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.

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. 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 cosmogonic 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. 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 nahuales 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 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 ceder 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 ceder because of its durability. In Tilcajete, they stamp their own personalities on the wood for centuries using purola 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 reminds 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
dancing chickens, says, "They are not
chickens. They are uaguals," 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."4

In the Mexico City of the 1930s, Pe-
dro Linares, delirious from a serious ill-
ness, dreamed of strange creatures that
made noises that seemed to say "alebri-
jeces."5 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. Ma-
nuel Jiménez borrowed it, but the two
virtuosos, Linares and Jiménez, are simul-
taneously the same and different, just as
Mexico City and Oaxaca are different.

Alebrijes are closer to angels and play-
ful spirits than monsters or truly diaboli-
cal, malignant beings. They are related to
the beings in pre-Hispanic stories and
adages, or to Asian or even Euro-

can myths; perhaps to those ani-
mals 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. Indi-
genous stories include, like in African fa-
bles, duels between clever characters. The
coyote represents the ladino6 trying to fool
the rabbit, who ends up being the more
clever of the two. In many regions, mes-
tizos are called "coyotes"; the rabbit's sa-
gacity can be interpreted as what indige-
nous people do not to be devoured.7 This
shows the artistic profundity of alebrijes.

As Bajín 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 propa-
gation of the species. "Death is pregnant;
all things limited, fixed and perfect merge
to be born again."8

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 fan-
tastic, but always surprising."9

Through their forms, designs and col-
ors, simple contact with these magical
objects remits us to a world full of free-
dom; freedom to imagine, but
above all, to live. ▲M

Notes
1 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 nagan or nahan that will be the baby’s
inseparable companion all his or her life, his/her
double and protector. The name of the nagan 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 nagan 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.]
2 For example, the research of Shepard Barhash in a
1980 issue of Smithsonian.
3 Interview of Fabián Ventura by Shepard Barhash
published in the Smithsonian magazine, op. cit.
4 "El creador de los alebrijes," taken from Internet,
http://www.eureka.com.mx/eessa/go/alebrije/alebri-
jes.htm.
5 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.]
6 The word ladino means literally an indigenous per-
son 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 shady, dishonest or crass. [Translator’s Note.]
7 Carlos Montemayor, Arte y trama en el cuento indi-
8 Miguel Bajín, La cultura popular en la edad media y
el renacimiento (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1974), p. 35.
9 Octavio Paz, Los privilegios de la vista (Mexico City: