



Oaxaca Times

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Inner life of Oaxaca

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Why Oaxaca?

MARY ELLEN SANGER

Over the last ten years I have kept close at hand these words from the great Mexican journalist German Dehesa: "Getting to Oaxaca is not a question of trains or planes; it requires an adventurous spirit and open heart... I suspect that Oaxaca's location is neither geographical nor historical – it is mythical."

Why does Oaxaca inspire even the greats to write prose that extols an almost sublime nature? What attracts so many adventurous spirits and open hearts to Oaxaca?

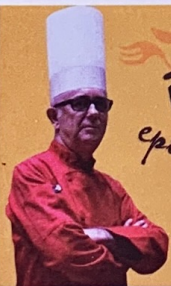
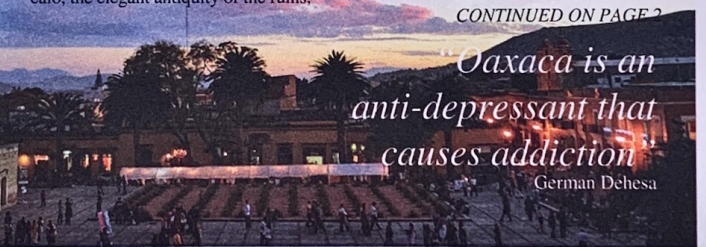
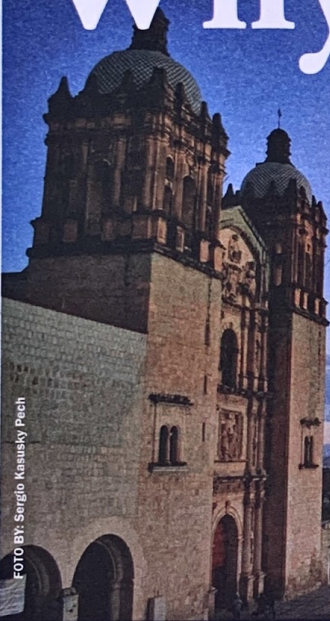
Of course, it is that long, lush and sensual list of attractions and festivals that appear on some of the most colorful pages of the tourist literature: the dances of the Guelaguetza with their ruffled pinks and oranges, the grinning skulls of Day of the Dead, the whimsical radish worlds that grace the Night of the Radishes, the seven moles with their hundreds of ingredients, the markets heaped with amaranth and grasshoppers, the cobbled streets and colorful doorways, the brass and balloons of the zócalo, the elegant antiquity of the ruins.

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"Oaxaca is an anti-depressant that causes addiction"

German Dehesa

FOTO BY: Sergio Kasusky Pich



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FOTO BY ULISES ESTRADA
Macedonio Alcalá Theatre

The rainbow array of handicrafts that are unique to the zone. It is all these things, of course. Oaxaca possesses a heady concentration of colors, flavors, scents and ideas that doesn't occur anywhere else on the planet. People come to Oaxaca expecting to confront something truly different. And Oaxaca never lets them down. But I suspect that what brings people back time and again to Oaxaca and her environs, and what makes people stay -- is something intangible. Something mythical.

It's as if visitors are invited to invent their own creation myths from sunlight and petal-dyed fiber, from black clay and black beans with epazote. There is, perhaps, a quality of light that occurs in Oaxaca, as the sun spills from around afternoon clouds, over the skirts of the mountains that ring the city, and into the narrow streets, that feels elemental, original, novel -- the light

of the primordial soup. There is a breath to the city, accented by the indigenous, that sings in a new scale to which our ears may be unaccustomed, but we know we like the harmony. So we fill our heads and hearts and hands with all these elements that are Oaxaca -- from her stones and her stories to her struggle and her strum -- we weave it all together and mold this new world around our old one. It has been done over and over again in Mexico. It is an old story. And we become part of it in Oaxaca. Through the sudden confrontation of the known and the unknown, we create something new. And we come away (if we come away) changed. And if we stay, we experience that change each day. Tomorrow we will try those tiny nisperos in sweet syrup. The woman in the red checkered apron who sells them on the corner of Morelos and García Vigil will have a story to tell.

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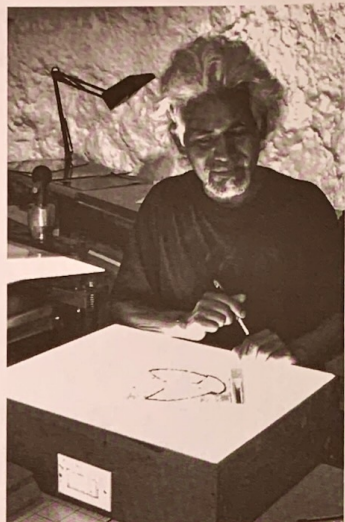
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Teaching in the Museum for Identity in Tecucugalpa



This is a light box used to create a design

BY BARBARA MORRIS

Reyes Gomez never intended to become an artist. He bends down to pluck a seed-laden branch from an epazote plant in his overgrown compound a few blocks north of M. Bravo Street. Carefully, he places it in a plastic bag and hands it to his visitor.

We share a love for the soil and for growing food. It's June and he wants to get out before the rains come to the small plot he tills just south of town. He'll need a few days, he says, to plant potatoes and sew papaya seeds and to "recharge the batteries."

Producing his art is a painstaking process. Reyes spends his nights alone in his workshop laboriously creating one or two prints from metal plates on a manual press. He tries to catch some sleep in the mornings.

By mid-afternoon he can be found in Plaza La Bastida not far from Santo Domingo Square with two boxes of his work to sell. Most are small etchings in indigo, red, brown and black.

Behind him, he's surrounded by stalls of colorfully embroidered huipiles and hand-woven skirts. To both sides of him there are other artists with oil paintings and watercolors.

He is quick to point out that he's the only etcher there.

"I may be the only etcher in the world who sells his work on the street," he says.

He's been doing so since 2007, when he returned to Oaxaca after studying in Europe.

"I'm the only one who's written a book in Spanish and English explaining the etching process," he adds, brandishing a slim blue volume with the title *Flor y Canto*.

Maybe he's also the only Oaxacan artist who intended to become a surgeon.

In fact, Reyes hails from a long line of Mixe healers. His father was a shaman in Santa Maria Alotepec, where Reyes was born, a six-hour bus ride south of Oaxaca, as was his grandmother. Both of his sisters are nurses.

The artist as teacher

He used to practice making wood carvings in order to train himself to use a knife.

And while he was enrolled in medical school in the city of Oaxaca, he wanted to prepare himself to become a reconstructive surgeon. So he took classes at the Rufino Tamayo Graphic Workshop in order to learn to draw the human body.

"I was practicing with watercolor and making paintings and just throwing them in the trash," he says.

"One day I noticed my neighbor had collected all of them from the trash and had papered her walls with them."

She wasn't the only one who noticed his talent. An Austrian professor who was teaching a histology course at the medical school watched him making watercolors of the human body.

"You paint like Wolfgang Hutter," he said. Hutter, a painter and printmaker and one of the founders of the Vienna school of fantastic realism, happened to be the professor's childhood friend.

He showed some of his paintings to Hutter, then a teacher of applied arts in Vienna. Soon Reyes had a scholarship to study in Austria. But in the back of his mind, his purpose was still to use the art training to become a better surgeon.

Europe changed him. He gained a new consciousness of race and ethnicity.

"I discovered I was brown," he says. "I discovered I could use art to show how great my country is and my country's people."

He also gained a new calling.

"I wanted to share my knowledge," he says.

He returned to Mexico with a master's in art education, began traveling around the country conducting workshops in print-making for children and founded Casa Cultural Condoy, a one-room arts and crafts school for children in his hometown. It provides a way out of poverty.

"They don't have to wash dishes," he says. "They can make masks or weave baskets or make pullovers."

"I taught them the first time how to make prints in 1998. Now there's a press," he says.

Selling his prints on the street has taught Reyes how to work economically. And how to make a living from art. Lessons he shares.

"I teach people how to make a press for five dollars. I teach them how to produce dyes and how to make paper. They can produce something of high quality, but cheaply. They can create their own workshop."

Currently he is working on a new book, *Alien Tales*, about how to make woodblock prints, and hopes to have a video out soon.

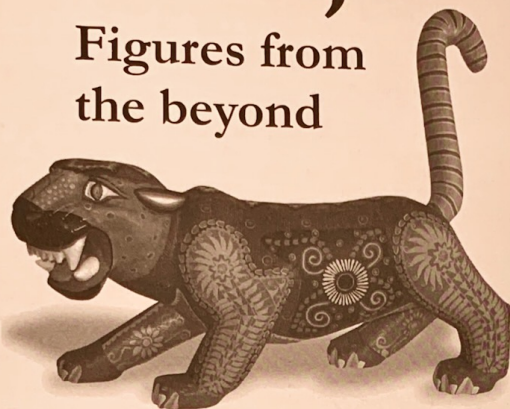
"All I do is teach people what I do," he says.

"I have a reason to exist. I have a purpose in life. I will teach my brothers how to fish."

For more information about Reyes Gomez and to see samples of his work, visit his website <http://www.reyesgomez.com/>

Alebríjes

Figures from the beyond



HOW TO GET THERE:

Both San Martín Tilcajete and Arrazola are about 45 minutes from Oaxaca Centro. You can get to Arrazola by bus or colectivo from the Central de Abasto. Collectivos direct to San Martín leave from an off-the-street parking lot a few blocks below the Zócalo on Arista Street (the College of Medicine is on the corner). Alternatively, you can take a colectivo from the Central for Ocotlán and ask them to let you off at the entrance to San Martín. It is opposite a big restaurant called Las Azucenas, where you might want to stop for lunch. From there, you will have about a fifteen minute walk into town.

To contact the artists about their work, you can visit the pueblos in person.

A green donkey with horns, a purple iguana, a blue polka-dotted horse, a porcupine with red and yellow spikes – who would have thought these curious and colorful animals which prowl on street corners and in markets had been inspired by a night mare? Named alebríjes, (gypsy slang for “a difficult tangled thing, shaped in confusing or fantastic figures”) were invented by Pedro Linares in Mexico City as a result of fever dreams. He dreamt of being in a strange and foreign world populated by bizarre and unfamiliar creatures with wild colors and designs. When he recovered, Linares wanted to share these animals with his family, so he began molding them in paper. Manuel Jiménez, a talented carver of Arrazola, was inspired by Linares’ creations and began carving alebríjes in wood. He experimented with different kinds of wood and found that Copalito was best because it has a small heart and no layers, so the animals can be carved in one piece without splitting. At first he was the only person in Oaxaca carving alebríjes. Later, he was discovered by an American patron, and soon his pieces were famous all over Mexico. Other carvers in Arrazola followed suit, and soon there was a boom in the little animal industry. After 1985, many other artisans joined the trend. Today, the villages of Arrazola and San Martín Tilcajete are famous for the magical alebríjes.

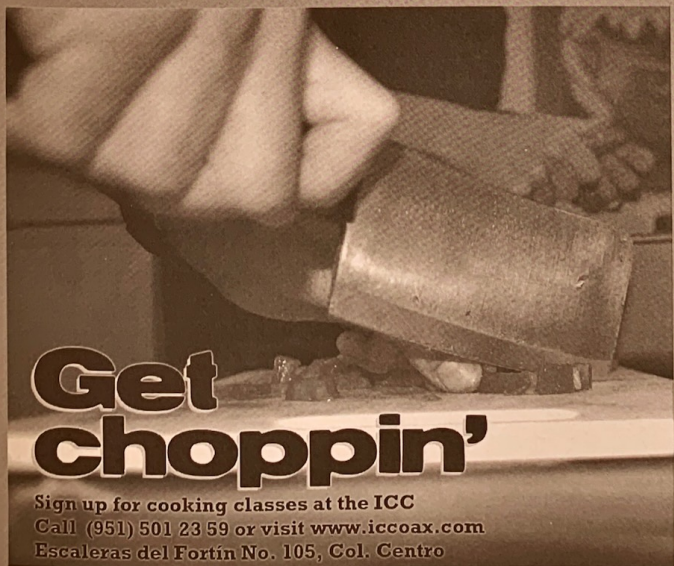
Zapotecs have always been carvers, making toys and

masks, and alebríjes open up a world for the imagination. Artisans began creating all kinds of fantastic beings: devils, angels, aliens, naguals, mermaids, and every kind of animal, real and imaginary, decorating them in

all varieties of color and design. Motifs tend to change monthly depending on demand as well as the restless inspiration of the artists. What you see in an artisan’s workshop one month may not be repeated the

next, though there are standard favorites, such as the iguanas and armadillos. Quality varies greatly, not only among the artisans but in the work of individuals. With some artisans, each piece is unique. Others hire staff to reproduce a popular design. In the US and elsewhere, alebríjes sell for three to five times what we would pay for them here, and you will find everywhere from sophisticated art galleries to cheap markets.

It is fascinating to watch the artists at work. All the carving is done with machetes and kitchen or pocket knives, which must be sharpened several times a day. A dull knife is more likely to cause cuts—a definite hazard of the job. Most alebríjes take one to five days to carve, and a week to a month to paint, depending on the design. Little ones cost less because tourists expect that, however, in some cases they are more difficult to make than larger ones. Most of the people in Arrazola and San Martín Tilcajete are involved in making alebríjes; it is a family affair. Generally, the men carve and the women paint, but both jobs are equally important. Knock on almost any door in these villages and you will find artisans at work. I recommend visiting many studios – it’s fun seeing the different styles of the artists. One of the favorites are, Jacobo Angeles, www.tilcajete.org, María Jiménez Ojeda and brothers. 10 Ignacio Allende St., Juventino Melchor, 14 Reforma St Ventura Fabián, 13 Reforma St. All of them from San Martín Tilcajete.



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