

THE WOOD OF APASEO EL ALTO

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Apaseo el Alto artisans are famous for their wooden horses.

In the state of Guanajuato there are two towns called Apaseo: Apaseo el Alto and Apaseo el Grande. Apaseo el Alto is 30 kilometers down the old road to Celaya, from the Queretaro highway. The first thing you see as you ride into town are workshops and storefronts full of different shapes, forms, textures and qualities of wood, all unsettling for our pocketbooks.

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The town was a hamlet previously known as El Paso (The Pass), because it was a pass on the old road called the Camino Real de Zacatecas. It was later renamed San Andrés, but the persistence of its inhabitants in refusing to accept the names given the town by the authorities was rewarded with its finally being called Apaseo el Alto.

Not only has the name changed over the years, but so have the principle forms of making a living and its ways of life. In the mid-1930s, the mainstay of the region's econo-

my, working in clay, had to change so the town could survive given the onslaught of plastic into the market.

Today, Apaseo el Alto is recognized for its excellent woodworking. This craft began by chance: the Sacred Heart Church needed new figures of saints and restored sculptures, and a sculptor was called in to do the work. Professor Domingo Galván (the initiator of the tradition of woodworking in Apaseo el Alto) was at that time a helper in the church and was in charge of contacting the sculptor. From him, Galván learned to work the wood to



Virgins and saints are among the main subjects of Apaseo el Alto artisans' work.

make saints that looked very old, a simulated antiquity more attractive to the buyer.

Little by little the technique spread among the population, which was successful in its sales of the "little wooden saints" to Mexican and foreign tourists. Families of artisans who had worked in clay began to work in wood: today Apaseo el Alto boasts almost 600 organized woodworkers.

When the demand for the figures of saints was exhausted, the craftspeople had to come up with other forms and shapes for working the wood. The first generation were all kinds of heavenly figures: angels, virgins and saints (particularly the image of Saint Francis of Assisi). Later came little animals: horses in different shapes and sizes and a variety of birds, like eagles and owls. They also made ornamental suns and moons. Finally, they began to carve furniture: trunks, niches, benches, dining room sets, chairs, shelves, etc. Today, each of the almost 80 family workshops specializes in one or another of these items.

A problem that the artisans had to solve was how to get their raw materials. They established an agreement with the municipal governments of Comonfort and Apaseo el Grande. With official permission, they also use wood from the trees cut down by construction companies to make room for housing projects. The woods worked are regional varieties (juniper, *colortín*, walnut wood, *pirul*, willow) and industrial wood like pine, mahogany and cedar. The variety known as "saint's wood" is avidly sought after, although it requires more effort because it is a hardwood.

The inhabitants of Apaseo el Alto live with and from wood; their lives center around obtaining it and creating or reproducing forms and figures out of it. Wood is present in all their activities, in their own furniture and utensils and also in their traditions, like the annual January 2 pilgrimage which includes the blessing of the wood in the virgins and saints which they carry to thank them for their protection.

Every March 24 there is a statewide competition of woodworking with five prizes in different categories: relief, sculpture, animals and miniatures.

Last year the competition was held in the town of San Miguel de Allende and an artisan from Apaseo el Alto won first place, confirming the quality of work in a craft sprung from happenstance that is now part of a solid tradition. ❧