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## Art Lecture

# *Latent Value: Spratling Silver and the Aesthetics of Mineral Development*

Grace Kuipers '14

Monday, April 6, 2026

4:30pm

Boger Hall, Room 112

Department of Art and Art History  
Center for the Arts  
Middletown, Connecticut  
[www.wesleyan.edu/art](http://www.wesleyan.edu/art)

This event is co-sponsored by the Samuel Silipo '85 Distinguished Visitors Fund of the Department of Art and Art History, the Bailey College of the Environment, and the Latin American Studies Program.



What can the U.S. pursuit of foreign minerals tell us about modernist design practices? This talk examines the U.S. designer William Spratling's silver jewelry workshop in Taxco, Mexico to explore the ways developmentalist approaches to mineral extraction shaped the aesthetic and cultural expressions of modernist primitivism in the 1930s. Crafted from high-grade Mexican silver and adapted from Pre-Columbian motifs, Spratling's jewelry was celebrated as a modernist revival of Indigenous design traditions. Yet the workshop was also framed as an economic revival, credited with resurrecting Taxco's colonial-era mines and reactivating the region's dormant mineral resources. As an early project of cultural diplomacy, Spratling's enterprise enacted a politics of mineral developmentalism, in which U.S. standards of technological modernity promised to more efficiently measure, manage, and extract Mexico's subterranean natural resources. Ultimately, this talk considers how mineral developmentalism shaped the visual dimensions of Spratling Silver: from the spectacles of Indigenous labor that produced it, to the silver materiality of the jewelry itself, and finally the aesthetic vocabulary of Spratling's primitivist design process, which staged the conversion of "latent" formal values into abstract stores of value that could be possessed or exchanged.

**Grace Kuipers '14**, an art historian and postdoctoral fellow based at the High Meadows Environmental Institute at Princeton University.

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**Center for  
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William Spratling, Snake Pin, c. 1932.