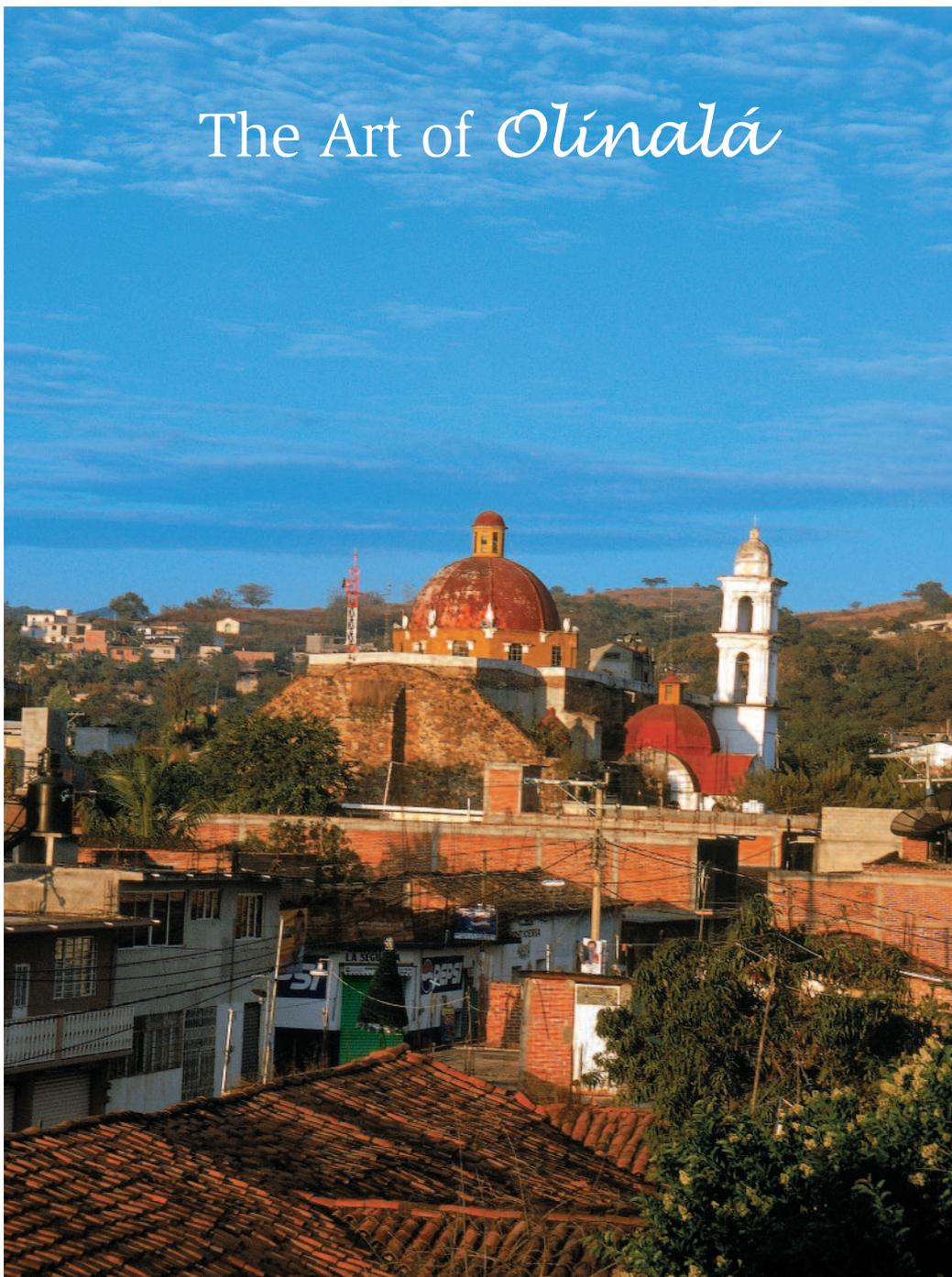


The Art of *Olinalá*



You cross the mountains of Guerrero to get to the valley where Olinalá is nestled. As you approach it from above, it gives you the impression that it is the only town in the area, making you think that time passes more slowly there and that changes from outside, from the globalized world, are checked—like the wind—in the mountains. That would explain why the essence of this lit-

tle Guerrero town's lacquer work remains almost intact until today: boxes, rattles, trays, coffers, picture frames, frames for mirrors, little figures of animals and many other items, prodigiously decorated using centuries-old techniques, are all produced everywhere in this town. The trade has been passed from parents to children for innumerable generations lost in time.



Wood piece for alms. "Gold" technique.

Today, the wooden objects are no longer made in the family carpenter shop, nor do the artisans necessarily have to go into the mountains to bring back the soil they use to prepare and decorate the boxes. People in the town now do a lively trade in both wooden objects and the earth and stains. But the preparation of the pieces, the soil and stains for their decoration and the techniques of application continue to be the same ones used by their forebears, probably even before the colonial period. And the most important thing is that all the pieces from this town have the unmistakable mark that identifies them as a product from Olinalá.

In the distant past, the lacquer was applied to the *jícara*, *bule* and *calabazo* gourds from the *tecomate* tree. Although these continue to be made, today it is more common to see the production of wooden trays, boxes and trunks, among other objects.

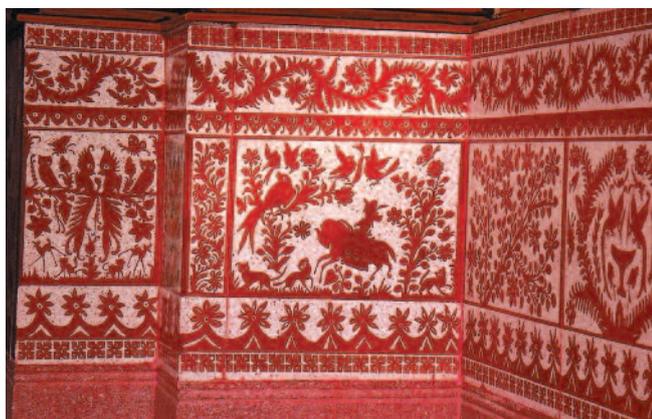
Everything about Olinalá's lacquer work is interesting, beginning with the wood most of the pieces were made of until very recently: *lináloe*, which comes from a 5- to 7-meter-high tree typical of the low forest. This tree's resin

gives off an exquisite aroma that permeates the boxes and trunks made of its wood and, if cut correctly, lasts for years. Unfortunately, *lináloe* has become very scarce, and so today other kinds of lumber are often used, applying essence of *lináloe* resin, whose aroma lasts only a few years. *Lináloe* is held in high regard in Olinalá and has become an item that differentiates some artisans from others. Many of them proudly say they know where it can still be found and that their important pieces are of the original wood.

The preparation of the pieces to be lacquered is another surprising step. After sanding and repairing the surface of the object, it is waterproofed with what the craftsmen call a varnish made with a mixture of *tecostle* earth and live-leaved sage or linseed oil. The earth comes from deposits close to the town and is toasted on a griddle and then ground. The most frequently used earths are *tecostle*, *tesicalte* and *tolte*, which many artisans buy already ground, but others still prepare themselves in their homes.

The next step is to polish the object using a piece of marble, obsidian or flint until it is completely smooth. Then they apply more soil mixed with coloring and live-leaved sage to

Even the main church is an unmistakable example of the beautiful art produced in Olinalá.



Decorations on granite at the base of the columns.



Olinalá artisans volunteered their services to decorate the church.

give the piece its color. Several coats of this paste have to be applied until the piece acquires the desired smoothness. Every process demands time for the piece to dry, a minimum of two or three days. Then, depending on which decorating technique is being used, the piece is burnished once again and more earth is applied with a sponge or it is followed by the “gold.”

The so-called “gold” requires a single polishing; after it dries, it is decorated using industrial pigments and colors (in the past it was done by brushing on gold dust and gold leaf). Very fine brushes made of cat hairs that the artisans still make themselves are used to draw landscapes, flowers, towns and an infinity of animal figures on the pieces.

The technique that requires two phases of polishing is the “scratching” whose second coat of earth is applied with a sponge. After drying pieces are “scratched,” that is drawn on with a *huizache* tree thorn. The powder produced by the scratching is cleaned off at the same time with a turkey feather. It is surprising how precise the drawing is and how quickly it is done, particularly because the artisans have no patterns to follow. Every stroke of the

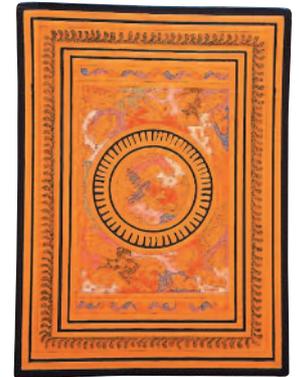
huizache thorn is a product of the craftsman’s imagination at the moment, even though animal, flower and landscape motifs are repeated in almost all the decorations.

Another possibility is the stippling, which consists of drawing the outline of the figures and applying tiny points of color to the white spaces. They also use casting, that consists of using the *huizache* thorn to take off part of the earth paste on each piece and surrounding the drawing to emphasize it and obtain a contrast between the drawing and the background. Finally the pieces are given their luster by rubbing them with cotton.

This process is followed more or less exactly in 80 percent of the homes in Olinalá and the fame of its products reaches beyond Mexico’s borders, although their price does not always embody the art and effort put into them.

ANOTHER UNIQUE ART FORM: THE TIGER MASKS

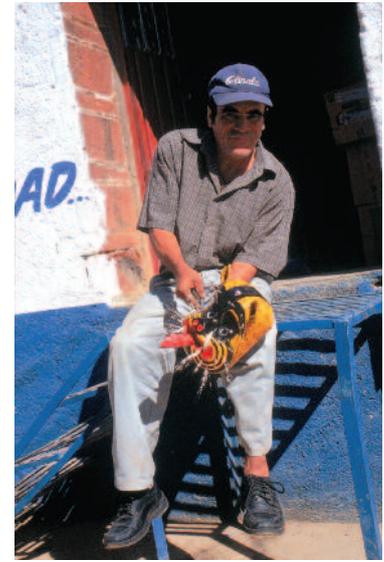
In early October of each year, the town of Olinalá celebrates a fiesta during which the “Tiger Dance” is performed. The participants dress in



Artisans follow no patterns.

Every stroke during the precise process of decoration is a product of their imagination.





Tiger masks have become another symbol of Olinalá. Their bright colors and design remain the same.

rough cotton clothing dyed yellow and marked in black with reed-grass and aniline. They all wear tiger masks made in the town itself by the only two families —related to each other— who ply this trade.

Don Felipe Díaz is the head of one of these families. His uncle, his mother's brother, taught him the trade he has been working at for more than 35 years. He makes masks of different sizes all year round, not just near the time of the fiesta, to sell not only to locals but also as decoration. The masks are made with *colorín* wood because it is soft and easily rounded. Don Felipe shapes it with a machete, takes out the eyes with a gouge and then prepares, sands and paints the wood with the earth used to lacquer the boxes. You can find similar masks in other places, but the authentic ones are only made in Don Felipe's and his aunt's house. Although it is not obvious at first glance, each mask is made using the skin, canine teeth and hair of three different animals: the tongue and ears are made of deer skin; the canine teeth are taken from pigs; and the eyebrows and moustache are made from the hair of wild boar.

These masks would not be noteworthy outside the town if it were not because they have become another symbol of Olinalá. Their bright yellow color and design have not changed, and the way they are produced has also remained the same.

AN AUTHENTIC CRAFT TOWN

Olinalá survives as an authentic craft town, with all the vicissitudes and all the conflicts that this implies: almost every family has lost at least one member to migration north or to one of the large cities in search of his or her fortune; the competition in commercializing the objects that pile up on the shelves in almost all the houses causes some division among the townspeople; and, most importantly, the retail and wholesale buyers lack knowledge and do not appreciate the precision of the “scratching” or the fine stippling work, much less can they distinguish when an item's lustrous finish comes from a perfect, careful polishing and not from the application of an industrial lacquer. This affects and tends to dishearten the artisans, who care about detail and perfection, the two characteristics that can turn their creations, apparently similar to the rest, into unique pieces.

Dealing in a craft market that rejects individuality and tries to put a price —the lowest possible one— on each piece may turn this art into something very like the mass production of goods in the modern world, even though its creators are still human beings with distinguishable features. **MM**

Elsie Montiel
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