they lack the central zigzag embossed line of the Chunucari sun. Both have faces delineated with a curious T-shape, but that of the Estrada sun is larger than the Chunucari T-shape. The mouths and eyes are similar, but the Estrada sun's mouth has simpler teeth and no fangs, unlike the Chunucari one (a genuine Huari piece would have fangs). The ears, however, are on backward on the Estrada sun, in a manner totally unknown to any ancient South American style. In fact, when you look carefully at the Estrada sun and compare it with the first published photograph of the Chunucari sun, a photograph that was widely available, you can see that every single difference between the Chunucari sun and the Estrada one is where the photograph was unclear!

When these small problems were pointed out in a public venue (in a symposium at the International Congress of Americanists in Quito in 1997), several archaeologists had a hard time believing that they could have been so taken in. One of them went so far as to have some pieces of the Chunucari and the Estrada suns analyzed (there are broken bits, of course; any good antiquity has some broken bits) and, on the basis of three analyses comparing the sun pieces with two sources of gold on the coast, declared that both were from the coast. Well, no. What we have here is a touching example of badly understood science and blind faith triumphing over reality. First of all, jewelers in Ecuador commonly get some of their gold from huaqueros. An awful lot of archaeological metal is found not in fancy artifacts, but in little, plain, broken bits of gold or semi-corroded copper-gold (tumbaga, guanin). It is not really salable on the antiquities market, but jewelers are always ready to buy gold at a good price; and both those who make new antiquities and those who repair ordinary jewelry often do so with ancient metal. Moreover, the placer gold of the coastal rivers comes from the highlands. There are a lot of problems here and, although any chemical analysis is welcome, given the paucity of information concerning ancient gold sources and the lack of analyses of ancient pieces that are known to be ancient, one simply cannot say that the two suns are equally ancient or share a provenience.

Another problem is apparently that the archaeologists and curators in question did not look at the official paperwork attendant upon the Estrada collection's purchase by the Museo del Banco

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Central in Guayaquil. The sun was actually bought as a modern replica, not as an antiquity, precisely because the Junta Monetaria (the money boys) did not think it was authentic. But it wasn't separated from the antiquities at that point, although in retrospect it should have been, and it was just accepted as authentic by the museum people. The fact that the only known Huari presence in Ecuador is in the southern highlands was not considered important, especially since the Chunucari sun was about to be given a new provenience by the Quito director of the museum, for reasons that still remain obscure (Saville and Segarra 2000). In any event, having their very own golden sun was just as important to the Guayaquil branch of the museum as it had been to Emilio Estrada, and the faux sun remains on display and is trotted about the world in traveling exhibits, just as if it were the real thing. And it is a real golden sun, just not an ancient one. And it is far more attractive than the series of plastic replicas of the Chunucari sun; the real one, for reasons of conservation, security, or sloth, has not been visible in Quito for years. That there is a lot of bad behavior involved in the stories of the two suns is another matter and, again, one that does not seem to bother museum personnel.

It seems likely that Estrada either commissioned the golden sun himself or managed to convince himself that one brought to him in secrecy was authentic. He was known to be interested in golden suns, and that would have been a clear temptation to a jeweler with a taste for reproduction and a copy of the published photograph. One suspects that a fair number of jewelers in the Guayaquil area produced artifacts for Mr. Estrada; it would be a miracle if they hadn't. Spotting a gullible customer and producing items specifically for him is a common practice, but it is not usually done on quite such a large scale as the Gold Museum in Lima.

Karen Olsen Bruhns, 1998, Huaquería, procedencia y fantasía: el caso de los Soles de Oro del Ecuador, *Boletín del Museo del Oro* 44-45:183-205, Bogotá. Id., 2004, *Huaquería and other bad behavior: the case of the Golden Sun of Sigsig*. Paper given at the 44^a Annual Meeting of the Institute of Andean Studies, Berkeley, CA. Marshall H., Saville, and Guillermo Segarra Iñiguez, 2000, *El tesoro de Sigsig, Ecuador*, Biblioteca Ecuatoriana de Arqueología, Quito.

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Source: Karen O. Bruhns and Nancy L. Kelker, 2010, *Faking: the Ancient Andes*, 2010, pp. 66-72, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA. Reprinted with authorization from the authors and the editor. The sun at the head of the article is from Guayaquil, and the one above from the Museo del Banco Central, Quito.