



Crafting Tradition: Oaxacan Wood Carvings

October 28, 2017 – January 21, 2018



Workshop of Jacobo Ángeles, *Armadillo*, 2005, copal and acrylic paint, 11.5 x 18.5 x 12.5 inches
University of Iowa Museum of Art Permanent Collection Museum Purchase, 2015.104

Introduction to Crafting Tradition: Oaxacan Wood Carvings

The wood carvings from the Mexican state of Oaxaca in this exhibition are part of a longstanding tradition for creating folk arts and crafts. Mexico in general and Oaxaca specifically have produced varieties of textiles, ceramics, sculptures, and other art forms for many years. Most often, these art forms continue with the skills and designs handed down from generation to generation. However, the tradition of creating wood carvings is relatively young in Oaxaca. Individual artisans in a few small towns began making wood carvings during the mid-20th century. These sculptures did not become widely known or popular until the 1980s.

Households in small towns such as San Martín Tilcajete and Arrazola are more likely than not to have at least one person, if not the entire family, earning money through the creation of these sculptures. Each artist or family has developed unique subjects, patterns, and colors to distinguish their work from those of other households. The exhibition includes everything from common and fantastic animals to religious figures and scenes from everyday life.

These sculptures were commissioned by the University of Iowa Museum of Art and are part of the UIMA permanent collection. Michael Chibnik, Professor Emeritus (Anthropology, University of Iowa) curated the exhibition. Dr. Chibnik began visiting Oaxaca in the 1980s, making contacts with the sculptors and learning more about their history. He began conducting research on the wood carving trade in the 1990s, which led to the commissioning of these sculptures and ultimately to having them placed in the collection of the UIMA. They are being shared with Sioux City through the Legacies for Iowa, a University of Iowa Museum of Art Collections-Sharing Project.

Where is Oaxaca?

Oaxaca (pronounced “wa-ha’-ka” or “wah-hah’-cah”) is a state in southern Mexico along the Pacific Ocean. Oaxaca is well-known for its sixteen existing indigenous people and cultures.

The best known of these are the Zapotecs and Mixtecs. There are also important ancient sites in Oaxaca, including Monte Albán, an ancient city with a large pyramid complex, and Mitla, an important religious site that is well more than 1,000 years old.

How long have people in Oaxaca been making wood sculptures?

For more than 2,000 years, people living in this area have been making remarkable animal and figurative sculptures, mostly using clay or stone. Over the nearly 500 years since Spain colonized the Mexican region, folk art traditions have continued, but not without significant changes. Most of the objects produced before the Spanish colonization were connected to religious rituals. When contemporary folk artists in Oaxaca create religious figures, these works now refer to Catholicism.

Folk art is generally considered to be art made by people who have had no formal artistic education. Often this work is anonymous, made by indigenous people and craftspeople from small towns and villages using traditional methods. These crafts are passed down over generations and from neighbor to neighbor within a community. Because of Mexico’s large geographical area, communities often live in partial isolation and maintain distinct cultures and traditions. The diversity of the local cultures and abundant availability of raw materials from Mexico is highlighted in the varied skills and arts that are created by artists.

In most ways, wood carving in Oaxaca is a new art form. While people in Oaxaca and throughout Mexico have made wood sculptures either as toys or as objects within churches or religious celebrations, the creation of wood sculptures for pure artistic pleasure dates back only to the late 1950s or early 1960s. In terms of wood carvings becoming a regional tradition, it was only during the 1980s that a few towns in Oaxaca became very active in the production of these sculptures.

How did the wood carving tradition begin?

These sculptures are often referred to as “alebrijes.” This word came from a dream that Pedro Linares Lopez, a folk artist in Mexico City, had in 1936. The dream inspired Linares to begin creating the fantastic animals and natural objects from his dream, all of which had shouted the word “alebrijes” in his dream. Linares became famous in Mexico and around the world for his imaginative sculptures made of papier mâché. In time, alebrije came to refer to any Mexican fantastic sculpture made of paper or wood.

The Oaxacan artist who is perhaps most responsible for popularizing the wood version of alebrijes was Manuel Juan Jiménez Ramírez (1919-2005), who died shortly after completing his Rabbit Nahuatl in this exhibition. Manuel Jiménez lived in Arrazola, a small town in the foothills near Monte Albán. He became noted for his wood carvings by the late 1950s, and began exhibiting them throughout Mexico and the United States by the late 1960s. For many years he kept his techniques a secret, divulging them only to his family (also included in the exhibition are works by his grandson, Moisés).

However, beginning in the 1980s, more people in Arrazola began making the sculptures. Today, Arrazola boasts more than 80 families who create alebrijes, leading the town of little more than 1,000 residents to refer to itself as the *cuna de alebrijes* (cradle of fantastic wooden figures).

Another town that has become a wood-carving center is San Martín Tilcajete, located about 20 miles south of Arrazola. Like Arrazola, the town has fewer than 2,000 residents. By the 1960s, the town had developed a craft-making reputation for its beautiful embroidery. However, wood carving was popularized there beginning in the early 1970s thanks to one man. Isidoro Cruz (1934-2015), a talented carver of wood masks, caught the attention of the Mexican National Tourist Council. He was hired to run the state craft buying center. In that position, Cruz not only encouraged others to learn his skills; he was able to purchase some of the carvings by others in his community. Today, wood carving makes up the largest portion of the town's economy.

How do they make these sculptures?

The sculptors primarily use wood from the copalillo tree (commonly known as the copal tree). This tree has been important for centuries in this region, used primarily for the ceremonial incense made from its aromatic resin. Carving begins as soon as possible while the wood remains wet and can take anywhere from hours to a month. The basic figure is created by the sculptor using a machete, and then by a series of smaller knives and/or chisels.

There are many varieties of copal tree in Mexico and in countries farther south. Generally, they are medium-sized, are considered to be softwood, and produce many curved branches. One of the first things that a wood carver must consider is the shape of the piece of wood he has to work with. More often than not, he chooses his subject based on the contours of the branch.

Once the carving is complete, the sculpture is left to dry; this process can take many months. Frequently, the wood is treated with gasoline or other substances to make certain that all insects have been destroyed. After filling any cracks that occur during the drying, the sculptor applies a base coat of paint using either a wide brush or a sponge. After this coat is dry, small brushes are used to apply the final painted design. Initially, most paints were based on natural materials. As the sculptures have become more popular, most artists have begun using acrylic paint for its durability.

As each town began making the sculptures, the work began with men. During the 1980s, the wood carvings became increasingly popular. Often the men would continue to do the carving, but women and children in the family would sand and paint the sculptures. By 1990, most households in Arrazola and San Martín Tilcajete were involved in the making and selling of the alebrijes.

How have these sculptures become so popular?

Each of the two towns producing a large portion of these sculptures had advantages. Arrazola is located very close



Martin Melchor, *Bicycle-Taxi with Giraffe Driver and Passengers*, 2005
pine, copal, reed, and acrylic paint, 11.5 x 13 x 9 inches
University of Iowa Museum of Art Permanent Collection Museum Purchase, 2015.108a-f

to Monte Albán, an important tourist destination. San Martín Tilcajete received financial and promotional backing from the national government.

But basic economics have fueled both the creation of the wood carvings and the purchase of them. The wood has been readily available (though there are issues now with overharvesting copal trees for sculpture production). The tools are basic. The paints are relatively inexpensive (many originally produced their own paints using local natural supplies). And labor is anyone in the household who can help. This made the initial prices for these sculptures quite low. As tourists began to purchase the sculptures, some sculptors focused on carvings they could produce easily, quickly, and inexpensively.

However, other sculptors quickly realized the advantage of working within a very new tradition: since there was no set of rules for techniques or styles, these sculptors could actively shape the tradition by being as innovative as possible. They continue to find more imaginative and challenging subjects while improving their designs and techniques. When the University of Iowa Museum of Art commissioned the sculptures for this exhibition, the sculptors were fully aware that their buyer valued originality and excellent craftsmanship. Therefore, what we see are examples of the best work these sculptors could create.



Jesús Sosa Calvo, Juanita Ortega, and other family members, *Seven Regions of Oaxaca*, 2005
copal and acrylic paint, 69 x 15 x 15 inches (approximately)
University of Iowa Museum of Art Permanent Collection Museum Purchase, 2015.106

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Rocio Ramírez and Germán Ramírez (Arrazola), *Iguana*, 2005
copal and acrylic paint, 7 x 19 x 20 inches
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Museum Purchase, 2015.98