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Crafts and Commodities: Oaxacan Wood Carvings

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Crafts and Commodities:

Oaxacan Wood Carvings

Lecture by

Michael Chibnik

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CRAFTS AND COMMODITIES:
OAXACAN WOOD CARVINGS

Michael Chibnik

On January 1, 1998, Jimmy Carter visited the small Mexican town of San Martín Tilcajete to look at brightly painted wood carvings. The former president of the United States was vacationing in the state of Oaxaca with his wife and family, and was accompanied by bodyguards, government officials, and guides on their excursions to the colonial churches, archaeological sites, craft villages, and markets of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca. They stayed in San Martín for half an hour, buying numerous pieces and chatting with artisans.

The Carters had decided to go to San Martín after seeing a display of carvings in the *zócalo* (central square) of the city of Oaxaca. Although the residents of San Martín were honored by the visit of the former president, they were not surprised that such a famous man would spend part of New Year's Day looking at Oaxacan wood carvings. Since the mid-1980s, these whimsical pieces have adorned the shelves of gift shops and private homes in Mexico, the United States, and Europe, and have been the subject of countless magazine and newspaper articles, museum exhibitions, and television programs. Oaxacan wood carvings appear on calendars, postcards, and t-shirts and are sold in catalogs and over the Internet. Artisans from the principal carving centers of San Martín Tilcajete, Arrazola, and La Unión Tejalapan have traveled throughout the United States giving exhibitions of their craft. Many families in these communities have prospered by selling their pieces to wholesalers, store owners, and tourists. Men and women who once eked out a living through farming and wage labor are now able to build concrete houses and purchase automobiles, satellite dishes, cell phones, and compact disk players.

Oaxacan wood carvings are part of a growing trade in what Nelson Graburn (1976) and others have called "ethnic and tourist arts." Crafts such as Otavalan weavings (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999), Kuna molas (Tice 1995), Côte d'Ivoire carvings (Steiner 1994), and New Guinea masks (Silverman 1999) change hands in complex, multistranded commodity chains that usually link artisans from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania with

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consumers from the middle and upper classes of the United States, Canada, and Europe. The commercialization of crafts has improved the standard of living of many artisans in some communities, but has enriched only a few merchants in others.

Since 1994 I have been conducting research on the history, production, marketing, and cultural representations of Oaxacan wood carvings (Chibnik 2003). These colorful pieces are an extraordinarily apt illustration of how the global demand for exotic "indigenous crafts" can lead to an invented tradition (Hobsbawm 1983). The origins of Oaxacan wood carvings differ from those of most other ethnic and tourist arts. Accounts of craft commercialization ordinarily describe how objects that were at one time integral parts of indigenous cultures become transformed as the result of a global marketplace. The hybrid nature of such crafts leads to heated debates about their artistic merit and "authenticity." The Oaxacan wood carvings, however, are mid-20th century creations that are made mostly by monolingual Spanish-speakers. The pieces nonetheless are stylistically similar in some respects to other local crafts with longer histories and are often promoted as a symbol of "Zapotec Indian" identity by merchants dealing in ethnic arts.

Crafts, Ideology, and Economics in Postrevolutionary Mexico

Certain states in Mexico have long been known for their crafts, especially those made by people identified by themselves or outsiders as "Indians." Although some "Indian" crafts have remained unchanged since preColumbian times, many others are complex mixtures of indigenous and Spanish technologies and artistic styles. For example, communities around Teotitlán del Valle in the state of Oaxaca wove cotton for local consumption prior to the Spanish conquest. After the Spanish introduced wool to the area in the 1500s, large numbers of blankets were made from that material during the colonial period. These wool blankets have since that time been widely regarded as an Indian (specifically Zapotec) craft.

Mexican elites in the 18th and 19th centuries adopted European ideas about artistic merit and largely ignored indigenous crafts. After the Mexican Revolution in the first part of the 20th century, however, intellectuals and politicians began to praise and publicize popular (usually Indian) arts and crafts. Famous Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros extolled Indian themes in their paintings. State agencies were soon established to promote and preserve popular arts and by the later part of the century there were more than fifty such governmental institutions (Novelo 1976:47).

The postrevolutionary state's interest in popular arts and crafts was initially ideological. The leaders of Mexico were seeking to unite a country divided along ethnic, linguistic, and political lines. In particular, they sought to draw the indigenous population into the state by creating national symbols of identity that reflected the country's preColumbian past. Although the eventual goal was to integrate the Indians into a mestizo state, the first step was to make all Mexicans value aspects of indigenous cultures such as dance, music, painting, weaving, and pottery. The syncretic nature of many of these cultural features was rarely emphasized by

the intellectuals and politicians who promoted this *indigenismo* and encouraged collectors such as Nelson Rockefeller (see Oettinger 1990) to purchase folk art.

By the mid-20th century, the state's promotion of popular art was also motivated by economic concerns. An increase in tourism spurred by transportation improvements had brought many visitors willing to buy Mexican crafts. At the same time, most rural residents were finding it ever more difficult to support their families through agriculture because of small plots, low crop prices, and poor soils; their economic situation worsened as land became more scarce as a result of population growth and government policies that favored large-scale, capital-intensive agriculture. The state therefore encouraged craft production in order to foster rural development, reduce rural-urban migration, and attract tourists to regions where there are large indigenous populations.

Government stores in major cities buy popular arts; banks give credit to artisans. The state puts on exhibits of crafts in both Mexico and abroad and sends artisans to demonstrate their work at such shows. Arts and crafts are displayed in state-run museums and featured extensively in brochures and videos put out by government tourist offices. State arts institutions sponsor craft contests about specific themes in which the winners receive significant amounts of money.

The state's goals of preserving "indigenous" art forms (notwithstanding their usual syncretic origins) and promoting craft sales have often been partly contradictory. Merchants sometimes find that "traditional" crafts sell better after they have been transformed in ways that appeal to foreign tastes. Many rugs from Teotitlán, for example, have designs taken from the work of European artists such as Picasso, Klee, and Escher. Furthermore, tourists have been willing to buy entirely new crafts that do not have longstanding cultural significance such as jewelry and wallets with preColumbian motifs.

The state's ideological and economic goals in promoting popular arts are most compatible when crafts (however transformed by market demands) have a long history of use by "Indians." Buyers both in Mexico and abroad also seem especially attracted to such crafts. As Arjun Appadurai has observed (1986:47), in tourist arts, the status politics of consumers revolves around the group identity of producers. It is difficult, however, to reconcile entirely new crafts made by people who are clearly not Indians, such as the papier mâché sculptures of the Linares family of Mexico City (Masuoka 1994), with an ideology that promotes popular arts as a symbol of national indigenous heritage. The state thus has had an ambivalent attitude to crafts such as the Linares' sculptures and Oaxacan wood carvings. Such crafts seem worthy of state support since they provide needed income for poor people and attract tourists. But they do not fit well into the national discourse about popular arts.

The Origins of Oaxacan Wood Carving

The trade in Oaxacan wood carving began with the activities of Oaxaca-based shop owners and three particular carvers: Manuel Jiménez of Arrazola, Isidoro Cruz of San Martín Tilcajete, and Martín Santiago of La Unión Tejalapan. Jiménez, born in

1919, started carving wood figures as a boy to pass time while tending animals. He sold a few carvings in the Oaxaca marketplace over the years. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, owners of crafts shops in Oaxaca began buying Jiménez's carvings and showing them to folk art collectors. By the late 1960s, Jiménez was exhibiting in museums in Mexico City and the United States. Tourists and collectors started to visit Jiménez's workshop in Arrazola during the 1970s. The master kept his techniques secret and for a long time the only carvers in Arrazola were Jiménez, his sons, and a son-in-law. In the early 1980s, however, other carvers in Arrazola began offering pieces for sale to people visiting Jiménez.

Isidoro Cruz was thirteen years old when he learned to carve during a long illness in 1947. While Cruz was working as an oxcart maker in the city of Oaxaca in 1968, he met Tonatiúh Gutiérrez, who worked for the National Council of Expositions. Gutiérrez hired Cruz to buy pieces for the council and encouraged him to sell his own carvings, which included animals, clowns, and masks. Cruz did not hide his methods, and about ten men in San Martín began to carve various types of wooden figures. In 1970, Gutiérrez became head of a government agency aimed at increasing craft sales. He named Cruz head of the agency's buying office in Oaxaca in 1971. During the four years Cruz ran the buying office, he was able to purchase many carvings from his friends and neighbors.

Between 1952 and 1967, Martín Santiago made seven different trips to the United States, where he worked as an agricultural laborer in California, Arizona, and Texas. After the U.S.-Mexican agreement (the *bracero* program) that had sponsored Santiago's seasonal agricultural migrations ended, he found that wage work and subsistence farming provided meager support for his growing family. In 1967, Santiago began selling wood carvings to a shop owner in Oaxaca who had stopped buying from Jiménez after a complex, bitter dispute. Santiago taught his four brothers how to make wood figures, and for many years the only carvers in La Unión were members of his large extended family.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, carvers in the three communities sold their pieces mostly to store owners in Oaxaca. Only Jiménez supported his family primarily by making wood figures; other carvers earned more from farming and wage labor. Wood carving during this time was a part-time occupation for a few adult males; women and children only occasionally worked on pieces. In the mid-1980s, wholesalers and store owners from the United States began to buy directly from carvers in Arrazola, San Martín, and La Unión. The weakening peso had made trading Mexican folk art more lucrative for dealers in the United States. By 1990 most households in Arrazola and San Martín earned part of their income from the sale of carvings. Because artisans in La Unión were less successful in attracting dealers and tourists, wood-carving households remained a minority.

As sales from wood carvings soared, the organization of work changed. Male carvers asked their wives and children to help with painting and sanding. Carving quickly became a family activity in which adult men contributed less than half the total labor. Some families in Arrazola and San Martín found that they could not fill large orders using only household labor

and they hired one or two workers to help with carving, painting, and sanding. In Arrazola several fábricas (factories) have been set up to produce wood carvings with hired workers. In San Martín many households buy unpainted carvings brought in from San Pedro Taviche, a community two hours away by public transportation. After these figures are painted, they are sold to local intermediaries and international wholesalers.

Specializations

Over the past two decades Oaxacan wood carvers have developed specialties in their efforts to appeal to a diverse clientele. Some artisans make expensive, labor-intensive carvings for collectors; others churn out cheap pieces for gift shops in the United States and tourists seeking souvenirs. They make animals, human figures, devils, angels, frames, chairs, tables, and ox carts. There are carvings of Benito Juárez, subcomandante Marcos (the Zapatista leader), chupacabras (imaginary beings that eat goats), "Martians," mermaids, and helicopters. The diverse economic strategies carvers have pursued in recent years are the result of a segmented market in the United States and Mexico that promotes novelty and rewards specialization. Buyers of wood carvings include collectors seeking original, beautifully painted pieces, tourists purchasing inexpensive souvenirs, merchants stocking ethnic arts shops, and wholesalers searching for items that can be sold in enormous gift shows. These different kinds of buyers, who have their own individual tastes, seek both items they know about and those they have never seen before. The wood carvers therefore try to increase their sales by doing something distinctive that is attractive to some, but not all, buyers. In so doing, they hope to create a demand for new types of carvings.

The increased specialization in carving over the years cannot be neatly separated from overall changes in styles. Prior to 1980, most carvings bore clear relevance to the natural, cultural, and spiritual world of the artisans. Many carvings were of human figures (e.g., farmers, old men), ox teams, animals from the Oaxaca region, devils, angels and skeletons. These pieces, which are now referred to as "rustic," were carved and painted in a simple, albeit charming manner. Because some buyers continue to prefer the older styles of carving and painting, a significant market remains for rustic pieces. Most contemporary artisans in La Unión specialize in modified versions of these simpler carvings. Moreover, many buyers—especially those interested in Day of the Dead motifs—still seek out the saints, angels, devils, and skeletons that dominated the wood carving trade in the early 1980s. Thus, some "specialization" is actually the continued production of "traditional" (twenty-year-old!) pieces.

The diversification of wood carvings in Arrazola, San Martín, and La Unión began with experiments by Manuel Jiménez, Isidoro Cruz, and Martín Santiago. These early wood carvers attempted to increase their overall sales by selling a variety of pieces. Specialization increased in the early 1970s because of the state-sponsored wood carving contests. These competitions encouraged wood carvers to try new pieces in an effort to win prizes and sell their pieces to the state. This stimulated a florescence of new styles, in San Martín in particular, because of Isidoro Cruz's connections with the state agencies running

the contests. The astonishing diversity of pieces and styles that characterizes the contemporary wood carving trade did not develop until the mid-1980s when increasing numbers of wholesalers, store owners, and tourists from the United States visited Arrazola and San Martín. Many villagers who previously had shown little interest in crafts began to make wood carvings. The neophyte carvers needed some way to attract dealers and tourists on their way to the houses of established artisans. The obvious solution was to make something different which would appeal to potential buyers.

Innovation in the wood carving trade has not been hampered by longstanding stylistic tradition. Some Oaxacan crafts, such as embroidered wedding dresses from San Antonino (Waterbury 1989), are so well-established that variability is restricted to rather fixed, culturally-defined limits. Buyers search for craft items "typical" of a particular place. Because there are no long-established wood carving styles, buyers have fewer preconceived notions about what they are looking for and are more receptive to new types of pieces. Wholesalers and store owners want to diversify their stock; tourists like having something unique that will impress their friends at home.

In recent years, certain styles of carving and painting have come to be considered typical of particular families and communities as wholesalers and store owners seek out pieces that have sold well in the past. Margarito Melchor has prospered by selling cats similar to those on the cover of a book about the wood carvings (Barbash 1993); María Jiménez and her brothers make spectacular saints and angels; Juan Carlos Santiago of Arrazola is sought out for his penguins; Arrazola carvers are known for their iguanas; La Unión artisans make multipiece rodeos, fiestas, and nativity scenes.

The fundamental appeal of the carvings, however, is still based on characteristics that encourage experimentation by artisans. Craft dealers whom I have interviewed in the United States and Mexico agree that customers especially appreciate the whimsy, color, and imagination of the carvings. When artisans are successful with particular kind of carvings (e.g., frogs reading books, parrot musicians, reclining cats), some of their neighbors copy their styles in cheaper, less technically proficient knockoffs. A type of figure once regarded as original, whimsical, and imaginative may come to seem hackneyed. Successful artisans are well aware of this process and sometimes complain bitterly about copiers. Their realization that the market can become saturated with particular kinds of pieces forces them to either innovate or develop specialties (e.g., difficult painting or carving styles) that cannot be easily copied.

The cheapness of materials also encourages experimentation. Artisans spend no more than two or three pesos for the paint and wood needed for a medium-sized carving which can be sold to a dealer for 30 or 40 pesos. Because several such pieces can be completed in a day, making something new requires minimal expenditures of time and money. If an experiment fails (a new type of carving is not bought), little is lost.

Commodity Chains

Anthropologists studying transglobal trade (e.g. Roseberry 1989; Steiner 1994)

have suggested following the "social life" of commodities as they move through time and space. The term "social life" (Appadurai 1986) refers to changes in the value, meaning, and use of commodities as they change hands and move from place to place. Emphasis is placed on the socioeconomic relations among the various people involved in a trading network and the cultural representations of commodities in different contexts. Such an approach is especially well-suited to analyses of the trade in ethnic and tourist arts which often involves long commodity chains in which the participants are producers, merchants, and consumers scattered around the globe.

Much of my research took a follow-the-commodity approach to the trade in Oaxacan wood carvings. This was hardly a straightforward undertaking since the carvings can take quite different paths in their journey from a collection of raw materials to their final destination on someone's shelf. The two following hypothetical examples show only a few of the trips that a carving might take:

1) A man from San Pedro Taviche cuts wood from a copal tree in the forest surrounding his mountain village on a pleasant February morning. After taking the tree limbs home, he carves a small turtle. He travels to San Martín Tilcajete in March, where he sells the unpainted piece for 10 pesos to a family living near the center of town. The wooden turtle is then painted by two teenage girls, one a member of the San Martín family and the other a hired laborer from a nearby village. The finished piece is sold in May for 20 pesos to a young man from Arrazola who works as an intermediary for a large-scale wholesaler from Arizona. The Arrazola intermediary ships the carving to the Arizona dealer, who had ordered 50 turtles from the family. At a gift show in San Francisco in August, the Arizona dealer sells three turtles at five dollars apiece (about 50 pesos) to a store owner from Portland, Oregon. The carving made in San Pedro Taviche and painted in San Martín Tilcajete is sent from a warehouse in Arizona to Portland, where it is sold in November for $12 to a 30-year old woman looking for a Christmas gift for a friend. The turtle is displayed on a counter in the friend's house for five years and then is sold in a yard sale for $1.

2) A man steps out of a truck filled with copal and knocks on the door of a wood-carving family in Arrazola. He is from a community about twenty kilometers from Arrazola where copal is abundant. The family uses the wood they buy to make elaborately curved, beautifully decorated lizards that can be hung on a wall. The decoration is done using housepaint bought in a store in the city of Oaxaca. The husband and a teenage son carve the pieces; painting is done by the wife and a daughter in her early twenties. The cost of the wood and paint used in an iguana carving is about four pesos. The iguanas are bought by the owner of a store in the historic district of the city of Oaxaca for 150 pesos apiece. The price of the iguanas in the store is 200 pesos. Some iguanas are bought by tourists passing by the shop. Others iguanas are picked up by a wholesaler from California, who resells the pieces in the United States to store owners for $40 apiece. These iguanas cost $80 in U.S. shops.

Despite the diverse paths that Oaxacan wood carvings can take over their lifetimes, their journey from production to

consumption can be generally outlined. After the raw materials (mostly wood and paint) are obtained, the carving is made by a work group living in a small community near the city of Oaxaca. Some carvings are sold in stores in Oaxaca; others end up in markets and shops elsewhere in Mexico. Most Oaxacan wood carvings, however, are ultimately sold in ethnic arts and gift shops in the United States and Canada.

Internet Sales

I first became aware of wood carving sales on the web in February 1996 through a dealer who sold inexpensive carvings at gift shows around the country and provided carvings on consignment to a business called Folk Art Exchange, which advertised them on their website along with many other crafts. Although the web was much in the news in early 1996, the thought had not occurred to me that this was a possible marketing channel for Oaxacan wood carvings. I went online and discovered that there were four or five companies selling pieces on the Internet. Nowadays there are hundreds of places on the internet that sell Oaxacan wood carvings, about half associated with retail stores (mostly in the Southwestern and West Coast states); the rest existed only in cyberspace and warehouses. Prices of pieces were at least five times their cost in Mexico and averaged about $60. Some sites specialized in high-quality carvings; the most expensive piece I saw advertised was a crab priced at $1,900 by Milagros, a Seattle store that buys from many talented artisans.

The recurrence of certain themes in web advertisements suggests a consensus among dealers about what might attract customers to the carvings. The artisans and their pieces are said to be part of a longstanding Zapotec crafts tradition in Oaxaca. The carvings are advertised as handmade, "authentic," and collectible. The carvers are often depicted as simple farmers at home with nature. The most common adjectives used to describe the carvings are "whimsical" and "magical." Advertisements occasionally include alleged folklore about how the carvings are used in daily life

The following web site advertisement is typical:

> The valley of Oaxaca ..., located in southern Mexico, is home for the Zapotec Indians. Over 2,600 years ago their ancestors began building the city of Monte Alban. Recently Zapotec woodcarvers living near Oaxaca City have developed the tradition of carving masks and wooden toys into an internationally appreciated art form. From the small pueblos of Arrazola and San Martin Tilcajete, the carvers journey to the mountains to gather the copal wood that is used in the carvings. This copal tree has the rich tradition of being the incense tree for the Aztecs and Zapotecs. The carving is done at home with simple hand tools. The whole family pitches in to paint figures using safe, colorfast acrylic paints. Because of the complexity of the carving and the highly detailed painting, the figures often take many weeks to complete. The wooden figures created by these modern-day Zapotec Indians have gained an international reputation for quality...Each piece is signed by the artist (web site for Folk Art & Lore — http:

//folkartlore.viamall.com/folkartlore/oaxwoodcar.html, downloaded June 25, 1999)

The common identification of the wood carvers as "Zapotec" found in this and many other advertisements, is not totally inaccurate. Some carvers speak Zapotec or another indigenous language; others who are monolingual Spanish speakers had parents or (more often) grandparents who spoke Zapotec. However, the great majority of the carvers speak only Spanish and do not think of themselves as Indian. Even those who speak an indigenous language identify themselves primarily as residents of a particular community rather than as Zapotecs or Mixes or Mixtecs. Many dealers are unaware of the complexity of ethnic identity in Oaxaca and simply assume that the carvers are "Zapotecs." Others may be more sophisticated, but nonetheless know that their customers like to think that the pieces they buy are made by "Indians."

The other ways in which the advertisement from Folk Art & Lore is misleading are also worthy of note. The dealers know that customers want to think that the carvings are the result of painstaking work done entirely by families using only a few tools. The advertisement therefore says that carvers from Arrazola and San Martín make "journeys" to gather copal when actually almost everyone buys wood from entrepreneurs with trucks or mules. While a few expensive pieces take several weeks to complete, many of the cheaper carvings sold over the web are made quickly. But a customer might be reluctant to buy a piece honestly advertised as "carved in three hours and painted in an additional two hours as part of an order for 25 frogs at 15 pesos apiece."

Future Prospects

Only eight years after the wood carving boom began, a writer (Barbash 1993: 40-42) was already concerned about the future prospects of the craft:

> How long will it last, this serendipitous interplay of market forces and creative spirit? Sales peaked in the late 1980s and have been hurt since by a sick U.S. economy [and] a gradual reevaluation of the peso...Many dealers have stopped buying entirely and are looking to the Pacific and the more impoverished Latin nations for bargains. Who knows? Perhaps ten years from now someone will write a book about the great carving boom in Bali, where people are also talented and prices are low.

These worries were unfounded in the short term as carving sales rebounded and remained good throughout the 1990s. The major devaluation of the peso in late 1994 made wood carvings much cheaper for dealers; the U.S. economy became extraordinarily strong in the latter half of the decade. However, these economic factors alone cannot account for the carvings' continuing popularity in the 1990s.

The carvers' success at the end of the 20th century did not guarantee that sales would remain good in future years. Guatemalan textiles, for example, sold well between 1970 and 1990 with only a brief downturn during the height of a horrendous civil war in the early 1980s. However, in the 1990s tastes in the United

States changed and the market for embroidered blouses, belts, and handbags weakened. One of the reasons for the wood carvers' success was that their pieces fit in with a Southwestern style of home design that was fashionable in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some dealers speculated that the lesser popularity of this design style would weaken the demand for carvings. But Teotitlán rugs, which fit in even better with this style than the carvings, sold reasonably well after the peak of the popularity of Southwestern design.

By the end of the 1990s, the carvings were featured prominently in guidebooks, videos, and state tourist pamphlets, and websites about Oaxaca. Carvings were sold in government stores, displayed in museums, and advertised in catalogs and over the Internet. The wood carvings had become a "typical" Oaxacan craft along with textiles, pottery, and tinware. Although the demand of for high-end carvings remains strong at the beginning of the 21st century, the market for inexpensive pieces has collapsed. The large factory-like workshops have either shut down or greatly reduced their scale of operations. The wood carving trade is now dominated by families making high-end, specialized pieces. If the market for expensive carvings also collapses, there is no question that many families would suffer in the short run.

The Romanticization of Indigenous Crafts

Most Oaxacan wood carvers are straightforward and matter-of-fact when asked about their craft and ethnicity. They readily say that wood carving is a new art form, that their primary motivation for making pieces is monetary, and that they would abandon the craft with little regret if the market collapsed. Many like making pieces and appreciate the artistic talent of their neighbors. But they know what it is like to be poor and cannot afford to be sentimental about their work. Although artisans in Arrazola, San Martín, and La Unión acknowledge indigenous ancestry, they talk about themselves as residents of a particular community, the state of Oaxaca and the country of Mexico. I have never heard artisans in these villages identify themselves as "Indians" or "Zapotecs." Very few speak an indigenous language.

The portraits of the wood carvers and their craft in many advertisements and tourist brochures differ greatly from what the artisans tell anyone willing to listen. The artisans are depicted as Zapotec Indians working in a craft tradition hundreds of years old. Men and women (never children) work together when they can spare time from farming. The inspiration for their pieces comes in dreams and often has a spiritual component. The discourse of the marketers of wood carvings says nothing about the makers' color televisions, Michael Jordan t-shirts, and relatives in California.

Why is it necessary to portray the wood carvers as noble Indians practicing an ancient craft? Is not a realistic story of ingenious men and women inventing an imaginative, appealing art form more interesting? The answers are obvious. The sellers know that crafts sell well when they fit into a romantic narrative that places the maximum cultural distance between artisans and customers.

Oaxacan wood carvings can aptly be described as an invented tradition. The

artisans are not the primary creators of this particular tradition and are often surprised to learn how their craft has been depicted. The invented tradition results from cultural assumptions romanticizing indigenous crafts that are shared by the marketers and buyers of folk art. The artisans' lack of control over how they are represented is a consequence of their peripheral position in a global commodity chain. But would the carvers change the advertisements if they could? The romantic misrepresentations, after all, help the artisans sell their pieces. The wood carving trade depends in part on intercultural miscommunication.

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