

A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

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The first time I saw Josefina Aguilar, some thirty years ago, she was sitting in the courtyard of her modest adobe house rapidly molding small figures out of dirty brown clay. Scattered about her feet was a group of six or seven children of various ages, busily painting the figures with bright primary colors out of jars of showcard paints. From their efforts a colorful Palm Sunday procession was coming into being, complete with Jesus riding on the figure of a horse, which was in turn borne on the shoulders of four men in boots and sombreros. A double row of men and women in blue, red, green and yellow, carrying enormous round palms, were the vanguard for the figure of Jesus, himself bearing a palm, and all was followed by a marching band.

Although there is a new pink wall topped with large samples of her folk art fronting the house, Josefina still lives in the same adobe house in the old Mexican colonial town of Ocotlan, an hour's drive from the provincial capital of Oaxaca. Josefina has become famous now, at least among the growing number of people interested in folk art. There is even an illustrated children's book published by Harcourt, Brace, entitled, *Josefina*. And some of that group of children who were sitting at Josefina's feet back then have become highly esteemed artists in their own right. There are now five or six Aguilers who are popular artists on both sides of the border, and their works have become quite fanciful, but this widespread family business began with a truly great artist merely recreating what she saw out of her window in a Mexican village.

And among the folk artists of Mexico she is a master. Her little figures come alive, and she captures the essence of what is so appealing about folk art. I think what led Roxann and me to discover the enchanting world of folk art, and particularly Mexican folk art, was that, beside the riot of colors and profusion of materials, there is often a whimsical, and at the same time penetrating commentary on life. One of my favorite characters, who has become a fixture in Mexican folk art, is *Calavera Catrina*. *Catrina* is wearing an enormous plumed hat, a brilliant green feather boa, her parasol in one hand and a cigarette jauntily upraised in her other. But *Catrina* is a skeleton, a whimsical expression of a human truth that death is the ultimate leveler. No matter how elegant or how rich we are we are all equal in the grave. *Catrina* was created by the Mexican artist Jose Guadalupe Posada, and immortalized by Diego Rivera in his painting, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Central Alameda Park*. The painting includes all the important people of Mexico City – with *Catrina* in the middle, and Frida Kahlo just behind her and almost as forbidding a figure.

Of course, not all folk art is whimsical, nor is there an adequate definition of the term, folk art. In Mexico, it is called *Arte Popular*, art of the people. Some is a beautification or adornment of the utilitarian. Far on the other side of Mexico City from Oaxaca is another fertile valley in the State of Michoacan. In central Michoacan picturesque Lake Patzcuaro shimmers in the mountain air at an elevation of 6,000 feet. Abruptly rising from the lake waters is the tiny island of Janitzio surmounted by an enormous concrete statue of the revolutionary hero, Morelos, with his fist raised in the

universal symbol for power. The villagers of Janitzio ply the lake with their distinctive butterfly nets for the delicious whitefish that are the specialty of the area. The other specialty of the area is an astonishing variety of folk art, all of which stems from the vision of one of the truly remarkable figures of early Mexican history.

The man in question is Don Vasco de Quiroga, who is a unique hero in Mexico, being neither a revolutionary nor a general nor a politician. He arrived in Mexico in 1531 as a member of an *audiencia* charged with cleaning up the outrageously corrupt Spanish colonial administration. One of the battles Quiroga and other like-minded humanitarians fought was over the nature of the native population of the New World. One school of thought proposed that the Indians were really subhuman creatures, "slaves by nature." That was a convenient belief for the *hacendados* who were enriching themselves through the use of slave labor. Quiroga, on the other hand, admired the Indians for their natural, simple virtues. Their humility, contempt for the world and their lack of interest in clothing reminded him of the unworldliness of the Apostles, and he and other religious figures fought for the rights of the Indians. The matter was not settled until 1537, when the papal bull, *Unigenitus Deus* declared that the Indians were endowed with reason and souls and could, therefore, be made Christians, and could not be enslaved.

As a reward for his championship of the native population, in 1537 Quiroga was offered the newly created bishopric of Michoacan, even though he was an attorney, not a priest. In a most unusual ceremony, he was ordained and consecrated bishop on the same day. For 27 years he was the beloved *Tata* Vasco, bishop and protector of the natives of the area, until he died suddenly at the ripe old age of 95 while he was on a pastoral visitation. The Tarascans had suffered particularly at the hands of the rapacious colonial administration – probably because they were an unruly lot who frequently rebelled against their Spanish overlords. They were also the one peoples of Mexico the Aztecs had never been able to subjugate.

At any rate Bishop Quiroga, who was strongly influenced by Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, as well as the humanism of Erasmus, had a vision of creating the perfect community in the New World. And he did, indeed create communities in Central Mexico that greatly improved the quality of life of the people in his diocese. Interested in the material, as well as the spiritual welfare of the natives under his care, he assigned various folk crafts to the several villages in his diocese. In what was a novel idea, Quiroga decreed that time and effort spent in the creation of crafts was a communal obligation just as was work in communal agriculture.

One of my favorite spots in Mexico is the ruined basilica of Bishop Quiroga in the village of Tzintzuntzan on Lake Patzcuaro. The olive trees in the great quadrangle facing the basilica are now well over four hundred years old; gnarled and twisted relics, they no longer produce olives. Yet their great age and tenacious hold on life evoke images of the Spanish bishop's attempt to recreate something of his homeland in the New World he was helping to shape. On my first trip to Tzintzuntzan, which means place of the hummingbird, over forty years ago, there were some ramshackle roadside booths selling pottery and the distinctive craft of the village, artifacts made from wheat straw.

When Quiroga moved the seat of his diocese from Tzintzuntzan to the town of Patzcuaro, he built an imposing cathedral, and was the first to commission a Christian image made of cornstalks in the unique pre-conquest sculptural tradition of meso-America. It is an exquisite, life-size statue of *Nuestra Senora de la Salud*, Our Lady of

Healing - an imposing piece of sculpture with a beautiful face - at the same time strong and at the same time lovely and serene.

Originally, the Tzintzuntzan locals made abstract designs of wheat straw that were hung in their houses as fertility symbols, but by the time I saw the artisans in the early 1950's they were making a variety of designs for sale to the infrequent tourists. Now, some forty years later, they have a splendid communal showroom made of masonry, and their streets are paved. Their repertory of straw figures has burgeoned; there are dozens of designs made expressly for Christmas Tree ornaments as well as all sorts of amusing creations, such as Ferris wheels and carousels. But my favorites are the religious figures, crucifixes and Madonnas, some of monumental proportions and all of an exquisite artistry.

Farther back in the mountains is the village of Santa Clara del Cobre, St. Clare of the Copper. On the maps it is labeled Villa Escalante, named after one of the innumerable revolutionary heroes, but in order to find it one must still ask for Santa Clara del Cobre. Practically every house in the village is a cottage industry creating things of utility and beauty out of copper. Although copperware is found in other parts of Mexico, none compares with the *martillado*, hand-hammered, forged copper of Santa Clara. The pre-Conquest Tarascans knew the secrets of tempering copper, and in fact were expert metallurgists, but they learned the technique of *martillado* from the Spaniards.

The artisans of the village create their masterpieces in the same way they did in Bishop Quiroga's day some four and a half centuries ago, shaping a bar of copper by hammering it against a crude anvil until they achieve the desired shape. The nearby copper mines are no longer operated, but the residents are nothing if not creative in finding sources of their raw material. They now buy discarded electric motor armatures, but earlier when the government decided to run telephone lines through the backcountry of Michoacan, the copper wire of the line disappeared into the forges of Santa Clara as fast as it could be built.

My first visit there happened to be on the occasion of their great festival - the time when the best efforts of each house are judged in a fair, and prizes are awarded for the most creative and beautiful objects. As I arrived the fair was in full swing and a brass band of this remote mountain village was playing *Anchors Away* - very badly. The prize pieces are of monumental proportions and intricate designs with roots in their pre-conquest history. In anthropological exhibits in museums all over Mexico there are very early clay vessels with the same classic shapes as the copperware of Santa Clara. On the occasion of my visit, a rich Texas lady was both astounded and infuriated because they would not sell her one of the prize-winning entries - even when she asked them to name their own price. All the winners over the years are displayed in the local museum, as is a handsome copper bust of *Tata Vasco*.

The objects created in Santa Clara are not only beautiful; there are sidewalks full of cauldrons and frying pans, candlesticks and pitchers of every size from miniature to gigantic. Children learn the craft from their parents' by making toy-size articles, and it was a bit disconcerting to see small children running to and fro around the workers, dodging the hot metal that was being lifted from the forges.

In the other direction from Bishop Quiroga's see city of Patzcuaro is the slightly decaying old colonial town of Uruapan located in a tropical valley surrounded by avocado orchards. Uruapan is the center of Mexico's - and the America's - lacquerware

artistry. Lacquer was used as adornment of temples and vessels prior to the conquest, but the natives had fled Michoacan to escape the vicious attacks of the conquistador, Nuno Guzman, whose cruelty was of epic proportions even by the brutal standards of the times. Enter the indefatigable bishop, Don Vasco, who designated the area as the center for lacquer crafts.

Our favorite lacquerware is the result of a family effort. As we watched, three generations were engaged in producing lacquer objects of exquisite beauty while a television was blaring out what appeared to be a Mexican version of "As the World Turns." The wife was applying the solid lacquer to a shallow wooden bowl –six coats are required for the base coat. After it had thoroughly dried the father of the family then took the piece and rapidly incised a pattern of great complexity with a knife similar to those used to cut carpet.

The children then rub lacquer of different colors into the incised pattern, and finally grandmother polishes the finished work with Johnson's wax. We were astounded to see her take off her glasses and polish them with the same wax she was using to polish the lacquerware. Our prize example of Uruapan lacquer is a fifteen inch shallow bowl with a fanciful bird with long slender tail feathers of all the colors of the rainbow surrounded by flowers which rival a Rousseau painting for imaginative shapes and colors – pink, red, blue, lavender, yellow. The colored paste waxes are from natural materials and reflect the vibrant palette nature used to adorn the tropical setting of Uruapan.

North of Uruapan is the village of Paracho, where under the aegis of the determined Bishop Quiroga, the making of guitars became, and still is, its hallmark. From the wide eaves of practically every house in the village, rows of guitars hang like ducks in Chinatown, and Paracho guitars are famous all over Mexico.

In Patzcuaro, itself, is the *La Casa de los Once Patios*, the House of Eleven Patios, once a convent but now a sort of Spanish Colonial mall exhibiting the famous manta cloth, as well as folk crafts from the region. Again, inspired by *Tata Vasco*, the artisans of Patzcuaro create sturdy woven cloth reflecting the rich variety of colors in the lush flora of the region. Tablecloths and matching napkins and bedspreads are the principal products, and a trip through their showrooms is an eye-catching parade of colors and patterns. The soft sturdy cloth is still made on great wooden looms, each as large as a small room, and laboriously operated by using feet and hands in the same manner taught them in the sixteenth century.

We happened to be in Patzcuaro on Good Friday and thought we were witnessing a festival, rather than a solemn religious occasion. Purple and white bunting adorned every available tree and lamppost, while booths selling everything from food and drink to clothing and household objects were doing a brisk business. In the center of the main square was the obligatory statue of Don Vasco, and around him young men and women strolled arm in arm while their elders sat on decorative cast iron benches around the perimeter.

We noticed several booths selling *papier-mache* figures of all sizes and shapes. Some were obviously demons of various fearsome demeanors, some were fantasy animals, and some were simply brightly colored human figures. They all had in common circles of bamboo tied to their backs with fused fireworks spaced along the circle. We found out they were called *Judas* figures, and the climax of the festivities came when these figures were set ablaze to spin and consume like Catherine Wheels. The figures

represented Judas, an assortment of evil demons, and even people who were perceived as enemies – a landlord or loan shark or a hated brother-in-law. After such a festive Good Friday, Easter was a definite anti-climax.

Returning to the state of Oaxaca we find another figure, who like Josefina Aguilar, created a new genre of folk art. Like Josefina, Manuel Jiminez has become famous, having had shows in the United States and in Europe, but he began his life in extreme poverty. Jiminez is now into his eighties, and much of the carving is done by family members, as is the case in most folk art. Nevertheless, an art form has come into prominence because of one person's genius. As the youngest in a large family he was sent out every day to tend the goats in their mountain pastures, and he began carving the fanciful animals he saw in the twisted branches of the native *Copal* trees.

Now the village of Arrazola, at the foot of the majestic complex of the Zapotec ruins on Monte Alban, is as well known for its Qaxacan animals as is Santa Clara for copper. Arrazola has prospered from the many artisan families devoted to creating fantastic versions of a variety of animals from cows, dogs and chickens to exotic beasts such as giraffes and elephants and even *bruho*, or witches, animals with human faces. No matter how fanciful the animals are, they capture the essence of their species, and as we walked through the displays in the plaza facing the cathedral, the purple cows and red giraffes were as appealing as a puppy in the SPCA kennels pleading for adoption.

In the same area, the tiny village of Coyotepec is noted for its unique black pottery, burnished to a jet black sheen by a method devised by Dona Rosa, who is now dead, but her family continues the tradition, as well as other families in the town. Even the church in Coyotepec is decorated with the village's trademark black pottery - as well it should be for the creation of a genre of folk art has rescued yet another village from abject poverty.

One of the most interesting artisans, and also one of the most unlikely success stories, was Candelario Medrano, whose family is continuing his tradition. He founded a successful family business by molding pottery into whimsical trains, busses, ships, churches, all with people in various positions and all in bright primary colors. His art came to be much in demand and the owner of one of the better shops in Monterrey asked him to sign a piece. Medrano, who was a tiny little man well under five feet sweated mightily to accommodate his patron and came up with crude block letters spelling his name. For you see, Medrano could neither read nor write. In spite of that handicap, he created an unmistakable artistic style still much in demand, and which is still being continued under the family name.

There are numerous other artisans and forms of folk art in Mexico, each with his or her own style as distinctive as a hallmark. Because it is so inordinately appealing, folk art has become a significant factor in Mexico's economy and also in the decorative arts in this country.

One of the intriguing features of folk art is the multiplicity of materials. The medium is whatever happens to be at hand - Clay, of course, but also straw, paper, tin and copper, wax, rope, sisal fibers and all sorts of recycled objects. We have a shrine to the Virgin made out of Carta Blanca cans, and an icon painted in the bottom of a bottle cap adorned with a border of pearls and a brilliant red stone. A magnet glued to the back of the icon makes it a most unusual refrigerator ornament.

Another fascinating aspect of folk art is the whimsy and color that make it seem festive. Even the ominous form of *Catrina Calavera* and the myriad other skeletal figures that have a prominent place in Mexican culture are more playful and engaging than grim reminders of death. The Day of the Dead is a festival rather than a solemn occasion for mourning. That such whimsical, colorful art as that of Mexico is the product of the interaction of Spanish and Mesoamerican cultures, neither of which was particularly given to playfulness is somewhat of a mystery and perhaps even lends to its charm.

The Nobel Prize winning novelist, Octavio Paz wrote, "Mesoamerica never conceived the concept of pure esthetic experience. . .Art was not an end in itself but a bridge. . .[It] changes the reality that we see for each other." Indeed it does change the reality we see. Mexican folk art has a magical quality that lifts the spirits, and from the examples that surround us in our home, we feel as if we were in the midst of a gala festival celebrating the wonder of ordinary life. And perhaps that is after all the best way to define Mexican folk art – as a celebration of life.