



The Craft Market

A Glimpse of the Essence of Michoacán

Elsie Montiel*



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Michoacán is one of those places where the conquest was at its fiercest but also brought forth some of the best results. The Michoacán indigenous groups decidedly opposed the invasion of Spanish soldiers, who massacred them indiscriminately. Later, during the first years of pacification, they were decimated by the demands of the *encomienda* system.¹ Evangelization, despite its moral burden and the frontal attack on indigenous beliefs and traditions, was actually a breather for the population when it was led by figures like Don Vasco de Quiroga, who argued for their rights and sought a way to adapt them to the new rules. The evangelizers took into account local customs to disseminate not only the word of God, but also part of the knowledge accumulated down the centuries in Spain, namely some of the skills and trades. These, combined with indigenous dexterity and creativity,

* Editor of *Voices of Mexico*.

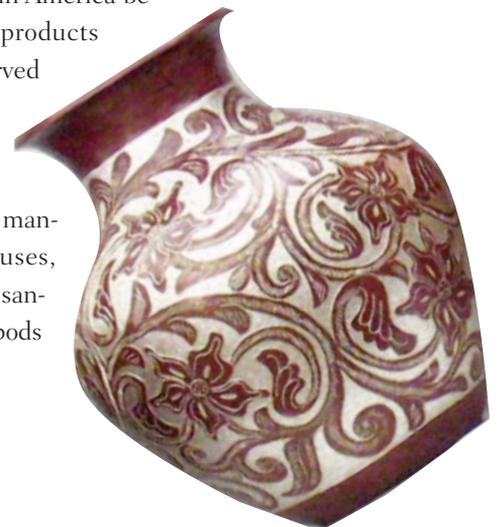


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turned the area into one of the regions richest in the production of all types of objects made of the finest, most varied materials used to trade. Even today, many of these objects are coveted as ornaments because of their beauty and exquisite manufacture.

A POPULAR FIESTA AT EASTER

The Uruapan craft market, or *tianguis*, is held in March and April every year at Easter time. This market has been dubbed the largest in Mexico and Latin America because of the number of towns that participate and the variety of products and materials to be found there: textiles, ceramics, clay, lacquer, carved wood, copper objects, musical instruments, items made of palm leaves, animal skins and leather. This year, for example, more than 1,200 artisans came from all over the state to sell their products in the city's main plaza. Here, you can purchase all manner of items both for daily use (jugs, sets of dishes, blouses, wooden cooking spoons, boxes, baskets, lamps, guitars, sandals, blankets) and as ornaments (flat, green *guaje* pods and hand-painted trays decorated with *maque*, a pre-Hispanic and colonial tech-



nique typical of Uruapan, which had practically disappeared but has recently been revived; all kinds of clay, copper and carved wood). For two weeks, the plaza brings together a sampling of almost all the products that can be purchased in Michoacán.

The *tianguis* is inaugurated by a parade of representatives from all the region's towns from the National Park on the edge of the city to the plaza by way of Carranza Street. The townspeople wait excitedly for the parade every year, with its additional attraction: many of the craftspeople carry with them small bags or baskets of samples of their wares that they give away to spectators on the way. For the children, these are little treasures to be piled up on the sidewalk and then boasted about to their friends. Foreigners are delighted when brown, generous hands hold out miniature pieces of copper, wooden spoons, clay containers, items made of palm leaves, finger traps and other objects that are the pride of entire communities specialized in making them.

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The contingents are accompanied by marching bands, whose cadences are catching, making the parading women sway to the music. Their outfits at first seem to be variations on a single theme, but gradually, you start to see the differences in the skirts, sashes, ribbons and colors that indicate their origin in one community or town or another. For example, the women from San Juan Nuevo are distinguished by their beautiful shiny, transparent blouses that look like lace, but are not. Without a doubt another color fest are the innumerable ribbons woven in with their braids that go almost all the way down their backs. The women are radiant in their finery, with their elegant, graceful hairdos.

Here is the true essence of Michoacán, its towns and its people, who preserve traditions, trades, customs, with the unusual mix of simple dress that highlight the beauty of the robust, brown bodies. The murmurs of their mother tongue, that they keep alive, like P'urhépecha, the most common language spoken at the *tianguis*, are heard in the streets and parks, soft and at the same time indistinguishable, with sounds we are not used to hearing, impossible to define, as though the diction of the words were lost, slipping over the lips without beginning or end.

The parade features those who underline the trade typical of their towns, like the craftspeople from Santa Clara, who have worked copper for centuries. They march with a flatbed truck featuring a little portable workshop showing off their dexterity.

During the two weeks the *tianguis* lasts, other activities attract the public, like the State Craft Contest, the Traditional Dress Pageant and the Popular Food Show.



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A UNIQUE SPACE FOR FOLK ART

When talking about crafts, we should distinguish between what is produced in great numbers for utilitarian purposes and the kind made by the most dedicated artisans, using all their knowledge and trade techniques to produce unique pieces. The latter are the ones that travel round the world and are promoted as the seal of identity of a people or region. In the case of Michoacán, the beautifully made folk art of all kinds can mainly be seen during the craft contests usually organized by state and municipal government cultural, economic development or tourism institutions. For the last 47 years,

a statewide contest has been held in Uruapan, bringing together the best pieces of craftsmanship from more than 50 communities. These contests aim to be an incentive to maintain the quality of folk art made with traditional techniques. But, creating a piece like this requires time and resources. So, like with all these kinds of activities, artisans do not have the economic freedom to work full time on a trade that does not offer them a way to make a living. For that reason, together with the prizes, the contest serves to promote the sale of the competing pieces to private buyers, gallery owners and folk art dealers from specialized shops in Mexico and other parts of the world.

More than 1,000 pieces of all kinds of folk art are entered in the competition: a) pottery: polychrome, high temperature, highly burnished, glazed, negative, sanded, leadless; b) *maque*; c) lacquer; d) plant fibers: *paniku*, palm leaves, reeds, cane and *chuspata*; e) miniatures; f) toys; g) paper cut-outs; h) feather art; i) cane paste; j) copper; k) gold and silver jewelry; l) wooden carving;





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m) wooden furniture; n) masks; o) musical instruments; and p) textiles: colored with natural dyes, or embroidered cotton, made of worked cotton; of finely woven *patakua*, of wool woven on waist looms or on back-strap looms; and cotton and woolen sashes.

Uruapan's state competition has become nationally and internationally famous; it boasts magnificent pieces at reasonable prices because they are sold directly by the makers. Regardless of the benefits of exhibiting at this fair, it is surprising just how many people come from throughout Mexico and abroad to the opening of the display of the winning pieces not to admire them, but to fight to buy them before anyone else can. So, a folk-art lover who arrives at the exhibit two hours after it opens probably will not see that year's winning pieces. This brings to mind the suggestion that the pieces be exhibited for a day, even if they have already been purchased, so the public can see the artisans' mastery of their trade. That would eliminate the impression that, instead of attending a competition that aims to preserve the quality of folk art, we are really visiting a huge bazaar where pieces are bought at a good price to be sold later, whether in pesos or foreign currency, for a great deal more. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The *encomienda* was a trusteeship labor system imposed by the Spanish crown from 1493 to 1791 in New Spain whereby overlords were granted the guardianship of indigenous people's souls with the responsibility of converting them to Catholicism in return for the right to tax them and command their labor. [Editor's Note.]



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