



Mexican Folk Art

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Art museums do not consider folk art to be art. History and ethnography museums do not encompass all its aspects; they limit themselves to its ethnographic features, or, at the very most, employ the ambiguous formula "folklore," which distorts the meaning of folk art.

The exhibit "Folk Art, 500 Years," presented in the majestic San Ildefonso building, closed recently. For the first time in 75 years, someone organized an exhibit showing the many artistic qualities of the Mexican people.

The last exhibit of its kind was promoted by Alberto J. Pani and sponsored by General Alvaro Obregón, the president of Mexico, in 1921. It included pieces gathered by a large group of visual artists like Jorge Enciso, Roberto Montenegro and Javier Guerrero, a group headed up by Gerardo Murillo, the painter from Jalisco better known as Dr. Atl.

They gathered what pieces they could in marketplaces and rural villages, all contemporary pieces according to the exhibition catalogue. Naturally, at that time they made no attempt at a retrospective look at folk art, but rather aimed to simply gather the pieces to publicize their existence and make a first, very special, attempt at better integrating our multi-cultural nation.

* Mexican art critic.

All photos reprinted courtesy of the Old San Ildefonso College, taken from the book *Arte Popular Mexicano* (Mexican Folk Art), Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso-CONACULTA-UNAM-DDF, Mexico City, 1996.

Art, undoubtedly including so-called folk art, is the highest expression of any culture. It has allowed human beings to express everything they valued creatively, everywhere and through the ages, in a fresh and universal language.

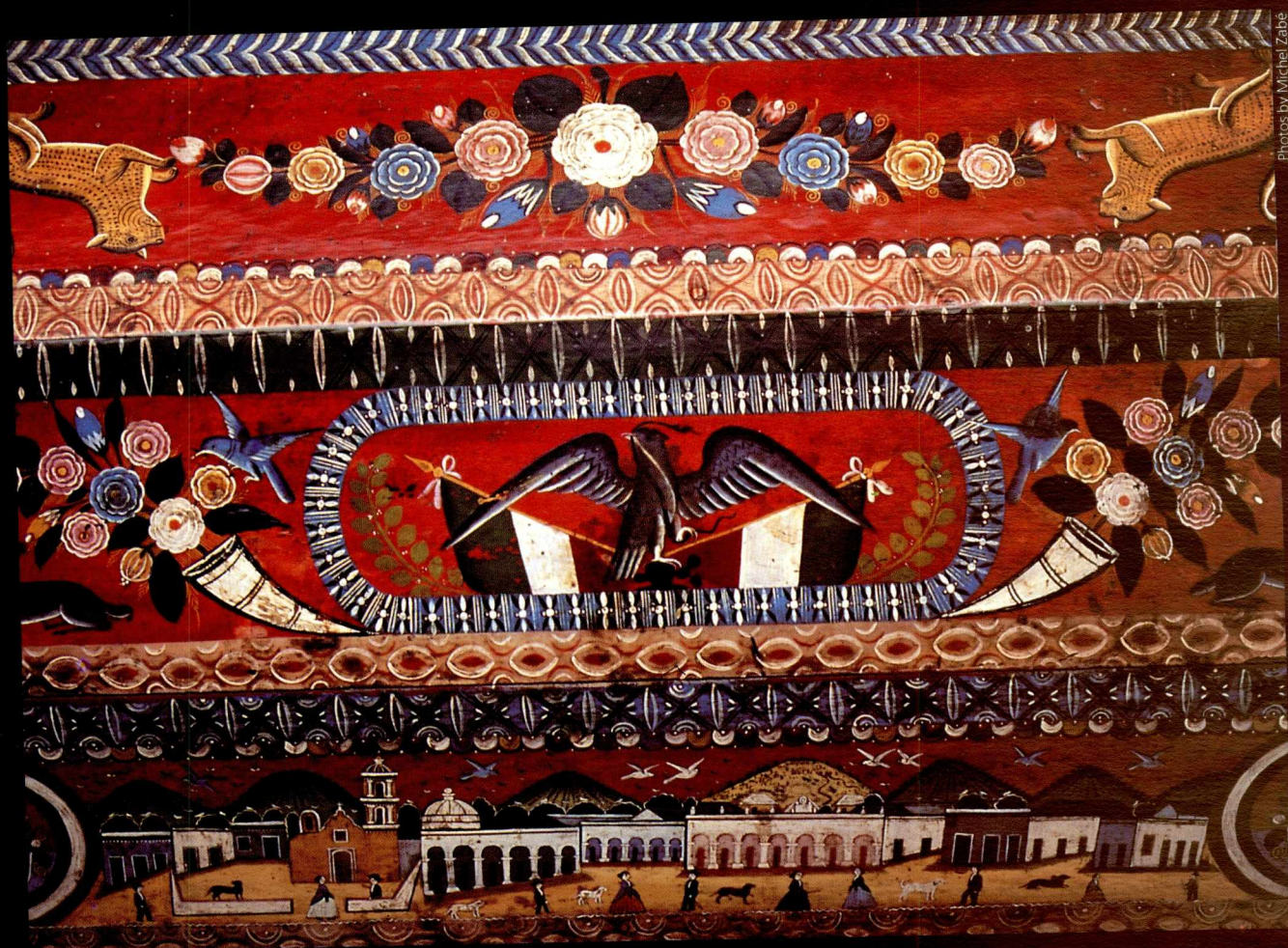
As Dr. Melville Herskovitz says, "In any given era, the arts superlatively express the qualities valued, the human actions preferred and the ideals that give it dignity. In the aesthetic attitude, we can capture a culture, not as a series of mere facts to be tabulated statistically, but as the joy of the labor of human minds."¹

For the first time, thanks to the understanding of almost 170 collectors, the management of San Ildefonso, determined government support as well as that of the artists themselves, we were able to get a glimpse of work by Mexicans done over a 500 year period. Of course, the 500 pieces shown are only a minimal part of the enormous amount of folk art to be found throughout Mexico in rural homes, museums and in many, many more private collections.

One outstanding piece among the exhibit's magnificent selection from the last century was a shawl, woven on a waist loom and embroidered with motifs popular at the time. It shows elements of *ikat*² as well as extraordinarily well made edging.

¹ Melville Kerskovitz, *El hombre y sus obras*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1952.

² *Ikat* is a knotting technique used to block the dye when dyeing thread. [Editor's Note.]



Photos by Michel Zabé

The show included ceramic objects from every period: pre-Hispanic, the Viceroyalty, the years around Independence and the early and late twentieth century. The techniques are enormously varied, ranging from modeling to casting, including decoration in the *pastillaje* style with daubs of clay, multicolored sheens, majolica ware, multicolored leaded glass and with *engobes*.³ Simple polishing, multicolored gloss, the black Oaxaca burnish made by firing the pieces and the use of *engobes* are all pre-Hispanic techniques which have developed immensely in our times. Majolica ware and lead polish were brought by the Europeans and over the years have acquired profoundly Mexican forms and decorations.

The exhibit also boasted delightful lacquered objects, mainly from Olinalá in the state of Guerrero. Discoveries

³ *Engobes* are a sort of under-glaze made of white clay or paste covering the still unfired, damp ceramic pieces and their dark color, serving as a base for the application of other glazes. [Editor's Note.]

Opposite page: clay mermaid.

Above: decorated trunk.

Below: inside of the same trunk.





Enameled Guanajuato-style platter.



Cotton and silk shawl.

at archeological digs show that these techniques and materials date from pre-Columbian times.

Though the lacquer work may have had Chinese influence, only traces are left and have been almost completely erased from the decorative forms: the lacquer designs went from their original pre-Columbian forms to the Mexican *creole* style, both of which continue to be worked beautifully into folk art today.

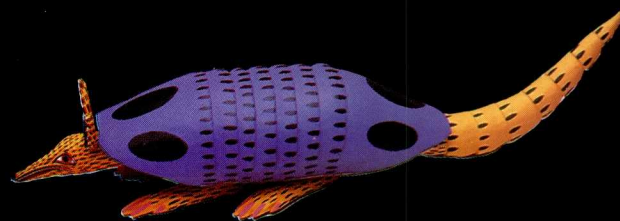
Because of the diversity of its textures, the ease of obtaining it and the variety of its applications, wood has been used in folk art for thousands of years. In Mexico, it is used both for domestic items, like kitchen utensils (spoons, beaters, churn-staffs, etc.), and for sculpture. In Oaxaca, wood used to be carved and then colored, particularly in making religious objects and toys in Arrazola and the city of Oaxaca. The inhabitants of an entire town, San Martín Tilcajete, in the central valleys of Oaxaca, became carvers and decorators. These artisans follow the shapes of branches and trunks to make fantasy figures that they decorate with joyful colors. Because of their similarity to Don Pedro Linares' paper-mâché figures, which he dubbed *alebrijes*, the Oaxaca wood carvers adopted the same name for their figures.

Almost no material daunts Mexican folk artists. Wool, silk, cotton or *ixtle*,⁴ tin plate, brass, iron, silver, gold, copper; cane, rods, *otate*,⁵ rattan, wicker, sisal fiber; bone, stone,

clay, wax, feathers, leather, gum, resins; a great variety of soft and hard woods; corn husks, glass, paper, straw and many more are used masterfully with just the right techniques for making each into beautiful objects, whether they be for daily or devotional use, a luxury or pure flight of fancy.

I would like to close with a quote from the well-known art critic and historian, Don Manuel Toussaint. Although here, he was referring to folk painting particularly, his opinion is applicable to all forms of Mexican folk art.

One of the most interesting manifestations of Mexican art in the eighteenth century is so-called folk painting. If we did not have those naive, storybook paintings, those childlike portraits, those *retablos* in which simple souls express their gratitude to the Creator, our eighteenth century would be much the poorer. Next to paintings by the masters, whose nature and mannerisms almost always make them intolerable, folk painting—completely clear, like the pure art it is—is invaluable. (*La pintura colonial mexicana*, vol. 1, UNAM-Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas. Mexico City, 1962). ❧



Alebrijes, fantastic animals carved in wood.

⁴ *Ixtle* is a hard fiber obtained from Mexican agave plants. [Editor's Note.]

⁵ A species of tall grass. [Editor's Note.]