

A Timeless Craft

A trip to Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, necessarily includes a visit to the House of the Eleven Patios, a converted convent with exhibits of crafts from different parts of the state. On a quick tour, the *maqueados*, or sumac lacquered objects, could get lost among the abundance of other lacquered items. Often they are taken to be the same. However, the other kinds of lacquer began to be used with the influence of Asian art that came from trade between New Spain and China's *nao* vessels, while *maqueado* was already known in the land conquered by the Spaniards.

Today, the difference between them is marked. The lacquers have incorporated industrialized products: glues, varnishes and paints, and are applied with brushes. *Maque* work uses only natural products to cover wood with colors, and it can only be applied with the fingers.

Maque comes in five basic colors, obtained naturally and combined to create many others. Red is extracted from the cochineal grain; black from the soot formed under a griddle placed on the fire; yellow is made from the *cepasúchil* flower, species of marigold, or another plant known as "cow gut" that grows locally during the rainy season; for white there are many earth deposits to choose from and the good craftsman knows which is the best for dyeing; lastly, the indigo plant yields blue.

These colors and their combinations are made into a powder and applied on an oil base extracted from lime-leaved sage, which makes the wood waterproof and gives it its peculiar sheen. The colors cannot be applied simultaneously; the craftsman must wait for one to dry before applying another. Therefore, the more colors included on a piece, the longer it will take to finish. Twenty days, a month or two: it is never certain.

Painting the *maque* on by hand is the only way to know when a piece is finished and many applications are needed before the work is done.

But it is not only the technique that makes *maqueado* unlike any other art. Form, decoration, colors, texture and sheen express the harmony between artisan and his work, creating an irreplaceable, unique relationship between him and each piece he makes.

Source: Explanations by craftsman Mario A. Gaspar Rodríguez, who has his workshop in the House of the Eleven Patios in the city of Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, and has been working almost 30 years in *maque* and cornstalk paste.



Dante Barrera