

Toys with the guarantee of time

At first sight the toys of Mexico arouse curiosity: what do they do and how do they work? Unlike toy rifles, trains or dolls, how they are used is often not apparent from looking at them.

Enigmatic and surprising like many Mexican traditions, some of these toys are operated through simple mechanisms: just moving a little stick or a bit of straw makes the little bird eat from his dish of seed or a pair of boxers begin to fight. You can even trap a boyfriend with the *pezca novios* (boyfriend-catcher), a woven tube which grabs onto the finger stuck into it and won't let go.

Wood, painted tin, gourds, straw, wicker, palm, nutshells—all these materials found in the countryside are



*Little toy soldier
don't go to war
don't make trouble.¹
May battles be dear
and peace come cheap.
It would be better to
become a cowboy
and go sing a serenade.*

¹ This is a pun, since *lata* (slang for trouble) also means tin. (Editor's note.)

used to make Mexican toys. Rich in regional variety, the toys are often accompanied by songs, chants or fortune-telling games.

Sources of inspiration

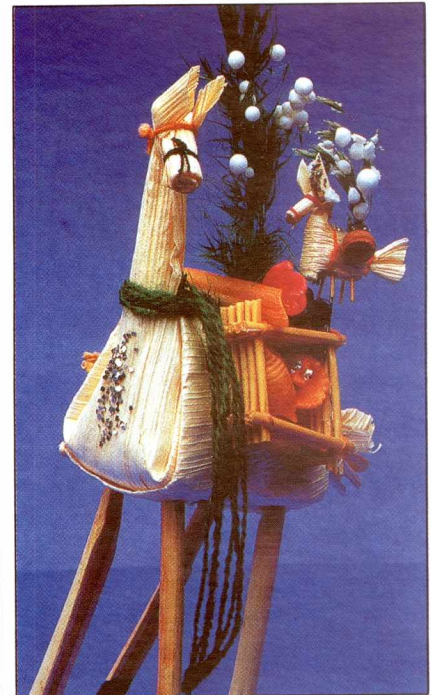
Toys and games reflect the many influences that have shaped Mexican culture.

In pre-Hispanic times games were mainly played for ritual purposes, with the objective of ensuring that the seasons would follow their cyclical course, that nature would be reborn, that the sun would rise and set—in other words, to prevent the extinction of order and humanity itself.

Nevertheless, codices from this period do not mention the existence of children's toys.

Spanish colonization introduced many traditions, particularly religious ones, which are still observed throughout Mexico today. Some festivals are symbolized by a toy, such as the traditional Corpus Thursday *mulita* (little mule), which is made in different sizes from corn husks, mud, tulle or blown glass, carrying gourds loaded with flowers and fruits. This represents the Indians who brought the best part of their harvests to the cathedral on that day.

The Day of the Dead's skeletons, graves and angels turn out to be sweets made from sugar, which children use as toys before eating them. Christmas parties feature little paper lanterns, whistles, flares, small candles, and above all piñatas. Traditional piñatas are shaped like stars, although today many of them are modeled after characters like the Simpsons, the



Corpus Thursday mulita.

Flintstones, etc., in line with the fashion of the moment. Nativity scenes abound during the same part of the year.

The child reproduces his or her daily life through games and toys. Food, visits to the doctor, little cars, toy soldiers—among other things—have become a tradition. Despite being hand-made, these toys continue to be very inexpensive in Mexico.

While rural children don't have sophisticated toys, they do have the advantage of playing in the countryside, which provides inspiration for their games. Natural and household objects that have fallen into disuse become their toys. An old tire is good for rolling around with a stick, soda cans can be made into telephones just by connecting them with string, a rope tied onto a tree becomes a swing and a twisted tree trunk can be used as a seesaw.

Miniatures and masks

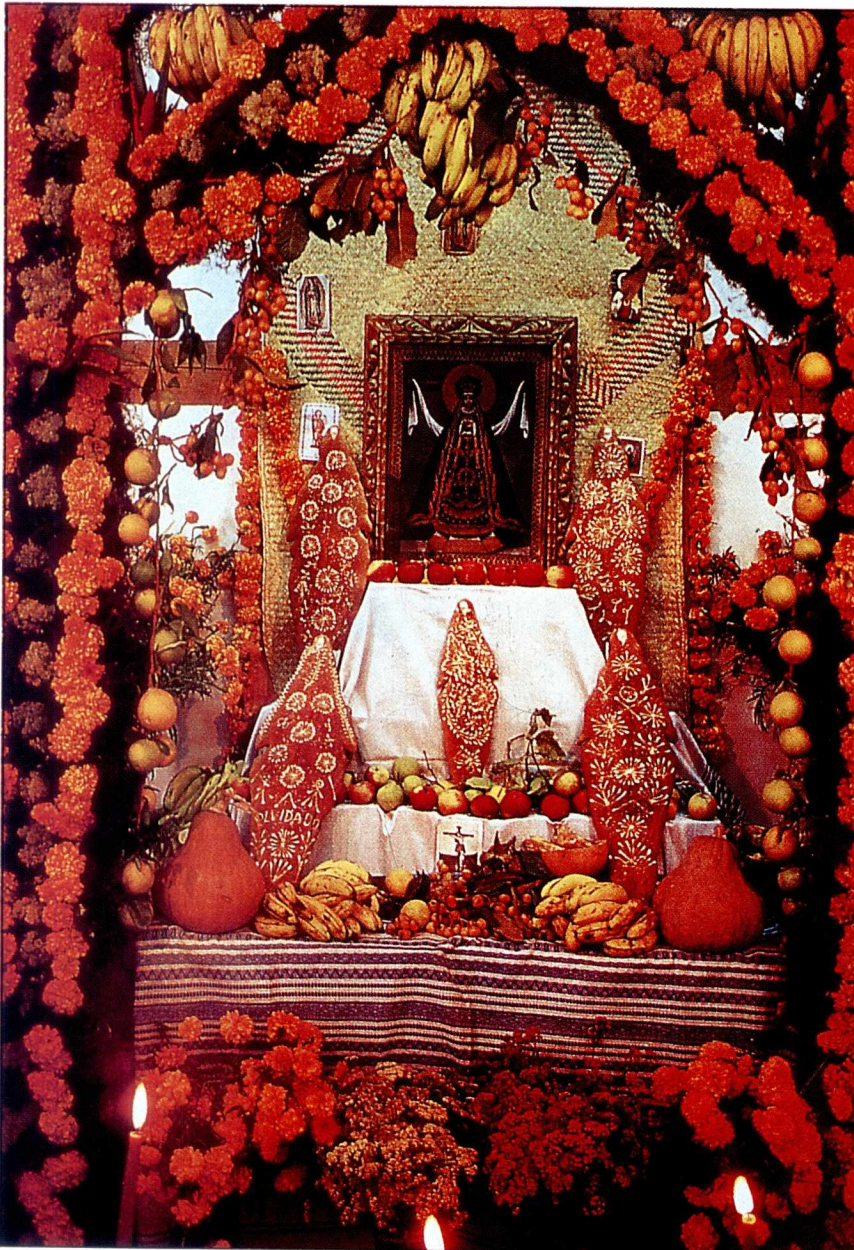
In various regions of Mexico, artisans pass the trade of miniature-making along from generation to generation.

Tlaquepaque, Jalisco is particularly interesting for its tradition of depicting daily life in miniature.

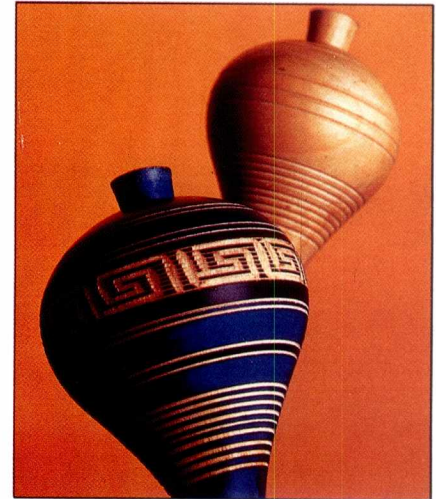
Scenes of town life are reproduced through figurines made of wire which is covered in clay and painted: the church, the news stand, women sitting on tiny benches in their *rebozos* (traditional shawls), children and parents dressed as cowboys taking a walk through the plaza. Scenes of a Sunday cockfight or rodeo are meticulously reproduced by hand.

San Luis Potosí is the birthplace of *retablos*: small boxes decorated

with miniatures, usually on religious themes but also relating to life during the Mexican Revolution. Examples are the replicas of hacienda kitchens with their walls covered in little cooking pots, the stove made of Talavera-style tiles, with a painted flower vase and even a minuscule *metate* (mortar and stone for grinding spices). There are also satires of death, with a skeleton stabbing somebody with a dagger as his victim laughs.



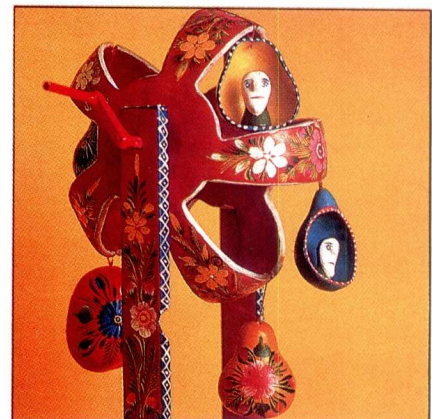
A beautiful Day of the Dead altar.



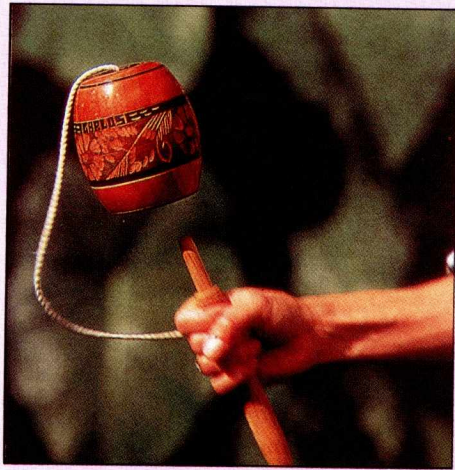
Dancing and spinning, spinning and dancing.

Pátzcuaro, Michoacán has a legendary tradition of mask-making. Pre-Hispanic warriors made masks to represent the figures they were most afraid of, or which were unknown to them, such as the heads of jaguars, snakes, demons, two-headed monsters or grotesque faces with several eyes and protruding tongues. By wearing them, they sought to instill in their opponents the same fear they felt, while taking on the attributes of the figures represented.

Today, young artisans have turned these terrifying faces into finely carved and enamelled works of art which, rather than toys, have become collector's items.



A very Mexican wheel of fortune.



*Without a shirt or tie
pants or suit
the skinny and the fat
are tied together.*

The cup-and-ball game!

candle, are placed in a tub of water and used in a fairground game.

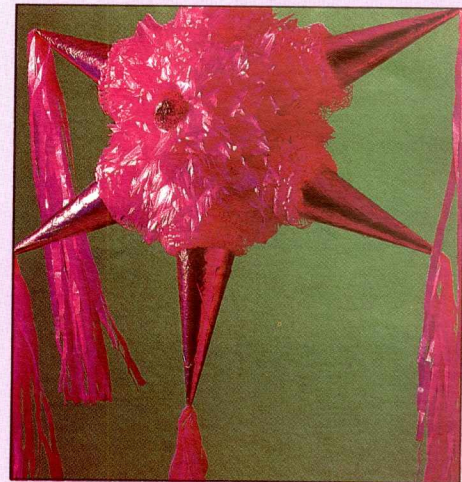
Musical toys are similar to the original instruments they are based on. Since Mexico has a strong musical tradition, the little violins, drums, guitars, flutes, ukuleles, rattles and other instruments made as children's toys produce such high-quality sounds that genuine regional musicians use them in concerts and recordings, to evoke a particular sound.

Many of the toys which originated in the Colonial mixture of Indian and Spanish culture have odd, barely

Naive art

Naive art is manifested not only in Indian folk painting but also in popular toys; brilliant and contrasting colors reflect innocence and simplicity, originality and playfulness. Among these are little animal figurines such as the armadillo painted in bright hues with black stripes, its head attached by a spring which makes it bob up and down in a funny way; or the tiny box out of which, when opened, there pops a wooden snake's head poised to bite. Small tin boats, painted in metallic colors and bearing a little

*I don't want gold
I don't want silver (plata)
what I want
is to break the piñata.*



*During the day I unwrap it
at night I cover it
sometimes with rags
and sometimes with cardboard.*

translatable names, such as *rehilete* (dart), *balero* (a cup-and-ball toy), *timbiriche* (a game of dots and lines), *matraca* (rattle), *trompo* (top) and *pirinola* (a rectangular top bearing messages).

Like a toy train, Mexican toys have travelled many a road, from the Industrial Revolution to the age of electronics. Yet traditional toys are unaffected by these trends and just watch them roll by. It may come to pass that they suffer the fate of their counterparts in Japan or Germany, where hand-made popular toys are more expensive than ones that are mass-produced in factories X