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## A Heritage In Clay And Copper

By JONATHAN KANDELL

MY childhood memories of Mexico during the 1950's are wrapped in rebozos: young women on their way to parties, resplendent in shawls woven from fine cotton dipped in natural dyes; a mother and infant blanketed and tethered by a swath of plain gray or brown.

Moroleón, a prosperous city in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato, was once famous as home of the finest rebozo weavers. Here Taller La Mexicana is one of the last workshops in the country to produce rebozos the traditional way, on creaking, foot-powered wooden looms. The 13 weavers are all in late middle age. I watched the oldest as he wove a shawl of black-and-white tie-dyed, silky cotton that will retail for about \$100.

His right hand plied a stick that raised and lowered the threads, and the fingers of his left hand deftly guided new strands through the fabric in a motion that resembled the plucking of a harp. Meanwhile, his feet pedaled away, moving the loom up, down and sideways. His face was utterly serene, as if he was in a trance, heedless of the constant clickety-clack. In a day, he finishes up to five rebozos.

"Young people won't put up with this work," said Luis Guzmán López, the 73-year-old owner of Taller La Mexicana, started by his ancestors six generations ago. Young Mexicans aren't buying good rebozos, either. Moroleón, a manufacturing center for international clothing concerns, is a fashion-conscious place, but the women wear American and European designs, said Mr. Guzmán, who doubts that his business will outlive him. "They think rebozos are for poor Indians. They're turning their backs on a cultural heritage."

Over the last several years, I have spent vacations (most recently in October) traveling through provincial Mexico searching for the keepers of this cultural heritage -- the aging master weavers, ceramists, carvers and metalworkers. I have met some of Mexico's finest artisans in the adjoining states of Michoacán and Guanajuato, a region known for crafts that meld Indian traditions and colonial Spanish techniques. To view and buy their works, a visitor must usually seek them out at their homes. I started out with certain advantages, including fluent Spanish and a thorough knowledge of the terrain. But most travelers can do as well by hiring a car and English-speaking driver-guide through hotels in Morelia and Guanajuato, the capitals of Michoacán and Guanajuato.

I began with a drive from Morelia 70 miles west to the artisanal town of Uruapan. The arid terrain gave way to a verdant, river-drained landscape of cornfields and banana plantations. Uruapan itself was a visual disappointment -- an overgrown service center for nearby farms that has devoured more picturesque villages on its outskirts.

The first master artisan on my list was 88-year-old Francisca Tulais Urbina, one of the last practitioners of macre (MAH-kray), a pre-Hispanic wood lacquering technique that achieves a warmer, less glossy surface than Asian methods. A few years earlier I had seen her platters and bowls at an artisan fair in Mexico City. But finding Ms. Tulais wasn't easy. I had only her photograph (clipped from a magazine) and the name of her street. When I asked neighbors about her, they shrugged, until finally, an elderly woman looked at the picture and exclaimed: "Ay, that's Panchita the milkmaid!"

Ms. Tulais -- Panchita -- had indeed tended cows for much of her life. I found her in the patio of her house, under a rubber tree, spreading paint with her fingers over a wooden bowl she had carved. An old vacuum-tube radio blared a plaintive ranchera -- Mexican country music -- by Pedro Infante, a favorite from my childhood days.

Ms. Tulais learned her art from her grandmother, but practiced it only at the end of the day after delivering milk. Now at last she sells enough objects to devote herself full time to macre. It takes her almost a month to complete a piece -- though she works on as many as four at a time, since they require several layers of lacquer and paint that must be allowed to dry before each application. She uses only local softwood species and mineral dyes made of materials collected from nearby riverbanks.

Ms. Tulais, who never married, is hoping that two nieces will take up her work. "Younger people find this work too dirty," she said. "They look at my fingernails and say, 'How disgusting!'" Some of her pieces were on display in a tiled corridor nearby: lacquered trays, jewel boxes and bowls with bird and flower designs. The smaller objects cost as little as \$20. For \$150, I bought a huge platter with mangoes and papayas etched on a cobalt blue background.

Another great artisan in his 80's, Victoriano Salgado Morales, a maker of wooden masks, lives only 10 blocks away. Uruapan was once famous for its masks, which are used by dancers in festivals, and Mr. Salgado is one of the last masters of the art. Rail-thin and wearing denim overalls, he beckoned me onto the terrace where he does his carving and painting behind his adobe-walled house.

He was working on a mask of a wrinkled face with a slightly sinister smile, part of a set for la danza de los viejitos (the dance of the old folk) to be held in a nearby village. As he sandpapered a mask, he explained how he became an artisan.

"My family had always been day laborers -- completely landless, the poorest of the poor," he told me. "When I was a boy, the only possible escape seemed to be mask-making." But the dozen mask-makers in his village all guarded their craft zealously, so Mr. Salgado had to learn on his own. He soon became known as an innovator. "People thought I had more imagination than the others because I was inspired by faces from old cartoon magazines," he says. Nowadays his clients include collectors throughout Mexico who pay \$50 to \$60 for a mask.

THE last of the trio of Uruapan master artisans I visited was Marta Morales Naranjo, inventor of her own genre -- miniature dolls, made of cloth and wire, representing folklore figures. Ms. Morales, who is 76, lives with her aunt, Carmen, in a rambling house on a hill sloping up from a river. She shapes the armature of the six-to-eight-inch dolls and sews their costumes on, while her 92-year-old aunt does the embroidering. "Her eyesight is a lot better than mine," said Ms. Morales, peering through thick bifocals.

The living room floor, where she receives her collectors, is cluttered with boxes of 50-year-old silk in every imaginable hue. "I've bought enough for the rest of my life because they don't make material of this quality anymore," she said. On shelves along the walls are her figurines of fishmongers, tortilla makers, bird sellers -- a hundred different street peddlers in all. Each doll sells for about \$50.

On the way back to Morelia, I veered south at Pátzcuaro for 10 miles to Santa Clara del Cobre. Celebrated for its copper artisans, this is a lovely town of cobblestone side streets and whitewashed adobe houses with dark-wood balconies and red-tiled roofs. A couple of blocks behind the main church, I found the home of Jesús Pérez Ornelas, 76. In his roofed but open-sided workshop, he and two sons were melting a nest of copper wire in a forge fired by pine charcoal.

The copper emerged in lumpy plates and was dipped into cold water that sizzled and steamed angrily. With giant iron pincers the old man held the copper plate on a tree stump shaped into an enormous block of wood, while his sons wielded sledgehammers to pound the copper flat.

Mr. Pérez wrapped the copper over a wax mold, and began to hammer the metal into its ultimate shape -- an oval-mouthed vessel with a hawk's head at each end. He then used a small hammer and pick to etch the surface with geometric and animal patterns.

The idea for those patterns came from a visit 40 years ago to the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City where he saw pre-Columbian ceramics for the first time. "I wanted to reproduce in copper the same designs -- well, maybe not the same, but similar ones," said Mr. Pérez, who learned his craft from an uncle. Most of his vessels sell for \$300 to \$500.

A few days later I headed north from Morelia to the state of Guanajuato. Moroleón, the former rebozo center, is a mere 30 miles away. The city of Guanajuato, my ultimate destination, is 90 miles farther.

Guanajuato is built on a mountain that once held the world's richest silver deposits, and its winding, cobblestone streets are as steeply angled as ski slopes. An underground warren of tunnels helps relieve congestion on the surface, but left me hopelessly lost. After almost an hour of wasted driving, I found the house of Gorky González, one of Mexico's most celebrated master artisans.

His finely glazed pottery pieces -- from a single \$11 cup to a waist-high urn retailing at \$1,500 -- are favored by the country's leading architects and interior designers. Hidden behind a towering wall, his house and studio are a wondrous refuge from urban sprawl and clatter.

Gorky, as everybody calls him, got his name because his father, a left-wing intellectual, adored the Russian writer Maxim Gorky. As a young man, Gorky González painted and did sculpture, until one day, rummaging through his father's antiques shop, he found pottery made with a double-glaze technique imported from Mediterranean Europe and known as majolica. The technique had been abandoned in Mexico in the 1820's after independence from Spain because it was identified with the colonial elite.

But Gorky was so drawn to majolica that he resolved to become a ceramist. "The notion of rescuing a forgotten craft -- especially one so beautiful -- was impossible to resist," said Gorky, whose unlined face and thick, black hair and mustache belie his 62 years.

Nowadays he has several assistants reproducing his designs while he concentrates on unique pieces. They work with clay extracted from the nearby Sierra de Santa Rosa, a source for Indian ceramists long before the arrival of the Spaniards in the 1500's. Shaped on potter's wheels and dried in adobe-walled storerooms, the pieces are decorated with plant, animal or folkloric figures in subtle blue, green, yellow and beige hues, then baked in modern electric ovens. A tin oxide enamel glaze is applied, and the works are baked again, this time at much higher temperatures. Samples of the pieces -- vases, planters, dinner sets -- are on display in a showroom.

Gorky's second son (also named Gorky), who apprenticed with his father and hopes to succeed him as master artisan someday, is responsible for the high-tech ovens, Internet communications and express shipping. Admittedly, it's not an operation that evokes the rebozo-garbed nostalgia of my childhood. But I feel a lot more hopeful about Mexico's cultural heritage knowing that a lost art can thrive again using modern methods.

Tracking down Mexico's crafts at the source

From Mexico City, it's a comfortable, four-hour bus trip to either Morelia or Guanajuato (about \$25, at 9.5 pesos to the dollar).

Lodging

In downtown Morelia, the 55-room Hotel Virrey de Mendoza, Avenida Madero Poniente 310, (52-4) 312-4940, fax (52-4) 312-6719, www.hotelvirrey.com, has rooms from \$117 to \$262, with the best and largest suites overlooking the main plaza.

On a hillside on the outskirts of Morelia, the 43-room Hotel & Suites Villa San José, Patzimba 77, Colonia Vista Bella, (52-4) 315-1738, fax (52-4) 324-4545, www.villasanjose.com.mx has panoramic views of the city with rooms around \$130.

In downtown Guanajuato, the Hotel San Diego, Jardín Unión 1, (52-4) 732-1300 and fax (52-4) 732-5626, has 45 rooms overlooking a leafy, pedestrian-only square at \$70 to \$95.

A 10-minute taxi ride from the city center, La Casa de Espíritus Alegres, telephone and fax (52-4) 733-1013, www.casaspirit.com, is a former hacienda with eight rooms (breakfast only) for \$135 to \$155.

Where to Eat

Los Comensales, Ignacio Zaragoza 148, downtown Morelia, (52-443) 312-9361, a quiet restaurant with tables around a verdant inner courtyard, offers classic Michoacán dishes, including quesadillas with the local sweet cheese, and fluffy corn tamales in spicy sauce (corundas) or in a sweet sauce (uchepos). A delicious meal for two, without drinks, will cost around \$10.

Cocina Económica "Mary," General Marcos Méndez 2, in Uruapan, (52-452) 524-2721, wonderful home-cooked, regional specialties for two -- for example, pork rind in green chile sauce (chicharrón) will cost about \$10.

La Casona del Cielo, Pastita 76, in front of a high school, Secundaria Benito Juárez, in Guanajuato, (52-473) 731-2000, serves inventive "nueva cocina mexicana" such as beef jerky marinated in lemon juice and coriander and empanadas of hibiscus flower, for \$30 for two, without drinks.

The Master Artisans

Francisca Tulais Urbina, lacquered wood objects, Gran Parada 147, between Pérez Coronado and Acapulco Streets, Barrio de la Magdalena, in Uruapan; (52-452) 524-9684.

Victoriano Salgado Morales, wood masks, Salazar 714, corner of Justo Mendoza, Barrio de la Magdalena, in Uruapan; (52-4) 527-0250.

Marta Morales Naranjo, miniature folkloric dolls, Cupatitzio 104, Colonia Centro, in Uruapan; (52-4) 523-0532.

Jesús Pérez Ornelas, copperware, Lázaro Cárdenas 311, in Santa Clara del Cobre; (52-434) 343-0144.

Taller La Mexicana, fine rebozos, owner Luis Guzmán López, Comercio 13, in Moroleón. (52-445) 457-0162.

Gorky González, majolica ceramics, Ex-Huerta de Montenegro s/n, next to the high school Secundaria Benito Juárez, Colonia Pastita, in city of Guanajuato; (52-473) 731-0389; www.gorkypottery.com

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