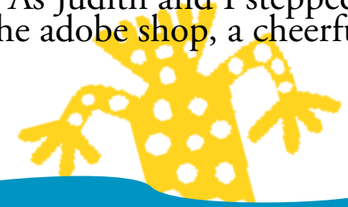
Hecho en Mexico

Exploring Mexican Folk Art

One of the most exciting things about vacationing in Oaxaca is the large artist community that lives and works there. My wife Judith and I traveled there last May and came home with many more pieces for our collection than we had ever imagined. Judith is a collector by nature. Every square inch of our tiny Manhattan apartment is filled with a treasure from one of our trips. I wanted to experience more than just the exchange of money with a merchant—I wanted to meet the artists. Having grown up in a family of sculptors (my father took commissions for his work from around the world), I wanted to see how these people crafted their pieces, how they lived, and what their art meant to them. Judith was more interested in buying art, but she finally agreed to go with me to meet a folk artist I heard about named Henry Luis Ramos.

As Judith and I stepped into the adobe shop, a cheerful black-



haired boy greeted us. "My father's expecting you," he said as he led us down a hall into a spacious room filled with hundreds of statues, clay pots, and tin artifacts that Ramos designed.

The brilliantly colored pieces captivated me. I couldn't stop investigating and touching them. I could see the influence of the Mayan culture and other native tribes. "My father did these," the boy said with a wide grin. In the center of the room, at a heavy table, sat a salt-and-pepper-bearded man in a green shirt and tan overalls. "Hello," he said as he took off his wire-frame glasses, stood, and shook my hand. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," he said. Judith shook his hand quickly, but she seemed more interested in the art that filled the large room.

Ramos's accent was quite thick and rich. I sat at the table with him while Judith browsed. The table was covered with tiny pottery artifacts, most of which depicted Mayan designs: jaguars, birds, and a two-headed serpent. I recognized the serpent as a symbol of Tlaloc, the rain god. They were beautiful! I could tell by the glint in Judith's eye that she was impressed. I half expected her to blurt out, "How much for everything in this room?" I tried hard to ignore her and focus my attention on Ramos. I was surprised by this charming but simple man, with his wild gray beard and tiny wire glasses.

> "I am giving my dreams shape and texture, while at the same time giving my Xalapan ancestors new life."

Ramos was raised on a farm in a small town near Xalapa, where his father was a farmer and metallotherapist. Ramos's mother was a teacher and artist, but spent most of her time working on their small farm and raising their four sons. Their grandfather also lived on the family farm, where he spent his retirement repairing old furniture for folks in the small town. He made whirly gigs and other toys from tin scraps for the boys in town.

"Life hasn't changed a lot for me since I left the farm and moved to Oaxaca. Except when I went to college in the United States—at Penn State, maybe you know it—it is so far away. I lived in a small town in the center of Pennsylvania called Bellefonte, where my son and I lived in a beautiful old Victorian on a hill that overlooks the land." Judith put down a figurine she was holding and joined us at the table.

"I have a very busy life from daybreak till late in the evening. I don't think of it as work—the pottery becomes an extension of my hands. I am giving my dreams shape and texture, while at the same time giving my Xalapan ancestors new life. My son and I wake early and eat breakfast together—it's our time—and then he walks to school and I walk here and start to work. I don't think about anything while I work, only what is in front of me, a clay pot or a piñata, until I hear Francisco come home from lunch. If it weren't for my little boy I probably wouldn't eat lunch at all."

Judith was entranced. Ramos resumed his tale. "I work alone. Although sometimes friends bring in some of their work and I try to sell it for them to the tourists. One of my friends—María—is painstakingly slow, but she makes the most beautiful piñatas. She makes them at her house and then she brings them to me to sell. I like her work. It is funny and colorful." He held up a piñata of a bright pink, blue and green bull with big eyes and a huge grin (*page 7*). "Children love these, or maybe they just love the candy and toys their parents put inside. The important thing is that they lift people's spirits." He laughed, and Judith joined in.

"People ask me often about my work in tin." He smiled broadly. "These are some of my favorite pieces, filled with myths and stories and symbols (*page 2*). My son is especially fond of these. A wall in his room is covered with them. He inspires me with his joy. He wants me to add Mayan figures—birds, serpents, and other creatures—to my work. The sun and the moon are favorites of mine (*page 5*). The sun god gives us the warmth we need to live and to work with the land for

food."

Ramos looked at a clock and then stood up from the table. The interview was over. I stood up, but Judith remained seated. She didn't want to leave. Before I could move away from the table, Ramos's son ran to me, grabbed my hand, and said, "You've gotta see my favorite room! It's the one filled with Papa's tin sculptures!" I followed the black-haired boy to see more of Ramos's creations.