



# Mexican Folk Art

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**Female figurine.** Made by Teodora Blanco; Santa María Atzompa, Oaxaca. Teodora Blanco (1928-80) was a major Mexican folk artist. While in her late twenties she began to make her female figurines, for which she is best known. This pot-carrying figure wears a Oaxacan shawl around her head.



# Mexico

✿ Mexico is very diverse geographically. It is made up of fertile valleys, tropical forests, high mountain peaks, deep canyons, and desert landscapes.



Clockwise: Pacific coast, south of Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco, 1996.

Lake Pátzcuaro, as seen from Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, 1996.

Landscape at Hacienda Venta de Cruz, Hidalgo, 1995.

Landscape near the Acueducto del Padre Tembleque, México, 1995.

*Photographs by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*





**Male figure**, from Colima or Jalisco; Late Formative Period (200 BC–AD 500).

**Ruins**, West Building, Quadrangle of the Nuns, Maya archaeological site; Uxmal, Yucatán. *Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*

## Ancient Mexico

 Mexico has a long and rich history.

Around 1500 BC great civilizations began to form. For over three thousand years, until the Spanish Conquest in 1521, the Olmec,



Maya, Teotihuacán, Toltec, and Aztec ruled over the lands and peoples of what is now Mexico.

These groups lived in regions stretching from the Rio Grande borderlands in the north to Guatemala in the south. They raised crops such as corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, cacao, chili peppers, and cotton. Ancient peoples traded with surrounding areas for jade, obsidian, and metals. Important technologies were pottery, weaving, and stoneworking. As early as the 6th century BC, the people of this region created and used a 260-day ritual calendar. Around AD 150 the Maya developed an advanced form of hieroglyphic writing.



Clockwise: **Female figure.** Nayarit; Late Formative Period (200 BC-AD 500). Male and female figures were placed in Nayarit tombs.

**Bowl and effigy jar.** Casas Grandes culture, Chihuahua; Ramos Polychrome style (ca. AD 1300-1400). The Casas Grandes Culture developed between AD 1150 and 1450 along the river valleys of northern Mexico, extending northward into southern Arizona and New Mexico. The cultural center was the town of Paquimé, also known as Casas Grandes, located along the Rio Casas Grandes. This was a border region, between the great Mesoamerican civilizations and the Mogollon and Hohokam populations of the American Southwest. The effigy figure may be a cat; its use is unknown.

**Spindle whorl.** Chalco, State of Mexico (shown larger than actual size, which is about that of a quarter). Small discs of clay, wood, or gourd are used with a spindle rod in order to spin fibers by hand. Spindle whorls come in a great variety of forms and decorations.



# The Spanish Conquest

✿ In 1519 the Spaniard Hernando Cortes sailed to Mexico with his army seeking gold and other riches. Cortes defeated Moctezuma, the king of the great Aztec empire, and for the next 300 hundred years Mexico was ruled by Spain. Over time, marriage between the Spanish and native populations created a new ethnic group called *mestizo*.

The Spanish influenced much of the culture in Mexico. During this time, horses were introduced. Many other European technologies were brought to Mexico. The Spanish also introduced the Catholic religion to the Native populations.

Mexico fought for its independence from Spain and won in 1821. About 60 Indian groups still live in Mexico today, more than four hundred and fifty years after the Spanish conquest.

**Religious lithograph of El Santo Niño de Atocha.** Mayo Indians; Navojoa District, Sonora. Lithography is a type of printing process that was invented in Germany in 1798. When the Spanish introduced Christianity to Mexico religious prints like this one, called *estampas* became common. This image is of a Christian saint called El Santo Niño de Atocha.



*Milagros* on display in Mexico City church, 1996. The word *milagro* means "miracle" in Spanish. They are miniature objects in silver, tin, or gold. First, a person will ask for a favor from a saint. Once the favor has been granted a *milagro* is pinned on or near a religious figure in thanks for the granting of a favor. A heart may be used to represent the worries of a heart condition or to represent the love someone might feel for another person, an eye is chosen for sight, an ear for hearing. The use of such images was introduced by the Spanish. *Milagros* were once hand-made; however today they are often sold by street vendors or in shops. They are often strung up on red ribbons.

*Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*



A Mexican print representing a soldier fighting for the rights of peasants during the revolution.  
*Image courtesy of Dover Publications, Inc.*

## The Mexican Revolution & Renaissance

✿ The Mexican revolution took place in 1910, almost one hundred years after Mexico won its independence from Spain. The revolution occurred because of a serious conflict between rich and poor. The goal of the revolution was to overthrow the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Under his rule, a small group of people controlled most of the country's power and wealth, while the majority of the population worked in poverty. The revolution was fought and won by Mexican peasants.

The 1920s and 1930s have often been described as Mexico's renaissance. During this time the government and the general population took a new interest in the arts and culture of Mexico. Many people began collecting and preserving folk arts in Mexico and exhibitions on Mexican folk arts were displayed in museums in Mexico and in the United States.



**Model ox-cart sculpture.** Mixtec Indians; Arrazola or San Martín Tilcajete, Oaxaca. The ox cart is a common sight in rural Mexico. This is an early form of Oaxacan wood carving made for sale. The craft started by the 1940s with dolls. By the 1960s, an artist named Manuel Jiménez had made the carvings quite popular. By the 1980s there was an explosion in brightly painted copal wood carvings from Oaxaca.

**Vendor figurines.** Tlaquepaque, Jalisco. These are mold-made, hand-painted clay sculptures representing common market vendors. Since the 1930s, the Panduro family has specialized in the craft, using the same molds for generations.

## Folk Art

❁ Folk art is not an easy word to define. Some folk art is made for sale to collectors. Other things considered folk art by some are made to be used everyday, such as hand-made children's toys. Some folk art in Mexico has been influenced by the Spanish while other folk art is based on traditional Indian arts and craft. Today, about 8 percent of the Mexican population, many of them Indian, earns a living making and selling forms of folk art and craft. Folk arts often begin with the creative ideas of a single person or a family and are then taken up by others in the village. Although folk art is based on shared traditions, it is constantly changing and evolving into new forms. Many, but not all types of Mexican folk art and craft are covered in these pages.





**Set of wake (*velorio*) figures.** Made by Timoteo Aguilar; Ocotlán de Morelos, Oaxaca. This set of 19 hand-painted ceramic figures shows a wake scene, an important ritual of traditional Mexican culture. These figures were made for sale to tourists, and became popular in the 1950s. This style was created by Doña Isaura Alcántara Díaz. She taught the style to her five daughters, along with their husbands and three brothers.

Since ancient times people in different areas of the world have participated in wakes. Wakes usually take place the night before a burial. The wake allows friends and relatives of the deceased to come to terms with the passing of a loved one. Often, traditional songs and prayers are recited and food and drink are offered at the wake. Wakes may vary from part of one night to three nights in length.





# Masks

✿ Masks have been used in many cultures around the world. Masks were an important part of Mexican culture long before the Spanish arrived. Today, masks are mostly found in the southern, central, and northwestern states of Mexico where many Indian populations live. Masks are still used at many festivals and ceremonial dances. Many of the masked dances are performed to secure happiness and good fortune. Popular subjects performed with masks include reenactment of the Spanish Conquest, religious tales, and dramas that include animals and supernatural figures.



In most areas masks are made by specialists who are usually men. Sometimes dancers make their own masks. Carved and painted wood is the most common material used. Masks are also made from leather, papier-mâché, clay, cloth, cardboard, wire mesh, gourds, and wax.

**Malinche mask.** (Left) Nahuatl Indians; Guerrero. This mask played a key role in the Tenochtlī Dance, which tells the story of the fall of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital.

**Hermit mask.** (Right) Tarascan (or Purépecha) Indians; Michoacán. This mask is used in the Pastorela Dance, a play for the Christmas season. Most of the dancers, unmasked, are girls and women. Men are the characters in the play who wear the masks.

Clockwise: **Helmet mask.** Tlapanec Indians; area of Axoxuca, Guerrero. This eye-catching mask is made of two thick pieces of leather that have been sewn together, with a large nose and horns of wood, and ribbon decorations. It may have been used in the Dance of the Vaqueros (cowboys), which centers on the capture of a bull. Its ears are devil-like, but the horns are more like a scorpion or insect.

**Grasshopper mask, with a human face (shown from 2 sides).** Made by Ernesto Abrajam, Nahua Indian; Tixtla, Guerrero.

**Giant's mask.** Zoque Indians, Rayón, Chiapas. Made by Feliz López, ca. 1945. This is one of up to three giant's masks that are used in the Dance of the Giants (*Baile de Gigante*). Held during carnival time, this dance tells the story of David and Goliath. Goliath, who carries a wooden machete, repeatedly charges the audience and frightens the children. On the top of their heads, above their masks, the giant dancers wear the skins of rams with the horns attached.





These ritual masked figures called *chinelos* are typical of Carnival and other ritual occasions throughout the state of Morelos.

*Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*



Clockwise: Masked dancer.

Corpus Christi "negrito" clown; Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, 1996.

Corpus Christi clown; Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, 1996.

Corpus Christi is a religious holiday in Mexico that takes place between the end of May and the 15th of June.

*Photographs by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*



**Tree of Life (*candelabra*).** The tree of life is a popular form of art in Mexico. Shaped in the form of a tree, it is then crafted in great detail with figures such as people, branches, flowers, fruit, animals and other subject matter. Trees of life usually hold candles and are often placed as decorative objects at weddings, churches, funerals, and various special occasions.

## Pottery

❁ Pottery is probably the most popular Mexican folk art, and one of the most ancient. Pottery is found throughout the country, in many different styles and forms. Mexican pottery was traditionally made by hand, using coils or molds. Called earthenware, this clay was fired at low temperatures. Before the Spanish came to Mexico, the firing took place in bonfires. Mineral glazes, the potter's wheel and open top kilns were introduced by the Spanish and are sometimes used today.

Common everyday pottery (*la loza corriente*) is simply decorated. It comes in a range of shapes and sizes. Most of this pottery is used to hold food or liquids. The more decorative pottery is often used for ceremonies or household decoration. Pots are decorated with slips (layers of liquid clay), paints, and glazes. Animal and human figurines are often made for sale.

Villages often specialize in making certain types of pottery. In many areas of the country, women might make the common ware and men the decorative. In some villages the entire family will work together to make a certain type of pottery.

Pottery, like all other Mexican crafts, has changed in the last 100 years. Traditional pottery is still made, but now usually for sale.



Clockwise: **Water jar.** San Bartolo Coyotepec, Oaxaca. Since the 1950s, the village has been noted for this unique blackware. Blackware is made by what is called a reducing atmosphere. When oxygen is prevented from reaching the pots during the firing, the clay combines with the carbon dioxide in the air which creates a black surface. The design is made by polishing some areas with a stone before a firing.

**Water jar in the form of a duck.** Tonalá, Jalisco; ca. 1880-1915. Tonalá pottery was traditionally popular for water jars because the clay that was used had a nice fragrance. The back on this duck has a hole for filling it with water and its beak has a hole for pouring the water.

**Bank in the form of a human head.** Tonalá, Jalisco. Though originally made for children, ceramic banks are greatly enjoyed by adults. The head form was first used in Tonalá during the 17th century and later made into banks. Banks like the one pictured here are now rare.

**Water jar.** Yucatán. Although an example of common every day pottery, this jar is quite pretty.

**Pitcher.** Ixtaltepec, Oaxaca.





Clockwise: Andrea Cuiriz, potter in the town of Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán. She is fitting together two halves of an olla, using pottery molds typical of the region, 1967.

Pátzcuaro pottery market, state of Michoacán, 1967.

Common and decorative pottery for sale at the market.

*Photographs by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*





Don Trinidad Rendón loading his adobe kiln with ollas; Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, 1968.

*Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*



**Small box on stand, with key.** Made by Juan García-Castro, Olinalá, Guerrero, ca. 1960. Painted lacquered boxes, in different sizes, have been popular in Mexico since Colonial times. This small box was made from the sweet-smelling but now rare linaloe wood. The artist of this piece, regarded as one of the best painters in Olinalá at the time, was a part-time barber.

**Tray (detail).** Rayado technique. Olinalá, Guerrero. Rayado-style lacquer ware is made by groups of artists who specialize in this type of the craft. Women usually build up the lacquer layers, while male artists usually carve out the designs. The design is worked out with a thorn, and the piece is then returned to the women who add on more pigment and polish the surface. Then the design is cut through to show the underlying colors, followed by more powder and polishing.

## Laquerware

 Lacquer is a shiny coating applied over wood or gourd for protection or decoration. Applying lacquer is not an easy thing to do. First, the surface is smeared with vegetable or insect oils. Next, it is covered with several coats of powdered minerals, which are dried and polished before being painted.



Lacquer is done in three regions—Michoacán, Guerrero and Chiapas. Three basic methods are used to create lacquerware: inlaid (*embutido*) is popular in Michoacán; painted (*aplicado* or *dorado*) in Guerrero and Chiapas; or carved (*rayado*) in Guerrero.

For inlaid pieces, a design is first laid down. Next, parts of the pattern are cut out and the hollows filled in with another color. For the carved technique, two coats of contrasting colors are applied and the top coat is scratched away. For painting, designs are simply painted with oil pigments onto the lacquer surface.

Laquerware often comes in the form of gourds, as well as wooden trays, dishes, and boxes. Decorations include flowers, leaves, people, birds, and other animals.

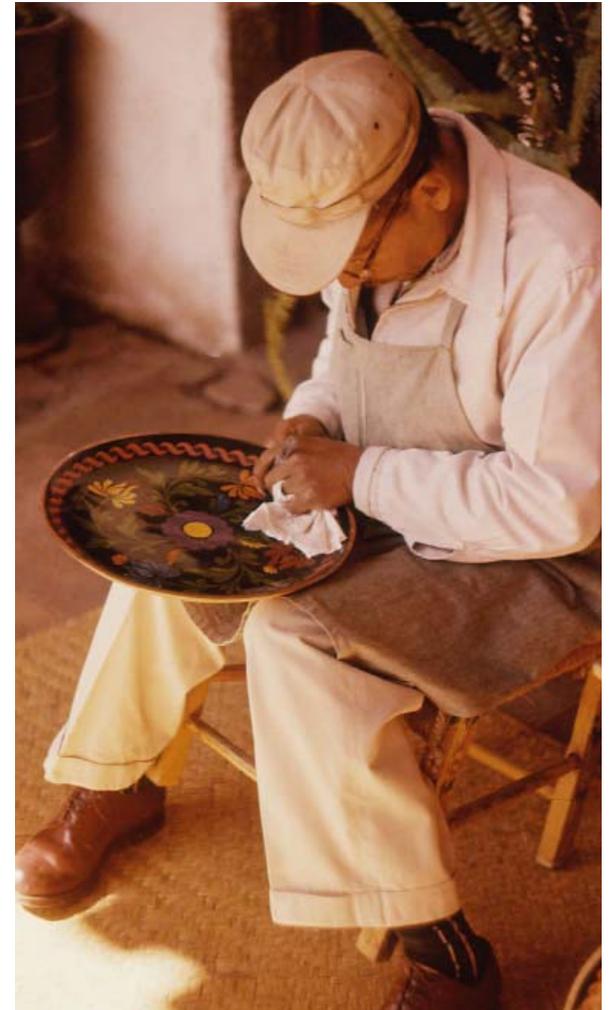


Clockwise: **Tray.** Made by Doña Cuca Cerda, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. This inlaid tray was made with the fat of the aje insect. The insect is boiled, ground, filtered, and dried to extract the fat, which is then often mixed with the oil of chia seeds.

**Snake figurine.** Made by Ernesto Jiménez, Olinalá, Guerrero. Appropriately-shaped gourds are often formed into animals as decorative objects. This unusual snake was cleverly made from a twisted root.

**Gourd bowl.** Olinalá, Guerrero. Lacquer ware is especially popular in the Guerrero town of Olinalá. The material used for the lacquer is the oil from chia seeds.





Left to right: Preparation of a batea; smoothing the outside with a hand scraper.

Preparing pigments; Michoacán technique.

Finishing touches being made to a piece of laquerware.

*Photographs by Katharine Jenkins.*



Child wearing a *quechquémitl*; San Pablo Toliman, Querétaro.  
 Photograph by Katharine Jenkins.

**Legging Ornament.** Mexico; 19th century. Shortly after the Conquest the Spanish forbade the Mexicans to ride horses, but riding slowly spread, especially on ranches. By the 19th century, horseback riding became a national sport for the upper class. Riders wore beautiful costumes, made with silver and silk embroidery.

## Clothing and Textiles

✿ Mexican clothing is rich in tradition, combining Indian and Spanish elements. Weaving is an ancient Mexican craft. The oldest loom-woven fragment in the country dates back to between 900 and 200 BC. Fibers used include: bark, agave, and cotton. The Spanish introduced wool and silk. Later on, man-made fibers and dyes came into use. Before the Spanish came to Mexico, fabrics were woven on the backstrap loom. This is still used by Indian women today to weave narrow panels of cloth. Men weave on the treadle or floor loom (introduced by the Spanish), creating wider pieces of cloth.



As in all cultures, Mexican clothing comes in many varieties. It is often set apart by gender (female, male), by class (rich, poor), and by occasion (everyday, ceremonial).

In Mexico, especially among Indian groups, in addition to a skirt, women wear one of two common forms of blouses: a sleeveless tunic (*huipil*) and a closed shoulder-cape (*quechquémitl*). Today, many women are wearing sleeved blouses, introduced by the Spanish. Men's clothing has changed more. The shirts and pants they wear are both European fashions. Around their shoulders women sometimes wear rectangular shawls (*rebozo*). In the 19th century men often wore large blanket capes (*sarape*).



Left to right: **Saltillo-style sarape (detail)**. Northern and central Mexico; ca. 1830-80. Saltillo sarapes are perhaps the finest and most beautiful Latin American textiles of their period. Although the origins and exact history of the Saltillo sarape are unknown, they are probably a mix of indigenous and Hispanic elements. They seem to have developed during the 19th century, with their greatest popularity between about 1830 and 1880. Sarapes seem to have started from clothing of Indian men. The Saltillo was made popular by vaqueros (cowboys) and other mestizo people of the countryside, before being taken up by wealthy landowners in northern and central Mexico. Just as saltillo sarapes were beginning to lose popularity in the late 19th century, the sarape had become a Mexican national symbol, spreading to all classes.

**Huichol Indian Costume.** Santa Catarina, Jalisco. Among the Huichol, men's costumes tend to be more decorated than women's, unlike most Mexican indigenous groups. This is ceremonial wear. The designs, embroidered with yarn on cotton cloth, represent spiritual symbols of birds, eagles, and the star-like *toto* flower.

**Woman's blouse.** Nahuatl Indians; Southern Huasteca of Hidalgo and Veracruz. In most of Mexico, sleeved blouses have gradually replaced *huipils* and *quechquémitls*.



Woman weaving on a backstrap loom; Navenchuac, Zinacantecos, Mexico, 1952.

Sarape weaver.

*Photographs by Katharine Jenkins.*



Nahua Indian women wearing traditional huipils; Amatlan, Veracruz, 1957.

*Photographs by Katharine Jenkins.*



Man weaving braid for hat; Nevachauc, Chiapas, Mexico, 1952.

## Baskets, Gourds and Glass



**Bottle.** Glass, swirled, amber glass, Central Mexico.

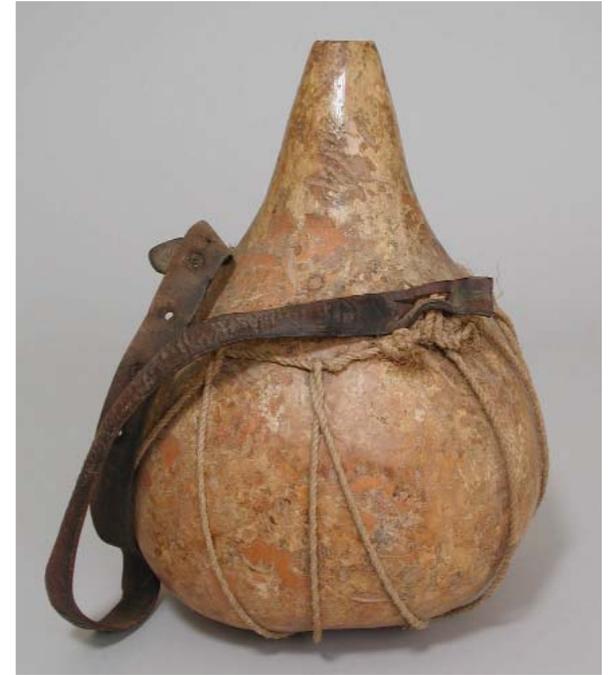
✿ Basketry is one of the most ancient of Mexican crafts. Like pottery, basketry may be created for everyday use or for decoration.

Gourd containers are another common craft. Used as early as 8000 BC, the gourd is a natural container. Many are left plain as bowls and utensils, some are used for rattles, while others are decorated for sale. In parts of Oaxaca, gourds are decoratively carved by Mixtec Indians. Coconut shells and other large seeds are carved in the same way in Tabasco and Veracruz.



Glass was introduced to Mexico by the Spanish. Puebla was the first place glass was crafted, from which it spread to Mexico City and Jalisco, where most Mexican glass is made today. While glass is most common in the form of containers, it is also popular in bead form for jewelry. Mexican hand-blown glass is noted for its rich variety of color.

**Carved gourd bowl (detail).** Central or southern Mexico; ca. 1910. Gourd bowls are often made from the rind of the fruit of the calabash tree (*Crescentia cujete*), grown in the coastal areas of Guerrero and Oaxaca. The carved design on this one depicts birds, trees, and circular medallions, one of which bears the inscription "Republica Mexicana," over the national emblem of an eagle holding a snake. This image was probably taken from a coin, as this ancient Aztec symbol has appeared on the back of all Mexican coins since 1823.



Clockwise: **Basket.** Tarahumara Indians; Creel, Chihuahua. This basket—double-woven in two layers, was made for sale to tourists. Among the Tarahumara, women are the basket weavers.

**Carved coconut.** Veracruz or Tabasco.

**Water bottle, gourd.** Mayo Indians; Navojoa District, Sonora. In addition to decorative objects made for sale, gourds in Mexico are often used for everyday purposes.

**Bottle.** Mexico, region unknown.

**Basket with lid.** Mixteca Baja Indians; Oaxaca.



## Toys and Miniatures

✿ Toys are an exciting and fun part of Mexican folk art. They are made from all kinds of materials. There are many different types of folk toys. Dolls or other kinds of human and animal figurines are popular along with coin banks, pull or push toys, whistles and rattles.

In addition to the common, everyday toys, many are made for ceremonial use,

especially for Day of the Dead. Many toys, once made for a child's play, have now become forms of folk art that are made for sale.



Miniatures are an especially rich tradition in Mexico. They are made to look just like the full-size objects they are modeled after. They may be made by children or used as children's toys, made and collected by adult Mexicans, or sold to foreign tourists.

**Male figurine.** Mexico Federal District. Many miniature male figurines of papier mâché resemble similar figures once made for Easter. The larger versions served as supports for fire-works or were set up in front of shops. They were crafted into many forms, such as devils, animals, bandits or disliked politicians. Most small paper mâché figures, such as this small toy, are made with molds.

**Noisemaker, bird-form (*matraca*).** Mexico Federal District. These noisemakers were used during Holy Week (the week before Easter), a time when church bells were not allowed to be rung. Given as Easter gifts, they were used by children.



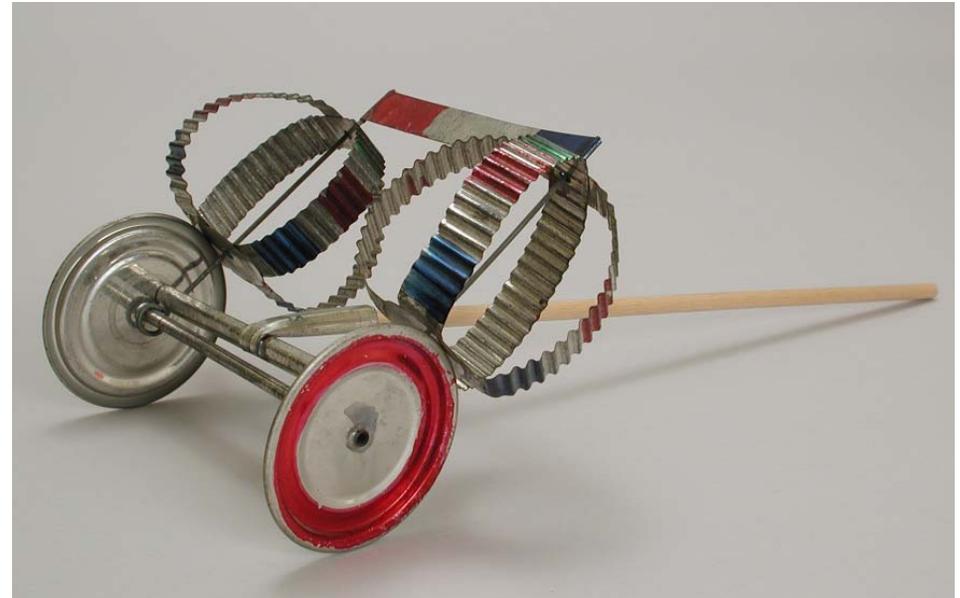
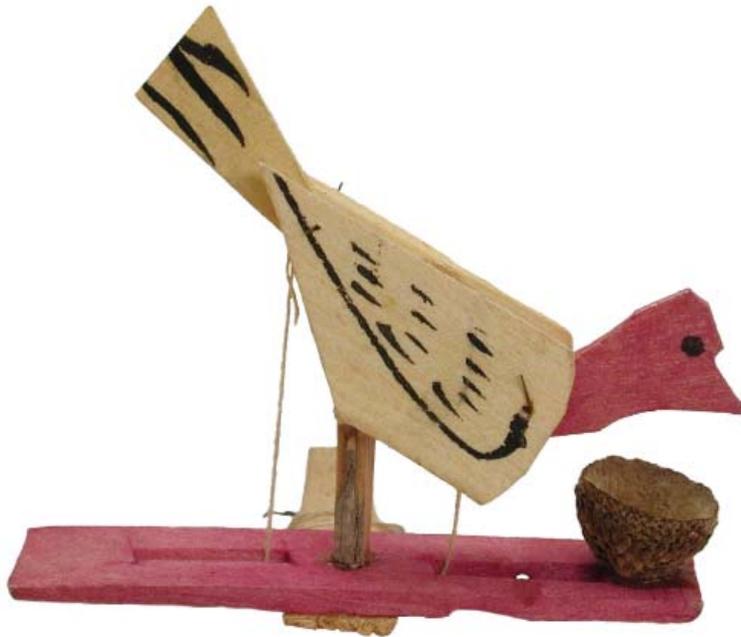
Clockwise: **Model airplane.** Mexico, unspecified. A universal children's toy, this one is made of palm leaf.

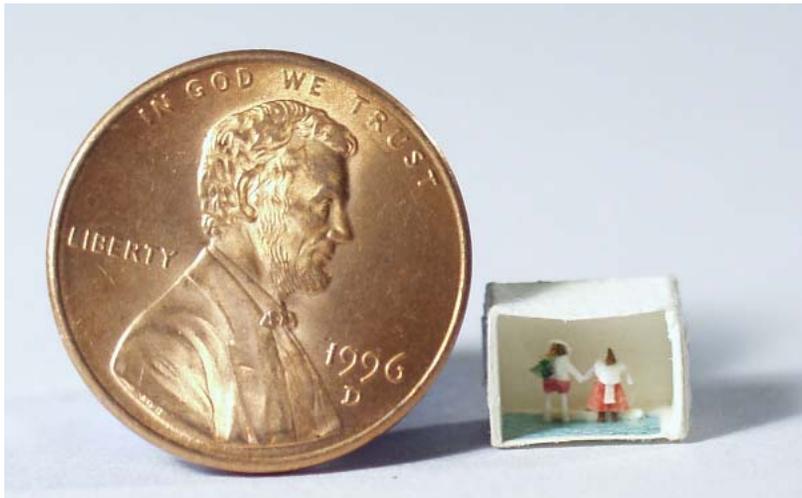


**Wheeled whistle.** Mexico Federal District. This tin whistle has a pinwheel above the opening, which whirls when the whistle is blown.

**Push toy.** Oaxaca.

**Pecking bird toy.** Toluca, State of Mexico. When the string is pulled through the hole, the bird bends down to eat from the acorn cup. A weight, now missing, was usually attached to the thread.





Clockwise: **Male and female figurines.** Jalisco, Puebla, or Mexico Federal District. Corn is the staple food in Mexico, so its husks are abundant throughout the country. This couple is carrying their goods to sell at a market.

**Ram figurine.** Amozac, Puebla. Ram figurines were most commonly mold-made in the form of banks. Versions made of sugar paste were used especially to decorate Day of the Dead altars, but are now rare.

**Male figurine.** Painted clay, Oaxaca.

**Dressed fleas.** Guanajuato. Practiced in Mexico for well over a century, the art of dressing fleas in tiny costumes has now disappeared. This pair is dressed in tiny male and female costumes; other examples are grouped into scenes like weddings.



Papier mâché wall masks; Taxco, Guerrero, 1996.

Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.

## Paper Arts

✿ Paper has been used in Mexico since ancient times. Paper created from tree bark was made into books to record ancient histories. It was also used for decoration and for ceremonial use. The Otomi Indians still prepare bark paper by hand. The paper is most often used to make paper dolls that represent different humans, animals and spirits. These paper dolls are used in different rituals.

BARK PAPER made by the Otomí Indians is also used by Mexican artists, especially from the state of Guerrero. On this bark paper, they create lively paintings that include flowers and animal figures.

PAPERCUTS (*papel picado*) are a popular form of decoration used for holidays and festivals in Mexico. In its simplest form, tissue paper is folded and cut with scissors to form different patterns. The paper is then glued together to form banners that can be hung most anywhere. Skilled craftsmen use tools such as blades, awls, and chisels to create more complicated designs that include animals, skeletons, flowers and much more. These craftsmen often cut through fifty or more sheets of tissue paper at one time.

PAPIER-MÂCHÉ (*papel pegado*) is a very popular art form in Mexico. Large carnival head figures and piñatas are made from papier-mâché for different festivals and holidays. Animals, skeletons, dolls and other toys are also made from papier-mâché to be used for decorations or for sale. Pieces of paper are torn into strips and soaked in paste. A frame is



made out of wood or wire to form a body. Strips of paper are then pasted onto the frame. After the piece is dry it is painted. The strips of paper are applied until the basic shape is created. When the piece is dry, extra features such as noses, ears and hands are added. Next, the piece is decorated with colored papers and foils, or it is painted in bright colors. Papier-mâché is also created using molds made from fired clay or plaster. By creating molds, the same figure can be made over and over again for sale. Two molds are made, one for each half of the figure. Once the wet paper is almost dry, the two halves are pasted together.



Boy making a piñata, covering the rabbit form;  
Mexico City.

*Photograph by Katharine Jenkins.*

**Traditional Mexican paper-cut.**

**Ritual doll, bark paper.** Otomí Indians; San Pablito,  
Puebla.





## Tin & Copper



The Spanish introduced tin to Mexico in colonial times. Many items are made from tin, such as ornaments, mirror frames, and small boxes. Tin is often cut out by hand, and special tools are used to punch designs into the tin. Parts of tin are put together using lead solder and a soldering iron. The tin is then painted in a variety of colors.



Copper was also introduced by the Spanish. Craftsmen create copper plates, pitchers, mugs, trays, cups, candlesticks, and other useful objects that are sold throughout Mexico. Many Tarascan Indians of Michoacán specialize in copperware. They hammer out the pieces by hand. Some of these specialists craft miniatures of their larger counterparts.

Tinsel flowers. Toluca, Mexico, 1956.  
*Photograph by Katharine Jenkins.*

Copper miniature, vase, and bowl.



## Art of the Huichol

✿ The Huichol Indians live in a distant part of Mexico in far-off areas of Nayarit and Jalisco. In the face of great pressures for change, they have maintained many of their traditional beliefs and ceremonies. The Huichol reflect their belief systems in all of the art-work that they do.

Many Huichol religious beliefs are illustrated in beautifully designed yarn paintings called *Nearika*. Yarn paintings are made by the Huichol for sale to supplement their income. To make their yarn art, the Huichol cover thin boards with a mixture of beeswax and pine resin. Threads of yarn are then pressed into the boards. Decorated gourd bowls are another important art form made by the Huichols. The gourds are adorned with beads to form a variety of meaningful symbols. Decorated gourd bowls help in offering prayers to the gods, although these too are now made for sale.



Left: Yarn painting by Ramon Medina Silva, 1968.  
Right: Yarn painting (detail).



**Votive gourd.** Huichol Indians; Santiago Ixcuintla, Nayarit. Votive gourds were just one of a number of symbolic objects that Huichol shamans offered to the gods to insure that their prayers for health and well being would be heard. Among the sacred designs on this one are the deer, corn, and eagle. This gourd was probably made for sale.

**Yarn paintings.** The painting above was made by Ramón Medina Silva, Huichol Indian; Nayarit or Jalisco. In the 1960s, Huichols began to create yarn paintings for sale to outsiders. While the story of this painting is not recorded, it seems to represent the sun and moon, a corn plant, and a man. The yarn painting below is from Nayarit.



Cat figurine. Oaxaca, Mexico.

Armadillo figurine. Oaxaca, Mexico, ca. 1995.

**Armadillo figurine.** Possibly from Arrazola, Oaxaca, ca. 1970. Colorfully painted wooden animals are now a major production in parts of Oaxaca. This piece may have been made by Manuel Jiménez, who is responsible for popularizing the art of woodcarving in Oaxaca.

## Oaxacan Woodcarving

 Oaxaca Valley is in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. Many of the carvers are descendants of the Zapotec Indians, native to this area. The soft wood of the copal tree is used to carve these amazing creatures. These figures are crafted with a great deal of imagination. They are carved, sanded and then painted by hand using bright colors. The carvings are usually made for sale. Men often carve the figures, when they are not farming, in order to earn extra money to support their families. Sometimes an entire family may help create these fantastic and amusing figures.





## Fireworks

🌸 Fireworks are a wonderful part of Mexican holidays and festivals, especially Christmas. The people who make fireworks displays take their jobs very seriously and are considered to be great craftsmen. Large fireworks are made to order. The *castillo* is the most difficult thing to create. The *castillo* is a castle-tower of fireworks of thirty or more feet in height made of wood. *Castillos* are often made by more than one craftsman and can take over a week to make. Once built, the fireworks are attached. At festival time, the *Castillo* fuse is lit and the fireworks begin to go off one section at a time. Finally, the fuse reaches the top and the colorful grand finale of fireworks begins.



Smaller displays of fireworks are often attached to papier-mâché creations such as the large doll pictured on the left. Another popular display is the *cohetero* (little bull) found throughout Mexico.

Papier mâché doll, laced with firecrackers, used during Corpus Christi celebrations; Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, 1996.

Papier-mache bull, laced with fireworks, Corpus Christi celebration; Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, 1996.

Photographs by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.



## Food

✿ In Mexico, as in all cultures, many objects are used for growing or gathering, storing, preparing, cooking, and serving food. These are made from many different materials, including wood, straw, and metal, as well as clay, lacquer, gourd, glass, and basketry.

The traditional Mexican staple is corn, often made into tortilla breads. Other foods are beans, squash, chile peppers, and many herbs and fruits. For the preparation of these foods special containers and utensils were made: for example, the flat clay griddle (*comal*) for baking tortillas or the tripod mortar (*molcajete*) made of stone or clay (*chirmolera*) for grinding chiles and spices.

Another important food is chocolate. Chocolate was used before the Spanish came to Mexico as a form of wealth and as a ritual drink of the upper classes. The Spanish introduced chocolate to Europe, where it was first mixed with sugar. In Mexico, it is still made into a drink and used in many different pastries. It is also used in stews such as mole. Chocolate is still used for ritual purposes, especially during the Day of Dead and other ceremonial occasions, when it is mixed with toasted cornmeal and wheat to prepare a drink known as *chocolateatole*, or formed into skulls or cakes.

Market scene.

Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.

Clockwise: **Grinder.** Acatlán, Puebla. One of the most common forms of Mexican kitchen ware is the three-legged mortar (*molcajete*), used with a pestle. A clay mortar was often used for grinding softer ingredients such as chiles, tomatoes, and tomatillos. Sizes vary according to their use, from restaurant size (about 15 inches) to small ones for children or grinding spices (about 4 inches).

**Cup for drinking chocolate.** Puebla de los Angeles, Puebla.

**Pot for stirring chocolate.** Tonalá, Jalisco. This pot shown, bearing the Mexican national emblem, is probably too decorative to have been used for chocolate, but it is an example of the kind of tall, narrow pot used to prepare the beverage.

**Chocolate stirrers or mills.** (Left to right):

Michoacán; Lacandon Indians, Lacanjá, Chiapas; Paracho, Michoacán; Michoacán. Chocolate, in the form of powder or cakes, is mixed with heated water or milk to make a drink. The exact history of these stirrers is uncertain. They may have been introduced by the Spanish, or developed in the Spanish colonies. During Pre-Conquest times, chocolate was stirred and whipped-up by pouring the mixture back and forth from one pot to another. The stirrer is placed with the decorated head down into the bowl and twirled between the palms. These stirrers are also used to mix similar drinks made of a liquid and a powder, such as corn meal.





Sara Villagómez making tortillas in the patio of her home;  
Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, 1978.

*Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*

Recipe taken from All Recipes online at: <http://holiday.allrecipes.com/az/CrnTrtlls.asp>

## CORN TORTILLAS

### INGREDIENTS:

- 1 3/4 cups masa harina
- 1 1/8 cups lukewarm water

1. In a medium bowl, mix together masa harina and hot water until thoroughly combined. Turn dough onto a clean surface and knead until pliable and smooth. If dough is too sticky, add more masa harina; if it begins to dry out, sprinkle with water. Cover dough tightly with plastic wrap and allow to stand for 30 minutes.
2. Preheat a cast iron skillet or griddle to medium-high.
3. Divide dough into 15 equal-size balls. Using a tortilla press, a rolling pin, or your hands, press each ball of dough flat between two sheets of plastic wrap.
4. Immediately place tortilla in preheated pan and allow to cook for approximately 30 seconds, or until browned and slightly puffy. Turn tortilla over to brown on second side for approximately 30 seconds more, then transfer to a plate. Repeat process with each ball of dough. Keep tortillas covered with a towel to stay warm and moist until ready to serve.

🌻 Masa means dough in Spanish, but really refers to corn dough. Masa harina is fresh corn masa that has been dried and powdered. It is sold in Mexican grocery stores, but you might be able to find it in your local grocery store.



## Day of the Dead

❁ Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) is one of the most important holidays in Mexico. November First is *All Saints' Day*. On this day, all children who have died are honored. On the second day of November, called *All Soul's Day*, all others who have passed away are honored. Many Mexicans believe that on these two nights the souls of dead persons return to visit their families. The souls are welcomed into peoples' homes. Altars are decorated with special foods, candles, incense and flowers for these special visitors. Toys and sweets are added to children's altars. Altars are set-up at home, in churches, and outside cemeteries. This is the only night of the year when spirits can enjoy eating. Many Mexicans hang food in baskets outside their doors so that passing souls who have no relatives to visit still have the chance to eat something and return to their graves happy.

On this special day, there are many types of toys, miniatures and masks made to look like skulls and skeletons. Certain foods and treats are also made around this holiday. *Pan de muerto* (bread of the dead) is very common. The dough is sometimes shaped into animals, people, and skeletons and topped with sugar. Another treat called *alfenique*, a sugar paste, is formed into a variety of figures; these are often used to decorate altars.

Day of the Dead toy *catrina*, ceramic and cloth, modeled after a print by José Posada.

Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.



Cardboard skeletons with movable joints, on sale at the temporary Toluca sugar figurine market set up each year at the time of the Day of the Dead. Toluca, capital of the State of Mexico, October 2000.

*Photograph by Stanley Brandes, Professor of Anthropology, UC Berkeley.*



Clockwise: Panaderia (bakery) advertising Pan de Muerto; Mexico, 1956.

*Ofrenda* (altar). Day of the Dead; House of Irene Orozco; Mixquic, Mexico, 1953.

Sugar skulls for Day of the Dead.

*Photographs by Katharine Jenkins.*



## *Pan de Muerto* Recipe

### INGREDIENTS

- 1/4 cup margarine or butter
- 1/4 cup milk
- 1/4 cup warm water (about 110 degrees F)
- 3 cups all purpose flour
- 1 1/4 teaspoons active dry yeast
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons anise seed, whole or crushed
- 1/4 cup white sugar
- 1/2 tablespoon cinnamon
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2 teaspoons orange zest
- 1/4 cup white sugar
- 1/4 cup orange juice
- 1 tablespoon orange zest
- 2 tablespoons white sugar

### DIRECTIONS

1. Heat the milk and the butter in a medium sized sauce pan until the butter melts. Remove the pan from the heat and then add the warm water. The mixture should be about 110 degrees.
2. In a large bowl, combine 1 cup of flour, yeast, salt, anise seed, cinnamon and 1/4 cup white sugar. Stir in the warm milk mixture. Then add the eggs and orange zest and mix until well blended. Stir in 1/2 cup of flour and continue adding flour until the dough is soft.
3. Put the dough on a lightly floured surface and knead it until it is smooth and elastic (9-10 minutes).



*Pan de Muerto. Photograph by Katharine Jenkins*

4. Put the dough in a lightly greased bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let the dough rise in a warm place until it has doubled in size. This should take between 1 and 2 hours. At this time, punch the dough and shape it into a round loaf shape with a round knob at the top. Put the dough on a baking sheet and loosely cover with plastic wrap and let it rise in a warm place once more for one hour or until it has doubled in size.

5. Bake the bread in an oven preheated to 350 degrees for 35-45 minutes.

6. Remove the bread from the oven and let it cool slightly before applying the glaze.

To make the glaze, combine 1/4 cup sugar, orange juice and orange zest in a small saucepan. Bring the mixture to a boil over medium heat for 2 minutes. Brush over the bread while still warm and sprinkle sugar over the glazed bread. This recipe makes about 15 servings.

*Some people sprinkle colored sugar on the finished product for a truly festive looking treat.*

Recipe from: <http://bread.allrecipes.com/az/PandeMuertosMexicanBreadof.asp>

# Vocabulary

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**Agave:** any number of plants belonging to the Agave family that are native to hot, dry areas and typically feature rosettes of tough, sword-shaped leaves.

**Backstrap loom:** a simple, horizontal loom used in Central and South America that consists of two beams that hold the warp yarn, connected to a strap that passes across the back of the weaver.

**Ceremonial:** any object or action that is used in or connected to a ceremony or ritual.

**Chia:** a plant in the mint family, native to Mexico and the southwest United States, having clusters of blue or violet flowers and edible seed-like fruits.

**Effigy:** a likeness or image, especially of a person

**Emblem:** a sign, design, or figure that identifies or represents something

**Extract:** to draw or pull out.

**Jade:** a pale green to white stone that is carved or made into the form of a gemstone.

**Filter:** a porous material through which a liquid or gas is passed in order to separate the fluid from the material

**Floor loom or treadle loom:** a loom moved by treadles or foot pedals, that move the machine and leave the weaver's hands free.

**Hieroglyphic Writing:** a system of writing that consists of pictorial symbols that represent a meaning or a sound.

**Indigenous:** having originated in or living naturally in a particular region.

**Inlaid:** Set into a surface in a decorative pattern.

**Obsidian:** a black, shiny, hard natural glass that is formed by the rapid cooling of lava.

**Mineral Glazes:** colored, opaque or transparent materials made of minerals that are applied to ceramics before they are baked in a kiln.

**Mole:** a variety of spicy sauces from Mexico with a base of onion, chiles, nuts or seeds and sometimes unsweetened chocolate that is usually served with meat or poultry.

**Olla:** A clay cooking pot.

**Open Top Kiln:** brick or adobe open top structures used to fire pottery; they are divided into two sections; the lower fire box area and an upper stacking area for placement of the pottery.

**Pigments:** usually dry powders containing natural materials such minerals, rocks, plants, and oxides of metals that are mixed with oil or water to create paint or dye.

**Pliable:** easily bent or shaped.

**Potter's Wheel:** a horizontal wooden wheel on which a potter molds clay while it is spinning.

**Region:** large, continuous areas of land that are often characterized by specific geographic features and plant and animal life.

**Renaissance:** an intense period of artistic and intellectual activity.

**Ritual:** associated with a ceremony, rite or service.

**Solder:** a metal alloy such as tin or lead that is used to join metallic parts.

**Soldering Iron:** a tool used to melt and apply solder.

**Specialist:** a person who devotes himself to one subject, interest, skill or craft; a person who is an expert in one field.

**Supernatural:** connected to powers that go beyond the natural world, unexplainable by natural law, extraordinary.

**Technologies:** the knowledge available to a society that allows them to make tools, art; enables them to develop skills, and collect materials.

**Votive:** offered, given, dedicated.

# Mexican Folk Art Review Questions

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## Mexico

1. What different kinds of environments are there in Mexico?

## Ancient Mexico

2. What kinds of crops did the early people of Mexico grow?
3. When were the great civilizations established?
4. What did these great civilizations trade amongst each other?
5. What were three important technologies they developed?
6. What is one of the greatest developments of the Mayan people?

## The Spanish Conquest

7. Why did Cortes sail to Mexico? When did he sail?
8. How long did the Spanish rule Mexico?
9. What was a person called who was part Spanish and part native Mexican?
10. List some things the Spanish introduced to Mexico.
11. When did Mexico gain independence from Spanish rule?
12. About how many Indian groups still live in Mexico today?

## The Mexican Revolution & Renaissance

13. When did the Mexican Revolution take place? Why did it happen?

## Folk Art

14. What are two ways of defining folk art?

## Masks

15. When are masks typically used?
16. What are popular subjects for masked dances?
17. What are some materials used to make masks?

## Pottery

18. How was Mexican pottery made before the Spanish Conquest?
19. What Spanish tools changed Mexican pottery?
20. What is most everyday pottery used for? How is it decorated?

## Lacquer

21. What is lacquer?
22. How is lacquer applied?
23. What are common lacquer decorations?

## Clothing and Textiles

24. What kinds of fibers are used in weaving?
25. What are the two types of looms used in Mexico?
26. What are three traditional women's garments?
27. What was a traditional garment worn by men in 19th century Mexico?

## Baskets, Gourds & Glass

28. How early were gourds used in Mexico?
29. What are gourds used for?
30. Who introduced glass to Mexico?
31. Where was glass first made in Mexico? Where is it made now?
32. What is special about Mexican blown glass?

## Toys and Miniatures

33. What are some examples of folk toys?
34. What are toys made for besides everyday use? What is one holiday in particular?
35. What was bark paper used for in ancient times? What is it used for today?
36. Who makes bark paper?
37. When are paper cuts used? How are they created?
38. What is papier-mâché used for in Mexico?

## Tin

39. When did the Spanish introduce tin to Mexico?
40. What is made out of tin? How are tin creations decorated?
41. What objects are made of copper?

## The Art the Huichol

42. What is reflected in the artwork of the Huichol people?
43. What are Nearika?
44. What are chaquiras?

### Oaxacan Woodcarving

45. What kind of wood is used by the people of Oaxaca to carve figures?

### Fireworks

46. When are fireworks used in Mexico?

47. What is a *castillo*?

### Food

48. What are some staple foods in Mexico?

49. What is a *comal* used for?

50. What is used to grind chiles and spices?

51. What was chocolate used for before the Spanish came to Mexico?

52. When is chocolate used for ritual purposes?

### Day of the Dead

53. What is the purpose of the Mexican holiday Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*)?

54. What are altars decorated with? Where are altars set up?

55. Why is food put outside on this holiday?

56. What is a popular form for toys, masks and food on Día de las Muertos?

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