

Oaxacan Woodcarving in Cyberspace Virtual Tourism and the Crafting of Zapotec Tradition in the Online Marketplace

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It is customary while vacationing abroad to sight-see, to loaf, to indulge in vigorous sports or casually to educate yourself. Occasionally you interrupt an itinerary in order to buy something, but shopping is usually incidental to the main purpose of travel.

But in Mexico this is reversed...

—James Norman, excerpt from a 1959 guide to buying Mexican crafts.

Sputnik, a consulting firm that analyzes trends of the under-30 crowd, suggests calling them the “digital” generation. High technology and cyberspace have created a nonphysical environment at work and home. A handcrafted object humanizes their surroundings. Whether their tastes are traditional or whimsical, young people like the idea that they buy a handmade item.

—Loretta Radeschi, from the article “Marketing to Generation X.”¹

The power of the state of Oaxaca to bewitch and seduce the foreign eye borders on legendary. Pick up a copy of the Sunday paper travel section or any of the myriad guidebooks to Mexico—the advice

to the foreign traveler is essentially the same: “Don’t miss visiting the magical state of Oaxaca!” Indeed, the capital city of Oaxaca and its surrounding area have long been a favorite among both Europeans and North Americans who are seeking an “alternative” destination with what many consider to be an increasingly “gringo-ized” Mexico. While the reasons given for Oaxaca’s popularity are numerous, praise for the region invariably centers around its ethnically diverse population, of which the Zapotec² and Mixtec indigenous groups represent a significant portion, and a long-standing tradition of artisan production. As a recent article in the *Austin American-Statesman* succinctly confirms: “Part of Oaxaca’s charm is the mountains. Part of its charm is the Indian culture. But...the Oaxacan mystique is forever connected to its arts and crafts, which are found in museums and galleries around the world” (Ferriss 1998). Yet the traffic in Oaxacan *artesanía*³ is no longer confined to local Mexican markets, or even the upscale galleries of US metropolitan centers. The end of the twentieth century has witnessed the development of a new method for marketing folk art: Internet websites.

Though offering many of the same goods as the folk art boutique, these websites employ a unique set of strategies for marketing ethnic crafts. These strategies are ideally suited to selling commodities in a cyberspace world that does not entail immediate physical contact with the producer, intermediary, or even the item to be purchased. Unlike the physical act of visiting a folk art store or gallery, where the consumer is confronted by tangible objects waiting to be smelled, caressed, and visually scrutinized, the online sale of similar goods seeks to transform mere computer images into concrete, authentic objects of desire for the Internet consumer. In many respects, the online search for crafts epitomizes that which Susan Stewart (1993) has identified as the quest for the authentic “souvenir.” Here “souvenir” refers to an object that will provide the illusion of lived experience in an increasingly fragmented world—a world whose landscape is dominated by the high-tech infrastructure of postindustrial society. Stewart states that

[w]ithin the development of culture under an exchange economy, the search for authentic experience and, correlatively, the search for the authentic object become critical. As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the

lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. “Authentic” experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated. [1993:133]

Stewart’s analysis of the souvenir can be further extended to encompass the online sale of ethnic arts and crafts. If we accept her assertion that the “souvenir may be seen as emblematic of the nostalgia that all narrative reveals—the longing for the place of origin,” then it becomes clear that what is being bought and sold over the Internet is not merely the folk art object itself (1993:xii). Rather, consumer desire transcends the actual object only to be remapped onto the object’s producer and the original site of production. Perhaps not surprisingly, audience-savvy folk art brokers in the U.S. play upon this nostalgic longing of the consumer when designing commercial websites. Eye-catching graphics and scanned photos of the objects themselves are oftentimes combined with lengthy texts in order to construct a cyberworld that will ultimately convey the pastoral qualities of folk art objects and, by extension, the artisans that create them. It is through these detailed narratives that folk art traditions are (re)invented and manipulated for the purpose of moving ethnic arts and crafts according to the logic of the capitalist marketplace.

Internet marketing has become a topic of increasing interest, particularly as more people are finding that myriad household needs can be met online. One can book airline reservations, browse over a million book titles at Amazon.com, check out tomorrow’s weather forecast, and send an instantaneous message to an acquaintance on the other side of the globe with a few strokes at the keyboard and a couple of clicks of the mouse. Shopping, too, has joined the ranks of activities that can be performed over the Internet. Those privileged with computer, modem, and credit card can, in fact, count on instant access to a variety of goods and services from all over the world.

The unprecedented penetration of the “information superhighway” throughout consumer society has precipitated the breakdown of both temporal and spatial boundaries. In his discussion of consumer society and postmodernism, Fredric Jameson (1988) argues that this rupture is a salient feature of the transition from the modern to the postmodern period. He further maintains that consonant with this pro-

cess is “the transformation of reality into images” and “the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents” (1988:28). Although Jameson’s analysis somewhat predates the widespread use of Internet technology, the Internet can be viewed as the most recent link in a chain of technological innovations contributing to the mass distribution of consumer goods. Constituting what might be considered the ultimate postmodern shopper’s paradise, the Internet supercedes notions of time and space as images of objects, people, and places become suspended in cyberspace.

Fittingly enough, it is within this high-tech virtual shopping mall that consumers not only have their pick from the latest fashions, automobiles, and electronic equipment, but also are free to choose from an extensive selection of handmade crafts. The FolkArt Gallery, located in Larkspur, California, is one such retailer that boasts a wide selection of ethnic arts and crafts for online customers. Perhaps nowhere is the striking contrast between handmade, “low-tech” goods and the most up-to-date technological means of obtaining them so clearly marked as in the following passage taken from the opening page of The FolkArt Gallery’s website:

Our collection includes African tribal masks, ceremonial and ritual artifacts, textiles, containers and other objects of daily life from around the world.... Whether it is a graceful ceramic pot made in the mountains of Peru, a rich and vibrant kilim uncovered deep in the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, or a crudely hammered prayer box from Northern Africa, folk arts and crafts offer a window into the lives, spirits and souls of the people who create them.⁴

In this passage, various geographic regions, cultural groups, and folk crafts converge into a convenient, one-stop shopping format, with the common denominator uniting the objects for sale being their “exotic” provenance and handmade, “low-tech” design. The narrative would have us believe that acquiring these “objects of daily life from around the world” can satiate the desire for intimate experience with foreign lands and the people who inhabit them. It is also through this type of narrative that the folk artisan comes to “embody a synchronic essentialism for postindustrial (Western) consumers” (Babcock 1995:125). The folk artist, for example, is someone whose daily life

remains uncontaminated by the frenetic pace of the “modern” world; he or she is tucked away, whether it is in the remote “mountains of Peru” or beneath mounds of textiles in a dark, smoky corner of a Turkish bazaar. Isolated from the technology of the industrial world, the folk artisan still fashions ritual and utilitarian objects according to traditional methods, a “crudely hammered prayer box” or a “graceful ceramic pot,” as opposed to the mass-produced plastic vessels that now flood local markets. Frozen in cyberspace, these images allow consumers to indulge their cravings for those “simpler times” of a pre-industrial past. In a certain sense, the online, exotic souvenir attains distance in both time and space, “but it does so in order to transform and collapse distance into proximity to, or approximation with, the self. The souvenir therefore contracts the world in order to expand the personal” (Stewart 1993:xii).

Among the numerous handmade crafts available on the Internet, some of the most frequently showcased are woodcarvings from Oaxaca, Mexico, also commonly referred to as *alebrijes*.⁵ This carving genre has enjoyed tremendous popularity with American and European audiences over the past couple of decades, to the extent that most websites dealing in Oaxacan crafts are bound to offer at least one model of these brightly painted figurines. The ubiquitous presence of Oaxacan woodcarvings online thus provides a useful site of analysis for examining the transformation of a specific folk art genre into an Internet commodity. In this essay I will engage in an analysis of a “virtual shopping spree” for Oaxacan woodcarvings in order to reveal the manner in which technological innovations are literally bringing global crafts into the consumer’s home, including the images of “Fourth World,”⁶ indigenous artisans created through the online narration process.

Virtual Tourism and the Rise of the Online Marketplace

Unlike electronic equipment, books, or other mass-produced goods, the appeal of handmade crafts is, in large part, due to the fact that North American consumers feel that these objects come with a story already attached, one of distant lands and native peoples. Forming but one part of an entire “virtual tourist industry,” folk art shopping online, therefore, is not only about purchasing handmade or hard-to-find objects, as one website dealing in “fine Mexican imports” sug-

gests; it is also about obtaining “a piece of Mexico for your home.”⁷ Just as the tourist in a foreign country combs the local marketplace in order to obtain the perfect souvenir—that one object that will come to embody the very experience of the journey—the virtual tourist, too, is seeking physical evidence of having “been there.” It is not enough to own the object; the virtual tourist wants to claim knowledge about the object’s provenance and, in particular, the individual who crafted it. In this sense, online folk art shopping constitutes part of the larger “virtual tourism” phenomenon that has surfaced during the last decade of the twentieth century.

Let us begin our discussion of Oaxacan woodcarvings on the Internet by examining the following quote, taken from a website purporting to be the “Biggest and Most Complete Tourist Guide of Oaxaca.” In an attempt to explicate the origins of the present-day carving genre, the passage states:

“Alebrije” is a slang term (generated from gypsy dialects) which means a “difficult tangled thing, shaped in confusing or fantastic figures.” The original name is thought to be “Arrazola” which is of Basque origins in Spain, the name of the region’s governor at colonial times. Since Zapotec is a tongue that does not include the letter “R,” it is safe to presume that the previously mentioned theory is more acceptable for the origin of the word “Alebrije.”⁸

First, it should be noted that portions of information presented in this particular passage are inaccurate. Although ethnically diverse, the Oaxaca region is not home to any “gypsy” community and the term “Arrazola” has never been used to identify this specific woodcarving genre, but rather is the name of one of the three primary villages in which the carvings are produced. Nevertheless, in light of the fact that this website was reached via a link from the “official” Oaxaca State government homepage, it is impossible to gauge the number of users who will read this as a mark of “authenticity” and presume the validity of otherwise incorrect information.⁹

However, this excerpt should not be dismissed as simply another unreliable Internet source due to the incorrect information that it offers the online user.¹⁰ On the contrary, a closer examination of the text reveals an expertly crafted description whose main function, as

part of a much larger *Guía Turística de Oaxaca*¹¹ website, is to construct Oaxaca as a supremely “exotic,” and thereby desirable, tourist destination. This is accomplished here by making mention of various foreign-sounding words (to the English-speaking consumer, that is), including those denoting place names and specific ethnic groups. According to the text, Oaxaca is a convergence point for several of the world’s most unique and mysterious cultural groups; Basques, Zapotecs, and “gypsies” are all groups that are perceived to exist “outside” or on the margins of a larger, dominant society. Nomadic, indigenous, and speaking non-European languages, these groups exhibit qualities that stand in striking contrast with traditionally accepted definitions of Western culture. These “exotic” peoples, in turn, produce a one-of-a-kind folk craft that, according to the text, “can take hours or even days to be done.”

This phenomenon of living through another’s experience—or vicariousness, as Celeste Olalquiaga (1992) calls it—can be viewed as a defining characteristic of postmodern culture. The increasingly fragmented world in which we live and the emotional detachment it produces, contends Olalquiaga, prompt the individual to search for “intense thrills and for the acute emotionality attributed to other times and peoples” (1992:40). Accordingly, she points to recent technological advancements, of which the Internet is the most current development, as the primary catalyst for this process:

The new sense of time and space generated by telecommunications—in the substitution of continuity and distance with the instantaneous and ubiquity—has transformed the perception of things so that they are no longer lived directly but through their representations. Experience is mainly available through signs: things are not lived directly but rather through the agency of a medium, in the consumption of images and objects that replace what they stand for. [1992: 39-40]

The postmodern consumption patterns may also be extended to the present-day tourist industry, in which the Internet is playing a larger and more important role than ever before. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposes that “tourism is predicated on dislocation—on moving people and, for that matter, sites from one place to another”

(1998:170). While her discussion of tourism encompasses theme parks, museums, and Las Vegas-style hotels, the idea of bringing the “site” to the “sightseer” holds true for virtual tourism on the Internet as well. With certain modifications, today’s Internet user has many of the same options available to them as the tourist visiting another country. One can sample Thai cuisine (via downloaded recipes), watch a Brazilian capoeira match, or listen to a drummer from Ghana perform without undertaking the physical journey to those locales.

The rise of such virtual sites appears to complement the emergence of the “post-tourist.” John Urry (1990) describes this individual as someone who does not necessarily need to leave the space of the home in order to consume many of the objects of the typical “tourist gaze.” Urry, although specifically noting TV and video mediums of “seeing,” offers an analysis that anticipates the arrival of Internet tourist technologies:

It is possible to imagine oneself ‘really’ there, really seeing the sunset, the mountain range or the turquoise-coloured sea. The typical tourist experience is anyway to see *named* scenes through a *frame*, such as the hotel window, the car wind-screen or the window of the coach. But this can now be experienced in one’s own living room, at the flick of a switch; and it can be repeated time and time again.
[1990:100]

As part of the shift from “lived” to “virtual” experiences, numerous websites devoted to the Oaxacan region of Mexico have also developed as part of the burgeoning online tourist industry (See Figure 2). Here the “named scenes” offered to the virtual tourist are likely to correlate with previously established tropes of *México folklórico*¹² (Bakewell 1995). Bright regional costumes, local festivals, and of course, Oaxacan folk crafts are some of the more common images “framed” within the window of the computer screen. The online Oaxacan marketplace, then, not only encourages the tourist to gaze upon frozen scenes of local life, but additionally entices him or her to buy a souvenir of those glimpsed moments.

Invented Tradition: Capitalizing on the Mystique of the Village Artisan

In the case of Oaxacan woodcarvings, typical marketing strategies center on the notion of the indigenous Zapotec craftsman. Unlike other Mexican crafts, which may or may not be specifically associated with a particular ethnic group or geographic region, the sale of Oaxacan *alebrijes* is very much tied to the mystique of a region world-famous for its indigenous craft traditions. Indeed, Oaxaca has come to be considered such a craft mecca that one website I encountered even makes a distinction between crafts from “Oaxaca” and crafts from “Mexico” by creating two separate categories for corresponding webpages.¹³ While consumers might purchase Mexican *amate* bark paintings, lacquerware boxes, and painted gourds without equating such objects with any particular region, it is exceedingly rare to see the woodcarvings—online or otherwise—marketed as anything but “Oaxacan *alebrijes*” or “Oaxacan woodcarvings.”

Oaxaca’s status as a mythical, timeless place is largely attributed to the fact that it is home to a significant indigenous population. Famed for their weaving and ceramic skills, the Zapotec Indians are also touted as the master carvers responsible for the Oaxacan *alebrijes*. Online folk art dealers looking to capitalize on the Western fascination with the art of “primitive” others often highlight this ethnic identity to entice its customers into buying.¹⁴ In a confusing mix of messages, Internet viewers are at once encouraged to recognize affinities between themselves and Zapotec artisans, while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between modern (us) and traditional (them) societies.

Operating on what Sally Price (1989) has termed the “universality principle,” many of the websites seek to establish common links between producer and consumer. One website, for example, features a smiling picture of woodcarver Arsenio Morales, with his wife, daughter, and family dog outside their home in Oaxaca.¹⁵ The message conveyed is that of the happy nuclear family—a symbol readily identified with mainstream American value systems. Nonetheless, attempts at creating a sentiment of “planetwide closeness” can often appear contrived or misplaced. As Price suggests,

from the privileged perspective of white Europeans and Americans, the mingling of races strongly implies an act of tolerance, kindness, and charity. The “equality” accorded to non-Westerners (and their art), the implication goes, is not a natural reflection of human equivalence, but rather the result of Western benevolence. [1989:25]

Consider the following text taken from The FolkArt Gallery website. Located under the heading “Toys & Gifts”—which happens to advertise Oaxacan woodcarvings among the many toys for sale—a passage reads:

In all cultures throughout history people have created toys for themselves and children. Even these simple toys give us many clues about the flavor of life in these faraway places, and yet they have universal appeal that transcends borders and cultures. Made of wood, ceramics, recycled materials such as tin cans, wire, scraps of fabrics, or anything at hand, they captivate the imagination of both old and young.¹⁶

Despite the “warm and fuzzy” sentiment evoked by this text, there is still something curiously paternalistic about its choice of language. Words and phrases such as “simple,” “scraps,” and “anything at hand” all serve to convey the inferiority of folk toys. In contrast to the elaborate, new, technologically sophisticated toys that North American kids play with, items like rag dolls and carved wooden animals are associated with the naïveté of the Fourth World producers who create them. Yet we are told that these toys, in spite of their crude materials and construction, deserve our respect and attention; making and playing with toys becomes still another universal concept shared by Western and non-Western cultures.

In maintaining distinctions between “First” and “Fourth World” folks, the term “traditional” is invariably utilized in conjunction with descriptions of indigenous lifeways. Although in reality just what does and does not constitute “traditional” is itself highly contested terrain, the term as used by folk art dealers can most easily be defined in relation to its binary opposite: modern. The mystique of the indigenous craftsman is based on the fact that he or she embodies the qualities that “moderns” are not considered to possess. A deep-rooted spirituality, “oneness” with nature, and pre-industrial technology are some of the more common attributes assigned to members of so-called “traditional societies.” Moreover, “traditional” also carries the implication of continuity over time. Therefore, many discussions of traditional societies relegate them to a static past, as they are not perceived to follow the linear progressions of time set forth by Western culture. The existence of the “other” in the same time as ours is regularly denied in Western

discourse, leading to the creation of what Johannes Fabian (1983) labels the “timeless subject.”

Not surprisingly, many website texts incorporate the notion of “tradition” in their attempts to peddle Oaxacan woodcarvings. Yet the woodcarvings as we know them today are a relatively recent spin-off of a centuries-old carving genre. It is only since the mid-1980s that they have enjoyed success in international markets as highly collectible folk art pieces (Barbash 1993). Their connection to an ancient Zapotec past is, nevertheless, a theme repeatedly highlighted by online texts. Indeed, what folk art dealers are marketing as an ancient Zapotec “tradition” might actually fall under the more appropriate rubric of “invented tradition,” as has been outlined by Eric Hobsbawm (1983). It is that author’s claim that “traditions” which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented with a particular economic or political agenda in mind. Invented traditions “normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” as they struggle to establish their claims to legitimacy within the larger society (1983:1).

The Oaxacan *alebrijes* present an interesting case in point. While the carving of toys, totemic figures, and ceremonial masks is a centuries-old activity, the origin of the genre that is widely recognized today is generally traced to the 1960s to a single man from the village of Arrazola, Manuel Jiménez (Barbash 1993). Nevertheless, during my online quest, it was rare to encounter a website that did not reference an “ancient Zapotec” past in conjunction with descriptions of contemporary artisans and their work. More often than not, the “suitable historic past” in which Oaxacan woodcarving gets situated is that of the grandiose pre-Columbian civilizations of Central Oaxaca, represented by the great archaeological sites of Monte Albán and Mitla. The following excerpts taken from Folk Art & Craft Exchange and the Work of Artists Gallery websites, respectively, emphasize the continuity of Oaxacan artistry over time:

The Zapotec Indians are primarily concentrated in the Oaxaca Valley, located in the Southern Mexican State of Oaxaca. This lush and beautiful valley was the site of a very advanced civilization about 2000 years ago, and the ruins of Monte Albán and Mitla are an everlasting testament to their creative skills in architec-

ture, design and construction.

The wood-working techniques and artistic capacity of the Zapotec people have been refined over generations. The wooden sculptures featured here are hand carved from the wood of the Copal tree, then hand sanded and hand painted in their characteristically bright colors.¹⁷

Here, phrases such as “ever-lasting testament,” “refined over generations,” and the most obvious time referent, “2000 years ago,” all serve to convey the seemingly enduring nature of Oaxacan folk crafts through a linear progression of time.

Of course, one could argue that the peoples of the Central Valley region have been carving wood into figural objects over the course of hundreds, even thousands, of years. However, while it is certainly true that the Zapotec have a long history of craft production, contemporary woodcarving does not necessarily rely on a set body of knowledge and techniques handed down through generations. In reading these texts, it might appear that the Oaxacan woodcarver possesses a certain aptitude for the craft based on his or her Zapotec ethnic status. In fact, the bright, whimsical *animalitos*¹⁸ and other creatures that are being produced in Oaxaca today appear to have diverged so dramatically from older figural carving forms that the notion of continuity over time is readily called into question. Present-day carvers use different materials (*copalillo* wood and synthetic paints), have incorporated an entirely new array of themes (exotic animals not native to Oaxaca, such as the zebra), and are producing almost exclusively for an outside market. These changes signal a radical break with past woodcarving genres that have traditionally been produced for local consumption as toys, religious icons, or totemic figures,¹⁹ and that have relied on natural dyes and/or other types of wood. Additionally, whereas some carvers have been plying their trade since youth, others have only recently taken up the craft as adults after witnessing the financial success enjoyed by some of the more prominent carvers in their villages. In certain instances, carving has proved more lucrative than “traditional” subsistence agricultural practices, with the result that many Oaxacans now eschew farming in order to devote themselves to carving full-time. In an interview with an *Austin American-Statesman* correspondent, one artisan indicated the occupational transition made by

her own family, remarking that “We still raise some corn and beans. But we pretty much dedicate ourselves to artisan work now” (Ferriss 1998).

What do website passages such as the ones cited above tell us, then, about the expectations of foreign consumers? Clearly, the Internet consumer shares many of the same ideas regarding village artisans as the visitor to Oaxaca. Just as the traveler treks out to the village expecting to see “traditional people” hard at work making “traditional crafts,” cyberspace shoppers, too, desire a recreated virtual context that will indulge their longings for a rustic experience. “Authentic” Zapotec Indians, for example, do not enjoy the same comforts of the Mexican city-dweller; they do not drive luxury vehicles, eat at fast-food chains, or have access to cable television. According to this logic of consumerism, they are expected to exist on the fringes of Western society, producing consumer goods for others, yet simultaneously resisting the materialism associated with full integration into the capitalist system.

Another text from the Lively Arts Gallery, an online website purporting to offer the “Finest, Truest, Most Charming Mexican Folk Art,” presents a particularly rich site of analysis, as many of the issues outlined thus far converge in a few basic, but telling, lines of text:

[T]hese objects seem to flow from the artists rather easily with only the natural form of the wood, a machete and a pocket knife. The work is often a family affair with the father and sons carving, the mothers and daughters painting. This work is done in the simple surroundings of the family’s home, usually on a farm, immediately in the presence of great natural beauty. Time is taken for the necessary chores of the home and farm. There is something very basic about the artists that allows great simplicity, strength and humor to grow in each piece.²⁰

First, there is the inherent ability of the Oaxacan artisan to craft a folk art object out of the most basic materials using the simplest of tools: a machete and a pocket knife. Just as the preceding passage stressed the idea of low-tech design, this excerpt, too, highlights the indigenous artisan’s ability to craft an object with only the rudimentary tools at hand. Not only are the tools of the Oaxacan carver of the most basic variety, but the text literally states that the artist himself possesses a certain simplicity that is readily manifested in the strong lines

and bold colors of his carvings. In the second sentence, the image evoked is one of the family-unit pooling together its labor resources; father, son, mother, and daughter—a picture-perfect family by many Western standards—all work diligently to produce the finished *alebrijes*. Of course, there is time for carving only after attending to the chores around the home and farm, both of which are located in a beautiful natural setting. This reference to the rural environment, a landscape that is unspoiled by the contaminants of the city (see Williams 1973), implicitly speaks to the “oneness with nature” that is a notion commonly linked to indigenous peoples. Indeed, I found the image of the unspoiled native artisan to be a recurring theme as I read further into the Lively Arts Gallery website.²¹

Interestingly enough, as the passage continues on, it shifts focus from the Oaxacan artisan to the Western consumer:

When you live around this art day by day, these strengths come into your life. A moment with any of the art we offer in Lively Arts can bring a feeling of release in our hectic lives, a moment of return to simplicity in our complex lives. Each of the sculptures shown...is well and individually handcrafted in wood with paint. They reflect the wood and their makers. We chose them because they are works of art and heart no matter the size or cost.²²

Standing in stark contrast to the description of the simplistic lifestyle of the Oaxacan carver situated immediately before it, perhaps nowhere is the construction of a modern/primitive dichotomy more apparent than in this bit of online text. In stressing the handmade design of the woodcarvings, the passage also suggests that a great deal of love and care went into the making of each and every piece. The implication here is that the “hectic,” “complex” lifestyle attributed to many Westerners does not afford them the time necessary for creating objects from scratch; hence, frozen microwave dinners, store-bought clothes, and mass-produced toys have become standard items in Western homes. It is only in places like Oaxaca and other parts of the so-called “developing world” that people still have the time—or better yet, the patience—to engage in handicraft production.²³

Most importantly, what should be noted here is not just how the tranquility of the indigenous artisan’s life is supposedly ingrained

in the objects he or she creates, but also that the Western consumer is able to acquire the same sense of tranquility upon *purchasing* these objects. In essence, then, the Oaxacan woodcarvings are not the only things here that can be labeled as cyberspace commodities. For, according to this passage, peace and tranquility too are “goods” that can be bought and sold.

Conclusion

My aim with this essay has been to situate the cyberspace folk crafts in the larger phenomenon of “virtual tourism” that has surfaced in the wake of widespread Internet access. But how does visiting an online “marketplace” differ from actually combing the expansive market stalls of Oaxaca’s *Mercado Benito Juárez*²⁴ for handmade souvenirs commemorating the foreign journey? It appears that the critical distinction here is that the online marketplace is wholly dependent upon textual representations of the Zapotec artisans and the objects they craft. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us that “the production of hereness in the absence of actualities depends increasingly on virtualities” (1998:169). The human body, the medium through which we experience “being there,” is almost entirely removed from the cyberspace realm. The cyberspace tourist or consumer must rely almost exclusively on virtual images and text in the absence of the visceral sensations provoked by the actual sounds, smells, and textures of the Oaxacan village marketplace. The online narrative form becomes the principle vehicle, then, for evoking desire for the object, and, by extension, the people and the place that it has come to symbolize.

As one online tourist guide confirms, travel to Oaxaca is frequently accompanied by expectations of a “cultural Mexican vacation.”²⁵ The success of tourism in Oaxaca is predicated on the region’s ability to offer visitors a taste of “ancient native culture” without forsaking the modern “comforts and conveniences expected by today’s international traveler.”²⁶ Visitors to Oaxaca are able to shuttle out to myriad “native villages” to watch Zapotec and Mixtec Indians engaged in the production of so-called “traditional handicrafts.” Purchasing one of these objects—be it a woven *tapete*,²⁷ a string of black ceramic beads, or a vibrantly painted *alebrije*—becomes a method for immortalizing the very moment of “contact” with the artisan “Other.” It is this object, and perhaps a stack of photographs, which will remain as

proof of the encounter long after the journey is over.

To borrow from Stewart, “hav[ing] a souvenir of the exotic is to possess both a specimen and a trophy; on the one hand, the object must be marked as exterior and foreign; on the other hand, it must be marked as arising directly out of an immediate experience of its possessor” (1983:147). The task at hand for folk art website designers, therefore, is not an easy one. The text they create must convince consumers that through acquiring the handmade object, a woodcarving in this case, they are able to have the experience of travel to a faraway land. As the numerous examples provided here suggest, these texts draw on a corpus of themes whose function is to convey a sense of alterity, themes that all run counter to the notion of post-industrial society.

Furthermore, aside from possessing what Nelson Graburn labels nostalgia for “the handmade in a ‘plastic world’”(1976:3), what does this online quest for “exotic” objects tell us about contemporary Internet consumers? Arjun Appadurai has remarked that “tourist art constitutes a special commodity traffic, in which the group identities of producers are tokens for the status politics of consumers” (1986:47). As is the case with purchases made on-site or at the boutique, the folk art object purchased online, too, serves as a testament to its owner’s sophisticated tastes. The current trend toward “adventure” tours and eco-tourism has made cultural awareness “hip.” A North American home strewn with handmade objects from around the world, for instance, makes a dramatic statement about its inhabitants: that they have both the economic resources and a somehow “broader” knowledge of the world that allow them to acquire and appreciate handmade crafts. The fact that these folk art purchases are now being conducted over the Internet adds yet another element of sophistication—technical skill—to the acquisition process. The “site” is quite literally brought to the “sightseer” as the Internet consumer does not even have to step beyond his or her doorstep in order to obtain a bit of “exotic” culture for the home.

Finally, while I do not mean to suggest that virtual tourism and online marketing are threatening to replace the practice of visiting distant locales, I do believe that they represent a parallel form for consuming the images and objects so often associated with tourist activity. According to Urry, the postmodern tourist “knows that they are a tourist and that tourism is a game, or rather a whole series of

games with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience” (1990:100). The online textual representations explored in this essay thus represent but a minute sample of the endless availability of “gazes” created for experiencing the artisan Other. Situated within in the context of this postmodern moment, in which vicariousness is no longer deemed a false dimension of the real, the online consumer/tourist is presented with yet another medium for negotiating his or her (post)modernist longings.

Notes

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1. Loretta Radeschi, “Marketing to Generation X.” *Niche: The Magazine for Progressive Retailers*. Winter 1999, p. 76.

2. Numerically speaking, the Zapotec are the principal indigenous group inhabiting the *Valles Centrales* (Central Valleys) region of Oaxaca State, where the capital city of Oaxaca is situated. They are also one of the indigenous populations most actively engaged in artisan work, including the production of the woodcarving discussed here.

3. Spanish term for handicrafts, including that which in English is often referred to as “folk art.”

4. Original text downloaded June 24, 1999, from the FolkArt Gallery website. This site may be visited at www.thefolkartgallery.com

5. The creation of this term has been credited to Mexico City papier-mâché artist Pedro Linares. According to folk art scholar Judith Bronowski, “[t]he Alebrijes are figures invented out of a kind of vision Don Pedro had as a child... . Since that time, he has worked in the art of papier-mâché to realize the images of his dream. ‘Alebrije is a made-up word used by Linares to name his figures’ (1978). However, the term “alebrije” has been widely appropriated by Oaxacan woodcarvers, as well as by those who buy and sell woodcarvings, to describe this particular carving genre.

6. I borrow this term from Nelson Graburn (1976), referring as he does to those native peoples whose lands and socioeconomic power are subsumed within the boundaries of the nation-states of the First, Second, and Third Worlds. In the case of many Fourth World artisans, their “arts are rarely produced for their own consumption or according to their own unmodified tastes” (Graburn 1976:1).

7. Slogan taken from the website for La Fuente Fine Mexican Imports, found at www.lafuente.com. The original text was downloaded November 11, 1998.

8. Quote taken from the Guía Turística de Oaxaca website, located at

www.oaxaca-travel.com. The original text was downloaded November 11, 1998.

9. The official Oaxaca State government website can be found at www.oaxaca.gov.mx. The initial homepage has a scanned photograph of the Monte Albán archeological site. Double-clicking on this image brings the Internet user to an official welcome letter in Spanish by the current Governor of Oaxaca. One can then select the link “Información Revelante Adicional” to arrive at the “Guía Turística” webpage.

10. One of the main issues surrounding information on the Internet is that of accountability. At present time, Internet websites are not obligated to state from what sources they are drawing their information. The lack of physical addresses and telephone numbers often makes it difficult to track down parties responsible for a particular website. While certain websites do provide email address where correspondence may be directed, many sites do not extend this invitation to their online visitors.

11. “Tourist Guide to Oaxaca.”

12. Translated as “folkloric Mexico,” this terminology is often applied by Mexicans when referring to traditions of the so-called “popular” sector. This may include, but is not limited to, a variety of folk crafts, dance, and musical genres. See Liza Bakewell (1995) for further discussion of the distinctions between popular and fine arts in Mexico.

13. The website to which I refer here is for the Folk Art & Craft Exchange, located at www.folkart.com, which was accessed June 24, 1999. Shoppers can locate merchandise within the site based on country or regional classifications. Some of the categories represent entire continents (i.e. South America), while others make reference to a much smaller regions such as Haiti. It is notable that Oaxaca is the only state within a country or region that is given its own separate category.

14. For a discussion of the connoisseurship of primitive art, see Sally Price’s *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

15. The photo of woodcarver Arsenio Morales and his family is found on the La Fuente website (www.lafuente.com). I first came across this photo on November 11, 1998, in my search for online folk art website.

16. Also taken from the FolkArt Gallery’s websites www.thefolkartgallery.com, June 24, 1999.

17. Text taken from the Folk Art and Craft Exchange website (www.folkart.com) and the Work of Artists Gallery website (www.workofartists.com). The text from Work Of Artists Gallery was obtained on June 24, 1999.

18. Literally, “little animals.”

19. The long-established tradition of carving *nahuatl*/*nahuales*, or totemic figures, appears to have directly influenced the production of many of the

contemporary half-human, half-animal pieces, as well as a number of demon-like creatures that constitute part of the carvers' repertoire. Further, visual depictions of verbal folklore are often manifested in the form of carved devils, skeletons, and mermaids.

20. From the Lively Arts Gallery website, www.livelyarts.com, June 24, 1999.

21. For instance, a description of one of the pieces for sale offers consumers this image: "The *Rooster by Maximo Santiago* is haughty, curious, cheerful. He projects his dominance of his farmyard and flock. He also reflects the experience of the most rural and remote of the artists." Another line from the site proclaims that "the artist works in a remote village setting."

22. Also from the Lively Arts Gallery website.

23. While working as an employee at a retail folk art boutique in Austin, Texas, I witnessed similar attitudes from customers regarding the time and effort that goes into creating handicrafts. Although the attitudes range from expressed amazement ("I can't even imagine the time it took to make that!") to mild disdain ("Those people sure must have a lot of time on their hands if they can sit around and make ceramic pots all day"), the general perception is that handicraft production is very time-consuming.

24. Benito Juárez Market.

25. Online guide found at www.mexico-travel.com, June 24, 1999.

26. Quote taken from the Oaxaca section of the Mexican travel website located at www.mexico-travel.com.

27. Tapestry or rug.

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