

Introduction

Tomorrow's Gold

A small "calling card" made of gold is now hurtling through the vast and frigid silence of interstellar space. Attached to a derelict spacecraft, this golden plaque may someday introduce our civilization to worlds beyond the solar system. It will take 80,000 years for this golden greeting to travel to the nearest star...more than ten billion years to enter the planetary system of the nearest star. But, because its surface is gold, the six-by-nine-inch plaque can be expected to remain eternally shining and smooth, its message free of tarnish, scale or corrosion.

Etched on the plaque's surface are the figures of a man and a woman with their return address (Planet Earth). The inscription is engraved in scientific symbols that might conceivably be understood by extraterrestrial civilizations.

The plaque was affixed to the antenna support struts of Pioneer 10 when it lifted off from Cape Canaveral in 1972 on a voyage that has already taken it past the planet Jupiter toward a point on the celestial sphere near the boundary of the constellations Taurus and Orion.

Gold, the most precious of metals, was a fitting choice to carry the space age message. Since the dawn of history cultures around the globe have regarded gold as a divine substance connected with the sun. However, it wasn't gold's beauty or

mystical associations that led scientists to use it for the first human message to leave our solar system. They chose gold because of its remarkable chemical and physical properties. Of course, it was these same characteristics that led the Ancients to regard the metal as a magic substance of divine origin.

The history of gold begins in remote antiquity. Without hard archaeological evidence to pinpoint the time and place of man's first felicitous encounter with the yellow metal we can only conjecture about those men who at various places and various times first came upon native gold. Bits of natural gold have been found in Spanish caves used by Paleolithic man about 40,000 B.C.

Yes, gold — a light that never dims — has held men in its thrall for thousands of years. No other metal has played such a consistent and dramatic role in the relatively short history of the frail creatures figured on the Pioneer 10 plaque. Gold is not essential for survival; yet, men have always craved it, subjugating whole nations and expunging civilizations and religions to get the yellow metal. No other substance has aroused such emotions or been invested with such power.

To see clearly the dichotomy of behavior gold has provoked we can trace the glittering golden thread through the annals of history and world literature...a source of joy and woe from the Golden Apples of the Hesperides to the Klondike poems of Robert Service. Lust for gold by men and nations has spurred exploration, furthered cultural exchange, developed international trade routes and hastened the development of technology.

Indeed, most nations of the Americas as we know them today can trace much of their history simply to the lust for gold. This most definitely includes the United States of America.