

EXHIBITION

Silver. Luxury and ruin



PONTIFICIA
UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA
DE CHILE

CIIR
Centro de Estudios
Interculturales e Indígenas



Antesio Quintana Contreras. Maestros de trabajo del oro y la plata.
Banco de Chile 1980. Archivo Central de Artes y Oficios, Universidad de Chile.

The exhibition is structured around silver as its central material and as symbol of multiple contradictions: wealth and poverty, brightness and darkness, luxury and ruin. It invites visitors to reflect on the tensions between the material and the spiritual, the visible and the hidden, and the relationship between value, work, and power in Chilean history.



Silver. Luxury and ruin



PONTIFICIA
UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA
DE CHILE



Since the arrival of the conquistadors in the Americas, silver and gold were seen by the Spaniards as symbols of wealth and power, while for the indigenous peoples they held a sacred and spiritual significance. This clash of worldviews gave rise to a long history of prosperity for a few and dispossession for many. The metal's gleam concealed the systems of exploitation and the harsh conditions of the miners, whose anonymous, calloused hands—the same that shaped coins, jewelry, and utensils—remained invisible behind the glitz of luxury.

The exhibition combines heritage objects—coins, liturgical pieces, jewelry, and domestic utensils—with works by five contemporary artists: Paula Anguita, Jacinta Besa, Seba Calfuqueo, Felipe Cusicanqui, and Luis Prato. Each offers a critical interpretation of the history of silver, exploring its symbolic and economic value, its connection to memory and heritage, and the cultural meanings this metal has acquired in Chilean territory.

Silver. Luxury and ruin



PONTIFICIA
UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA
DE CHILE



The curatorial approach incorporates the temporal dimension as key to understanding the cycles of boom and decline associated with silver. The objects, now preserved as heritage, were in their time symbols of power and ostentation, and their current revaluation allows us to reflect on the transformation of value and the enduring desire for brilliance and prestige.



Silver, the quintessential precious metal, is distinguished by its brilliance, malleability, and resistance to corrosion. These qualities have made it, since ancient times, a symbol of status and beauty, taking on various forms: coins, jewelry, ornaments, or utensils. For centuries, it also served as a medium of exchange, as silver coins were valued by weight and materially represented money, while also spreading the image of the political or religious power of those who minted them.

Silver. Luxury and ruin



PONTIFICIA
UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA
DE CHILE

In the Americas, silver assumed a central role from the 16th century, following the Conquest. During the 17th century, it fueled global trade thanks to the abundance of the Potosí mines, which attracted thousands of European adventurers. In Chile, its boom began after Independence, when in 1832 Juan Godoy discovered the Chañarcillo vein in the Atacama Desert. This discovery marked the start of a mining prosperity cycle that transformed the northern economy and gave rise to new settlements and commercial networks. The discovery of Tres Puntas in 1848 extended this extractive fever, reflecting both material wealth and the nation's aspirations for modernization.



The exhibition explores how silver became a symbol of luxury, power, and social distinction, beyond its economic value. The metal took shape in domestic and ceremonial objects—such as altar frontals, basins, cutlery, and filigree baskets—that reflected refinement and abundance. In Mapuche culture, silver held its own meanings: jewelry and harnesses symbolized authority, identity, and spiritual connection.

Colonial, republican, and Mapuche pieces, though culturally diverse, share the materiality of the metal and its shine as an emblem of power. Curators encourage viewers to see them not merely as luxury items, but as expressions of an abundance that transcends necessity and manifests the desire for social distinction. Eating with silver cutlery or riding with silver stirrups was an act that affirmed social status.

Silver. Luxury and ruin



PONTIFICIA
UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA
DE CHILE



Luxury is also linked to the excesses of mining. The former mines of Chañarcillo and Tres Puntas, now in ruins, still contain fragments of English ceramics that reflect imported sophistication alongside the harshness of the environment. Silver also drove modernization: it spurred the construction of towns, telegraph lines, and the country's first railway, transforming Chile's territory, infrastructure, and its integration into the global economy.

The splendor of silver had its dark side: ruin. Mines that once symbolized prosperity became desolate landscapes. Exploitation exhausted the veins, devastated the environment, and left abandoned towns behind. The story of Juan Godoy, discoverer of Chañarcillo, embodies this paradox: from muleteer to wealthy man, he ended up impoverished, while his partner Miguel Gallo amassed fortune and influence. His fate reflects the unequal distribution of mining wealth and the contradictions of extractive modernity.

Contemporary chronicles, such as those by Treutler and Vallejos, describe the harshness of miners' lives: exhausting days underground followed by weekends of wasteful excess. In mining towns, gambling, alcohol, and indulgence quickly consumed earnings, creating a cycle of fleeting wealth and decline. Vallejos depicts the miner as a tragic figure: half-naked men, drenched in sweat, emerging from darkness with heavy loads, barely breathing before returning to the earth.

Silver. Luxury and ruin



PONTIFICIA
UNIVERSIDAD
CATÓLICA
DE CHILE

These images resonate with the hands featured in the exhibition: anonymous, hardworking hands that remind us of the human dimension behind metallic splendor. Ruin, therefore, is not only material but also social and moral. Empty mountains, ghost towns, and exhausted bodies testify to the costs of wealth and the passage of time on collective memory.