Mestizaje as Revealed in the Dual Nature of Oaxacan Wood Carvings

an Honors Project submitted by

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Mexico is often seen as a collision of two worlds—indigenous customs overlapping with European beliefs—a mestizaje. Author Carlos Fuentes has referred to Mexico’s past as a “buried mirror” in which people of modern Mexico can see themselves by looking at the archaeological remnants left by ancestors. Archaeology has indeed revealed many figures from the world of ancient Mexico that may still exist in some hybrid form in the present culture. The wood carvings of Oaxaca encompass the entire spectrum of Mexican history, from the ties with Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica to the new cultural elements brought about by the Spanish conquest to the emergence of the Mexican nation into the global market during the twentieth century. The figures that emerge in Oaxacan wood carving demonstrate the concept of mestizaje as people from rural Mexico carve out images that have found their way into the villagers’ lives through archaeological remnants and popular culture. Author Marjorie Agosín presents a poetic description of this relationship between the artist and his country as she discusses two of Mexico’s most recognized artists, “Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera inserted the art of Europe into that of Mexico by focusing on the concept of a hybrid and transparent nation, at once sophisticated and innocent, steeped in its own violence. As artists, they invented themselves, but they also invented Mexico” (11). Kahlo and Rivera illustrate mestizaje by bearing a national art that recognizes the dual aspect of the country’s birth. The inclusion of a blue eyed, dark skinned baby in one of Rivera’s murals at the National Palace best represents this hybrid birth of the nation. This mestizaje reveals itself in the predominantly mestizo population and in a fusion of cultural elements.

The artisans of the villages of Oaxaca are also a part of this story of a nation of dualities and sometimes paradoxes. The wood carvers of San Martín, Arrazola, and La Unión built a market out of local timber sources, basic knives, and inspiration, yet Oaxacan wood carving
demonstrates the *mestizaje* of Mexico as much as the murals on the nation’s history that Diego Rivera implanted in the walls of the National Palace. Oaxacan wood carving captures the dual nature of Mexico through the antagonism between the popular art of the village and the economic drive of the global marketplace. The wood carvings depict native animals and historical figures as well as exotic creatures from the imagination of the artist. The carvers render this multitude of shapes and in doing so their figures become images that identify Mexico once they appear on the global market. Which Mexico? The Mexico of history textbooks? The Mexico that tourists perceive? The Mexico that the carvers experience from day to day? As Agosín tells us in regard to Kahlo and Rivera, it is the artists who define Mexico. The carvings come from the images that the carvers have in their minds, and the final forms become a part of a definition of Mexico that is based on the experiences of the individuals that compose the country. Much critical attention has been given to the impact of the global market on rural villages that produce folk art, but the market is not the ultimate deciding factor on carvings produced in Oaxaca. Néstor García Canclini\(^1\) discusses the importance of a two-fold view of communal craft products:

> We do not get a total picture of what is happening with crafts if we consider the situation that currently confronts them one-way, from the perspective of capitalism alone. Artisanal goods have also been, for many centuries, cultural and economic expressions of Indian groups. This double enrollment—historical (in a process that stems from pre-Columbian societies) and structural (in the contemporary logic of dependent capitalism)—gives rise to their hybrid nature. The analysis of this hybrid nature must travel a road between two precipices: the

\(^1\) Argentine-born author Néstor García Canclini’s publications include *Hybrid Cultures* (1995) and other works on the implications of mixed culture in Latin America.
folklorist temptation to see only the *ethnic* aspect and consider crafts as merely fading remnants of dying cultures; or, as a backlash, the danger of isolating an *economic* interpretation and studying them as one would any other item ruled by the logic of the market (45).

This study of Oaxacan wood carving will examine the carvings in a dual manner. The economic trends in folk art and the carving villages have been a popular focus of study in an age that concerns itself with fair trade and sustainable livelihoods for rural people and their cultures, but the cultural and artistic background of the carvings should not be denied or ignored. I will examine the ways in which the artists express themselves and depict various aspects of their culture to arrive at a more holistic understanding of Oaxacan wood carvings as they relate to broader concepts of Mexican history by validating the cultural and artistic qualities present in the craft.

My interest in Oaxacan woodcarvings began when I was at Disney’s Epcot in 2006. A woman was painting brightly colored animal figures that had been carved in Oaxaca, one of Mexico’s southernmost states. I purchased an armadillo and upon returning home to Tennessee, I was surprised to find similar carvings being sold in the Smoky Mountains. I began to wonder why these allegedly traditional pieces of Mexican folk art were of so much interest to American buyers. Despite what American buyers might think, the carvings are not a traditional Mexican folk art at all but were developed by a *mestizo* man in the 1960s during economic difficulties in Mexico. North American buyers may assume that the carvings are related to indigenous cultures of the Oaxaca region, but the original creator of the carvings is not indigenous just as the patterns painted on the carvings are not always traditional styles. While collectors and wholesalers generally refer to the carvings as “alebrijes”, the term is actually an inappropriate application. It
came from a popular papier-mâché artist, Pedro Linares, from Mexico City and was applied to the carvings due to the recognizable aspect of the term and the fanciful animal shapes present in both art forms.

What are today referred to as “alebrijes” or Oaxacan wood carvings, were born of the inspiration of Manuel Jiménez, a mestizo man who worked in masonry and agriculture until his carvings received significant attention. Carving had been done in the form of ox carts, festival masks, and children’s toys to some extent, but the popular “alebrije” form of today was unknown. Manuel Jiménez hails from Arrazola, a village southwest of the Oaxacan state capital. Anthropologist Michael Chibnik, a premier authority on Oaxacan wood carving, notes that Jiménez is recognized as the original creator who believes all other carvers to be unoriginal copiers (Crafting Tradition 19). Jiménez selected a local wood known as copal that grows in a twisted manner, is soft enough for carving, and sands smoothly. Carvers often select pieces of wood with particular curves that may be suitable for an animal shape; a branch with a curl like a tail may be formed into an iguana, for example. Painting was originally done with aniline dyes but in the 1980s most artists converted to acrylic house paints (40). The decoration of the carvings sometimes includes real animal hair, corn husks, and ixtle fibers (40). Other carving villages have developed in San Martín Tilcajete south of Oaxaca with Isidoro Cruz as a leading carver and La Unión Tejalapan west of Oaxaca headed by Martín Santiago. In the 1970s, government agencies also encouraged craft sales in order to improve the economy; in fact, Isidoro Cruz began selling his carvings after contact with and encouragement from the National Council of Expositions, a government organization pushing crafts for the tourist market in search of economic stimulation for the country (Market Niches 229). The pioneers of “alebrije” carving

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made way for drastic transformation in the villages as a wood carving boom began in the mid 1980s (*Crafting Tradition* 35). Though it is still difficult to travel to the villages of Arrazola, San Martín, and La Unión due to their rural settings, the economic impact has improved the lives of many villagers. Entire families often participate in the production process with men cutting the shape out of copal or pine wood, children and the elderly sanding the pieces and women painting them (Barbash 40). Despite the fact that the villages engage with a global market for economic stability, they still retain communal qualities of a pre-industrial society; for example, all family members contribute equally to the financial well-being of the family, and the extended family participates in the process as opposed to a mobile nuclear family in which one family member works outside the home to provide financial support.

While the carving villages retain the communal elements that characterize traditional folk art production, the craft has also become more commercial through the extension to a global market and the inclusion of large workshops that produce the carvings. The commercialization of folk art leads to questions concerning the original artistic value of “alebrijes” due to the economic dependency some families have on the craft. In his study “Market Niches in Oaxacan Woodcarving,” Chibnik states, “Merchants have learned that tourists are also willing to buy “folk” artisanry that does not have long-standing cultural significance. Pre-Columbian motifs appear on pottery, jewelry, and wallets. Skirts, jackets and blouses made of local textiles bear patterns invented in the twentieth century” (228). Appearing in the mid 1960s, Oaxacan wood carvings seemingly lack a long heritage. The painters develop individual styles that appeal to buyers often because the latter may presume the figure to be painted in an indigenous motif; thus, the market dictates the styles of carvings. As Chibnik points out, superior artists can be more experimental with their creations and take the time to produce more elaborate figures for
collectors (235). Individuals who rely on the craft for income do not have the luxury of experimenting with unique pieces because they need the product to be stable for profit. Shapes and paint styles that readily sell are continually reproduced and may lose originality even though each individual carving is handcrafted. Carvers who are artistically superior also compete with the more commercial artists because pieces that sell well or pieces that have been popularized by advertisement are quickly imitated for the tourist market in its search for cultural relics.

The presence of magical or fantastic elements in everyday life is one facet of Mexican culture that foreign buyers may look for in the carvings. According to internet sites such as El Caracol Zapoteca and Port Wahakaa that make carvings available for purchase with descriptions of the particular carver’s specialties and each carving’s uniqueness, the “alebrijes” contain spirits from the trees. Perhaps such legends are the origin of journalist Shepard Barbash’s book on the whimsy of the carvings entitled *The Magic in the Trees*. The difficulty comes in knowing whether these stories are merely inventions to give the craft some sale-promoting substance. On a trip to a border town I observed a selection of “alebrijes” in a gift shop and noticed that the brightly colored figures appealed to many tourists passing by the display. Above the showcase a poster highlighted various symbolic interpretations of the carvings, such as “the flat feet represent our connection to the earth.” On the contrary, my research has not indicated that this specific form of symbolism exists in the carvings or in the beliefs of the carvers. Many of the stories and pieces of information supplied to buyers are merely for the purpose of creating a deeper significance behind the “alebrijes.” However, many of the carvers of San Martín claim a Zapotec heritage, and the Zapotecs did have certain symbolic elements that parallel the carvings. Joyce Marcus describes Pre-Columbian Zapotec religion:
Perhaps the most crucial concept in Zapotec religion was that of pe (written pee in the sixteenth century, pronounced be by today's Zapotec). Variously translated as 'wind', 'breath' or 'spirit', pe was the vital force that made all living things move. Anything that moved was thus alive, to some degree sacred, and deserving of respect: animals, human beings, clouds, lightning, earthquakes, the 260-day ritual calendar and the foam on the top of a cup of stirred hot chocolate are examples of things which possessed pe. (174)

While the Pre-Columbian Zapotecs had a concept of a Supreme Being, their religion also retained an animistic quality like that present in many early hunter-gather societies. This data on the historical religious perspective of the Zapotecs gives credibility to stories of spirits within the trees that manifest themselves in the carved figures. In addition, carver Vicente Hernández Vázquez further confirms the stories with the idea that the figures are “magical” ³ (interview).

Traditional festivals also place the woodcarvings in a better understood social and historical context. Villages organize festivals and fiestas throughout the year for everything from religious commemoration to rites of passage. Many times the carvings reflect these social customs and religious traditions through figures representing mariachis and saints. Therefore, it is challenging to determine if instrument playing frogs have been modeled to intrigue tourists or if these whimsical figures are an extension of an elaborate cultural heritage of celebrations since many of the well-known carvers of “alebrijes,” including Manuel Jiménez, were involved in carving festival masks prior to the wood carving boom.

³ It is difficult to determine what is meant by “magical” as Vicente Hernández Vázquez only replied “Yes, magical” without elaboration when asked if he considered the pieces to be magical. His response may have been for the appeasement of the interviewer as he also said that foreign buyers sometimes come in and say “Oh, this looks like a…” to which he replies “Okay.” Further, though the carvers accept notions of the magical in the everyday, the carvers are generally unfamiliar with terms such as magical realism that are discussed in the academic world.
Many craft forms in Mexico experience problems with their authenticity as a folk art and lack a long-standing communal heritage. Zapotec weavings are marketed as a product that has been fabricated unchanged since the arrival of sheep in the Americas during the 16th century in order to give the craft the appeal that it stems from the days before capitalism and mass production (Stephen 23). Sellers of “alebrijes” also play off the simplistic features of the craft as a way of marketing in a world of competitiveness and cheap goods. Paradoxically, artisans that sell items such as weavings, pottery or “alebrijes” become increasingly dissociated from them as they participate in the global market. Néstor García Canclini describes this irony in relation to the everyday dress of rural and indigenous people:

On the one hand, Indian made clothes and household items are worn and used less and less in peasant societies since they are being replaced by manufactured goods that are cheaper and more attractive because of their design and modern connotations. But the declining artisanal production is revived thanks to a growing demand for exotic objects in the country’s cities and abroad. (41)

While tourists purchase goods from rural areas because of their seeming disconnection with the complications of the industrial world, artisans from rural areas simultaneously idolize the attractiveness of urban society that tourists transport into their villages. In the case of some traditional folk arts, the everyday importance of the objects and their local cultural value is increasingly overshadowed by the appeal of profits. David Carruthers describes the appeal of the folk art of these villages for outsiders: “In a machine-manufactured world of reliable uniformity, handmade indigenous arts and crafts offer a refreshing antidote to the grinding homogenization

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and standardization of corporate capitalism” (4). The rationalized locales that promote consumption in an urban society supply the appeal of folk art as people search for commodities that break from the uniformity of goods from the industrial sector. The popularity of Oaxacan wood carvings may be attributed to this break from the corporate world since carvers still produce them by hand.

Despite the economic implications of the woodcarving boom, I believe the cultural background of the artists is an undeniable and important influence on the products. Ox-carts and festival masks have a long-standing carving heritage and some of the carvers of “alebrijes” worked in these traditions prior to the wood-carving boom. However, one must distinguish between fabricated claims of cultural significance and authenticity and genuine links to Pre-Columbian artistic expression and underlying belief systems.

Oaxaca is a state in Mexico with an enduring and vibrant indigenous population. Around 350,000 Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and Nahuas inhabited the Valley of Oaxaca before the Spanish conquest (Chance 607). Remnants of these groups remain in Oaxaca even today, though in a hybridized form. The first factor relating to the modification in these groups is the mestizaje brought about by the influx of Spaniards in the 16th century. A group designated as the naborías worked for the Spanish in jobs relating to artisanship, public works, and household service, placing a sector of the indigenous population in continual contact with the Spanish conquerors (610). As early as the Colonial Period, the value of the skills of the various indigenous groups was recognized as beneficial to communal progress; thus, the diverse indigenous populations became more interspersed in urban Spanish society. Marriage records reveal, however, that the Indian population in colonial Oaxaca was more inclined to marry within its ethnic group (623). Whether this inclination relates to class hierarchy or indigenous intent to preserve culture, this
fact may account for the high visibility of indigenous groups in Oaxaca today. Despite a strong organization according to ethnic groups in southern Mexico, religious iconography, community organization, and linguistic classifications are all sectors of a social structure that were altered in some way by the interchange of Spanish and varied indigenous customs. Professor John K. Chance describes the situation of *mestizaje* in colonial Oaxaca:

> Despite the many differences separating Indians from other members of society, Indians often attended the same churches, held the same jobs, and worked in the same shops as non-Indians. They formed an integral part of the urban milieu, though in a decidedly inferior position and without them the city would have been unable to function. (623)

The ethnic and linguistic distinctions that remained stronger in Oaxaca than elsewhere in Mexico have been narrowed by the use of the term “indigenous” to refer to any number of Indian people from the region; most people, particularly outsiders, cannot distinguish between the groups. In a primarily *mestizo* nation, the use of the term “indigenous” often connotes ignorance, backwardness and a rejection of modern progress. Thus, one may exalt the sophistication of the ancient Maya or Aztec people yet deny one’s own indigenous heritage. At the same time, the widespread artisan ability characteristic of indigenous cultures is interpreted as Mexican culture and packaged for marketing to tourists. The curious case for Oaxaca wood carvings in the 20th century is that they are not a traditional craft of Indian artisans but rather were developed by a *mestizo* man.

Despite the non-indigenous foundations of Oaxacan wood carving, indigenous patterns and symbols are often incorporated into the designs of the “alebrijes.” People who produce folk art objects often sell them at sites of Pre-Columbian culture like the Zócalo of Mexico City, the
pyramids of Teotihuacán, and the Zapotec pyramids of Monte Albán and Mitla in Oaxaca. Mitla is well-known for its carved geometric designs that distinguish it from other pyramids in Mexico with hieroglyphs. Zapotec symbols and designs like those found on the pyramid at Mitla are sometimes integrated into the folk art of Oaxaca including regional pottery and “alebrijes.”

Close to the carving village of San Martín Tilcajete is San Bartolo Coyotepec, which is known for its black colored pottery, and is also the location of the Museum of Popular Art of the State of Oaxaca. The majority of the museum’s collection consists of black pottery, ceramic sculptures and wood carvings. Traditionally, pottery has a more utilitarian purpose, but in San Bartolo Coyotepec it surpasses the daily object and falls into the realm of the artistic. Alba Leon Cantón captures the style of the Mitla pyramid that is also interpreted on wood carvings through the use of repeated geometric forms (see fig. 1). These decorative symbols at Mitla contrast with
pictographic images included on the pyramids of the Aztecs and the Mayas, and the artists of Oaxaca, including the wood carvers, incorporate this unique regional style into their art forms.

The influence of Pre-Colombian cultures is still evident not only in the visual presence of pyramids that project from the landscape throughout Mexico, but also in elements of culture. Thus, the traditional style flower-embroidered dress from the region is comparable to the dress portrayed in the carving of an indigenous woman by Melchor Calvo (see fig. 2 and fig. 3).

Fig. 2
Fig. 3

The attire portrayed by Calvo actually represents the traditional dress for the event of *mayordomía*, a sponsorship that individuals pay to host a celebration for a local saint. This festival contains elements of *mestizaje* as Catholic religious practices utilize traditional folk art of the region for its practice. Although “alebrije” carving is not traditionally an indigenous craft, the highly visible indigenous population of Oaxaca is nonetheless a subject for the carvers. The artist realistically renders the characteristics of the figure from this occasion and also captures the detail of the floral designs present in traditional Oaxacan clothing. This inclusion of indigenous elements in a non-indigenous craft also expresses *mestizaje* as the carvers adopt a variety of cultural elements for their carvings. Furthermore, the representation of more culturally significant figures creates a sense of pride for their creators, and these figures may be displayed in the home of the carver rather than sold as Jacobo Ángeles exemplifies here with his carved interpretation of the *matlazigua*. 
The matlazigua is an element of cultural folklore regarding a perfect, elusive woman that appears as a temptation for men. As a form of mestizaje, the tale mixes the reality of temptation with a folkloric icon. Jacobo Ángeles worked with his wife, María, to complete this multi-component carving which they display in their home in San Martín (see fig.4).

Another cultural element depicted in the wood carvings are the faunas of Mesoamerica. Historically, such carvings have a long and enduring presence in the art of Mexico. Guilhelm Olivier writes, “The omnipresence of the animal world in the daily life and the cosmovision of the people of Mesoamerica appear in abundant and varied testimonies of archaeological, plastic, iconographic, and literary character”5 (5). The dog is one such symbol in Mexico that was of importance to Mesoamerican cultures and that still roams the streets throughout Mexico. It is believed to have appeared in the geographical area of modern day Mexico around 8000 years ago, making it the first domesticated animal in Mexico (Azua 34). It had continual importance in various Mesoamerican civilizations, as evidenced in the discovery of dogs in tombs as a guide

5 Translation mine
into the world of the dead (Olivier 6; Garza 28). Accompanying this ritual importance of dogs is the symbolic position the dog held in Mesoamerica as a representation of Xólotl, the twin brother of the god Quetzalcoatl. Further, the dog was sometimes used in ritual sacrifice and also appears on the ritual calendar of the Nahuas and Mayas (Garza 30). The importance of animals, and specifically the dog, presents itself in various Pre-Columbian civilizations. The interaction of the human inhabitants of the region with the fauna of the area leads to their representation in the culture and integration into the sacred.

Today, contact between the animals and people of Mexico still leads to the reflection of the people on their surroundings. While the dog is no longer considered sacred in Mexican culture as it was in Pre-Columbian times, artistic representations prevail. One of the first shapes to appear in Oaxacan carving is the dog (see fig. 5). Collectors sometimes classify these early “alebrijes” as rustic due to more harshly cut lines, the attachment of parts with nails and modest painting that characterizes these carvings. The early carvings of dogs not only display the continued popularity of the dog as a key figure in Mexican culture, but also an evolution in the style of the carvings from the rustic form to a more stylized shape.

![Rustic style dog. Personal photograph by author. 31 May 2008.](image)
Fig. 6

Narcisco González Ramírez’s carving of a gaunt dog reveals a progression in style in Oaxacan carvings as the more recent figures are fluid, emerge from a solid piece of wood, and contain brightly colored paint schemes (see fig. 6). Further, the carving can be interpreted as a portrayal of the dog that exposes its degraded position in modern Mexican society due to overpopulation. Dogs roam the streets of modern Mexico, often undernourished or ill; the carving nonetheless indicates that the dog is still a cultural icon. Indeed, the dog also encapsulates the notion of *mestizaje*, as is evidenced in the cat-like ears and tail of the carving that indicate the mixture of breeds.

Animals, in general, are a commonly utilized subject for the carvings just as they are visible subjects in Pre-Columbian cave paintings in Southern Mexico. The hummingbird, the jaguar, and the grasshopper are among these animals that were present in Pre-Colombian art figures and that also appear in today’s Oaxacan carvings. The jaguar appears in Mesoamerican
cultures as a figure for various gods and is often represented by sculptures, including at the pyramid of Monte Albán in Oaxaca (National Museum of Anthropology). According to carver Vicente Hernández Vásquez of San Martín Tilcajete, the jaguar continues to be a symbol of strength and sacredness (interview).

The hummingbird appears on Mixteca pottery as yet another being from the animal world that is integrated into the visual art of the people (see fig.7). Archaeologists consider the “Copa con colibrí” a highpoint in Mixteca art as the bird sits on the cup poised to drink (National Museum of Anthropology). Generally, highly decorated pieces of pottery or sculpture are indicative of their more sacred value in Pre-Columbian culture. The “alebrije” hummingbird shares some stylistic features with the Mixteca hummingbird that give the two a shared
appearance (see fig. 8). Though the Oaxacan carving has no ritual intent, the artist produces a piece with similar details.

![Hummingbird](image)

**Fig. 8**
**Hummingbird. Personal photograph by author. 31 May 2008.**

While many of the figures formed by Oaxacan artisans are pulled from images of their own culture, the imagination and the wider world are also influential on the shapes that come out of the carving villages. Like the cultural *mestizaje* resulting from Spanish conquest of indigenous populations, globalization results in an overlay of world images into the more traditional and native figures depicted by the carvings. Carvings of animals from the African savannah are often found amidst carvings of the typical fauna of Mexico, demonstrating the influx of images from abroad into the minds and imaginations of the carvers. Perhaps these new creative expressions based on images from abroad are just another way for the carvers to interpret the exoticness and whimsy of the world, and, in particular, its animals.
Carver Eleazar Morales incorporates personal creative elements with the painting of zebras within zebra stripes (see fig. 9). While the stripe colors are realistic, the color of the animal’s mane is changed into something more fanciful. In this way, the carver takes liberty to depict a non-native animal.

Just as the carvers’ attention is currently being directed toward different parts of the globe for inspiration, the completion of a successful Cuban Revolution in 1958 attuned the attention of the world to the affairs of Latin America and the Caribbean. This event can be viewed as a starting point for the “Boom” in Latin America (Rodríguez 847). The “Boom” is primarily viewed as a literary movement, during which time the translation of many Spanish works into various languages occurred. Nonetheless, the interest of foreigners in the political and cultural events of Latin America and the Caribbean throughout the decades of the 1960s and 1970s spans beyond just the literary. An apex of the “Boom” occurred when Guatemalan author Miguel Ángel Asturias received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1967, precisely at the time “alebrije” carving was emerging in Oaxaca. In particular, Asturias’ 1949 novel *Hombres de Maíz* deals...
with the conflict between the “organic” indigenous world and the rational, commercial world that destructively intrudes in it (Franco 310). While the correlation with Asturias’ Nobel Prize is intended to show the emergence of Oaxacan wood carvings on the world market during a period in which Latin American artists began receiving world recognition, it is also interesting to note that Asturias’ writings engage the hybrid nature of Hispanic culture.

“Alebrijes” connect with the important development of magical realism that transpired during the period of the “Boom.” Magical realism is considered an invention in which writers severed ties with strictly Eurocentric ideas of reality in order to present the clash between a rational and spiritual world present in their own culture (847). The term is applied to literature as well as visual arts. Jeffrey Weschler describes the genre from the perspective of painting, “Magical realism affords a surprising latitude of psychological effects, although it is pinned in, as it were, between realism and Surrealism” (294). The difficulty in defining magical realism relates to a structure that includes an element that is not entirely part of the rational world and at the same time does not belong entirely to the realm of the psychological or the subconscious of dreams. Rather, the break with reason can be associated with the indigenous heritage throughout Latin America and its supernatural and superstitious elements. A rejection of reason as it is defined by the Western world encapsulates the cosmology of much of Latin America. Latin American cultures break with the rationalization of the Western world, allowing the magical to occur in the everyday world. Interestingly, this literary and artistic genre relates to the much broader notion of mestizaje in which the rationalistic European model and the variety of indigenous beliefs combine to form a layered and multifaceted reality throughout Latin America. The spiritual world is generally seen as integrated into Mexican culture as a vibrant tradition that has continually coexisted with Western institutions since the European conquest of the Pre-
Columbian civilizations. By incorporating non-realistic elements into “alebrijes,” Oaxacan wood carvers seem to integrate the widely recognized genre of magical realism into the essence of the carvings.

In addition to magical realism, the carvings include other distinct Latin American features. The symbolism and supernatural that is an important part of the indigenous worldview finds its way into the carvings in the specific form of nahualism. Alessandro Lupo describes the continued presence of this concept:

Between the numerous and varied examples offered with respect to the Mesoamerican people, the concepts conventionally denoted as nahualism and tonalism constitute a peculiar case, that even today they are found amply dispersed in the indigenous populations of Mexico and Guatemala, insomuch as their origins date back to the great civilizations of the Pre-Hispanic era⁶ (17).

The term nahualism refers to the supernatural ability of some people to take on a particular animal form, whereas the term tonalism deals with the concept of each person being born with an alter ego in the form of an animal. These concepts, present in an informal structure in Mesoamerica prior to Spanish arrival, were not extinguished by the conquest. Rather, they become factors of the mestizaje. Fransico Rojas González projects that the birth of nahualism coincides with the time of Spanish conquest (364). That is to say that nahualism emerged as a product of the mestizaje. Early civilizations in Mesoamerica had the characteristic of animism. Upon the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores and monks, Christian religious iconography and symbols mixed with the religious background of the indigenous groups, giving birth to a new hybrid religious culture that is still alive in modern Latin America; nahualism is one such facet of this mix. The acceptance of the thin veil between the human world and the supernatural world of

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⁶ Translation mine
animal spirits and gods was not only accepted by Pre-Columbian peoples who inhabited Mexico but was revitalized and transformed into the concept of nahualism portrayed by carver Manuel Jiménez in the twentieth century (see fig. 10 and fig. 11). The nahual depicted by Jiménez is a

![Vase with the form of a dog and the face of a man](image_url)

**Fig. 10**

![“Nahual” by Manuel Jiménez](image_url)

**Fig. 11**
less realistic subject for a wood carving; some of Jiménez’s early and more famous carvings include unpainted dogs and cross-legged frogs. Nahualism and other supernatural concepts are well-known by Mexican people, and Jiménez transfers this idea into a physical form. While the concept of nahualism does not originate with Jiménez, he creates his own interpretation through wood carving.

Wood carvers like Jiménez transfer cultural concepts and images into a physical object via artistic interpretation. While “alebrije” carving is not a traditional or long-standing craft, the carvings themselves suggest the influence of an older culture on the product. *Mestizaje* evidences itself in the steady inclusion of Pre-Columbian motifs in a modern folk art, the carving of long-standing cultural symbols such as animals along with new images from abroad, and the continued blending of Western and indigenous cultures depicted by the carvings. The ongoing hybridization of Mexican culture confirms itself in the carvings and also serves to validate the cultural significance of Oaxacan wood carving. Nonetheless, the carvings also have an artistic merit that should be recognized in order to address questions of artistic value brought up by the commercial aspects of Oaxacan wood carving.

The Museum of Folk Art in New York has defined folk art with relation to four thematic ideas: utility, community, individuality and symbolism. “Alebrijes” can be categorized according to these same principles because, although wood carving in Oaxaca is a relatively new tradition that emerged around the time of the “Boom” in Latin American culture, it still operates as a folk art in that it has a utilitarian function, is practiced throughout communities, requires individual expression, and retains culturally symbolic elements.

The utility of Oaxacan wood carvings is one principle that has been discussed in great detail and that has also placed the carvings in a debatable position as genuine artistic pieces.
Wood carving in Oaxacan villages became popular as a means of financial success due to several factors. In *Crafting Tradition*, Chibnik links the Pan American Highway to increased tourist influx into the area in the 1940s (24). Another factor of perhaps greater influence was the push by the state for rural areas to hitch to the global economy. The development of the Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de Artesanías (FONART) in the 1970s has been one such influence that aided in the promotion of the craft (29). FONART is still an active government organization that encourages Mexican artisans and the preservation of cultural traditions by supporting their economic place in both local and global markets (www.fonart.gob.mx). With the success of individuals such as Manuel Jiménez, other individuals have sought advancement through the production of wood carvings as well. The influence of the carving trade is present throughout the village of San Martín, which I visited in the summer of 2008. Just by walking down side streets, one can find a multitude of family workshops. While many of the streets in San Martín are still unpaved, the main entry into the village is now a regular road that contrasts the plowed fields that line it and the ox drawn carts that move through the village (see fig. 12). While the villages

![Image of village](image)

*Fig. 12
View leaving the village of San Martín Tilcajete. Personal photograph. 31 May 2008.*
are still not total commercial or tourist centers, there is an obvious shift from agriculture to handcrafts as a means of economic advancement for the villagers. Indeed, significant economic stability has been provided to villages who have engaged in the global market through the production of folk arts. As a result of this commercialization, Oaxacan wood carving has entered a controversial realm. This project does not intend to resolve this controversy but simply legitimize “alebrijes” as a form of mestizaje and recognize the economic factor of the craft as a key to its utilitarianism. The emergence of another utilitarian aspect of carving in Oaxacan villages is the availability of household objects. Carver Vicente Hernández Vásquez not only creates “alebrijes” but also furniture from cedar wood. Other items such as carved picture frames can be found in many carving shops that incorporate the village’s livelihood into goods for buyers who look for usefulness in an artistic object.

Oaxacan carvings can be found on the internet, at Disney’s Epcot, and in fair trade shops in the mountains of East Tennessee. The widespread availability of the carvings gives rise to the question of their artistic merit. If they are produced in such large numbers by so many people, are they of high artistic quality? The artisanship of the carvings comes in varying degrees, which leads to another perspective of folk art. The nature of community in the Oaxacan wood carving craft places the carvings in the category of folk art. The widespread presence of the craft may be more related to the high concentration of participants than haste in production. Nowadays, the carvings are still produced by hand using mostly machetes and perhaps a couple of other tools for more precision (see fig. 13). Detailed painting is also carried out by hand, often by the women of the family.
As is characteristic of folk art, the craft is preserved by the teaching of it from generation to generation. Jacobo Ángeles, who has taught his craft in workshops throughout the world, including Russia, China, and the United States, first learned carving techniques from his father, a man who was more involved in agriculture than art production, when 12 years old. Jacobo Ángeles still proudly displays one of his favorite carvings that reminds him of his father (see fig. 14). There are no machines, no “made in ___” stickers, and no volumes of records on how to
produce a carving. Numerous households within a given village participate in wood carving, and often the entire family contributes to the process. Generational learning and family participation relate to the indigenous or pre-industrial aspects of the carving trade. Certainly, a sense of competition is also present within these picturesque, old-world carving communities.

Since there are so many people involved in wood carving in the villages of Oaxaca, individuality in design is difficult to obtain and it also accounts for the varying degrees of artisanship seen in the carvings. Not only is there variation in carving style from one person to another but also variation in painting style. Some family workshops carve mostly solid pieces of wood while others may affix pieces together with nails to create a figure. The same differentiation occurs with painting when some workshops use more abstract designs while others select specific symbols. In order to preserve ideas developed by an individual, photos are often prohibited in workshops. Some designs, such as a frog by Manuel Jiménez, are found repeatedly in shops throughout the city of Oaxaca as they are easily recognized by tourists who
have possibly seen the early Jiménez design in Barbash’s original book *Oaxacan Woodcarving: The Magic in the Trees* (see fig. 15).

Nonetheless, originality is important to carvers who wish to have distinct pieces among such a concentrated body of artists in the area of Oaxaca City. This also explains why the carvings often venture into shapes that are not original to the region of Oaxaca or even to Latin America. Completely fantastical figures are not uncommon. One life-sized figure of a “guerrero” selling for $2500USD in the shop of Francisco Fabian Ojeda incorporates elements that include a snake-wrapped cross, a face representing life and death, and a costume mixing the traits of various gods. He says that such figures come from “the fantasy of the imagination.” While tables are lined with many repeated figures, large fanciful figures also stand tall in Ojeda’s workshop-home turned art store.

The ability to move outside the bounds of what is native to Oaxaca or what is perceived by outsiders as traditional is exemplary of the individuality of the carvers. An artist’s personal interpretation of the world outside Mexico reinvents a craft that could otherwise become a
stagnant folk art turned commodity. The importance of individual input and the evolution of style can be traced in another Mexican folk art tradition from San Luis Potosí. During the Easter season, artisans fabricate so-called “Judas” figures that will be filled with explosives and blown up. All folk arts have some similar characteristics but particular similarities emerge as parallel between the Judas figures and the “alebrije” carvings. The creation of the figures in San Luis Potosí shares the element of reinvention of a tradition with Oaxacan wood carvings. As shown in the documentary “Quema Judas,” a contest is held annually to promote the creation of papier-mâché representations of evil. The craft is becoming obsolete due to its unprofitability as it is limited to the Easter season. While some of the artists create more simplistic designs that follow the traditional style, other artists submit much more fanciful creations. Eleazar Rodríguez, a designer for a mining company, is documented in the film for his devotion around Easter to the papier-mâché craft. He believes, “Tradition evolves. A culture survives depending on its ability to adapt to changing times, new materials, techniques. Peoples’ tastes change along with their lifestyles” (“Quema Judas”). Oaxacan carving has followed a similar route in the creation of designs. The earliest figures known in the rustic style had minimal painting and basic shapes. More recently, carvers have ventured into many different realms of elaborate shapes and vibrant colors to repeatedly captivate buyers of “alebrijes.” Vicente Hernández Vásquez also pursues woodcarving, a skill that he learned from his grandparents, in the village of San Martín. He claims to make not only what appeals to customers, but that he also utilizes his imagination and puts detail into his pieces. While carvings are made with the hope that they will appeal a buyer, they ultimately come from the creativity and the whims of Hernández Vásquez. When asked where his designs come from he said that they were just made up from his imagination (interview). Like the artist Eleazar Rodríguez from the documentary, Hernández Vásquez and
other Oaxacan wood carvers incorporate original creative elements into folk art to expand its growth and prevent its stagnation in an ever-evolving culture.

Intimately related to the integration of new images into the menageries of figures, Oaxacan woodcarving also carries the symbolic landmark of folk art. Zapotec motifs are sometimes found in the painting of the carvings as an indicator of personal symbols in the lineage of some carvers, as is evident in the designs of the workshop of Jacobo Ángeles. To celebrate the Mexican holiday, El Día de los Muertos, artisans in San Martín Tilcajete often carve altars for the festival, formulating a version of the celebration that incorporates specific elements of their village’s skills.

In addition to animal symbolism and symbolic elements from festivals, nature symbolism is used in the design of carvings. Female carver María Florentina Jiménez Ojeda combines a childhood whimsy and her connection to the earth in “Niña Mariposa en un Tulipan” (see fig. 13). In a moment of magical realism a young girl emerges from the flower as a butterfly.

Fig. 16
Perhaps Ojeda is interpreting the transformation of a girl into a woman and related this phase of life to a cycle in nature. The base of the carving is further decorated with a floral motif, which is a common paint scheme among the wood carvings. Carvers often incorporate nature symbolism into the carvings since the natural world is an important part of their livelihoods as both farmers and folk artists.

Ironically, the mass production of wood carvings may be destroying the very landscape that inspires the carver’s interpretations and depleting the resources that provide for the fabrication of their folk art. As David Carruthers notes, “Mexico’s indigenous folk art manifests this link between cultural and biological diversity. Each art form has emerged in the context of a distinct natural resource endowment, reproducing Mexico’s dramatic variety of ecosystems…Many artisans extract their own raw materials” (2). Oaxacan wood carvings indeed developed with close environmental ties, notably the twisting branches of the copal tree that were once used by the Maya for incense offerings (Marcus 186). Even today, some artists like Jacobo Ángeles use naturally derived paints that come from mixing pomegranates or medicinal plants with dried powder from tree sap. On the other hand, artists such as Francisco Fabian Ojeda purchase metallic paints to give their abstract creations an eye-catching shimmer. At one time, carvings may have been left altogether unpainted, but the evolution in style now compels carvers to paint the majority of their figures. Vicente Hernández Vásquez is one example of a carver who formerly made all natural carvings but now paints most of his work; nonetheless, an occasional unpainted figure appears on the shelf of his shop to reveal the natural beauty of the wood.

Many carvers still recognize the beauty of their resources and their connectedness to the land. On a trip to Oaxaca in May 2008, I was invited to accompany the Ángeles family to plant
copal trees. The family understands the deforestation caused by the widespread use of copal wood for the carvings, and, through such replanting efforts, actively involves itself in combating the negative environmental impact in which they have taken part. Further, the family now only uses farmed copal wood. Carruthers explains of rural artist families, “On the edge of subsistence, artisan households have every incentive to be careful stewards of scarce resources, supporting biological diversity, avoiding waste, and recycling castoff materials” (3). The ecological impact on the surrounding land when crafts become commoditized goods available for consumption in shops abroad and on the internet brings into question the long term sustainability of the craft. Ultimately, poorly managed resources will run out, leaving the villages in a degraded condition and depriving them of the utilitarian livelihood of their folk art.

In summation, Oaxacan wood carving can be categorized as a folk art according to the four principles of utility, community, individuality and symbolism. If any controversy still surrounds the genuine nature of Oaxacan wood carving as a folk art, Fabian López Ortega dispels it through a self-reflective carving that could be the visual biography of any carving family (see fig. 17). The presence of the husband as the principal carver, the wife as the chief
painter and a child playing with the finished pieces indicates the familial aspect associated with the carving process. Once again, this individual contribution to the household has remnants of a world view associated with Pre-Columbian cultures. The involvement of the family in this manner is further confirmed in the Ángeles household in San Martín. His children play in the yard while a table of women, including his wife, carries out painting with meticulous detail and the young men sit on stools behind them carving the figures. Ortega’s carving represents the daily process of fabricating both an economically advantageous craft and a culturally significant folk art that the carving households undergo. While the commoditization of festivals and crafts could be viewed as an exploitation of culture, an increasingly globalized world sometimes requires the utilization of culture as a resource for profit. It is then that the purity of the festivals or crafts is called into question since they undergo refinement for special appeal to tourists.

Oaxacan wood carving exemplifies the influence of indigenous culture in the state of Oaxaca and the enduring symbols and animal figures that go back to Pre-Columbian cultures. *Mestizaje* continues to reveal itself as a foundational component of Mexican culture in which the cultural and artistic characteristics of the past form integral parts of the villages today. The carvers interpret some of the same animal symbols that were of importance to Mesoamerican cultures prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, as well as hybridized festivals like *Día de los Muertos* and *Mayordomía* that were formed after the clash of indigenous and European customs. Despite their more recent development and recognition, which coincided with the “Boom” of Latin American literature in the 1960s, the carvings maintain a traditional element in the sense that the carvers extract them from enduring cultural images. On the other hand, the carvings reveal a new type of *mestizaje* that is occurring in conjunction with globalization. The success of the carvings is linked to their attachment to the global market as a
commodity that sells a version of Mexican culture. In conjunction with the carvings entering into the global market, the villages have further been inundated with images from the outside world through international visitors, the internet, and in the case of more skilled carvers, trips abroad to teach the craft. The ability of the carvers to draw from a variety of sources for inspiration, including both local traditions and international imagery, demonstrates the ongoing process of *mestizaje*. The craft must constantly evolve artistically not only to maintain competitiveness in the economic market, but also to express the constant progressions occurring in the culture of the carvers. Buyers may purchase pieces that they consider exemplary of Mexican culture, but in fact, all the pieces accomplish the goal of expressing Mexican culture in the sense that the carvers express their understanding of the world with which they have come into contact. Ultimately, every “alebrije” the carvers make takes part in defining Mexico as a nation of dualities and a cultural *mestizaje* that continues to evolve.
Works Cited


