



Oaxaca Times

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OAXACA, OAX

JIMENEZ THE ART PIONEER OF ARRAZOLA

The Oaxaca valley nurtures an encyclopedic diversity of crafts, some of whose origins date back more than a thousand years. There is black pottery, serape weaving, basket weaving, tin, jewelry, and puppet making. For the night of the radishes, in December, Oaxacan's carve elaborate scenes out of radishes. For funerals, they paint with sand. Few places offer a richer, more complicated variety of cultures. Vast and mountainous, the state of Oaxaca is home to sixteen linguistically distinct Indian tribes, who continue to survive within the countries dominant culture of the Spanish speaking mestizos.

History lives everywhere. The great Zapotec ruins of Monte Alban not only survive above the capital city, but grow, as pyramids are continually being unearthed and excavated. Archaeological surveys pieced together ancient settlements throughout the state. One carver dug up a pre-Hispanic funerary urn in his backyard and now uses the hole as a barbeque pit. Pelota Mixteca, a ball game ten times older than baseball, ranks behind only soccer and basketball in popularity among team sports. Hundreds of active Catholic churches - many of them more than three hundred years old - stand as reminders that the Spaniards came, conquered and, even after Mexico's independence, stayed on.

Most of the artisans now carving begin within the past twelve years. Lacking the constraints of a long artistic tradition, they have been free to mine the region's creative heritage - its jumbled culture of Indian and Spanish, religious and commercial, foreign and local. Motifs seem to change monthly, driven by competition.

As with most folk art, quality varies as widely as the subject matter, from carver to carver, and within the cumulative work of an individual. The magic is often serendipitous. Artisans - they almost never refer to themselves as artists - are the first to admit they don't always know why a piece is deemed good. If it sells, they say it is good.



On the other hand, buyers who try to turn their suppliers into cheap, high-volume jobbers are often disappointed. Consistent, dependable, repetitive these people are not. One jewelry store owner from Vancouver, British Columbia brought down five samples of Northwest coast Indian art - sacred symbols from a distant world - and asked a carver to knock off one hundred of each. The jeweler even flew down an Indian artist to show him how. It didn't work. The carver got bored less than half way through and began changing each piece just a little. He finally abandoned the order.

Buyers with more noble intentions are quick to discover that buying and selling Third World folk art is not an easy business. Competition among dealers is intense, top quality work is scarce and shipping costs from pueblo to gallery are high. Retailers in the United States must generally charge four to five times what the carvers are paid just to stay in the black. The market for carvings also is confused and fragmented. They have sold

at fancy galleries for up to \$3,500 and at department stores for a lot less. They have been direct-mailed out of a catalog and sawed in half and marketed as napkin holders. They can be found in art museums in tacky border-markets.

The emergence of this art form is easy to chart. Oaxacans have carved toys for children and masks for fiestas for five hundred years. The style that dominates today, however, can be traced back to the iracible seventy-one year old Manuel Jimenez from the tiny village of Arrazola. It was Jimenez who first used the wood that all the carvers now use, copal, after experimenting with a dozen others. It was Jimenez who took the tradition of miniature toy making and gave his carvings a grander scale and finer execution, and who tackled more ambitious subject matter. It was Jimenez who through his tremendous commercial success established the international market.

It wasn't easy. For thirty five years Jimenez was among the poorest peasants in a very poor village. Settle tightly at the base of Monte Alban, Arrazola is a former sugar hacienda only now recovering from a century of serfdom. Jimenez herded goats as a boy, making models of his flock in clay. For twenty years he moved from one job to another - cane cutter, mason, band leader, barber. He carved masks to sell at Monte Alban. Finally, in 1957 he was discovered by an American living in Oaxaca, Arthur Train, who launched his career.

"I've never seen another like him." Train, who has since retired, says now. "The individuality of Jimenez is unique. You say 'Three Kings' and he can visualize them, and in his own way. In all the years I was here I ran into very few people whose work really expressed something of themselves. For Jimenez that was always true."

CARVING DREAMS

Ninety percent of the carver live in three villages near Oaxaca - Arrazola, San Martin Tilcajete and La Union Tejalapan. Since 1986 when sales first soared these villages have been transformed. One in three families devote some time to carving. Buoyed by their export art, dozens of carvers have built new houses, replacing adobe or bamboo with brick. Curiously they chose not to leave their villages; their ties to their families and community are too strong. The most successful have bought cars. Many more have bought farm land. A few have been flown to the States to give demonstrations as honored guests of art galleries and museums.

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From Page No. 1

THE DAY OF THE SUN

Following a three hour wait, forty rockets were fired from the four cardinal points at Monte Alban. The best time had ar rived to witness the eclipse of the sun and the moon. Conch horns sounded from atop the pyramids, and a hundred or more Oaxacan feathered dancers descended to the great plaza. The ancient Meso-American rite was once again to be celebrated - the death of the old sun and the birth of the new sun.

Ancient Monte Alban was the capital of the Zapotec civilization. The decendants who participated in the celebration are from Teotitlan, Santa Ana del Valle, Cuilapan, Zaachila and other regions of Oaxaca, Mexico. All ages danced to the music of rudimentary pre-Hispanic instruments blended with the "13th Sound" classical music written by distinguished Mexican

composer: maestro Julian Carrillo. "Day in, day out, the sun sweeps across the celestial vault, then descends to the underworlds. It conquers the Tenebrae, rises and, with serpent of fire, beheads the moon." Superb text by Adela Fernandez accompanied the sun death ritual. Then, the sun and moon cosumated an age-old tryst in cosmic embrace and, thereby, coupled the human and the divine.

Young Mexican musicians played autochtonous, mestizo and contemporary instruments in a concert that spanned eras, from pre-Hispanic to industrial rock, and concluded in magnificent simplicity with the notes of the traditional Oaxacan song "La Zandunga." The burdens of all the myths and beliefs of forefathers past and present became instantly one.

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Like the rest of rural Mexico, Oaxaca is a land rich in superstition. Goats are the devil, black dogs are good luck, snake bite cures rabies, mezcal stops diarrhea, and skunk meat clears up acne. Witches and other temptresses inhabit the hills outside all three villages; there is a rock in San Martin that turns into a woman at noon. And if you don't think Adrian Xuana's grandfather could really fly, try telling that to Xuana.

Fanciful carving comes not from mushrooms or mezcal but from the carver's simple willingness to imagine - with extraordinary fecundity - a world less exhausting, dreary, and filled with death than their own.

Still, the carvers are wary. The better ones have become more worldly in recent years, and they are working like there is no tomorrow. The Melchor family says "This work has been a blessing from God, but who knows how long it will last. That's why we have to work night and day. Frankly we don't take a day of rest. We never stop working. While we sleep the other members of the family paint. We are trying to finish our house. When the good times pass, when the buyers stop coming, I want to at least have the house."



excerpt from article by:
Shepard Barbash
photographs by:
Vicki Ragan

A TIME FOR CHANGE

WE ARE PLEASE TO ANNOUNCE TO ALL OUR STUDENTS AND READERS THAT THE INSTITUTO DE COMUNICACION Y CULTURA & OAXACA TIMES MOVED TO THE THIRD BLOCK OF THE ALCALA ST. 307-12 4 BLOCKS FROM ZOCALO THE BEAUTIFUL WALKING STREET OF OUR CITY.

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SAN RAMON

On the Thirty-first of August at 5PM at the La Merced Church in our city we celebrate San Ramon's day. All the pets of Oaxacan families get to dress up in different costumes and parade for visitors and locals. A parrot might become a bride or a clown for the day, a dog will dress like a ballarina - a frog will wear a sombrero and a serape. You talk with the owners and touch their pets - admire the owner's talent and spirit of fun. Be with you Oaxacan neighbors for a day. Take your camera and your appetite to savor the local finger food! Don't miss it! See you there!



TOURIST INFORMATION
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Phone: 6-48-28
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LETTERS FROM OUR READERS



Dear Yolanda,

Once again my thoughts of your wonderful city were revived by the arrival of the Oaxaca Times.

In my travels I find myself comparing each place with Oaxaca: the unspoiled Indian and Spanish cultures, the beautiful Spanish Colonial architecture mixing with that of the native Indians, the unique style of local crafts (pottery, weaving, and jewelry), the beautiful people who made me feel at home and among friends.

Thank you for the Oaxaca Times and bringing beautiful thoughts into my life each month.

I look forward to visiting with my Oaxacan family soon.

Charles Torian
Long Beach, Cal.
U.S.A.

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Taxes and tips: All services and products in Mexico include the IVA (ad valorem) tax. Tips to waiters for a good service are 15% percent of the bill. Check your bill to see if the tip has been included. Bellhops at the hotels and skycaps at the airport are generally tipped 1 to 3 dollars.

Change is usually given in pesos.

24-hour Bank Machines: Visa and Mastercard Ave. Hidalgo # 821 or around the corner on the first street of Armenta y Lopez.

Bancomer: their machine is located on Independencia Ave. 801 (Carnet cards only)

Banamex open from 9 to 1:30 and 4 to 6 pm. Dollar exch. 9-11:30 and 4-5 pm.

Most banks open only in the morning from 9-1. Dollar exchange from 9-11:30. Their service is slow so if you want to take advantage of your time go to any of the money exchange agencies that advertise with us.

Speed limits: 60 kilometers or 37 miles in the school zone; 40 kilometers or 24 miles downtown; 90 kilometers or 55 miles on highways.

Long distance: Dial 98 for international calls and 95 for the United States and Canada, then dial code and area. The number of 100-peso coins you will need will immediately appear on the screen of the telephone. Then dial the complete number you wish to call. For collect calls dial 09. There are telephone booths in various shopping or at the airport. Some take credit cards.

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