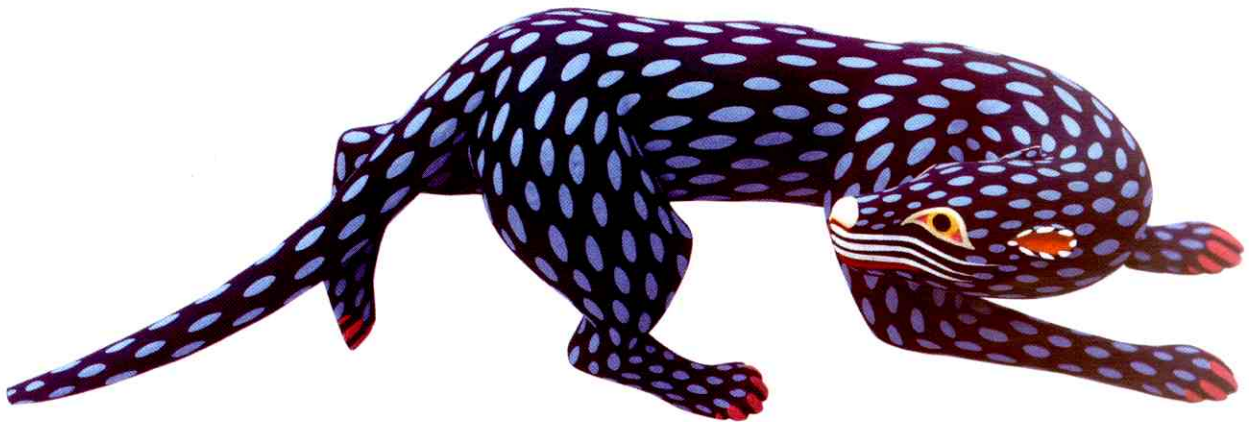


# Alebrijes

## Folk Imagery

David Malpica Uribe\*



For more than 40 years, several indigenous towns near the capital of the state of Oaxaca, following a tradition that dates from time immemorial when they carved ritual masks, toys and gods, have been creating enigmatic objects of extraordinary artistic quality. With sensitivity and skill, men, women and children infuse wood with their way of life. They do it for sale, but also for the pure pleasure of creating. Cutting the aromatic wood used by their ancestors in rituals lost in time, carving and smoothing their forms, polishing, painting and decorating with vivid colors both figures and symbols yield forms and images that simultaneously inhabit the worlds of reality and fantasy.

\* Researcher at the Autonomous University of Puebla.

All *alebrijes* are by Don Manuel Jiménez, a pioneer of this craft, who lives in Arrazola, Oaxaca.

Photos by Dante Barrera.

Animal-objects materialize in multiple forms and meanings. Their nature is as infinite as the imagination of their creators: angels and demons, virgins and saints, and *naguales* —mythical beings who populated the pre-Hispanic world and whose influence can still be felt among these people.<sup>1</sup> Sirens, dragons, pink giraffes, heart-eating jaguars with purple coats and yellow spots; dancing armadillos, dressed chicken sensually dancing, reptiles whose scales have become symbolic, geometric stylized lines. Other figures that seem to come from the far-flung corners of the universe are actually reproductions of toys that entertained the children of Monte Albán and Mitla many centuries ago.

*Alebrije* carvers are indigenous people of Mixe, Zapotec or Mixtec blood who, just like their forebears, work the land for a living and as a form of worship of the land and nature. Heirs to a rich cosmog-

nic and religious culture, with profound knowledge about their surroundings, they also have great ability and proficiency in their art. Nature in Oaxaca helps them with the spectacular colors of its sunsets, the profile of its mountains and its pure air that, when it blows, makes you feel that life is worth living.

Day after day, these indigenous peasants create objects renowned the world over. Museums and galleries in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Cleveland, Manhattan or the southwest United States exhibit their work, and elegant boutiques sell sculptures by artisans like Manuel Jiménez for hundreds of dollars each. Many pieces can be found in bazaars throughout the world or in private collections. Institutions like the Smithsonian have carried out research projects and produced a vast amount of documentation about this work in their scientific publications.<sup>2</sup> In Oaxaca, however, we



can still find *alebrijes* signed by well known artisans for U.S.\$2.50 for a small piece to U.S.\$20.00 for the medium-sized pieces.

*Alebrijes* form part of the sophisticated cultural world thanks to the originality of their designs, their expressive force and their refinement. The infinite variety of forms, lines and colors can only be suggested by the imagination and fantasy nourished by the life force. Allegories that tell stories through sculpture: games, fights, weddings, rites, magic, religion, traditional healing and daily life. The most captivating thing about this art is its close contact with the life of its creators. For them the *naguales* they fashion are not supernatural, the product of the minds of old men, but beings who wander through their towns, ravines and hills; they may belong to another dimension and have other ends, but they are as real as a reality full of wonder and fantasy.

Wood gives the *alebrije* its body, and the one that best provides a reflection of its soul is the copal tree or *copalillo*. Since pre-Hispanic times, this tree has had ritual-ceremonial value; it was burned in the Zapotec terra cotta incense burners and urns. When wounded with the machete, the copal weeps its resin, which is burned in a purifying fire. Its aroma produces

states of profound mysticism. Even today, copal resin is burned on the Day of the Dead.

This wood has been obtained for centuries in the hills and mountains of Oaxaca. It has to be cut daily because it must be worked "when the time is right," as though it were an invocation, to make contact with the sacred material. The men carve the forms and the women and children paint and decorate them with dazzling colors and designs.

One of the towns where *alebrijes* are made is Arrazola Xoxocotlán, where Manuel Jiménez, known as the father of this folk art, is from. Other towns are San Martín Tilcajete, La Unión Tejalpan and, hidden in the Sierra de Oaxaca, San Pedro Tapiche. They are also made in some Mixe towns. With a sense of community, their creators divide their time between the cultivation of corn and beans and the carving of their images, for which they use different types of wood. The Mixe communities continue to use the wood called *palo torcido*, or "twisted stick," and cedar found in their deepest

mountain ranges, more appropriate for masks and toys because of their hardness. In Arrazola, they carve in copal; but Manuel Jiménez, a man of forceful character and a natural leader, stopped using copal and now exclusively uses cedar because of its durability. In Tilcajete, they stamp their own personalities on the wood for centuries using *parota* and juniper to make masks and toys for ritual and play. They also use copal cut with a machete and carved with a kitchen knife and the blade all indigenous men carry with them.

Another key is that they only use aniline, vegetable, water-based dyes, following Manuel Jiménez' lead.

The symbolism of color represents the vitality of Oaxaca and remits us to the scenery, to the tones and shades of the Sun over valleys and mountains, to limpid or stormy seas and skies. These artisans see with the eyes of great painters, like

thousands of Tamayos; that is why these delirious forms, product of a conscious overflowing of what is real, are not simple objects, but the very meaning of life.

These men say that *alebrijes* do not represent things, not even animals or real beings. Fabián Ventura, the creator of dancing chickens, says, "They are not chickens. They are *naguales*,"<sup>3</sup> made of the same stuff as our dreams and they exist in their own world and according to their own nature, even though they belong to us a little because we are part of a whole and must respect them. As Pedro Linares said when he stopped making *alebrijes*, "It's just that soon I will go to live with them and I don't want to offend them anymore."<sup>4</sup>

In the Mexico City of the 1930s, Pedro Linares, delirious from a serious illness, dreamed of strange creatures that made noises that seemed to say "alebrijeec."<sup>5</sup> Pedro was a master at making cardboard figures and made the Judas dolls and devils that are traditionally filled with gunpowder and blown up on Easter Saturday in Mexico. This trade, using cardboard, paper, glue and bright lacquer paints dates from the colonial period. Manuel Jiménez borrowed it, but the two virtuosos, Linares and Jiménez, are simultaneously the same and different, just as Mexico City and Oaxaca are different.

*Alebrijes* are closer to angels and playful spirits than monsters or truly diabolical, malignant beings. They are related to the beings in pre-Hispanic stories and adages, or to Asian or even European myths; perhaps to those animals of African fables, like the clever hare, or even the hybrid half-cat-half-sheep or the "animal-object, similar to a spindle," both

included in Kafka's famous *Bestiary*. Indigenous stories include, like in African fables, duels between clever characters. The coyote represents the *ladino*<sup>6</sup> trying to fool the rabbit, who ends up being the more clever of the two. In many regions, mestizos are called "coyotes"; the rabbit's sagacity can be interpreted as what indigenous people do not to be devoured.<sup>7</sup> This shows the artistic profundity of *alebrijes*.

As Bajtín would say, in this ornamental game, an exceptional freedom and lightness can be seen in artistic fantasy; also, the freedom can be conceived of as a lucky joy, smiling chaos. In true folk art, like in single-cell organisms, death does not exist, but is identical with the propagation of the species. "Death is pregnant; all things limited, fixed and perfect merge to be born again."<sup>8</sup>

To conclude, I will quote Octavio Paz. "There are two types of artists: some use materials; others are its servants....The indigenous person transforms matter into something different, sensual or fantastic, but always surprising."<sup>9</sup>

Through their forms, designs and colors, simple contact with these magical objects remits us to a world full of freedom; freedom to imagine, but above all, to live. ■■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some peoples in Mexico believe that a circle must be drawn around the house of a newborn baby, and the animal or object which first crosses the circle will be the *nagual* or *nahual* that will be the baby's inseparable companion all his or her life, his/her double and protector. The name of the *nagual* even becomes the person's middle name, or *tona*. This name may be known only by those closest to him or her since if a stranger knew it, it would make the individual vulnerable to dangers and evil intentions. The term *nagual* can also refer to a warlock or wizard whose eyes shine brightly and who has the ability to transform himself into a dog or a coyote. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> For example, the research of Shepard Barbash in a 1980 issue of *Smithsonian*.

<sup>3</sup> Interview of Fabián Ventura by Shepard Barbash published in the *Smithsonian* magazine, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> "El creador de los alebrijes," taken from Internet, <http://www.eureka.com.mx/ecsca/ga/alebrije/alebrijes.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> The word "*alebrije*" began to be used to refer to Pedro Linares' figures and later was applied to the figures made in Oaxaca, despite the difference in the materials used. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>6</sup> The word *ladino* means literally an indigenous person who has left behind his/her indigenous culture and adopted that of the Europeans; for historical reasons, in common parlance, it has come to mean someone sly, dishonest or crafty. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>7</sup> Carlos Montemayor, *Arte y trama en el cuento indígena* (Mexico City: FCL, 1998), p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Mijaíl Bajtín, *La cultura popular en la edad media y el renacimiento* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1974), p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Octavio Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista* (Mexico City: FCE, 1989), p. 102.

