Arte Popular

A preview of the new
Latin American Folk Art collection

Gallery Guide

ASU Museum of Anthropology

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Folk art (arte popular) is bound to the cultural life of a people. Characterized by a system of communal values and aesthetics, it is passed down through generations of people who possess local knowledge of materials, techniques and customs. The relationship of folk art production to tradition is perhaps one of the most vital aspects of understanding the context of the objects in this category. Folk art is integral to cultural life, evidenced by its prevalence in religious and secular events, architecture, and decorative and utilitarian items. Unlike fine art, it is rarely innovative. Instead, the poignancy of its meaning is derived from the past, the familiar.

These objects embody the everyday lives of the people who crafted them -- the things of their gods, dreams, chilhood, loves, and livelihood. While folk art was originally made to be used and discarded, many of the objects in this collection reflect a new aspect of life for the makers -- economic opportunities brought by tourism. Objects made for the tourist trade find inspiration from local art traditions, but are made with the clear purpose to be bought and sold.

Do these objects appeal to you as a consumer? As you browse, think about their subject, size and material. What would appear in your shopping bag?
Why is this the new Latin American Folk Art Collection?

During the summer of 2007, the School of Human Evolution and Social Change acquired this collection of Latin American Folk Art from Arizona State University’s Center for Latin American Studies. Dr. Jerry Ladman, an economist who directed the Center began this collection in 1976 during his research-related travels throughout Latin America. As tourism increased and the artistic genre of “folk art” came into vogue, objects like the ones in this exhibit continued to be produced as part of cultural fabric of everyday life, but also sold to outsiders. Easily transported objects were more likely to be produced for sale, and in some areas objects were fashioned in miniature. As with most collections, the objects included reflect the tastes of not only the people who made them, but also the person who bought and assembled them.

While the collection began over thirty years ago, its entrance into the School’s collections invites new opportunities for research and exhibition. Arte Popular is no exception – many of the objects you will see have been researched and interpreted by graduate and undergraduate anthropology students.
Alebrijes
Mexico

Wooden Animal Carvings
Arrasola, Oaxaca, Mexico

The two papier-mâché creatures, called *alebrijes*, were first created by the famous Mexican folk artist, Pedro Linares. Drawing inspiration from an illness-induced dream, his creations gained international renown after being discovered by a gallery owner in Cuernavaca. The *alebrijes* on exhibit are from the Linares workshop and were probably made by one of Linares’s sons or grandsons, who carry on the tradition today.

The term *alebrije* is also used to describe carved *figuras*, or wooden figures, created by Oaxacan artists from the wood of the copalillo tree. While the wooden carvings exhibited here originate from Oaxaca and are carved from the same soft wood, they differ from Oaxacan *alebrijes* commonly found on the tourist market, as they are less refined toys meant for children’s play.

Hand-made toys are a strong part of the Mexican folk art tradition. Can you imagine children playing with the *alebrijes* and wooden carvings?
Born from the Ashes
Casas Grandes replica effigy jar
Polychrome ceramics

From the ancient site of Casas Grandes (Paquime) in northern Chihuahua, Mexico a new ceramic style emerged. In the small village of Mata Ortiz lived a young man named Juan Quezada. As he roamed the desert he discovered beautiful sherds from the ruins of Paquime. Simply by studying these sherds he taught himself to recreate ceramics in the polychrome style. In the 1970s traders bought all of his pots and immediately sold them as prehistoric pieces. Juan learned to etch his signature onto the bottom of his pots so that buyers would know his were contemporary pieces. The replica jar you see here is part of a long tradition. Artisans all over the world create replicas of ancient ceramics to sell to tourists. The effigy jar style was highly developed at Casas Grandes and was often formed in the shape of a human figure or painted with representations of gods and myths.
Teacarts
Sarchí, Alajuela Department, Costa Rica

The painted, wooden teacarts seen here are small models of traditional oxcarts, called carretas, used to transport coffee from plantations to ports in Costa Rica. They come from the city of Sarchí, known as the ‘cradle of national crafts’. Originally, Sarchí produced only the larger oxcarts, but now craftsmen cater to the demand for folk arts in the tourist trade and produce smaller teacarts. Even so, the quality of the elaborate, brightly colored designs and the craftsmanship remain.
Candelabras
Acatlán, Puebla, Mexico

Acatlán’s history of pottery production begins in pre-Hispanic times. Local potters made a great variety of domestic utensils including: jugs, bowls, pots, pitchers, and small candleholders for All Saints’ Day celebrations, which inspired these elaborate candelabras. Made of hand-formed clay coils and painted with colorful slips, these were probably made under the artistic direction of Herón Martínez Mendoza, a well-known potter in Acatlán.
Ceramic Church
Quinua, Ayacucho, Peru

The region of Ayacucho, known locally as Huamanga, is located in the central highlands of Peru. The small village of Quinua, located approximately 20 miles outside the region’s capital, is home to this model church. Such churches can be found on rooftops throughout the village and are used to ward off evil spirits. The churches are hand made by a local red clay and painted with white and brown slips, special to the area. Today, Quinua is the only place in Peru where this traditional method is still practiced.
Painted Wood Carving
Unknown provenance

This ‘Buddy Christ’ was found in the collection with only the name “Lucia” on the back. This peaceful and happy depiction of Christ reminds us of similar representations in popular culture today, hence the name ‘Buddy Christ’ from the movie *Dogma*. Throughout the world, there are many different folk art depictions of Jesus.

What does this depiction say to you?
**Tree Topper?**

**Unpainted Virgin**

Santa Maria Atzompa, Oaxaca, Mexico

This statue of a Virgin follows in the long tradition of ceramics that are fired only once (bisque fired) and left without glaze. The floral relief is made of hand-modeled clay appliqués created separately and applied to the form before firing. The floral designs are reminiscent of richly embroidered huipiles worn by indigenous people throughout Central America. This pieced is signed ‘AG’ but there is no other information on the artisan. The shape brings to mind the traditional figures that are placed atop Christmas trees, but this “angel” is too heavy for such a duty.
The retablo arrived in the Americas with evangelizing priests in the early 1600s. These portable altars are commonly decorated with religious images and were used to convert native communities to Christianity. Over time, retablos evolved to include images of daily Andean life and culture. The tradition of retablo-making is very strong in the region of Ayacucho. Retablos can also be found in Lima and are made by Ayacuchans who fled to the country’s capital during twenty-three years of armed conflict that ended in 2003.
Man on Burro Ceramic Statuette
Pernambuco State, Brazil

Unglazed hand-made ceramic figurines that depict scenes from everyday peasant life are a common art form in Brazil. The open-air market of Alto do Moura, Caruaru, recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage site, has 22,000 stalls and is especially famous for its ceramic figurine miniatures. A museum located on the site is dedicated to the artist Mestre Vitalino, one of the most famous folk artists of Brazil. It is likely that this figurine, which depicts a peasant man on a burro, was inspired by the type of figurines that Vitalino created.
Ceramic dogs
Mexico

“Dancing dogs” such as this ceramic are attributed to the small, coastal Mexican state of Colima and are replicas of figurines from archaeological sites. The Mexican hairless dog or Xoloitzcuintle (show-low-eats-quint-lee) is likely represented in this ceramic. In pre-Columbian Mexico dogs were commonly eaten as well as found in funerary sites, as they were believed to accompany a person’s soul to the underworld. The incisions on the dog on the left indicate wrinkles or hair.
Opossum Family on the March
Herón Martínez Mendoza
Acatlán, Puebla, Mexico

The opossum is a nocturnal animal and the only marsupial on the North American continent. The babies live in mother’s pouch and ride on her back in safety. Whether the opossum held special importance for the creator is not known. Perhaps he just enjoyed creating the animal forms. The same master artisan who made the candelabra ceramics in the collection created this delightful opossum family. The whimsical family is decorated with popular floral designs and then burnished to achieve the shiny surface. Artisans in Mexico have a long tradition of creating animals, both realistic and imaginary in a wide variety of materials such as wood, paper maché and ceramics.
Ceramic Ashtray
Acatlán, Puebla, Mexico

The talent and imagination of the artist has transformed a mundane household item into a fanciful and expressive piece of folk art. Decorative elements reflect communal aesthetics and feature familiar designs and imagery.
Ceramic snake with rabbit
San Augustín Oapan, Guerrero, Mexico

The village of San Augustín Oapan is one of the isolated and poor mountain villages of the Mexican state of Guerrero, home to the tourist destination Acapulco. Oapan’s pottery tradition is one of the oldest in the region and characteristically depicts simple scenes of animals and flowers.

Pottery was made for domestic use as well as for sale to tourists. Due to the relative isolation of the village, tourist pieces had to be transported to urban centers. Bad roads and stubborn mules resulted in many broken pieces. Amate (bark) painting, using traditional pottery designs, was soon adopted in lieu of pottery production for the tourist trade.
Polychrome gourd in the form of a snake
Olinalá, Guerrero, Mexico

This piece originates from the village of Olinalá, famous for its folk art tradition of *maque* -- lacquering carved boxes and gourds using gold, silver and chía oils. Polychrome gourds found at archaeological sites establish a lacquer tradition nearly two thousand years old.
Feline Effigy Incense Burner
La Paz, Bolivia

The Tiwanaku culture of Bolivia not only left us magnificent archaeological ruins, but also made a lasting impression on local artisans in the area. Today, potters are inspired by the form and design of ancient vessels and are reviving their ancestors’ techniques, producing objects like the one here. Elaborate ceramic pitchers were once used as ceremonial incense burners and would sometimes accompany human burials. An hourglass shape would sometimes feature the molded head and tail of a puma projecting from a scallop edged rim. The profile of a colorful, bird-like composite creature decorates the “stomach” of the puma.
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