

CRAFTING TRADITION

OAXACAN WOOD CARVINGS

University of Iowa Museum of Art
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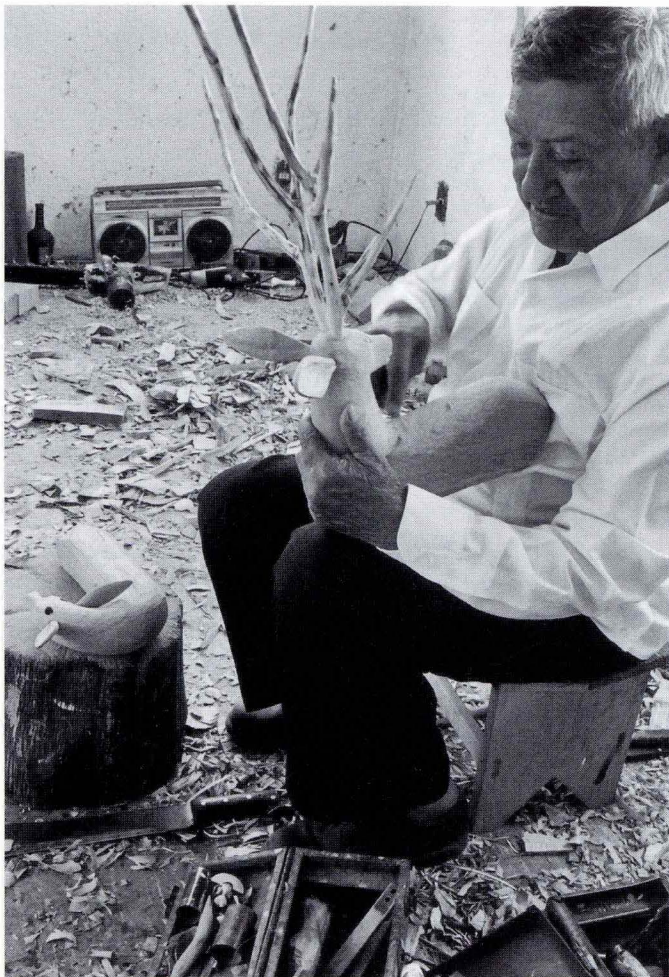
(figure 1)
Porfirio Sosa and Sofía Ojeda
San Martín Tilcajete
Alebrije
Copal

The wood carvings from the Mexican state of Oaxaca in this exhibit are part of a growing worldwide trade in ethnic and tourist arts. Oaxacan wood carvings show how this international market can result in new artistic forms that straddle the border between popular craft and art. These brightly painted, whimsical creations are visually appealing to both art connoisseurs and the wider audience that appreciates handmade crafts exemplifying Mexican culture. Although the inspirations for Oaxacan wood carvings are often rooted in the past, the pieces are also influenced by contemporary change in Mexico and the artistic taste of buyers in the United States and Europe.

Oaxacan wood carvings are often referred to as *alebrijes*. This term was originally restricted to fantastic figures such as the piece in the exhibit by Porfirio Sosa and Sofía Ojeda [figure 1]. Such wood carvings are inspired by the alebrijes (papier-mâché-sculptures) of the Linares family of Mexico City. Over time the word "alebrije" has come to be applied to all Oaxacan wood carvings.

In the past several decades, alebrijes have become increasingly popular with collectors, galleries, and museums. The first carvings sold in significant numbers

*The exhibition is curated by
Professor Michael Chibnik,
Chair of the UI Department
of Anthropology and a noted
economic anthropologist.*



(figure 2)
Manuel Jiménez

were charming but crude. As artisans competed with one another to gain customers, they began to make innovative, technically proficient pieces. Some families in the principal wood carving communities of Arrazola, San Martín Tilcajete, and La Unión Tejalapan have prospered through the sale of their pieces to store owners and wholesalers. Men and women who once eked out a living through farming and wage labor are now able to build concrete houses and purchase automobiles, satellite dishes, cell phones, and CD players.

It is not always obvious who created a particular Oaxacan wood carving. Almost every high-end alebrije is signed, usually by an adult man who did the carving. The signature often erases the work of one or more female family members who did some or all of the painting. There is considerable variability in the extent to which alebrijes are primarily the work of one artist. Some of the pieces in this exhibit (e.g., the skeleton by Isidoro Cruz and the "royal couple" by Miguel Santiago) are

basically one-person creations. Others (e.g., the armadillo from the workshop of Jacobo Ángeles, and the "seven regions of Oaxaca" by Jesús Sosa, his wife, Juanita Ortega, several of their teenage and adult children, and Jesús's sister Francisca Calvo) must be regarded as group efforts.

HISTORY OF OAXACAN WOOD CARVINGS

Oaxacan wood carving does not fit the stereotypical portrait of a Mexican craft in two important respects. Most carvers are monolingual in Spanish and are not regarded by themselves or others as Indians. (Almost all, however, have ancestors who self-identified as Indians and spoke an indigenous language.) The wood carvings are novel creations without longstanding cultural significance.

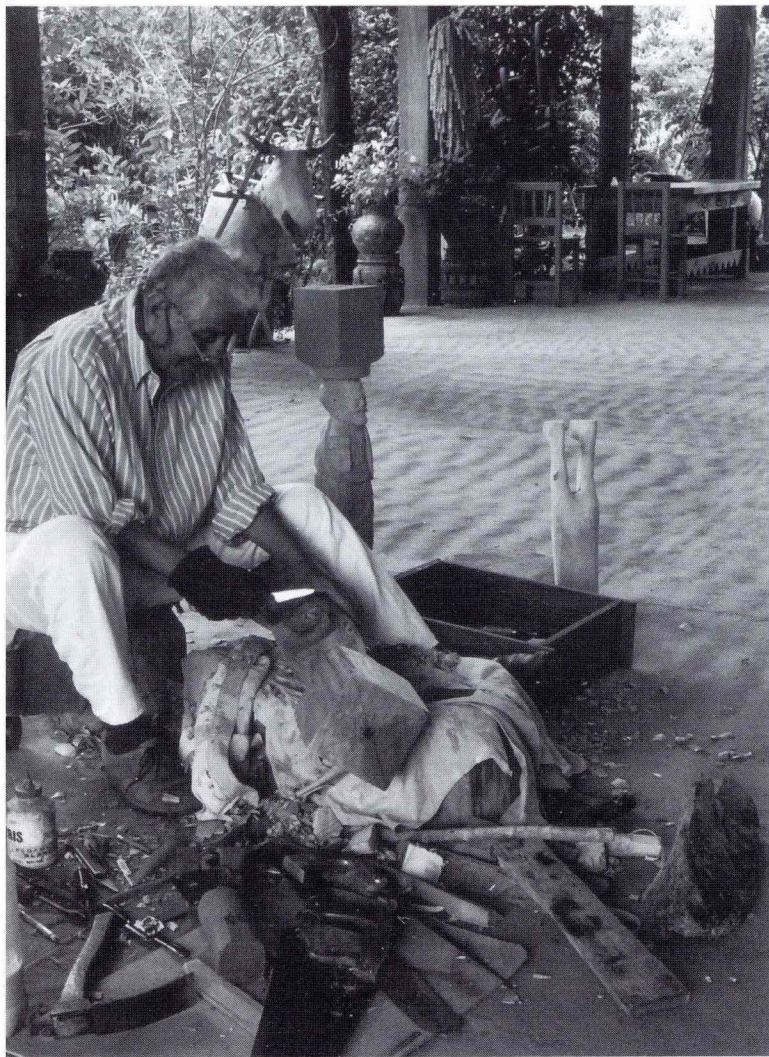
Prior to the 1960s, the great majority of wood carvings in the state of Oaxaca were children's toys, masks used in Carnaval and All Saints' Day celebrations, and figures in Catholic churches. There can be no question that there are direct links between these carvings of the past and certain contemporary pieces such as masks and saints. Furthermore, most wood carvings share design features with established traditions of pottery and weaving



(figure 3) *display area in Manuel Jiménez's workshop*

in Oaxaca and more generally fit in with the magical realism characteristic of much Latin American art and literature. Nonetheless, the origins of the contemporary wood carving tradition must be attributed primarily to the mid-twentieth-century activities of Oaxaca-based shop owners and two particular carvers, the late Manuel Jiménez (figures 2 and 3) of Arrazola and Isidoro Cruz (figure 4) of San Martín Tilcajete.

Jiménez (1919–2005) began carving wooden figures as a boy to pass time while tending animals. In the late



(figure 4) *Isidoro Cruz*

1950s and early 1960s, owners of craft shops in the city of Oaxaca, the state capital, started to buy Jiménez's carvings and show them to folk art collectors such as Nelson Rockefeller. Jiménez, a charismatic, idiosyncratic man interested in religion and healing, fascinated the collectors and reporters who visited him. By the late 1960s, he was giving exhibitions in museums in Mexico City and the United States. The master kept his techniques secret and for a long time the only carvers in Arrazola were Jiménez, his sons, and a son-in-law. In the early 1980s, other carvers in Arrazola began offering pieces to tourists and collectors visiting Jiménez. Still, there were only about six carving families in town as late as 1985. Although Jiménez changed the paints and woods he used over the years, the themes of his carvings—animals and depictions of religious and folkloric figures—remained the same.

Isidoro Cruz learned to carve when he was 13 during

a long illness in the late 1940s. While Cruz was working as an oxcart maker in the city of Oaxaca in 1968, his carvings were noticed by Tonatiuh Gutiérrez, the director of expositions for the National Tourist Council of Mexico. Gutiérrez urged Cruz to make masks for sale. When Gutiérrez soon afterwards became head of a government organization aimed at increasing craft sales, he appointed Cruz as the head of the agency's buying center in Oaxaca. Cruz was open about his artistic techniques and a dozen men in San Martín became carvers in the early 1970s. Although carving and painting techniques have changed greatly over the past several decades, the founder of the craft in San Martín still uses the methods that first brought him success. Cruz's masks (figure 5), animals, and saints are decorated with water-based aniline paints and cochineal (a dye from the crushed bodies of certain insects). They are made from woods traditionally used by carvers for local churches and by the creators of masks for religious festivals. By using these woods and paints, Cruz is consciously demonstrating the links between his carvings and those of the past.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a few men began carving in a third community, La Unión Tejalapan. Most La Unión carvings are inspired by daily lives and religious beliefs of their creators. The graveyard and church wedding scene carvings in this exhibit by Maximino Santiago and Yolanda López exemplify the La Unión style.

Carvers in the 1970s and early 1980s sold their pieces mostly to store owners in the city of Oaxaca. Only Jiménez supported his family by making alebrijes;



(figure 5) *masks by Isidoro Cruz*

other carvers spent more time farming and doing wage labor. Wood carving during this period was a part-time occupation for a few adult men; women and children occasionally helped with painting and sanding. By the mid 1980s, wholesalers and store owners from the United States were regularly visiting wood carving communities to purchase alebrijes. A change in the dollar-peso exchange rate had made selling Mexican folk art more lucrative for dealers from the United States. Dealers could make significant amounts of money by selling carvings in the United States at four to six times their cost in Mexico. As more dealers came, carvers developed new styles in their efforts to attract clients. Animal carvings — sometimes of nonindigenous fauna such as zebras, lions, and elephants — sold best and soon dominated the trade. Aniline paints gave way to house paints introduced to Mexico in the mid 1980s that did not run as much and were less likely to fade in the sun. Carvings became more complicated and paint jobs more ornate as families competed to show their skills.

When the demand for alebrijes increased in the 1980s, male wood carvers needed their wives and children to help with painting and sanding. Carving quickly became a family activity carried out in workshops in which adult men often contributed less than half the total labor. A typical, though hardly universal, division of labor developed in which men carved and did some painting, women painted, and children sanded.

By 1990, most households in Arrazola and San Martín earned part of their income from the sale of carvings. The trade in alebrijes had dramatic effects on the economies of these two communities. In Arrazola some families abandoned agriculture altogether and worked as full-time carvers. Although most carving households in San Martín continued to farm, agriculture became a secondary, subsistence-oriented activity. Because artisans in La Unión were less successful in attracting dealers and tourists, wood-carving households remained



(figure 6) *Inocencio Vásquez carving*

a minority in that community.

MAKING ALEBRIJES

The great majority of alebrijes are made from copalillo (commonly called copal), a light wood that is easily cut when wet and hard after drying. Some carvers specialize by making some or all of their pieces from other types of wood. Chairs, tables, frames, and refrigerator magnets are made from pine. Isidoro Cruz and a few other carvers in San Martín use zompantele (*Erythrina coralloides*). In recent years Manuel Jiménez and his sons Isaías and Angélico have made all their pieces from cedar imported from Guatemala.

In order to take advantage of the malleability of fresh copal, carvers begin working on a piece immediately after removing the bark from a branch (figure 6). Although toolkits vary greatly, almost every carver uses a machete, a large knife, several smaller knives of differing shapes, a hammer, and one or more gouges and chisels. Artisans employ several brushes of different thicknesses when painting a piece. The base coat is ordinarily applied with a wide brush; thinner brushes are used to make finer decorations with geometrical or representational designs. The base coat is occasionally sponged on rather than painted with a brush. Applying the base coat is an easy task sometimes given to children

or others learning to paint. Decorating with the thinner brushes is a more difficult task (figure 7).

SPECIALIZATIONS

Over the past two decades, Oaxacan wood carvers have developed specializations in their efforts to appeal to a diverse clientele. Some artisans make expensive, labor-intensive pieces for collectors such as the *alebrijes* in this exhibit. Others churn out inexpensive pieces for gift shops in the United States and tourists seeking souvenirs. Artisans vary in their painting and carving styles and the size of their pieces. Because there are no long-established wood-carving styles, buyers have few preconceived notions about what to expect and are receptive to new kinds of *alebrijes*.

Animal carvings are omnipresent. These are usually brightly painted and sometimes have exaggerated features that bear little resemblance to what occurs in the natural world. Anthropomorphism is common and carvings of animals playing musical instruments, golfing, fishing, and engaging in other human pursuits are popular. Examples of well-crafted animals in the exhibit include cats (Margarito Melchor Fuentes and Zeny



(figure 7) *María Jiménez painting*

Fuentes), a platypus (Miguel Santiago), a frog (Manuel Jiménez and his sons Angélico and Isaías) a crocodile (Gabino Reyes), a giraffe (Antonio Mandarin), an iguana (Rocio Ramírez and Germán Ramírez), and a black bear, opossum family, nutria, and rabbit (all by Moisés Jiménez, a grandson of Manuel Jiménez). An elaborate armadillo from the workshop of Jacobo Ángeles is decorated with designs used by the Mixtecs who lived at the famous Oaxacan archaeological site at Mitla. Anthropomorphism can be seen in a dog bicyclist and a bicycle-taxi with a giraffe driver and passengers (both by Martín Melchor and Hermelinda Ortega) and in the band of animal musicians (Justo Xuana and Feliza Fabián).

Many carvings depict religious or folkloric beings important in Mexican culture. Angels, saints, virgins, devils, and skeletons and masks used in Carnaval and Day of the Dead celebrations are popular. The exhibit includes traditional masks (Juan Jiménez and Inocencio Vásquez), skeletons (Isidoro Cruz, Margarito Melchor Santiago [playing a guitar!], and Justo Xuana and Feliza Fabián), an angel (Alberto Jiménez), a devil seated on a chair (Inocencio Vásquez), a saint (Agustín Cruz Tinoco), and a Nativity scene (Margarito Melchor Fuentes). A piece in the exhibit by Manuel Jiménez and his sons Isaías and Angélico is especially noteworthy in this context. Since pre-hispanic times, many people in Oaxaca have believed in *nahuales*, protective spirits of humans that often take animal form. The rabbit *nahual* displayed here is one of the last pieces that Manuel Jiménez worked on prior to his death.

Depiction of scenes from daily life and Mexican history are common motifs. These are represented here by a graveyard and church wedding (both by Maximino Santiago and Yolanda López), a shepherd with animals (Gabino Reyes), and a carving of Emiliano Zapata and some soldiers in a carriage (Agustín Cruz Tinoco). The exhibit also includes an elaborate carving of dancers in a stadium (Agustín Cruz Tinoco). The dancers are performing at the Guelaguetza, the major event of a summer festival in Oaxaca. Artisans often make mermaids and dragons and occasionally carve other mythic figures. In addition to the *alebrije* by Porfirio Sosa and Sofía Ojeda, the exhibit has on display St. George and the dragon (Epifanio Fuentes and Laurencia Santiago, figure 8) and another dragon (Gabino Reyes).

Some of the most intriguing carvings are novel creations. The exhibit includes four very different innovations.

(1) Miguel Santiago (figure 9), the carver who gets the highest prices for his pieces, was asked to make whatever he wanted. He chose to carve a "royal couple," doubtless inspired by both historical figures of the past and the artist's imagination.

(2) Jesús Sosa, one of the few wood carvers who has taken formal art lessons, works closely with other members of his large family in designing and making pieces. The family decided to make for the exhibit a large piece called the "seven regions of Oaxaca" that includes many folkloric images and was clearly influenced by the invented tradition of the Guelaguetza.

(3) Martín Melchor and Hermelinda Ortega some years ago experimented by making large, brightly decorated pine chairs in addition to their usual animal musicians, bicyclists, fishers, and golfers. They no longer make these chairs, which did not sell well because of their size and the consequent expense of shipping.

(4) Some of the most eye-catching carvings in the exhibit are four imaginative music stands from

the collection of Christopher Stowens of Newton, Massachusetts. His collection of 50 such stands illustrates the individualistic styles and creativity of the wood carvers. The exhibit includes two music stands with grape and pineapple motifs (Jesús Sosa family), another with Jesus Christ as the base (Agustín Cruz Tinoco), and one with a Guelaguetza theme (Melchor Melchor Calvo).

THE CREATION OF A FINE ART

In the past several years I have been conducting research on attempts by certain wood carvers to have their work recognized as fine art by the gatekeepers and tastemakers of the art world. Such attempts are partly driven by financial motives. The carvers know that pieces esteemed by art connoisseurs sell for high prices. However, in recent years a few wood carvers have begun to self-identify as artists and to downplay the importance of money when explaining their motivation for making pieces.

Oaxacan wood carvers confront formidable obstacles in their efforts to enter the fine arts world. The collectors, curators, and gallery owners who make judgments about the quality of ethnic and tourist



(figure 8) Epifanio Fuentes, Laurencia Santiago, and other family members, Zeny Fuentes on extreme left



(figure 9) *Miguel Santiago*

art objects often emphasize: authenticity — whether a piece can be associated tightly or loosely with a longstanding ethnic aesthetic tradition; individuality — attribution, in most cases, to an individual maker rather than a community or anonymous artisans; originality — while valued pieces must be within a recognized tradition, a premium is nonetheless placed on creative differentiation. The recent invention of Oaxacan wood carvings may make them seem inauthentic. Because most carvings are made by a group of family members, even some of the most aesthetically pleasing pieces cannot be attributed to an individual talented artist. The low standard of living of many wood carvers makes it difficult for them to adopt an “art for art’s sake” philosophy emphasizing experimentation, originality, and a relative lack of concern for commercial considerations. Instead, most artisan families attempt to adopt successful product lines in which similar pieces are repetitively made. Therefore, even among economically successful carvers, only a few come close to acting in ways that match Western notions of what artists do.

The great majority of pieces in this exhibit were

commissioned by either private collectors or the University of Iowa Museum of Art. Because the creators of these pieces were conscious that these buyers value originality and technical proficiency, the carvings you see here are examples of what they consider to be their very best work.

— *Michael Chibnik*

photo credits: Figure 1- Mike McClellen; Figures 2-7, 9 - Fidel Ugarte; Figure 8 - Don Roberts; Figure of Armadillo on back cover - Mike McClellen

Jacobo Ángeles San Martín Tilcajete
Armadillo
Copal



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