

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Practising Aesthetics:
Artisanal production and politics in a woodcarving village in
Oaxaca, Mexico

Alanna Cant

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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Abstract

The cultural tourism industry, on which the economy of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca depends, is focused primarily on the promotion of the pre-Hispanic and colonial histories of the region, as well as the “traditional” lifeways of its contemporary population. Key sites within this tourism industry are the many craft villages that dot the countryside, where tourists can encounter and consume apparently traditional crafts made in small family workshops. Despite touristic and state-driven nationalistic discourses that frame craftwork as the materialisation of long standing cultural traditions, Oaxacan woodcarvings, sometimes known as “alebrijes,” are of recent invention and have rapidly become the economic mainstay of the field site, San Martín Tilcajete. While previous research has investigated the political economy and cultural politics of Oaxacan craft production, this thesis engages with important debates surrounding materiality, aesthetics and the production of art.

Through ethnographic data from fieldwork with artisans in San Martín Tilcajete, I argue throughout the thesis that “aesthetics” can be understood anthropologically as an on-going practice in which a variety of actors are engaged. The chapters address questions that fall within three general themes: (1) artisans’ aesthetic practice, including questions of how production is experienced aesthetically and conceptualisations of authorship, style and skill; (2) how different actors’ aesthetic sensibilities produce and reproduce the woodcarvings as a genre; and (3) the political consequences of these aesthetic practices for issues of competition, community politics, belonging and emergent understandings of aesthetic ownership, framed in terms of intellectual property. In making these arguments, the thesis also charts the nature of contemporary artisanal work from the micro-level of household workshops, to international experiences of artisans in the ethnic art markets in the United States, and to large-scale issues of the globalisation of culture.

Dedication

To my parents, who told us that girls can do anything they want,

And to my sisters, who believed them.

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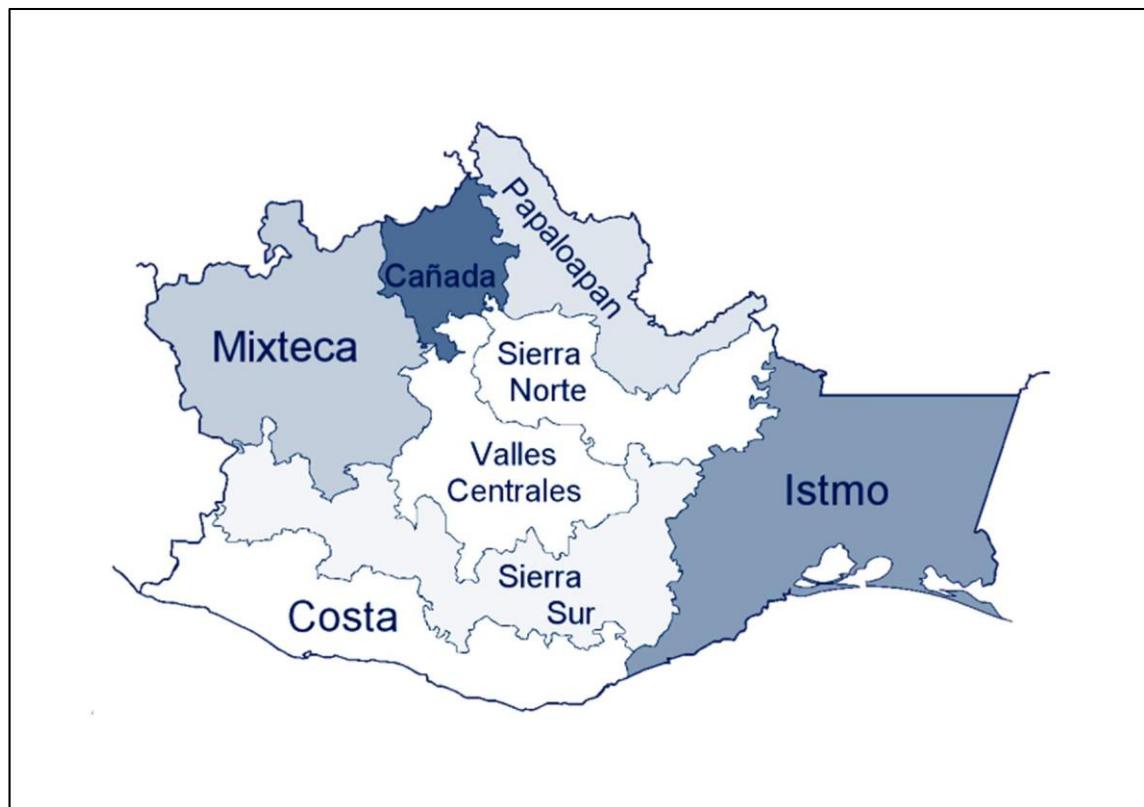
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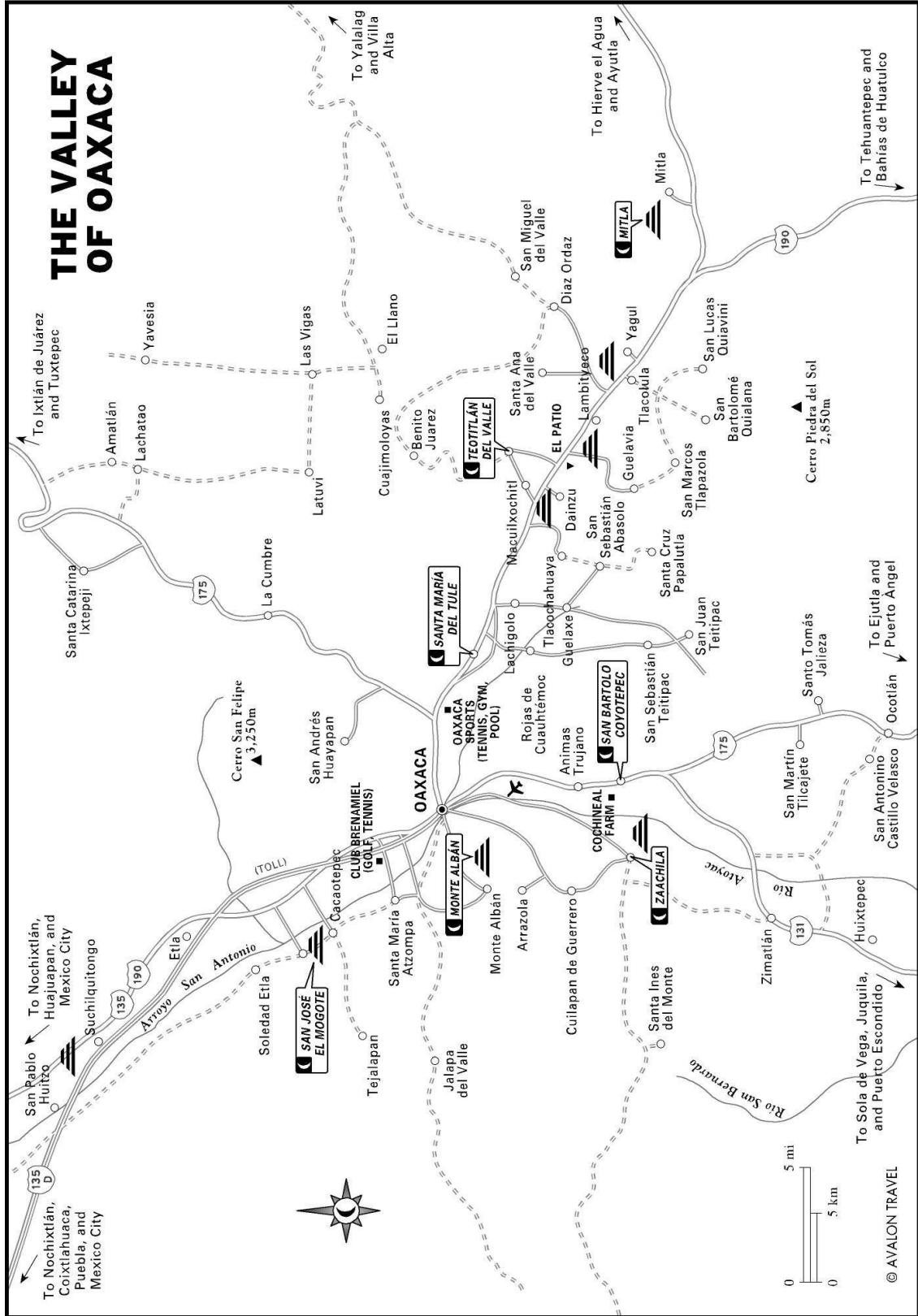
Maps



Map 1: The Country of Mexico



Map 2: Regions of the State of Oaxaca



Map 3: The Tourism Complex of the Valles Centrales
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List of Acronyms

APPO	<i>Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca</i>	The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca
ARIPO	<i>Artesanías e Industrias Populares del Estado de Oaxaca (Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías)</i>	Artesanías and Popular Industries of the State of Oaxaca (Oaxacan Craft Institute)
CDI	<i>Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas</i>	National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (formerly INI)
COCEI	<i>La Coalición Obrera Campesina Estudiantil del Istmo</i>	The Worker-Peasant-Student Coalition of the Isthmus (of Tehuantepec)
EZLN	<i>Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional</i>	Zapatista Army of National Liberation, colloquially known as “the Zapatistas”
FOFA	_____	Friends of Oaxacan Folk Art
FONAES	<i>Fondo Nacional de Apoyos para Empresas en Solidaridad</i>	National Fund for Support for Cooperatives
FONART	<i>Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías</i>	National Fund for the Development of Artesanías
GBP	_____	British Pounds Sterling
IMPI	<i>Instituto Mexicano de la Propiedad Industrial</i>	Mexican Institute of Industrial Property
INAH	<i>Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia</i>	National Institute of Anthropology and History
INEGI	<i>Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía</i>	National Institute of Statistics and Geography
INI	<i>Instituto Nacional Indigenista</i>	National Indigenist Institute (currently CDI)
IP	_____	Intellectual Property
PAN	<i>Partido Acción Nacional</i>	National Action Party
PRI	<i>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</i>	Institutional Revolutionary Party

SECTUR Secretaría de Turismo

Secretary of Tourism (Federal)

SNTE Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación National Educational Workers' Union

STYDE *Secretaría de Turismo y Desarrollo Económico* Secretary of Tourism and Economic Development (Oaxaca)

TRIPs _____ Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property

UNESCO _____ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

USD _____ United States Dollars

WIPO _____ World Intellectual Property Organization

Pronunciation Guide

Alebrije	Al-eh-BREE-hey
Artesanía	Art-eh-san-EE-ya
Comercial	Co-mir-SEE-al
Comadrazgo	Com-pad-RAS-go
Fina	FEE-na
Guelaguetza	Gay-la-GATE-sa
Indígena	In-DEE-hen-a
Mestizo	Meh-STEE-so
Ocotlán	Oh-coat-LAN
Oaxaca	Wa-HA-ka
Rústica	ROO-stee-ka
San Martín	San Mar-TEEN
Tequio	TEC-ee-oh
Tianguis	Tee-AN-gees
Tilcajete	Til-ka-HET-ey
Tileño/Tileña	Til-EN-yo / Til-EN-ya
Típica	TIP-ee-ka
Valles Centrales	VAY-ey Cent-RAAL-ey
Zapotec	SAP-oh-tec

*Note: Generally in Spanish the emphasis falls on the second-to-last syllable, except where indicated by an accent.

* * * * *

All personal names in this thesis are pseudonyms, except where indicated on first usage by †.

The names of San Martín's artisan organisations are anonymised; however all other private and public organisations are indicated by their actual names.

Monetary exchange rates between Mexican pesos, and American dollars and British pounds sterling have been adjusted to the average rates for 2008. In 2008, 1 Mexican peso was equal to \$0.074 USD and £0.048 GBP.

All photographs and figures are owned by the author, except where indicated.

* * * * *

Introduction ***Oaxacan Woodcarvings: the Aestheticisation of a Genre***

“Red, green, yellow, blue. Colores de la vida”

– Cynthia Weill, *Colores de la Vida*, a children’s book illustrated with Oaxacan woodcarvings

“Art objects are characteristically ‘difficult’. They are difficult to make, difficult to ‘think’, difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator. Their peculiarity, intransigence, and oddness is a key factor in their efficacy as social instruments.”

– Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency*

The small Oaxacan village of San Martín Tilcajete sits just above a wide, dry valley that is dominated by the noise and bustle of Oaxaca City. Nestled in a shallow basin bounded by a high ridge and the enchanted hill of María Sánchez, San Martín seems to turn away from the noisy urban centre to face the cool Sierra Madre Mountains that crease and gouge the landscape of the state. In the dry season, crystalline blue skies soar above the village and its tidy fields. In the rainy season, deep purple thunderclouds gather on the mountain tops for the afternoon storms that make the desert bloom. From the viewpoint of the high hill of Cerro Chile just to the east, San Martín appears no different from the other small villages that lie on this plateau amongst these high valleys: its dusty roads are laid out in a neat Spanish colonial grid; the domes of its seventeenth-century Catholic church tower over brightly painted concrete walls and houses; and in the fields grow *milpas*, the traditional Mesoamerican crops of beans, maize and squash.



Figure 1: San Martín Tilcajete, with the hill “María Sánchez” in background

Everyday life in San Martín is in many ways similar to that in neighbouring towns. In the mornings, women rise early to prepare breakfasts of tortillas, black beans and chillies for their families, a task made infinitely easier now that fresh tortillas are sold by young men on motorcycles that race around the village twice a day. Children in uniforms walk through the streets in small groups making their way to school, while young men wander into the hills with herds of goats and the occasional cow for grazing, or more frequently, with young women out to the highway where they catch buses or taxis towards Oaxaca City for work or high school. On Fridays, families make their way to nearby Ocotlán de Morelos for the weekly market. There they can select from huge ranges of local and imported produce like radishes, avocados and mangoes; fresh meat and prepared food; agricultural and household tools; fresh-cut flowers and incense; and the ubiquitous “pirated” CDs, DVDs and computer software. Many look forward to Friday evenings when María Jimenez and her sisters-in-law sell homemade *tamales*, steamed cornmeal dumplings stuffed with chicken, chillies and savoury sauces. Or

families might enjoy a late dinner at San Martín's part-time *taqueria* (taco stand) after taking a stroll around the central plaza or visiting with friends and *compadres*.

However, everyday life in San Martín is also distinct from neighbouring villages. When María isn't making *tamales* or tending her fields, she is usually found in her workshop, a small shady room to the rear of her household compound, where she carefully paints flowers, doves and gemstone-like motifs onto the figures of animals and angels that are carved out of wood by her brothers. On the other side of town her cousin Pedro, like many other middle-aged men in the village, spends most days in the courtyard of his home whittling, sanding and painting elaborately carved pieces while his youngest son plays in the sunshine. Once every few weeks Pedro takes some of his pieces into Oaxaca City, to a gallery where his work is sold to tourists and collectors. Around the corner from Pedro's, on the paved main street that leads into the village from the highway, other workshops are full of hundreds of small woodcarvings; their owners carve and paint while they wait for independent tourists to happen by or for guides to arrive with their clients.

The woodcarvings that draw tourists, collectors and wholesalers to San Martín are diverse and peculiar. Many are small enough to be tucked into pockets or attached to key chains; others are so large they must be shipped to their final destinations. While a majority represent animals – both real and imaginary – the carvings also take the forms of human characters and religious figures that are common in Mexican popular arts and culture. On the shelves of San Martín's workshops Mexican fauna, like iguanas, jaguars, and coyotes, share space with giraffes, dragons, saints and devils. While their forms are diverse, their stylised manner and bright and elaborate paintwork cast a spell of regularity amongst them; fine lines, dots, flowers, chevrons and swirls, in vibrant

reds, sunny yellows, fresh greens, seem to spill from one piece to the next, creating a landscape of colour and form that stretches between workshops.

It was a dry day at the end of March when I decided I would do my fieldwork in San Martín. The weather was important because the sun-bleached landscape seemed to throw the bright colours of the woodcarvings I saw that day into immediate contrast. I had spent the previous two weeks accompanying a tour guide and his clients to many of the craft producing villages surrounding Oaxaca City, where he introduced me to his contacts, and I had the opportunity to assess whether a household and a community would be appropriate for my project. Oaxaca is famous for its material culture, both ancient and contemporary, and one of the first decisions I faced in my research was what kind of material culture I wanted to study. As I had planned to work with “artisans” rather than “artists” I immediately narrowed down the possibilities to weavers, embroiderers, potters, ceramicists, tin-ware makers, jewellers, silversmiths, and woodcarvers. Clearly, I still had a lot to choose from.

Oaxaca is arguably the state in Mexico most known for its craftwork. The tourism industry based in the Valles Centrales (Central Valleys) region, where the state’s capital is located, is one of *cultural* tourism. The majority of activities marketed to tourists are oriented towards experiencing the colonial city centre of Oaxaca City, pre-Hispanic Zapotec and Mixtec ruins, and contemporary villages and towns dotted throughout the valleys which offer the chance to experience a traditional market, observe artisanal production of food and craft objects, or both (see Map 1 and Map 3). For complex historical and contemporary reasons, many communities in Oaxaca’s Valles Centrales are known for producing a single kind of product and consequently some of the villages within this region are now marketed by the tourism industry as

producing a single type of craft.¹ Teotitlán del Valle and Santa Ana del Valle are known for their woollen textiles; Santa María Atzompa for its green and polychrome pottery; San Bartolo Coyotepec for its burnished black pottery; and San Antonio Arrazola, La Unión Tejalapam and San Martín Tilcajete are known for woodcarvings.

San Martín was ideal for my project in many respects. On a practical level, it has received relatively less anthropological attention than the weaving communities on the other side of the valley. Unlike some of the pottery villages, which lie closer to Oaxaca City, San Martín was of a manageable size for the kind of village ethnography that I planned to conduct, since I also wanted to learn about and experience aspects of village life that were not explicitly tied to craft production. Theoretically, the woodcarvings also posed interesting questions concerning the ideological framings of material culture, especially regarding the category of “craft.” Unlike many other craft objects in Oaxaca that are the products of long historical trajectories, Oaxacan woodcarvings were recently invented. In the 1960s, in the town of Arrazola, a farmer called Manuel Jimenez† began carving small pieces for sale; his success inspired his neighbours to try their hands at woodcarving production, much to his dismay (Chibnik 2003: 23-26). The subsequent development of the woodcarving market for tourists and collectors was such that their production was always commercial and intended for consumption outside of the communities where they are produced. Despite their recent invention, by the time of my field work Oaxacan woodcarvings were considered an authentic and quintessentially Mexican product by the producers, consumers and other actors involved in their marketing. As this short historical development of woodcarvings appears to contradict popular notions of Oaxacan craftwork as the material expression of long standing cultural forms, it raises questions regarding the invention of traditions and the authentication of material culture. The woodcarvings also pose a challenge to

¹ See Chapter One for a more detailed explanation.

traditionally understood art/craft distinctions, as they are objects made in workshops, often by more than one person, and yet also often carry signatures and are discussed in terms of personal styles. These apparent contradictions led me to wonder in what ways the woodcarvings were “art-like” and “craft-like” and how these characteristics affected artisans’ experiences of woodcarving production and marketing. However, an equally significant factor that attracted me to San Martín on that day in March was that I thought the woodcarvings were beautiful.

The tour guide I was accompanying brought his clients to the workshop of Miguel and Catalina García, who produce fine, high-end carvings for the museum, collector and tourist-art markets. Like the tourists in my group, I was astounded by the quality, detail, colour and form of the carvings that the workshop produced. We were shown the technical skill needed to transform the knotty *copal* wood into the organic shapes of animals and people, and the painstaking details that were brushed onto the smooth surfaces in colour combinations that evoked (as was pointed out to us) the earth, the sky and the water. On my way back to the city, I fantasised that if I conducted research in the village, I might even own one of these carvings myself. Looking back on my notes from that day, it seems now that Alfred Gell (1996) was right about artworks being traps, and I had fallen in.

The woodcarvings that are today produced in San Martín are just one of the many crafts made in Oaxaca, a state that has attracted as much attention from anthropologists as it has from tourists. Oaxaca has become in many ways a magnet for anthropological research, addressing themes as diverse as indigeneity and communal sociality; identity politics; urbanisation and city life; gender, sexuality, and disability;

and international migration.² From the writings of other anthropologists on Oaxacan craftwork, I was prepared to encounter a variety of modes of production, including family operations, complex putting-out systems, and small factory-like workshops.³ I had been to Oaxaca on an undergraduate field school in 2001, and so I was aware of the cultural politics surrounding tourism, and the romanticising association of the pre-Hispanic past and contemporary cultural practices. In San Martín I found evidence of many of the processes previously described by Oaxacan scholars and I spent much time tracing these lines of enquiry. Yet throughout my fieldwork, I was constantly reminded of my original reaction to the woodcarvings, which can only be described as “aesthetic.” As the beauty and form of the carvings surfaced in conversations with tourists, collectors and the artisans themselves, I struggled to understand where this data could fit into an analysis of the production and marketing of a craft.

The anthropology of craftwork, which for the most part has analytically addressed concerns of political economy and “the politics of culture,” has provided important insights into the workings of the global market for handmade goods.⁴ Its ethnography has provoked rich discussions on the central roles that tourism institutions, museums and nation states play in directing discourses of heritage and authenticity which drive these markets and, consequently, the producers who respond to them (e.g. Tice 1995; Terrio 1999; Aragon 1999; Colloredo Mansfeld 2002; Weil 2004; Adams 2006). Despite these important insights on the politics of production and marketing, for the most part this branch of anthropology has paid less attention to the material qualities

² E.g. Stephen 2002; Cohen 1999, 2004; Campbell 1994; Murphy and Stepick 1991; Higgens and Coen 2000; see Chapter One for a discussion of anthropological research in Oaxaca.

³ E.g. Stephen 2005: 172-185, 201-204; Chibnik 2003: 112-123; Waterbury 1989; See Chapter One for a full review of this literature.

⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, I distinguish between the “anthropology of craft” and recent studies on practices of “craftsmanship,” skill and learning, by authors such as Ingold, O’Connor and Marchand, whose work is addressed in Chapter 2. This body of work has to date had little impact in the study of *artesanías* in Mexico, and one of my goals is to bring it into the discussion of the Mexican context.

of craft objects themselves. Recent works by author such as Graburn (2005), O'Connor (2005) and Wood (2008) are important exceptions in this regard (see note 4, above).

My initial identification of the woodcarvings as “crafts” was directly influenced by the literature on the products of rural populations in Mexico, which generally approaches them in this way. This is understandable, as handmade objects in Mexico are generally classed under the local rubric of “*artesanías*,” which translates to the English term “craft.” As I discuss below, while this translation is linguistically correct, the two terms contain certain historical and conceptual differences, at least in the way that “artesanía” is currently conceived in Mexico. With time, I realised that while the woodcarvings were “crafts” in many respects, and were most definitely *artesanías*, they also had much in common with other kinds of objects that have been described as “art,” “ethnic art,” and “tourist art,” addressed by literatures that have attempted to deal with issues of aesthetics and materiality, debates with which I have found it necessary to engage in order to understand woodcarving in Oaxaca.⁵ As I aim in this thesis to understand the production and politics of Oaxacan woodcarvings, I consider the ways they are authenticated by producers and the state, competition between artisans, and the roles of brokers and “experts” in the market place. However, where my analysis differs from many studies of Mexican craftwork is the central place I give to aesthetic practice and authorship in these processes. I focus on the “art-like” qualities of craftwork, and suggest ways in which such qualities determine the form and value of products, and the status they confer to their producers.

⁵ It is not a coincidence, I suspect, that studies which categorise hand-made objects as “crafts” tend to be focused in Latin America, Southeast Asia and India, where peasant agriculture has been historically (and analytically) predominant. In contrast, studies of “ethnic arts” and “tourist arts” are often located in the post-settler colonies of Anglo North America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

In the pages that follow, I assemble the theoretical frame through which I approach my ethnography, starting with an interrogation of the term “aesthetics” and how we might use it productively within anthropology. I then move on to my own analytical approach to the aesthetics of woodcarvings by arguing that their analysis must proceed from their consideration as a genre: while individual artisan households produce their own specific styles I suggest that the development of the aesthetics of Oaxacan woodcarvings must also be understood *at the level of the category*. Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of fields of cultural production, I argue that the category “Oaxacan woodcarvings,” constitutes an “aesthetic field” that is currently characterised by three intersecting aesthetic perspectives: a Mexican and Oaxacan aesthetic of *artesanías*; an international touristic aesthetic of ethnic art; and artisans’ own aesthetic sensibilities and activities. The specific conditions of this field (which will vary for different products and in different locations) set the aesthetic limits which artisans work within and against when developing their personal styles.

I further suggest that Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “aura” of works of art is particularly useful in making sense of how this “field” works because it allows for multiple readings of objects (and therefore multiple explanations of the woodcarvings’ desirability) to be accounted for simultaneously within an explanation of the object and its relations with its producers and viewers. Through exploring these aesthetic processes, other aspects of the daily lives of artisans and their products, such as configurations of authorship and belonging, can be brought into, rather than attached onto, the analysis of craft production. Throughout the thesis, I explore these social and material/aesthetic aspects of woodcarvings in tandem with the political economy and the politics of culture that clearly shape the everyday practices of artisans in Oaxaca. In so doing, I bring into focus the ways that the aesthetic sensibilities of San Martín’s

artisans and the objects that they produce interact dynamically with the political economies of craft production and the politics of culture and aesthetics in Mexico and Oaxaca.

Aesthetic concerns have not been easily (or often very fully) incorporated by anthropologists analytically, and yet the concept is brought to bear on topics as wide-ranging as nationalism, religion, and corporate and public institutions (e.g. Lindquist 2002; Meyer 2009; Mookherjee 2011; Rowlands 2011). As Van Damme has argued, “the attempts to further specify [aesthetic] feelings or experiences are usually limited to merely adding the adjective 'aesthetic'" (1996: 15). While this approach has led to insights about the qualitative and experiential aspects of large scale social processes such as nationalism, it seems to me that the discipline must engage with the concept in greater critical depth, especially in the study of the production of art objects. I argue that the concept of “aesthetics” can be sharpened into a useful tool for investigating the nature and experience of production processes. This is particularly so in contexts such as those described in this thesis, where objects are consumed primarily for the way they look. Thus, a broader contribution of my work is to develop a theoretical approach to aesthetics and materiality that can be useful for the study of hand-crafted items that are neither clearly unique pieces of “art,” nor purely utilitarian objects.

Anthropology and the problem of aesthetics

Anthropologists working on art have struggled to decide how, and even if, to utilise the concept of aesthetics, and much of the history of the anthropology of art can be seen as various attempts to come to terms with this issue (Svašek 2007: 16-87). The rejection of aesthetic universalism, which was rooted in European epistemological philosophy and nineteenth century social evolutionism, led anthropologists from the

1960s to the 1980s to undertake projects of “ethnoaesthetics” (e.g. Dark 1966; Carpenter 1973). Often influenced by Levi-Strauss’ structuralism, these projects sought to describe indigenous systems of classification and knowledge, connecting them to other cultural processes and institutions via symbolic and semiotic analyses (Svašek 2007: 16-20; 32-37).⁶ While this approach increased disciplinary understandings of material culture cross-culturally, by the 1990s many anthropologists began to reject the blanket use of the term “aesthetics,” arguing that the concept itself was so entangled with Western European (Kantian and/or Platonic) notions of transcendental beauty and disinterested judgement to really be of any analytical use at all (cf. Morphy, *et al.* 1996).⁷ This uncertainty resulted in the hesitation by many anthropologists to analytically engage with art and aesthetics, marginalising their study within the discipline (Townsend-Gault 1998: 425).

Despite these difficulties, concerns for the aesthetic have not disappeared, and it seems they are unlikely to do so. James Weiner, for example, has observed that the globalisation of media and communication technologies has resulted in increased attention towards the aesthetic aspects of culture and self-presentation (1993: 251-252). The rise of social media like Facebook capitalises on these processes, by providing individuals with platforms for the aesthetic management and display of their social selves (Miller 2011: 65-77). Indeed, as will be addressed in Chapters Four and Five, the specificities of the aesthetic construction and management of individual and collective

⁶ Boasian culturalist approaches also assumed universal aesthetic principles, but detached the significance of art from scales of social evolution, focusing instead on culturally relative meanings attached to the content of art. Where structural-functional approaches addressed art, it was usually only considered as a technology of social cohesion or control (Svašek 2007: 22-29).

⁷ For both Plato and Immanuel Kant, the recognition of “beauty” figured prominently in their aesthetic philosophies, which continues to be reflected in everyday and academic usages of “aesthetics.” Plato’s philosophy was founded on the relationship between beauty and morality, where beauty is equated with goodness, and the contemplation of beauty can lead the mind towards true knowledge; art is an attempt to imitate or represent this beauty (Pappas 2008). Kant argued for a universal concept of “beauty” that could be determined through disinterested judgements which claim universality because the form of the truly beautiful object is intrinsically pleasing for all viewers (Baugh 2004: 499; Wenzel 2005:19-31).

identities are central to everyday practices of Tileños⁸ in the current period of cultural tourism and migration.

Recent theoretical movements in the anthropology of material culture have attempted to resolve the discipline's discomfort with aesthetics by expanding their concern beyond ethnoaesthetics to encompass the cross-cultural circulation of material culture. The interest in how objects become "art" first became a central concern for anthropologists writing in the late 1980s. James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) and Sally Price's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989) were ground-breaking in turning attention to activities of collection, curation and the power to define "culture" that was central to the practices of museums and galleries. Their insights coincided with the publication of Arjun Appadurai's edited volume, *The Social Life of Things* (1986), which was one of the first texts that put material objects firmly at the centre of social analysis. In his introduction, Appadurai pointed to the fact that objects are not stable entities, but rather are transformed by their categorisation (as commodities, gifts, and so forth) and their circulation through what he called "regimes of value," or "the cultural framework[s] that define the commodity candidacy of things" (Appadurai 1986: 14). Pushed forward by the insights of Clifford, Price and Appadurai, important research began into the intersections of Western notions of art with non-Western material production and use, most notably in the research of Fred Myers on Aboriginal Australian painters (2001; 2002), and Nicholas Thomas on colonial collecting practices in the Pacific (1991).

Following Appadurai's lead, both Myers and Thomas conceptualised the transition that objects make when recontextualised into Western art markets as

⁸ People from San Martín Tilcajete; following standard Spanish conventions, the male and gender-neutral proper noun is "Tileño," while the female proper noun is "Tileña."

transitions in “regimes of value.” They explored the varying and complex modes by which value in art objects is created and sustained through the actions of individuals and institutions, which they conceptualised as “art worlds” (Myers 2001: 6). The “art worlds” term was developed by art sociologist Howard Becker to refer to the collections of people whose activities are necessary for the production of the works that they themselves define as art (1982: 34). Two important features distinguished this approach from previous explanations of artistic institutions and actors: firstly, unlike the aesthetician Arthur Danto who saw the world of art as singular and distinguishable from the larger society, Becker conceptualised art *worlds* as pluralistic and overlapping with other parts of society, since they are not only made up of actors in structured institutions, but are “entire cooperating network[s] that radiate out from the work in question” (ibid: 35). Secondly, and crucially for my thesis, Becker also challenged the commonly held (Western) idea that works of art are the products of individual gifted artists, but rather “joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world’s characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence” (Becker 1982: 35; cf. Soussloff 1997 on the naturalisation of the concept of the genius-artist in the West). This approach has much in common with Wood’s use of the “community of practice” concept which will be taken in relation to Oaxacan woodcarvings in more detail in Chapter Three. Becker and Wood’s complementary ideas provide some of the key tools with which my analysis bridges the distinctions between art and craft, as both kinds of objects are produced by similar “worlds” of actors.

For Myers and Thomas, art objects and artifacts are intrinsically changed as they are moved by processes of collecting and curation across the boundaries of different art (or non-art) worlds because these worlds also constitute different regimes of value. Following this observation, they argue that value in objects is actually produced through

the organisation of difference, which can translate the “qualitative values” held in different worlds into the measurable “quantitative value” of relative prices in monetary transactions as objects move between them (Myers 2001: 6). The regimes of value approach has proven extremely fruitful in the analyses of the circulation of objects across cultural and social boundaries, and Myers has further shown how this circulation of objects in turn reconstitutes the ideas about art, value and aesthetics held by producers of material culture themselves (Myers 2002: 80-119; 184-208). While following “things” has proven extremely fruitful in terms of anthropological understandings of the social lives of art objects, it is this second insight that I direct my analysis towards: how the production and circulation of aesthetic objects outside of their place of production inherently conditions the place of production itself. Or to put it another way, how does the beauty and subjective worth of things for consumers affect the aesthetics of producers?

In order to begin to answer this question, the term “aesthetics” needs to be clarified. Maruska Svašek has argued that rather than thinking about aesthetics as a culture’s static set of ideas about beauty and value, we should rather consider the social processes that persuade us to frame and value certain objects and experiences in terms of their *sensory qualities*, suggesting the use of the term “aestheticisation” rather than aesthetics as the anthropological principle (Svašek 2007: 9-11; cf. Morphy and Perkins 2006).⁹ While aestheticisation can and does take place outside of artistic contexts (*ibid*: 9), the production of new, yet “authentic” material culture, such as the Oaxacan woodcarvings, allows us to see quite clearly the processes of circumscription that cause objects to be considered “aesthetic,” valued for the way they *look* rather than anything

⁹ This theoretical move also follows recent approaches within art and literary criticism, which remind us that the root of “aesthetics” in European thought was originally not about art *per se*, but about experience via the five senses; the opposite of “aesthetic” is literally “anaesthetic”, that is, without sensory experience (Buck-Morss 1992).

they can be used for. While Svašek's approach draws attention to the political processes of aestheticisation, in this thesis I unpack these processes in order to show that they collectively constitute a "practice of aesthetics," where the actions of people result in the ways Oaxacan woodcarvings look. In the next section, I argue that in the case of the Oaxacan woodcarvings, aesthetics and aesthetic practice must be understood at the level of the *genre*, as the woodcarvings are not produced as unique pieces of "art" by individual artists, but are rather created through ongoing artisanal production in workshops in San Martín, where consumers and producers expect a certain consistency in the ways woodcarvings look, both amongst artisans and over time. I suggest that this genre can be understood as an "aesthetic field," a concept I examine ethnographically in Chapter Three. In the next section, I explain what I mean by an "aesthetic field," which draws on the theories of practice developed by Pierre Bourdieu.

Oaxacan woodcarvings as genre: theorising an "aesthetic field"

Within the processes of producing woodcarvings, artisans in San Martín make a great variety of aesthetic decisions. These decisions may be influenced by culturally informed or even idiosyncratic ideas about what woodcarvings should look like. Chibnik reports, for example, that María Jimenez† connects her painting style to her previous work as an embroiderer (2006: 504-505), while other carvers, such as Isidoro Cruz† consider themselves "true artists" who are motivated by creative experimentation rather than market demands (ibid: 501-502). Despite these claims to individuality, there is an indisputable aesthetic consistency amongst the woodcarvings that cannot be accounted for via individuals' explanations of personal styles and decision making. I argue that the consistency of the aesthetics of woodcarvings is generated by the conceptual categories that are already at play within the woodcarvings' art world, namely the aesthetics of artesanías, and the aesthetics of ethnic art, which I address in

more detail below. Here, however, I suggest how we can theorise *how* the expectations of the woodcarvings' art world affect their production by considering the inter-subjective nature of aesthetic practice.

Much of the Oaxacan ethnography on the production of craftwork, which I review in detail in Chapter One, has focused on questions of economy, political economy and the politics of culture. These studies have provided important understandings of the organisation of production and markets and the nature of power within these structures. I extend these insights to my exploration of aesthetics, as demand for woodcarvings is generated by the desires of very specific groups of people whose understandings of Oaxacan woodcarvings are informed by processes located outside of San Martín. *How* these understandings come to be inscribed onto the objects of woodcarvings, and what formations of authenticity and desire motivate them, are processes that must be understood at the level of “Oaxacan woodcarvings” as a category or genre, as it is to the category, rather than the products of individual artisans, that these processes are addressed.¹⁰

Johannes Fabian's notion of “genre” in popular culture is useful for making sense of the ways that the conceptual category “Oaxacan woodcarvings” works to define the kinds of objects Tileños produce. In his exploration of different genres of Zairian popular painting, Fabian insists on the recognition of the power of certain people to classify objects as one kind or another. He argues that these classifications are important because they direct future cultural production, and come to be the concepts through which both consumers *and* producers imagine and understand the paintings, therefore in turn producing more objects that satisfy the conditions of the categories.

¹⁰ For example, popular and touristic literature about Oaxacan woodcarvings *never* presents the work of one artisan as an individual; artisans are always presented “as an example” of this specific kind of work.

Thus, pre-existing genres of art organise difference in a way that is both productive and conservative (Fabian 1998: 48-51). While genres may produce similarities, they also are able to contain a certain amount of aesthetic variation. Given this, I argue genres themselves can be understood as aesthetic “fields” rather than homogenising categories. My notion of the “aesthetic field” borrows directly from Bourdieu’s work on cultural production, but with certain fundamental differences.

In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Bourdieu maps out a vision of art and literary communities that stands against both Kantian notions of aesthetic universality and Structuralist readings of the meanings of art (Johnson 1993: 2). Like Becker’s “art world” theory, Bourdieu argues that art and literary objects are not the products of independent and charismatic artists, as the Western art tradition holds, but rather the material results of whole networks of interacting actors. However, unlike Becker’s analysis which conceived the art world as a population linked by networks of interaction, Bourdieu addresses his theory to the *nature* of these relations (which are not necessarily interactive) by introducing his concept of the *habitus*, as developed in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). The *habitus* might be understood as a “feel for the game” that predisposes individuals to act and react to situations in a manner that is neither consciously calculated nor pre-determined by social structure. Within an artistic field, the *habitus* of a given actor involved, according to Bourdieu, is conditioned by that actor’s position within the field, which is formed by all of the other positions that exist at that given moment:

“[each position] is subjectively defined … relative to other positions; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field; and that the structure of the field, i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field… It follows from this, for example, that a position-taking changes, even when the position remains identical, whenever there is change in the universe of options that are simultaneously offered for producers and consumers to choose from” (Bourdieu 1993: 30-31).

In Bourdieu’s formulation, the field is a relational space in which the positions and actions of actors are continually shifting the nature of that space over time. Bourdieu does not limit the field approach to the art or literary fields *per se*, but suggests it can be used to describe different realms of social interaction. These different fields are delineated by their uses of different kinds of “specific capital,” that is, the sources of value that render actors more or less powerful or successful within the field. For example, in economically-oriented fields, the capital is economic in nature, such as money and property; in social fields, “connections” and charisma are the working capital, and kinds of capital between fields may be more or less easily convertible (Bourdieu 1986: 241). Bourdieu sees two forms of capital that are particularly relevant in the field of cultural production: symbolic capital (accumulated prestige, knowledge or honour) and recognition (by other actors within the field) which he glosses together as “legitimacy” (Bourdieu 1993: 40-41). Each artistic field however, has its own definitions and rules for this capital; having “legitimacy” in the world of Classical Realist painting, for example, does not necessarily confer “legitimacy” in the Graphic Novel community.

While Bourdieu’s insights into the relational and subjective-yet-structured nature of art production have been helpful for fleshing out and historicising the details of how art worlds work, Georgina Born has critiqued the inability of his approach to

“address the specificity of the art object” (2010: 177). She points out that Bourdieu’s approach cannot address the substantive meaning of works of art, nor why aesthetic formations develop in certain directions over time, as the historical questions Bourdieu asks relate more to the strategies of “protagonists” in competitions for legitimacy, rather than the circulating and changing ideas and expectations of the aesthetics themselves through time (ibid: 178-179).

Born’s critique is a serious one, as Bourdieu’s formulation of “fields of production” appears to explain the relationships involved in many different kinds of socially-produced objects or ideas, not just those of art worlds. For example, one can readily see how Bourdieu’s formulation of “legitimacy” as the accumulation of knowledge, prestige and recognition, also may be the “specific capital” within the fields that produce scientific and other kinds of academic knowledge, and the relations between actors within academic communities could also be well-described by the above quote about the workings of “fields” (p. 34; cf. Marks 1997: 7-8). However, the *objects* that artistic or literary fields produce are significantly different than those produced by other social fields, and this must be taken into account. To continue the comparison, art objects differ from scientific or other academic objects in many significant ways. One of the most important ways is the fact that art objects are usually primarily valued for their “aesthetics” or “artistic merit” (i.e. the way they look, sound or feel) in addition to their content, a requirement not necessarily central to academic knowledge production.

A second indicative difference is that art objects are desired and desirable for very different reasons than academic products. Although both academic and artistic communities may indeed be structured by similar competitions for legitimacy within relational fields, this legitimacy depends on extremely different constructions of value

around the objects they produce. In the case of art or art-like objects, I argue their value is inherently contingent upon the object's ability to demand the attention of viewers. Unlike many other commodities, works of art, whether by famous artists like Picasso or by relatively or completely unknown artists, are not valued solely for their exchange value or for the explicit messages or information they may communicate. Although these are, of course, also components of their value, works of art seem to have a power to fascinate that extends beyond their explicit "meaning." This power to fascinate has been variously defined as an object's "presence" (van Eck 2010), "agency" (Gell 1998) and "aura" (W. Benjamin 2008a), a quality that is often experienced by viewers as its "authority" or "genuineness," a point I return to below.

Although Bourdieu's "field" analysis of cultural production is unable to account for the intrinsic characteristics of art objects, I believe that his insights may be renovated to produce an anthropological theory of art that can account for both aesthetics forms and for the dramatic authority and power that works of art appear to contain. In regards to aesthetics, I argue that if we imagine the field itself is an *aesthetic* topography, where the positions represent aesthetic positions, rather than politically competitive ones, we can re-centre analysis onto the art objects themselves, rather than onto competitions amongst "protagonists". Refiguring the field in this way allows for divergent aesthetic perspectives to co-exist in the same analysis, and importantly allows me to analyse the aesthetic changes that have occurred in Oaxacan woodcarvings in San Martín. In this way, I can also retain Bourdieu's model of "specific capital" or legitimacy, which in itself is important for understanding the nature of competition within art worlds. To my knowledge, there has been no suggestion to date that Bourdieu's field could be reconceptualised in this way; as I discuss in Chapter Three, this framework emerged ethnographically through my observations that the aesthetics of

Oaxacan woodcarvings are both reproduced and altered by the practices of artisans and others.

While reconceptualising the “field” as an aesthetic topography can address the concerns raised by Born about the aesthetic trajectories of art, Bourdieu’s approach needs to be further revised in order to account for the captivating power of art objects. This is crucial for anthropologists of art and craft, not only for understanding the nature of art within a given art world, but also because it is frequently this power of objects, rather than the power of actors, that is the driver of both art worlds and art markets through its relationship to value. I suggest in the next section that Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “aura” of art objects offers a promising avenue through which the relationship between this power and the aesthetic fields of art worlds may be conceptualised. While Benjamin’s formulation of the aura of artworks appears to be inherently antithetical to Bourdieu’s somewhat reductivist sociological concerns about power and prestige within art worlds, I argue that by placing artworks and their auras at the heart of an analysis of the *aesthetic* fields of production, a more robust analysis of art production and art worlds can emerge.

I begin the next section by exploring Benjamin’s aura by comparison to the work on the agency of artworks by Alfred Gell. I suggest that the “aura” is more apt for my project, as it more easily accounts for the multiple “readings” of artworks by different viewers. This condition is necessary in my analysis, not only because it facilitates an exploration of woodcarving production through the “field” analytic, but – more importantly – because it reflects my ethnographic observations about the multiplicity of ways that people interact with woodcarvings and with one another in San Martín. Despite this, many of Gell’s insights are helpful to understanding the

relationship between art objects and viewers, and have informed this thesis in a number of important ways, especially in terms of the nature of authorship, and the social efficacy of art works. As such, I bring the two authors into productive conversation with one another in my work, drawing on Gell's insights in order to make Benjamin's "aura" useful for anthropological study.

The aura of artworks as aesthetic capital

The anthropological interest in the movement of art objects, which I described above as addressing the politics and practices of art worlds and their related regimes of value, also refocused anthropological attention onto the physical aspects of material culture. As material nature or "materiality" often determines where and how objects cross borders between regimes of value, theorising materiality has recently become an important development in this research. This work on materiality has proven analytically fruitful; it began with a questioning of social science's tendency to only consider material objects as reifications or place-markers of social relations, a situation Daniel Miller has called the "tyranny of the subject" (2005: 3). Instead, materiality-centred approaches challenge the assumed hierarchical subject-object relationship, and drawing on insights by Latour about modernity and purification, argue that material forms can and do have consequences for people that are autonomous from human agency (ibid: 11). This position led to a new ethnographic project, focused on "material worlds," rather than just the production and consumption of material goods (cf. Miller 1998).

Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998) has been an extremely important text in linking approaches to materiality with the anthropology of art. While his work is clearly a refutation of Kantian or universal approaches to aesthetics (Miller 2005: 13), his theory

of object agency is precisely about the social effects caused by people engaging with objects in terms of their sensory visual qualities, that is, the way they look. Unlike Bourdieu and Becker, Gell's project begins from his position that an *anthropological* theory of art does *not* attend itself solely to the study of actors or institutions in a given "art world" (1998: 7-9). He argues that these "sociological" approaches to art not only neglect the qualities of the art objects themselves (as Born's critique of Bourdieu suggests), but also that they necessarily neglect "art-like" objects that are not produced within easily recognised Western art worlds (ibid: 13-14). Instead, he argues that anthropological theories of art must attempt to "account for the production and circulation of art objects as a function of [their] relational context" (ibid: 11); a position in accordance with my own project of investigating aesthetic fields.

Gell's well-known example of Trobriand Kula canoe prow-boards illustrates his explanation of the nature of art-like objects. He says that these prow-boards are "art-like" because they index the "abduction of agency" by which he means an inferred intentionality on the part of the viewer. To put it another way: the social effects of a work of art are due to an inference by the viewer of the intentionality and agency of the creator of the object, whether that creator is understood as a single artist/author, a commissioner of a work, a collective authorial body, or divine or other non-human origins (ibid: 14-16; 23-24).

In Gell's analysis, the richly intricate carving and painting on the prows of the canoes used during the Kula exchange act socially by instantiating the agency of their carvers, demoralising opposing parties while at the same time enhancing the agency of the trading party. They do this by captivating viewers through their inability to mentally understand the processes by which they are made, which is brought about by the

magical power and efficacy of the artist who created them. In this sense, prow-boards and other art objects work like “traps” as they are explicitly designed to “ensnare” the viewer (Gell 1992). The presence of the prow-boards carries over this magical ability to entrap into the wider social transactions of the Kula exchange (Gell 1998: 69-72). Thus Gell explains the power of art (that Kant attempted to explain by reference to transcendental beauty) using a theory that attributes the effects of art objects to the agency of their creators, arguing that this agency is subsequently distributed by the objects as they circulate (Gell 1998: 24). From Gell’s perspective, then, the Kula exchange can be understood as an example of the mobilisation of aesthetics to affect desired social outcomes, the analysis of which he says must be made central to the anthropology of art (ibid: 4).

Gell’s formulation of agency has made his text both inspiring and problematic for anthropologists working on art. The notion of distributed agency resonates well with the idea that art objects are evidence of the power of an artist to shape her or his world through their work, a perspective expressed by many contemporary producers of art objects themselves (Finney 1993; Driscoll-Engelstad 1996; Graburn 2004). However, Gell’s formulation of agency, which he defines as the power to cause events to happen by “acts of mind or will or intention” (1998: 16), is somewhat analytically limited. While Gell does acknowledge that the events that transpire might not necessarily be “the specific events which were ‘intended’ by the agent,” (ibid), this caveat is not enough to account for the fact that the artist’s desired result of their work often differs from its actual reception. This difference can be accounted for by the fact that agency does not only occur as objects are produced and sent out into the world, but also materializes in a variety of forms as objects are “read” by viewers. These readings, which are often conditioned by cultural conventions and other social factors, must not

be taken as peripheral to anthropological understandings of art objects, but rather as central elements that must be analytically addressed (Layton 2003: 447).

Focusing attention on the “reading” of art objects necessarily invokes issues of differential power in the ability to describe, classify and consume, an issue that asserted itself in a variety of ways throughout my fieldwork. However, these readings may not always be stable or consistent between different viewers; the multiple ways that objects may be read are necessarily conditioned by the contexts in which they are encountered; by the cultural or discursive frames in which they are understood; and by the motivating desires behind the attention given to the object by the viewer/consumer (Price 1989; S. Errington 1998). This multiplicity must be taken into consideration analytically in order to understand the relationships between artisans and consumers in San Martín, but also in order to understand how the objects themselves are conditioned by these multiple readings. I propose that these multiple readings can be connected to the materiality and aesthetics – rather than just discursive practice – of the woodcarvings through Walter Benjamin’s conceptualisation of the “aura” of works of art.

Walter Benjamin wrote numerous essays on European literature, art and the urban environment in the early part of the twentieth century and his work has been at the centre of many debates in the field of art and literary history and criticism as well as anthropology. In fact, Gell’s notion of the agency of art objects can be connected, via Michael Taussig, to Benjamin whose work on the “optical unconscious” sought to explain how we visually create coherent images from pieces of information (Hoskins 2006: 77). Despite the fact that Benjamin’s ideas were specifically formulated for Western art contexts and values, I have found that his formulation of the “auras” of

artworks useful for unpacking a number of questions that I address throughout my thesis.

Benjamin's most famous essay was originally published in 1936, and is translated to English as either *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1970; 2008a) or *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (2008b).¹¹ In it, he argues that the mechanical reproduction of works of art leads to a fundamental change in our perceptions of what art is; he describes this change as a decline of artworks' "aura," a term which he used, often ambiguously, throughout his writings. The issue of the reproduction of artworks is taken in detail in Chapter Six, where I address the discovery of replica Oaxacan woodcarvings that were industrially produced in China, but at this point, I focus on the "aura" itself, as it is a concept I have found useful for illuminating the subtle differences in the ways different actors relate to Oaxacan woodcarvings.

Unlike Gell, who frames the power of artworks in terms of authorial agency, Benjamin locates their power within the objects themselves through his concept of "aura," which he variably describes as a "genuineness" (W. Benjamin 2008a: 5); "singularity" (p. 10); or "the here and now of the work of art" (p. 7). For Benjamin, what gives works of art their authority is that they are singular and therefore locatable in specific places through time, and therefore also embedded in tradition (p. 10).¹² But the concept "singularity" does not fully contain Benjamin's vision, for it is also the aura that give works of art their inexplicable allure or desirability; what Gell calls their

¹¹ The difference in the titles reflects the on-going debate amongst critical theorists about Benjamin's vision of the societal changes that were afoot with the onset of "modernity" in Europe and North America. Benjamin believed that the advent of new technologies such as film and photography not only changed the political relationship between the bourgeoisie and the masses to art and its production (by democratising art's accessibility), but also fundamentally changed the way that artworks are aesthetically experienced under the conditions of modernity (Jennings *et al* 2008: 1).

¹² I use the lesser known translation by J.A. Underwood, as other translations continue to refer to "aura" as "authenticity," which confuses the matter for my purposes.

“captivation” or their “trap-like” effect, which prevents the viewer from completely comprehending the object, and therefore from completely resolving (or escaping from) it (Gell 1996; 1998: 69; 80-82).

The concept of the aura has been debated and utilised in a variety of ways.

Drawing on Barthes, Andrew Benjamin links the aura to art’s “significance,” by which he means its irreducibility to a single or stable explanation (either of literal or symbolic content), which in turn promotes its continued reinterpretation, and thus its fascination and allure for viewers (A. Benjamin 1986: 30-32). Miriam Bratu Hansen has addressed Benjamin’s use of aura in his broader collective works, and has argued that the term also relates to intersubjectivity, that is, viewers experience works of art as an engagement between subjects, rather than as a subject-object relationship. Reminiscent of Gell’s “abduction,” although not focused on the authors of artworks *per se*, this intersubjectivity establishes what Benjamin called “the unique manifestation of a remoteness, however close it may be” (2008a: 9), or, as Hansen explains, an essential unapproachability and unavailability of the work (2008: 343-344).¹³

Crucially for my thesis, Hansen explains that this elusive aura, dependent on the relationship between object and viewer, is unstable and relational in character, and thus contingent on “acts of reading and interpretation” (ibid: 359). It is this character of the aura that gives me an analytical purchase on my ethnography from San Martín that Gell’s object agency cannot wholly account for; Gell’s “abduction of agency” indicates that the viewer is necessarily focused to some degree on the *creator* of the artwork (however that is understood). However, in many cases the viewers of Oaxacan

¹³ This remoteness is not inconsistent with A. Benjamin’s terms, as remoteness and instability of meaning can both be understood as the elusiveness of works of art. However, this distance is also temporal, which gives the work of art its authority, as it is part of, and thus also constitutive of, a canon of tradition (Jennings 2008: 14).

woodcarvings are not (completely) concerned with the agency of the creator, but rather how the object can stand in for or contain the essence of other entities or concepts, for example, the place of Oaxaca, the nation of Mexico, or the viewer's own identity as a cosmopolitan and well-travelled person. Further, as will be explored throughout this thesis, the ways that woodcarvings are read and interpreted by a variety of actors not only affects their desirability for those actors, but also affects the ways the woodcarvings are produced and look. This suggests that rather than objects impressing the agency of their creators upon consumers, a dyadic relationship exists between maker and viewer, one that is mediated by aesthetics.

Given that Benjamin's essay explicitly addressed the challenges that traditional and *singular* works of art face under conditions of modernity, the question of whether the "aura" is an appropriate tool for the study of craft objects might be raised. Christopher Steiner and Christopher Pinney have drawn on Benjamin's notion of the aura in their analyses of African tourist art, and Indian printed religious imagery, respectively. Their work shows that outside of Western contexts, auras of artworks may not always be tied to their singularity, and both suggest that the aura of works of art can be observed in other cultures, if one takes into account the local relations that produce auras in the first place. Steiner argues that in certain art contexts, especially those oriented towards cultural tourism in post-colonial settings, repetition and *not* singularity is what gives the work of art its aura. He suggests that this is because "authenticity is measured... through redundancy rather than originality. Anything that deviates too far from the accepted canons of a particular ethnic style is judged [by the consuming tourist public] as inauthentic" (Steiner 1999: 101). According to this perspective, this repetition of style and form is a direct result of the tourism discourses that sell places, and the products and people that can be found there, through registers of tradition, authenticity,

and nostalgia that place the value of the tourism destination on its status of being both unique and unchanging.

While Steiner's analysis certainly highlights the ways that tourism discourses may privilege aesthetic conservatism and repetition, Pinney's ethnography pushes further, showing that repetition can produce aura in its own right. He argues that his Indian informants connect with mass produced images of gods through sensory and embodied engagement, which allows them to build up the auras of the mass produced images over time, grounding the relationship between the object and the aura in their everyday practices as Hindu believers (Pinney 2002). For his informants, the authenticity of their deity images is completely divorced from ideas that connect objects to their production and authorship, and even to their form. He reports that people were blankly indifferent to information about the sources of the images and the nature of their execution, suggesting instead that their power came from their "visuality or the mutual relationship between the image and the devotee (Pinney 2004: 189-191). Pinney's work therefore pushes the concept of the aura in new directions, suggesting that objects become "sensorily emboldened" *through their relationships to their viewers.*¹⁴ Benjamin's idea that the aura of an artwork is necessarily dependent on its singularity surely reflects European cultural ideas of his time concerning artistic genius, creativity and authorship. Yet, what Pinney and Steiner have shown, is that by releasing Benjamin's concept of the aura from its dependence on singularity it can shed new light on the great variety of ways that works of art are rendered authentic and desirable.

¹⁴ Although he does not take his analysis in this direction, for me Pinney's ethnography also indicates that Gell's configuration of the power of art objects as abducted agency can be brought into productive conversation with Benjamin's aura. While Pinney's informants may not be interested in the human authorship of the artwork, their devotional and relational practices with the images indicate readings of agency and aura at the same time; they attribute the agency of the artwork to the god whose image it represents, but it is the image itself that has aura, built up over time through their devotional practices. Indeed, as I will show in different ways throughout my thesis, the coexistence of aura and agency within Oaxacan woodcarvings constitutes a large part of the desires that drive their production.

These processes work through objects' emplacements, that is, the ways they are grounded within the social relations of the places in which they occur.

In this thesis I follow Steiner and Pinney to explore the ways that auras of Oaxacan woodcarvings are produced. As I will show, these auras are a quality of the objects themselves but are not necessarily stable, consistent or singular. This reading of aura, unlike the stricter one imagined as the connection between the unique work of art and its viewer, leaves conceptual space for artisans, as well as other actors, to be active agents in the production and contestation of the auras of woodcarvings. By approaching the topic in this way, I can explore the multitude of ways that actors involved with Oaxacan woodcarving read the objects, and consider how these readings are central to woodcarving production (not just interpretation) and therefore artisans' experiences of their own work. It allows for the instances in which "aura" is read as agency, but does not limit the possibilities of aura to this.

I have so far argued that the auras of works of art both index and mediate the dyadic relationships between maker and viewers, and that it is this aura that gives works of art their authority, genuineness and desirability. In this way, the auras of works of art themselves are crucial for the existence of art worlds or "fields" of cultural production in the first place, as the relationships between the human actors would not exist were it not for this compelling power of art. Because of this, I argue that Bourdieu's formulation of the "fields" of actors that make up art worlds must be underpinned by the ethnographic analysis of the multiple ways that the auras of works of art are produced and experienced. As I will show ethnographically in later chapters, Benjamin's concept of the aura is most useful within an anthropological study of aesthetic practice if we consider it as a kind of "legitimacy" of the art objects themselves that can generate

change within the woodcarving's aesthetic field. Thus, rather than Bourdieu's "social legitimacy" functioning as capital between competing human actors, the nature of aesthetic fields can be explored by considering how objects themselves have more or less aura, or "aesthetic capital". The changing ways that these auras are "read" by different viewers explains how the aesthetic field – that is, the aesthetics of the genre – of Oaxacan woodcarvings changes through time.

Artisans' creations compete with one another for the attention of tourists, collectors, wholesalers, and also the "legitimising experts" within their art world, such as tour guides, journalists and state actors. In turn, as suggested by Fabian's observations on genres of popular art, the aesthetics of those woodcarvings which appear to have more aura, and are therefore more authoritative and desirable, also come to define what "good" Oaxacan woodcarving looks like within the market. By making this power of the woodcarvings themselves a central analytic in my thesis, I am also able to position the aesthetic practices that are at work in San Martín within the everyday practices of engagement between artisans, material objects and social others. While authors like Overing and Gow may make the case that aesthetics is not a useful category in all cultures and times (Morphy *et al.*: 1996), it is clear that Tileño artisans necessarily deal with (and deal in) aesthetic conceptualisations in their everyday work lives.

Like other craftwork in Oaxaca, the aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarvings is coloured by the ways that the state, the tourism industry and the art worlds understand them. In the case of Oaxacan woodcarvings, artisans' aesthetic practices are conditioned by two intersecting historical developments: the aesthetics of artesanías, as this term has been conceptualised within post-Revolutionary and neoliberal Mexico and Oaxaca; and

the aesthetics of ethnic art, as generated primarily by Anglo North American touristic interest in the material culture of indigenous societies. This is not to say that consumers of Oaxacan woodcarvings are limited to those who necessarily purchase them as symbols of Mexico or symbols of indigeneity. Oaxacan woodcarvings circulate through a wide variety of spaces and encounter a great number of people who cannot be neatly classified as representing “Mexican national” nor “Anglo North American” perspectives. As I briefly note in later chapters, these people may also include Chicanos or Mexican Americans, members of other North American indigenous groups or communities, Europeans of non-English backgrounds, and other Mexicans who do not have “national” sentiments in mind when they purchase woodcarvings.¹⁵ However, as I discuss in Chapter Three, during my research I found that it was the two aesthetic perspectives of “traditional Mexican artesanías” and “indigenous ethnic art” that had the *most* aesthetic influence on Tileño artisans.

This dual influence was due to a combination of factors: firstly, as the Oaxacan and Mexican states’ artesanía organisations are the primary pathways through which many Tileños access markets and receive financial support and marketing guidance, the aesthetics of artesanías continues to be a powerful aesthetic trope through which Tileños and others imagine and categorise their work. Secondly, by the time of my fieldwork, the most successful artisan family in San Martín had begun to differentiate themselves from other producers by explicitly drawing on the aesthetics and discourses that are central to the indigenous art market of Canada and the United States, which is primarily marketed to Anglo North Americans. As I discuss in Chapters Three and Four, the successes of this family have greatly influenced other Tileño artisans and other actors within the art world, which in turn influences the expectations of tourists and other

¹⁵ “Chicano” generally refers to Americans of Mexican heritage, although it is usually used in conjunction with a specific politics of rights and identity within the United States.

visitors to the most successful workshops. As it is within the most successful workshops where demonstrations for tourists take place, it is also in these locations – most commonly visited by Anglo North American tourists - where the majority of self-conscious elaboration, discussion and consolidation of aesthetic ideas and processes by artisans take place. In the next section, I briefly introduce the aesthetics of artesanías and the aesthetics of ethnic art, in order to give the reader a sense of the aesthetic genres that Tileño artisans work within. In the final sections of the introduction, I lay out the structure of the thesis chapters and conclude by addressing my research methods.

The aesthetics of the nation: artesanías in Oaxaca

Oaxacan woodcarvings have been traditionally influenced by the aesthetics of artesanías; as I address in Chapter Three, the influence of ethnic art aesthetics have only more recently come to be important for some Tileño artisans. “Artesanías” are a category of objects within Mexico that have been unequivocally entwined with Mexican nationalism, notions of Mexican development, and Mexican anthropology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The history of this entanglement has been well described by many scholars, and the ideological use of artesanías by nationalists, and the concomitant state patronage of producers is well documented (Novelo 1976: 30-46; 47-92, 1993: 227-231; García Canclini 1993a; López 2010).

Most anthropological studies of Oaxacan crafts highlight the central role of the early twentieth century post-Revolutionary Mexican state in the construction of the authenticity of artesanías, which continues to structure and inform current discourses in the promotion of craftwork and tourism (Chibnik 2003: 7-10; Stephen 2005: 157-164; Brulotte 2006: 18-25; Wood 2008: 8). The category “artesanía” in Mexico has been central to the construction not only of class differences within the Mexican nation, but

also the nation itself. However, these processes cannot be properly connected to processes of aestheticisation without fully comprehending the category and the hierarchies that attach to it (Bright 1995a: 2-4). As noted above, I believe there is a slippage between the way in which the Spanish word “artesanía” is used in Mexico, and its English translation, “craft.” A comparison of these terms can help to clarify of the term “artesanía” and can bring the aesthetics of this category into focus.

The English term “craft” encompasses two distinct, yet related European historical trajectories, both of which are reflected in contemporary usage. The first relates to the concept of “folk art,” which emerged in the late eighteenth century in Europe, as a romantic fascination with the folklore and material products of the peasantry which fostered an increasing separation of class between literate elite consumers and illiterate peasant producers (Graburn 1976), thus setting up the opposition between craft/folk art on the one hand, and “high art” on the other. The second historical position was the romantic-modernist Arts and Crafts Movement, which began producing decorative arts in England, followed by the United States, in the late nineteenth century as a reaction against the increasing mechanisation and industrialisation of production processes. The Arts and Crafts Movement emphasised the aesthetic and moral superiority of hand produced objects, made on a small scale, to the industrially produced consumer goods of the day (Greenhalgh 1997: 32-35), thus setting up the opposition between craft and craftsmanship on the one hand and “industrial commodity” on the other. This heritage can be seen in today’s usage of the term, for example, in the American phenomenon of “craft beer,” or in the emerging preferences of French and American consumers for “Grand Cru” chocolates (Terrio 2011).

While Bakewell (1995) notes the term “artesanía” also maps on to hierarchies of class and takes the subordinate position in the hierarchy of artesanías/*bellas artes* (crafts/fine arts), the ideological consolidation of the term in Mexico was not directly in response to modernist anxieties about industrial production, but was rather formed through attempts by the political and intellectual elite to consolidate the nation immediately after the Mexican Revolution, a process which López describes as “ethnicising the nation” (2010: 9), emphasising the central role that ideas about art and artesanías played in national processes of *mestizaje*, the ideology that promotes the mixing of indigenous and Spanish cultures and races.

García Canclini, amongst others, has argued that the objects brought together under the category “artesanías” has been an effective and sustained ideological tool for the Mexican nation and the elite classes (1989; 1993a). Thus, the ideological category of “artesanías” in Mexico is not the same as the category “craft” in the English sense of the word, because while “craft” in English is used to indicate differences in class and the aesthetic celebration of the hand-made, “artesanía” encapsulates the ideological underpinnings of a Mexican nationalism grounded on an idealised mestizo Mexican subject. In their reproduction and circulation artesanías reference and reproduce the specific ideological framework that constructs Mexico as an ethnicised, mestizo nation vis-à-vis other nation states.

Prior to the Mexican War of Independence, which began in 1810, elites in New Spain had looked to Europe for cultural legitimacy and aesthetic taste. Although the content of sixteenth and seventeenth century artistic work may have been influenced by the cultures of the colony, as in the proliferation of paintings of the Virgin of Guadalupe or the “casta” paintings that represented the different “racial mixtures” of New Spain,

the aesthetics of these works were thoroughly European, executed in Baroque and Naturalist styles. This aesthetic stance was part of larger social processes that maintained the racial-class hierarchies that separated Europeans, mestizos (those with mixed Spanish and indigenous “blood”) and indigenous people throughout the colonial period (Ruiz Gomar 2005: 76-77; Bargellini 2005: 81-91).



Figure 2: "Calaveras de Artesanos" (Skeletons of Artisans) [n.d.] by Jose Guadalupe Posada; Reprinted with permission from the Jean Charlot Collection, University of Hawaii at Manoa Library

“There are many artisans now at rest,
Because their bones will also cry,
They are lent to Saint Monday forever,
Ignoring that they will soon go to the inferno,
And in their long existence, these disdainful ones,
They will only be disgusting skeletons.”

After independence from Spain was won in 1821, these strict racial categories began to be altered as different, often contradictory, projects of modernisation were undertaken by the Mexican state. Art production during the periods of the First Republic (1824-1864) and “La Reforma” (1861-1876), continued to be executed in European styles. Reflecting the strong French influence on Mexico in this period, the popularity of Romantic and Realist painting combined with Mexico’s political need to distinguish itself from Spain, leading artists to depict romantic and nationalistic scenes of Mexican daily life (Fernández 1967).¹⁶ In this period, the artisanal class came to be an important symbolic feature within elite and national imaginings of the nation, but as the *subjects* of political power, discourse and art, rather than creators of valuable national culture in their own right. The engraving by Posada entitled *Calaveras de Artesanos*, for example, satirises the elite opinion on artisans and other working class labourers (see Figure 2).

By the Porfiriato, European neoclassical and religious aesthetics were dominant, and European-style art, as well as the development of railways, industries and the military was used by the technocrats of the dictatorship as evidence of Mexico’s progress towards civilization and modernity, justifying the republic’s independence from Spain and the French Empire (López 2010: 3; Calil Zarur and Muir Lovell 2001).¹⁷ After the Revolution (1910-1920), which overthrew Porfirio Díaz, the newly empowered liberal elites struggled to unite a country deeply divided by language,

¹⁶ “La Reforma,” the period of liberal reform period, from 1855 to the beginning of the Porfiriato in 1876. It is most commonly associated with the presidency of Benito Juarez, an indigenous lawyer from Oaxaca who is today celebrated as Mexico’s first indigenous president, although his policies, in the liberal tradition, were directed towards equality for all Mexican citizens, and indigenous rights *per se* were not his concern.

¹⁷ The Porfiriato is the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, also from Oaxaca, 1876-1911. During this period, indigenous peoples were considered backwards hindrances to modernity. The French Intervention in Mexico lasted from 1862-1867, when Maximilian I of Mexico was defeated at Puebla; Juarez was subsequently re-elected president.

ethnicity and the political chasms that had deepened during the intense violence of the Revolution. In the 1920s, the intelligentsia in Mexico City, which famously included Mexico's minister of education, Jose Vasconcelos and anthropologists Manuel Gamio and Julio de la Fuente, sought to draw the country together by creating a Mexican national identity that was distinct from its historical connections to Europe.

Gamio, who created the Bureau of Anthropology in 1917, emerged as one of the most important figures in this new nationalist moment. His widely read book, *Forjando Patria* ("Forging the Fatherland") (1916), attempted to ground a new Mexican identity on the idealisation of the mestizo subject (mixed Spanish and Indigenous). In it, he argued that despite government statistics which claimed the indigenous population was rapidly declining, in reality the majority of Mexicans were still indigenous "in culture," and that this culture should provide the bedrock for the formation of cultural bonds amongst all Mexicans, a position called "*Indigenismo*" (López 2010: 129-130). The intense ideological promotion of indigeneity as a national aesthetic is reflected in the artistic works of the fine artists of the time. The story of the Mexican nation grounded in the glorious indigenous past was literally painted onto the capital city through the works of muralists like Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros, and artists like Rivera and Frida Kahlo became avid collectors of artesanías (Novelo 1993: 228-229; Brulotte 2006: 24). However, as López shows, the post-Revolutionary state's interest in the promotion of artesanías through different presidential administrations was variable and often was also implemented as a developmentalist strategy for curbing the rush of unskilled labourers to the cities and the alleviation of poverty in the countryside, rather than simple ideological posturing (Hernández Díaz and Zafra 2005: 17; López 2010: 151-174).

While researchers working with contemporary artisans in Mexico are right to note the relevance of this history to contemporary artisanal practice, the state of Oaxaca has not always been completely subsumed by these national processes of Mexicanisation. Although the discourses of elites and intellectuals from Oaxaca, like those of Mexico City, focused on the indigenous in their populist re-imaginings of the Mexican nation, their version of indigeneity was framed in ways that differed from the discourse of Mexico City which was perceptibly saturated with specifically Aztec and Mayan culture and history (López 2010: 68).

Deborah Poole (2004) has described how nineteenth and early twentieth century Oaxacan urban intellectuals looked at “their” Indians in ways that diverged from the Mexican standard. Like Mexican nationalists, the perspective of the Oaxacan elite on indigenous peoples simultaneously incorporated the contradictions inherent in *indigenismo*:

“The Indian was marked simultaneously as both pure and degenerate, noble and servile, and, importantly, as at once incommensurably “other” and sentimentally “ours.” Indians were both the past that hindered progress and the original Oaxaqueños” (Poole 2004: 39).

However, unlike the elite in Mexico City, Oaxacans first looked to Zapotecness, and subsequently, after the Revolution, to Oaxaca’s cultural diversity, in the effort to build sentiments of *Oaxaqueñidad* (Oaxacanness). Oaxaca’s cultural diversity, rather than being subsumed by the simple dichotomy of Indian/mestizo was co-opted and then celebrated through the deliberate construction of *aesthetic* representations which were materialised and circulated in type photographs of Oaxaca’s indigenous groups, postcards, female traditional dress (*traje*), and the Homenaje Racial event (Racial Homage), held in 1932, which was the precursor to today’s annual Guelaguetza festival (see Chapters One and Five) (Poole 2011).

In these aesthetic representations, Oaxaca's ethnic diversity was distilled into the material culture of each region, most importantly into traditional dress, which then became reified as symbols of the region (Poole 2004). Through events like the Homenaje Racial this diversity was collected together and consolidated in the state capital, thus relocating the essence of Oaxacanness from the landscape, history and customs of Oaxaca's countryside to the capital city (*ibid*: 58). This process was particularly evident in the vogue for Tehuana dress by elite women in Oaxaca and Mexico City, including the painter Frida Kahlo (*ibid*: 63-68).

By the late 1920s, "Oaxacan exceptionalism," – the idea that Oaxaca by virtue of its cultural diversity is exceptionally representative of Mexican culture – was firmly grounded in the minds of the urban elite through the cultural activities that were heavily funded and promoted by the state, through which they sought to construct what they referred to as a "Oaxacan soul." This process repackaged state history to emphasise the resistance of Oaxacan tribes against Aztec imperial domination, shortly before the arrival of Cortez in the fifteenth century. It also celebrated the Oaxacan Zapotec president of Mexico, Benito Juarez, and more ambiguously, the dictator Porfirio Díaz (*ibid*: 72-73); processes that continue to be evident in Oaxaca City. Today, this notion of Oaxacan cultural exceptionalism continues to inform cultural politics and the promotion of cultural activities by the state. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, agencies for the promotion of artesanías at the national and state levels take particularly divergent stances on artesanías and the role the state should play in their development.¹⁸

¹⁸ This brief review is not meant to suggest that Mexican and Oaxacan elite and state discourses on aesthetics and artesanías are wholly accepted or go unchallenged, but these perspectives are extremely important for influencing the aesthetic field of woodcarvings.

The association of artesanías with the nation and/or the state of Oaxaca continues to be strong today; now the aesthetics of Mexicanness and Oaxacanness are not only produced by state actors and intellectuals attempting to forge a national sentiment, but by many other industries that use and depend on the existence of uniquely Mexican culture. The role of tourism is central as the demand by tourists for souvenirs representative of “authentic” local culture maintains the bulk of Mexico’s artesanía industry. Art collectors and even anthropologists are also complicit in the maintenance of this aesthetic category, as books about material culture come to be authenticators of these aesthetics, thus ensuring their reproduction in the future. The details of these actors and how they come to bear directly in San Martín are explored in Chapter Three, but it is important to note here that while the aesthetics of artesanías function to maintain both the nation and the cultural industries of Oaxaca, they also work to constrain and reproduce the character of the very aesthetic products they point to for authenticity.

The aesthetic content of the category “artesanía” is crucial to its work as a symbol of belonging; in order to function “as artesanías,” hand produced objects must be recognisably Mexican outside of their context of production. In her study of the Mexico City art world, Liza Bakewell observes that for Mexican consumers, artesanías should be “typically Mexican in palette, shape and sentiment” (1995: 20). As one artist explained to her:

"Mexican artesanías embody the real truthful culture, the authentic personality of America - all of Latin America, but especially Mexico. I learned about color from Mexican artesanías. All of it has a lot of color, texture, form. It is a special characteristic of Mexico" (ibid).

Artesanías thus have a characteristic aesthetic, which is easily recognisable to many Mexicans as “*folclórico*” (folkloric) (ibid: 19-20; D’Ascia 2007: 20). In Mexico, the

“folkloric” refers to a specified set of romantic images of the indigenous and peasant countryside, like the stories and characters of legends or the gender and class relations of the colonial hacienda, which are frequently circulated in material culture, film and print media (Mraz 2009: 23-38; 76-79). But at the same time it refers to a specific aesthetic approach, a certain combination of colours and forms that set the folkloric apart from other kinds of Mexican material production, and from the material production of non-Mexicans. As Myers and Thomas observed, as objects move into the category of “artesanía” (and its accompanying regimes of value), they take on the meanings of the category. But not every object can make this transition; only those with the certain “look”, the Mexican aesthetic, or what Mary Coffey calls the “fiesta palette,” or “mexicolors,” such as “cobalt blue, terra-cotta, hot pink or sunny yellow... which [recall] stereotypical ideas about Mexico’s colourful people and culture” (2010: 302); an aesthetic that is as recognisable within Canada and the United States as it is in Mexico itself. However, this engagement with Mexican artesanías has not been aesthetically passive; categories of material culture that emerge from Canada and the United States have in turn influenced the aesthetics of artesanía production, albeit more recently and in less deterministic ways.

This section has sketched the contours of what I term the aesthetic of artesanías, as it is located both in the Mexican national space and in the cultural space of Oaxaca. I turn now to a different, yet complementary aesthetic process that also works to delimit the aesthetic field in which Tileño artisans produce their woodcarvings. This process can be understood as the “aesthetics of indigenous ethnic art.” While the historical processes that contributed to the development of this aesthetic are similar in many general ways to the development of the Mexican aesthetic of artesanías, it takes a particularly different form in terms of aesthetic content, as it is linked directly to a

notion of ethnic indigeneity as a separate identity from, rather than a symbol iconic of national belonging.

Aesthetics of ethnic art: Oaxacan woodcarvings in the American Southwest

From the 1920s onward, Mexican elite interest in artesanías began to spill over into the United States, through the collecting, writing and promotional activities of Americans like Dwight D. Morrow and Frances Toor (Delpar 1992; López 2010: 95-126). In the 1950s American tourism to Mexico also began in earnest, and the country's exotic draw was partially grounded in "layers" of indigeneity that could be readily interpreted from an American point of view (Zolov 2001: 234-243), often rendering Mexican material culture as a straightforward marker of ethnic difference, consistent with American conceptualisations of indigenous material culture produced within their own borders.

The collection of indigenous material culture as markers of ethnic difference was a consistent practice in North America by British, and later American and Canadian individuals and institutions since the period of initial colonisation. The production of objects specifically for collectors had already begun by the turn of the twentieth century; the proprietor of Seattle's Ye Old Curiosity Shop, for example, commissioned local artisans to make copies of objects illustrated in Franz Boas' *Primitive Art*, some of which were sold to anthropologist A.C. Haddon for London's Horniman Museum collection (Duncan 2000: 11-13). However, these objects were not usually considered "ethnic art" per se, but rather ethnological artifacts or material culture.

Shelly Errington locates the emergence of the category "ethnic art" in the United States in the 1970s, when indigenous and foreign objects held by museums, collectors

and other began to be reclassified as “ethnic art”, as the usage of the word “primitive” in reference to art was losing its social acceptability. Despite the fact that they are no longer labelled “primitive art,” Errington notes that the role that the exotic and the authentic play in determining the value and desirability of these objects make them a kind of variant as they “have a place in the primitivesque objects market, and dealers and customers of each seek to promote them as authentic” (S. Errington 1998: 98). While “ethnic arts,” like “artesanías” are concerned with the authentic, the role that authenticity plays in the ethnic arts market is to establish cultural exoticism, rather than national belonging.

Within the United States and Canada, the ethnic art of the Americas has come to be understood as “indigenous,” as the material products of other subaltern groups, like Blacks, Hispanics, or the poor, are considered to be “popular” or “folk” art (Bright 1995b, Anderson 2000: 14-15; cf. Whisnant 1983; Forrest 1988). While these categories are not entirely exclusive, the aesthetics of indigeneity have become increasingly profitable values within American and Canadian cultural markets as Native aesthetics are often presented as offering the possibility of spiritual connection or transformation through supposedly authentic and non-commercialised means (M. Brown 1994; Oberholtzer 1995; Tiffany 2006: 150-151).

Nelson Graburn has argued that a variety of actors and institutions have been central to the development and authentication of specific ethnic styles over time. He has charted how in the Canadian arctic, Inuit commercial art grew out of the desires of Canadian state agencies to promote art production as a development policy in order to reduce state welfare expenditures in the North. Graburn perceptively draws attention to the imposed aesthetic category “Eskimo art” that these Inuit artists have appropriated

and transformed for their own aesthetic projects. At the same time, he shows that this aesthetic continues to reproduce national Canadian imaginings of the North and of the Inuit as a group (2004). Graburn argues that these imaginings of “Inuitness” circulate and interact dynamically with other conceptualisations of indigeneity, which together form a generalised Native American aesthetic which, like the category “artesanías,” blurs differences amongst indigenous groups, and also makes available the content of indigenous culture for use by non-indigenous individuals and organisations (c.f. Townsend Gault 2004).¹⁹

This processes of “scaling up” the cultural differences of Native groups into the ethnic marker “indigenous” strongly characterises the processes of cultural production that take place in the American Southwest, the region of the United States where Mexican artesanías, including Oaxacan woodcarvings, are most commonly sold. As I explore in Chapters Three and Five, Mexican indigenous identities are easily subsumed into the aesthetics of ethnic difference that characterise this region. American Southwestern motifs, such as colour-blocking, figurative patterning, and the use of “earthy” or “desert” palettes, like umber, mustard yellow, vermillion, turquoise and jade are easily translated into Mexican aesthetic categories, and the desert landscapes of both Oaxaca and the Southwest have been claimed to influence aesthetics in both cases.

The American Southwest is a particularly appropriate place for Oaxacan craftwork to be sold in the United States because, much like Oaxaca within Mexico, it is often associated with indigeneity in the national imaginary (Maruyama, Yen and

¹⁹ It is important to note that indigenous artists and consumers have not always been passive “recipients” of state discourses about themselves and their work, but these imaginaries have been surprisingly strong within the markets for ethnic art within Canada and the United States (Towsend-Gault 2001; Bunten 2006).

Stronza 2008).²⁰ Further, as the region was part of New Spain and then independent Mexico until it was ceded to the United States in 1848, its regional identity is grounded in Spanish place names and Mexican aesthetic and cultural forms, which contribute to the area's particular character (Rodríguez 1989; 1997). The Southwest also happens to be the location of a particularly robust art world that is focused on ethnic art production and marketing. Santa Fe, New Mexico is considered to be the third largest art market in the United States, and is focused on the annual Indian Art Market, urban galleries in the Plaza District and the surrounding Pueblo Indian communities (Maruyama, Yen and Stronza 2008: 457).

The history, politics and aesthetic content of Southwestern art production has been well explored by various authors (e.g. Dubin 2001; Mullin 2001). In both Taos and Santa Fe, art colonies were established around the turn of the twentieth century by East Coast and Midwestern artists who were attracted to the area by the natural landscape and the promise of a frontier experience; their work was focused primarily on representing indigenous and Mexican peoples as subjects in their works (Rodríguez 1989: 78-80; 83-85). This initial aesthetic interest in the region has led to the development of a large scale indigenous art complex which, like that of Oaxacan woodcarvings, ranges from small, low-priced “souvenir” pieces, up to high-end “collector-quality” work.

The historical reconfiguration of indigenous peoples and experiences into clear groupings of ethnicity with their concomitant “cultures” has resulted in North America (as elsewhere), in the repackaging of this culture as “style” for the production of mass

²⁰ The Southwest Region is comprised of the states of California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Texas and Oklahoma. The main locus of the Southwest as a cultural unit revolves around the “Four Corners” states of Arizona, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico, where, along with California, the majority of Oaxacan produced crafts sold in the United States are marketed.

produced consumer goods (Handler 1990: 346). This style has become central to how many North Americans understand the geography of the nation: as symbols and aesthetics are conventionalised and generalised, they no longer represent the people who produce them, but rather the geographical region where they occur. This process has been particularly visible in areas like the Canadian North, The Northwest Pacific Coast, The Plains and the American Southwest (Townsend-Gault 2004; cf. Leuthold 1998: 24). Through this regionalisation, Native American aesthetics are also brought into the nation. As Michael Brown observes, in the United States “[what are perceived as] native design styles have become part of the warp and weft of mass culture and visual expressions of national identity” (M. Brown 2003: 91). The use of Native American aesthetics and symbolism as styles and logos is a hotly contested issue, as debates about intellectual and cultural property and cultural appropriation have been foregrounded in recent years (Coombe 1998 185-213; M. Brown 2003; see Chapter Six). Despite these challenges, the aesthetic category of “indigenous art” continues to circulate, “insinuating aboriginality into private and public spheres” (Townsend-Gault 2004: 192), in the process making “indigenous art” a common-sense category which North American consumers can easily identify.

While the aesthetic of indigenous ethnic art in the United States and Canada also references the nation, I would argue it does so in ways that are distinctly different than the logic of artesanías, as described above. Because the Mexican nation was built on an ideological construction of *mestizaje*, the producers of artesanías are necessarily (from the perspective of national ideology) incorporated *into* the Mexican national population, thus making artesanías a product of the national, if subaltern, self. In the United States and Canada, indigenous art is not conceptualised as a product of the *self*, but a product of *ethnic difference*. Ethnic difference is contained within the national politics and

practice of multiculturalism (C. Taylor 1994), an ideology that has not had the same resonance in the Mexican mestizo nation. This difference is illustrated, for example, in the way that artesanía and *arte popular* (popular art) are not distinct categories in Mexico, as they are in the United States and Canada.²¹ I should note here that the recognition of indigenous aesthetics as ethnic difference within the contexts of Canada and the United States often does little for demands for political recognition of the same sort, as difference is frequently only recognised in terms of “expressions of culture,” an issue I address in more detail in Chapter Six.

Nevertheless, in Mexico, the United States and Canada, Chicano, Mexican and indigenous artists have been central to many social movements in all three countries, while they also produce and consume ethnic art and artesanías (cf. Townsend Gault 2001; Arenas 2011). The involvement of these art producers in movements for justice and change indicates that the aesthetic processes described here are not static, apolitical nor uncontested, and these aesthetic practices of others also help to shape and define the aesthetic processes that Tileño artisans work within. The ideological frames of reference that underpin the “aesthetics of artesanías” and “the aesthetics of ethnic art”, also of course, contain contradictions and divergent voices. Although I have here somewhat simplified the processes involved, this discussion nonetheless illustrates a general difference in form between the ideological underpinnings of Mexican artesanías and North American ethnic art. The category of “indigenous ethnic art” has had increasing influence on the aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarvings in recent years. As discussed in Chapter Three, this is because certain Tileño artisans have had increasing contact with the central ideas of this category, not just via tourism from North America, but also through their experiences marketing and selling their work in the United States. While

²¹ The relative unimportance of multiculturalism as a national ideology in Mexico, compared to the United States and Canada also colours the cultural politics of indigeneity and indigenous groups’ demands vis-à-vis the state.

the incorporation of the aesthetic of indigenous art might be considered a cynical appropriation of ethnicity purely for marketing purposes, as I show in Chapter Five, the idea of indigeneity is now engaged with earnestly by community members in San Martín. However, as will also be shown, by positioning their woodcarvings as expressions of indigenous culture, they are in turn constrained by already existing aesthetic expectations that are attached to this art.

Although I have set the aesthetic influences of artesanías and ethnic art as separate trajectories, what remains is an exploration of how these combine with artisans' own aesthetic sensibilities in San Martín, a theme that runs throughout this thesis. The aesthetic forms of artesanías and ethnic art are not directly or exclusively related to certain groups of consumers, but are rather aesthetic categories that consumers and producers utilise in order to understand, talk about and position Oaxacan woodcarvings. As discussed in detail in Chapter Three, the aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarvings is relational and inter-subjective; as such the woodcarvings of specific artisans cannot be neatly classified as responding to either the artesanía or ethnic art aesthetic, but are rather created in an aesthetic space that is co-generated by both processes as well as artisans' own aesthetic practices.

Outline of thesis

Anthropological approaches to production of material culture in Mexico has frequently approached it as “craftwork,” a tendency which directs analyses towards concerns of political economy and the politics of culture, to the expense of material and aesthetic concerns. I argue that in order to understand the aesthetics of Oaxacan woodcarvings, they must be approached as a genre, in order to tease out the ways that they come to be conceptualised *en masse* by their producers, promoters and consumers.

In positioning woodcarvings as a genre, I argue that they are defined by an aesthetic space which functions as a “field” that is structured by the aesthetic practices of Tileño artisans, in which woodcarvings’ auras work as a kind of “specific capital” so that some carvings are understood to be more legitimate or desirable than others. This field is also conditioned by the intersection of the “aesthetics of artesanías” and “the aesthetics of ethnic art,” which provide the context in which producers and consumers understand this work. All Oaxacan woodcarvings are necessarily restricted aesthetically to this field and its given conditions, although the field itself is also continually reconstituted by ongoing practices of production and marketing.

This conceptual framing of the aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarvings is useful for considering their material and aesthetic aspects, since it affords an analysis that moves beyond simplistic cause-and-effect relationships between ideology, tourism, ethnicity and markets on the one hand and material culture on the other. It also refocuses aesthetics as a “practice” rather than a static “position,” which allows me to consider how the actions of a variety of different actors necessarily reproduce or change the woodcarvings themselves. This is important because it allows a more subtle approach than that usually afforded in “impact-and-reaction” models of power in cultural production. In the chapters that follow, I explore various aspects of this aesthetic field and aesthetic practice, including how they interact with concerns of political economy and the politics of culture, but also how they intersect with Tileños’ notions of belonging, morality, and community. In this way, I hope to deepen anthropological understandings of the connections between the anthropology of craft, and the anthropologies of art, of ethnicity and culture.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss the issues raised in this introduction through an analysis focused upon three general themes: (1) artisans' aesthetic practice; (2) how different actors' aesthetic sensibilities produce and reproduce the woodcarvings as a genre; and (3) the consequences of these aesthetic practices for local and supra-local political processes.

In Chapter One, I situate my work vis-à-vis the historical development of the anthropological study of craftwork in Mexico. I then describe the political and historical context of Oaxaca in which the current production of Oaxacan woodcarvings takes place. In particular, I focus on the nature and economic importance of the Oaxacan tourism industry, and discuss recent challenges which it faces in particular the “war on drugs” and political unrest in the state. I then move on to describe the historical development of the Oaxacan woodcarvings as a recently invented form of artesanías, as well as describe the research site, the village of San Martín Tilcajete, and introduce the forms of the woodcarvings that are produced there.

In Chapter Two, I begin my ethnographic exploration of the artisans' aesthetic practices by investigating the processes of production and authorship that take place within San Martín's workshops. I argue that these processes can be understood as complementary practices of engagement and detachment, both in terms of artisans' interactions with the tools and materials they use to produce woodcarvings, and in terms of the ways that authorship is configured within workshops. I suggest that these practices contribute to the production of the auras of the woodcarvings for their viewers, but that these auras are not necessarily stable or predictable for artisans.

In Chapter Three, I continue to explore artisans' aesthetic practices through an investigation of the aesthetic field of woodcarvings. As discussed, the aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarvings is characterised by the intersection of the aesthetics of artesanías and the aesthetics of ethnic art. Until recently, all Oaxacan woodcarvings have been more aesthetically consistent with artesanías, and I argue that it has been through the participation within American ethnic art markets that Miguel and Catalina García have been able to "ethnicise" their work, reconstituting the aesthetic field of the woodcarvings in the process.

Chapters Four, Five and Six can be collectively read as an analysis of different *consequences* of artisans' aesthetic practices in San Martín. In Chapter Four, I analyse the issues and complexities of competition amongst Tileño artisans. I argue that the tensions that I observed during my fieldwork are not *solely* the result of economic competition between neighbours but must be understood in reference to communal ideals in San Martín. Specifically, I argue that the tensions caused by economic competition are exacerbated by processes of privatisation and aestheticisation that have accompanied the success of a few artisans in contrast to many of their neighbours.

In Chapter Five, I consider how the participation of *some* artisans in ethnic art markets has led to a reconsidering of indigeneity amongst Tileños, but observe that these processes are not totalising, and other forms of belonging remain central to Tileño identities today. Finally, in Chapter Six, I discuss artisans' response to the discovery of replicas of Oaxacan woodcarvings that were made in China. Although their attempt to develop a collective trademark programme points towards national and global discourses of intellectual property, I argue that artisan and state representatives'

responses can be more clearly understood if considered from the perspective of aesthetic practices and the auras of the woodcarvings themselves.

The thesis makes three chief contributions to existing scholarship. First, I contribute to discussions in the anthropology of art by tracing processes of aestheticisation, and suggesting how the notion of “genre” might be studied anthropologically. Second, I contribute to the anthropology of craft, by showing how aesthetics can be used as an analytic focus with which to answer key questions about production and material engagement. Third, I provide a detailed analysis of the nature of artisanal work, which for contemporary artisans does not only require the skilled production of handmade goods, but also the navigation of aesthetic and political processes both in their own workshops and in the global art markets in which they are enmeshed.

My research: methods and challenges

The research for this project took place over twenty one months, between January 2008 and September 2009, however my interest in Oaxacan and indigenous art and artesanías began many years earlier. Growing up in rural western Canada, where I attended school with Native Canadian classmates, I had for many years been interested in the aesthetics of indigeneity that seemed to circulate with ease in the artistic and touristic images of western Canada, and yet did not seem to be very important to anyone I knew personally. My puzzlement over this situation continued as my university studies drew my interest to Latin America.

In 2001, I spent two months in southern Mexico on a Latin American studies field school, which I took as part of my undergraduate studies at the University of

Calgary. Continuing my interest in indigenous peoples' relationships with tourism, I was keen to see how Oaxacans dealt with the increasingly intense tourism in the Valles Centrales. As the activities of that field school took me to many different sites of cultural tourism – markets, archaeological sites, and craft producing villages, including San Martín Tilcajete – I was left with more questions than answers, and my experiences in Oaxaca at that time significantly influenced the development of my project many years later. The aesthetic, cultural and historical complexity of Oaxaca seemed to me an intricate puzzle which, despite the rather large amount of anthropological attention, continues to be intellectually elusive and enchanting.

However, as I formulated my doctoral research project in 2006 and 2007, I became increasingly concerned that my explicit focus on tourism might prove to be problematic. 2006 was the year that tourist to Oaxaca City and the surrounding valleys was significantly decreased, due to the blockades, marches and occupations of the APPO²² movement and the increasingly violent responses by the state. It was unclear at that time what condition Oaxaca's tourism industry might be in when I began my research. Despite this, I was keen to return to Oaxaca to work with artisans, and so I expanded my research questions and prepared myself to focus more on the social, material and aesthetic processes of art production rather than tourism itself, and a whole new series of questions emerged through this work.

When I arrived in Oaxaca City in January 2008, I spent the first two months researching the complexities of the tourism and artesanía networks that link the villages in the Valles Centrales and beyond into Oaxaca City through economic, political and social connections. Following this initial groundwork, I contacted a local tour guide,

²² *Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* (The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca); see Chapter One

Alvin Starkman†, a retired Canadian lawyer who also runs a bed and breakfast mostly for North American clients with his wife Arlene. Alvin’s master’s degree in anthropology made him the perfect “gatekeeper,” as he often stepped back with a critical eye to the cultural and economic processes that he was engaged in. For the next few weeks, he allowed me to join him on his tours with his clients, which took us to all of the major, and many of the minor, cultural tourism sites in Valles Centrales, during which time I was also able to participate in detailed conversations with these tourists, sometimes over a couple of days. Alvin also introduced me to many of his contacts in the craft producing villages, and it was through his generosity that I met the couple whom I call Miguel and Catalina García in San Martín Tilcajete.

Miguel and Catalina’s work greatly intrigued me from my first visit to their home. Not only were their pieces carved and painted to a very high standard, but it was clear that they also had a highly organised business, and a well-developed account of their work that made their explanations to tourists both convincing and attractive. At the end of March 2008, I moved into their spare bedroom, and they kindly permitted me to observe and participate in the everyday rhythms of activity in the workshop and share in their family life in the evenings. Their workshop and household quickly became one of my key research sites.

In Miguel and Catalina’s large workshop, I was able to observe the interactions and social relationships between the artisans who work there, and Miguel and Catalina’s employees subsequently introduced me to their own family members who worked as artisans in their own right. It was also important to my project that I worked closely with the Garcías because, as I explore throughout the thesis, they are uniquely

positioned within San Martín’s artisan community, and are increasingly important figures in the woodcarving market and the art world of artesanías.

The first ten months of my research I focused my attention onto the workshops and production of woodcarvings in San Martín. In addition to my work at the Garcías’ I conducted a survey of the workshops, which helped me understand the different configurations and the styles of the woodcarvings that were being made. Many of the artisans I met during this survey eventually became important research collaborators and friends, although in some cases this took time. Working in tourism areas at times can prove difficult for anthropologists, as people are accustomed to dealing with “outsiders” in a standardised, almost scripted way (cf. Dumont 1984; Evans-Pritchard 1989). This issue was further complicated in San Martín, as Tileños have also become accustomed to many journalists and researchers working in their community.²³ On the one hand, this eased my introduction to village life, because it was not out of the ordinary for outsiders to want to be involved in community activities and to interview people. However, it also meant that people frequently had a preconceived notion about the kind of information I wanted (usually some version of the history of the woodcarvings), and about the kind of publication that might result from my work. In some cases it took quite some time before people stopped treating me as a kind of “tourist.” With one female artisan in particular, I never succeeded in having a conversation that went very far beyond her attempting to sell me another woodcarving.

The vast majority of my ethnographic data from this period comes from time spent in the workshops of about fifteen different artisans. Some of this data –

²³ In addition to long term anthropological research conducted on woodcarving production by Chibnik since the late 1990s, and research on social and cultural construction of maternity by Serrano Oswald in 2004/5 and 2008/9, many journalists, film students, teachers and researchers at undergraduate and graduate levels of study have conducted surveys, interviews and documentary work in the community.

particularly information on workshop organisation, working histories and relationships with collectors, dealers and the state came through open-ended conversations and semi-structured interviews. I followed up these interviews by mapping the genealogies of thirty artisan families. Although my research questions had very little to do with kinship, this activity allowed me to make some sense of the familial relations between artisans' households and also often occasioned the telling of anecdotes or explanations that I would not have heard in regular interviews.

Another research strategy I used during this first period was long-term observation of artisans at work. This was somewhat difficult in small household workshops, as my informants often seemed uncomfortable to have me present if we were not conversing. Yet, because of the nature of their craft, especially in regards to carving, it proved difficult for many informants to carry on a conversation while they worked. With time, I realised that if I volunteered to help paint their carvings, artisans were more comfortable with my presence; this resulted in my learning to paint carvings in the styles of a number of different artisans. While this approach allowed me a deeper understanding of the processes involved in the production of woodcarvings, it was often difficult to entirely "get at" the ways artisans experience the materials, actions and aesthetics of carving and painting themselves. Partially, I suspect this is due to most Tileños' lack of experience with exegesis about art that students learn in formal art educational institutions elsewhere. But I also find convincing the suggestion that many of the "mental representations" that humans possess cannot always be articulated through language, making communication about certain aspects of artisanal work complicated, if not impossible (Marchand 2010: 100; 104). Despite these difficulties, many hours of observing and participating in workshop environments has at the very least allowed me to consider material practices from artisans' points of view.

These strategies were complemented by more traditional ethnographic practices of “participant observation” in which my friends and informants kindly allowed me to participate. I joined shopping expeditions to the Friday market in Ocotlán, checked on crops while walking through the countryside, and travelled with young friends into Oaxaca City to go dancing at a “banda” club. I attended many small family fiestas for birthdays; large *quinceaños* fiestas and village-wide celebrations such as the commemoration of the miracles of Saint Martin, Day of the Dead and Carnival. I was invited to celebrate the Catholic sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and marriage by families; and was able to contribute to communal work on days of tree-planting and health centre maintenance.

My ethnographic research with Tileño artisans was also complemented by short, open-ended interviews with tourists and collectors that I met during their visits to San Martín. It is important to note that I met the majority of these collectors and tourists while they were visiting the workshops of the Garcías and other well-known woodcarvers. As discussed in Chapter Four, these workshops are linked into specific networks of powerful actors within the tourism and artesanía industries that other artisans, and possibly other consumers, cannot or do not access. As such, the people I interviewed were more likely to represent a specific segment of the market for Oaxacan woodcarvings, that is, they were predominantly Anglo North American tourists and collectors. While many other groups of consumers, such as Chicanos, Mexican Americans, and other ethnic or cultural minorities in Mexico, the United States and Canada also form significant markets, and therefore also contribute to the aesthetic development of Oaxacan woodcarvings, it was the “aesthetics of ethnic art” as envisioned and described by the “Anglo North American” consumers that had the

greatest influence on Tileño artisans during my fieldwork. Although I have not done so in this research project, following Oaxacan woodcarvings through their “social trajectories” in order to trace the multiple lines of aesthetic influences between these other groups of consumers in Canada and the United States and Oaxacan artisans may also yield interesting findings, and possibly will become more important as the aesthetic repertoires of artisans change and develop over time.

I also had the opportunity to speak on different occasions with both American and Mexican ethnic art and artesanía dealers, as well as a number of business associates and state bureaucrats within whom artisans work on an on-going basis. My understandings of the aesthetic discourses that come to bear on the woodcarvings was greatly enhanced by two sales trips to Mexico City, and one to Tucson, Arizona, on which I was invited by Miguel García.

While I continued with these research strategies, during the latter eight months of my fieldwork I also began to focus more on the politics of woodcarving both in the village and beyond. While this topic was always central to my research questions, it took some time before I had built up enough trust and rapport with different artisans to broach the subject in any direct way. As discussed in Chapter Four, tensions were high between different groups of artisans during my fieldwork, precipitated by the high levels of competition, and exacerbated by the increasingly precarious economic situations in which artisans found themselves. By that point, everyone in San Martín knew that I was living at the Garcías’ home and so in order to gain the trust of some of the others, I volunteered to help the community artisans group organise their Holy Week craft fair. This inevitably caused tension between me and Miguel and Catalina. However, I felt that it was important to try to understand the different perspectives on

the issues. By the end of my fieldwork, relations between different groups and individuals within San Martín felt to me even more tense, although they were attempting to work together to form the collective trademark that is discussed in Chapter Six.

These inter-personal tensions between many of my informants caused me to reflect near the end of my fieldwork period on whether I would anonymise them in my thesis. Given the fact that San Martín is one of only three woodcarving villages in the Valles Centrales, and the only one where claims to indigeneity are grounded on cultural practices and historical evidence, there is no possibility of anonymising the research site. Despite the fact that I had explained numerous times that my “book,” as my thesis was often referred to, was partially about the problems and tensions in San Martín, many of my informants did not want to be anonymised. In their experiences, publications such as travel magazine articles, coffee table books and buyer’s guides for collectors, focus on only a few artisans, directly contributing – in their eyes – to these artisans’ successes. However, I worried that it was not my place to exacerbate existing tensions by naming individuals either as the causes or complainants of problems. When I raised my concerns with my informants, they often agreed that it was probably best to hide peoples’ names. But, more often than not, whomever I was talking to would suggest that I hide only the “bad peoples” names, using their own real name, suggesting they never gossiped or caused problems, a strategy that could precipitate greater ethical and analytical problems.

I have a further reason for anonymisation in this work. As artisans’ success in the cultural tourism and ethnic art industries require to a great extent the successful positioning of their work within discourses and imaginaries of “authenticity,” simply

showing the constructed, and at times strategic, nature of the ways which artisans render their work authentic might be read by non-anthropological audiences as a critique or challenge to the “truth” of their claims (cf. Wood 2001a: 487). Although popular audiences rarely read PhD theses, in the longer term, it is possible that my work will be read by these audiences. The cultural tourism that generates the demand for Oaxacan woodcarvings is based precisely on an ethnographic-like sentiment for knowing the Other. As many American tourists and folk-art collectors do not speak fluent Spanish, they often turn to books in order to contextualize their tourism experiences. Many times during my research, interested tourists would ask me questions about ethnographies by Lynn Stephen or Jeffrey Cohen that they had picked up in the English book store in Oaxaca City, and I can expect that my own future publications might also be read by these audiences. This issue was raised during my fieldwork when I was asked directly about my ethical stance in my research by an old friend of some of the artisans.

As she reminded me:

“Collectors at … shows believe that they’re buying pieces that [the artisans] have made with their own hands. They don’t want something an employee has made. Who do you think keeps these guys in business? Who do you think helps them get their US visas? You must be very careful.”

Despite the fact that pseudonyms will not completely obscure the identities of my friends and informants, I have chosen to use them for both individuals and the two community-level artisans’ organisations I write about here. Given that LSE theses are now made publically available online, I am aware of the possibility that my thesis could easily be linked to the increasing online presence by Tileño artisans. Since my fieldwork period, internet access in San Martín has greatly expanded as TelMex has improved network service to the area. Many artisans are now experimenting with the internet as a mode of direct marketing to consumers, so at the very least, anonymisation may prevent the details of my thesis being directly associated with any particular

artisan's name by search engines or other internet tools. The decision to anonymise the artisans in my ethnography of San Martín was very difficult, as I am aware that people genuinely want to be "in my book," not just for the publicity, but also in recognition of the time and experiences that we shared together, that were the basis for this research. However, I hope that if any of my informants should read this work, they will find our experiences reflected in these pages.

Chapter One
“There aren’t many roads out of San Martín”
Tourism, Politics and Production in Oaxaca

The many roads into San Martín

One: The morning breeze was cool as the blue pickup truck drove along Highway 175, which winds south through the high sierras all the way to the warm Pacific coast at Puerto Angel. Alvin Starkman, a retired Canadian lawyer who runs a small bed and breakfast was touring with his clients Wendy and John, a husband and wife who were visiting for a week from Washington State. Their journey was accompanied by the rattling second-class busses and shouts from *colectivo* taxi-drivers looking for fares on the busy stretch of highway through Coyotepec, heavy with the smoky smell of barbecued chickens from the *asadores* that mingled with exhaust fumes.

After leaving the congestion of the lower valley, the highway gave way to a fresher, emptier road as they passed the large image of the Virgin of Guadalupe chalked into the slope of a ridge. The fields and mountains opened out before them, and ten minutes later a large sign appeared on the highway: “Welcome to San Martín Tilcajete. Wooden crafts – alebrijes.” As they pulled off down the small paved road that led to the centre of the village, Alvin explained that the word “alebrije” is a name sometimes used for Oaxacan woodcarvings, the main craft produced by the artisans of San Martín, and that they were going to see a demonstration at one of the finest workshops in the village. Compared to the noise of a few minutes earlier, the sunny corn fields and small orange grove on the way into the village seemed hushed. Passing a young man herding goats in a straw cowboy hat, Wendy leaned out the window and snapped a photograph.

As they approached the centre of town, many signs, hand-painted in brilliant reds, blues and greens, began to appear: “Santiago Family Workshop”; “Wooden Figures by the Ramos Pérez Family”; “We have artesanías!” and many more. Apart from the medical clinic and the primary school, almost every building on the quiet road seemed to shout that woodcarvings were available to buy. Pulling off the only paved road in the village onto a side street, they passed more and more workshops, and as Alvin pulled the pickup to a stop and turned off the engine, the rhythmic sound of machetes on wood could be heard drifting out from a nearby doorway. They went through a gate leading into a large workshop where they were greeted Miguel García, who proceeded to explain with enthusiasm about his life’s passion: his village of Tilcajete and his craft of woodcarving. An hour later, after the demonstration was over and Wendy and John had bought a finely-made carving of a bear, they got back in the pickup and headed back to the highway, to find lunch and continue their journey on to the famous Aguilar sisters, sculptors who live in the market town of Ocotlán de Morelos.

Two: The slowing of the pickup truck awoke Pedro and Daniela as Miguel exited the highway onto San Martín’s *entrada*, the long, straight road that leads into the village. It was about one in the morning, and the road was dark and silent. They had left Tucson, Arizona almost forty hours before, and had driven straight through, taking turns driving and sleeping, stopping only for short breaks. Despite the fact that it traversed smaller, slower roads, their route had crossed the U.S. – Mexican border at Douglas/Agua Prieta in order to avoid the possibility of problems in Ciudad Juarez; rumours circulated amongst Oaxacan artisans of trouble in that beleaguered border city. Despite their exhaustion, Pedro, Daniela and Miguel were pleased with the outcome of the journey. Their carvings, and Daniela’s mother’s embroidered blouses, sold well at the artesanía

fair, and they were returning home with new carving knives, clothing and gifts for their families, purchased in air-conditioned shopping malls in Tucson. After dropping off Daniela and Pedro, Miguel smiled with relief as he pulled into his courtyard, and locked the gate. Before going to bed, he sat up with Catalina, telling her about the trip while he savoured a *tlayuda*; the thin, tough tortillas he had missed while he was away.

Three: Two tourists clambered out of the bus from Oaxaca, along with Lupe and her infant son, onto the hard shoulder of the highway. None of San Martín's three mototaxis, which zip around the village and shuttle people to-and-from the bus stop, were waiting and so the tourists asked Lupe in hesitant Spanish how far it was to walk to the village. "Only about ten minutes," Lupe answered, and then suggested that they should visit her uncle Leovigildo whose workshop was directly across from the church. "He will give you a good price," she said as she propped her son on her hip and began to walk towards the village herself. The tourists hurried on ahead, unencumbered by a child and the large bag Lupe was carrying. As she passed the first workshop on the right, she noticed they had been beckoned inside by Mauricio Coronado, who was showing them his stock of many small woodcarvings, laid out in rows of armadillos, porcupines and donkeys on a paint-spattered table. As she continued down the road, the tourists exited Mauricio's workshop before ducking in to Doña Rubiela's small store where she had displayed a number of woodcarvings, as well as refrigerated drinks, packets of crisps and toiletries.

Four: I crossed the highway towards the *entrada*, carrying the dozen white roses that I had just purchased in Ocotlán, when I recognised the figure waiting patiently in the shade of a tree for a mototaxi. I greeted Dawn warmly, as I had met the Californian artesanía collector the previous year when she stayed in San Martín for a week with her

friends, the Santiago family. She looked at the roses and then asked if I was also going to the christening of Carlos Flores' son. I said I was on my way back now, as the mass had taken place early that morning and the fiesta was about to begin. She looked relieved and told me that she is always flattered to be invited to fiestas, but that she has a hard time with Spanish in the noisy environment. She carried with her a bottle of mezcal, an appropriate gift for the parents, as well as a small woodcarving she had purchased that morning from Román and Marisol Castillo. Dropping her voice, she admitted that she had been disappointed with the quality of Román's pieces this year. "I think they are having problems, Marisol and Román. I'm not sure if it's about money or about a woman."

* * * * *

Almost every day in San Martín Tilcajete, and the other craft producing communities of Oaxaca, tourists arrive at the workshops of artisans to see and buy a little piece of "real Mexico." That authentic Mexico is located in rustic, rural villages and distilled down into the handcrafted objects that villagers make is an idea that is continually produced, circulated and recirculated by the tourism industry in Oaxaca, a location famous in the Mexican imagination for traditional and indigenous culture, and well known internationally for its colonial architecture, ancient ruins and unique cuisine. The desires of tourists, while not necessarily the only market that artisans consider, form a large part of the "imaginaries" of Tileños who spend a significant amount of their time thinking about tourists and imagining what might attract them to their own work. Tourism and tourism-related industries form important vehicles through which the aesthetic sensibilities of Oaxacan woodcarvers are directed, developed and reinforced. Tourism, then, forms a significant part of the background against which artisans make aesthetic

decisions, and in many ways it is the driving force behind the desirability of contemporary Oaxacan craftwork, even for other actors like the state, collectors and museums. However, despite the central importance of tourism today for the production of craft objects, the study of craftwork has a much longer history in the anthropology of Mexico, and this historical trajectory continues to inform the research questions of contemporary anthropologists working on craft.

In this chapter, I sketch these intellectual and social contexts of my research to form a background onto which the arguments and data presented in this thesis can be drawn. This background has three major features, each of which inflects my project in unique and important ways: the history of anthropological research in Mexico; the politics and economics of tourism in the state of Oaxaca; and the research site itself, the village of San Martín Tilcajete. I begin with the anthropology of Mexican craft, charting its theoretical changes through time to show how these changes reflect the shifting analytical problems and intellectual moods of the discipline as well as the changing position of artisans within the Mexican economy and society. I then move on to the social context of my research, focusing primarily on the development of the tourism industry and the political context in which tourism has itself become politicised. Finally, I introduce San Martín Tilcajete and the artisans with whom I worked. This background provides the necessary information through which the ethnographic exploration of the aesthetics and the auras of art objects may be understood.

The anthropology of craft in Mexico: culture, campesinos and the political economy of production

Recent anthropological debates about the materiality of the objects people use have called into question the terms by which anthropologists have traditionally classified material culture (Myers 2001: 12-31). But as early as the 1970s, anthropologists and art sociologists were beginning to unpack the concept of “art” to try to uncover the processes involved in constituting different kinds of art. Nelson Graburn’s ground breaking volume, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts* (1976) was the first major attempt to engage with the aesthetic objects produced by marginalised and colonised peoples on their own terms, taking into account the important productive role that tourism plays in the creation of these works. Graburn proposed a typology of ethnic art, based on a basic distinction between work that is mainly produced for, appreciated, and used by people within a society, and those that are made primarily for outside consumption (1976: 5). Thus “tourist art,” according to Graburn’s original typology, occurs when the symbolic content and aesthetics conform more to outsiders’ popular notions of the ethnic group concerned and when the artist’s aesthetic desires are subsumed to market demand (ibid; Graburn 1984).

Graburn’s typology was important within the anthropology of art at the time because it drew attention to the fact that tourist art is not necessarily inauthentic or acculturated versions of “true” ethnic art, but should be considered a different kind of art object altogether. This move opened up the field for the critical investigation of many different types of arts all around the world, and set the stage for other important projects within anthropology, like the unpacking of the concepts of “primitivism” and “culture” within the study of art in the 1980s (e.g. Clifford 1988; Price 1989) and serious anthropological engagement with arts as cultural commodities in colonial and postcolonial contexts (e.g. Phillips and Steiner 1999; Myers 2002).

While some of the aesthetic products of rural and indigenous peoples in Mexico have been considered as cultural commodities within larger systems of ethnic art production (e.g. Stephen 2005: 152-199; Wood 2008; see below), they have for the most part been approached as “craftwork,” owing to their identification within Mexico as artesanías. Indeed, as Néstor García Canclini notes, unlike any other Latin American country,

“[even] before mass communication and tourism, the artesanías of different ethnic groups, historical symbols, and regional ways of thinking transcended their exclusive connections to local culture... forming a unified iconographic repertoire that is seen as representative of Mexicanness [*mexicanidad*]” (1993a: 47, my translation).

This transcendence of local culture resulted in the generalising categorisation of Mexican aesthetic objects as “artesanías” – generally translated to “crafts” – which has resulted in the dominance of specific kinds of research topics, meaning that certain questions currently posed by the anthropology of art have not yet impacted significantly on this field.

As early as the 1930s, weaving was described by Elsie Clews Parsons as one of the primary economic activities of the Zapotec-speaking communities in Oaxaca’s Valles Centrales (Wood 2000a: 183). In the decades between the 1930s and the 1950s many other ethnographers of rural Mexico also mentioned, at least in passing, the production of craftwork, along with peasant milpa agriculture, as a primary economic activity of the communities they studied (e.g. Redfield 1930: 31-53; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962 [1934]: 41-42, 49; O. Lewis 1951: 101-102, 167-168).²⁴ These early studies did not usually focus on craft production as a topic per se, but rather considered it an artifact or expression of the social institutions of the indigenous community, such as

²⁴ *Milpa* agriculture is the combination of maize, beans and squash that has been the main food staple of the Mesoamerican geographical area. The term “milpa” derives from the Nahuatl (Aztec) language for “field” and is used in contemporary Mexican Spanish to refer to fields in general, but also often indicates complex interactions and relationships between people and the land.

kinship and *compadrazgo* (ritual co-parenthood), the civil-religious hierarchy of the *cargo* system (see below), the religious *cofradias* (confraternities for the celebration of the saints) and their ever-present fiestas. It was common to identify in this material culture the remnants of pre-Hispanic cultural forms, even where other aspects of the community were considered to have been radically changed (e.g. Redfield 1930: 48).

As many of the American anthropologists working in Mexico at this time were affiliated with the University of Chicago, it is unsurprising that a Boasian culture concept informed these studies; communities that were imagined to have retained the most indigenous culture since the conquest were compared and contrasted with those who had become more “acculturated.” This approach matched well with the theoretical and political concerns of the Mexican *Indigenista* (indigenist) anthropologists, who worked with and within the Secretario de Gobernación (Ministry of the Interior) to deal with Mexico’s “Indian problem” (García Canclini 1993b: 24; Gutiérrez 1999: 90-91; see Introduction, Chapter Three). For both Mexican and American anthropologists at this time, the small communities that were the focus of research were considered to be cultural “regions of refuge,” where indigenous culture with its pre-Hispanic origins was still maintained. This cultural essentialist position thus took the ethnographic project as an “archaeology of culture” (Wood n.d.: 6), undertaken to identify, sort, and analyse the various cultural traits that reflected the continuing pre-Hispanic character of contemporary indigenous life. In the case of the Indigenistas, however, this “archaeology of culture” was undertaken in order to better understand the relations between these “regions of refuge” and the larger society, in order that they might be brought into the civilising fold of the Mexican nation state, dominated by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).²⁵

²⁵ *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), The Institutional Revolutionary Party, previously the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR) which had emerged successfully after the Revolution. The PRI

In reaction to this cultural essentialist position that had dominated Mexican anthropology until this point, what Watanabe calls a “colonial historicist” position began to develop in the 1960s (1992: 5; Wood n.d.). Drawing on the greater shift in anthropology away from imaging communities and cultures as stable entities, researchers of rural Mexico began to attribute what had once been seen as “culture” to the inhabitants’ experiences within colonial and post-colonial political structures (Watanabe 1992: 7; e.g. Wolf 1957; 1982; Friedlander 1975). Kearney has shown that the particular historical combination of the end of direct colonialism in Africa and the rise of developmentalism in the context of the Cold War contributed to the consolidation of a new dichotomy of “modern versus traditional,” where the “traditional, rural and underdeveloped” replaced the “primitive and primordial” as anthropology’s generalised Other (Kearney 1996: 31-41), a change that was later reflected in the practices of Euro-American culture industries, like museums and art galleries in the late eighties (S. Errington 1998: 98). This shift was also driven by the realities of Mexico in the later twentieth century; anthropologists could not ignore the fact that the daily lives of their informants were increasingly characterised by urbanisation, migration, economic crisis and domination by the state, its bureaucracies and the PRI (e.g. O. Lewis 1963; Rothstein 1982; Wolf 1986).

As this transition in research agendas took place, a new Marxist-inspired focus on class led anthropologists, political scientists and others to consider rural people as a whole as *campesinos* (peasants), rather than Indians or mestizos, and their articulation with the capitalist economy became a central concern (e.g. Rothstein 1979; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Benería and Roldan 1987; Brandes 1988). Because of this, political-economic studies specifically focused on craft production began to be more common,

famously was the longest-tenured elected party in the world, with an unbroken rule of over 70 years when it fell out of power in 2000. For the PRI in Oaxaca, see below.

and the terms of analysis turned from discussions of artifacts and material culture, to ones of modes of production, markets and commoditisation. Kearney observes that while the colonial historicist position was reacting against the essentialising approach to “culture” of earlier anthropological attitudes, this in turn influenced many of the new dependency theorists, informed Chayanov’s writings on the peasantry, who began to reify the category of “the peasant” and often romanticised rural life, evoking a stable and uniform peasant economy in the countryside (Kearney 1996: 73-81; 88-90). This often led, as Kearney shows, to the presentation of “the Valley of Oaxaca and other comparable regions as populated with subsistence and petty commodity producers operating outside of capitalist relations” (ibid: 95); categorising the peasant economy as “traditional” and the capitalist economy as “modern,” thus positioning traditional craft production outside of the capitalist relations of the market (ibid: 46-49, *passim*; cf. Bartra 1993: 22-27; 59-78; Novelo 1993: 220-231).

Despite the romanticism that characterised some work on peasants in the 1980s, this new focus on rural economic processes served to bring the production of craftwork to the heart of anthropological analyses in Mexico, in the longer term resulting in more nuanced, less romantic perspectives on artisans and crafts. Scott Cook’s work on small-scale agricultural producers and artisans in the Valles Centrales has demonstrated that there is no clear-cut distinction between the peasant and capitalist markets in Mexico, and argues for a rejection of the dualistic approach to economy in favour of a “unitarian commodity economy concept” (Cook and Binford 1990: 30; Cook 1993). Cook has also been concerned with social differentiation amongst Oaxaca’s campesinos as a result of the peasant economy’s on-going articulation with the national and global capitalist markets, showing in his detailed survey of the Valles Centrales, completed with Leigh Binford in 1990, that new classes of pieceworkers, petty merchants and petty industrial

capitalists were emerging from the more established classes of small agricultural and artisanal producers. Unlike the dependency theorists and other development and planning approaches, which concerned themselves with the class-based exploitation of peasants and workers, Cook and Binford argued convincingly that social relations of production are concretely experienced and lived through many vertical and horizontal ties of kinship, ethnicity and class, making the divisions between class groups much more complex than other approaches allow for (Cook and Binford 1990: 229). Cook's refreshing insights into the mechanisms of class and market change in Oaxaca's countryside provided the necessary economic context for deeper understandings of craft production. However, his rather rigid approach to economic anthropology could only explain the production and marketing of crafts as commodities, and leaves little room for explanations of the role that consumers, culture and national ideology play in driving demand and the specific forms that crafts take (García Canclini 1993b: 45).²⁶

In attempts to deal with this, some anthropologists have combined the important political-economic insights of the economicistic and historicist approaches with a consideration of the “politics of culture” that has since the late 1980s become an increasingly important topic within anthropology more generally. This move has again been in response to both disciplinary and historical changes (cf. Diskin 1995). As the critique of the culture concept took hold in anthropological debates (Handler 1988; 1990; Clifford 1988; Price 1989; S. Errington 1993), the roles that tourism, museums and even anthropology play in the production and marketing of craftwork became a central concern for Mexican craft studies.

²⁶ See, for example, the “formalist-substantivist” debate of the 1960s (Cook 1966; Cancian 1966: 465-466, 469).

At the same time, culture has also been foregrounded in public debates and disputes surrounding ethnicity and identity in Mexico since the 1990s, especially with the increasing visibility of indigenous rights movements, such as the Zapatistas (EZLN) in the state of Chiapas, who have fought for autonomy from the Mexican state since 1994 (Mattiace 2003). Next door in Oaxaca, indigenous rights discourses and cultural revivalist movements are more often than not entangled with class and occupational concerns (Stephen 1997). Intellectuals and formal political organisations such as the COCEI have worked to foment and politicise a particularly Zapotec ethnic identity in the southern Isthmus region of the state (Campbell 1994: 213-246).²⁷ Indigenous leaders were also centrally involved in The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) movement in Oaxaca City, instigated by a teachers strike in 2006, which I discuss in detail below (Hernández Díaz 2007a: 11-12; Stephen 2009).²⁸

The rise of the politics of culture has profoundly influenced anthropological analyses of artisanal production in the countryside, and since the early 1990s, analysts have combined a concern with these movements and their political objectives with the insights provided by economicistic approaches. June Nash, for example, has expanded insights from Cook's economic analyses to embed discussions of markets, commoditisation and economic change within a discussion of culture, emphasising that artesanías are not just the products of relations between campesinos and capitalism, but between *indigenous* campesinos and capitalism. Unlike the cultural essentialists of the early twentieth century, her approach accords the possibility of change to indigenous culture itself without equating it to acculturation and cultural loss (Nash 1993a: 2). Although concerns about the effects of commoditisation on local gender relations and

²⁷ EZLN - Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation); COCEI - La Coalición Obrera Campesina Estudiantil del Istmo (The Worker-Peasant-Student Coalition of the Isthmus [of Tehuantepec])

²⁸ See Eisenstadt 2011: 18-44 for a useful comparison of the Zapatista and APPO movements.

household reproduction are central to her work, Nash grounds her notions of change not just in terms of articulations with the capitalist economy, but also within a consideration of the roles of tourism and the state in directing these changes (Nash 1993b: 142-149). Elsewhere, García Canclini has also drawn significant attention to the class politics of craft promotion and consumption in Mexico, arguing that the category “artesanía” functions to categorise people and their products, subsuming varied material practices into organised and logical categories which are then mobilised by the state and elite for their own desires (García Canclini 1993, 1995; see Chapter Three).

Both the disciplinary and the political contexts since the mid-1990s in Mexico, then, have reasserted the need to take culture into account, problematizing in turn the class- and economy-dominated focus of earlier studies. What differentiates these newer approaches from the cultural essentialist position of the early twentieth century is their recognition of the mutable and profoundly political nature of culture and indigeneity. This concern is now fundamental to most ethnographic analyses of artisanal production in the Mexican countryside (e.g. Cohen 1998, 1999; Carruthers 2001; Cowen 2005).

Lynn Stephen’s work on the village of Teotitlán del Valle, in the Tlacolula arm of the Valles Centrales exemplifies this approach. Her analysis focuses on the changing relations of gender and class as Zapotec weavers and merchants negotiate the internal and external dynamics of producing and marketing their wool rugs and bags in the artesanía and ethnic art markets. On the one hand, Stephen traces the economic linkages between different modes of production through time and space, such as the development of weaving cooperatives from the 1980s to the early 2000s, emphasising, as did Cook and Binford, the emergence of new class positions directly in relation to the modes of production and marketing of textiles (2005: 215-230). On the other hand, like Nash and

García Canclini, she relates the everyday experiences of weavers as producers of artesanías to their position within a national and global economy of cultural difference. She argues that their attempts to define a unified local ethnicity, through the development of a community museum and discourses of indigeneity, are in constant tension with the processes of economic stratification within the community itself (ibid: 199), resulting in significant changes in the social reproduction of households, gender relations and the civil-religious cargo system of power and prestige (ibid: 199; 251-255; 279-323).

While Stephen's work vividly portrays everyday experiences of work and power, especially for women, in Teotitlán del Valle, her monograph focuses for the most part on (re)productive relations within the community and pays less attention to the interconnections and dependencies between Teotitlán and other communities and institutions. While she does address the issue of Teotiteco weavers reproducing Navajo designs in their textiles (2005: 189-194), her attention remains focused on the artisans as workers and members of households, workshops, and cooperatives, and pays less attention to them as aesthetic producers of objects, and to those objects themselves. In this thesis, I extend the useful research programme established by anthropologists like Stephen, by bringing these concerns to the heart of questions about the politics and culture of craft in Oaxaca.

Refocusing on objects has been a central concern of recent scholarship, inspired by the writings on globalisation by Arjun Appadurai (1985) and George Marcus (1995), amongst others. This has led to more nuanced understandings of the interrelationships among craft-producing communities in Oaxaca, and between these communities and the many locales where crafts are bought, sold and resold. Rather than focusing on single

villages, Michael Chibnik (2003) and William Warner Wood (2000, 2008) have addressed different communities that produce the same kinds of objects. Both authors have plotted the historical and economic relationships formed by material connections, demonstrating that processes working outside the boundaries of “the community” are increasingly significant in the everyday practices of craft production and marketing in Oaxaca.

Chibnik’s exploration of the particular history of Oaxacan woodcarvings emphasises the importance of wholesalers, journalists, and collectors in the development and direction of markets for the carvings (2003: 19-59; 174-234). He has also helpfully shown that economic and stylistic decision-making by individual artisans is often an inseparable combination of market rationality and personal idiosyncrasy (ibid: 130-173; 2006). Wood has explored in detail the implications of what he calls the “weaving production complex” of the Tlacolula arm of the Valles Centrales region, emphasising that the economic and social relationships between the smaller weaving communities and the more dominant Teotitlán del Valle are not merely incidental to the character and form of textile production, but rather directly shape it. He suggests these extra-community relationships should be made central to any analysis of weaving in Oaxaca (2000), and expands this observation to argue that the cultural institutions of the state, and the North American tourism and museum industries, should likewise be foregrounded in analyses of craft production. He suggests that rather than considering these actors as outside influences on crafts, they should instead be considered part of the communities that produce woodcarvings, shifting the focus of analytical attention from the physical communities like Teotitlán to a more conceptual “community of practice” (Wood 2008). Both Chibnik’s and Wood’s analyses have proven highly useful in

making sense of the processes of production and marketing I observed in San Martín, and I shall return to them throughout this thesis.

What becomes clear through tracing this history is that within Mexican anthropology, Oaxaca has been an important location for a large amount of research on campesino lifeways and craft production in particular. This is partially due to the fact that the state actually does produce a very high proportion of artesanías, both for consumption within Mexico and for export. It is also due to the fact that Oaxaca continues to attract anthropological interest in general, as it is a state with a large indigenous population, and a complex history of ethnic relations and political activity, topics which continue to be attractive within the discipline. The next section sets out the general context of my research in Oaxaca, focusing particularly on the development of tourism and the political conditions that have had a significant impact on artesanía markets in recent years. As most Tileño artisans continue to depend on tourists' purchases of their work, the volatility of politics in Oaxaca has placed them in a situation of economic unpredictability, leading to a general state of disapproval by Tileños towards oppositional politics and movements.

Sketching the outlines: tourism and politics in the state of Oaxaca

Wendy and John's short visit to San Martín Tilcajete was an experience that is had by many of the thousands of visitors who travel to the state of Oaxaca each year. Visiting at least one of the many craft villages that are scattered around the city is a common activity for tourists who visit the state; it is promoted on tourist websites, in printed travel guides such as Lonely Planet and Moon Handbooks, and is an integral part of the organised tours that are made daily out of Oaxaca City. Visiting craft workshops is an experience that is central to the on-going construction of Oaxaca as a

“cultural” or “ethnic tourism” destination, a process that involves conceptually foregrounding the lifeways of groups of people defined by ethnic or class difference (Smith 1977: 5).

Unlike some of the more famous tourism destinations in Mexico, like Acapulco or Cancún, the tourism industry of Oaxaca City is not focused on the beach tourism “sun, sand, and sea” model that has made Mexico the tenth most visited international destination in the world, generating approximately £8.4 billion GBP/ \$13.3 billion USD in 2008 (UNWTO 2010). While Oaxaca does have a few beach destinations, like Huatulco and Puerto Escondido, the focus of its tourism programme has been the promotion of cultural tourism, centred in and around the state capital, Oaxaca de Juárez, or Oaxaca City, which plays on its history and culture to attract tourists. In productive tension with the marketing of the beach resorts, Oaxaca City sets itself apart as an opportunity to experience authentic Mexico, which it often subtly suggests is diluted elsewhere.

The state of Oaxaca is located on the southern Pacific coast and is known for its geographical, natural and cultural diversity. The population is approximately 3.8 million; over one million live in the Valles Centrales (Central Valleys) region, where Oaxaca City is located, making it politically and economically the most important region in the state (INEGI 2010; See Map 2). Like its neighbouring states of Chiapas and Guerrero, Oaxaca is home to a large proportion of Mexico’s indigenous peoples. As of 2000, 37 percent of Oaxaca’s adult population spoke an indigenous first language, and over one-third of all indigenous municipalities in Mexico are located in Oaxaca (INEGI 2000). Oaxaca has fourteen major ethno-linguistic groups that are recognised by

the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI).²⁹ Many of these ethno-linguistic groups, however, actually comprise a much greater number of related yet distinct languages. For example, the most widely spoken indigenous language in Oaxaca, Zapotec, includes at least four variants in the Sierra Norte, the Sierra del Sur, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Valles Centrales, and each of these, in turn, have a number of local dialects (INALI: 2010). In Oaxaca, as elsewhere in southern Mexico, common language does not necessarily translate to conceptualisations of ethnic belonging in any consistent manner (Cook and Joo 1995; see Chapter 5).

Deborah Poole has observed that is not a coincidence that Oaxaca is both one of the most indigenous and one of the poorest states in the country; she reports that 356 of the 400 Mexican municipalities categorised as in “extreme poverty” are located there (2009: 205). In 2003, the World Bank also concluded that seventy percent of the population of southern Mexico lives in extreme poverty, that is, they are unable to meet their basic subsistence needs (Canby 2010). The overall economy is extremely depressed: although Oaxaca represents three percent of the nation’s population, it only contributes 1.5 percent to Mexico’s gross national product (Waterbury 2007: 8). Ironically, Oaxaca’s underdevelopment has contributed to its attractiveness to tourists; the lack of industrial development, like the factories and refineries that have sprawled out around many Mexican cities, has meant that it has retained the aesthetic charm that tourists seek.

The Oaxacan economy traditionally depended on campesino agricultural and artisanal production, along with some industry, but it expanded dramatically in 1980s as

²⁹ *Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas* (CDI); formerly the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI) National Indigenist Institute; The fourteen linguistic groups are: Amuzgo, Chatino, Chontal de Oaxaca, Chinanteco, Chocho, Cuicatec, Huave, Mazateco, Mixe, Mixteco, Nahuatl, Triqui, Zoque and Zapotec.

increased federal funding to the state led to growth in the government sector, simultaneously increasing activity in construction and service industries. Employment in the service sector is now much more common in Oaxaca City than other cities of similar size elsewhere in Mexico (Murphy and Stepik 1991: 85-87). The Oaxacan state considers tourism a significant factor within the economy. It is now so dependent on it that the current governor, Gabino Cué Monteagudo, combined the departments for tourism and development in 2010 to create the Office of the Secretary of Tourism and Economic Development (STYDE).³⁰ In 2010 hotels registered over 4.1 million arrivals, generating almost eight billion pesos through hotels and guest houses alone (INEGI 2012; STYDE 2012).³¹ Importantly, Mexican residents make up a large percentage of Oaxacan tourism, representing 95 percent of hotel visitors, the majority of which are from Mexico City or Puebla (STYDE 2012). Although the state also economically invests in the development of natural resources through shipping, mining, forestry and the generation of wind-power and hydroelectricity, tourism clearly is the primary official economic generator. As a bureaucrat at Oaxaca's Secretary of Tourism told me in 2009, tourism only lags behind the undocumented economies of drug trafficking and migrant remittances in the state.

Oaxaca's ethnic tourism model is focused on three major themes, which are continually represented through state and private tourism imagery: the pre-Hispanic past; the colonial period of Oaxaca City; and the contemporary culture and lifeways of traditional and indigenous peoples. These three themes are made central to the tourist experience over and over again in Oaxaca, directly through tourism promotional material, and more subtly through the circulation of imagery and discourses that surround tourists from the moment they arrive (see Figure 3). As Wood has observed,

³⁰ *Secretaría de Turismo y Desarrollo Económico* (STYDE)

³¹ Approximately £400 million GBP/\$630 million USD

the Mexican and Oaxacan state governments have gone to great lengths to control and disseminate this image of Oaxaca through urban planning interventions, like repaving the streets in the tourist centre to match the colonial architecture (2008: 32), or by directing funding towards museums and cultural activities that fall in line with this project.



Figure 3: Oaxacan State Tourism Advertising, the official poster of 2010 Guelaguetza Festival

The pre-Hispanic past is offered to tourists in the form of excavated and reconstructed Zapotec and Mixtec archaeological sites and in museums in Oaxaca City. The sites are some of the most significant local resources for Oaxacan tourism; in 2008 the archaeological zones of Oaxaca, managed and operated by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), attracted almost 620,000 visitors (SECTUR 2012).³² The site of Monte Albán, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and touted as the first city in the Americas, and Mitla, the site known for its unique mosaic fretwork that decorates its stone walls, are the most important. It is telling that only the fluorescence of Zapotec and Mixtec pre-Hispanic culture is emphasised; other periods, like the

³² *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH)

conquest of the Valley of Oaxaca by the Aztec empire in the late fifteenth century, are notably avoided.

The colonial history of Oaxaca City or Antequera, as it was known then, is also highly visible in Oaxacan tourism imagery. As it was the site the first major Spanish settlement outside of Mexico City, the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church invested heavily in the building of cathedrals, monasteries and basilicas throughout the colonial period (1519-1810) (see Figure 4). Many of the colonial secular buildings also remain, and the city centre of Oaxaca was also declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987. This focus on the colonial history of Oaxaca within tourism discourses is directly tied to the greater political projects of the state, as the official story told to tourists leaves out other important periods in Oaxacan history, which place the state in a less positive light, like the Porfiriato, the dictatorship of the Oaxacan Porfirio Díaz, or the Revolution in which Oaxaca's role was peripheral and ambivalent. Recent political history is also avoided where possible (Lira Vásquez 2009). This historicisation in tourism is not unique to Oaxaca, but rather is a tool used by different states throughout Mexico to promote their cultural and heritage locations. For example, unlike Oaxaca the Revolution dominates tourism imaginaries in Guanajuato, in central Mexico, where important silver mines were located and key events in the Revolution took place (see Ferry 2005: 2-3).



Figure 4: 17th century Catholic Church of Saint Martin Obispo, San Martín Tilcajete

Finally, the traditions and cultures of contemporary Oaxacans form a large part of the draw for cultural tourists, and it is within this tourism theme that the artisans of San Martín and the other craft communities of the Valles Centrales work. Other attractions that showcase the contemporary cultures of Oaxaca include the state-sponsored Guelaguetza Festival, held each July, at which invited representatives from the eight regions of Oaxaca perform dances in traditional dress (see Chapter 5); and the Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations in late October and early November. The state has also been involved in developing new cultural tourism events, like the now annual Feria de Mezcal, focused on the Oaxacan agave liquor, and the Feria del Chocolate, first held in January 2009, which highlights chocolate-based Oaxacan cuisine like mole, champurrado, and Oaxacan hot chocolate.

Despite the fact that tourism to Oaxaca grew significantly in the nineties and early 2000s, since then the state has faced marked difficulties in retaining the same levels of visitors. In 2006, the city was effectively closed to tourism for a full year due to on-going political protests, marches and blockades by APPO, a loose affiliation of popular class- and ethnic-based movements from across the state, comprised mostly of the “elite segment of the working class” like unionised and skilled workers, health workers, school teachers, and local intellectuals like professors and artists (Waterbury 2007: 8). The movement was instigated by calls for general strike action by the Oaxacan Section 22 of the National Educational Workers’ Union (SNTE) during their annual strike and occupation of Oaxaca City’s zócalo, the main square. Like many other unions and organisations, Section 22 had long opposed the domination of the state government by the PRI party, which had been in power in Oaxaca for over seventy years (*ibid*). What sparked the intense action in 2006 however, were direct claims for Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz to step down amidst allegations of election fraud and general corruption. Facing increasing violence and human rights abuses from the state, APPO reacted with further blockades that not only caught the attention of the Mexican nation, but also, with the shooting of American freelance journalist Bradley Will, the international press, resulting in hundreds of stories warning travellers to avoid the city.³³

Although the violence and intense political action subsided in the latter months of 2006, and Ulises Ruiz and the PRI were finally defeated in the 2009 gubernatorial elections to the social democratic Convergencia party candidate Gabino Cué, political strife continues in Oaxaca. Unions and other organisations still frequently block roads and set up encampments in the zócalo, the very heart of Oaxaca City’s tourism centre. Tourism itself has also become a politically contentious issue. At the height of the 2006

³³ See the multiple pieces in Anthropology News 48(3), Norget (2010), Eisenstadt (2011: 21-24), Esteva et al (2010) for succinct analyses of the events of 2006.

protests, UNESCO threatened to revoke Oaxaca City's World Heritage designation, as protestors' graffiti and encampments were "harming," in their words, the colonial architecture for which it was granted. This threat was used rhetorically in the conservative media to undermine the protestors' arguments. Tourism was also a convenient excuse by successive PRI governments to carry out unneeded or unpopular activities, often allowing them to channel funds to personal and private interests (c.f. Esteva *et al.* 2007; Gómez Aguiar 2007; Olvera 2010: 100).

This political unrest has also taken place within the context of other pressures on tourism. 2009, the second year of my research, proved a particularly difficult year for tourism to Oaxaca, with the global financial crash, the swine-flu (H1N1) epidemic and reports of increasing violence converging to keep travellers away. The high-profile drug-related violence, exacerbated by the "war on drugs" continues to be the most significant of these issues. Since the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)'s Felipe Calderón became president of Mexico in 2006, he increased pressure by the state on drug cartels and paramilitary organisations, elevating insecurity in Mexico significantly and attracting wide media coverage in North America and Europe (Shirk 2012: 1).³⁴ While Oaxaca has remained for the most part removed from the drug violence, some high-profile incidents reportedly involving the paramilitary group "Los Zetas" have resulted in conflicting reports for tourists about security (cf. Las Noticias 2010; CBC News 2012). Although drug violence-related deaths in Oaxaca nearly doubled between 2009 and 2010, they are still relatively low compared to other Mexican states (Shirk 2012: 5). Frequently, reports of post-electoral political violence in Oaxacan municipalities far removed from tourism areas get picked up by the international media in its stream of

³⁴ PAN *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party), the conservative party that held two 6-year presidencies since it defeated the PRI in 2000; Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006-2012). On July 1st, 2012, Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI won the presidential election and will take power in December.

reports on Mexican drug violence, warning tourists to avoid the state altogether.

Although national tourist arrivals to Oaxaca remain strong, the number of international visitors entering Mexico hit a twenty-year low in the first six months of 2011, raising serious concerns for the long-term health of the tourism economy (FNS: 2011).

Despite these difficulties, many families in the craft communities in the Valles Centrales continue to produce beautiful hand-made objects for the tourist and collector markets. Some families are lucky in that they have connections with wholesalers and gallery owners outside of Oaxaca to whom they can sell their work directly. As each community is known for specialising in one type of craft, (see Map 3) this arrangement is particularly convenient for tourism, as it allows guides to structure tours around visiting a few different villages in one day. However, this spatial division of production is the result of long-standing system of regional rotating markets known as *tianguis*. The *tianguis* system is organised so that markets are held in different towns on specific days of the week, for example in Ocotlán de Morelos on Fridays and Tlacolula on Saturdays. This allows people from the villages and adjacent regions of the Valles Centrales to bring their goods to larger markets, as vendors travel to each market to sell their wares (Diskin 1976: 49-65). As the *tianguis* also draw tourists, it means that Fridays are by far the busiest day for tourism in San Martín Tilcajete. In the final sections of this chapter, I introduce San Martín and the woodcarvings that are produced there for tourists, collectors and export. San Martín has much in common sociologically with many other villages in the Valles Centrales, and parallels will be strong to descriptions of communities throughout Oaxaca. However, many characteristics specific to San Martín as a village also influence the character of woodcarving production and these will be drawn out throughout the chapters that follow.

The field site: San Martín Tilcajete

San Martín Tilcajete is an ideal location for selling “authentic Mexico.” Its dusty streets stretch, in a neat Spanish colonial grid, past brightly painted cement walls, the trimmed garden of the main square, and the imposing seventeenth century church, dedicated to Saint Martin Obispo of Tours, France, who became the patron saint of the village, after his miraculous appearance saved the majority of the town’s population from attack during the Revolution. Behind the new cement facades, old adobe walls seem to be returning to the earth, and cows, goats and donkeys wander through the streets, providing opportunities for great photographs (See Figure 5). Dark little shops, selling crisps, pop and ice cream provide a welcome retreat from the bright sun, and children often run along the main street, offering to take tourists to their families’ workshops.

San Martín is located about 25 kilometres south of Oaxaca City, and is the head (*cabecera municipal*) of its own small municipality in the Ocotlán district. According to the 2010 national census, the population is 1,742 people (INEGI 2010). However, the population varies throughout the year as migrants come and go from the United States; the 2000 national census reported San Martín’s population as 2,776 people, and Cohen reports that over fifty percent of San Martín’s households are economically dependent on remittances (2004: 153-154). It is one of the smallest municipalities in the state, occupying only about 27 square kilometres, constrained between Highway 175 and the large hill known locally as “María Sánchez” (see Figure 1, p.18).³⁵ From 1891 it was an *ayuntamiento* (council) under the control of the municipality of Ocotlán, but it gained political independence in 1905 and for some time controlled the neighbouring

³⁵Or “La Teta de María Sánchez,” (the breast of “María Sánchez”). The hill figures in prominently in local folktales (see Chapter 5).

municipalities of San Pedro Guegorexe, Santo Tomás Jalieza, and Santa Cecilia y San Cristóbal Izcatlán as *agencias* (Serrano Oswald 2010: 123).



Figure 5: An idyllic street scene in San Martín Tilcajete

The centre of the village proper is divided up into private plots, on which families have their houses, keep animals and plant small gardens. The arable land surrounding the village is cultivated by households who have equal access to it, as it is communally held by the municipality, either in *terreno comunal* or *ejidal* forms. Communal land claims were granted in Mexico where communities could claim “primordial title,” and ejido lands were redistributed from large landowners and the Church under the agrarian reforms after the Mexican Revolution (Bartra 1993: 94-97; Eisenstadt 2011: 29). San

Martín itself claims primordial title by reference to the Zapotec sites on the ridge above the village, which indicate occupation from at least 500 BC (Flannery and Marcus 2007: xi). Its two ejido lands are relatively small, and the entire area is very arid, and a lack of water sources makes irrigation impossible. The village continues to be involved in a land dispute with the neighbouring municipality to the west, Santa María Zaachila, which, like other inter-village conflicts in Oaxaca, occasionally flares up into violence (Serrano Oswald 2010: 136; cf. Dennis 1987).

An etymological catalogue of Oaxacan place names from 1883 reports that the earlier Zapotec name for San Martín was Tilcaxitl meaning “black cajete” or black earthenware pot. However, many older residents of San Martín reported to me that the “Til” refers to the natural red cochineal dye, which was an important export from Oaxaca during the colonial period. San Martín’s municipality is currently governed under the system of *usos y costumbres*, literally, “uses and customs,” or “traditions,” a system that was legally sanctified under reforms to Oaxaca’s constitution in 1995. These reforms were officially intended to grant further autonomy to indigenous communities and to legally recognise the political practices already existing in Oaxaca (Durand Ponte 2007: 20). They prohibit political parties from participation in municipal elections within designated municipalities, and election to community leadership takes place within the structures of the *cargo* hierarchical system of power. The cargo system, common in indigenous communities throughout Latin America, is constituted by a hierarchy of unpaid positions of community service, which are occupied by men who work their way up through the ranks.

In San Martín, men begin their cargos or “servicios” when they turn eighteen or marry, and those in full-time education are not allowed to take on positions. Unlike

some other villages, in San Martín all men must start at the lowest cargo (*topiles*, the village police force) and slowly work their way up through the positions in the hierarchy, such as the health centre committee, before they can even consider running for a position in the municipality (see Appendix 1). As such, the members of the municipal authority tend to be over forty five years of age and those who have spent the majority of their lives in San Martín, rather than working elsewhere. While women are allowed to vote in the municipal assemblies for elections and other decision-making processes, they cannot hold cargos. However, a large number of them work with the school committee (said to be because of their responsibilities for child-care within the household) and are able to hold the position of Municipal Secretary. Yet they themselves do not accrue the moral authority that characterises a man's movement through the system. Each year of service is generally followed by a year of rest, and although migrants are able to make payments to "stand in" for their year of service, those who live in San Martín feel great pressure to participate actively.³⁶

Although the recognition of usos y costumbres appears to be a liberal move towards indigenous autonomy in Oaxaca, it has been subject to critique by activists and intellectuals. Many have observed that although it is supposed to be free of political party influence, it often functions as a de facto mechanism for the PRI to consolidate its power in rural municipalities (Anaya Muñoz 2005: 601-608; Hernández Díaz 2007b: 50-52; Eisenstadt 2011: 53-54). Further, questions have been raised about the ability to defend individuals' and women's rights within usos y costumbres communities; the case of Eufrosina Cruz who was elected by her community and then stripped of office in 2007 for being a woman was highly publicised in Oaxaca (ibid: 120, 159). During my

³⁶ In accordance with Oaxacan law, official cargos in San Martín are now only civil rather than a combination of civil and religious. Economic costs for the saints' days is shared out through a separate sponsorship regime but the prestige associated with the sponsorship of these fiestas does not contribute to the male head of household's position within the civil cargo system.

fieldwork in San Martín, at least one family had their electricity cut off for many months during a dispute with the municipality over participation in the cargos.

The majority of Tileños are practising or nominally Catholic. One family had converted to Jehovah's Witness in the early 2000s and on a visit back to San Martín in 2010 I found another family had started attending an evangelical church located in Ocotlán. Many Tileños are aware of problems that other communities have had with "Los Cristianos," (evangelical Christians), and cite their common faith – or at least participation – in the Catholic Church as one way the community remains united.

Most households in San Martín engage in multiple activities for their livelihoods. Many cultivate the traditional milpa crops and raise goats, chickens and *guajolotes* (Mexican turkeys), both for their own consumption and to sell. As families can lose rights to specific plots of communal land that is left uncultivated, wealthier households continue to plant crops, even if they contribute relatively little to the household economy. Other sources of income include working in the government and service sectors in Oaxaca City, running small shops selling grocery, household and stationary products, hairdressing, driving *colectivo* taxis between the village and Ocotlán or Oaxaca City, driving small *mototaxis* around the village, construction work, and of course, migrant remittances.

Many of the artisans with whom I worked are in their late thirties to late fifties, and we often spoke about the futures their children might have in Oaxaca. Their worries often came up in conversations about the business side of artesanías. The profits that could be made from woodcarving have tailed-off in recent years, due to the effects on tourism described above and also because of more general maturation of the market

(Chibnik: 2003: 239-242). While artisans are aware that it is increasingly difficult to trust in the income from woodcarving for their costs, most felt at a loss for alternatives to suggest to their children. Many encouraged their sons and daughters to continue education past the *secundaria* (middle school) level that was available in San Martín. However, while a few wanted their children to go to college in Oaxaca City, others did not see education as a route to a secure future: many Tileños have returned in recent years with unused degrees in computer science, engineering or architecture, and now work alongside their less-educated neighbours either in service industries or making woodcarvings.

Within Tileños' living memory, migration has always been an option that many young men and women seek. Over the years a number of Tileños have left for other parts of Mexico, especially Mexico City, but most go to the United States. Many of their male relatives had participated in the United States' "bracero" programme for agricultural workers, which lasted until the 1960s (Serrano Oswald 2010: 183-184). Today, many who left San Martín as young people live permanently in the United States, generally as "undocumented" labourers in construction, factory work and domestic services. Most Tileños live in Santa Cruz, California, while there are also a number of extended families in Chicago and New York. While migration to the United States continues to be a future that many young Tileños dream about, as I was leaving the field in 2009, two young girls had "returned" to San Martín from their birthplace in Santa Cruz; with the financial downturn, their parents could no longer afford to live there, and the girls were homesick for their lives in the United States. One afternoon, as I was talking with Felipe, a bright and imaginative carver, about the challenges facing his teen-aged son in the next few years, he admitted that while he was uncertain about the future of woodcarving, it was better that his son learned to do it than not: "Now,

there aren't many roads out of San Martín, so he needs a way to remain here. These little carvings of wood might not make us rich, but they stop us from getting too poor.”

While woodcarving production is now so ingrained in the economy and society of San Martín, their establishment is still within memory of all but the youngest Tileños. In the next section, I chart the history of the woodcarvings in Oaxaca and describe how they came to be produced in San Martín, before turning to the workshops and the basic categories that Tileños use to distinguish and classify the work of one another. These categories frame the ways that Tileños themselves understand the genre and markets of Oaxacan woodcarving, and it is within and between these categories that the practices of aesthetics, as explored in the following chapters, takes place.

History, workshops and styles of Oaxacan woodcarvings

Until the 1980s, San Martín might have been known for their finely embroidered blouses and dresses, but the village is now mostly known for the production of Oaxacan woodcarvings: small, brightly painted figures, often of animals or popular Mexican folk characters, that tourists buy as souvenirs or collectors find in galleries and stores throughout Mexico and the United States. In the 1950s a sometime-mason and peasant farmer, Manuel Jimenez† from the village of San Antonio Arrazola began selling carved masks and small sculptures to vendors in Oaxaca City's market. By the 1960s, with the help of investment and guidance from two wholesalers with whom he worked, he developed a particular style, taking inspiration from picture books of Mexican folktales and other traditional artesanías. He established the current corpus of woodcarving design by the 1970s, reproducing the classic motifs of Mexican popular art: devils, skeletons, saints, the Virgin of Guadalupe, as well as real and fantastical animals. By this point, others in his village had also begun to capitalise on this lucrative

endeavour and were now producing many pieces of varying quality and price for the wholesale and tourist market (Chibnik 2003:23-26; Brulotte 2006: 40-65). By the 1990s, the brightly coloured and intricately patterned paintwork led many collectors and wholesalers to call the woodcarvings “alebrijes,” the name for the large paper mâché figures produced in Mexico City, although many artisans I knew were unhappy with the name, and preferred to call them Oaxacan woodcarvings, or simply, “*las figuras*” (figures).

The woodcarvings did not begin to be produced in San Martín until as recently as the late 1970s when a Tileño by the name of Isidoro Cruz†, who made masks for Carnival and other fiestas, had a chance encounter with Tonatiúh Gutiérrez†, a director in Mexico’s Department of Tourism (SECTUR).³⁷ The two became close friends and business associates, and Gutiérrez eventually named Cruz the manager of an artesanía buying centre in Oaxaca for FONART, the National Fund for the Development of Artesanías.³⁸ Cruz’s connections at FONART, and his increasing knowledge of the artesanía world, allowed him to encourage and support other carvers in San Martín through FONART purchasing schemes and woodcarving competitions, and by the 1990s, woodcarving was established as a major source of income for many Tileño households (see Chibnik 2003: 27-30; 32-34).

A survey conducted at the beginning of my fieldwork in 2008 found that 68 percent of San Martín’s 446 households participated in the production of woodcarvings in some way, although many of these households must supplement their income in other sectors, owing to the seasonal and unpredictable nature of the tourism and artesanía markets. Some households depended to greater degrees than others on income from

³⁷ Secretaría de Turismo

³⁸ El Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías (FONART)

woodcarving, and some families experienced much greater financial security as a result of their sales than others. Although tourists are frequently told by guides, the popular media, and by artisans themselves that woodcarvings are invariably made in small household workshops, in practice production assumes a wide variety of forms.

My initial survey also indicated that there were 121 “recognised” artisan households in San Martín, and that 76 (63 percent) of these considered woodcarving a “full time” occupation.³⁹ Most artisan households combined woodcarving production with other kinds of income-generating or subsistence activities. This was often agricultural production, but also included the running of small shops, or employment in Oaxaca’s service or government sectors. Two artisan families also ran restaurants on the highway, and hired their staff from the village.

With a few exceptions, workshops are located within the household compounds of their owners, meaning that the division of household and workshop labour is not always clearly defined, and people move between tasks throughout the day. Workshop organisation is also quite variable. While all of the 44 part time workshops matched the household workshop model, among the 76 full time workshops this was only true for 63 percent of businesses. As such, slightly under a quarter (23 percent) of San Martín’s workshops deviated from the household model. This sizeable minority of workshops hired at least one employee, normally a close relative or godchild. Two of these workshops, owned by the García and Castillo families, hired more than five employees, corresponding to what Chibnik described as “factory-like workshops” that emerged in Arrazola in the late nineties (Chibnik 2003: 115-119).

³⁹ The difference between this figure and the first is that the first includes households where only employees or piece workers live, while the second is the number of households where a registered Tileño artisan lives.

The workshop of Rufino Pérez Santiago is a representative full-time, household workshop. Rufino is in his late forties and has been working as an artisan since 1982. His workshop consists of a few tables and carving blocks, located on the shady side of the central courtyard of his home where he lives with his wife, Rosa, and his four children. His daughter and youngest son commute by bus into Oaxaca City for *prepa* (high school) and university each day. His elder sons have finished school and now work full time with their father in the workshop, carving, painting, and preparing the wood. Previously, two of Rufino's brothers worked with them, but have since established their own workshops in their homes. Rosa and their daughter do not help with workshop activities, but rather take care of household chores, such as cooking and cleaning and caring for their chickens. Rosa also runs one of San Martín's many *tienditas*, small shops selling basic food stuffs like tortillas, milk, eggs and tinned chillies, and general household products. While they depend to some extent on income from tourists, the vast majority of their sales are in bulk to a variety of Mexican wholesalers, or on consignment at government stores with whom Rufino has long-standing business relationships.

This set up contrasts in many ways to the workshop of Miguel and Catalina García. Miguel and Catalina are in their thirties and have been producing carvings together since 1990. They now run one of the largest workshops in San Martín, which is located on the ground floor of their two-story home where they live with their two young children. Approximately thirty employees go there Monday through Saturday to work. Sunday work is optional, although most weeks at least five or six painters will arrive to earn extra money, as they are paid hourly wages. The workshop also employs a number of pieceworkers, usually younger women with small children, who work at home sanding or painting the base-coats on the carvings. Occasionally, if a waged

employee needs to earn extra money, he or she can also do piecework in the evenings, which they are paid for apart from their hourly wages. In addition to the artisans, Miguel and Catalina also employ Xochitl and Ana, who run the office, managing accounts, organising events and arranging meetings with clients and other contacts. They also employ Miguel's aunt María who works in the kitchen, usually with another young woman, cooking the *almuerzo* (a late-morning breakfast) and *comida* (the large, mid-afternoon meal) for everyone in the workshop.

Like the Garcías, many workshops utilise “putting-out-systems” where materials and designs are provided to piece workers who work at home (cf. Waterbury 1991; Carrier 1992: 543-544). This partially explains the large quantities of carvings for sale in small family workshops, especially along the *entrada*. However, many Tileño artisans also frequently purchase unpainted carvings from people from the village of San Pedro Taviche, over an hour's drive past Ocotlán, which they then paint, sign, and sell alongside their own carvings (cf. Chibnik 50-51; 83-86). This practice was something that artisans often avoided talking about in any great detail, as it was acknowledged that it did not conform to the image Tileños and others provide to tourists and collectors about the woodcarvings' origins. Some artisans expressed scorn towards those they believed to be painting the carvings of others; one well established carver I knew frequently referred to them as “decorators” rather than artisans. Others, however, expressed sympathy as they observed that some of these “decorators” were women whose husbands had migrated to the United States, and so they had no one at home to do the carving and were economically more precarious than “complete” households. With the exception of Isidoro Cruz who prefers a wood known as “zompantle” all of the artisans in San Martín use a local wood known as *copal* (or *copalillo*) for carving. Copal grows in the arid and semi-arid regions of highland southern Mexico, and has a rough,

knotty exterior and especially soft wood that allows it to retain water for long periods of time. This makes it ideal for carving – the wood is extremely easy to carve while “green,” rarely breaks, and becomes very hard and durable once completely dry. Tileños distinguish between male (*macho*) and female (*hembra*) trees, which Chibnik explains are actually two separate species, *Bursera glabrifolia* and *Bursera bipinnata*, respectively (2003: 95).

Before the woodcarving “boom” of the 1990s copal was fairly abundant in the countryside surrounding San Martín, but by the time of my fieldwork the supplies had been depleted and Tileño artisans had to buy their wood from suppliers who arrived every second week from the Sierra Norte. The cost of wood was considered reasonably low by everyone I knew, so access to it did not create significant distinctions between artisans, and while copal varies in terms of its quality for carving, this does not affect the price in any significant way. Most Tileños also use acrylic paint and wood fillers, which are readily available nearby in Ocotlán. Thus materially, the woodcarvings produced in San Martín are very similar, and the distinctions made between woodcarvings are based on the way that finished pieces look.

The woodcarvings that Tileños make to sell to tourists and collectors are immediately recognisable as “Mexican”: they are often animal forms, carved in stylised or exaggerated form, and decorated with brilliant, bright colours. Although the woodcarvings can be understood to be of the same genre, there are many variations amongst them, and these differences are explored throughout the chapters. There are three basic divisions that Tileño artisans colloquially use when describing woodcarvings, which can be understood as evaluative descriptions of style: (1) “*piezas comerciales*” (commercial pieces); (2) “*piezas típicas*” or “*rústicas*” (traditional or

“rustic” pieces); and (3) “*piezas finas*” (fine pieces). The divisions of these categories are made along lines of stylistic or visual qualities that relate to the way the finished pieces look and also partially encompass evaluations of the quality of execution and of the price that might be achieved. *Finas* are generally thought to be of higher quality in construction than *comerciales*, but they are not thought to be categorically of higher quality than *rústicas*, because while *finas* might appear to be more elaborate or difficult to produce, *rústicas* are understood to be valued by collectors, who prize them for their simple, “authentic” look.

On the other hand, Tileños expressed an understanding that these three categories had a relatively stable relationship in terms of their monetary worth: *finas* were more likely to command higher prices than *rústicas* or *comerciales*, and individual *rústica* pieces were likely to command higher prices than *comerciales*.⁴⁰ This was generally accounted for by artisans in terms of the time invested: *finas* were thought in general to take much longer to make in comparison to *rústica* and especially *comercial* pieces. The fact that the woodcarvings are understood at one level to be different kinds of objects highlights the importance of aesthetic distinctions, a major theme of this thesis, since the carvings are all made out of the same materials by more-or-less similar processes.

Comercial pieces comprise the majority of woodcarvings that are sold in San Martín and in Oaxaca more generally. This style was consolidated during the late 1990s when woodcarvings came to be seen as a viable livelihood, and many people began producing them. Workshops where *comerciales* are produced often have a display area

⁴⁰ Prices for the woodcarvings vary greatly; small *comercial* pieces can sell for as little as 15 pesos (about \$1.10 USD/ £0.70 GBP), up to about 300 pesos (\$22USD/ £15 GBP) while *fina* pieces can sell from between 500 and 10,000, with an upward limit of a very large pieces at 30,000 pesos (38 USD/ £25 GBP to \$800USD/£470 GBP // £2000 USD/ 1400 GBP).

full of hundreds of pieces of different forms where tourists and wholesalers can view them. They are small to medium sized pieces, ranging from about 5 to 20 centimetres in height. They take a range of shapes, mostly of animals, like cats, iguanas, and armadillos, usually carved in simplified or stylised poses (Figure 6).

Many carvers told me they delighted in exaggerating aspects of the animals' forms, and it is not uncommon to find giraffes with double-length necks or rabbits with ears the size of their bodies. A few other forms are common, such as cacti or sun-and-moon motifs, and a strange fantasy character, often called a "Martian" by artisans and in tourists' guide books has become very common in recent years (Figure 7). Many of these carvings are made out of multiple small pieces of wood, and are produced and assembled in series. Many artisans also make other commercial style objects, like crosses, magnets, picture frames and doll-sized furniture (Figure 8). The artisans who make them believe that these objects are appealing to tourists because they can be used for something, rather than just decor. The decoration on commercial pieces is very consistent, often a combination of many bright and contrasting hues. Different types of acrylic paint might be mixed; in some workshops is not uncommon to find matte, glossy, and fluorescent paint on the same piece. Generally, a simple base coat of one colour is laid on, followed by decoration with floral, dotted, or other repetitive designs over distinct fields of the piece's surface. Although artisans themselves might identify a form that is their speciality, such as penguins or dragons, they always make a wide variety of forms. Tourists and wholesalers from other tourism regions (like Acapulco and Puerto Vallarta) constitute the majority market for these pieces. Many tourists commented to me that most of these woodcarvings seemed to be more or less the same between workshops, indicating a strong stylistic consistency amongst commercial producers.

Típicas or rústica pieces take explicitly different forms from the comerciales. The figures are often the characters typical of Mexican folk tales and popular culture, hence their name, típica (typical or characteristic). These figures include saints, devils, skeletons and campesinos (Figure 9). Unlike the comerciales, animals represented are more likely to be animals that are found in the Oaxacan countryside, rather than all sorts of real and fantastical animals (Figure 10). They are carved in more organic forms, with the intention, according to some artisans, of achieving some level of realism, and often they are created as sets intended to depict scenes such as working, drinking or nativities (Figure 11). Rústica carvers also often continue to carve masks that are used in San Martín's annual Carnival celebration before the beginning of Lent, and collectors are fond of masks (Figure 12).

Rústica pieces are painted in less ornate styles than the comerciales, often in single colours with decoration reserved for the figures' clothing, again with the intention of some form of realism. Sometimes, they are intentionally left unpainted. Unlike the comerciales, artisans who make típica carvings work hard to differentiate their products from one another, and might focus on just a few forms rather than a whole range. Many of the típica carvers were amongst the first woodcarvers in San Martín, and continue to work their fields as well as carve and paint. Because of this, their production is significantly lower than the comerciales and they are considered very "collectable" by shop owners and collectors.

The last category that is used in San Martín is fina pieces. This description was used with much less frequency than the other two, and my sense is that this is because only recently have some artisans began to be distinguished (by themselves and others) as producing "high end" products (Figure 13). More often than identifying specific

pieces as “fine” people would comment “*su trabajo es muy fino*” (his or her work is very fine). This is probably reinforced by the fact that, unlike the comerciales and the rústicas, there is not one single style associated with this group. In fact, each artisan or workshop is considered to have their own, very unique style of carving and/or painting. Like rústica producers, their work is considered very collectable, although the levels of production vary greatly between workshops. Some pieces that were described as finas by artisans were similar, stylistically speaking, to commercial or típica pieces (Figure 14).

These categories that Tileños use are not exclusive or necessarily precise at all times. Objects can be evaluated differently by people, and these categories are not generally used in the abstract, but rather to describe the work of an artisan or an individual piece, and there are many artisans whose work in general might not fall clearly into one category or another, but might be described at the same time as “quite típica” but also “very fina”. Despite this ambiguity, when I asked artisans about fina, típica or comercial pieces, they could immediately give me an example of this kind of work. Once, I was admiring a típica carving of a devil drinking mezcal in the small shop attached to the workshop of Miguel and Catalina García, where expensive carvings are made. I knew the piece was considered típica by Catalina, as she had pointed it out to me earlier that week when we were talking about styles. I asked David who was working in the shop at the time if he thought the piece was good. He said that he thought it was very good, that he liked it very much. I then asked if he thought it was as good as the pieces made in the workshop there. He nodded yes, and went on to say, “Yes, they’re both good – in different ways. There isn’t one that is better: our pieces are very good, very complicated, but this devil is *muy lindo* (very lovely), and it’s the traditional, the classic style.” Thus, these descriptors work as aesthetic categories, since

artisans insist that different styles of pieces cannot be directly compared, as they are not entirely the same kinds of objects.

The local categories of comercial, rústica and fina, while referring only to the style of woodcarvings themselves, are at the same time indicative of a variety of aesthetic and productive processes that form the central thematic questions within the body of my thesis. As I will explore in subsequent chapters, some fina producers now have a significant amount of power in terms of their ability to direct the aesthetic conventions of Oaxacan woodcarvings, resulting in differential experiences of artisanal work in San Martín today. In the next chapter I consider the ability to produce good woodcarvings, which are now an important aspect to the ways that Tileños evaluate personhood and morality within more long-standing conceptualisations of work, which in turn impact on understandings and evaluations of personal and workshop styles, highlighting the important, auratic-like connection between aesthetics and materiality of carvings on the one hand, and the people who produce them on the other.



Figure 6: Armadillo in comercial style



Figure 7: A "Martian" comercial style carving



Figure 8: Other objects in comercial style: napkin holders, frames and doll's furniture.



Figure 9: Rústica style skeletons as an assemblage piece



Figure 10: Rústica style cows pulling a traditional style cart.



Figure 3: Rústica style nativity, left unpainted



Figure 42: Carved mask worn for Carnival



Figure 5: Fina carving by Miguel and Catalina García



Figure 6: Fina quality carving, executed in a commercial-like style

Chapter Two
Aura, Artisanship and Authorship:
Engagement and Detachment in the Workshops of San Martín

“To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”

-Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*

“Quoyle looked at his boat. The timbers were the real stuff of it, he thought, mistaking the fact for the idea. For the boat had existed in Yark’s mind for months.”

-E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*

One quiet afternoon as I was walking along a sunny street in San Martín I heard Lázaro Ramos, a comercial carver, excitedly call for me from across the street. I went over and ducked into his shady workshop, where he normally sat at a small table near the doorway, so he could keep an eye out for passing tourists. “Come in! Come in!” he exclaimed as he clanged the metal door shut behind me, which startled me since his door was always open. “I’m going to turn off the lights,” he warned me, as he directed my gaze towards a table where thirty or so carvings were lined up against the plain concrete wall. “Look.” As he turned off the light, he flicked another switch and I finally understood what was happening: the thirty carvings jumped to life in the eerie glow of a black light. Opening the door again, he asked, smiling, “what do you think?” I was uncertain how to respond, as I wondered whether tourists and collectors would be interested in glow-in-the-dark Oaxacan woodcarvings. To my relief, Lázaro did not wait for an answer, and in his characteristically playful way told me: “Like the conquistadors and Cortez, who were enchanted by the gold of the Aztecs, these will enchant the tourists.”

Lázaro's imaginative prediction about the ability of the phosphorescent glow of black-light paint to enchant the tourists was, of course, said as a kind of jest. However, his comment reflects what Tileño artisans intuitively know to be true; that there is a certain inexplicable quality that seems to draw tourists and collectors to the woodcarvings. When I asked artisans outright why they thought tourists wanted to buy their work many seemed uncertain and either resorted to explanations of authenticity and tradition, or more often, to aesthetic descriptions of colours, forms and sentiments. Because they are "*muy alegre*" (very cheerful) was one of the most common answers. One of the problems that both analysts and artisans face, is not why tourists desire a souvenir of Oaxaca – that people want to take home a "*recuerdo de Oaxaca*" is unsurprising for anyone – but rather what it is that attracts consumers to the Oaxacan woodcarvings specifically, and to the work of certain individuals in particular. This question is not only interesting for the analyst attempting to understand the production and circulation of material culture, but as we shall see in chapters Four and Six, it is also at the heart of competition amongst artisans, a significant social feature in San Martín today.

I suggest that we can begin to answer this question by thinking about Oaxacan woodcarvings, and other art objects like them, through the analytical device of "auras" as developed by Walter Benjamin. Tourist arts, like the woodcarvings made in San Martín, seem not to fit with Benjamin's description of the aura, or essential "genuineness" of true works of art. The very definition of tourist art seems to be in opposition with the aura, as they are aesthetic commodities produced entirely for consumption outside the community, at times appearing to have little or no auratic power over the consuming public itself. Indeed such forms of art are often deemed "too commercial" to be authentic (cf. Graburn 1976: 5; Littrell et al 1993: 204-207; Phillips

2010: 431-437). However, Benjamin's conceptualisation of the aura of artworks nonetheless remains relevant in contexts where tourist art is able to capture the imagination of its public as an authentic material expression.

In this chapter I explore the ways that aura is infused into Oaxacan woodcarvings, through the material and relational practices of artisans in their workshops. I argue that these material and aesthetic practices constitute important features that condition the ways in which the auras of Oaxacan woodcarvings are read by their consumers. I begin by describing three different ways that the aura of woodcarvings is experienced by viewers, in order to illustrate why this term is preferable to "authenticity." I then move on to the aesthetic practices of artisanship for Tileño woodcarvers and painters, by considering the dual processes of material engagement and detachment. This discussion is followed by an exploration of how these same processes of engagement and detachment also work at the level of authorship, as local understandings of "styles" of woodcarvings and the signatures that they carry consolidate their attachment to some individuals, while detaching them from others. The dyadic processes of attachment and detachment direct how auras are formed around the woodcarvings, as they focus artisans' and viewers' attention onto particular production processes and spaces, aesthetic styles of artisans, and the aesthetics of the woodcarvings as a genre.

Since Graburn's typology of ethnic art (1976: 5), studies of craft objects like Oaxacan woodcarvings have frequently addressed them as examples of "tourist art," arguing that their desirability is linked to their capacity to be "souvenirs," physical objects that work metonymically to represent their place of purchase (Graburn 1976, 2004; Stewart 1993: 135-139; Lee 1999: 270-271). Whether or not an object works as a

souvenir depends heavily on the locally specific configurations of “authenticity” both in terms of the given location, and the object itself. Like other rural Mexicans, Oaxacans are conceptualised touristically as small scale producers of traditional folklore and crafts, who create their pieces through innate, rather than learned aesthetic sensibilities (López 2010: 72-94; Wood 2008: 105-114; c.f. Price 1989). Oaxacan woodcarvings work particularly well as souvenirs, precisely because they are believed to reflect something essential or unique about Oaxaca by both artisans and tourists, a quality that is labelled in the literature, and in Oaxacan tourism discourses as “authenticity.”

Authenticity has proven a difficult concept for anthropologists to address analytically as the meanings that attach to the term are highly inconsistent (Lindholm 2008: 1-10). “Personal authenticity” in the West may relate to tropes of “being true” to one’s essential emotions and nature, regardless of circumstances (*ibid*: 65-74). In contrast, context is crucially important for other kinds of authenticity: Christopher Steiner observed in his study of African tourist art that the emplacement of objects in specific locations is crucial to their desirability for collectors. Pieces that were discovered by collectors in non-commercial locations were judged more authentic than those found in shops or markets. The African traders with whom Steiner worked endeavoured to enhance this experience by arranging to “discover” pieces in small villages away from markets, adding to the authenticity, and thus the value of their goods (Steiner 1995:152-156).

Since the mid-twentieth century authenticity has become an increasingly desirable (and therefore marketable) quality that is seen to attach to objects, food, people and places (cf. Terrio 1999; Bruner 2005; Lindholm 2008). While Western understandings of authenticity link it to temporal conditions of “tradition” and

“history,” and material conditions of “uniqueness,” “genuineness” and “singularity” (Lindholm 2008: 6-10), recent research has shown that these qualities are not the core of the concept everywhere. In other contexts, authenticity has been shown to be grounded in cultural or societal values that instead take pleasure in appropriation, replication and imitation; qualities that appear to contradict its Western constructions (N. Taylor 1999; Vann 2006; Crăciun 2012). Although authenticity understood in the Western frame is at the heart of tourism and artesanía discourses in Oaxaca, I suggest that the concept in and of itself is an inadequate analytical tool for anthropologists. While the various ways that people globally construct, challenge and reconstitute authenticity provide an interesting set of research questions, an overly narrow focus on it can obscure other important formations of value (Bruner 2005: 5). Yet, the sentiment of something that our informants might call “authenticity” when engaging with art objects must be accounted for, and I suggest that this quality is better analytically understood as “aura.”

In the introduction, I argued that Benjamin’s aura can be remade into an incisive analytical tool that addresses these issues without the intellectual baggage that the term authenticity carries. This is possible because Benjamin’s configuration of the aura of works of art leaves room for more flexible explanations of what art objects are and do, allowing multiple and simultaneous readings of the same object in ways that are different, yet equally satisfying, for different actors involved. This polyvalence incorporates the “intersubjective” nature of works of art, proposed by the idea that tourist arts are co-productions made by both artists and tourists. This intersubjectivity is a quality that has been observed by anthropologists working in art and craft production, but which cannot easily be explained through the concept of authenticity (Bruner 1996: 172-179; Graburn 2004; cf. Hansen 2008: 343-344). The aura, then, is a quality of the work of art which makes it engaging and interesting to viewers, a quality which is

contingent on its emplacement and continued connection to certain people and places. This aura is what makes a work of art desirable for its viewers, but need not directly index desire; what the aura represents foremost is the art object's qualities of authority and genuineness (W. Benjamin 2008a: 5, 7).

In the next section, I examine some of the ways that aura is infused into Oaxacan woodcarvings by comparing the ways that three different kinds of visitors – tourists, a collector, and “old friends” – encounter the woodcarvings in Miguel and Catalina’s workshop. I am not suggesting that these are the only ways that woodcarvings might be rendered authoritative and genuine, but these examples illustrate a significant and hitherto under-analysed component of this topic. I then move on to artisans’ aesthetic and productive practices that construct auras by (re)producing inalienable and authorial connections between artisans and the woodcarvings that are produced in their workshops. Throughout this discussion, I show that the auras of woodcarvings are read in ways that are not wholly dependent on culturalist conceptions of authenticity, but are rather polyvalent and contingent on the social contexts in which objects are encountered; the spaces and social contexts in which they are produced; and the kinds of people who produce and consume them.

Reading the auras of carvings: production, producers and viewers

The ways that viewers encounter woodcarvings, and their own understandings of art production and producers, greatly affects the ways that auras of woodcarvings are read. During the time I spent in Miguel and Catalina’s workshop, I realised that different kinds of viewers encounter the woodcarvings in very different ways, despite the fact that all of these encounters happened in the exact same space. In order to illustrate the details of these differences, I describe three encounters that occurred

during my fieldwork: a group of English-speaking tourists who came to see a demonstration of the woodcarvings; a seasoned collector who had visited Oaxaca on two previous occasions; and a Mexican-American couple who met the Garcías years earlier in California, and were staying in their home. While the differences between these encounters could be read as different definitions of “authenticity,” this reading renders the carvings themselves passive within the analysis. However, as I show in the latter sections of this chapter the carvings, and the artisanal practices that create them, are actually at the heart of these aura-generating processes.

In July 2008, a large group of North American and English tourists arrived at Miguel and Catalina’s workshop in the late morning. As the tourists emerged from their air conditioned white vans, they found themselves in a tranquil and sunny courtyard, painted in terracotta, with accents of cerulean blue and “rosa mexicana” (Mexican pink). This group of tourists were part of a large organised tour of the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca that focused on the major archaeological and historical sites in the region. Half of the group was spending the day visiting artisans in San Bartolo Coyotepec, San Martín and Ocotlán, while the other half elected to remain in Oaxaca City to visit museums.

The courtyard was accented with raised planters, filled with lush alocasias with their large, flat leaves, interspersed with bright flowers, creating a stark contrast to the dry and dusty streets of the village outside. David, Miguel’s nephew who speaks excellent English, greeted the visitors and led them into the painting workshop space, offering them a can of Coke or a bottle of water (see Appendix 2). The tourists filed into the painting workshop, which was comfortably open to the courtyard, and as they took

their seats on the series of benches tucked along the right-hand side of the space, Miguel stood up from where he had been painting to greet the visitors.

“Welcome to my home and our workshop, amigos” he began, as he took his place behind a small table, laden with powders and plant materials. “Today I am going to tell you about our work here and our beautiful village of Tilcajete.” On the walls behind the carving block sat drying about forty unpainted, highly technical carvings, and as Miguel began to explain the history of the town and its name, he produced a machete and started peeling the bark from a small piece of copal. As he explained about the wood, and how its sap had been used for incense for thousands of years in southern Mexico, he held the bark to his nose, deeply inhaling before passing the clean, fresh-smelling wood to the tourists, indicating with a gesture that they should do the same. After describing the wood, he moved on to Oaxaca’s pre-Hispanic and colonial heritage of natural inks and dyes, referring directly to the vivid red pigment produced from the cochineal insect, which had been an important commodity for the Spanish colony. As he spoke, he began mixing in his palms different powdered minerals and plant materials with liquids, producing a surprising variety of hues and opacities from seemingly dull, everyday materials. The peak of the demonstration came as Miguel crushed deep red pomegranate seeds into bright white powdered zinc with his thumbs, the resulting turquoise hue surprised everyone: the tourists eagerly leaned forward, and a few “oohs” were uttered from the audience, then, with just a dash of dried *anil*, an indigo-producing plant, the bright turquoise transformed into a deep, inky blue (see Figure 15).

After explaining the stylistic inspirations of his work, Miguel introduced each of the painters by name, highlighting when someone was a member of his large extended

family.⁴¹ As the demonstration wound to a close, two or three of the tourists rushed up to Miguel to take pictures of his palette-like hands, and a few others leaned over the painters' shoulders to get a better look at their intricate work. As I was sitting in the back corner at a table next to Catalina, I noticed a middle-aged woman with a large-lensed camera, shifting this way and that. After a minute, I understood she was trying to get a picture of the painters without me in the frame; as I rose to move out of the way, she thanked me with a sheepish smile.



Figure 15: Demonstration of natural inks and dyes.

Moving to the rear of the courtyard, Miguel introduced the tour group to Catalina's nephew Amado, one of four carvers who were working quietly in the carving workshop. Amado, shyer and more reserved than Miguel, quietly explained in Spanish (with Miguel translating) the basic steps of woodcarving, starting with the way he plans the figures in his mind before beginning to carve. Occasionally, Miguel expanded his translation from Amado's words, elaborating and emphasising the most interesting parts of the carving process. Returning to his carving, Amado showed the gathered tourists

⁴¹ See Chapter Three for a discussion of Miguel and Catalina's styles and inspirations.

how he makes large, deep cuts with the machete, before turning to his set of fine, razor-sharp knives and chisels to sculpt and incise the details. One of the men in the group asked if he ever cuts himself with the machete, and Amado answered that it does happen occasionally, but that it is much more common to cut oneself with dull knives.

After a few more minutes of watching the carvers work, Miguel led the group to the rear of the workshop where many carvings were drying, giving a very short explanation of how the wood is prepared and treated. At the end of the demonstration, as he answered a woman's question about where the wood is grown, Miguel began to wander back to the front of the courtyard, drawing the tourists to the small store, where their own carvings, as well as the work of other artisans from San Martín and Arrazola, sat on well-lit glass shelves. David was already waiting for them in the store, and informed them that he could also take orders for pieces if any of the visitors wanted something different from what was available. The visitors spent over twenty minutes browsing through the carvings, bringing them out into the sunlight to get a better look, and comparing the colours and forms. Of the twelve, six people bought medium sized, relatively expensive pieces made in the workshop, and five purchased smaller pieces by other artisans. Only one man decided not to purchase anything because, as he told me while we sat on the sofas outside of the store, his suitcase was already too full of "artifacts" he had bought in Chiapas.

For many tourists, viewing the woodcarvings being made in workshops in traditional-seeming villages adds greatly to their desirability. Through the pedagogical processes of the demonstration, tourists are provided a frame through which they can imagine the woodcarvings' production as part of a long cultural history, as suggested by Miguel's explanations of the uses of copal and natural pigments. Further, the seemingly

magical transformation of dull powders into bright paints also imparts a sense of aura to the work contemporary painters, whose finely detailed brushwork is impressive to watch. By experiencing their introduction to woodcarvings through the artisans' workshop, the woodcarvings cannot but seem to be authoritative and genuine: as one Canadian man expressed during a tour at the beginning of my fieldwork, "I'm not sure I would have bought one of those things in a store, but once you see where they're made, you just want one!"

The experiences of these tourists contrast greatly with another visitor who arrived to Miguel and Catalina's just a few weeks later with Alvin Starkman. Greg described himself as an avid collector of artesanías and Mexican folk art, and he was well versed in the language of collecting. I spent the remainder of the day with Alvin and Greg and we discussed the merits and difficulties of using the many published "collectors guides" about Oaxacan artesanías, as well as what kinds of things Greg looked for when searching for pieces. He emphasised a combination of both "uniqueness" and "tradition," saying that he was not fond of artisans who produced large amounts for export: "what's the point of finding something that I can just as easily buy in L.A.?" At the same time, he wanted something that he saw as consistent with the established genre of Oaxacan woodcarvings; he explained that as a collector he wanted "the real thing."

When Alvin and Greg arrived at the workshop, David went over to greet him, as he usually did when tourists and other visitors arrived. However, Greg quickly indicated that he was not interested in a demonstration, but rather wanted to see what kind of work they were producing at the moment. The three went into the workshop, and David informally showed him what different people were working on. As Greg wandered

around the workshop something caught his eye: a small carving of a man that appeared rather old that was sitting on the workshop's altar, off to one side.⁴² He asked if he could look at it, and David assented. After a moment or two he hesitantly asked if it might be for sale. David was uncertain, and went to find Catalina who was in her home, upstairs.



Figure 16: An altar in a Tileño workshop.

A few minutes later, Catalina came down and spoke with Greg off to one side, and finally she walked over to the altar and took the piece away to the store, where she wrapped it in tissue paper, and Greg paid for his new carving. As he was waiting for

⁴² Many Tileños construct altars in their homes that carry images of Christ as well as the Virgin and different saints, always including Saint Martin. As most workshops are located in households, they do not usually have separate altars; where workshops are separated by even a little distance from the household they generally have their own altar, and when a new workshop space is opened, Tileños often have the village priest come to give a blessing.

Catalina to write up the receipt, he casually glanced around the store at the carvings that filled the shelves, but he did not look at any of them closely; instead he picked up Michael Chibnik's ethnography about Oaxacan woodcarvings that was on display and flipped through it casually. Greg was very pleased with his purchase, and over lunch he admitted that he while he was not sure if he had done the right thing by asking to buy something from the altar, he thought in the end Catalina was happy to sell the piece. He was excited that it appeared to be an old piece of work, perhaps from the 1980s: "these kinds of things become harder to find as more artisans enter the market and carvings become popular; they just get scooped up."

Unlike the tourists in the first example, for Greg it was not just provenance in an "authentic" workshop that made the piece desirable. In fact, Greg seemed relatively disinterested in the work that was being produced at the time; he wanted something that was older and "unique" yet also recognisably a Oaxacan woodcarving. Although Greg could not have known where the woodcarving actually came from, the fact that the artisans themselves had treated it as "genuine" by placing it on their altar greatly increased its authority, establishing a genealogical-like connection between this carving as an "ancestor" of contemporary pieces. His acknowledgement that it was perhaps impolite to ask to purchase something from the altar shows that his interest was less in the artisans as people, and more in the object itself.

Despite this, for collectors there is an important connection between a woodcarving and the named individual who produced it; art collecting by definition distinguishes between the products of different producers within the same genre, creating submarkets for the work of certain individuals who become "collectable," that is, desirable to those individuals who have some level of expert knowledge about the

genre itself. For collectors, the auras of Oaxacan woodcarvings are indeed intimately related to their producers, but this relation focuses on individuals rather than the “cultural unit” that tourists often relate them to. The importance for collectors of the connection between the author and her work was rather forcefully demonstrated one day by the shock and offence of a woman who discovered that I was helping a Tileña paint her woodcarvings during the busy lead-up to Christmas; she loudly insisted that she not be sold a piece that I had painted.

The experiences of both the tourists and Greg the collector can also be fruitfully contrasted to those of Rita and Daniel, Mexican-American friends of the Garcías who live in Los Angeles, California. Rita and Daniel met the Garcías about fifteen years earlier when they were selling their work at an artesanía fair, and had struck up a strong friendship. Rita told me that for her, her friendship with Miguel and Catalina was very valuable, because it allowed her to feel a connection to her Mexican roots. Despite the fact that her family had not been Oaxacan, she felt her journeys to Oaxaca provided her the opportunity to “reconnect with her heritage.”

Rita visited twice during my fieldwork period, and on the second occasion, she decided to purchase an expensive piece from the Garcías. When Rita announced that she wanted to buy a piece, Catalina seemed slightly embarrassed because she had intended to give her a carving as a gift, but Rita refused, explaining that she wanted to buy the piece, as a recognition of Catalina and Miguel’s incredible work and skill. She explained that for her this piece would be treasured, as it was the essence of who her friends really are, and she would think of them always when she saw the piece in her home. For Rita, then, the aura of the carvings has very little to do with the generalised cultural content that the tourists value, or even the “genealogical” or “authorial”

genuineness that collectors seek. The authority of the carving rested on the personal connection between Rita and the Garcías, and its desirability was not, at least at that point in their relationship, enhanced or even connected to its production in San Martín or its relationship to other woodcarvings in the genre. Instead, its aura was generated by its production in the Garcías home that made it important and desirable for Rita.

Despite these different readings of auras, there are also continuities between the ways that different viewers read the carvings as “genuine.” For tourists, collectors and other viewers of carvings, skill and household production tied the aura of woodcarvings to the lives of their producers, making their purchase in San Martín a more meaningful act than buying similar pieces in Oaxaca City’s markets and galleries. The fact that the pieces are carved and painted by hand is extremely important; one American collector with a long history in San Martín told me that she suspected one of the well-known carvers used power tools in the evenings when no tourists were around. When I asked her why this should matter, she said that woodcarving in this way was not “true” and “authentic,” that these carvings “were not the same as hand carved pieces” and in her opinion were worth less money. In other words, by producing woodcarvings with power tools, the aura of the work was reduced because it lost its authority as hand-made art.

For tourists and collectors, the auras that surround the carvings are also connected to the kind of people who have produced it. Artisans sometimes divide the tasks of carving and painting, as carving is usually only done by men and older boys. There were a few women carvers in San Martín during my research, and it is noteworthy that these women were either unmarried or married to men working in the United States. Although it is sometimes reported in the popular press that women do most of the painting, many of the male carvers I knew also often painted their own work

(cf. Chibnik 2003: 40). In some smaller household-workshops, decisions about who would paint which carving were not made explicitly, but were structured around other considerations such as whether children were home from school, or if the wife was occupied by other household activities. In large workshops with hired employees, there was a strict and consistent division of labour in most areas of production, particularly between carvers and painters. In explanations to tourists, artisans often emphasised kin relations within the production process and the gender division of labour within workshops, despite the fact that these descriptions are often inaccurate. Relations of production are knowingly presented to viewers as conforming to what they imagine to be traditional kin-based forms of work. This presentation is integral to the construction of Oaxacan woodcarvings as both representative of, and inalienable from local culture and people. Thus, woodcarving production is not, contrary to touristic discourses, the natural result of Mexican peasant lifeways. Instead, production is a highly variable and constantly changing set of material and social relationships with as much heterogeneity as that found in small-scale industries in industrial or urban contexts. However, the frequent emphasis on “authenticity” among collectors and tourists invites producers to obscure the facts of contemporary woodcarving production, since they have the capacity to destabilise the touristic aura of the woodcarvings, as both souvenirs and as ethnic art.

Despite the fact that the auras of the woodcarvings appear to be connected to their production in San Martín’s workshops by Tileño artisans, as we shall see in a variety of ways throughout this thesis, these auras are neither consistent nor equally effective. Some artisans are much more successful at gaining the attention of tourists, guides and other important actors in their art world. As a consequence, the pieces that some workshops produce are more authoritative and auratic than others, resulting in different experiences and political consequences for Tileño artisans, as discussed in

chapters Three through Six. At least three factors govern the efficacy of auras of carvings and their authority as art objects: the workshop spaces in which they are produced, the aesthetic styles of artisans, and the aesthetics of the woodcarvings as a genre. In the remainder of this chapter, I explore the first of these processes by showing that while the actual production in Tileño workshops do not necessarily match tourists' and collectors' expectations, the auras of woodcarvings can be produced and maintained through different modes of attachment and detachment between artisans and their products.

The processes of attachment and detachment during production work to impart aura to the woodcarvings through skilled hand work, which as described above is central to different viewers' experiences of their aura. I argue that the actual engagement between artisans and their materials is a central aspect of the production of aura, which often appears as a kind of "residue" of the connection between producer and object. Researchers have observed that certain artistic or hand crafted commodities cannot be wholly separated from their producers, as they seem to retain an essence of their maker long after they have been sold (Myers 2001: 12-27; Geismar 2001: 32-37; Ingold 2001: 18; Leach 2003: 136-140; cf. Miller 2001). Drawing on Annette Weiner's concept of "inalienable possessions" (1992), they argue that this connection is crucial to the maintenance of objects' value over time, as it is the connection the object represents, rather than necessarily the object itself, that is of worth. However, I show that while these parallel processes of attachment and detachment work to direct the inalienable auratic connection between named artisans and their pieces, they take place at the expense of other kinds of relations, severing the inalienable connection between some artisans and their products.⁴³

⁴³ The other factors that condition the efficacy of the auras of woodcarvings – the aesthetic styles of artisans, and the aesthetics of the woodcarvings as a genre – are addressed in the next chapter.

Engagement and detachment in artisanal work

The anthropology of craft in Mexico has focused largely on the relations and politics of production of artesanías, rather than the actual ways in which objects are made. One notable exception to this has been the work of William Warner Wood, who has analysed both the diversity of personal trajectories by which Zapotec weavers learn to weave, and the different bodily techniques and time disciplines required to produce aesthetically pleasing textiles (2008: 139-188). Wood's detailed and subtle analysis illustrates that although traditional approaches to crafts in Mexico have provided important insights about the workings of culture and power within the economies of artesanías and ethnic art, by bringing newer perspectives on materiality and craft practice into analyses of Mexican craft production, other aspects of the nature of work for Mexican artisans can be brought into analytical focus.

Recent approaches to craft and craftsmanship have taken up the challenges posed by anthropologists working on material culture and materiality to develop theories of production that avoid purely processual explanations of the ways that objects are made. Many argue that presenting production in a progressive fashion, naturalises and generalises experiences of craftspeople, and diminishes our ability to fully comprehend the processes involved in the making of objects (Wood 2008: 142; Venkatesan 2010: 168). This shift has resulted in two interrelated streams of research; the first draws on insights by Mauss (1973 [1934]) and Bourdieu (1977) about bodily expressions of culture, leading researchers to consider the ways in which skills and tasks are learned. Skills are understood to be incorporated into the body through practice-based learning, thus becoming "embodied" as opposed to "cerebral" knowledge (e.g.; O'Connor 2005; Ory DeNicola 2005; Portisch 2009; Venkatesan 2010; cf. Marchand 2010 on the cognitive processes involved in this kind of learning).

A second stream, more directly relevant to my research, has focused on the material practices of artisans and other producers of objects (e.g. Keller 2001; Ingold 2001; Sennet 2008; Malkogeorgou 2011). Authors in this stream have sought to “unpack” the steps of production, asking what is actually happening as artisans transform raw materials into material culture. In some ways, this move echoes the “regimes of value” stance exemplified by Myers (2001; 2002) and Thomas (1991), as both approaches consider how one “kind” of object becomes another. However, where the “regimes of value” approach focuses more on the cultural and institutional (re)contextualisation of objects, the “material practices” approach focuses on the ways objects are physically transformed, leading to their redefinition as objects of other domains.

The processes by which people physically transform materials into desired objects are often difficult to demarcate analytically. Keller uses the phrase “productive acts” in order to separate out the multitude of mental and physical actions that are contained within each “step” of production processes, as generally understood (2001: 34). Ingold, alternatively, has resisted the breaking down of practice into smaller constituent parts, suggesting that artisans’ (and others’) practices of work should be understood as part of relational and synergetic actions which form what he calls “taskscapes,” which he explains in this way:

“How, then, should we describe the practices of work in their concrete particulars? For this purpose, I shall adopt the term ‘task,’ defined as any practical operation carried out by a skilled agent in an environment, as part of his or her normal business of life...No more than features of the landscape, however, are tasks suspended in a vacuum. Every task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or parallel, and usually by many people working together... It is to this entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer by the concept of taskscape. Just as landscape is an array of related features, so – by analogy – the taskscape is an array of related activities” (Ingold 2000: 195).

Ingold's notion of a "taskscape" is helpful for refocusing analytical attention back onto the experiences of the artisans as they produce objects, rather than on the objects themselves; when "following the thing" we might only see production (and beyond) as a series of moves made by the object through space and time (Colloredo Mansfeld 2002b: 125). Instead, artisans experience production as the objectification of their own work and intentions, the temporal boundaries of which may not map neatly onto the biography of the object they make. I believe this insistence on practice to be an important component in the study of hand produced aesthetic objects, at the very least to prevent the inverse of Miller's "tyranny of the subject" (2005: 3), i.e. the over-determination of objects in our analyses of social worlds.

There are two distinct taskscapes in the production of Oaxacan woodcarvings: carving and painting. These are interspersed with a variety of other tasks that Tileños distinguish from the "creative steps" of the process, which include removing the bark from the wood, treating the wood for insects, and sanding. Where possible, artisans often delegate these tasks to children or older relatives, as they can take a considerable amount of time which could be used otherwise in producing more carvings.

Carvers do not work at tables, instead they use large stumps of wood as carving blocks which they place between their legs; a regular table is insufficient against the force necessary to make the deep cuts with the machete, and also limits the movement of the arm. For carvers, a piece begins long before the machete is first put to the wood to remove the bark. The inspiration for the original idea of the form can come from a multitude of sources: an image or story he recently encountered, an order that was placed by a tourist, conversations with other carvers or, most commonly, previous pieces that he has made. Inspirations for the forms of the carving can come from a

multitude of sources. For example, Alejandro Pérez, a commercial carver, often refers to images from his children's storybooks for animal forms that are not familiar to him. Other artisans have encyclopaedias or magazines from which they take animal forms. However, I observed that for the most part, carvers tend to repeat figures that they are comfortable with, drawing on their aesthetic knowledge about the curves, angles and balance that work for different shapes. Although imagination is central to beginning a piece, carvers must immediately incorporate their knowledge of the material and its qualities into their plans; they only imagine pieces that are, in reality, possible to carve, suggesting also that imagination is broadened with one's growing skill.

This detailed knowledge of materials and their potential informs every idea and plan artisans have about woodcarving. As copal branches are spindly and twisting, the carver must take into consideration what he wants the final piece to look like even as he selects his wood. Vito Salazar, an experienced carver, explained that Oaxacan woodcarvings generally represent organic forms because "it's not the nature of copal to be straight." Alejandro, who delights in making lizards with multiple loops in their tails, also told me that although these carvings look complicated, he finds them easier than hand-carving flat, even surfaces, as the grain of copal is rarely straight, thus making curves more "natural" to carve in this wood than planes. This material knowledge is one thing that distinguishes experts from novices. The expert's experimentation with form takes place within what they understand to be possible – the limits of which must be learned by novices through experimentation. This was clear when watching younger boys learning how to carve with their fathers and uncles; as they began to make more delicate pieces, they often broke from too much pressure on the knife. As there is no formal apprenticeship, and overt moments of teaching rarely take place, this testing of materials is an important part of Tileños' development as carvers; Vito laughed good

heartedly when his son looked startled as the piece he was carving snapped, “Oh, he has learned how far that wood can be pushed.”

The plan that the carver has in his head, however, is not just directly transferred to the wood. Carvers frequently told me that the wood itself guides their continually-changing vision of a piece as they work on it. This happens in obvious ways, like when the form of the branch they are using guides the position of the figure’s body and limbs, or the knots in the wood require the carver to change the angle of his cuts. But it also happens in more subtle ways; the carvers feel that the shape of the piece emerges from the wood, rather than something that they impose onto it, a sentiment that has also been expressed by Inuit ivory carvers (Carpenter 1973: 59) and by the Renaissance sculptor, Michelangelo (Somervill 2006: 60), suggesting that material engagement may be commonly experienced as a sublimation of agency, at least for carvers and sculptors.

For carvers, every single piece of wood is different. Some are soft and even and good for carving, while others are more difficult because the wood is twisted. As the wood itself is so variable, each piece feels different in their hands. Lalo explained that for him the experience of carving was about being guided by the tools and materials, “you find the knife moves with the grain of the wood. You don’t do it intentionally, it just happens.” As a carver works on a piece, the action of his hand with the machete or knife engages with the physicality of the wood, and because the material is variable, every single stroke feels differently and this feeling affects the stroke that directly follows. Thus, the seemingly repetitive action of carving should not be understood a series of discrete cuts made into the wood, but rather as a fluid practice during which the carver is engaged with his tools and materials. Thus, the repetitive action of the machete is better understood as rhythmic, as a single practice that is continually unfolding into the

future, rather than just an imitation of the same act over and over again (cf. Ingold and Hallam 2007: 67).



Figure 17: Beginning the basic form; the machete work is finished and the knife work has just begun around the face.

It is partially this rhythmic quality that engages the artisans in their work. At the Garcías' workshop, sometimes as the four carvers work together, the sounds of their machetes fall into harmony, and the experience of the carving becomes collective. Raimundo alluded to this collective experience when he explained, "you can always tell when your blade is getting dull, because it throws the rhythm off. The others will hear it at the same time as you feel it." It is therefore not a surprise that the carvers talk very little during the day, and prefer to listen to music with a strong rhythm as it helps to guide their actions. I was told that they used to listen to the football matches sometimes, but they would hardly get any work done – it was just too distracting to listen to the game while carving.



Figure 18: Carving with machetes and knives

Like carvers, painters do not experience working on each piece in the same way, even though the sanding and preparation of the wood before painting renders the surface of every piece smooth and uniform. The physical properties (size, position of the figure's body and limbs, and the animal it represents), affect the ways that painters go about their work. Rosalinda and Araceli, two experienced painters who work in Miguel and Catalina's workshop, both told me that they prefer to paint large pieces even though they take much more time. This is because they can sit with the piece on their lap to steady it and use the whole length of their arm to make the long, sweeping brush strokes with which they make the borders of different coloured areas (see Figure 19). Small pieces, by contrast must be held in the hand opposite the paintbrush; many of the

women (myself included) often tucked them against the body or laid their hand on the table in order to make it sufficiently stable to paint, which at least for me, made the details of what I was doing more difficult to see. The men's lower arm strength, in contrast, was often enough not to have to do this.

Rosalinda also preferred larger pieces because she felt she had time to "get to know" (*conocer*) the character of the piece and the patterns she was painting. She explained that painting finely-detailed patterns in rows was something she particularly enjoyed, because it was a rhythmic activity, not only because of the repetition of brush strokes, but also because within patterns, colours need to be balanced. Showing me an area she had just painted, she pointed out that if you pay attention to the light and dark hues, one pattern emerges, but if you pay attention to the colours, a different pattern emerges. She said she never really planned which patterns she would use ahead of time, but that they came to her as she worked.

The actual form of the carving also changes the way that painters work. Bulkier forms, like buffalo, rabbits or dogs are often painted section by section, perhaps beginning with both of the hind haunches, then moving to the front legs, followed by the back, torso and ultimately the head. This is to ensure symmetry on both sides of the animal. For example, when the left leg is finished, the artisan moves immediately to the matching right leg. Spindlier, more delicate animals, such as lizards or serpents, are painted as a whole – they are begun at the spine, and gradually worked out from there. While symmetry is a concern on these pieces, the flatter form of the animal allows the artisan's eye to play back and forth between the limbs without having to shift the position of the piece; the two front limbs, for example, can be painted as one surface rather than two separate ones.

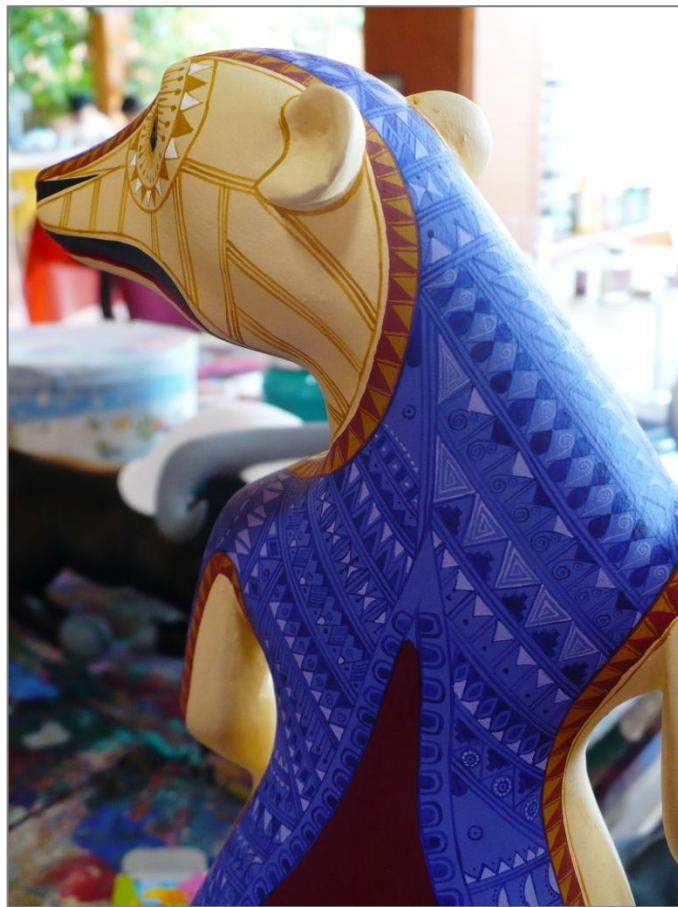


Figure 19: Painting in progress on a medium-sized fina carving



Figure 20: Painting in progress on a set of small commercial carvings

Blanca Fernández, a commercial artisan, told me that she likes painting many small, identical pieces in series, as she “can get into a rhythm” (see Figure 20). She said that although she might switch colours between pieces, the patterns she paints on them will remain fairly consistent, and this consistency helps her “make each piece balanced.” She enjoys seeing a whole series of matching animals lined up in a row at the end of the day, indicating that this also makes tourists want to buy one. Blanca works very quickly, and the display areas in her workshop are always full of many small pieces. She attributes her speed to her method of painting in series, indicating that she only has to make design decisions on the first piece of a series; afterwards, she just follows the plan in her head that she set for the first. The experience of engaging with materials, by both carvers and painters, thus provides a consistency between pieces, resulting in a practice that is much greater, in temporal terms, than the production of a single piece. Unlike individual woodcarvings, which move from stage-to-stage of production, artisans experience production as an on-going activity, where the act of carving or painting pieces in the past is not discontinuous with doing so in the present.

These ethnographic observations resonate with “material engagement,” a key theme that has developed within practice-oriented anthropology, or what Richard Sennett calls “engaged material consciousness” (2008: 119-146). He suggests that material consciousness exists in all sorts of ways, from our ability to imagine what a texture feels like without having actually touched it, to the “prehension” of the hand, that is, how the hand anticipates the shape of an object by forming itself appropriately as we reach for it. But what distinguishes the special kind of embodied knowledge of artisanal or creative production – *engaged* material consciousness – from other kinds of material consciousness is the dynamic way that the artisan is connected to the object as she or he is producing it (Sennett 2008: 175).

From her ethnography-apprenticeship in a glassblowing workshop in New York, Erin O'Connor suggests that the experience of material engagement for artisans is not necessarily one of heightened control of the materials, but rather, at least at times, a surrendering of agency to them, as they guide the artisan's bodily movements, seemingly circumventing overt thoughts and plans. She reports feeling as if she could not remove herself from the tasks at hand, being completely, or even overly, engaged with the materials (2005:195-197). This observation corresponds to other researchers' descriptions of skilled work as the enactment of complex systems of tacit knowledge that have been incorporated into the body through practice and repetition, rather than through the mental comprehension of explicit instructions (Ingold 2001: 21-25; Wacquant 2006; Prentice 2008: 59).

While the complexities of the interactions between artisans and their materials have been helpfully brought into view through the attention paid to material engagement, Thomas Yarrow suggests that the over-emphasis on "engagement" per se has had a tendency to perpetuate popular notions that craftwork is an antidote to the alienation that is supposed to inhere in modernity and capitalist modes of production (2012). He argues that a subtext of the works of Sennett, Ingold, and others is that craft offers "redemptive possibilities through the reintegration of mind and body," which appear to have become detached under conditions of modernity (cf. Scrase 2003: 450). When framed in this way, an obvious ideological continuity appears with the historical foundations of the craft concept (i.e. the image that craft is un-alienated labour), the position taken by William Morris and others in the Arts and Crafts Movement in the nineteenth century. From his research with stone masons at Glasgow Cathedral, Yarrow instead suggests that artisanal practice is made up of jointly-emerging conditions of both engagement and detachment, where detachment is understood not in opposition to

engagement, but rather denotes moments where artisans feel that they are separated from their materials or the objects they produce, although they may continue to physically engage with them (Yarrow 2012).⁴⁴

Yarrow's formulation of co-existing states of detachment and engagement resonates with my own observations from San Martín, although there these states occur in ways different to the Glasgow masons. Like Yarrow's stone masons, who feel they go onto "auto-pilot," carvers note that the wood itself seems to carry along the process. Recall that Lalo explained that his knife seems to be moved by the grain of the wood, "you don't do it intentionally, it just happens". He expanded by saying that especially when he is carving a form that he has made many times before, he doesn't really think about how to get from the image in his head to the finished piece, and that when he is carving, he is not aware of his individual movements or of the passage of time: "when I first begin to carve in the morning, I am aware of working, making the first few cuts and looking at the piece. The next thing I know, it's eleven (o'clock), and it's time to *almorzar* (to eat)."

A second moment of detachment comes when carvers or painters come close to finishing the piece they are working on. I often noticed artisans putting their piece down, and taking a few steps back, or walking away for a moment before returning to consider it with fresh eyes. Carvers often pick up the piece and turn it over and over again in their hands, looking and feeling with their fingers the form, movement and balance. Amado told me that when he first started carving he was often surprised how different the finished piece looked to him once he had taken a step away and considered

⁴⁴ Intriguingly, Yarrow's concept of detachment has arisen from engagement with work by Joanna Cook on Buddhist meditation.

it from a different point of view; now, however, he expects to see it differently, because, he says, “when you’re carving it, you’re too close to see what it really looks like.”

A different kind of detachment takes place in the large workshops where a strict division of labour is usually maintained. As the carving made by one artisan is completed, he relinquishes aesthetic control over the piece to the painter who will then take it forward. I asked the carvers in both of the larger workshops if they ever made suggestions about the way a piece should be painted, but no one said they did; most rarely thought about what colour a piece might be painted, since after it left their hands, it became someone else’s piece to work on. But this does not constitute a complete detachment, as carvers continue to acknowledge and point out which carvings they had made, even after they have been painted. However, they no longer consider them an object with which they can continue to engage in the productive mode, as the carving has been completed, and the work has now become someone else’s. This indicates that the inalienable connection that Weiner and others have observed between people and objects may be one of degrees; that different kinds of alienability and inalienability may co-exist, depending on the nature of all the social relations that are involved.

The attention paid by tourists and collectors to the skill and location of the production of woodcarvings ties their aura to the actual production processes and experiences in the workshops of San Martín. While these experiences of attachment and detachment may not always be effectively communicated to viewers, they work to create what Weiner described as inalienability, as processes of artisanship are intimately linked to inalienability for the woodcarvings’ consumers. The experience of this production and materials for artisans is a central aspect of the aura, as it helps to

generate the ways that tourists, collectors and other viewers come to know the woodcarvings through their interactions with artisans.

In the next section, I consider how other social processes within Tileños' workshops work to direct this inalienability via local conceptions of authorship and style. Where Yarrow's informants detached themselves from authorial connections to the objects they produced in order to subsume the objects' potentially unique identities to the cohesive whole of the cathedral, in San Martín this form of detachment subsumes certain individuals' connections to the authorial connections of others to their work. I also show that the making of "styles" within the genre of Oaxacan woodcarving results in the detachment of objects from some of the people who produce them, and reinforces connections to others. In so doing, these processes contribute to the construction of the auras of woodcarvings, as they are grounded on the authority of their authorship and the emplacement of their production.

Styles and signatures: detachments and connections in authorship

One warm summer afternoon in 2008 I was observing the Garcías' painting workshop as a group of American tourists were watching Miguel's demonstration. As the demonstration finished, and the group moved towards the back of the courtyard to see the carvers, I noticed one young woman had hung back and was looking closely at the piece Citlalli was just finishing. Although the woman seemed interested in the piece, she was asking Citlalli in Spanish how long she had worked there for. She answered "two years," and looked up, smiling at the young woman. Dropping her voice, she then asked, "and do you ever get to sign your own work, or is it always signed by the *jefes*?" Citlalli's smile flickered for a moment, and then she said, "We are all people of this workshop, and this is the name of the workshop, so that is our signature." Although

Citlalli delivered a smooth explanation, the tourist's probing question points to a set of issues that arose throughout my research, which coalesced around the related problems of defining authorship and style.

Given the plasticity of wood and the wide variety of ways in which carvings potentially could be painted, there is a surprisingly strong over-all consistency in the types of carvings that are produced; they are clearly all "of a kind," and, as I stated in the introduction, can best be understood as constituting a genre. The carvings made in San Martín almost exclusively represent animals or traditional Mexican folk characters, and are painted in bold, bright hues that are also found in other Mexican artesanías, and, for example, are common in a particular style of interior decoration which draws on the "mexicolours" or "fiesta palette" described by Coffey (2010: 302). The aesthetic content of the genre of Oaxacan woodcarvings is influenced, in no small degree, by the expectations of tourists, guides, wholesalers and state actors, through processes explored in detail in the next chapter. Here, however, I want to turn to Tileños' conceptualisations of style in order to consider how these understandings work to detach carvings from some artisans, and reinforce connections with others, a process which contributes to their aura.

Style, as a term, is difficult to pin down analytically, and yet its use in descriptions of artworks is common both within academic writing and in popular media. Although it is more frequently used in linguistic anthropology and archaeology, in social anthropology style is often invoked, like aesthetics, to indicate sensorial or other equally elusive qualities about the processes described. In other words, style is often invoked by anthropologists to describe qualitative similarities and differences, leading to topics like "parenting styles" or "political styles." The anthropology of art, curiously

enough, has not deeply engaged with the term perhaps because, as Ruth Phillips has shown, the historical academic division between the anthropology of art and art history was based on the study of art's cultural meaning by the former and aesthetic style by the latter (Phillips 1991: 92).

Anthropological explanations of style have tended to address what they "do" rather than what they "are"; Martin Wobst working in material culture studies has argued for the "communicative function of style," and Richard Wilk has suggested that style is a form of "common difference" – an organised arena within which difference can be expressed in a regularised and consistent way across social boundaries (Conkey 2006: 360-361; Wobst 1999; Wilk 2004). This perspective resonates with James Ferguson's use of "localist" and "cosmopolitan" styles of behaviour, which utilises the concept of style to investigate conflicting ideals of behaviour within the same urban Zambian Copperbelt community (Ferguson 1999: 82-121). Birgit Meyer has further developed Ferguson's formulation in order to approach the aesthetics of the interactions between Pentecostal churches and popular cinema in Ghana, arguing that a stylistic resemblance between the melodrama of popular films and Pentecostalism results in a cultural convergence that contributes to the popularity of both (Meyer 2004).

Artisans in San Martín, however, invoke an understanding of style that is much more in line with those from the disciplines of art history and criticism, which, to generalise, can be thought of as a property that associates a work with an artist, period, region, school, et cetera, rather than another, and which works in some way as an aesthetic signature (Goodman 1975). Not all Tileño artisans have managed to develop a recognised style; those that have are felt to have achieved some level of success that may guarantee them financial security. At the very least, they are felt to be able to better

market their products to wholesalers and shop owners who are often on the lookout for something unique. Because of this importance, during interviews with artisans, the conversation often turned to styles as a topic of interest and concern, and as will be discussed in Chapter Six, concerns about the copying of styles were at the forefront of peoples' minds.

Although the popular literature about Oaxacan woodcarvings frames style in terms of named individuals, styles actually adhere to workshops; in most cases, those who work in the same workshop produce the same style of carving and painting. There are, of course, a few exceptions to this rule: one artisan in his late fifties and his adult son work together in their household compound, where both live with their families. Their work, however, is quite distinct, and the son sells his work under his own name. However, a very large number of pieces made in San Martín are at least partially made by people who are not considered the authors of the styles in which they are produced. Pieces by Tomás Castillo, for example, which are sold in San Martín, in galleries, and online, are not produced by him alone. Although Tomás has developed his own carving style, and carves the pieces himself, his wife, Lupe, inevitably has a hand in their production. She paints almost all of the pieces her husband carves, and has worked to develop her own painting style, which has become characteristic of their work. And yet the pieces are signed “Tomás Castillo,” and they are considered quite collectable, as Tomás has not only built a name for himself over the years, but also is the son of one of the original carvers in San Martín. In the cases where workshops carry the name of the family (e.g. “workshop of the Pérez Santiago family”), the family names used are always that of the adult male, not the wife or the children.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Naming practices in San Martín follow those of other Spanish-speaking countries more generally where children take their *apellido paterno* (father's surname) followed by their *apellido materno* (mother's surname) to form their own surnames. The significance here is that unlike common English naming

The attachment of “styles” onto family workshops is a significant feature in the development of the aura of woodcarvings. While the Western fine art tradition idealises the individual “genius” as the agent in artistic creation (Soussloff 1997: 19, 34; S. Errington 1998: 140-141), ideas that circulate about the production of artesanías often are tied to the household and to peasant lifeways, making the household-workshop an importance space in which aura is created.⁴⁶ As the Canadian tourist above observed, seeing woodcarving production in the household-workshop environment makes them more desirable. This is because of a presumed relationship, present in popular (and development) discourses about the nature of work within the household; household workshops appear as spaces of unalienated and collective family labour in which “honest” work, removed from the “commercialisation” of the market, takes place (Dilley 2004: 803-805; Wherry 2006; Wood 2008: 46). The American woman’s warning to me about not disclosing the “secret” of paid labour within woodcarving workshops emphasises the power of the aura of household-production for an important consuming audience of the woodcarvings (see Introduction, p. 73).

The gendered implications of these processes are clear; with one or two exceptions, the named artisans in San Martín are men, and although the women and children of artisanal households often contribute to woodcarving production, they rarely receive the same recognition. This gender division of authorship is reinforced through most Tileños’ discourses as women and children’s work is often described as “helping,” rather than work in its own right.⁴⁷ Not everyone is satisfied with this state of affairs,

practices, children do not have identical surnames to their fathers, thus workshops’ names, even in the “family” mode, continue to reflect the adult man’s identity.

⁴⁶ Of course, the production of art by a single artist has only been the standard in the West for a relatively short period of time. In the Renaissance, famous artists such as Michelangelo frequently and openly governed over workshops and hoards of apprentices that executed their work (B. Cole 1983).

⁴⁷ It must be acknowledged that there are a few men who produce woodcarvings entirely from beginning to end themselves. It is not a coincidence, however, that in all cases but one, their children were either grown, and had left their natal households, or their children were still too young to “help.”

however; a few women complained to me that by calling the pieces “woodcarvings” their work is undervalued, as the carved aspect of the work is emphasised over the painting. However, most pragmatically concede that it was difficult to know what else the woodcarvings should be called, and in any case the profits from woodcarvings were almost always used for household needs.⁴⁸ Thus, the notion that unique styles of carvings are the creations of adult male woodcarvers works to detach their authorship from the women and children who frequently also contribute to their production (cf. Godelier 1986: 9-31).

This form of detachment of authorship is even more discernible in the case of the large workshops like the one owned by Miguel and Catalina. As illustrated by the conversation between Citlalli and the tourist above, despite the fact that up to four different individuals might work on a single piece, the signature always bears the name of workshop’s owners.⁴⁹ In many instances, Miguel and Catalina themselves do not work at all on the pieces that bear their names. This detachment is conceptually created through local understandings of style, which as I have described are produced and reproduced, but not authorially recognised, at the level of the workshop. Despite the fact that many talented artisans work in their workshop, the Garcías are considered the true authors of the woodcarvings by virtue of the fact that they are regarded as the authors of the style in which the carvings are made.

The aesthetic style of the forms of their woodcarvings was developed by Miguel over a period of approximately 3 years in the early 2000s as he and Catalina worked to

⁴⁸ Many women I interviewed contrasted woodcarving to migration in this aspect, saying that at least with woodcarving they knew that the income was being spent “for the home,” as women are aware that men who migrate to the United States frequently do not remit as much as they can.

⁴⁹ I asked Catalina about her use of the surname “García,” since her actual surnames are not those of her husband. She explained that she has found that Mexican naming practices are often confusing for their American clients, and so for simplicity’s sake, she uses her husband’s surname in her work life.

cultivate their small family workshop. Significantly, today Miguel never carves pieces himself, and yet the creative work of authorship is still considered to have been done by him. Similarly, Catalina is the person who is understood to have developed the entire painting repertoire of the workshop, including their unique colour combinations, their specific patterns and designs, and their two “lines” (i.e. distinct styles) of carvings which are easily distinguished from the work of their neighbours.

It is not just the products of the workshop that are seen as specifically belonging to Miguel and Catalina, but also the style itself. David also helps his own parents paint their carvings in the evenings after he has finished work. However, he explained to me that he would never paint his father’s carvings in the style that he works in at Miguel and Catalina’s, even though they sell for higher prices. He said that this would not be fair, because it would be like stealing, and I never saw pieces at his parents’ workshop that were at all similar to Catalina’s painting style. He did admit that sometimes ideas come to him during his working day, and that they are probably influenced by Catalina, but that was as far as one should go. Indeed, the copying of other peoples’ styles is widely regarded as unethical.

The association of authorship with the owners of workshops is also reinforced by the ideology of the ethnic art market in which Oaxacan woodcarvings, especially *finas* and *rústicas*, circulate. The concept of authorship that now operates within the North American ethnic art market integrates ideas of the “Western” notions of artistic genius into culturalist expectations about ethnicity and art (Driscoll-Engelstad 1996; Anthes 2009; cf. Myers 2002: 58-66; 194-198). By coincidence while I was doing my fieldwork, Lisa, a Canadian artist who is a good friend of my mother’s, discovered the armadillo carving she owned by Miguel and Catalina had somehow lost its ears during a

move. The combination of this discovery and my presence in Oaxaca at the time, encouraged Lisa to make a trip down during my fieldwork, and she brought along the armadillo in order to have it repaired. Although the amount of work involved was minimal, and could have been easily done by any of the woodcarvers I knew in San Martín (or indeed, by someone who knew their way around carving or carpentry in Canada), it was clear that for her the repair could only be carried out in Miguel and Catalina's workshop. Although we had no way of knowing which of Miguel and Catalina's employees had contributed to the piece originally, and Miguel and Catalina themselves were not going to do the repair work, Lisa was satisfied that the woodcarving would be "whole" again once it had been repaired there. This event tells us something important about the ongoing connection that anthropologists have observed between art productions and their authors; although there appears to be "inalienability" between art producers and their products (cf. A. Weiner 1992), this connection is not straightforwardly a connection between object and producer, but rather a more indirect connection between object and the person(s) with whom authorship – however it is defined – resides.

The association of an aesthetic style with the owners of a workshop also helps to build aura around the products of that workshop. In February 2009, I was invited to join Miguel, his sister Daniela, and artisan Pedro Flores, on a sales trip to Tucson, Arizona. They had been invited by the Western National Parks Association (WNPA) to give a demonstration and sell their work at a show. The WNPA show opened at ten o'clock on a Friday morning, and I was very surprised to see at ten minutes to ten a large queue of desperate looking people, mostly in their sixties and seventies, waiting outside the glass doors. As soon as the doors opened, these collectors rushed to Miguel's stall, and within twenty minutes they had bought more than ten of his expensive pieces.

The aesthetics and quality of Miguel and Catalina's pieces are central to the aura that now surrounds them. The finely detailed paintwork and the rounded, organic lines of the animal's bodies, the soft, yet expressive faces, and the intimation of movement, stand out within the genre of Oaxacan woodcarvings. Their work is now highly sought after by collectors; when I spoke briefly with a woman who had purchased one of Miguel's pieces in Tucson, she said she felt relieved that she'd managed to purchase one before they all were gone, as her sister had bought a piece from them the previous year, and ever since her own collection of "Indian art" had felt empty. Thus, a large part of the aura of their work can be understood as connected to what Alfred Gell calls "captivation" by an artwork; the inability on the part of the viewer to conceive of producing such an item:

Gazing at the picture, my jaw drops, in admiration - and defeat. This defeat is, however, profitable to me also, to the extent that in mentally retracing Vermeer's origination of his picture, the technical and imaginative performance which culminated in the finished work, I do manage, exercising such powers as I possess, to attain a certain point, before I break off in bewilderment and can follow Vermeer no longer through the maze of his artistic agency... (Gell 1998: 69).

The aesthetics of Miguel and Catalina's work is captivating in this sense. The intricate details and fineness of the carving and painting are such that it is hard for most of us to imagine having such skill. For collectors of art, this excellence gives them an aura of pricelessness, despite the fact that they do have a price. At the WNPA show, a particularly passionate customer was asking me questions about the amount of time it would have taken to paint the piece she was considering. As I turned it over in my hand, the detachable tail fell to the concrete floor, and she started screaming at me that I might have ruined the whole thing. I recall finding the moment very jarring, as in the workshop, tails and other loose appendages sometimes fall to the floor without much concern, but in this case Miguel had to make a visible effort to check the piece for

scratches and repaint the area she thought had been ruined, in order to appease the customer.

The desperation to own one of Miguel and Catalina's pieces is also attributable to the aura that has built up around their "name" which they have successfully developed into a brand-like status over the years. They have expanded the aesthetic style of their woodcarvings to every aspect of their business; from the décor of their workshop, galleries and restaurant to their website, to the fact that they and their employees wear traditional *típica* blouses and shirts while at work. The cohesiveness of their style between all aspects of their business makes it appear to be less consciously invented and more a natural expression of their aesthetic and cultural qualities, which are the foundation of the aura of objects that circulate in ethnic art and artesanía markets.

While the nature of authorship in Miguel and Catalina's workshop is such that the pieces always remain firmly associated with themselves, the detachment of woodcarvings from the employed artisans who make them is not always complete. Jaime, Pedro Flores' son, has worked for Miguel and Catalina for over three years and is considered one of the most talented painters in their workshop. The pieces he paints, while in general match Catalina's stylistic repertoire, often incorporate flourishes that are recognised by everyone – including Miguel and Catalina – as distinctly Jaime's. For example, he will often insert a space within the usual geometric lines, in which he might paint a scene, such as women making tortillas, or ancient Mexicans building pyramids. Other times, he produces new iconography within the standard geometric patterns, and plays with differences in scale or colour to produce pieces with a distinct difference (see Figure 21).



Figure 21: Carving from the Garcías' workshop, painted by Jaime Flores.

Because of the uniqueness of his pieces, paired with a very high technical execution, they not only earn more money for Miguel and Catalina's workshop, they also have won Jaime a great deal of respect throughout San Martín. Two of Jaime's own pieces (not produced in the Garcías' workshop) were featured in a special exhibition in the State Museum of Popular Art in the nearby town of San Bartolo Coyotepec, and many of the other artisans outside of Miguel and Catalina's recognise that Jaime is one of the most talented painters in the community

However, although Jaime is able to exercise some aesthetic agency and maintain some authorial connection to the pieces he produces at the Garcías', members of his family were concerned that his style was being appropriated into the general style of the workshop. They thought that Jaime would be better off working on his own, developing a name for himself, and they were concerned that the aesthetic innovations Jaime was making were being "absorbed" into Miguel and Catalina's style. For his part, Jaime explained to me that he preferred working at the Garcías' because he had enough

freedom to try out new painting techniques and ideas, while at the same time he earned a steady income of cash – something very desirable to a young man planning on marrying in the next few years. He also said it was more fun working in the large workshop with others his own age than at home with his small family.

I have shown in this chapter that both the analytical concepts of attachment and detachment are required to understand the practices of Tileños, both in terms of the material production that occurs in their workshops, and in terms of the readings of authorship of styles that take place at the workshop level. These aesthetic practices work to maintain the authorial and inalienable connection between named artisans and the woodcarvings that are produced in their workshops, while at the same time work to detach the woodcarvings from others who are also intimately involved in their production. While previous studies have focused on how market capitalism may work to devalue or detach objects from their producers (Carrier 1992), my analysis shows that these processes also take place at the more localised level of small scale artisanal production. This suggests that it is crucial for anthropologists to pay attention not only to the moments in productive processes where power is obviously enacted, but also to more subtle issues of material and aesthetic practice so that we can fully address the nature of the relationships between material objects and people.

I have also shown in this chapter that the auras of woodcarvings are read in ways that are not wholly dependent on culturalist conceptions of “authenticity,” but are rather polyvalent and contingent on the contexts in which objects are encountered; the spaces and social situations in which they are produced; the kinds of people who produce them; and even the intentions and desires of viewers themselves. Despite the fact that in principle, all Tileños should be equally able (re)produce these readings of the aura of

their work, the reality is that these readings are inconsistent and change with time. I explore the consequences of this condition in later chapters in the thesis, but in the next chapter I turn to another way that auratic connections are produced by certain people in San Martín, by considering the way that Miguel and Catalina García have reconditioned the genre of the woodcarvings by adopting an explicit aesthetic of ethnic art, thus drawing on the auras that is read in indigenous art, by people within the ethnic art world.

Chapter Three
Artesanías into Ethnic Art:
The Shifting Aesthetic Field of Oaxacan Woodcarvings

A few months into my fieldwork I was chatting with a small group of women, American tourists who were touring the workshop of the Garcías. An older woman in the group mentioned to me that she had really appreciated visiting their workshop because, as she put it, she was “more interested in ethnic art than crafts.” I asked her what was it about their work that made it art for her, and she described how it showed “real creativity and passion” and that “there was something unique in each piece [and]… you could see how Miguel and Catalina put themselves into the work.” After she left, I puzzled over the woman’s comments. It surprised me a little that she had felt Miguel and Catalina had “put themselves” into each piece when she had just met all of their employees who were carving and painting the work. As described in the last chapter, the woman’s reaction is consistent with the processes involved in the attachment of objects to their named authors, but her comments also point to another theme central to my project; the aesthetic perspectives that at times mark the woodcarvings as artesanías, and other times as art, particularly ethnic art.

After the tour group left, I returned to my seat in the painting workshop and I wondered what the young artisans who were employed there thought about the issue, and so I provocatively asked if they thought they were artists or artisans. In the conversation that ensued, it was clear to me that the ambiguities of these terms were no more resolved for the painters than they were for me; all of the painters thought that they were definitely artisans, although Citlalli asserted that it was possible to be an artisan and an artist at the same time, mentioning her neighbour, Isidoro Cruz as an example. Juan disagreed; he thought that you either were an artist or an artisan, but that artisans could sometimes make art, and artists, artesanías. Pushing the argument along, I

suggested that surely artists make art, and that artisans make artesanías, but Juan disagreed, saying that art is completely from the imagination, while artesanías are from tradition. Pointing out that the woodcarvings they were painting were not strictly traditional, I asked if they were art or artesanías, and Isabel hesitantly suggested that maybe they were a little of both because “they look like art, but they are made like artesanías.”⁵⁰ As the conversation continued in circles, Jaime, with a mischievous grin, disappeared into the office, returning a few minutes later with a print-out of the English Wikipedia website definitions of “art” and “craft,” after which he jokingly offered to resolve any more problems in my thesis for me.

* * * * *

In the previous chapter I explored two of the many ways that the auras of woodcarvings are read by their viewers; through the workshop spaces in which they are produced and the aesthetic styles of named artisans. In this chapter, I trace the ways that the aesthetics of the genre are constituted, and how this genre also affects the ways that woodcarvings’ auras are read by different viewers. In the introduction, I suggested that the character of the aesthetics of Oaxacan woodcarvings as a genre could be understood by considering three intersecting aesthetic processes: the aesthetics of artesanías, as conceptualised within the Mexican and Oaxacan contexts; the aesthetics of ethnic art, as understood in the North American context, particularly within the American Southwest region; and the aesthetic conceptualisations of the artisans themselves. In this chapter, I show ethnographically how these three perspectives come together. However, rather than suggesting that they are static or coherent “influences on” the woodcarvings, my analysis instead will show that these aesthetic perspectives mingle in changing, and

⁵⁰ or “seem like art,” “*se parecen el arte*”

sometimes contradictory ways, so that the genre's aesthetics are constantly in flux, and should be understood in processual, rather than fixed terms (cf. Svašek 2007: 9-11).

As these aesthetic processes involve the participation of many different kinds of outsiders – that is, people who are not from, nor live in San Martín – their roles in these processes are placed at the heart of my analysis. In this chapter, then, I explore not only how Tileño artisans' aesthetic practices are moulded by the genre of Oaxacan woodcarvings, but how the genre itself is continually defined and redefined through artisans' practices within the “aesthetic field” of the woodcarvings. However, before I move on to the details of this argument, I briefly address how Tileños in general consider themselves aesthetic producers by virtue of being from an artisan village, as the aesthetic authority they see themselves as having works in many ways to mediate the relations of power that lean towards outsiders within the aesthetic field of practice. I then move on to artisans' woodcarving aesthetics, focusing particularly on their own explanations of style, form and quality, in order to show how their aesthetic production can be understood as constitutive of an “aesthetic field.”

As my analysis will show, artisans' aesthetic practices alone do not form this field, as the aesthetic expectations of outsiders are also central to its character. Therefore, I also address the ways that state and tourism actors have been central to the constitution of the woodcarvings-as-artesanías aesthetic, which is currently being shifted to include the woodcarvings-as-ethnic-art aesthetic through the work of Miguel and Catalina García. My analysis of this emergent aesthetic in the woodcarving genre both shows the ways that communities of practice can influence the aesthetic fields of material culture, and at the same time reinforce changes that are made by artisans themselves.

The aesthetic authority of Tileño artisans

Although the stark beauty of San Martín in the dry season is photographed more often by tourists than by villagers, Tileños themselves also believe that their village is a beautiful place, and in their everyday lives they are interested in the ways things look. Despite the fact that the woodcarvings are the objects that draw the most attention from outsiders, Tileños in general are concerned with making things beautiful for themselves.⁵¹ This expresses itself in a multitude of ways within the community. For example, despite the fact that the village has relatively restricted access to water resources, large amounts of water, time and money are spent by the municipality cultivating the beautiful garden that surrounds a small gazebo in the village's main square. Most Tileño homes, whether they have a fair amount of material wealth or not, are always tidy and well-organised, and have many flourishes of decoration: brightly coloured embroidered cushions on sofas and beds; pots of flowering plants tucked into corners of courtyards where trees and vines are cultivated, and many pictures and photographs on brightly painted cement walls. Prized objects, like ceramic figures of saints and family heirlooms, are displayed in large, glass-fronted armoires, which are often received as wedding gifts, and are considered an important component of a proper household.

Artisans' houses in particular come to bear the aesthetic stamp of Oaxacan woodcarvings. This of course helps to reinforce the auras of the carvings, as they appear situated within a consistent aesthetic landscape, but it also shows the delight that Tileños take in making their homes beautiful spaces; many artisans' private spaces

⁵¹ Barbara Bodenhorn and I have discussed whether this might be an especially salient cultural characteristic in Oaxaca. In both San Martín, and in Ixtlán de Juarez, where Bodenhorn works, people seem very concerned with making things "look right." Decorations for fiestas, a certain desirability of hand-crafted clothing and objects, and even the way that fruit and vegetables are arranged in Oaxacan markets, seem always approached with a concern for making them *look* nice. For example, Bodenhorn contrasted the fact that the young people she works with on an indigenous cultural programme in Ixtlán spent much more time making their presentations and projects "look good" than youth in other communities where she has worked.

where tourists and most collectors never enter are also decorated and painted in bright colours, often with the same motifs as their woodcarvings.

Fiestas of all sizes – from intimate family affairs, to village-wide celebrations – are moments when Tileños' desire for things to “look right” is at its greatest. Families now save for months to pay for the dress, decorations and dance choreographers for girls' *quinceaños* (fifteenth birthday) fiestas, and young women spend a large amount of time preparing for village fiestas and saints' days. Although it is possible to purchase in Ocotlán the baskets covered with fresh flowers that young women carry on their heads during *calendas* (street processions that mark saints' days), Tileña artisans prefer to make their own baskets, even though this is not the kind of work they normally do.



Figure 22: Outbuilding at a fina workshop



Figure 23: A young Tileña artisan attaching fresh flowers to a calenda basket

A telling example of this is the renovation of San Martín's seventeenth century church, which took place over my entire fieldwork period. According to my informants, in the late 1990s, the Rodolfo Morales Foundation, a cultural fund that was established by the internationally famous Oaxacan painter from Ocotlán, approached the community of San Martín with a plan to renovate and restore the church, as part of the foundation's greater project of restoring and regenerating the Ocotlán region (see Holo 2004: 92-99 on Morales' philanthropic pursuits). After much debate and deliberation in the community assembly, the village decided to reject the foundation's offer of assistance, and take the renovation project on themselves. While the Morales Foundation turned to nearby Santa Ana Zegache to renovate their church instead, Tileños spent the following ten years fundraising and saving in order to pay for the renovation that they recognised was needed.

According to some of my informants, this decision potentially had direct repercussions for artisans, because the project could have cemented relations with the

foundation, but they also believed that if they had accepted the foundation's grant, they would have had to abide their wishes for the church. Indeed, many Tileños dislike outsiders entering their church, and Doña Isaura told me that it was better that the Morales Foundation was not involved, because they would have "expected the community to open the church doors to the whole world in order to show off their work."⁵²

In 2008, a crew of eight Tileño builders were working on the church, and when I interviewed the leader of the group, he explained that one of the primary concerns of the Morales Foundation had been the restoration of the murals that were flaking away along with the church's degrading plaster interior walls. He told me that they took this as an indication that these works needed to be updated, but said "why should we entrust our church to some experts from outside of San Martín? This is a community of artisans – of artists! We have the skills that we need to restore the murals." He went on to explain that a benefit of Tileños being the only ones to work on the church was that it could be renovated in ways that Tileños wanted. While he was aware that San Martín's church was legally defined as "national patrimony" and should have technically only been restored under the supervision of National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH). He said, "For us, this isn't a seventeenth century ruin, it is our church, and it is very important to our community. Because we are a community of artisans, we know what looks right and balanced and beautiful, so we don't want any outsiders, not even experts, telling us how to paint our church."⁵³

⁵² In fact, Tileño artisans have developed strong relations with the Morales Foundation, but through the development of a *copal* reforestation programme on San Martín's ejidal lands.

⁵³ The Morales Foundation itself is also at odds with INAH over the same issue; the foundation, and others like it in Oaxaca (such as the Harp Helú Foundation) approach restoration projects with an eye to beautification in the present, where INAH, because of its focus on research and preservation is much more concerned with accurately representing certain periods of the past (Arenas 2011: 102-103).

Thus, the aesthetic authority of Tileños as artisans spills outside of the “world” of Oaxacan woodcarvings, drawing other Tileños into the practice of aesthetics as well. That Tileños express a distinctive aesthetic authority vis-à-vis powerful state and cultural interests, whom they also engage with in their “professional” lives as artisans, shows that Tileños are not just passive recipients of aesthetic influences from outside the community, but rather that they interact with these influences within the production and marketing of woodcarvings. In the remainder of this chapter, I explore the processes involved in these interactions, and suggest that they are best understood as occurring within a relational field of aesthetics. In the next section, I briefly reintroduce my concept of the aesthetic field before turning to the kinds of aesthetic processes that currently contribute to the constitution of this field in San Martín: the aesthetic practices of artisans, the aesthetics of artesanías and the aesthetics of ethnic art.

Tileño aesthetic practice in the field of Oaxacan woodcarving

The concept of “aesthetic fields,” which I argue is a kind of aesthetic topography, is drawn from Bourdieu’s “field theory,” which he elaborates in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993; see Introduction, pp. 15-19). Bourdieu argues that art worlds work as a relational field where competing actors take positions vis-à-vis one another for legitimacy, which he explains is a combination of symbolic capital (accumulated prestige, knowledge or honour) and recognition (by other actors within the field). What distinguishes Bourdieu’s approach from earlier “art world” theories is that he argues that the nature of the positions of these actors is relational, so that the terrain over which they compete is at once produced by and determines the positions that actors can take in the future (ibid: 30-31). As I suggested in the introduction, this approach has the distinct benefit of accounting for the fact that different art worlds utilise different kinds of “specific capital” that index actors’ legitimacy, and of offering

a way to theorise how influence works within art worlds without characterising it as cause-and-effect, an expression that suggests unidirectional and firm relations, but does not encapsulate the processes that are actually involved.

Despite the utility of Bourdieu's model, other art sociologists such as Georgina Born (2010) have critiqued the field approach for its inability to account for the objects that are produced by art worlds, suggesting that there is no room in Bourdieu's analysis for aesthetics beyond the basic fact that aesthetic value is for the most part both produced and evaluated by the same world of actors.⁵⁴ I suggested in the introduction that this shortcoming in Bourdieu's approach can be addressed if the "positions" are understood as specifically aesthetic ones, not exclusively as politically-competitive ones. This means that the art products of different artisans or artists within the same art world take the relational positions, rather than the artisans themselves, and that it is these objects that are in competition with one another for legitimacy. Within this adjusted model, "legitimacy" (also defined as "specific capital") can therefore be understood as the "desirability" or "genuineness" of a work of art to its viewers, or in other words, its "aura," which as explored in the previous chapter can be partially produced by artisans through a variety of aesthetic practices. In what follows, I explore the processes through which the aesthetic field is constituted, and the ways that the very strong (or "legitimated") auras of the work by Miguel and Catalina García work to reconstitute the field, expanding it from an aesthetics of artesanías to encompass a new engagement with the aesthetics of ethnic art.

The aesthetics of Tileño artisans, which I have this far characterised by terms such as "sensibilities" or "dispositions" are better understood as a collection of processes that attend to Tileños' on going and changing relationship to their products.

⁵⁴ Bourdieu explores this argument in detail in *Distinction* (1984).

By defining it in this way, it allows me to analytically approach their aesthetics as a form of practice rather than a “mood” or a stance, as aesthetics are often characterised in standard approaches to art (e.g. Sibley 2004). This aesthetic practice appears in a multitude of ways, from the physical engagement and detachment with the materials, to the painting of signs and doors of workshops in order to entice customers to come inside. Here, I will describe those practices that help to constitute the aesthetic field of woodcarvings; artisans’ descriptions and evaluations of style, form and quality.

In everyday conversations, the artisans I knew rarely spoke critically about the work of others. Partially, this was due to the fact that most artisans actually did not have many opportunities to view each other’s work, as workshops were ambiguous spaces; public to tourists, guides and collectors, but other artisans were not really welcome without reason. Unless artisans were close friends, or as was more often the case, close relatives, they rarely had the opportunity to closely view the work of others. I infrequently saw other artisans discuss work when visiting, which often took place either outside of workshop or store areas, or moved to one side, away from the pieces. The majority of conversations I was able to have with artisans about the work of others took place in the contexts of shops and craft fairs, where pieces were more readily visible.

One late afternoon in November 2008, I was walking through the large community craft fair that had been assembled around the main square of the village with artisan César Santiago and his wife Eda Castro. The fair had been arranged to take advantage of the greater tourist numbers over the Day of the Dead period, and a series of cultural performances were also taking place in the hopes of attracting more attention. As we wandered among the stalls, I frequently stopped to look at the carvings

that were displayed. Near the end of one row, I found a table of carvings that were done in the commercial style, but almost entirely painted in fluorescent colours. I was surprised because fluorescent paints were only normally used for accents and they did not seem to be as readily available as matte or glossy paints in Ocotlán, where the majority of artisans purchase their paint and tools. The artisan who made them was absent from his stall, and I asked who he was. As was usual for Tileños, César answered by telling me where he lived and which family he belonged to, indicating he was a distant cousin. I commented that the carvings were a little different, and asked what César thought of them. He paused speculatively, and answered that these colours were not to his taste (“*no son de mi gusto*”). I then asked if he thought the carvings were “not good,” and Eda interjected, saying “it’s not that they’re bad, they’re just a different style than he likes to make,” referring to César. “There are tourists who like all sorts of things, and so, the truth is that there are not objectively bad styles.” Her comment struck me at the time, because Eda was not a woman to mince words, and I had often heard her gossiping, saying people had done good and bad things, so I concluded she must have really meant this, and was not just being polite.

It turned out that this was a very common response amongst artisans when I asked them directly about the work of other people. Rather than expressing judgements on the relative artistic value of someone’s work, they would instead express preferences for styles, colours and forms, often drawing comparisons with their own work as a means of explanation. For example, when I later asked César if he liked the work of Ernesto Pérez, whose work is stylistically quite different from César’s own, he answered, while pointing to a carving “yes – see, we both like to use combinations of colours that are close to each other, like blue and purple or orange and red. I like this very much.”

Personal preferences for colours and styles were also used as explanations for purchasing choices amongst the few artisans who openly re-sold the work of their neighbours in their small shops. Catalina did much of the buying of woodcarvings and other artesanías for her family's shops, and she told me that it is sometimes hard to select amongst the work of all of her neighbours, "because all of it has value." Instead, she said she had to make decisions based on what she liked and thought would combine well stylistically with their own work, to provide the customer with "a pleasant and consistent" experience. A phrase she often used when she found a piece she wanted to buy was "this grabs my attention! (*esto me llama la atención!*)"⁵⁵

This framing of the judgement of style as personal preference supports Svasek's suggestion that we look to processes of aestheticisation, rather than looking for local standards and judgements of beauty (2007: 9-11). However, it also suggests that these aesthetic processes must be understood as *part of* the practices through which objects are made, rather than only something that happens post-hoc to objects as they travel along their trajectories through moments of consumption, collection and curation. Just as Fabian observed for Zairian paintings, the aesthetic grammars through which producers and viewers understand Oaxacan woodcarvings in turn work to direct future production, as more objects are produced that match these existent understandings. In this way, Tileños' aesthetic practice works to condition the forms that their products take.

For many artisans, the forms of the carvings are what provide a large amount of their variation, as most execute many different animals in similar carving and painting styles. Rufino Pérez, for example, often carves gazelles, giraffes and even dogs and cats

⁵⁵ Of course, personal preferences are only a partial explanation of her purchases, as Catalina also consistently sold pieces by her close friends and family members, and these networks are also important in building relationships both within the community and without (see below and Chapter Four).

with long, sweeping legs and necks, a device that he considers integral to his personal style. He explained to me that although he is known for gazelles, he would not consider it copying if someone else made them as well, unless they tried to do it in exactly the same way. He explained that this was because “it is impossible to keep ideas to yourself; they are constantly floating around, and you don’t really know if your ideas came from someone else or not, or if you were both separately inspired by the same idea.” Rufino elaborated, saying that “all of us in San Martín have similar lives, similar knowledge (*conocimientos*), so it makes sense we might have similar ideas.”

The repetition of certain forms is quite common within and between workshops. As Chibnik observes, this has been heavily influenced by journalistic and collectors’ guide books that describe the works of artisans in detail, thus providing an incentive for named artisans to continually produce this work to match buyers’ expectations, or an incentive for others to produce similar forms to the photographs of pieces that have been published in these popular books (2003: 180-182). Repetition in form also is useful when dealing with wholesalers, especially for commercial producers, as wholesalers often want to buy large numbers of similar pieces to resell in bulk. Some artisans also told me that they enjoy working with the same form over and over again, as it allows them to further explore and push the limits of the shapes that they thought were possible.

These practical considerations aside, repetition is also a feature characteristic of tourist art markets in many locations around the world. As Steiner has shown, the tendency for repetition is seemingly integral to the functioning of art markets that depend on “authenticity” as their currency (1999). This is true as well for the woodcarvings, as buyers’ understandings of what woodcarvings should look like are

conditioned by their ubiquity (either as images in books or actual woodcarvings) sold in Oaxacan City or in workshops in San Martín. An Austrian tourist who was visiting San Martín without a guide summed it up: “once you have gone into a few workshops or galleries you get a feel for the woodcarvings, you know what they look like in general. Then you can decide which one you like best, as you know what they should look like.” Artisans of course, tend to repeat the forms and aesthetics they believe will easily sell, and this repetition of style contributes to a large extent to the reproduction of the aesthetic field.

From this discussion, we can see that Tileños’ aesthetics structure the aesthetic field of the woodcarvings in relational ways, where one artisan’s creations or styles cannot be understood as isolated works, but are positioned and described in reference to their previous work, and to the works of others. Despite this structure, artisans in San Martín do have the ability to push the boundaries of the aesthetic field. A good example of this is Marina Castillo, a Tileña artisan who used to work painting woodcarvings for her brother, but now produces paper mâché figures and sells them in her brother’s workshop and at woodcarving fairs in San Martín and Oaxaca. She began making the paper mâché ladies because, as she told me, she wanted to pursue her own ideas in a different form. She felt that the malleable and softer medium of paper mâché suited her personality more than wood, and also her figures, which are dressed in traditional dresses from the different regions of Oaxaca, are something unique but at the same time, “típica.” Despite the fact that Marina works in a different medium, the style of her painting on the figures is consistent with the general style of commercial Oaxacan woodcarvings, often reproducing floral print-like motifs, or incorporating the figures of small birds and insects into her painting (see Figure 24). Marina has quickly gained recognition for her work; the same year she started making them she was invited to the

Maestros del Arte fair held annually in Chapala, Jalisco.⁵⁶ Although Marina's figures are not examples of Oaxacan woodcarvings, they respond to the same aesthetic attitude as the carvings, and can be understood as continuing the woodcarvings style in a different form. This process can also be seen, for example, in the products of another Tileña artisan, who married the son of one of the Aguilar ceramicists in nearby Ocotlán; their figures now frequently include Oaxacan woodcarvings represented in clay (see Figure 25).

Although negative evaluations of an artisan's style, which included carving forms and colour choices, were persistently avoided, Tileños would comment on the quality of individual pieces, and the elements that were considered indicators of quality were consistent amongst everyone. Evaluations of quality were directly related to the proper execution of each step of the production process, and thus related to Tileños' notions of good practice or artisanship. The selection of wood is an important decision in the carving process for some carvers, especially those who make larger carvings. "Macho" wood dries to be more brittle and harder than "hembra" and is better for carvings that will have finer details or will be carved with more delicate forms. The hembra wood dries to be less brittle and the branches are generally thicker and thus better for large, solid pieces.

⁵⁶ *Feria Maestros del Arte* is an annual fair organised by an American ex-patriot who lives in Jalisco. It is promoted in both English and Spanish, and is considered a great opportunity for young artisans to show their work to an international clientele.



Figure 24: Paper mâché figures by Marina Castillo



Figure 25: Painted clay figurine of woman with Oaxacan woodcarvings

Carvers who generally produced smaller carvings also recognised the difference between the types of wood, but most mentioned this only affected the amount of pressure needed on knives and machetes during carving and did not affect the final outcome of the piece. For the carvers who make large *fina* carvings, pieces made out of a single piece of wood without the need to attach appendages are considered higher quality work; if a piece broke during carving, it reduced the quality of the piece, even if the repair work was invisible once painting was complete. I observed that if the piece was salvageable, breakage did not reduce the price they charged buyers, but carvers were disappointed in the outcome nonetheless. In contrast, the cracks that often appear naturally as large pieces dry, and which must be filled with wood splints and glue, are not considered to affect the quality of the piece, because it is the result of the wood and not the artisan's work.

The drying and treating of wood also affects the quality of the piece in the eyes of artisans. While this step is not paid much attention by tourists and many wholesalers, artisans and most collectors consider it central to producing good work. As the wood is very moist when carved, it must be completely dry before any painting should occur. Depending on the size of the piece and the season (rainy or dry), this can take anywhere from a couple of weeks up to nine months. In most cases, pieces are left in the sun in the centre of the household courtyard or on shelves in workshops areas. Occasionally small pieces may be put on the household's *comal*, a large, round terracotta plate with a fire built underneath for making tortillas. Some higher end producers now use commercial bread ovens to speed up the drying process of larger pieces. The importance of drying relates to the texture of the paint when the piece is finally finished; as the pieces are painted in acrylics, the paint forms a water-tight seal around the wood. If the wood is not completely dry before it is painted, the paint can bubble and crease as the moisture

tries to escape. For all of the artisans I interviewed on the topic of quality, this was cited as evidence of poor quality work.

Copal is also susceptible to infestations by a small insect known in English as the powderpost beetle (*Lyctus brunneus*). If the wood has not been properly treated, the insects can eventually eat their way through the wood, leaving small holes and trails. This can have disastrous consequences for artisans' relationships with their customers, especially with wholesalers and gallery owners whose reputations also depend on the quality of the work they sell. As such, this was a major source of concern for all of the artisans I knew, and yet there was great disagreement about the appropriate way to prevent infestations of the *animalitos* ("little animals"). The majority of carvers soaked their pieces in gasoline, insecticide, or a mixture of the two. Others did not believe this helped much, and was considered by most to have a number of drawbacks; some expressed concerns over health problems relating to the fumes, and most were aware that the smell of the gasoline on the carvings could be off-putting to customers.⁵⁷

The quality of paint application is also considered to be highly variable. Smoothness and clarity in paint application were the most common ways that artisans evaluated the work of other people. Clear brush strokes that were not streaky were evidence of a "steady hand," an indication of skill; large areas of colour were supposed to be evenly painted; and the boundaries between colours were supposed to be sharp, even and clean. While buying pieces for her shop, Catalina told me that she always checks each piece carefully, even if it was from someone she knows well. "When people are rushed, they don't take as much care with their painting. If the paint has run,

⁵⁷ Barbash reports that artisans told him the copal cut under the full moon is less susceptible to beetle infestations (1993: 38). Although some artisans recounted this tale to me, no one suggested that it was a useful method. Following newspaper reports, Chibnik suggests that putting carvings in the freezer seems to be sufficient to kill any eggs or insects in the wood (2003: 99-101).

or is not smoothly applied, this can ruin a piece. If you look at some of the pieces on the *entrada*, you can see how quickly they were painted, without care.”

Perhaps unexpectedly, some of the artisans who produce commercial figures on the *entrada* admitted to me that they frequently made lower quality pieces than those of their neighbours, however they felt they had to balance concerns of quality against the price they could expect to receive for a piece. As Blanca Fernández told me, “there’s no point in spending two hours painting a piece that I can only sell for twenty five pesos. It’s better to do them quickly and make more of them.” Indeed, the painting quality varies on Blanca’s pieces; her large pieces, which can earn up to 500 pesos show more even paint application and definition between the coloured areas.⁵⁸ I asked Blanca if it bothered her to make lower quality pieces. She told me that of course sometimes she prefers to take her time and work on a large piece, but that making quick little pieces does not affect her abilities as an artisan: “I know I can paint well, but sometimes I have to paint quickly!” There is a risk to this rationalising approach, however, as artisans who consistently produce low quality work may come to be viewed by their families and neighbours as apathetic or lazy, an issue taken up in Chapter Four.

Although Tileños’ aesthetic practices are central to the contours of the aesthetic topography of the field of their woodcarvings, this field is also strongly characterised by the aesthetic expectations of other actors, especially those who are intimately involved with the carvings’ promotion and development. In the next section, I will show how the aesthetic practices and expectations of state agencies, at both national and Oaxacan levels, as well as collectors, have contributed to the infusion of Oaxacan woodcarvings

⁵⁸ 25 pesos = \$1.84 USD / £1.20 GBP
500 pesos = \$37.00 USD / £24.00 GBP

with the aesthetic of artesanías, an aesthetic lens that, as I outlined in the introduction, is symbolically and discursively important in the politics of culture of Oaxaca today.

The aesthetic field and communities of practice

Studies of material culture and tourism have often considered the connections between art producers and others in terms of “us and them” relationships, rather than taking all of these actors together as the object of study. Early studies were often couched in negative evaluations of changes brought to communities by outsiders (Greenwood 1989: 172-173), and much of the later work focused to a large extent on the changing gender, class and ethnic power relations involved in these processes (Nash 1993b; van den Burge 1994, 1995; Juarez 2002; Flechsig 2004). Particular attention has been rightfully paid to the politics of representation that are involved in the marketing and other knowledge-producing discourses associated with the promotion of tourism and ethnic art (Babcock 1995; Parezo 1999; D. Brown 1999; S. Cole 2006: 90-91). More recently, many studies have shifted attention to also focus on how local people appropriate, rework and redeploy these tourism imaginaries about their lives for their own projects and goals (Blundell 1993; Meisch 1995: 98-100, 240-267; Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999: 169-187, 198-210; Little 2008). This newer approach has provided a welcome, and somewhat optimistic, counter to some of the negative portrayals of the everyday lives of those who find themselves working within tourism contexts. Yet these studies continue to have much in common with earlier works in that they focus particularly on the relations of power that emerge as a consequence of, or in response to, involvement in tourism.

Anthropological interest in material objects generally has also refocused attention to also consider the ways that things can create, mediate and organise social

relationships between the different kinds of actors that had previously been considered simply as locals and outsiders. For researchers working on tourist arts, the suggestion by George Marcus to “follow the thing” (1995) opened up many new research possibilities, and allowed more nuanced understandings of the connections between the different kinds of actors involved in the tourism industry, but also, significantly, how the movement of these objects connects people who might have been overlooked in straightforward analyses of tourism (cf. Spooner 1986; Steiner 1994: 16-39; L. Hart 1995). Sharon Tiffany’s exploration of the divergent narratives that Zapotec rugs elicit as they move from Oaxaca to the United States is an archetypal example of the utility of this kind of research. She shows that as objects move along the diverse pathways of textile consumption, narratives about authenticity, indigeneity, and spirituality provided by artisans, vendors, consumers and academics about the textiles attach themselves to the objects. These narratives not only affect the value of the textiles in the moment of purchase, but also the on-going use and engagement with the object by its final owner (2006: 135-136).

Following tourist art from its place of purchase along the many routes it can take has expanded anthropological understandings of the nature of the relationships that are formed between people and art objects. This step has been crucial to providing more nuanced understandings of what motivates tourists’ and collectors’ desires for the art in the first place; earlier studies of tourism often subsumed tourists’ interest in hand-crafted objects into a generalised notion of the desire for the authentic (MacCannell 1976: 91-108; Littrell *et al* 1993; Schouten 2006). As discussed in Chapter One, “authenticity” is a key feature of the discourses that drive the tourism industry in Oaxaca, and it also clearly looms large in the ways people talk about Oaxacan woodcarvings. However, the ways that authenticity is conceived of and utilised is

neither consistent nor always is the most significant factor for Tileño artisans (cf. Bunten 2006).

Working in Oaxaca, Hernández Díaz and Zafra have observed that economic relations between producers and consumers form “a communicating vessel that allows [artisans and consumers] to develop their aesthetic tastes, [and] negotiate and share the meanings of the object created by the artist or artisan” (2005: 16; my translation).

Although Tileño artisans produce the woodcarvings almost exclusively for outside consumption, the ways that these actors’ intentions and readings of the woodcarvings affect their production is more complex than what is captured in the idea of “market demand,” which implies a coherent, or at the very least, articulable, set of expectations and desires. I want to complicate this picture by arguing that rather than simple cause-and-effect relationships between input from specific outsiders and the objects that artisans produce, the reality is more fluid and irregular. The network of actors who provide the aesthetic sensibilities that structure Tileño artisanal work can best be understood as a “community of practice” as their collective existence does more than just move ideas and objects, but actually produces the objects, and consequently the geographical-historical communities in which they are made.

In his book *Made in Mexico: Zapotec weavers and the global ethnic art market*, Wood borrows the phrase “community of practice” from Lave and Wenger in order to address what he calls “the problem of context,” or the difficulties anthropologists face when trying to account for the fact that the localities that people live within are simultaneously the setting of social life and generative of the setting of social life, in other words that “the context of any practice grows out of such a practice” (Wood 2008: 15; cf. Appadurai 1996: 182, 184). Wood argues that rather than focusing solely on the

historical-geographical communities in which artisans live, the practice of producing art objects must be understood within the “social, cultural and spatial geography …[that emerges] as a product of the lives and practices engaged in the making of Zapotec textiles” (Wood 2008: 15). Conceiving of the setting of textile production not as the discrete villages of Teotitlán and Santa Ana del Valle, but rather as the conceptual spaces formed by actors whose actions and discourses shape and define the material and symbolic practices of Zapotec weavers allows Wood to simultaneously address the circulation of Zapotec textiles (à la “follow the thing”), while at the same time retaining close attention to the politics of representation and production in a single coherent analytical strategy. As he argues:

“the network of practiced spaces associated with crafting Zapotec textiles has a social structure I conceive in terms of a field of positions marked out in conflicts over definition: the definition of what constitutes a Zapotec textile, … and “legitimate” or “authentic” Zapotec weaving practices [...] The social structure of this community of practice, its overall shape or topography and its limits or boundaries, is a field of positions on, and competing definitions of, what constitutes a Zapotec textile” (Wood 2008: 19).

The “field” Wood writes of is drawn, like my own concept of the aesthetic field, from Bourdieu’s formulation of the field of cultural production. However, unlike Bourdieu’s field, the community of practice approach retains at its core an analytical interest in how this community affects its resultant art productions and their circulation, rather than focusing on the position-taking of actors as the object of analysis (Wood 2008: 117-161; cf. Becker 1982: 2-5, 7, 35, *passim*). Also, unlike the cultural field approach, which assumes that through their involvement in art, that all actors are *ipso facto* “at play” in the field, the community of practice concept suggests that different actors can be more-or-less (or not at all) involved in the community, and thus have varying access not only to the “specific capital” but also the knowledge practices that organise it. The community of practice approach thus extends many of the insights provided by Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005); while it also emphasises the

relationality and synergy between people and material objects, it refigures the concept of the network, highlighting that connections between actors might not be evenly constructed, or even form connectable points.

The main kinds of actors that constitute the community of practice for Oaxacan woodcarvings are tourists, guides, collectors, journalists, state actors, other members of the culture and tourism industries, as well as the artisans themselves. Some of these actors are not necessarily located in Oaxaca and others may not even be easily locatable in the “social vicinity” of the woodcarvings. Chibnik (2003) and Hernández Díaz (2005) have explored the economic and political consequences of some of these actors for woodcarvers in Oaxaca, and their analyses helpfully show that artisans must engage with many different kinds of actors in order to be economically successful. Tileño artisans are, without exception, dependent on many of these actors for their livelihoods.

Tourists might appear in San Martín as the most obvious actors within the community of practice that influence artisanal production, as they interact directly with artisans, often in their workshops. However, what has become clear through my research is that while tourist arts have been helpfully conceived as co-produced by tourists and their makers (Bruner 1996: 159), the tourists themselves do not straightforwardly contribute to the development of the aesthetics of woodcarvings. Rather, they learn about aesthetics through their experiences in San Martín and engagements with different parts of the community of practice, especially tour guides and popular literature. In fact, I never heard tourists making suggestions about how artisans should make woodcarvings, and in the cases where I observed tourists placing orders for specific carvings, they expected that it would be produced in the style of the workshop where it was to be made. In some instances, tourists might give input into the

colour palettes or the specific form that they would like, but these options were constrained by the already existing aesthetics of woodcarvings, and no one requested pieces that could not have been recognised as consistent with the Oaxacan woodcarving genre.

While tourists might be co-producers of the objects of woodcarvings, in the sense that they would not exist were it not for touristic demand, they cannot be understood necessarily as a central force in the development of woodcarving aesthetics, as they are the intended recipients of these processes, and in many ways they contribute to the stability of the aesthetics of the genre of Oaxacan woodcarvings through their consumption, as their expectations are based on the aesthetic conventions that are generated around them through the discourses and actions of other actors in the community of practice (cf. Steiner 1999). Despite the fact that tourists believe the artisans produce their carvings through somehow natural or, at the very least traditional, aesthetic sensibilities, the character of the woodcarvings in San Martín has developed in response to the aesthetic lenses of other parts of the community of practice, who are more consistently present in the lives of Tileño artisans.

The aesthetics of artesanías: woodcarvings in and of the nation

The aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarvings in San Martín has been directly influenced by the aesthetic lens of artesanías, which is highly valued by parts of their community of practice. As discussed in the introduction, since the early twentieth century, artesanías have been a central component in the production and fortification of the Mexican nation. After the chaos of the Revolution, the Mexican state, artists and intellectuals in Mexico City sought to consolidate the disparate ethnic groups, classes, political and religious movements into a coherent national ideology, which was founded

upon the idealised figure of the mestizo. Artesanías were brought into this configuration of the nation as a safe symbol of the indigenous and subaltern classes, as they could aesthetically represent their contribution to Mexican culture, without opening the door to demands for real social justice and equality (García Canclini 1995: 118-120).

The *Indigenistas* pursued this project via the academic disciplines of anthropology and history, and through practical programmes based on education and health. They also established many of today's cultural and economic institutions of the state, like INAH, the National Museum, and the National Indigenist Institute (INI; now the CDI), many of which are central not only to the promotion of artesanías, but also to the promotion of cultural tourism (Alonso 2004; López 2010: 131; 139-150). Ideologically and aesthetically, indigeneity and the rural countryside have remained central to the production of Mexicanness at the national level, and much anxiety continues to surround the maintenance of the authenticity of indigenous material culture (Novelo 1976: 30-41; Alonso 2004: 467-469).

Néstor García Canclini has observed that the role of artesanías in Mexico is unlike that of any other Latin American country in that artesanías were considered integral to the functioning of the nation state even before the full development of mass tourism as "artesanías of different ethnic groups ... transcended their localities to become [nationally unifying]"; in fact, this consolidation of the nation directly contributed to its international touristic demand (1993a: 47). He argues that the relationship between this nationalist project and artesanías in the early twentieth century had long-lasting effects on the practices of artesanía and popular art production in the late twentieth century. He shows that "artesanías" as a category continues to represent the national, in that they reduce "the ethnic to the typical," and represent "the Mexican"

vis-à-vis “the foreign” (García Canclini 1993b: viii; 43-45). By putting material objects to this use, they became subordinated to the demands of the ideology of artesanías in Mexico. Thus he states:

“When one goes to artisan villages one finds, for example, pottery from Capula, lacquered objects from Patzucaro, mats from Ihuatzio. In the stores of Quiroga, a market city where the roads linking these three towns cross, pottery, lacquered objects, and mats *become artesanías*” (1982: 126, emphasis in original).⁵⁹

According to García Canclini, when elite Mexicans consume artesanías as aesthetic objects, they reproduce this ideology. The category of artesanía therefore helped to symbolically ground twentieth century Mexican nationalists’ political and ideological goals in claims that the root of authentic Mexicanness was located in indigenous culture. This programme clearly has had lasting effects on the production of artesanías in Oaxaca’s Valles Centrales, as producers of artesanías have come to be *de facto* associated with indigeneity, an association continually emphasised and supported by the state (Stephen 2005: 124-151; Brulotte 2006: 66-70).

Ronda Brulotte (2006) has shown how the production of replica archaeological artifacts in Arrazola are rendered illegitimate and dangerous by the ideology of artesanías, while in the same community, legitimate production of woodcarvings receives support and recognition by the state and culture industries. This process resonates with my own ethnographic data from San Martín; a number of artisan informants were interested in producing other kinds of artistic production, yet never attempted to sell them alongside their more familiar woodcarvings. When I interviewed Citlalli Ramos about her life growing up in an artisan household, she excitedly told me about the development of her own style of carving and painting, which she said she also

⁵⁹ While I am not convinced that García Canclini’s analysis accurately portrays all hand-crafted objects in Mexico, it does seem appropriate to objects like Oaxacan woodcarvings that are unquestioningly addressed as “artesanías”; objects distributed throughout the Mexican nation that are now clear symbols of mexicanness.

explored through paintings. A few other artisans also indicated that they were interested in painting and drawing, and some had even taken classes at the Casa de Cultura (Institute of Culture) in Oaxaca City. But none of these artisans ever showed this work to potential buyers, nor did they exhibit it at local fairs. When I asked Tomás Santiago, one of the artisans who had taken art classes why he did not try to sell the work, he said, “Because they’re just for me, they’re not really art, since I am an artisan. People come here to buy artesanías, not paintings.”

Two young artisans from a large workshop were given small scholarships by a Danish art college whose students had come to Oaxaca to participate in their photography course. Jaime Flores, one of the most talented young painters in San Martín, was excited about the course and was very pleased with his results. Although his photographs had been shown in an exhibition of the students’ work in Oaxaca City, he said he wouldn’t bother trying to sell them in San Martín, since they were not artesanías. In fact, he found my suggestion that he might very amusing.

This reticence comes into contrast when we consider the work of Marina Castillo, the Tileña who produces the paper mâché figures. While these figures are not the kind of artesanía that San Martín is known for, no one considers it strange that Marina would exhibit her work alongside the woodcarvings, as they fall easily within the aesthetic bounds of the Mexican artesanía category, and thus are acceptable products to be sold in San Martín. In Oaxaca particularly, artesanías have come to represent the state’s cultural diversity and believed distinctive status as a source of indigenous authenticity within the nation, coalescing around Oaxaca City as the focal point of discourses about a particularly Oaxacan identity and exceptional authenticity (Poole: 2004; see Introduction, pp. 35-37). As artesanías are inherently linked to state-based

institutional ideology, it is unsurprising that the aesthetics of artesanías are also promoted within the woodcarvings' community of practice through these same institutions: the Oaxacan state's ARIPO, Artesanías and Popular Industries of the State of Oaxaca, and at the national level, FONART, The National Fund for the Development of Artesanías.⁶⁰

FONART is a public trust within the federal government managed by the Office of the Secretary of Social Development (SEDESOL).⁶¹ It was founded in 1974 as a response to the perceived necessity to promote artisanal activity throughout the country, primarily as a mode of bringing development to rural communities. After many successive failures by various federal government agencies, and debates about the role of the state in the development of the artesanía industry, FONART was formed during the Echeverría presidency (1970-1976), and it benefitted from that administration's populist programmes which sought to shield artisans from fluctuations in the market. However, as it is also the conceptual descendent of a long string of post-Revolutionary government institutions dedicated to the protection and promotion of national patrimony, a major force within FONART continues to be the promotion and defence of artesanías as representations of Mexicanness (López 2010: 189-193).

FONART's major operating roles are firstly to provide artisan households with access to low-interest credit, which helps them purchase raw materials, and – more significantly – the running of a series of national stores that purchase their inventories directly from producers from all over Mexico. In general, FONART stores promote the centralising discourse of Mexicanness, by dissolving ethnic and regional differences, and consequently authorship as well, through their marketing and display activities,

⁶⁰ Artesanías e Industrias Populares del Estado de Oaxaca (ARIPO); Fondo Nacional Para el Fomento De Las Artesanías (FONART)

⁶¹ Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL)

where products from all over Mexico are sold side by side, without significant efforts to communicate differences to consumers (Stephen 2005: 166).

Although FONART was directly responsible for the establishment of woodcarving in San Martín through the work of Isidoro Cruz (see Chapter One), during my fieldwork, most Tileño artisans had relatively little direct interaction with the organisation in terms of loans, and only a small number were participating in FONART organised competitions at the state level. However, as FONART is the largest national level organisation in Mexico that promotes craftwork, its aesthetic perspective of artesanías as vessels of national identity continue to influence the aesthetic field of the woodcarvings, especially through relations to collectors from Mexico City. Although American collectors have a stronger presence in the academic, popular and online literature, Mexican nationals are a large market for Oaxacan woodcarvings. In Mexico City, artesanías have been long established as objects of desire for elite Mexicans who connect the material culture of rural and indigenous communities to national belonging (López 2010: 65-94). The consumption of artesanías by the Mexican elite can be read as expressions of modern cosmopolitanism, grounded in national aspirations, as artisans (and “Indians”) serve as the internalised other, against whom elite identities are built (cf. Bakewell 1995: 49). Artisans regularly interact with and take orders from Mexican collectors and wholesalers who prefer aesthetic forms that represent “the typical” or “quaint” (*lo típico*), that is the authentically Mexican. In Miguel and Catalina’s shop, for example, Mexican collectors, unlike their North American counterparts, frequently ordered carvings of symbols of the Mexican nation, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Juan Diego (the Indian peasant who witnessed the virgin’s miracle), or the Eagle and the Snake symbol of the Mexican flag. Many artisans I interviewed were more interested in carving the forms of other saints, or the more locally important Virgin of

Juquila, but they are less popular with customers from Mexico City and elsewhere in the country.

Unlike FONART, ARIPO is an organisation that Tileño artisans deal with on a regular basis. It was originally established as a private organisation for the promotion of Oaxacan craftwork. In 1981 it was absorbed into the Oaxacan state bureaucracy, and until recently it has been overshadowed in many ways by FONART in terms of its ability to manage and distribute state funding and other resources (Holo 2004: 179-180).⁶² Many artisans I knew had low-interest loans organised through ARIPO, and participated in the multiple fairs it organises throughout the year to coincide with high tourism seasons. Additionally, ARIPO provides training and support in terms of small business organisation and marketing, and often funds the promotional materials for events organised by San Martín's community artisan group, Artesanos del Pueblo. It also provides accreditation for artisans, which is required for participation in national level expos, and for exporting carvings. Throughout my fieldwork, I often met officials from ARIPO at fiestas thrown by Tileños to celebrate birthdays, baptisms, and weddings, indicating the importance of these relationships to artisans' working activities. ARIPO's influence on the aesthetic field of the woodcarvings is much more direct than FONART's currently is. Although the organisation also frames Oaxacan woodcarvings, and other Oaxacan handmade products, as "artesanías," the connection to patrimony and authenticity is directed much more to the state of Oaxaca, rather than the national level per se. Through their competitions and store in Oaxaca City, which sells artesanías on consignment, the officials at ARIPO subtly direct the aesthetic field by rewarding artisans who meet their standards of quality and desirable style.

⁶² In 2004 it was renamed the Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías (The Oaxacan Artesanía Institute), although the artisans I worked with continued to call it ARIPO or "*El Instituto*" (The Institute) interchangeably, and the store itself continues to be named in Oaxacan tourism literature as the ARIPO store.

One afternoon, I was in the ARIPO store in Oaxaca City with Rufino Pérez, who has a long standing relationship with ARIPO through his work with Artesanos del Pueblo. Rufino and I had come into town to see if we could secure some funding for an upcoming craft fair that was being organised. While we waited for our appointment, we went to the woodcarving room to look at the pieces they had in stock. After pointing out some carvings by his brother, Rufino drew me over to a short pedestal standing next to the door. Pointing at the hand-written index card accompanying the piece, he proudly told me that he had won an ARIPO competition a few years earlier. I asked him why he thought his piece had won, and he pointed out to me the quality of the carving, citing the delicate forms, and also the theme of the piece, which was a large nativity scene, painted in bright colours. It was clear to me that Rufino had spent a lot of time on the piece, and I mentioned that his hard work and skill had obviously impressed the judges. He agreed saying he had spent longer on this piece than any other he had made, but said that this was not why the piece had won. Explaining that all of the artisans who entered the competition were capable of making equally detailed or finely carved pieces, he thought the piece had won because it was “muy típica.” I’d never seen Rufino sell carvings like the nativity in his workshop, and so I asked about the difference in styles. He said that in this case, he had “adjusted” his style because he knew that at ARIPO and FONART competitions, they love things that look “really traditional.”

Because ARIPO and FONART are the central institutions for the promotion of artesanías within the Oaxacan and Mexican context, their ideas about what artesanías should look like become extremely important factors for structuring the aesthetic field of the Oaxacan woodcarvings. During an interview with a member of staff at ARIPO, he made it clear that he felt their role was not only to support Oaxaca’s artisans through loans and administration, but also to “develop an appreciation amongst artisans for

quality and beauty, and especially for what is authentic and traditional in Oaxaca.”

Otherwise, he worried, “Oaxaca may become just like any other resort in Mexico, some kind of Disneyland. If artisans do not preserve our true traditions, who will?”

Artisans whose aesthetics fit nicely within the expectations of these institutions not only are more likely to make a “name” for themselves, through sponsorship and invitations to events, but are also more likely to match touristic expectations of Mexican craftwork, as it is those institutions which frequently set the aesthetic standards through their publications of promotional materials and exporting programmes. As such, it is very risky for artisans not to fall within these institutional aesthetic expectations, as they might be less likely to receive support and recognition at these levels.

Despite these state discourses that firmly frame Oaxacan woodcarvings as “artesanías,” some artisans have been successful in redefining the aesthetics of their work, and in so doing have shifted the aesthetic field of the Oaxacan woodcarvings. In the remainder of the chapter, I consider the case of Miguel and Catalina García, who have created an aesthetic for their work that does not speak to the aesthetics of artesanías so much as it does to the aesthetics of “ethnic art.”

New aesthetic practices: the “ethnicisation” of Oaxacan woodcarvings

Miguel and Catalina García have been very successful in recent years, and a large part of their success has been their ability to stake out a new aesthetic territory within the field of Oaxacan woodcarvings. They began working out of Miguel’s mother’s house when they were newlyweds, but now their business has expanded significantly; in addition to the workshop at their home, they also own a restaurant on the highway and three galleries, one located at the restaurant, and the others in the

historical district of Oaxaca City. In addition to their own work, in the galleries they also sell pieces by other artisans from San Martín and other woodcarving communities, as well as other types of artesanías from all over Mexico. Thus, although they primarily consider themselves artisans, a significant part of their business is also the reselling of other artesanías in Oaxaca.

Miguel and Catalina are considered by their neighbours, and many others within the industries of tourism and artesanías, to be very successful artisans. Although the tourism industry in Oaxaca has suffered in recent years, due to political disruptions and Mexico's problems of drug violence, their business has continued to flourish, and they always have a number of pieces on back-order that have been commissioned by private clients or museums and galleries, and Miguel continues to travel to the United States many times each year. He has recently also made trips to Europe and Asia, in the hopes of expanding interest in Oaxacan artesanías overseas. Their successes are explained by their friends in the tourism and artesanías industries as due to a combination of very high quality work, an "entrepreneurial business ethic," and good salesmanship on the part of Miguel.

While these explanations are in many ways correct, I argue that they are also successful because they have managed to align themselves with influential actors in the woodcarving community of practice. They have significantly benefitted from their long-standing friendships with key wholesalers, collectors and state officials who function as gatekeepers to the tourist and ethnic art markets in Mexico and the United States. They do this via the obvious routes of providing publicity and introductions to other actors in these networks, thus building up demand for pieces with their signatures. But they also work in much subtler ways by facilitating opportunities to travel and to practise English.

These tours also provide them with opportunities to show their work at a wide variety of museums and up-market galleries, where they have been exposed to experts' discourses on skill and quality, giving them the language and the means through which to match their work to the expectations of wealthier consumers, and especially to see how comparable art objects look and are marketed in other locales.

Working with Oaxacan textile producers, both Lynn Stephen and William Warner Wood have observed that the production of weavings in Teotitlán del Valle and its surrounding villages has led to the development of what might be called a “Zapotec industry” in which actors simultaneously produce the products, and the definitions, of “Zapotecness” through their production and circulation of textiles (Stephen 2005: 186-199; Wood 2008: 105-114). Wood has documented the ways that American wholesalers have directly encouraged Oaxacan weavers to tailor their products to fit in with a particular Southwestern aesthetic (*ibid*: 77-103; 2001). This aesthetic was especially appropriate for Zapotec weavers to incorporate into their work, because the style of loom (upright treadle) and the fibres of the textiles (wool) were the same as the Navajo textile production that had already been established in New Mexico and Arizona as authentic indigenous products in the early- to mid-twentieth century (Wood 2008: 95-97).⁶³

The case of the woodcarvings is somewhat different to that of textiles; while some Zapotec weavers are able to make copies of specific Navajo designs, there is not an established wood carving tradition from which Oaxacan woodcarvers could directly import designs and motifs. Instead, Miguel and Catalina have responded to a demand for objects that have what Michael Brown refers to as the generalised “look and feel” of

⁶³ The coincidence of the upright treadle loom amongst Navajo and Zapotec weavers is historically due to its introduction by Spanish colonisers in New Spain.

indigenous cultural products (M. Brown 2003: 89; c.f. Tiffany 2006: 139). Many trips to the Southwestern United States over the years have influenced the aesthetic lens through which Miguel and Catalina now view their work, and they now situate their work more frequently as “ethnic art” than “artesanías.” When I travelled to Tucson with Miguel and the others in 2009, I was able to observe his interactions with important members of the woodcarvings’ community of practice.

The first person we met in Arizona was Tommy Bolan, a wholesaler whom I had met at Miguel and Catalina’s on a number of previous occasions. Tommy’s business consisted of selling Oaxacan woodcarvings and textiles either directly to consumers at shows, or to shop and gallery owners throughout the Southwestern United States, Chicago, and California. He started off selling Oaxacan textiles in the mid-eighties, and eventually moved into selling woodcarvings as well. He began working with Miguel and Catalina in 1994 and as time has gone on, he has found it convenient to work quite closely with Miguel. For example, rather than spending many days hunting around the woodcarving villages for stock, Tommy often now buys pieces directly from Miguel and Catalina or in conjunction with them, much to the disappointment of some other artisans in San Martín. He also on occasion sends damaged carvings, or carvings that have been improperly treated for insects, to Miguel and Catalina’s, where they are repaired or refinished, regardless of who they were originally made by.

Tommy also specialises in expensive pottery from Mata Ortiz, in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua. This pottery is known for the fine etching and detailed geometric patterns that are created in glazes before it is fired. Like Oaxacan woodcarvings, Mata Ortiz pottery was “invented” in the twentieth century, and draws on both Mesoamerican and Aboriginal North American aesthetic conventions (Parks

1997).⁶⁴ On two different occasions, Tommy pointed out to me in interviews that the Mata Ortiz pottery had a direct aesthetic influence on Miguel and Catalina's style of painting, and that Miguel would never have seen it if it had not been for their friendship. Indeed, the similarities between the pottery and the Garcías' work are striking (see Figures 13 [p.119] and 26 for comparison). Miguel and Catalina themselves do not deny this connection, but say that they have incorporated the "feeling" (*el sentimiento*) of Mata Ortiz work, rather than copying its style.



Figure 26: Mata Ortiz pottery from Chihuahua, Mexico

Because Mata Ortiz pottery and Miguel and Catalina's woodcarvings now carry strong aesthetic similarities to each other, and to North American indigenous art, they are easily read as manifestations of indigenous ethnic aesthetics. This situation allows them not only to be economically successful in the American Southwest art market, which

⁶⁴ The history of Mata Ortiz often calls the pottery the "revival" of Mesoamerican pottery, although there was not a continuous history of pottery production in Mata Ortiz, and in any case the pottery they now produce is substantially different than Mesoamerican forms of the classic period.

itself has a powerful set of ideological and aesthetic proclivities (Rodríguez 1989, 1997), but also allows them to be recognised, in a more subtle and generalised sense as having the “look and feel” of Native American culture, thus adding to their aura for North American consumers, and reinforcing at home in Oaxaca the impression that Oaxacan woodcarving is “about” indigeneity (see Chapter 5).

At the show, I also met Erin Kers, a collector and old friend of Pedro, Miguel and Tommy’s. She had come to know them through her previous work in what she described as a “world art and craft gallery” in San Diego that hosts a large sale every August. After the WNPA show was over, she invited all of us to her home on the outskirts of Tucson for dinner. As they reminisced about the past, Erin mentioned that she had carvings by Miguel in “his old style.” When I asked what that meant, she pointed to some carvings that were displayed in her living room, indicating a large one on the left (Figure 27). Laughing, Miguel said “yes, my work has really changed since then.”



Figure 27: Early piece by Miguel García, made circa 1993

Miguel later explained to me that when he first started carving he did not know what kinds of things he should make, but that he learned from looking at the work of other artisans. He explained that he made this Mickey Mouse carving because he thought that people would want figures of popular characters, but said that it was during his early sales trips he began to develop himself (*progresarse*) in his own style, because he was able to see what kind of pieces sold well, and he was able to talk to collectors and wholesalers, from whom he learned more about the history of ethnic art and artesanías. He said, “Once I started going to the States, my work changed very rapidly. I had so many inspirations from all different kinds of work, and I could talk to those expert collectors who really knew about our kind of art.” Indeed, the differences between Miguel and Catalina’s early work and their later work is great, and even in the last five years there have been smaller developments of their house style, for example, the detailed patterning has become increasingly smaller, finer, and more complex. However, what the Garcías really learned in the American Southwest is that for certain art markets, indigeneity sells. They have worked hard to align their work with a recognisably ethnic style, and they infuse their pieces with an aura of authenticity and indigeneity through the ways they sell their work in their workshop.

As described in the last chapter, the demonstrations that tourists receive in their workshop are meticulously organised, making them ideal for tour guides who need to impress clients. While I have already explored the ways that artisanal processes and contexts are utilised to provide the woodcarvings with aura, other aspects of the demonstration also work to establish the authority of the carvings as specifically ethnic art. Miguel’s demonstrations always include an explanation that in the Zapotec language, Tilcajete means black *cajete*, or ink pot, and that Oaxacan woodcarvings usually take the form of animals. The traditional animal forms, Miguel insists, come

from the ancient Zapotec calendar, which was based on twenty days, named for different animals native to Oaxaca, which he explains are known “*tonas*” in Zapotec. He often points to a hand-carved pendant around his neck, explaining that his tona is the coyote, and holding up a book, offers to look up visitors’ “Zapotec birthdays” when the demonstration is finished.

Miguel also links the styles and materials of his work to the ancient Oaxacans whose ruins form key sites within the local tourism geography: “If you visit the state museum in Oaxaca City, you will see that the ancient Zapotecs always wrote their codices in three colours: black, yellow and red. We can still make these colours today, using natural plants and minerals.” After the demonstration of the natural pigments, Miguel passes around a piece in the processes of being painted, and explains how the symbols and iconography on their work are directly related to the imagery and patterning that can be found on the walls of the ruins at Mitla, and that the ruins on the hillsides above San Martín were part of the same culture as Monte Albán. By making these connections, he forwards the idea that Tileño artisans are the genealogical descendants of ancient stonemasons and scribes, not only rendering them “authentic” within the context of contemporary Oaxacan culture, but also, simultaneously, within the ethnic art world that seeks “indigeneity” as one of its key motifs. While his earlier “Mickey Mouse” carving would have struggled to materially sustain this discourse, Miguel and Catalina’s current work seamlessly attaches itself to the common sense understandings of indigenous art that circulate within the ethnic art world that link objects to culture, history and identity (cf. Michaels 1991; Townsend Gault 2001: 240-243).

Miguel's demonstration might be seen as an "autoethnographic account" of his community's link to Zapotec culture and tradition, and indeed, as I will explore in Chapter Five, Tileños have recently become very interested in reconnecting to some form of indigeneity. Wood has suggested that artisans' accounts of production in the textile producing villages serve to rebalance the unequal power relations between themselves and powerful dealers within the community of practice (2008: 32-33). While many Tileño artisans' narrations of their working experiences often emphasised difficulties they have had dealing with others within the community of practice, Miguel and Catalina's project of ethnicisation of their woodcarvings has received much support from different parts of this community. Their close relationships with guides and journalists that they have been able to cultivate over the years have not only been helpful for the growth of their business, but have also proven to be invaluable in the establishment of their ethnicised woodcarvings as a legitimate aesthetic practice, thus making their work more authoritative and auratic vis-à-vis the work of others.

Miguel and Catalina have increasingly become important people within the art world of Oaxacan art and artesanías. They frequently are invited to attend openings and events in Oaxaca City, which is the centre of a regionally important fine art market (Holo 2004: 59-101), and they have also become consumers of fine art themselves; they own at least one very expensive painting by Rodolfo Morales, as well as many prints by other Mexican artists. They have also managed to cultivate important relationships with government officials and members of Oaxaca's press and tourism industries. These connections with many different kinds of actors allows them to draw on relationships with people who have not traditionally been within the woodcarvings' community of practice, allowing them to circulate their ethnicised account of the woodcarvings in ways that other artisans cannot do.

They have developed, for example, a strong and long-term relationship with the owner of a courier agency in Oaxaca City, one of only two that offer shipping insurance to buyers and collectors who want to send fragile artesanías to the United States or Europe. This relationship has been mutually beneficial to both Miguel and Catalina and the courier, as they frequently can send one another clients. Further, the courier has advertised this relationship publically, presumably to reassure clients that he is experienced in shipping artesanías (see Figure 28). Importantly, the caption on the advertisement, which ran in a national level English language magazine for ex-patriots living in Mexico names Miguel and Catalina as “artists,” and the circulation of this advertisement is a powerful symbol of the aesthetic authority of Miguel and Catalina’s work.

More directly, their ethnicised aesthetics of the woodcarvings have also been promoted in a variety of Spanish and English language articles throughout Mexico and North America. Many of these articles feature interviews with Miguel and/or Catalina, and often include their explanation of the woodcarvings as the product of their indigenous or Zapotec culture, a trope that was also reflected very frequently by tour guides in their workshop. The frequent presentation of the Garcías’ explanation of the woodcarvings via a discourse of ethnic art within these popular, and widely distributed networks of actors means that “their version” of woodcarving aesthetics gains authority and legitimacy, not only promoting the auratic authority of their work, but also shifting the entire genre of Oaxacan woodcarvings, by creating new aesthetic positions within the woodcarvings’ aesthetic field, thus changing the relationship not only between their work and the work of others, but also between other carvers’ work and the genre itself. These practices work to not only give their pieces authority as culturally valuable and

auratic art objects, but also render their work the “most legitimate,” despite the fact that it is also differs the most from longer-established woodcarving aesthetic practices.

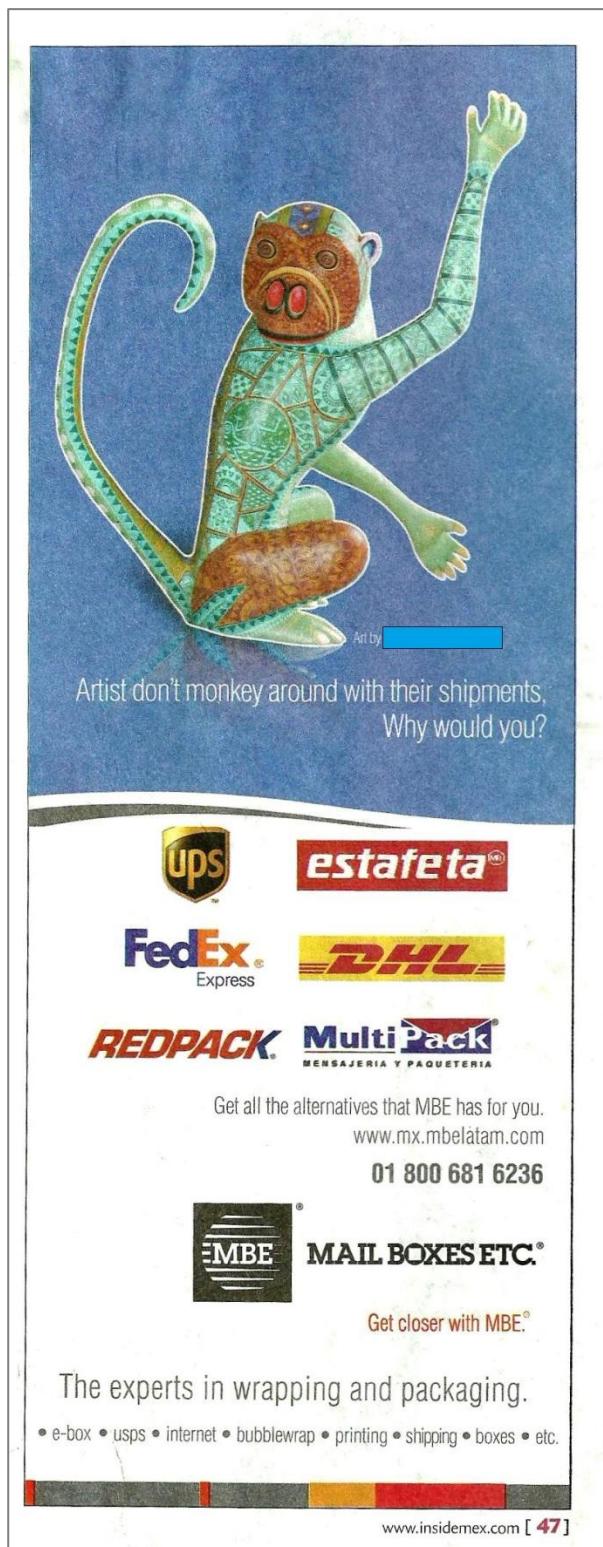


Figure 28: Advertisement featuring work of Miguel and Catalina García

Given the fact that Miguel and Catalina's ethnicisation of the aesthetics of the woodcarvings is not in direct agreement with the aesthetics of artesanías promoted by the state, one might expect these two perspectives to be at odds with one another. However, while their aesthetics and exegesis of the origins of their work rests on a specific version of Zapotec culture, it does not necessarily contradict the aesthetic sensibilities of artesanías and nationalism; as the aesthetics of artesanías are precisely about bringing the indigenous into the fold of the Mexican nation, Miguel and Catalina's ethnicised woodcarvings are in the end, artesanías par excellence, as they reconstitute indigeneity into an aesthetic stance, rather than a political one that might demand rights or autonomy (Alonso 2004; see Chapter Five).

This shift of the aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarvings to include the aesthetics of ethnic art has not meant that previous positions within the field are somehow less authentic or less consumable as representations of Oaxacan material culture. It has meant, however, that a new dimension has been added to competition amongst artisans in San Martín, as this aesthetic discourse of ethnicity has become, through Miguel and Catalina's efforts, established as an authoritative and convincing way that the woodcarvings may be read by viewers and consumers. In his discussion of the book *Ethnicity Inc.*, by John and Jean Comaroff (2009), Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld suggests that their major contribution is the linking of "the new economy of difference to capitalism's current drivers of accumulation; the entrepreneurial subject." He suggests, however, that more research is needed on how ethnic commodities arise from work practices, and the effect that these have on the local organisation of these new economies (Colloredo Mansfeld 2011: 2). In the next three chapters, I consider the political and social consequences of Miguel and Catalina's entrepreneurial and aesthetic projects. I argue that through their work as artisans, Miguel and Catalina have not only

shifted the aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarvings but also have initiated new frames of reference through which Tileños understand themselves and their community. In the next chapter, I address specifically the issue of competition in San Martín, and suggest that Tileños' intense reactions to Miguel and Catalina's current projects need to be understood within more long-standing experiences of "community," rather than just competition and accumulation.

Chapter Four
Competition and Privatisation:
The Politics of Aestheticisation in San Martín

In the spring of 2009, I spent much of my time working with artisan Rufino Pérez and the community organisation of which he was the president, Artesanos del Pueblo. I had wanted to work with Rufino and the other artisans in his group precisely because they were not involved directly with Miguel and Catalina García's project of ethnicising the woodcarvings, and I wanted to know to what extent other artisans were interested in, or aware of, the aesthetics of ethnic art that the Garcías were working so hard to construct. At this point I was aware that there were strained relations between Rufino's group and Garcías: the previous autumn tensions had flared as two groups held simultaneous woodcarving fairs in San Martín. As everyone in Artesanos del Pueblo knew that I had spent most of the previous year working with Miguel and Catalina, I decided to help them organise their Semana Santa (Holy Week) fair in order to gain their trust and to learn more about how the committee worked.

After a morning meeting of Artesanos del Pueblo's executive committee had finished, Rufino, his brother Andrés, Manuel Ramos and Jesús Fernández lingered in Rufino's patio area, arranging the details of who would next go to Oaxaca City to see the bureaucrats at ARIPO and the state tourism office to see if they could get more money for publicity. Although they had secured sponsorship from InverOax, a savings bank with a branch in Ocotlán, they did not have enough funds to cover the costs of the fliers and banners they had ordered. After it was decided that Rufino and Manuel would go the next day, the conversation turned to the previous autumn's fair and the altercations that had taken place with Miguel and Catalina. As the four men pulled up chairs, and invited me to sit, Rufino's wife Rosa brought us cold Corona beers, the unofficial and ubiquitous drink of San Martín. Once we sat down, Andrés asked me if I

knew the story of the small track that led out of the village towards the neighbouring town of Santa Ana Zegache. I said that I did not and Andrés began, adopting a storyteller's tone of voice. He said that when he was a boy, his grandmother always told him to be careful when walking near the track, because that is where El Catrín had been known to wander after dark. In Mexican folk mythology, El Catrín is an elegant and wealthy gentleman, whom one should not trust because he is often the devil in disguise (Beezley 2008: 46). Andrés went on, saying that just once he had run into El Catrín when he was coming home from the fields after dark, and that he stopped Andrés for a chat. "He was very nice, always always smiling. And do you know what his name was?" he asked me. "No," I replied. "Miguel," he said with a wink, as the other three men laughed aloud.

Andrés' story, although obviously told as a joke, crystallises the nature of the tensions between Miguel and Catalina and many of their neighbours. The problem was not that the Garcías were economically successful, as many migrants to the United States had achieved a fair amount of security over the years, often investing in building large homes in San Martín in the hope that they will one day retire there. It was also not that they had achieved notoriety *per se*, as other well-known artisans, like Isidoro Cruz who had brought the woodcarving craft to San Martín had also received great recognition in Oaxaca and abroad, without falling into disfavour with his neighbours. In fact, Isidoro, or "Beto" as he is affectionately known, was considered by everyone as friendly and a good neighbour. By calling Miguel "El Catrín" Andrés was making clear that his success was somehow dangerous to other Tileños, causing his neighbours discomfort, and suggesting that his conduct was somehow amoral. This implied social critique of Miguel and Catalina's activities was palpable amongst many Tileños. Gossip circulated that Miguel might be transporting drugs hidden inside the carvings across the

U.S.-Mexican border, a speculation that no one took very seriously but enjoyed repeating nonetheless.⁶⁵ People also often expressed concern that the Garcías were taking advantage of me by “making” me work in their workshop, which I attempted to discount by explaining that I had asked them to teach me how to paint the woodcarvings.

Although these tensions do not causally relate to economic achievement or notoriety, they clearly do connect to issues of competition in San Martín; that migrants are not subjected to the same criticisms over their success suggests that economic prosperity generated within the village is somehow more difficult to accept than prosperity generated far away. This observation evokes the image of “limited good,” the suggestion made by George Foster that the peasant world-view considers the amount of “good” (i.e. luck, money, success, etc.) in the social world to be limited, so that one person’s achievement is another’s loss (G.M. Foster 1965a). While the limited good theory seems to resonate in some ways with Tileños’ discourses about competition, it does not explain why only Miguel and Catalina were subjected to the strong moral critique of their neighbours, as other artisans also enjoy success (although not quite to the same degree) without the same difficulties.

In the previous two chapters, I explored the ways that Miguel and Catalina are especially able to enact their agency as aesthetic producers, both through the maintenance of connections between themselves and their products, and through their project of reframing Oaxacan woodcarvings as “ethnic art.” In this chapter, I explore the political consequences of these processes, and I suggest that the tensions between the Garcías and other members of their community are not incidental to their aesthetic

⁶⁵ I saw no evidence of the involvement of Miguel and Catalina in the drug trade, and I do not think they were as both held particularly strong anti-drugs views.

projects, but rather they are central features of the aesthetic practice of woodcarving in San Martín today.

I begin with a short discussion of the nature of competition in San Martín's woodcarving market before moving on to ethnography which documents the specific tensions that I observed while in the field. The unease with Miguel and Catalina's activities potentially could be understood as a reaction against competition within the community, as in the "limited good" theory. However my analysis shows that while competition is a concern amongst Tileño artisans in general, the greater tensions with the Garcías coalesce around processes of privatisation and entrepreneurialism; I argue that the specific intensity of these tensions is only comprehensible when taken within the context of Tileños' moral discourses of "community", which are structured by the opposition of "cooperation" (*cooperación*) and "selfishness" (*egoismo*). This analysis thus contributes to the on-going debates in Mesoamerican studies about the nature and relevance of "the community," while at the same time it interjects into discussions about economic change and globalisation by suggesting that political and economic effects of these processes cannot be wholly attributed to transformations of the organisation of production, but also at times must take aesthetic practices into account.

Names and histories: competition in San Martín

Anthropological research on craft and tourist art production and marketing has frequently addressed the issue of competition. Unsurprisingly, many authors report that in areas where tourism appears to locals as one of the few economic options that allow them to remain at home, the number of artisans that enter this inconsistent market often far exceeds demand, leaving many people in situations of economic insecurity (Cohen 2001a; Wilson 2010: 176-177). Often, governments look to tourist art and craft

production as an important means of development in the countryside, encouraging people to move into artisanal production through programmes and investment (Scrase 2003; López 2010: 151-154).

In Oaxaca particularly, the government has fostered growth in the size of the artisanal industries, not only through extending loans and promotional opportunities to those communities already participating in artesanía production through FONART and ARIPO, but by continuing to encourage the expansion of production into communities where it previously did not exist. I was told that as recently as 2007, the government wanted Tileño artisans to visit villages in the Sierra region in order to teach them how to make woodcarvings. While this approach may help to shore up certain basic standards of development throughout the countryside, the market for artesanías is unlikely to be able to absorb these ever-increasing levels of production, especially as the market seems to be contracting (Chibnik 2003:240-242; Vélez Ascencio 2011; Chavela Rivas 2011). Furthermore, anthropologists have observed that government programmes are often unable to take into account village-level economic and social variability, often meaning that poorer community members are ignored by projects entirely (Cohen 2001a: 389; cf. Morales Cano and Myssyk 2004 and Richard 2008 on Mexican state-local relations in development contexts). Many analysts have also addressed this issue from the perspectives of development or “empowerment,” attempting to highlight how minorities within communities (especially women) experience craft work and markets in ways that differ from the development industry’s expectations (e.g. Swain 1992; Cone 1995; Creighton 1995; see Venkatesan 2006 for a critique of the community concept in craft studies).

As discussed in Chapter One, 68 percent of Tileño households now depend in some way on income from woodcarvings. Unsurprisingly, a majority of San Martín's artisanal households entered the trade during the "boom" in the late eighties when the market was growing; by 1990 San Martín had become a well-established centre for woodcarving in the minds of collectors and wholesalers, and although artisans at the time recognised that the market might not last, more and more of them learned to make woodcarvings (Chibnik 2003: 39). Unlike some craft contexts where individuals must complete apprenticeships – which function to balance the labour market and provide necessary training – no period of formal apprenticeship is required in San Martín to enter the trade as a full artisan (cf. Argenti 2002 on apprenticeship; Carrier 1992: 545-546 on medieval European craft guilds). While some of my informants had learned their skills from their parents, many more had learned by experimentation, and in relatively short periods of time were able to produce marketable carvings.

As a few of these artisans have managed to achieve high levels of success, the results of their achievements have literally materialised in San Martín as expensive pick-up trucks and large, comfortable homes. Although quality of life in general has improved for all Tileños in recent years, people's perception is that San Martín is currently more unequal than it was in the past.⁶⁶ Because historically most villagers sustained themselves on agricultural production on communal and ejidal land and migrant remittances, Tileños had more or less equal access to the means by which they could earn a living (Pérez Vargas 1993: 29-31). In recent years, however, this basic level of household equality has changed and some families are now very well-off in

⁶⁶ UNDP Mexico reports an increase in San Martín's Human Development Index (HDI) rating from 0.7122 to 0.8106 between 2000 and 2005 (UNDP Mexico 2009: 248); surpassing the state of Oaxaca's average HDI of 0.73, and approaching the Mexican national HDI of 0.82 (*ibid*: 6). However, the National Population Council reported in 2005 that the poorest 20 percent of San Martín's households receive only 36 percent of the average monthly income, which was 2010 pesos in 2000; giving them 724 pesos per month (\$54USD/£35GBP) (Consejo Nacional de Población 2005: 130).

ways that are obvious to others. The source of this uneven prosperity is most visibly located in success in woodcarving production and sale so that competition between neighbours is experienced acutely. This intense competition is not new; in the early 1990s, popular writer Shepard Barbash described San Martín's competition as a “curious arms race” (Barbash 1993: 27).

Tileños' concerns about competition are not only focused on the very successful; even amongst friends and artisans who work together in the same organisations, concerns are palpable. At the Artesanos del Pueblo's Holy Week fair that I had helped organise, for example, I was surprised to see that the participating artisans had left large spaces (about four metres) between most of the tables that they'd set up in the covered basketball court that functions as San Martín's main square. On the first morning, I suggested to Rufino and other members of the executive committee that they should consider moving the tables closer together in order to create a more market-like atmosphere, so that it felt busier when customers arrived. Rufino looked sceptical but walked around the group, encouraging them to move the tables further in, but he did not have any success in convincing the artisans to move closer together. Later that afternoon, I asked Marina why everyone had their tables so far apart. Looking around, she pointed out to me that not everyone had their tables widely spaced; Ernesto's and Andrés' tables were right next to one another, as were Blanca's and Victor's. The reason, Marina explained was that they were family: Ernesto and Andrés are brothers, so it did not matter if they overheard one another's prices, and they knew they could trust each other not to steal their ideas and styles; Blanca and Victor are husband and wife.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Victor and his brother carve all the carvings that both Victor and Blanca sell; Blanca signs the pieces she paints.

Her explanation had surprised me; as the twenty two artisans who were participating in the fair had worked more or less well together in the preceding months to organise it, I had assumed that they got on well enough not to worry about stealing styles, a concern I had often heard artisans express in interviews about their work (see Chapter Six). However, it seemed I had underestimated the power of concerns about competition, even amongst the participants of the Artesanos del Pueblo group, which ironically was founded to help artisans work together for their collective benefit.

Despite these concerns about competition, however, there did seem to be a general sense amongst Artesanos del Pueblo members that competition in itself was a normal, even desirable, state of affairs. Although artisans did not want their neighbours to hear their prices or steal their own styles, Alejandro observed that seeing other artisans' successes right in front of his eyes inspired him to try to make new and unique forms. Apart from the concern about stealing styles, Tileños never described the “normal” acts and conditions of competition in the negative ways I heard the Garcías’ activities discussed.

In many ways, the market for woodcarvings is similar to the local fine art market of St. Louis, described by Stuart Plattner, where the high price that some artists can command indicates that value placed on their work by consuming elites is driven by more ephemeral notions of taste and fashion, rather than solely the relationships of supply and demand (1998: 79). This suggests the importance of developing a “name” for oneself in art markets; an issue that was often at the forefront of concerns for the artisans I worked with. The recognition of “names” (“*un nombre*” or “*fama*”) is one type of social capital that greatly influences artisans’ success, not only because buyers seek out known artisans, but also because in order to secure invitations and visas to show their work, they must build up “histories” (*historias*), that is documented evidence

of their work in competitions or publications. However, the ability to develop a “name” is not a clear process, and it is somewhat out of the artisans’ control. Comparing the work histories of two artisans, one who has successfully developed a recognised name for himself and one who has not, can illustrate this point.

Tomás Santiago had trained as an electrician when he finished school, but once woodcarving became an option for Tileños through the growing market in the early 1990s, he realised that he could potentially earn more by producing woodcarvings. Soon afterwards, he entered an ARIPO sponsored competition in San Martín, in which he won third place in the “open” category, the results of which were published in one of Oaxaca’s daily newspapers. A short time later, a woman who owned an artesanía gallery in Oaxaca City came to San Martín looking to buy pieces from those who had won in the recent competitions. In 1995, Tomás travelled for the first time to the United States on an invitation from a gallery in Washington D.C., and his trip was also combined with smaller appearances at schools and stores in Virginia. This initial trip eased further travel to the United States, as once he secured his first visa it was easier to acquire others. Photographs of Tomás’ work have been featured in many popular publications about the woodcarvings, and he told me that collectors often come to his home with copies of these photographs. He has also developed many long-term relationships with buyers and collectors in the United States, often staying at their homes when he travels. More recently, his biography and work have been featured on online retailers’ websites, which provide information about how to visit Tomás in Oaxaca as well as purchase his work directly from the site. His story has also been featured in academic work and he is included in all of the collector’s guide books that have been produced in the past ten years. Tomás said he is very pleased with the

achievements he has made in the last fifteen years, and that he is proud of the recognition his work has received by people “who are knowledgeable about art.”

In contrast, Vito Salazar has not been very successful building a name for himself. Although he has entered and even placed in ARIPO competitions in the past, he has never been invited to show his work in the United States nor outside of Oaxaca in Mexico. He is an active member of Artesanos del Pueblo, and so he has been interviewed in Oaxacan newspapers about upcoming events, and is listed as a participant. More recently, Vito was featured in a short piece in a promotional book by an online “ethnic” home décor and jewellery retailer that sells handicrafts from all over the world. Despite this apparent level of visibility, Vito is not featured in collectors’ guide books, nor is considered “collectible” by the different collectors I interviewed, who regarded Tomás’ work as “very creative,” “unique” and of “good quality,” while Vito’s was “average” or “too commercial.” Vito’s level of success can be understood more as a result of the prime location of his workshop on the *entrada*, close to San Martín’s church and his friendly personality rather than the result of his “name,” as the majority of his clients are one-time tourists buying souvenirs, or wholesalers from elsewhere in Mexico buying large amounts of stock at one time. Vito told me that he would like the opportunity to develop his work and show it outside of Oaxaca, but that it is necessary to “know the right people” in order to do this. While he is happy that he is able to support his family on his current woodcarving business, he is worried that as his children get older he may have difficulties paying for school and other expenses.

The work histories of Tomás and Vito also highlight another aspect of competition in San Martín: the central role that travelling to the United States plays in the careers of more successful artisans. To begin with, direct access to U.S. markets is

unevenly distributed in San Martín as only about twenty percent of full-time artisans have ever travelled to the United States on a visa. In recent years, new visas have been increasingly difficult to acquire as illegal migration by Mexican nationals has become a major issue within American politics. Travel to the U.S. is important, not only because it allows artisans the opportunity to sell directly to their clients, cutting out “middlemen” wholesalers who many artisans depend on, but also because it allows them to build networks within the culture industries, like museums and galleries, and collector markets, where consumers are more likely to pay higher prices, and make multiple purchases over time.

These contacts can become significant resources for artisans in the long term. Many long lasting friendships have developed between artisans and American collectors, who often arrange places for them to stay while in the United States, introduce them to their networks, and at times even help when artisans find themselves in financial difficulties. I know of cases where American friends have helped to pay for children’s education or have helped when times were financially tough by arranging sales for their work. During the fears of an H1N1 epidemic in 2009, for example, when tourism levels to Oaxaca dropped significantly, a number of artisans I know contacted their friends in the United States to arrange for the sale of extra carvings in order to make ends meet. Pedro Flores told me, for example, that during the “Oaxaca Rebellion” of 2006, he depended almost exclusively on his contacts in the United States as he wasn’t able to sell any pieces to galleries or shops in Oaxaca City.⁶⁸

Contrasting Tomás and Vito illustrates some problems with understanding the nature of competition in San Martín as only one of supply outstripping demand

⁶⁸ Interestingly, I did not find any evidence of *compadrazgo* relationships between Tileño artisans and foreigners as I have heard about in other craft producing communities.

(although this is also an issue). A majority of artisans in the village find themselves in Vito's position; although they may be able to make some kind of a living from passing tourists and wholesalers, their ability to increase their business is severely curtailed because they cannot build their "names" through hard work alone, and they are often unable to make the contacts required to initiate the long-term relationships with those members of the community of practice who function as gatekeepers to the status of being a well-known artisan. While the U.S.-based collectors' organisation Friends of Oaxacan Folk Art (FOFA) has recently made attempts to recognise young and upcoming talented artisans in San Martín, many Tileño artisans go unrecognised by the members of the community of practice that produce the necessary documents to build their "names," i.e. books and articles and certificates of participation in events.

In Plattner's study of St. Louis, he observed that a general characteristic of art markets is that most participants are not economically successful (1998: 482). He explains the continued participation of "unsuccessful" artists in the market by reference to their "art for art's sake" ideology through which his informants justified the time spent on seemingly unproductive activities. Despite touristic and (some) collectors' discourses that present Tileños as "natural artisans" who make woodcarvings because it is "part of their culture," or at times "in their blood," most Tileños never expressed to me a true "art for art's sake" mentality. My informants frequently acknowledged that they continue to make woodcarvings out of a lack of feasible alternatives. Indeed, one by-product of the perceived inexplicability of some artisans' success is that new artisans have hope that they might also achieve recognition. As it is not entirely clear exactly what drives success and the ability to develop "names" the possibility always remains that there is room within the woodcarving market for the work of new artisans (cf. Sanchez 2012 on similar processes in an industrial context).

Given the fact that competition is an everyday characteristic of the relations amongst artisans in San Martín, the extremely negative reaction to the Garcías might appear out of place. However, as I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, the negative reactions must be understood not as commentaries on competition per se, but on the specific ways that Miguel and Catalina go about being competitive, practices which are seen as at odds with certain community values in San Martín. In the next section, I describe some Tileños' characterisation of Miguel and Catalina's practices, which many in the woodcarvings' community of practice approvingly identify as "very entrepreneurial." This entrepreneurial attitude, however, draws critique from some of their neighbours, who read their business practices as "selfish" (*egoísta*). In the remainder of the chapter, I argue that while being a "good artisan" has become a central aspect of being a "good Tileño" today, the Garcías draw the criticism of "selfish" behaviour precisely because of their non-artisanal work activities that have allowed their woodcarvings to be successful.

Artisanship and entrepreneurialism: Tileño moralities of work

Today in San Martín, artisanship ("ser un buen artesano"), which Tileños describe as a combination of skill and talent, is now a central aspect to moral evaluations of work and personhood, despite the fact that woodcarving does not have the same long-standing presence in the village as other activities. For Tileños, skill is a personal quality necessary to being a "good artisan," while "talent" is a special quality that can make one an "excellent" artisan. However, not everyone is considered to have these qualities in equal measure.

By the time of my fieldwork, Juan and Isabel had both worked in the Garcías' workshop for over four years. Isabel in this time had become an excellent painter; she was often asked by Catalina to paint the largest, most expensive pieces and younger

workers often turned to her for advice. She also had taken on other leadership roles, such as assigning new pieces to be painted and keeping track of the special orders from clients. Juan, on the other hand had not developed his skills. He preferred to do the preparation work of sanding and gluing rather than the more difficult work of painting. Juan's father also happens to be one of the original woodcarvers who began working with Isidoro Cruz in the 1970s, and people in general regarded him as an expert carver. As such, I found it odd that Juan did not seem interested in becoming a skilled artisan too. One evening, when visiting with his family at his home, I asked him why he preferred preparation work, when most of the other painters tried to avoid it. He told me that he just did not like painting that much, that he did not like how long it took; he preferred to finish a task all in one day. His mother Ana María, who was cooking nearby scoffed, "it's that my son is very lazy. He prefers to do nothing at all!"

Ana María's use of "laziness" to explain her son's preference for what is regarded by Tileños as unskilled labour is attached to a strong moral discourse about work and self-discipline: those who cultivate their skills are judged positively, and those who do not are judged negatively. As an employee in a workshop, Juan was not only paid for his time, but also his ability. It was widely known that Isabel's wage is higher than his, precisely because her work contributes to what Tileños view as the "valued" part of woodcarving. As the development of skill is seen to be an essential and desired part of artisanship, Juan devalued his own labour by failing to develop his skill, thus incurring the critique by his mother, and often unfortunately for Juan, his wife as well.

Laziness was often the explanation given by Tileños for people who do not achieve a certain level of skill, as skill is read as an indicator of past effort and work and present initiative. This critique was levelled at everyone considered "unskilled" rather

than just those who to me appeared lazy, and was attributed in respect to all types of work – not just artisanal work, but also community leaders, state politicians, the English teacher in the *secundaria* school, and even one “failed” illegal migrant who was caught trying to cross the U.S. border six times before finally returning home to the village. However, while Tileños see skill as something that can and should be cultivated and developed by all, “talent” on the other hand is viewed as an innate quality of the person, a gift that has been bestowed upon the individual by God. The ways Tileños understand talent are also connected to moral evaluations of individuals. However, unlike the failure to develop skill, one would never be judged negatively for not having talent, as it is given by God, and cannot be changed through one’s own will.⁶⁹ While the bestowal of talent by God is clearly understood as positive, the failure to take advantage of one’s talent is judged very negatively. Distinguishing people as “skilled” and “talented” in San Martín is therefore a way of indicating achievement and good work amongst artisans. However, while all Tileños agreed that Miguel and Catalina were both very skilled and very talented artisans – possibly even the most skilled and talented – they received many more criticisms by Tileños than did any other artisans in the community. What became clear to me throughout my fieldwork was that it was not the Garcías’ *artisanal* work practices that were drawing criticisms from their neighbours, but rather the auxiliary work practices that were also central to their success, which can be understood as entrepreneurial practices.

The nature of entrepreneurialism has been the subject of a rather large amount of recent anthropological literature. Many emphasise that under current conditions of neoliberalism, the entrepreneurial subject’s “moral autonomy” is gauged and celebrated

⁶⁹ Tileños’ explanations that God has chosen people to have artistic talent clearly is directly connected to a Catholic world-view of the relationship between the individual and God, and one could also argue that the aesthetic sensibilities of the artisans are greatly bolstered by the aesthetic orientations of Mexican Catholic spaces and practices.

by individuals' ability to provide for their own needs and ambitions, through practices that focus on "productivity," and "self-promotion" (W. Brown 2003: 6; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 50). The entrepreneurial subject is therefore intimately tied to processes of privatisation, and while these idealised subjectivities may also result in practices of "accountability" (ibid), it is also frequently observed that entrepreneurialism is often accompanied by practices of secrecy and social conflict (Rosi 1998; Isik: 2010: 57-59), conditions that resonates with my observations from San Martín.

I first became aware of the tensions that exist between the Garcías and some of the other artisans early into my fieldwork, when I was interviewing Román Castillo, another fina producer, about his clients and customers. Intending to interview him about the effects that the political problems of 2006 had had on his business, I started by asking him what he thought the biggest changes in the woodcarving market had been in the previous five years. Much to my surprise, Román launched into a long discussion about Miguel and how he was currently monopolising all of the "sources of the market." He explained that previously Tommy Bolan, the dealer with whom Miguel has developed a very close relationship, used to buy carvings from many different people in San Martín. Now, Román asserted, he just buys directly from Miguel, so that other carvers have not only lost an important source of their livelihoods, but Miguel himself earns a small profit off each piece by other artisans that Tommy buys from him. Additionally, Román added, it was Miguel who first began the practice of paying tour guides commissions on their sales; now, almost everyone must pay commission or the guides just take their customers elsewhere. He explained these behaviours were evidence of Miguel's *egoísmo*, noting that Miguel and Catalina are not content to be the most successful in the village, they always want more.

While I often heard some artisans and their families express similar feelings to Román, there were many others who did not feel the same way. Although Miguel and Catalina have made the growth of their business the main focus of their activities in recent years, they also collaborate with other artisans in the community. In response to the difficult economic year artisans experienced in 2006, Catalina established an artisans' organisation called *Artistas Artesanales*, to which they invited those artisans whose work Catalina felt were, in her own words, "of high or collector quality, and were unique to the artisan himself." The organisation was conceived to help promote their collective interests through the promotion of their work as a group at state organised events throughout Oaxaca and to organise fairs in San Martín. Many of the artisans who are members of *Artistas Artesanales* are those artisans who have already made "names" for themselves, and have well developed "histories." Catalina elaborated, "we were also thinking about our clients when we formed the group; people who buy from us are likely to be interested in work by Pedro, Daniela, María... This way, we help them discover new work they might like, and we as a group benefit." Further, many members of *Artistas Artesanales* have long-standing personal relationships with Miguel and Catalina, either through friendship, compadrazgo, or kinship, and a number of their children or godchildren work in the Garcías' workshop.

In late October 2008, *Artistas Artesanales* held their second annual fair to take advantage of the high numbers of North American and Mexican tourists who travel to Oaxaca to experience Day of the Dead. Although all fifteen members of the group contributed to the costs of marketing and decorating the fair space, and they had some sponsorship from The Secretary of Tourism, the Garcías paid a large part of the expenses and all of the organising was done by their office employees. The event was held at their successful restaurant on the highway by San Martín, in order to take

advantage of passing traffic to Ocotlán and the coast. The event space was beautifully decorated with traditional Mexican decorations like *papel picado* and marigolds, the flowers of the dead, giving the space an overall aesthetic coherence. Traditional *ranchera* music played quietly in the background while carvers gave short demonstrations to visiting tourists.

Based on Artistas Artesanales' success during the Day of the Dead period the year before, Artesanos del Pueblo had also decided to arrange a craft fair in the main square in San Martín in 2008. As Artesanos del Pueblo is the community artisans' organisation, organised and supported through the municipal government, any artisan in San Martín is permitted to join and participate in their events, even those who are members of Artistas Artesanales. However, members of Artistas Artesanales were asked by Catalina not to participate in both events. Artesanos del Pueblo organised ten days' worth of cultural events, demonstrations and a market space to sell their carvings, local food, drinks and sweets, and mezcal, locally-produced agave cactus liquor. Unlike the Artistas Artesanales event, which was organised by Catalina and Miguel's office staff, the community fair was entirely organised by volunteers from the Artesanos del Pueblo executive committee, many of whom had no previous experience organising an event of such a large scale.

The day after the two events began I encountered Rufino and Vito from Artesanos del Pueblo at the intersection of the highway and the road that leads into the village, which is immediately across the street from the Garcías' restaurant. They were playing very loud rowdy *banda* music, and had put up a hand-drawn banner. They also had two megaphones, through which they were shouting at the cars passing by, directing them towards their fair, and away from the Artistas Artesanales event. I

stopped to chat with them for a moment, and Rufino told me that their new approach was working; they'd already had more tourist traffic that morning than most of the day before and he was offering free mototaxi rides to the centre of town for those who came by bus or *colectivo* taxi. Across the road at the restaurant where Artistas Artesanales' event was taking place, the atmosphere was decidedly changed from the day before. The patio of the restaurant, which was normally busy, was practically empty and although the day was beautiful most of the customers were sitting inside. In the parking lot to the side of the restaurant where the Artistas Artesanales' stalls had been set up only a few tourists idly wandered around, and the *ranchera* style music that had been playing for background ambiance had been turned up to an uncomfortable level, and was clashing audibly with the music coming from the other side of the highway.

This situation persisted into the late afternoon until the performance of the Danza de la Pluma began.⁷⁰ The Artesanos del Pueblo executive committee had arranged for San Martín's Danza group to perform a shortened version of the dance in the basketball court in the centre of their fair and they had advertised it widely on their fliers and radio announcements, as they believed it would be a big attraction for tourists who would not normally have the opportunity to see the Danza at this time of year. After the dancers had been performing for about fifteen minutes, Miguel arrived in his pickup truck with an American couple and waved me over. Miguel explained that the man and woman were acquaintances of his from the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, who had come to Oaxaca to make some purchases for the museum's collection. He said that they'd been interested to see some of the Danza de la Pluma, and so they had stopped there to watch it before continuing on to his workshop. After they left, a few members of the Artesanos del Pueblo executive committee began talking off to one side about what had just happened; they somehow already knew that the

⁷⁰ *Danza de la Pluma*, "The Feather Dance," the Valley Zapotec conquest dance (see Chapter Five).

visitors Miguel had arrived with were from an American museum, and they were upset that Miguel had used “the community’s event” to impress the Americans, thus promoting his own interests. Victor muttered, “These days, Miguel is more *político* than artisan.”⁷¹

Victor’s accusation that Miguel was a “*político*” became a more common sentiment in the months that followed.⁷² In the summer of 2009, FONART began a project called “Manos Mágicas” in San Martín. Manos Mágicas is a series of films produced all over Mexico about the children of artisans, and the filmmakers decided that Miguel and Catalina’s workshop was the perfect space to make their film, as it was large, sunny and aesthetically pleasing. Many Tileños were very unhappy that FONART had chosen the Garcías’ workshop, rather than the public spaces of the elementary school or the basketball court, to film the video. Although the children of all Tileño artisans had been invited by FONART, many people – especially those who were active in the Artesanos del Pueblo group – refused to send their children to participate. In the end, almost all of the children who participated in the FONART programme were related to members of the Artistas Artesanales group.⁷³

It was also around this time that I began to hear people grumbling that Miguel was the new *cacique* of San Martín. “Cacique” is a term that was used for powerful local landowners in New Spain and independent Mexico until the post-Revolutionary land redistribution in the Thirties greatly reduced their power. Since then, it has

⁷¹ *Politico*, meaning politician, but also implying the smooth underhandedness associated with politicians.

⁷² It is not insignificant that Tileños’ complaints about the Garcías’ business practices were usually directed towards Miguel and not Catalina, despite the fact that Catalina is equally involved in the decision-making and networking that drives their business. This reflects Tileños’ assumptions about men and women’s differential status both when it comes to authorship (as addressed in Chapter Two), and public power.

⁷³ This is also another example of the ability of Miguel and Catalina to successfully disseminate their explanation of the woodcarvings’ meanings and history, as the Manos Magicas film overtly links the woodcarvings to Zapotec culture and *tonas*.

frequently been used to describe local bosses whose power is strong enough to significantly influence political process at a given level. In colloquial use, it usually indicates the abuse of power, especially within the context of a community that is run under a regime of usos y costumbres which at least in principle prevents the accumulation of personal power. Those who had begun to call Miguel a cacique felt their feelings were justified when near the end of my fieldwork in 2009 the Secretary of Tourism arranged for Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, then Governor of the State of Oaxaca, to make a public appearance in San Martín as part of his support campaign for the next PRI gubernatorial candidate.

As part of his day-long and highly publicised tour of the Ocotlán arm of the Valles Centrales, Ruiz Ortega lunched in the Garcías' restaurant on the highway before proceeding with a large entourage of journalists, photographers and state employees to their workshop. At the workshop, members of Artistas Artesanales as well as other well-known artisans from all over the Valles Centrales had set up a small fair to show their work to the governor. As happens in small communities, everyone in San Martín knew about the governor's visit before the day arrived, and many artisans were sorely disappointed that they would not be able to participate in what they saw as an important opportunity to build their "names." Further, many Tileños – artisans and non-artisans alike – thought it inappropriate that the head of the state government would visit San Martín without any formal acknowledgement of the community's president or municipal authority. This, I was told, was not only a lack of respect on the part of the governor for their community's autonomy, but also showed that Miguel did not really value the communal ideals on which the functioning of their community depended. In the next section, I discuss those communal ideals in San Martín, which form a moral

discourse about appropriate behaviour, structured by the opposition of “cooperation” (*cooperación*) and “selfishness” (*egoísmo*).

Sharing and selfishness: communal ideals in San Martín

For at least the past sixty years “the community” as a concept has been a focus of anthropological attention in Mexico. This has been partially due to the long-standing disciplinary interest in indigenous communal forms. As discussed in Chapter One, foundational conceptual work, such as Redfield’s notions about community structure and “progress” and Wolf’s influential conceptualisation of the “closed corporate community” have had significant influence on the kinds of research questions addressed in Mexico (Redfield 1930; Wolf 1957; 1986). At the same time people have in recent decades begun to assert their rights as communities; Oaxaca’s 1995 constitutional change establishing usos y costumbres, and requests to have artifacts from national collections “repatriated” to community museums are but two examples from Oaxaca (cf. Cohen 2001b). While recent work within Mesoamerican studies has advanced some serious critiques against the privileging of “the community” as the fundamental unit of sociality in the region (e.g. Diskin 1995; Sandstrom 1996); “community” remains a key concern for many rural Oaxacans.

For Tileños, the community of San Martín remains an important concept, even for those whose livelihoods have either taken them away from the village through migration, or for those artisans, tradesmen and professionals who no longer depend on communal land to sustain themselves. For migrants in particular, communal aspects of life in San Martín play a large part in their understandings and experiences of “home.” Lamberto Roque Hernández†, a Tileño migrant who has published a small book of letters and recollections entitled *Cartas a Crispina* captures the feeling of many Tileños

that the village is ideally a united community. He writes in his essay *San Martín Tilcajete: between magic and surrealism*:

“Here there are professionals of distinct disciplines and there are also people who don’t know how to read nor write. There are curanderos [healers]. And there is unity. Here, still, converge the necessities of the poor with the kindness of hearts to make a healthy society” (Roque Hernández 2002: 101-102, my translation).

While Roque Hernández’s romantic sentiments about San Martín may be read as the emotional longing by migrants for home (Castellanos 2009), Tileños still living in San Martín often expressed sentiments about the desirability of unity within the community, even if it was not always achieved.

The disjunction between the ideal united community and the real divisions and tensions of community life were often framed by the older generation as an opposition between “cooperation” and “envy,” and by younger generations as “cooperation” and “selfishness.” Cooperative institutions are common aspects of village life in Oaxaca, as studies by Lynn Stephen (2005) Jeffrey Cohen (1999) and Laura Nader (1991) have shown. Nader’s analysis of a Sierra Zapotec community shows that village tensions are kept in check by the “cross-linkages” of different relationships that balance each other out in order to maintain overall harmony within the village. These cross-linkages are formed at different levels of opposition and cooperation as community members’ formal relationships with one another limit the extent to which contests over power and status can develop (ibid: 59).

In many communities in the Valles Centrales, these “cross-linkages” of cooperation between families take the forms of the cultural institutions of *guelaguetza* and *comadrazgo*. Guelaguetza is an institution of reciprocal giving networks organised through exchanges of gifts and services, which are usually received by families for

events that require large expenditures, such as weddings. For example, people may give goods, such as animals to be slaughtered for the meal or bottles of mezcal, or they may give service, such as helping to cook and prepare the large quantities of food, or paying for the band. There are complex social conventions that surround the establishment of *guelaguetza* relationships, and the details of what is given and received are usually recorded in notebooks which are guarded by each family (Cohen 1999: 90-93). In San Martín, formal *guelaguetza* (with the recording of debts) was practised until very recently; many middle aged Tileños recall their mothers keeping *guelaguetza* books for their households. More recently, the institution has become deformalised, although goods and services are often still exchanged at large life-cycle events. As Ermelina, the wife of an older artisan told me, “we might not write the exchanges down, but we women always remember.”

Cooperation is also established through *comadrazgo* or ritual co-parenthood. In contrast to godparentage in Northern European or North American societies, the most important relationship created with the election of godparents is between the parents of the child and the godparents, which from that point necessarily entail relations of mutual aid and respect, and who from then on call each other “*comadre*” (co-father/co-parent) or “*comadre*” (co-mother), and always speak in the formal “*usted*” form of speech, regardless of previous forms of speaking (*comadrazgo* as an institution exists throughout urban and rural Latin America; see Cohen 1999: 93-102; Nutini 1984). In San Martín, the most important *comadrazgo* relationship is established with baptism, and these relationships are important and intense family-like connections. One can expect help from these *comadres* in times of need, or during the organisation of children’s life-cycle rituals. However, *comadrazgo* is also established at the celebration of all of the Catholic sacraments, and in a way similar to *guelaguetza*, people will be

called on for large celebrations like weddings to be the “godparents” of different expensive items, such as “the godparents of the rings,” or the “godparents of the mezcal.”

In San Martín, community level institutions of cooperation also are centrally important to the functioning of everyday village life. As described in Chapter One, the village is governed under the political system of usos y costumbres, formed by the hierarchical system of cargos, which are held for the most part for one year, through which married men work their way up until they have earned enough moral authority and respect through their service to the community to run for municipal office. The cargo system can be understood as a strong force of integration and communality within the community, as it is based on the principles of reciprocity and public service (Cohen 1999: 124-133). The notion of service to one’s community is often explicitly emphasised by Tileños who normally use the term “*servicio*” (service) rather than “cargo” (burden). More than once it was explained to me that they do not see this contribution as a burden, although it can in some instances require an extremely large amount of unpaid labour on the part of the cargo holder. Although it is possible to make a cash payment to the municipality instead of completing a cargo, I did not hear of anyone actually living in San Martín who paid their way out; even those artisans for whom the time spent on cargos may have been much more financially productive elsewhere all completed their cargos.

The municipal authority also organises communal labour activities, called *tequio*. Tequio is in some way the community-level equivalent of *guelaguetza*, as it is an expression of mutual aid and support, but directed towards the needs of the community rather than households (Cohen 1999: 114). Members of each household are expected to

contribute to tequio projects throughout the year, and it is either used for activities where the municipality's employees cannot complete the project on their own or where it is seen as particularly important that the community should do it together (for example, reforestation activities or the building of a bridge across a stream). Although the municipality can officially imprison Tileños who do not participate in their cargos or tequio, the jail in the municipal building is never occupied and is currently used for storage.

Although Tileños discursively give a high amount of importance to community and communalidad, I also often heard people lament that they were living through a difficult and divisive time in San Martín. Older Tileños often blamed *la envidia* (envy) for the cause of the community's problems. La envidia in rural Mexico is often understood anthropologically as a “social disease,” at times linked to witchcraft. The envy that one feels for the objects or good luck of another can cause harm to the other, and this belief intersects with other locally held notions of *mal ojo* (evil eye), which Tileños worry about, especially in relation to young children. Thus, in line with Foster's argument about limited good, one should not do things that might draw the envy of others (cf. G.M. Foster 1965b; Kearney 1972: 70-80). Martín, a campesino who is the father of an artisan I knew well, explained San Martín's lack of a proper market as the result of *la envidia*. He told me that every time someone attempted to set up a market or even a weekly stall to sell vegetables and meat, the envy of other Tileños would make it fail. However, outsiders from San Antonio, about fifteen minutes up the highway, were able to achieve success selling vegetables and fruit out of their truck once a week, because, as Martín explained, they were less susceptible to the *envidia* of Tileños.

In contrast, younger generations often blamed “*egoísmo*” (selfishness) for San Martín’s current problems (cf. Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009: 67). During my fieldwork there were many heated debates in the community assembly about whether the village should allow a mobile phone operator to build a mast. While some members of the community had voiced concerns over the effects on health that mobile phone masts may cause, the majority were more concerned about who was going to benefit financially from the tower. The mobile company’s representative had brokered a deal with a couple who were willing to have the mast placed on the roof of their house, which being located on a ridge, would have given it the height it needed. Despite the fact that the representative had also offered to donate multiple computers to San Martín’s schools, as well as make financial contributions to the following year’s Artesanos del Pueblo fair, the proposal was eventually rejected. At the same time this was going on, the couple also had an (officially unrelated) dispute with the municipal authorities, who had cut off their running water and electricity over allegations that the husband had failed to complete his cargos. Both the couple, and those opposing them, explained to me that it was “selfishness” that was motivating the other party. In the case of the mobile mast, others accused the couple of building something within the boundaries of the village, but keeping the profit for themselves, while the couple argued that the selfishness of their neighbours led them to prefer to lose all of the benefits the mobile company was offering in order to prevent one family from earning just a little bit more.

These events can provide some clues about the nature of the tensions between many of the artisans and Miguel and Catalina; while older discourses of *envidia* place the blame for social strife on both the envied and the envier (Kearney 1972: 72-74), newer conceptualisations of “selfishness” remove the envier from the equation, thus lying the blame for the strife at the feet of the “envied” or successful persons,

consequently placing them in direct contradiction with the communal institutions and ideals of San Martín. While the Garcías' actions are in many ways in line with Tileños' notions of "good" artisanal work, they are not fully reconcilable with San Martín's community institutions that are focused on the creation of "cross-linkages," as their entrepreneurial work practices increasingly encompass processes of privatisation which alienate the communal prerogative of San Martín. It is this "cultural style" of entrepreneurial activity that has both made them successful in the eyes of the community of practice, while at the same time opened them up to moral criticisms of their neighbours who adopt a different cultural style of community belonging.

Fredrick Errington (1987), in a piece centred on public auctions in the small town of Rock Creek, Montana, suggests that the American residents of this town are able to reconcile their apparently opposing beliefs that place value on individual entrepreneurial and competitive success at the same time as valuing the ideals of community and mutual aid. His informants insist that competitors can remain friends so long as everyone follows what they consider to be "fair business practice," which often includes the tempering of aggressive competition and the exchange of gifts and favours between competitors (F. Errington 1987: 300-301). Despite these insistences, the economic conditions and nature of competition in Rock Creek mean that some businesses fail, and that those failures necessarily entail some kind of benefit for competitors. Errington suggests that public auctions of repossessed goods and homes are important institutions through which this conflict is (temporarily) resolved, as they render the tension invisible by reconstituting the purchase of the failed competitor's capital as "good neighbourly" conduct (*ibid*: 303).

Unlike Errington's American informants, however, Tileño ideals of community do not include individualism or competitive success, but rather focus on sharing responsibility and costs amongst households. As such, community institutions and events such as the craft fairs described above reveal rather than disguise the tensions between this ideal, and current entrepreneurial practices by Miguel and Catalina. I often heard guides and collectors admiringly remark that Miguel's business acumen was what set him apart from many other artisans, and attributed his success to the combination of these skills and his workshop's beautiful carvings. While their enthusiasm and respect for Miguel's business approach is resonant with modern capitalist conceptualisations about hard work and success (cf. Lengyel 2002), from the perspective situated within the village these practices are directly contradictory to understandings of how one should interact with fellow villagers.

The entrepreneurial outlook that has partially contributed to Miguel and Catalina's great success necessarily involves the redefinition of the public/private divide. As entrepreneurialism is focused on (culturally and contextually defined) notions of efficiency and the maximisation of profits (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002: 123), it also entails clear definitions of ownership and the foregrounding of "business success and leadership" as an essential measurement of personal value (K. Hart 2001: 96). While Tileño collective ideals do not reject private ownership or individual success, the Garcías' entrepreneurial practices contradict Tileño ideals about what should be made publically available, redrawing the lines so that their labour and goods stay within their private realm. The case of the competing craft fairs is evidence of the tensions that surround this process of privatisation; although the Artistas Artesanales event was not just for Miguel and Catalina's benefit, it occurred on private property and was clearly organised and directed through their private interests. Their "use" of the community as a

resource to impress the visiting museum representatives was also read by other Tileños as an attempt to redraw this boundary between the private and public. Miguel's presentation of the Danza de la Pluma as "our tradition," while at the same time not participating in, but rather competing with, the community-organised event was read by the organisers as an act of *egoísmo*, selfishness at the expense of communal benefit. These processes of privatisation are felt strongly within a community where the ideals of communality and mutual benefit are considered ideals and models for good practice.

However, the problem of privatisation does not fully explain all Tileños' discomfort with the Garcías' success. Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld suggests that competition in contemporary "new" markets is predicated on expressiveness and communication rather than solely on economic factors (2002: 113; cf. K. Thomas 2009). In the case of the Garcías, these expressive and communicative factors are intimately connected to their aesthetic project of ethnicising the woodcarvings. As discussed in the last chapter, Miguel and Catalina have benefitted greatly from their ability to match the aesthetics and discourses of authenticity to the ethnic art market's expectations. Thus, the tensions between the Garcías and other members of their community are not incidental to their aesthetic projects, but rather are central to the practice of aesthetics in San Martín today. While I agree with Hernández Díaz and Zafra that artisans can learn about aesthetics and meaning-making from tourists in the exchanges that take place in Oaxaca (2005: 14), those artisans who have had the opportunity to travel to the United States also have had the advantage of engagement with a greater variety of perspectives and networks. This may include the exposure to new aesthetic ideas and discourses, as described in Chapter Three, as well as having a greater understanding of the discourses and ideologies of art that drive the markets in which their products circulate. Knowledge of these discourses and ideologies can be

understood as a certain kind of competence or “ability to make one’s way into other cultures” (Hannerz 1990: 239). In the context of a competitive market for woodcarvings, where the variety of the aesthetic forms is limited, and all are at least potentially able to make the same kinds of claims to authenticity, this competence becomes another kind of social capital that allows some artisans to more easily to move within these global networks of actors and to match the expectations of their consumers (Notar 2008; cf. Salazar 2010 on the “cosmopolitan capital” of tour guides).

For those artisans who have not engaged within these same networks, this ability is a subtle and difficult to identify quality that appears to be simultaneously a cause and effect of success; this explains in some ways the stories about Miguel and Catalina’s involvement in the drug economy, and the jokes about El Catrín, as their rapidly increasing wealth seems “unnatural” within the more limited artesanía economy in which most artisans participate (cf. Nugent 1996). This intangibility means that that it is often unclear to others exactly what Miguel and Catalina know that they do not. Thus, I argue that unlike conventional assumptions about the role that competition plays in engendering innovation, in the case of San Martín’s artisans, aesthetic innovation in their products, and the ability to sell them for higher prices, is not directly the result competition within the market, so much as the uneven distribution of opportunities to develop the specific social and cultural skills that allow them better access to ethnic art and artesanía markets.

My analysis of the politics of competition amongst Tileño artisans suggests that a defining feature of these politics is not connected to the problem of competition per se, but rather to the kind of competition that develops in cultural commodity markets. In San Martín, these politics play out within an idealised moral discourse of community

and cooperation, which casts the entrepreneurial business ethic as inherently “selfish” and at odds with the community. In San Martín, this process coalesces around the processes of entrepreneurialism and the privatisation of work, which create tensions within the community. This analysis reaffirms Colloredo Mansfeld’s suggestion that anthropology’s way forward is “undoing theoretical descriptions that merely affirm the “logical machine” of the market model [...and] make knowable the new links among competition, economy, and cultural identity” (2002: 126). The final two chapters of this thesis do just that, by considering how cultural identity and claims to cultural property are intimately linked to competition and the nature of artworks in the global economy of ethnic art.

Chapter Five
Hues of belonging:
Rhetorics of connection through indigeneity and place

“See my last name? Xuana. That’s a Zapotec name. It’s the only Zapotec name left in the village. Somehow we managed to keep who we are.”

- Aquilino Xuana, Tileño artisan

“There is a larger “aesthetics of place” inherent in the term “indigenous.”

- Steven Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*

In Chapter Three, my analysis was concerned with the recent shift in the aesthetics of Oaxacan woodcarvings that has been to a large extent brought about through the explicit efforts of the Garcías to ground their work within the aesthetics of ethnic art, a process that I described as the “ethnicisation” of the woodcarvings. In the last chapter, I addressed the political effects of the aesthetic practices of Miguel and Catalina. To contrast, in this chapter, I address the effects of aesthetic practice on modes of “belonging” in San Martín. Rudi Colloredo Mansfeld has observed that in many cases ethnic brands get “spun out” of local identities (2011: 1). While new forms of cultural belonging have indeed arisen due to Tileños’ participation in the ethnic art and artesanía markets, in the case of San Martín, the identities themselves are “spun out” of these processes, rather than vice-versa. In this chapter I explore social processes that run against the divisive politics of competition, which have begun in recent years to bring concerns about indigeneity and community to the heart of current modes of belonging in San Martín.

New aesthetic and economic interests in ethnic art by artisans, paired with the awareness of indigeneity and authenticity promoted by the cultural tourism industry in Oaxaca, has led to new conversations in San Martín about what it means to be Tileño or Tileña in the twenty first century. As issues of Tileño identity are currently tied up with

globalising processes, both those inherent in the production and marketing of the woodcarvings, and those central to the experiences of Tileño migrants, the debates involved connect centrally with Tileño discussions about modernity and community.

When I began my fieldwork in San Martín, I found that with most people, direct questions concerning identity almost always transitioned rapidly to other related topics such as the functioning of the village’s political system; “*el campo*” (their land and crops); the telling of folktales; and the miracles of Saint Martin of Tours. On other occasions, when I tried to direct conversations towards questions of whether Tileños were Zapotecs or *indígenas* (indigenous persons), I received a variety of responses ranging from pride to some defensiveness, but also frequently uncertainty.⁷⁴ More than once I was directed to Padre Saturnino†, the village’s Catholic priest originally from Oaxaca City, because he had “books about these things.”

Through my conversations with artisans and their families, I realised fairly quickly that the production of woodcarvings in San Martín is not connected to any coherent or stable notion of what it means to be Tileño in the early twenty first century, let alone an essential or primordial connection to a collective indigenous past (cf. Wade 1997: 21). Although anthropological perspectives have long accepted that identities are rarely stable or coherent concepts, the instability of Tileños’ claims to belonging and especially the relatively new focus on “indigeneity” at times has led to self-conscious, almost defensive assertions of “culture.” As I will show below, these responses are in part reactions to certain understandings of authenticity that circulate within tourism contexts about what culture “is.” At the same time, however, they also respond to the great diversity in the ways that Tileños themselves explain feelings of belonging.

⁷⁴ Ronda Brulotte has reported a similar experience in Arrazola, the other main woodcarving community of the Valles Centrales (2009: 461).

Despite the fact that Tileños' different modes of belonging may not clearly match up with some tourists' expectations, they do resonate in many ways with the historical and social circumstances in Oaxaca that have often resulted in complex, overlapping and multiple registers of identity. This complexity in recent years has often been vocally framed around issues of indigeneity, although in Oaxaca other registers of identity frequently reassert themselves in ways both complimentary and contradictory to ethnicised explanations of belonging (Norget 2010). Because of this, anthropologists working in Oaxaca have been attracted to questions of community and belonging, investigating the importance of factors as diverse as migration (Kearney 1995; Cohen 2004), gender and work (Stephen 2005; Feinberg 2008); and sexuality and disability (Higgins and Coen 2000). From this research, it is clear that these different kinds of identity are impossible to separate into discrete forms. Experiences of class, gender and migration, for example, are shown in the work of Lynn Stephen to come together in dynamic ways within the work of producing Zapotec textiles, contributing to the identification practices of weavers in Teotitlán de Valle (Stephen 2005).

Like Arjun Appadurai (1988) observed for caste in India or exchange in Melanesia, ethnicity and identity have become academic touchstones for many researchers working in Latin America, driven simultaneously by the histories of the region and of anthropological research (Harris 1995; Wade 1997: 42-60). As addressed in the introduction, the relationship between the history of anthropology and the history of identity processes in Mexico has not been incidental; the anthropological project which sought to identify and describe cultures as discrete units directly informed the Mexican and Oaxaca states' projects of nation- and state-building in the twentieth century, and often deployed the language of "identity" within these projects.

In Oaxaca these processes continue today through the promotion by the state and other powerful actors of concepts that invoke identity in public and touristic discourses and promotion. The concept of identity works within the logics of cultural tourism in Oaxaca as an organising theme that allows for the translation of the complicated and often contradictory experiences of subjectivities or belonging by Oaxacans into straightforward tropes that are easily understood and consumed by tourists. Thus, visitors to Oaxaca are frequently told that the unique history, cuisines, dress and artesanías that are produced in the state are the essence of the Oaxacan identity. The state also sees identity as a resource through which it can direct its own agendas and social programs. The promotion of state programs often implores people to participate “as Oaxacans,” and frequently explicitly promotes “our identity” (*nuestra identidad*) as something that should be recognised, valued and shared. At the same time, the work of ethnic and pan-indigenous rights organisations, like COCEI, and justice-based movements like APPD have generated and facilitated alternative readings of what “identity” can and does mean in the Oaxacan context (Campbell 1994; Kearney 2000; Arenas 2011: 10-22). The work of these organisations and movements has meant that an alternative language of “identity” has emerged alongside the state and touristic discourses that generally present it as an integrative and cohesive concept.

Because Tileños frequently find themselves in spaces and situations where the state and tourism industry’s language of “identity-as-cultural resource” is deployed, this understanding of identity is now an important element that structures artisans’ relationships with the woodcarvings’ community of practice and with each other. However, as a tool for anthropological analysis “identity” has been problematised within the discipline for its imprecision and possible ethnocentric basis (Handler 1994; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In particular “identity” has been criticised for the way it

appears to conflate three distinct aspects of human experience: feelings of selfhood held by individuals; feelings of groupness held by collectivities of people; and the relationship between these two processes (Handler 1994: 28). Where “identity” as a concept may also speak to the experiences of individuals’ subjectivities, in San Martín, I found that artisans and their relatives most often invoked the kinds of identity that have more recently been described as “processes of belonging.” “Belonging” has become a useful analytic for anthropologists that allows us to focus on those aspects of “identity” that can be described as “rhetorics of connection” (Glick Schiller 2005: 297), which, as we will see, aptly describes the feelings evoked by Tileños in their explanations of who they are.⁷⁵ As such, rather than focusing on However, as will also become clear the “connection” aspect of Tileño belonging is not always pitched to the register of community. Instead, Tileños engage in rhetorics of belonging that connect themselves to different collective imaginaries, some of which relate to community membership and some which do not.

In order to attend to the variety of belongings in San Martín, I suggest that the colour metaphor of “hues” of belonging, rather than the more frequently invoked sound metaphor of “registers,” is a useful concept through which Tileño practices of belonging can be understood. This metaphorical device has the advantage in this case of drawing from the artisanal work that Tileños physically do in order to help explain the work they conceptually do when explaining who they are. By framing questions of belonging in terms of “hues” I also emphasise the inherent mixability of these forms of belonging, as they, like coloured paint, are blended and combined in complex, unique and changing ways by Tileños themselves. This metaphor has the advantage of forwarding Tileños’ own agency within these processes; although the social, historical and political

⁷⁵ “Belonging,” as a device of connection, is therefore explicitly contrasted to more personal levels of identity formation indicated by terms like “subjectivity.”

surroundings may provide the palette of belonging, as it were, during my fieldwork I found Tileños were able to “dip in” to different hues of belonging, in active and engaged ways, in building and (re)constituting ideas about what it means to be Tileño today.

In this chapter, I distil out two of these “hues of belonging” amongst the many that are present: indigeneity, and the place of San Martín. Many other hues of belonging are centrally important to many Tileños such as kinship, compadrazgo, participation in the Catholic Church, or supporting either the Cruz Azul or América football clubs. I have chosen indigeneity and the place of San Martín because both connect in some way to the production of woodcarvings and because together they illustrate the complexities of belonging that I observed. These forms of belonging are not conceptually consistent amongst Tileños, but are rather sites of negotiation, and both are subject to forces that arrive from outside of San Martín, highlighting the important relational nature of Tileños’ belonging in all its forms, even when it is only enacted for themselves.

As the first of these two hues of belonging is the emergence of a discourse of indigeneity in San Martín, I begin my discussion with a very brief overview of the currents that the concept of “indigenous” has run through at national and state levels. The details of the issues that I raise are complicated and while I do not have space to fully investigate them here, they have been addressed in detail by many authors. The politics of indigeneity in Oaxaca and Mexico more generally is currently an extremely important political concern, and a discussion of these politics is necessary to properly understand the implications of Tileños’ claims to indigeneity. Following this grounding, I move to my ethnography from San Martín in order to explore the ways that the hue of indigeneity colours belonging for Tileños. I suggest that for at least some Tileños, the

prospect of an indigenous identity offers an experience of *modernity* rather than tradition, although the paths to this modernity are forged in different ways. I then contrast these experiences with an understanding of place as a hue of belonging in San Martín that neither opposes nor agrees with the indigeneity framing, but rather exists as a concurrent and durable connection between people and place.

Oaxacan and Mexican visions of indigeneity

As described in Chapter One, a significant part of the appeal of Oaxacan cultural tourism rests on the marketing of the region's indigenous cultures as "heritage," a discourse which draws on what have been called "common sense Western assumptions" of indigeneity such as reified concepts of community, the intimate and balanced relationship with the environment, gender complementarity, and particular representations of culture (Wilson 2010: 178; cf. Van den Berghe 1995). However, this "common sense Western" understanding of indigeneity that Wilson describes has only become relevant in Oaxaca in the past twenty years, as it has been imported, to some extent, along with North American cultural tourism. Mexican and Oaxacan framings (which themselves appear commonsensical within their own frames of reference) continue to be important forces in the Valles Centrales, and are closely interwoven with contemporary tourist discourses about indigeneity in the context of Oaxacan craft production (Brulotte 2009: 458).

Governmental definitions of indigeneity today often rely heavily on indigenous language use as a mode of categorisation (ibid: 463); through census-taking and other devices of documentation, diverse populations are subsumed under the rubric "*indígena*" (indigenous) and are subsequently addressed by the CDI at the village level as "indigenous localities." However, language use is not an exhaustive diagnostic of

indigeneity within official programmes, as certain communities like San Martín, where very few inhabitants speak an indigenous language, are also addressed at times by the CDI as indigenous localities. This ambiguity in definition is the result of historical processes, both at the Mexican federal level and in Oaxaca, where understandings of indigeneity have not always coincided.

At the national level, conceptualisations of indigeneity that were forged in the post-Revolutionary moment described in the introduction continue to have salience today. To review: before the Revolution, scientific, popular and official discourses circulated the view that the people of Mexico were representatives of multiple and very different races (*razas*) and castes (*castas*). Although generalised racial categories circulated widely, many local variations existed and contradicted one another. In a nineteenth century census, for example, the Prefect of Soconusco, Chiapas, reported four racial categories: *ladinos* (Spanish-speaking Indians), Indians, blacks and *Lancandones*, believing that the Lancandon Mayas were a different race than other Indians (Lomnitz 2011: 206). These processes that divided the people of Mexico into multiple races and castes, picturesque and gendered images of which were circulated widely in postcards and ethnographic studies, persisted until the early twentieth century. The nationalistic needs of a Mexican nation that sought to be truly independent from Europe required the consolidation of the emerging idea of a *Mexican*, ideally *mestizo*, race (ibid: 207-209).

After the Revolution ended in 1920, Mexico's large rural indigenous population became symbolically important within the Mexican national imaginary through the related processes of nation building and *indigenismo*. As the new government attempted to consolidate the nation, the nationalist discourse of *mestizaje* (mixture/*mestizo*-isation)

that emerged from Mexico City mapped its ethno-racial categories onto the national territory, coding southern and rural Mexico, including Oaxaca, as “Indian,” while the North and the urban were coded as “Mexican,” a geography that continues to inform visions of the South from Mexico City and other centres (Alonso 2004: 469). Thus, Oaxaca came to represent the “Indian element [that] grounds the nation’s claim to territory, provides a continuity of blood, and roots the nation’s history in that of ancient, pre-Columbian civilizations whose art and mythology [are] integral to the ‘national soul’ ” (ibid: 467- 469; cf. Wade 1997: 42; Cook and Joo 1995: 33-34).

This official *indigenista* narrative largely omitted indigenous groups as historical agents, positioning them paradoxically as both living representatives of the nation’s glorious Pre-Hispanic past and as subjects to be civilised and modernised through the extension of Mexican national society (Knight 1990; Mallón 1992: 35-38; Feinberg 2003: 72; Poole 2009: 204). *Indigenismo* also worked to subsume the diversity amongst and within the more than sixty major ethno-linguistic groups to the generalising category “indígena,” which was symbolically linked to the ruins and artifacts of specifically Aztec and Mayan pasts through institutions like the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), and its National Museum of Anthropology (S. Errington 1998: 165-183; Poole 2009: 210; López 2010: 68, 125).

Although it is clear that the rhetoric and intentions of official *indigenismo* were assimilationist in nature, the state also contributed to, and indeed benefitted from, the reproduction of ethnic difference; it allowed for the maintenance of class structures between agrarian producers and mestizo land owners and merchants, and also permitted the PRI to construct and maintain its clientelistic networks through which it infamously controlled Mexico for more than seventy years (Collier 1994; Martinez Novo 2006: 60).

While the *indigenista* frames of indigeneity have persisted in the Mexican national imaginary, they have also been transformed in both legal and societal spheres. In the 1970 and 1980s, some Mexico City intellectuals began to question the dominant *indigenista* discourse in favour of socialist, class-based ideologies (de la Peña 1995: 117), and a softer so-called “participatory *indigenismo*” began to promote the preservation of indigenous groups, rather than assimilation (Saldívar 2003: 72-81; Martínez Novo 2006: 59). More significantly, the rise of indigenous rights movements in the 1990s, such as the COCEI in Oaxaca and especially the EZLN in Chiapas, has since infused the national discussion of identity with a language of multiculturalism. Although they may not (yet?) be deeply rooted (Brulotte 2009: 461), discourses of “ethnic citizenship” have redefined the rules of political and social participation, at least in principle (de la Peña 1995: 117-118). In 1990, the Mexican congress ratified the International Labor Organization’s Treaty 169 on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, and in 1991, an amendment to Article Four of the constitution declared that Mexico is a “multicultural and pluriethnic nation...based originally upon its indigenous peoples.” The symbolic significance of this reform lay in the fact that it was the first time indigenous peoples had been mentioned in the constitution at all (de la Peña 2011: 308-309).

However in practice, these reforms have done very little as the collective rights of indigenous groups remain unrecognised within the liberal constitutional order that privileges individual rights and freedoms (de la Peña 1995: 131). Collective concerns were not addressed until 2001 when many aspects of the San Andrés Accords were included in the constitution, and 2004 when congress passed the *General Law of Linguistic Rights* and the federal government replaced the INI with the CDI, although these changes are perceived by many to be too tepid for effective change of indigenous

rights in Mexico (de la Peña 2011: 308).⁷⁶ Not by coincidence, the 1990s also saw the beginning of the implementation of Neoliberal reforms to the Mexican economy under the presidency of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), who reformed Article 27 of the constitution, effectively ending land redistribution, and allowing for the privatisation of communally held land by many indigenous groups (de la Peña 1995: 131).⁷⁷ These seemingly contradictory processes of the legal recognition of indigenous rights and their economic destabilization through legal and constitutional changes have been persistently continued throughout the 2000s.

In Oaxaca, conceptualisations of indigeneity have not always accorded with articulations at the national level. John Chance (1978) has argued, for example, that unlike other states like Chiapas, where a caste-like divide between *indigenas* and *mestizos* persisted well into the early twentieth century, in Oaxaca by the late eighteenth century a class-based form of social stratification had emerged as the region was incorporated into systems of commercial capitalism. Despite this apparent class-like stratification, Oaxaca's ethnic diversity persisted with force. In the imaginations of the Oaxacan elite in the late nineteenth century, neither assimilation nor the concept of *mestizaje* itself were topics of concern, but rather they sought to ground a particularly Oaxacan legitimacy in the specificities of a Zapotec historical past and visual and material present (Poole 2011:184-188).

⁷⁶ The San Andrés Accords are the agreements reached between the EZLN and the Mexican government in 1996, which established five points of indigenous rights in Mexico. See Stephen (2002: 328-335) for a detailed discussion of the San Andrés Accords and their relationship to Oaxacan indigenous rights and movements.

⁷⁷ Land redistribution was a central part of the agrarian reform programme, one of the touchstone programmes of the PRI's post-Revolutionary national agenda. Agrarian reform was constitutionally established under the presidency of Lazaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, and worked through the system of *ejido* parcelling, which redistributed land seized from large landowners and the Catholic Church and granted communal access for agriculture to communities throughout Mexico, although the state ultimately owned the property rights (Stephen 1997: 41, n.1). San Martín was the recipient of some ejidal land, although it is of poor quality and quite unproductive. See Stephen (1997) for a detailed discussion of the political effects of the *ejido* programme and the amendment to Article 27 in Oaxaca.

After the Revolution, Oaxacan intellectuals, facing threats of cessation from various regions of the state, shifted from the focus on Zapotec cultural legitimacy to “make diversity itself the consensual basis of a unified Oaxacan identity” (ibid: 188). Unlike Mexican national discourses of the time, which tended to amalgamate ethnic difference under the rubric of indigeneity, the Oaxacan elite and state built an alternative reading by creatively appropriating national discourses and programmes in order to emphasise Oaxaca’s exceptional status within the Mexican nation. The symbolic and discursive emphasis on the state’s cultural diversity reformulated the mestizo urban centre of Oaxaca City as a place where this diversity was materially and visually comingled and valorised through cultural display. One notable example was the pageantry of the *Homenaje Racial* celebration, the precursor of today’s annual Guelaguetza festival (Poole 2011: 188-191; see below). This purportedly synergetic relationship between Oaxaca City and the eight regions has remained an important symbolic and organisational genre within official discourses at the state level (Poole 2009: 6-10).

Although diversity amongst indigenous groups has been more recognised in Oaxacan discourses than national ones, the line between indigenous and mestizo has remained an important organising principle for ethnic and racial categories in the state. Language continues to be a default diagnostic of indigeneity in Oaxaca, along with other observable indicators of cultural difference, which have become part of the standard “laundry list” of traits that have set the line between indigenous and non-indigenous. These include features such as dress, community political organisation, *tequio*, *guelaguetza* and subsistence agriculture (Cook and Joo 1995: 34, 36; Stephen 2005: 29-34; Brulotte 2009: 463). This culture-content line of reasoning has been so entrenched, that groups or communities that do not clearly demonstrate these indicators

of indigeneity have often been redefined as peasants in both popular and academic imaginations, and thus treated to an analytic of class rather than other modes of identification (Mallón 1992: 36; Wade 1997: 41). At the same time, communities that do meet these criteria for indigeneity, especially where indigenous languages are spoken, have been unquestioningly labelled as indigenous, without taking into consideration whether this type of identification is relevant to community members at all (cf. Castañeda 2004; Schmal 2007). This approach has served to reify even more the *indígena*-mestizo binary for elites and academics, while at the same time obscured cultural and linguistic differences amongst indigenous and other non-mestizo groups (Stephen 1999; L. Lewis 2000).

Recent anthropological work on ethnicity in Oaxaca's Valles Centrales region has provided a more nuanced picture of indigeneity than that previously assumed by national and Oaxacan state perspectives. This research has raised questions about what the analytical use of categories like "Zapotec" and "indigenous" has reified and even obscured in the anthropology of Oaxaca (e.g. Nagengast and Kearny 1990; Stephen 1993; Whitecotton 1996; Brulotte 2009; and outside the Valles Centrales Feinberg 2003). Scott Cook and Jong-Taick Joo's methodical investigation of economics and ethnicity in the Valles Centrales found that most of the "nonlanguage forms of ethnocultural expression" of Zapotec-speaking communities were of equal importance in monolingual Spanish speaking communities, and that historical and community-based identities were equally shared by both mestizos and Zapotec-speakers (1995: 36). Further, they found no indication that ethnic categories, while recognised in the abstract, were asserted for oneself, or used to categorise others:

“In neither group is a specific ethnic identity systematically asserted at the intervillage or regional level. Identities built around class, residence, occupation, or citizenship rather than around language-marked ethnicity have more importance outside the village. Valley Zapotecs and mestizos tend not to refer to each other (or to themselves) in direct ethnic terms like *mestizo*, *indio*, *indígena*, or *Zapoteco*, although it is not uncommon for mestizo urbanites to use the term *indio* as a categorical pejorative for all peasants or members of the rural working class... Moreover, valley Zapotec-speakers, at least until recently, have not typically used the generic term *Zapoteco* to refer to their indigenous ancestors. They refer to them in Spanish simply as “*nuestros antepasados*” (our ancestors)” (ibid: 36-37).

The one exception to this pattern in the communities surveyed by Cook and Joo was Teotitlán del Valle, the Zapotec-speaking textile-producing community that is, like San Martín, at the centre of Oaxaca’s cultural tourism program, where “the celebration of being Zapotec now goes hand in hand with exceptional success in tourist-oriented and capitalist-organized weaving”(Cook and Joo 1995: 37).

Recent investigations such as Cook and Joo’s into the problem of indigeneity in the Valles Centrales helps to contextualise other studies from Oaxaca, that focus on *campesinos* (peasants), within a discussion of identity rather than class, showing that explanations of belonging have been historically more focused on community membership or culture-based notions of *campesinismo* (peasanthood) rather than class or ethnicity (Kearney 1996: 15-22; Cohen 1999). Community-based identity, for example, is often highlighted and brought to the fore by frequent tensions with neighbouring communities over land, rather than ethno-linguistic groupings throughout the Valles Centrales (Dennis 1987: 95-109). However, it should be noted that even communitarian-level identities in Oaxaca are not always persuasive; recent survey work has shown that land tenure structures, state relations and a long-standing sense of political autonomy in some communities have meant that individualist identities and goals sometimes supersede communal prerogatives (Eisenstadt 2011: 54-71).

Despite the apparent contradictions in Oaxacan identities that seem to both crystallise and dissolve at the level of community, these are not necessarily experienced by people themselves as disjunction or contradiction. As will be explored below, this is possible precisely because communal belonging in Oaxaca is often mediated through an “affective attachment to *place* through which genealogical belonging is expressed” (Poole 2009: 203; my emphasis). As Wade has noted, ethnicity often uses a language of place which creates a cultural topography of difference (1997: 18). Topographies of difference allow for various gradients and combinations of hues of belonging to be mixed together in different ways, depending on one’s location at a given time, meaning that belonging is better understood as fluid and context dependant, rather than static and enduring.

Observations about identities in the Valles Centrales being built around occupation, citizenship and especially residence resonate in a general sense with what I found in San Martín. The village would be categorised according to Cook and Joo’s language-based schema as “mestizo,” because less than 30 percent of Tileños speak Zapotec (cf. Cook and Joo 1995: 40). In fact, the only person originally from San Martín who spoke any Zapotec during my fieldwork was a very old woman, estimated by her family members to be about 93 years old. The other bilingual Zapotec speakers in the village had married-in from other communities. Many members of the older generation (from their late 60s-onward) recalled that their parents had spoken *some* Zapotec, but explained that this was often in conversations amongst themselves and never directly to their children or in public. Many people told me of Catholic priests from the 1940s through the 1960s who forbid Zapotec from being used in their school classes, indicating that at least some Zapotec was used by Tileños at this point.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ San Martín’s first public school was not established until 1973 (Serrano Oswald, 2010: 149)

Apart from Zapotec language use, San Martín does exhibit many of the standard characteristics that are generally thought of as indicators of indigeneity in southern Mexico. As described in Chapters One and Four, it is an autonomous political municipality based on a system of usos y costumbres, rather than party-based electoral politics, in which political positions are achieved by married adult males through the completion of successive hierarchically-ranked cargos and communal tequio projects, labour exchange between households, known as *guelaguetza* is regularly practised for family and community level fiestas. *Compadrazgo* (ritual co-parenthood) is usually established at all Catholic life-cycle events, a practice shared by many indigenous and non-indigenous Mexicans alike.⁷⁹ Marriage continues to be frequently endogamous within the village (including young men who return from the United States to marry), but this has never been absolute. When marriages between San Martín residents and non-Tileño Oaxacans occur, Tileño women generally move to the community of their spouse, while non-Tileño women tend to move to San Martín, replicating the continuing practice of living in the husband's parents' home for at least a few years after marriage. While San Martín has much in common with the ways of life in neighbouring Zapotec-speaking and "transitional" towns, such as Santa Cecilia Jalieza and Santo Tomás Jalieza (Cook and Joo 1995: 40), it in some ways shares much more with Teotitlán del Valle, located on the other side of Oaxaca City.

Although experiencing cultural or ethnic difference may be the main reason tourists visit Oaxaca and other locales marketed as sites of "ethnic tourism" (Brulotte 2009: 457; Graburn 1989; Smith 1989; van den Berghe 1994), involvement in ethnic tourism also provides locals with new ways of conceptualising belonging. As Walter Little notes for Maya craft vendors in Guatemala: "International tourism has contributed

⁷⁹ Many authors have explored these institutions in Oaxaca; see Stephen 2005, Cohen 1999 in particular for detailed descriptions of these institutions in other communities in the Valles Centrales

a larger palette and more colors from which Maya vendors can construct, maintain, and reflect on their identities as vendors, Mayas, and *indígenas*” (Little 2004a: 11). In San Martín too, involvement in the cultural tourism industry has provided new conceptual options from which Tileños actively construct their own characterisations of indigeneity, the processes of which I explore in the next section.

Constructing belonging through ethnic art and tourism imaginaries

Although popular and touristic imaginaries about indigeneity in Oaxaca, like elsewhere, suggest that to be indigenous is also to be traditional, for Tileños, an interest in indigeneity in any form is something new. It has only been recently that some Tileños have had any interest in questions of indigenous or Zapotec culture, and this interest is especially strong for those who are directly involved in the production and marketing of woodcarvings. This appears to be a logical response to the “cultural tourism” paradigm that is promoted in Oaxaca, and the “ethnic art” paradigm promoted both in Mexico and abroad that links essentialised or named identities of producers to the objects that they produce through discourses of “authenticity” (MacCannell 1976; Myers 2005; Tiffany 2006: 149-150; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 26-28). However, I argue that in the case of San Martín, the employment of indigeneity as a hue of belonging is experienced as a kind of modernising move, where those who acknowledge the “truth” about San Martín’s culture and past simultaneously position their indigeneity in cosmopolitan terms of “understanding.”

As previously addressed, in 2009 I joined Miguel, Daniela and Pedro on their trip to Arizona. This was the third year Miguel had been invited by the Western National Parks Association (WNPA) to give demonstrations and sell his work at the WNPA’s main store and gallery. The store sells books, toys, jewellery, and art and craft

items that relate to the natural and social histories of the American Southwest. While the range of the topics covered in the books and guides was large, they were, for the most part, popular publications that were unambiguously divided into sections on nature and the environment, European settler histories and Native American histories and contemporary life. The store also provides pamphlets and maps of the region's national parks, as well as hosts a variety of educational and cultural events, almost always relating in some way to the over-arching theme of the Southwest as a place of settlers and Indians.

The content of the demonstration that Miguel gave to the crowd of about twenty-five people was more or less the same as that given to tourists who visit his workshop in San Martín. However, he glossed over steps of the production process that he regarded as less interesting, and focused specifically on the carving and painting of the pieces. Like the demonstrations in his workshop, Miguel began by explaining that the village he comes from is called San Martín Tilcajete: "In the Zapotec language, Tilcajete means black *cajete*, or ink pot." While using his machete to remove some bark from a small log of wood, he went on to explain that the wood used to make the pieces is called *copal*, a desert tree native to Oaxaca, which has been used for thousands of years as incense in rituals and ceremonies. After passing the fresh-smelling bark around, Miguel briefly showed how the basic shape of a figure is formed with the machete. The machete, he explained, is a normal tool in his village, much like a hammer for American men. "We use it for all kinds of work in our homes and in the fields, like cutting cactuses or corn." After the demonstration Miguel concluded and asked if anyone had any questions. Like the presentations in his workshop, most spectators wanted him to look up their "Zapotec birthday" in the book on the Mesoamerican calendar system he had brought along. While he was looking up the birthday of a woman in her late sixties,

she asked him, “What tribe did you say you’re from, dear?” Without a pause, Miguel smiled and answered, “Zapotec.”

This exchange between Miguel and the woman caught me by surprise; while I had many times heard Miguel talk about Zapotecness in terms of cultural attributes, I had never heard him describe himself as part of a “tribe” before, which seemed to me out of place in reference to “the Zapotec.” In fact, although Miguel consistently referred to Zapotec culture and his feelings of being indigenous, he never connected this state of “having indigenous culture” to belonging to a specific group, as in “tribe” in United States, or “ethno-linguistic group” by many dominant Mexican and Oaxacan conceptualisations. Partially, Miguel’s framing of Zapotecness in terms of “tribal belonging” in this context works to make his demonstration more intelligible for the North American consumers, whose understandings of indigenous belonging are often articulated in the language of “tribes” and “bands.” Further, this framing also makes sense within the paradigms of ethnic art, which link the authenticity of the artwork to its authentic grounding in a cultural *community* (Bright 1995a: 5). This demonstration of indigeneity, which served to enhance the already-exotic aura of the woodcarvings, was clearly a touristic performance given by Miguel with the intention of selling his work. His performance itself was made more authentic for its audience by its location in a not-for-profit institution associated with the American federal government that provides authoritative explanations to the public about Native North American lifeways. Miguel’s declaration of his indigenous identity, and his difference from his American audience, was reaffirmed to the clients through every step of the demonstration; by being from a village with a Zapotec name, his skilled handling of a machete, the references to the ancient Zapotec civilization, et cetera.

The connection that anthropologists have made between “authenticity” and touristic performances such as these, often address to what extent they fulfil tourists’ desires to experience the “really real” (Handler and Saxton 1988: 245). Dean MacCannell’s widely influential usage of Irving Goffman’s front and back stages to suggest that touristic performance is a form of “staged authenticity” (1976: 91-107)⁸⁰ has led to insightful and nuanced insights about what tourists are really searching for when they seek “authentic experiences,” and how those experiences are provided to them (e.g. Van den Berghe 1994; Steiner 2001). Examples abound in the literature of people creating “authentic” moments for tourists, from Maya handicraft vendors hiding radios and calculators (Little 2004b: 50) to African mask dealers planting and then “discovering” pieces in old dusty trunks in villages outside of the city for the benefit of collectors (Steiner 1995: 155-156). There has been, to date, less research done on how these performances are made authentic or “really real” for the performers themselves. Miguel is acutely aware that not everyone is convinced by his claims to indigenous connections for his work. As Ronda Brulotte has shown in the case of replica artifact vendors at Monte Albán, the uncertain definitions of indigeneity and their attending politics in the Valles Centrales often leads to confusion and sometimes defensiveness regarding these claims (Brulotte 2009: 465-466).

This uncertainty was made clear to me in Arizona when I met an old friend of Miguel’s, an American a woman named Ellen who had spent many years living in Oaxaca. Standing off to one side, away from the bustle of the customers and WNPA staff, Ellen commented on Miguel’s attire. While Miguel always wore blue jeans, black shoes, and a white *típica* (“traditional”) shirt during a regular workday in Oaxaca, in Arizona he had chosen to wear *traje*, traditional clothing associated with indigenous culture in Oaxaca and Mexico more generally, accompanied by *huaraches*, or leather

⁸⁰ “Staged” in both meanings of the term – as in “put on for show”, but also “in stages”.

sandals. Ellen asked me what I thought of him using Huichol traditional dress to sell his products.⁸¹ I answered that I thought it was the costume that the boys from San Martín wear while performing their traditional dance, the *Danza de la Pluma*.⁸² She said she knew it wasn't because she knows all about the *Danza* from time she had spent in Teotitlán del Valle. When I suggested that perhaps the costume in San Martín was different than that of Teotitlán, she paused and said, "maybe... but we both know Miguel doesn't speak Zapotec." I took this to mean that Miguel wasn't *really* Zapotec in Ellen's mind because unlike her acquaintances in Teotitlán he didn't speak the Zapotec language; he was just donning Zapotec-ness for the customers who were there to buy his woodcarvings.⁸³

Ellen's comment regarding Miguel's *traje* might be read as the other side of the authenticity coin; what Edward Bruner has called the tourist's "questioning gaze" (2005: 95) in that she called his claims to indigeneity into question through her own knowledge of Oaxaca that she gained through her interactions with Teotitlán textile producers. Her "questioning gaze" is, of course, a performance in itself, separating her from Miguel's customers. However, this line of analysis does not tell us what the performers themselves may think of performing indigeneity. When I later mentioned this conversation to Miguel, he became very annoyed and said, "sometimes people don't understand the difference between culture and language. Just because I tell people about culture rather than just do it doesn't make it false. But Ellen should know better. She's seen our home, she knows we come from Tilcajete, she should know that although we don't speak Zapotec, we *are* Zapotec."

⁸¹ The Huichol or Wixáritari are an indigenous group from West-Central Mexico.

⁸² The Conquest Dance associated with Central Valley Zapotec culture – see below.

⁸³ I decided not to push this discussion further with Ellen on this occasion, because I was aware that we could easily be overheard by any of the customers or WNPA staff, which I believed could have caused problems.

Bruner suggests that anthropologists should take touristic performances seriously as moments for anthropological enquiry because dividing touristic performances off from the “real life” of performers is to assume that an action is somehow less authentic by virtue of the fact that it has an audience. Instead, he argues that analysts should consider touristic performances as part of the acts of everyday life through which people construct notions of who they are: “to put it another way, performance is constitutive” (ibid: 5). While I have framed this expression of Zapotecness as performance, Miguel himself, like the Native American tour guides described by Alexis Bunten (2008), calls this “sharing culture.” Bunten argues that through their work of sharing culture with outsiders, Alaskan Tlingit tour guides develop what she calls a “commodified persona,” that is “a set of beliefs and practices in which an individual chooses to construct a marketable identity product while striving to avoid alienating him- or her-self” (2008: 381). She challenges simplistic critiques that characterise these processes of identity construction as merely “impression management,” or “selling-out,” arguing that the creation of commodified personas involves agency and emotional labour on the part of the guides, and that these forms of identity construction are actually quite common in the current period of late capitalism (ibid).⁸⁴

Like all other forms of belonging, commodified personas are produced within the tensions of historical structure and agency. They must at some level conform to, or at least address, clients’ expectations which are drawn from popular media, national discourses, and other tourism experiences, in order to succeed in their purpose of providing tourists with an experience that is understandable (and therefore consumable) to them. This explains Miguel’s smooth response to the woman who asked what tribe he

⁸⁴ She cites airline attendants, “gangsta” rappers and television personalities like Oprah Winfrey as examples.

was from; although he knew very well that “tribe” is not really the best way to categorise the idea “Zapotec,” he also knew that what the woman was really looking for was an ethnic label to pin on him; one he happily provided. Thus, the commodified personas of the Tileño artisans that choose to market their products on a basis of Zapotecness, or other identities like *campesinos* or “traditional craftspeople,” are best understood as co-productions between artisans and other members of the community of practice, in much the same way that I described the aesthetics of the carvings themselves in Chapter Three (cf. Myers 2005: 105-109).

For Miguel and Catalina, their touristic performances developed over the past fifteen years, during which time they frequently travelled to art and craft fairs throughout the United States and Mexico; dealt with wholesalers and other artisans knowledgeable in the marketing of “ethnic art,” and ethnicity; and themselves have been tourists in other cultural tourism destinations. Through these experiences, they came to learn not only about the aesthetics of ethnic art, but also have reflected on how these aesthetics might relate to their own sense of belonging to an indigenous community. While one important characteristic, and indeed utility, of a commodified persona is that it can be “compartmentalized to the workplace” (Bunten 2008: 382), for Miguel and Catalina these experiences not only informed their work-time practices, but also how they conceive of themselves and their community. As Catalina told me in an interview, “before, we didn’t know who we were. No, it’s more than that, we didn’t even think about who we were. I want my daughter to know who she is. I want her to be proud that she is *indígena*. This is why we never use the term *indio*.” In Mexico, “*indio*” (Indian), which continues to be used in popular publications and language, carries a pejorative tone that people are acutely aware of, often simultaneously referencing ethnicity (or race) and class. Intellectuals and activists have promoted the

use of terms like “*indígena*” (indigenous), or “*pueblos originarios*” (first peoples) as acceptable alternatives (Cook and Joo 1995: 33 n.1; de la Peña 2005: 718).⁸⁵ Catalina’s explanation that she did not want her daughter to be ashamed of being an “indio,” but proud to be an “*indígena*” resonates with the politics of some indigenous activists in Oaxaca, although Catalina, like most other artisans in San Martín vehemently oppose any radical identity politics whose actions put the tourism industry they depend on at risk.

Instead of a real discourse of indigenous rights, Catalina’s desire that her family be proud to be *indígenas* can be understood through a specific kind of cosmopolitanism and modernity that is prevalent within the ethnic art and tourism worlds they frequently deal in. This cosmopolitanism is embedded in the larger social processes that increasingly recognise cultural citizenship based on difference, and crystallise within the ethnic art world through an “affective economy” where individuals derive status from their knowledge of and respect for cultural and ethnic difference, which is often legitimised through discourses of “connoisseurship” (Myers 2006; Coffey 2010: 298; 303-304). The ideas that Catalina and Miguel espouse about “respect for indigenous cultures,” a theme I heard them speak about with frequency, draws more fundamentally from popular (often romantic) notions of indigeneity than from the politics and agendas of the different organisations engaged in public debate over the meanings and content of indigeneity in Oaxaca. Indeed, the private (i.e. non-workshop) areas of Miguel and Catalina’s home are filled with books, National Geographic magazines and videos describing cultural practices and art of indigenous groups from all over the Americas, publications which promote a particularly aestheticised and romantic image of contemporary indigenous lifeworlds (cf. Lutz and Collins 1993). These aestheticised

⁸⁵ Although some indigenous activists have also reappropriated the term in order to resist state and elite drive *indigenista* politics (de la Peña 2005: 718).

images connect easily to Miguel and Catalina's own aesthetic project with the woodcarvings, and through their consumption, they feel connected to the people and cultures represented. Catalina recounted to me how once a Navajo man had come to their workshop: "He spoke to the *muchachos* about the history of the *indígenas* and about our culture that we share. We were very proud to have him in our home."⁸⁶

Miguel and Catalina's feelings of indigeneity, while surely initiated and informed by their interactions with tourists must be understood as genuine responses to *their* experiences of indigeneity in the ethnic art and tourist worlds. Their relatively economically secure situation means that they do not experience many of the negative consequences of being indigenous in contemporary Oaxaca. Instead, their interactions with middle class consumers who value indigenous aesthetics and culture has allowed them to "dip into" this hue of belonging, which connects them to a larger world populated with indigenous people who they believe are like themselves. While their notions of indigeneity are based partially on tourists' expectations, it is also a project that they continue for its own sake, for what it offers them and their children in terms of feelings of belonging and self-confidence.

Miguel and Catalina are not the only ones in San Martín who are increasingly interested in exploring indigeneity as a form of belonging, but not everyone uses the same creative manner that they exhibit through their touristic performances and projects of self-fashioning. For some Tileños, belonging is more earnestly connected to concepts of indigeneity that are grounded in the historical trajectory of San Martín particularly, rather than generalised understandings of what it means to be indigenous. In the next section, I explore how the hue of indigeneity is used in a significantly different way by

⁸⁶ "Muchachos": young people; the carvers and painters employed at her workshop.

other actors in San Martín, which neither complement nor directly contradict Miguel and Catalina's constructions of belonging.

The aura of culture and history: Contesting indigeneities in San Martín

In 2009, San Martín's *Danza de la Pluma* (Dance of the Feathers) was finally accepted, after many years of hard work, to be performed in the annual state-sponsored Guelaguetza festival in Oaxaca City. The modern festival has its roots in the *Homenaje Racial* ("Racial Homage") held in Oaxaca in 1932 by Governor Francisco López Cortez in celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the founding of the city of Oaxaca. The main event of the Guelaguetza is the "Lunes del Cerro" (Mondays on the Hill) when the traditional dances representing Oaxaca's official eight cultural regions are performed for the Governor and a paying audience at Oaxaca City's Auditorio Guelaguetza. For the young dancers who make up the regional delegations, an invitation to dance at the Guelaguetza is "both an opportunity to pursue careers as cultural performers and a means to establish politically crucial ties to representatives of the Oaxacan state" (Poole 2009: 210-211; 214-215).

Performances in the official Guelaguetza must first be authorised by the powerful Committee of Authenticity, which is made up of twelve senior folklorists who travel the state in the months preceding the Guelaguetza to hold auditions. Their task, according to one of the committee members, is "to take care [*cuidar*] that the delegations really present themselves with the authenticity and dignity of their ethnic group" (cited in Poole 2009: 215). The fact that the Committee of Authenticity exists, and calls itself by this name highlights the ways that the state itself is intimately involved in not only the promotion of tourism to Oaxaca, but with the construction of what is truly and essentially Oaxacan.

On a sunny day in early March 2009, the Committee of Authenticity arrived in San Martín to judge the Tileño dance group's performance. The *Danza de la Pluma* is a conquest dance that tells the story of the arrival of the Spanish to the Americas and their battles with the Aztec empire and its emperor Moctezuma. In the official Guelaguetza discourse, it is the traditional dance of the Valley Zapotecs, and represents the Valles Centrales region of the state. Before the performance began, Agustín Flores, the son of an artisan and the unofficial leader of the dance group, gave a short presentation about what made San Martín's Danza both authentic and unique.



Figure 29: The Danza de la Pluma performed for the Feast of Saint Martin in San Martín's churchyard

In his presentation, Agustín emphasized certain details of the choreography that were not performed in other communities, but the main focus of his speech was on the fact that San Martín's Danza was grounded in *history*. As a languages student at the “Benito Juárez” Autonomous University of Oaxaca, Agustín spent much of his free time

researching the histories of Oaxaca and San Martín both in the library and online.⁸⁷ He emphasized that many other *Danzas* eventually showed Moctezuma defeating the Europeans, but that the performance they were about to see was unique, because it tells the true story of the Conquest, and in the end, the Europeans defeat Moctezuma.

Agustín also presented the committee with a Spanish translation he had done himself of the first chapter of Christina Elson's (2007) *Excavations at Cerro Tilcajete*, an archaeological volume on one of the pre-Hispanic Tilcajete sites, which thoroughly impressed the committee. He went on to say that he believed that at the time that the Spanish arrived, the Ocotlán arm of the Valles Centrales had been under Aztec imperial control, and that is why the *Danza* tells the story of Moctezuma, the Aztec emperor, rather than a story of the Zapotecs. As evidence of this, he mentioned that many place-names in the area were derived from Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs), rather than Zapotec.⁸⁸ After the speech, the dancers began a fifteen-minute arrangement of the key movements of the *Danza*, which at village fiestas normally takes over 3 hours to perform.⁸⁹ After some deliberation, the Committee of Authenticity met with the dancers and their parents to tell them that they had indeed decided to invite the Tileño *Danza de la Pluma* to the Guelaguetza, and after a brief reception with the group and the municipal authority, promptly left to return to Oaxaca City.

Later the same week, Agustín told me that Miguel, whose son is one of the dancers, had not been pleased with the presentation because he had claimed San Martín was Aztec as well as Zapotec. But Agustín thought Miguel was the one in error: "I understand he wants to be proud of being Zapotec; I am proud too, but many of the

⁸⁷ Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca (UABJO)

⁸⁸ Interestingly, Agustín's emphasis on the *success* of the Aztec empire appears to go against the Oaxacan *Indigenista* discourse of the early 20th century that emphasised the *resistance* of the Zapotecs to Aztec domination (cf: Poole 2009: 210)

⁸⁹ Alan's father told me when he was a dancer the *Danza* took five hours, but no one now wants to watch them for five hours, so they cut it to three.

things he says can't even be proven! I have spent so much time in the library, so I know what's true." Unlike Miguel and Catalina's image of indigeneity, which is grounded in a timeless conception of a general pre-Hispanic past, Agustín's focus on "accuracy" attaches his explanation of indigeneity to the specific time of history. Both temporal forms seek to claim authentic indigeneity for contemporary Tileños, but do not agree on what kind of indigeneity that is, or indeed what constitutes confirmation or corroboration of this identity. Miguel and Catalina's use of a generic indigenous past allows them to creatively draw on many resources through which they fashion a coherent identity that claims indigeneity to be about previous occupancy of the Americas in general and about shared traits and experiences among indigenous peoples today. Agustín, in contrast, draws on specific evidence, such as histories, books, and archaeology, to base Tileños' ethnic indigeneity in San Martín as a specific place that is indigenous because of events and processes that happened in the location of San Martín in the past. To put it another way, both Agustín and Miguel's "hues" of indigeneity are based on feelings of shared origins with other indigenous peoples; where they differ is exactly which others they share origins with.

Despite the fact that they do not agree on definitions, Agustín and Miguel do agree that San Martín is an indigenous place, and therefore its residents are collectively indigenous subjects. Yet both of their positions continue to be *about* indigeneity, which is a hue of belonging that only recently has had salience in San Martín. Although many Tileños (especially of the younger generations) are now interested in exploring how and in what ways indigeneity may be relevant to them, this interest happens alongside other modes of belonging that Tileños' enact and use in different situations and contexts. In the following section I consider the ways that San Martín as a *Tileño* place,

rather than an *indigenous* place, is central to ongoing processes of belonging which connect Tileños to one another and to their community.

The hue of home: place and belonging in San Martín

One of the first things people told me when I began my fieldwork in 2008 was that as an anthropologist I would be interested to see the ruins that are located above the town on the nearby hillside. Current research shows the Tilcajete site “El Mogote” had been the second-largest occupation in the Valles Centrales during the pre-Monte Albán period (before 500 BC). Later, during its resistance to the expansion of the Monte Albán state into the Ocotlán valley, the population moved to a more defensible point on the ridge at the “El Palenque” site, until they were finally defeated in the first century BC, when Monte Albán destroyed the temples and palace and subsequently established a subordinate administrative centre at “Cerro Tilcajete” in the Monte Albán II period (100 BC-AD 200) (Flannery and Marcus 2007: *x-xi*). As no written evidence for the pre-Hispanic place-names exist, these site names reflect Tileños’ own names for the three sites that have always had significance in local geographies and folktales.

Archaeological investigations began above San Martín in 1993, as part of the large scale and long term study into the prehistory and human ecology of the Valley of Oaxaca, focused mainly on understanding the founding, development and regional dominance by Monte Albán, one of the earliest “state-level” societies in the Americas, which is organised by the University of Michigan (*ibid*). Nine field seasons have taken place since 1993, focused on all three of the major Tilcajete sites, and resulting in a number of archaeological technical publications, the most recent being *Excavations at Cerro Tilcajete* (Elson 2007) which Agustín had used in his presentation to the Guelaguetza Committee of Authenticity. Indeed, the archaeologists’ descriptions of the

Tilcajete sites have at some point entered Tileños' own understandings of the past; a few people mentioned with pride that *los antiguos* (the ancients) had resisted the expansion of Monte Albán.

By local accounts, the University of Michigan archaeologists approached the community assembly for permission to begin excavations after securing their permits from the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH).⁹⁰ I was told that at the original meeting, some attendees had expressed interest in receiving help to establish a community museum, as they were aware that Teotitlán and other villages had success with their museums, and thought that the local archaeology might attract wider interest than just craft production. By the time of my research, this plan had not come to fruition, but many people still expressed interest in the possibility of creating a museum in the future.

In early January 2009, I was at the home of Rufino Pérez waiting for a meeting of the executive committee of Artesanos del Pueblo to begin. As usual, it was already fifteen minutes past the arranged hour, and only Victor Castillo and I had arrived. Victor appeared agitated that everyone was late, and asked Rufino if he could add something to the evening's agenda, which was mostly concerning sponsorship for the craft fair they were organising for Holy Week. When I asked him what he wanted to add to the agenda, he brusquely passed me some pages of paper. On the papers were washed out print-offs of photos that I immediately recognised as archaeological dig sites. "Are these from San Martín?" I asked. "Yes, the archaeologists are going to come back this summer," he replied. The previous year, my first summer in San Martín, the archaeologists had not come for the field season, and people had speculated if they were

⁹⁰ *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH)*

going to return or not. Once everyone arrived at the meeting, Rufino asked Victor if he would like to speak first.

Victor passed around the pictures and said that he had just been talking to the municipal president, who had informed him that he was planning to extend the archaeologists' permission to excavate the Tilcajete sites, after he raised the issue at the next community assembly meeting. Victor thought that this could be their chance to find out what happened to the pieces the archaeologists had taken from San Martín. Some of the other committee members expressed worry that if they caused problems for the archaeologists they might leave; they always hired their crew from the men of the village, and this income was important to many young families. Victor agreed, but added "look, this is more important than a few *pesitos* (little pesos). Those things are from San Martín, and we don't even know where they are. Probably some *extranjero* [foreigner] has taken them home for his collection."

In the following weeks, the subject of the archaeologists was a popular theme amongst the artisans and everyone else in the village. At first I had assumed that the ambivalence I encountered in these discussions was similar to that experienced by Lisa Breglia's Maya informants who live and work near major archaeological sites in Mexico's Yucatán peninsula (2006). Breglia locates their ambivalence in the tensions that were caused as two different regimes of rights came into conflict: the local community's own traditional and legal rights of communal ownership of their land and the conceptualisation of patrimony that is central to the discourse of heritage conservation. Patrimony, as promoted by Mexican national institutions such as INAH, and global ones such as UNESCO, redefines ownership rights over heritage sites by asserting that by virtue of their unique characteristics, they belong to all citizens of the

nation or of the world (Breglia 2006: 31-35). As Breglia argues, tensions and ambivalences arise because as the logics of patrimony play out, the result is, “that which is everybody’s is nobody’s” (ibid: 208).

However very few of my informants in San Martín seemed particularly worried about the sites *per se*. To my surprise, they were much more interested in talking about what the archaeologists were doing in the present than in abstract interpretations of the past or concerns about rights of access in the future. Some expressed regret that they had not been able to use the sites to attract more tourism, but reasonably believed that most tourists would not want to hike up the cactus-covered hillside above the village. Others, like Victor, aired their suspicions about the location of the many treasures that they were sure had been taken from the ground. Frequently, these conversations led to my friends digging around in their back rooms or under furniture to find broken pieces of pots or the human-shaped figurines that had been dug out of the ground over the years by ploughs in the fields or children while they were out herding goats in the hills. A few suggested maybe I knew some foreigners who would want to buy pieces like these, but most said they kept them because they were curious objects from the past. Many people told me that if I wanted to find more figurines, the best place to look was near the hill of “María Sánchez.” The men who worked for the archaeologists reportedly said that they mostly only found broken pots at the site, and many Tileños wondered why the archaeologists did not look near María Sánchez to find more figurines for themselves.

María Sánchez is a large distinctive hill that dominates the horizon behind San Martín (see Figure 1, p. 18). It is the focal point of many Tileño folktales, in which it is described generally as an enchanted place where goats and dogs may disappear, and

children may encounter the mysterious and ambivalent figure of María Sánchez, for whom the hill is named. Doña Francisca, a grandmother in her seventies, told me that even still boys in the village climb María Sánchez on the Feast of San Juan (August 29th), the day the hill is known to be at its most enchanted. On this night, she told me, from the village one might see ghostly *danzantes* (dancers) appear on top of the hill; she noted I might see them from my window as my room at Miguel and Catalina's faced the western edge of the village, nearest to the foot of the hill. Smiling, she told me "It's just a story... but at the same time it's not just a story, because once in a while it comes true."

Many other locations in San Martín's small municipality have many folktales associated with them, including the archaeological sites, but also locations known as *El Pie de Moctezuma* (Moctezuma's Foot), and *El Cerro de los Duendes* (the Hill of the Sprites). Usually, when someone tells a story relating to these places, the protagonist is a remembered family member from the past, such as a grandparent or an older uncle or aunt. I was visiting with Doña Rubiela one afternoon in her daughter's small workshop when her grandchildren came running in from school, clearly excited. Smiling, she told me that the children had been excited since the previous day because the neighbour's daughter had seen a *duende* near the middle school, located on the south-western edge of the village. Doña Rubiela went on to explain that ever since the middle school was built, there had been many more *duende* sightings in San Martín. This was because the *duendes* had been hiding on that edge of town ever since they had been evicted from the Cerro de los Duendes by her grandmother's generation. They had done this, Doña Rubiela told me, because all the children would disappear to play with the *duendes* when they were supposed to be tending their goats. In the end, the adults got tired of losing their goats and so fought a battle with the *duendes* to remove them from the land.

Doña Rubiela noted insightfully that was not unlike the past and current land conflicts with neighbouring municipalities.

According to Keith Basso, the Western Apache transform their landscape through the telling of stories into something resembling a theatre, so that moral and legitimising lessons become permanently at play in the landscape (Basso 1996: 66). Similarly, Tileños' engagements with the local geography through storytelling is part of how they distinguish themselves from outsiders, not only marking difference, but also connecting individuals to each other with the place of San Martín as a mediating factor, not just to one another as a community of people. The sites, as part of the mythical landscape of San Martín are more than just locations that stories refer to. Being familiar with this landscape is part of the knowledge Tileños share of their place, and this knowledge is considered by them an important part of defining who they are. This was demonstrated to me, for example, when I helped the Artesanos del Pueblo group reorganise their website. Although its main purpose was to publicise upcoming events, the members spent a much greater part of their time and energies photographing and narrating the mythical sites just mentioned. Each of the tales was written out in fine detail, and they insisted that I translated them to English so that, as Rufino told me, "everyone can know how we became who we are." While we were photographing the sites, Rufino reminisced of his childhood days spent with other boys his age herding their goats in the hills above the village. For him, the different features on the topography of the countryside were not discrete places where events had occurred in the past, but were rather part of the ongoing lived landscape of Tileño belonging.

Landscape also underpins the kin relations of the community. Families are often described not just by their surnames, but also by where their homes are. People will

distinguish, for example, amongst the families whose surname is Castillo as the “Castillos of *el centro* (the centre) and the Castillos of *el cerrito* (the little hill), or even the Castillos of *la carretera* (the highway). Maintaining this connection to the geography of San Martín remains important for migrants; many send a significant amount of resources home to build houses and maintain their standing in the cargo system, in order to maintain their connection and rights in the community.

Personal histories are also grounded in the local geography. Very frequently when passing through town in a *mototaxi*, or walking in the countryside, my informants would highlight locations that were part of their own life stories. An older woman, for example, light-heartedly lamented to me that it was a shame the archaeologists were digging up “El Mogote” because she was sure it was where she had conceived her first son, hastening the marriage to her husband. Specific events in the yearly calendar also join Tileños together as a community: the feast days of Saint Martin, celebrations of Holy Week and Christmas, as well as their own mini-Guelaguetza dance festival that is performed by the village’s youth dance troupe all provide moments of heightened cohesion, when Tileños’ belonging as a community is heightened, and everyone celebrates with one another.



Figure 30: Guelaguetza Festival in San Martín

Deborah Poole has described Oaxacan conceptualisations of cultural identity as created by a “genealogical imagination” (2009: 203), corresponding with my observations on how Tileños engage with the place of San Martín as a hue that colours their feelings of belonging. San Martín as a place links living people together via their past relatives and shared knowledge of the mythical and physical landscape, but not necessarily to an identification of indigeneity. In this context, it is clearly significant that the Spanish phrase “*el pueblo*” refers to both the village (the place) and the villagers who inhabit it (the people).⁹¹ Place-rooted identity is an extremely important register of identity for all Tileños, including those who also make claims to indigenous belonging: Agustín’s presentation to the Committee of Authenticity emphasized not just San Martín’s accurate *Danza de la Pluma*, but its accuracy vis-à-vis other communities where the *Danza* is performed. Miguel uses Tilcajete purported etymological roots as grounding for his own claim to indigeneity, as someone from a place with a Zapotec name. Of course, this focus on San Martín place as a basis for identity formation does

⁹¹ Members of the nation, the Mexican people, are also referred to as *el pueblo mexicano*.

not disallow the possibility that what is enacted is at times rooted in ethnicity; as Wade has noted, ethnicity often uses a language of place, as cultural difference is spread over geographical space, forming a cultural topography of difference (1997: 18).

Race and Class: Hues of ambiguity in Tileño belonging

Tileños are able to select from many hues of belonging in order to construct connections between themselves and others in the formation of what is often called “identity.” However, as much as Tileños are able to actively and creatively draw on different ideas and images, as many anthropologists have observed, identity is never entirely a process of one’s own crafting. Although personal and collective identities are always emergent and often highly performative, identity formation is never simply a matter of choice, but is based on pre-existing structures and relationships (Warren 2001: 99; Watanabe 1995: 36; Little 2004b). Tileños do not always have the opportunity to assert their own ways of understanding their belonging, and these moments too are essential to explain how these ideas are interpreted by the artisans with whom I worked.

In Arrazola, the other major woodcarving village, Ronda Brulotte found that artifact replica vendors who work at Monte Albán often play with concepts of indigeneity in ambiguous social spaces that “mark and unmark them as indigenous” (Brulotte 2009: 459), often asserting “*soy nativo de aquí*” (“I am native to here”), rather than directly claiming indigenous or Zapotec ethnicity. The ambiguous social spaces she describes are those where it is not precisely clear for what reason one might be questioned about their ethnicity. Vendors at once must mediate the expectations of what it means to be indigenous to tourists of different backgrounds, as well as to the state bureaucrats and other mestizo Oaxacans that they encounter while selling their work. She links this ambiguity to the “tense dynamics of being categorized by others [while]

seeking to define themselves within and against indigeneity's dense web of symbols, fantasies, and meanings" (Brulotte 2009: 459).

Surprisingly, although perhaps not coincidentally, two artisans recounted to me on different occasions a story that was also told to Brulotte by her informants (ibid: 469). Several years ago some artisans from Oaxaca had been invited to a FONART craft exhibition in Mexico City. However, much to their surprise when they arrived at the hotel where their rooms had been booked by the exhibition's organisers, they found they had been assigned rooms with no beds. Like Brulotte's informant, my informants interpreted this situation as a humiliating example of being treated like an *indio*, like one who sleeps on *tapetes* (woven mats) on the ground. One of my friends noted that the next day he met some sculptors from the city of Puebla. He asked them about their rooms and discovered that they had been given normal hotel rooms with beds.

Moments such as these, and the fact that artisans recall them with such clarity years later and indeed find them important to recount to visiting anthropologists, show that although the newer dynamics of cultural tourism in Oaxaca have inspired people like Miguel and Agustín to use their claims to indigeneity as a grounding for positive identification and self-confidence, these processes come up against other, very real and often negative interpretations of what it means to be indigenous in contemporary Mexico. Less dramatically, in the day-to-day lives of the artisans I worked with, they often encountered aspects of the tendency, noted by Cook and Joo (1995: 36), of some mestizo urban Oaxacans to treat rural people as *indios*. Recall, for example, Catalina's insistence that they did not use the term in front of her daughter, in whom she hoped to instil a positive indigenous identity. Catalina also told me that she refused to shop at the highest-end department store in Oaxaca City because, as she put it, "although I can

afford to buy their nice things, the staff take one look at my dark [*morena*] face, and assume that I shouldn't be there."

On another occasion, as I was sitting with Catalina in the painting workshop, she took a phone call from a client in Mexico City who had commissioned an expensive carving of Juan Diego, the indigenous peasant who witnessed the miracle of Mexico's patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Catalina had emailed the client a photograph of the piece as it was being painted so that she could suggest what kind of colours to paint on his *sarape* (the cloak where the image of the virgin appeared). After a moment, Catalina held her hand up in the air for silence, and then put the call on speaker-phone. The client was explaining that the figure of Juan Diego's skin was much too dark, and that she wanted it painted lighter before the piece was shipped. After hanging up the phone, Catalina looked very unhappy, but said, "What can I do? This customer has paid a lot of money to commission a piece, and we always try to deliver what the customer wants." Although Isabel had been painting the piece, Catalina took it from her and saying she would rather finish it herself, so that "she could reflect on what had been said."

Tileño artisans also encountered moments such as these during the course of their work-related outings. Often, when I accompanied artisans to speak to state employees in their offices in the city, I was surprised by the bureaucrats' insistence on using the familiar "*tu*" form of speech, when their respective ages and lack of close social or familial ties would normally have occasioned the formal "*usted*." I once asked Rufino, with whom his children and neighbours always spoke in "*usted*," how he felt about this. He said to me, "You know, these *licenciados* have so much education, yet

they don't have education at all (*no tienen nada de educación*).⁹² Rufino was playing with the phrases of “being educated,” as in having gone to school, and the Spanish phrase “having education,” that is, having good manners. He mused it was probably because he was “just an artisan” that they spoke to him that way.

In contemporary San Martín, the engagement with the tourism and ethnic art economies that value indigeneity as an essential aspect of the commodities they consume has resulted in certain people reconsidering and using indigeneity as mode of expression, a process that John and Jean Comaroff have elsewhere identified as “re-ethnicization” (2009: 21). However, unlike the examples cited by the Comaroffs, this has not necessarily led to a more heightened feeling of groupness amongst Tileños than has existed in the past, because this new indigeneity has not transformed nor evenly mapped onto other hues of belonging that continue to be relevant in San Martín.

In this chapter, I suggested that the colour metaphor of “hues” of belonging, allows a more subtle understanding of the ways in which Tileño conceptualisations of belonging come together within the experiences and practices of individuals. This metaphor not only allows space for the agency and creativity that I witnessed in the means by which Tileños crafted forms of belonging with social others, but also avoids definitions of identity that expect consistency and cohesion at the level of the group. The disagreements about indigeneity and belonging in San Martín indicate, as we have seen in previous chapters, the ambiguity that has characterised many aspects of the practice of woodcarvings’ promotion and production. In the next chapter, this theme is continued through the ethnographic case of peoples’ reactions to the discovery of replicas of their work that were made in China.

⁹² “*Licenciados*” are people with undergraduate degrees; used as a term of address, like “doctor” or “professor” in English

Chapter Six
Chinese Copies and Unstable Auras:
Intellectual Property, Artisans and the State in a Global Market

“Originality is also a social label, and originals form peculiar bonds with other people.”

– Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*

“An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them.”

- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

At the height of Oaxaca's Day of the Dead celebrations in 2007 the *Las Noticias* newspaper ran a story which read very much like the peasant folktales that anthropologists have been collecting there for generations: a year earlier a stranger, a foreigner, had come to the small villages surrounding the city and proposed a deal that would allow people to make money well beyond their expectations. The stranger, who was only identified as “El Americano,” had purchased five large Oaxacan woodcarvings from artisans in both San Martín and Arrazola, and in exchange for a signature on a contract, he paid their producers significantly more than their usual asking prices. When El Americano returned in 2007 to buy more pieces, the artisans and the reading public were horrified to discover that he had in fact taken the woodcarvings to China and had them made into resin copies, or as the newspaper put it, “clones,” which were now being sold in the United States and online. While the Mexican folktales usually end with the stranger, that is, the devil, tricking the local protagonist and leaving him with less than he began with, the newspaper story suggested that something must be done (see Salanueva Camargo 2007).

The story had broken in the local paper as part of a larger ongoing campaign by ARIPO and the Oaxacan Ministry of Finance to inform Oaxacan residents that their culture and economy were at risk from the import of cheap consumer goods and

“pirated” Oaxacan products that were flooding local marketplaces from China and elsewhere in Asia and Central America. While ARIPO had been concerned about Guatemalan textiles flooding Oaxacan marketplaces for quite some time, this was the first time that they had faced the industrial replication of woodcarvings. The replicas had been brought to ARIPO’s attention by Miguel and Catalina, who told me that they had discovered the “clones” when El Americano had approached them first in 2007 to see if they would agree to sell him more carvings as prototypes. Catalina said that because one of the first pieces was a replica of their work, she felt responsible for preventing further copies in the future.

Concerns about copying are now a pervasive theme in the global economy, where the branding or identity of products can be of greater value than the actual commodity itself (G. Foster 2007). Technologies of mass reproduction and manufacture are now easily affordable and are widely available throughout the world, which has led to a proliferation of replica consumer goods that have pushed both intellectual property (IP) regimes and “local” engagement with their ideologies in new and often complicated directions (N. Taylor 1999; Crăciun 2012). Even within nations with comparably established and enforceable IP laws, new debates surrounding the aesthetic content that can be covered by IP protection are problematic for existing legislation. The inconsistent outcomes of recent legal battles in Europe, such as Apple’s generally successful series of lawsuits against Samsung in regards to design infringement on the iPad, compared with Louboutin’s failed attempt to trademark the signature red sole of their designer shoes, show the extent to which the copying of designs and styles sits uneasily within the boundaries of existing intellectual property concepts (Slind-Flor 2011; BBC News 2011; Falkenberg 2011; cf. Strathern 1999:178).

This chapter brings together many of the issues that have been raised in the previous chapters of the thesis, as it addresses current concerns about authorship, aesthetics and competition within San Martín. Through an exploration of the state's and artisans' responses to the discovery of these made-in-China figures, I argue that the copies themselves have become a kind of symbolic surrogate onto which the different anxieties produced by the ambivalent economic and aesthetic status of Oaxacan woodcarvings are projected. What makes this case in particular analytically challenging is its location at the intersection of a number of current theoretical debates in anthropology, discussions not only about property and law and the global dissemination of a discourse of "rights," but also aesthetics, culture and economic competition.

Anthropologists like Haidy Geismar (2005); Michael Brown (1998, 2003); and Lorraine Aragon and James Leach (2008) have attempted to make sense of intellectual property rights in the context of indigenous art production. They address the problem of whether Euro-American legal regimes can be appropriate tools for the protection of indigenous peoples and cultures. This work has provided many incisive and often critical claims regarding the cultural and practical problems of addressing non-Western art production through the rubric of property. However, rather than focusing directly on how claims to intellectual property may or may not serve the interests of the artisans with whom I work, in this chapter I take an analytic step backwards in order to explore the more challenging question of why people are claiming rights to intellectual property at all.

The importance of asking this question was not immediately apparent to me as I began to investigate the story of the factory copies. Like many others who were involved, my instinctive reaction was that my informants' intellectual property had been

violated. The only question that remained was what they could do to remedy the situation. As I discuss below, they responded by forming a collective trademark union, endorsed by various Oaxacan and federal state agencies. One afternoon, I was explaining this collective trademark over coffee to Antonio, a weaver from Teotitlán del Valle who is also part of Oaxaca City's vibrant art scene. As I described the copies and the trademark union, he stopped me. "But what I don't understand is, why do they care?" he asked. I paused for a moment and was unable to answer this surprising question. It seemed easy to respond by saying that producers were concerned for their livelihoods, but I was aware that the copies, for reasons discussed below, did not seem to pose any real threat. After a moment or two, I had to admit to Antonio that I was not entirely sure.

The newspaper story seems to answer Antonio's question: the artisans' creative expressions had been copied and sold en masse, not only putting their livelihoods at risk, but also committing the thoroughly modern crime of "cultural appropriation," an accusation central to many indigenous or minority groups' claims for the return and exclusive use of cultural symbols and objects (Coombe 1998: 209; 232-241; 245-247; Coleman 2004). But as I will show, these factory copies of Oaxacan woodcarvings actually pose little or no threat to local livelihoods, nor can they be accused of simple cultural appropriation. Rather than reposing on generalising economic and culturalist explanations, I suggest instead that artisans' appeals for intellectual property protection must be understood within a broader consideration of the aesthetic practices and social processes that have been addressed in the previous chapters. In particular, I will show that local conceptualisations of style and authorship, the problems of competition within San Martín, and the ways in which auras of woodcarvings are mutable and constructed,

must be taken into consideration in order to explain why Tileño artisans care about resin factory copies that are sold abroad.

As my different informants were concerned about the replication of Oaxacan woodcarvings, this case might initially appear to be a straightforward example of Benjamin's predictions of the decline of the aura of artworks when they are copied. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin argues that the replication of a work of art reduces the authority of the original by "[detaching] the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition... [and] substituting a mass existence for a unique existence" (W. Benjamin 2008b: 22). Taken within Benjamin's larger intellectual project about the manner in which art and communication media act as a medium that stands between the world and our sensory experiences of it, the singular work of art "in the age of its technological reproducibility" loses its authority not only because of the multiple copies that circulate, but also because our "mode of perception" (or "human sensorial capacity") no longer reads authenticity in unique works of art in the same way (ibid: 9-11; Jennings 2008: 1-3). In short, the potential to reproduce a work of art not only diminishes the value which society accords to a given original, but potentially the value which we confer upon all "originals."⁹³ Thus, Benjamin predicted the decline of the authority of all "auratic" art with the rise of the aestheticisation of politics in the twentieth century (ibid: 36-42).

However, the processes of change that affected relations between viewers and works of art in the twentieth century did not take place quite as Benjamin envisioned: in the mid-twentieth century, pop-artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein actually

⁹³ Susan Buck-Morss has observed that this loss of aura was considered variously as both a positive and negative phenomenon by Benjamin, who noted at times that this change allowed for democratisation and freedom in art; at other times he lamented the end of the autonomy of art, which has now been made subject to pressures of popular demand and the market (Buck-Morss 1977: 160-161; A. Benjamin 1986: 31).

created, rather than destroyed, the authority of their works through serialisation. And yet, this work carries with it the same genuineness and authority that Benjamin pointed to in his conceptualisation of the aura: “real” Warhols are much more valuable than “replicas.” These processes also continue, for example, in street-art production where replication is central to the generation of its auratic authority, and yet, only street art by artists who have developed “names” in the more common forms of art worlds are able to generate enough authority to become economically valuable (cf. *Exit Through the Giftshop*, 2010).

Central to Benjamin’s argument is that copies reduce the aura of the original by making them overly “available.” Like in Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Grey*, the existence of the copy threatens the unique authority and viability of the original by distributing its existence in more places than one; detaching the image from the “here and now” of the original object, and thus reducing its aura or genuineness. Despite the fact that concerns in the media and in everyday conversations about the replicas focused on the risk they pose to the authority of Oaxacan cultural production, I suggest that the real danger of the resin copies was that they threatened to reveal the inconsistent and unstable nature of the ways that woodcarvings are rendered authoritative and genuine. In other words, they did not threaten the actual auras of Oaxacan woodcarvings, but rather threatened to unmask them, revealing the fact that their actual authority is not tied to the claims of “authenticity” on which they appear to be based. In the next section, I address the practical and theoretical problems that anthropologists have addressed with the production and dissemination of the concept of intellectual property in order to contrast my approach to previous work and to lay out the basic concepts through which anthropology can address IP regimes and values.

Anthropology and the challenge of intellectual property

Intellectual property rights, as a system of legal and quasi-legal arrangements at national and international levels, have recently attracted a large amount of attention from anthropologists, political scientists and legal theorists. These arrangements are considered integral to the workings of the current neoliberal economic order, and are underpinned by the World Trade Organization's 1994 Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPs), which required developing nations such as Mexico to formulate national IP legislation by 2005. This global move towards legally defined rights in intellectual products is also backed by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a United Nations body whose official mission is "to promote through international cooperation the creation, dissemination, use and protection of works of the human spirit for the economic, cultural and social progress of all mankind" (WIPO 2001, cited in Nobel 2007: 338). Like Mexico, many countries have willingly participated in the development of national and international IP guidelines and legislation, as IP is considered an important tool in the promotion of economic development and competitiveness on the global stage. In recent years, many nations, both wealthy and poor have enthusiastically bought into the development and global coordination of intellectual property within their legal and judicial infrastructures (Correa 2000; Matthews 2002; Sell 2003). Not coincidentally, these changes have come at a moment in the global economy where there is a new emphasis, in both development and financial parlance, on the "knowledge economy" and the "information society," key concepts promoted by global institutions like the World Bank, the United Nations and the WIPO (Chan 2011: 91).

The development of these formalising regimes has provided a rich seam of data for anthropologists working on the themes of property, rights and culture. The legal

anthropologist Rosemary Coombe has shown that the conceptualisations of intellectual property currently promoted by these institutions derive from a history of legal decisions in the United States and Europe that are grounded in specific cultural understandings of individual creative authorship and ownership (Coombe 1998: 77-78; 86). Equally importantly, she reminds us that intellectual property rights were not developed to prevent the reproduction and circulation of images or ideas, but the contrary: to encourage the circulation of creative or innovative ideas with the proviso that the author receives just compensation (Coombe 1998: 169; cf. M. Brown 2003: 59-61; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 34). As Coombe shows, this logic of IP law stands in direct contradiction to the now frequent attempts by indigenous groups and their supporters to mobilise IP rights against corporations who use their cultures and likenesses as trademarks, design motifs or names. This is so, because many indigenous groups are not seeking compensation but rather cessation of the use of what they now call their collective cultural property. As Coombe wryly notes, property-oriented counterclaims often are more persuasive to the public and judiciary than assertions that racial stereotypes and the generalising dissemination of their culture damages the public- and self- esteem of their people (Coombe 204; 174-207).⁹⁴

Coombe's work provided the grounding for the ethnographic exploration of the use of intellectual property ideas amongst and against indigenous peoples around the world, most famously in cases of bioprospecting by pharmaceutical companies (Brush 1993; Posey and Dutfield 1996; M. Brown 2003: 95-143; Hayden 2003). In the case of design and artwork, important research with Aboriginal Australians by Fred Myers and Francesca Merlan has supported Coombe's suspicions that the Western cultural base of

⁹⁴ Indeed, it is an ironic characteristic of the political and economic structures in which todays anti-capitalist and anti-big-business movements take place that they find themselves at once defending the intellectual commons as a necessary space for public life and creativity to temper the self-interest of the market (Reid and Taylor 2010: 12), while at the same time arguing for indigenous and other minorities' rights to cultural protection.

IP law often results in clashes or confusions about ideas of authorship and creation when works of art move from one art system to another (Merlan 2001; Myers 2005). Myers has argued that these “disjunctures,” as he calls them, are made especially visible when Aboriginal Australians accuse non-Aborigines of IP infringement on designs that are not thought to be owned by any individual in particular (Myers 2005: 91-99). Disjunctures like these have been investigated in many other contexts, in efforts to show where and why Western notions of IP do or do not coincide with non-Western cultural beliefs and desires (e.g. Geismar 2005; Aragon and Leach 2008).

Work by Marilyn Strathern has further led to useful reconceptualisations of anthropological definitions of property and authorship both in reference to her Papua New Guinea material and in the context of Western intellectual and reproductive rights (Strathern 1999: 161-203, 2001). She shows that what intellectual property rights do in the West, as well as elsewhere, is to halt the perpetual movement of signs and ideas, by “locating them in an owner [and] halting endless dissemination” (Strathern 1999: 177). This observation is central to understanding what is at stake when people or companies make claims to intellectual property, as it pinpoints a contradiction that exists within the idea of IP itself: intellectual property regimes are based on the assumption that the intellectual or physical objects concerned are the result of the creative work by a unique and detached individual author (Litman 1991: 246; Soussloff 1997). This individualised conception of authorship is often contrasted in the anthropological literature to ideas of communal production and authorship that many indigenous and other minority groups hold, highlighting a major difficulty in the use of IP for the protection of cultural resources. But Strathern’s point also highlights the fact that the conceptualisation of authorship that grounds Western IP law is itself a romantic and inherently incorrect vision of how creative or intellectual production works in any context. That is, all

authors, whether located in the West or elsewhere, draw on signs and symbols that are constantly in circulation. What intellectual property regimes really do, then, is confer rights to the benefits of this circulation, rather than the rights to the objects, symbols or signs themselves, while at the same time perpetuating what Jennifer Litman (1997) calls the “myth” of authorship in intellectual property.

This state of affairs is reflected in the most common forms that intellectual property rights take: copyright, patent and trademark. Copyright distinguishes the idea from its material expression, and only the material expression is owned by a copyright owner; that owner has the right to restrict the reproduction of the material expression, not the idea itself. Patent, in contrast, allows for the material reproduction of an object, provided that royalties are paid to the patent holder. Patent was developed during the industrial revolution in order to facilitate technological advances by encouraging inventors to share their work. A trademark, in contrast is an identifying mark, which guarantees the object is produced by a named author, company or institution, conferring certain assumed guarantees to the buyer about quality, provenance or content. Only the use of the symbol or name of the trademark is protected, not the product on which it is stamped (Coombe 1996: 169-170; M. Brown 2003: 55-59, 74-76, 102-104; Myers 2005: 88). Newer forms of trademark, such as design-right attempt to protect the signature “look” of an object that is now a valuable part of many industrially produced goods. At this point however, these newer forms of intellectual property are struggling to be consolidated even in contexts with long-standing IP law; Christian Louboutin failed in their lawsuit against Yves Saint Laurent for making red-soled shoes because the judge in the case ruled that their 2008 trademark was “likely not protectable” (Falkenberg 2011; Sweeny 2011).

As we shall see below, in the case of Oaxacan woodcarvings not just protection but “protectability” is also at issue. Protectability, or what Colloredo Mansfeld calls the “enclosability” of cultural expressions is often what is at stake for non-Western art objects and other cultural goods made in contexts where authorship cannot be straightforwardly assigned to a single author (2011: 54).⁹⁵ Despite the fact that legal scholars and analysts have recently attempted to make IP law more cross-culturally applicable by promoting the development of *sui generis* copyright systems, the legislative orders that have proliferated amongst nations in the past ten years actually reinforce the specific characteristics of traditional copyright, patent and trademark (Geismar 2005: 439; Aragon and Leach 2008: 607-615).

Given this, it is in some ways surprising that the artisans who produce woodcarvings in Oaxaca would turn to intellectual property for protection, as neither copyright, patent nor trademark are suitable to stop the replication of their work in resin; as will be described in the next section the made-in-China resin copies would not violate traditional forms of intellectual property even if they had been in place. In the next section, I describe the resin copies, which are called “InSpiriters,” focusing on their materiality and marketing and I address why these specific features make the Oaxacans’ appeal to IP for protection problematic. Following this, I describe the development of the woodcarvers’ collective trademark programme before turning my attention to the Mexican state and its interest in the development of collective trademarks. I suggest that rather than collective trademarks’ ability to offer an effective response to the InSpiriters, the Mexican and Oaxaca states’ promotion of intellectual property discourse relates more to Mexico’s current uncertain status in the global economy than any systematic response to the discovery of replica Mexican artesanías.

⁹⁵ “Enclosability” referring to the ability “enclose” cultural assets out of the public commons.

InSpiriters: The look and feel of Oaxaca, factory-made in China

The resin factory copies of the Oaxacan woodcarvings are made by the Arizona-based company Sterling and Camille, and are sold through a website directly to customers or to other online retailers and shops. They come packaged in satin-lined collector's boxes and cost between \$20 and \$45 USD. They visually appear to be very similar to the Oaxacan woodcarvings that served as their prototypes however there are significant material differences between the resin figures and the woodcarvings (See Figures 31 and 32). While finished Oaxacan woodcarvings are brittle and extremely lightweight, the resin figures are surprisingly heavy and have a plastic texture to them. The design details of the InSpiriters are cast during the pouring of the resin before they are painted, meaning the patterns feel raised on the surface, giving a texture to each piece. In contrast, the Oaxacan woodcarvings are painted after the form is complete and smoothness in paint application is valued as an indicator of quality by both artisans and buyers alike. As such, it would be very difficult for a customer to confuse Oaxacan woodcarvings and InSpiriter figures if they saw them in person.



Figure 31: InSpiriter ram (left); Oaxacan woodcarving ram (right).



Figure 32: InSpiriter armadillo (left); Oaxacan woodcarving armadillo (right).

Apart from these material variances, there are significant differences in how and to whom the objects are marketed. Nowhere on the InSpiriter's website or their accompanying leaflet do they claim to be Oaxacan, Zapotec or even Mexican. They also do not explicitly make claims to "indigeneity"; because they are not produced by members of a recognised American Indian tribe, under the United States' Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1990), they legally cannot claim or suggest that they are made by Native Americans (Wood 2001b; 2008: 96). Instead, they rely on a generalised Native American aesthetic, using what Michael Brown refers to as the "look and feel of indigenous cultural products" (M. Brown 2003: 89; c.f. Tiffany 2006: 139). Like the aesthetics of ethnic art to which Miguel and Catalina and increasingly other Tileños appeal, these objects draw on the discursive and aesthetic markers of North America's "circulating aboriginality," through which repetitive images of the peoples and cultures of the Pacific Northwest, the Plains, and the American Southwest come not only to symbolise Native American peoples, but metonymically represent North American landscapes and nations in general (Graburn 2004: 144). At the same time, this circulation of aboriginality makes the symbols of Native Americanness inconspicuous by subtly infusing the everyday material lives of both indigenous and non-indigenous national subjects with indigenous-like aesthetic forms (Townsend Gault 2004: 187-

188). This has the result that even the aesthetic products of specific Native American cultures come to be “scaled up” to a level so generalised they are only read as “difference,” in the same way that “ethnic art” commodities and markets materialise all forms of difference as representations of “the exotic” (S. Errington 1998: 98). In contrast to this mode of consumption, the consumers of the woodcarvings are distinctly different from those who purchase the InSpiriter factory figures, making it very unlikely that the resin copies are actually competing economically with the Oaxacan woodcarvings at all.

Judging by the retail websites and available publications, InSpiriters are sold to two distinct but overlapping groups of consumers: North American New Age spiritualists and purchasers of “giftware,” industrially produced objects sold in gift and greeting card shops. Drawing on New Age interpretations of Native American spirituality, the official website declares that InSpiriter means “to fill with spirit and encourage,” with the five animal forms each representing special attributes: “boundaries” (armadillo), “healing” (frog), “joy from within” (baboon), “determination” (ram) and “safety in expressing feelings without fear” (rabbit) (Sterling and Camille 2009). InSpiriters are sold through New Age healing and retail websites and even received a “best of show” recommendation from New Age Retailer Magazine in its review of an international trade show of New Age, metaphysical and wellness-related products, held annually in Denver, Colorado (Haller and Group 2007: 116-117).⁹⁶

Unlike the InSpiriters, however, the desirability of Oaxacan woodcarvings for their consumers is inherently connected to their locatability within the greater history or

⁹⁶ In the autumn of 2009 and again in 2010 I attempted to contact the owner of Sterling and Camille by email, the only method of contact provided on the website, but I did not receive a response; the website has since closed, and the company appears to have gone out of business, although the InSpiriter figures continue to be sold on third-party websites.

“tradition” of Oaxacan craft production and their emplacement in household workshops and in San Martín as a typical “traditional” Mexican village. While tourists and collectors also respond to popular romantic images about indigenous cultures, their interest in purchasing the woodcarvings and other crafts in Oaxaca is distinct from the generalising imagery that surrounds the InSpiriters’ marketing. The woodcarvings are desirable to tourists and folk art collectors not only because they have the “look and feel” of indigenous culture, but because they are cultural products specific to Oaxaca, and certain villages in particular. This particularity is precisely what Antonio was pointing to when he asked why Tileño artisans care about the InSpiriter copies, as the defining features of desirability of Oaxacan woodcarvings is not met nor even directly challenged by them.

While I am not making an argument about whether indigenous or non-Western art production can be protected under intellectual property laws, some clarifications about the problems this case presents will help to explain why I have formulated an alternative reading of Tileños’ desire to form a collective trademark. There are number of “objective” difficulties with the attempt to use IP protection to halt the production of InSpiriters and other products like them, which are greater than the practical problems that would be involved if economically disadvantaged artisans from Mexico attempted to file a formal lawsuit against a business located in another country.⁹⁷ Here, I address the problems of authorship and content, which speak to the issue of “protectability.” This is not an exhaustive account of the problems that are involved in addressing cultural production through IP regimes, but rather a short description in order to give some indication of the kinds of issues that occur.

⁹⁷ By objective, I mean from the perspective of intellectual property itself, not that I claim these are inherently objective, but to distinguish this discussion from Tileños’ own explanations of why they seek to utilise intellectual property.

Firstly is the problem of authorship, as copyright, patent and trademark laws require the identification of an author or owner (cf. Coombe 1998: 59-73 on the relationship between authorship and these property regimes). The short history of the woodcarvings might appear to provide an easy solution to the fact that copyright requires the establishment of originality and identifiable authorship in order to grant protection. The requirement of an identifiable author, of course, need not be an individual in the commonplace sense of the word, but a legal individual, which can be a person or an incorporated institution (Rahmatian 2007: 218). While Manuel Jimenez, the farmer from Arrazola who began woodcarving in the 1950s, might be named as the original author, it would be difficult to argue that his authorial rights should be extended to all the artisans in the villages currently producing woodcarvings, especially given that he publically expressed annoyance that others were profiting from his work (Chibnik 2003: 31; Brulotte 2006: 57).

Alternatively, Oaxacan artisans might instead attempt to claim collective authorship. In some cases, most notably in the United States and Panama, indigenous groups have had some success with claims to collective authorship, often resulting in cultural property and fair advertising laws, such as the United States Indian Arts and Crafts Act (1990), or Panama's Indigenous Intellectual Property Law (2000) which prevent non-members of recognised groups from using or claiming authorial rights to "indigenous-like" products (U.S. Department of the Interior 1990; Valiente López 2002). However, these claims are usually based on the weight of "cultural nationalist" arguments where members of a recognised "nation" or "tribe" claim to be the de facto authors of the aesthetic products associated with that culture (Coombe 1998: 224). For Oaxacan woodcarvers this claim is difficult to assert, as there is no consistent cultural or social unit (apart from Oaxaca itself) to which they all ascribe. This problem is further

complicated by the fact that artisans claim individualised authorship (and occasionally intellectual property rights) of their own styles at the level of workshops, and concerns about copying are prevalent amongst artisans. These claims run counter to assertions of collective authorship, which would afford the strongest collective intellectual property protection under current systems, but might undermine individual claims to specific styles and forms.⁹⁸

A second issue is that of the nature of the content of the alleged infringement. As the aesthetics or the “look” of Oaxacan woodcarvings draw on forms and styles common to many Mexican artesanías, it is difficult to define which aspects should be restricted only to Oaxacan woodcarvings, or indeed Oaxacan artesanías. The forms and styles that most Oaxacan woodcarvings take are drawn from the general repertoire of Mexican popular culture, and in the case of collective or design-based trademark infringement, one would need to prove that the replica object in question was imitating the original product enough to lead the public into mistaking the one for the other (Coombe 1998: 60-61). As the InSpiriters neither claim to be Oaxacan, nor insinuate any connection to Mexico at all, this claim would be very difficult to establish.

Despite these difficulties, Oaxacan woodcarvers decided, on the advice of state officials, that the development of an intellectual property programme for the woodcarvings was an appropriate measure against the production of replicas of their work. In the next section, I describe the development of the woodcarvings’ collective

⁹⁸ Cultural property laws also generally differ in scope from the IP laws that protect individual authors; individuals are able to claim possession of their original works as discrete objects and reproductions of that work in any medium, where collective claims to authorship can only be extended to “authentic artifacts” or original pieces of work (Coombe 1998: 224-225). This condition is currently being challenged in a number of U.S. lawsuits, such as the Navajo nation versus Urban Outfitters clothing, who utilised the name “Navajo” along with a number of Navajo traditional motifs on their clothing and accessories in autumn 2011. However, legal observers expect that while the copyright infringement relating to the use of the name “Navajo” is likely to be successful, their objection to “traditionally styled” beadwork and prints is much less likely to be upheld (Associated Press 2012).

trademark which began directly in response to the discovery of the InSpiriter carvings. Following this, in the second half of the chapter, I then move on to ethnographically explore other reasons why the artisans and the state actors were concerned about the InSpiriters. I argue that their concerns actually had very little to do with intellectual property per se, but rather that the InSpiriters tapped into pre-existing anxieties to which IP discursively seemed relevant. For the state, these anxieties are about Mexico's insecure position in the global economy, while for artisans they concern the unstable nature of the woodcarvings' auras, which are an integral part of their appeal to their customers.

“Tonas of Oaxaca”: development of the collective trademark

Even before 2007, when Miguel and Catalina brought the InSpiriter pieces to the attention of ARIPO in Oaxaca City, the Mexican government already had quite a lot of experience with the development of collective IP programmes for artisans and other small scale producers. Mexico already held twelve “geographical indications,” which under TRIPS legally restrict the use of a product’s name to producers within the indicated region (like Champagne); for example, only agave liquor made in five Mexican states can be legally called “tequila” and only agave liquor (produced by a different process) from Oaxaca can be called “mezcal” (IMPI 2009). Since 2004, the federal institutions of FONAES and IMPI have worked together to establish twenty four different collective trademark programmes for artisanal products, like guitars and embroidered textiles made in the state of Guerrero, and Puebla’s Talavera pottery (ibid; López 2010: 23).⁹⁹ They function through the use of emblems that distinguish the products made by members of a union who join together on the basis of product characteristics or common origin (WIPO 2003: 93).

⁹⁹ FONAES, *Fondo Nacional Para el Fomento de Apoyo Para Empresas en Solidaridad* (National Fund for the Development and Support of Social Enterprises); IMPI *Instituto Mexicano de la Propiedad Industrial* (Mexican Institute of Industrial Property)

At the same time, FONAES has also promoted the registration of individual workshops in San Martín as private businesses. In 2008 they sponsored two training sessions for artisans in order to teach them how to legally register companies and trademarks. Although only a few artisans have taken the steps to register themselves as businesses, the language of intellectual property was common in their explanations of their workshops: Rufino, for example, often told me that he is very happy now that he has registered his company, not only for himself, but to be able to pass on his styles and rights to his children. He also saw his registered trademark as a tool through which he could discourage his neighbours from copying his styles, as this was a point emphasised by the FONAES instructor and the booklets that were provided in the training sessions. Given this previous involvement with IMPI and FONAES, it is not surprising that artisans would be interested in the development of a collective trademark in this case as well.

In 2008 artisan representatives from the woodcarving villages were invited to attend a meeting in Oaxaca City with ARIPO and FONART. At the meeting, Catalina produced one of the InSpiriter factory copies and passed them around for inspection. She described what they were and how they were made, and then went on to explain her concerns about the appearance of the resin figures, noting that this was not only a threat to the artisans' livelihoods but also to Oaxaca's culture. Other artisans in attendance expressed similar concerns. One woman from Arrazola noted that she had heard that the hand-produced cotton textiles sold in Oaxaca were now mostly manufactured in Guatemala, and worried that a similar process was beginning with the woodcarvings. The FONART representative then suggested that the best course of action would be to establish a collective trademark, as it was a way that artisans together could protect their work. Everyone was enthusiastic in their agreement. With the organisational support of

ARIPO they formally established the union in September 2008, which they called the Union of Woodcarvers, Producers of Alebrijes, Tonas of Oaxaca,[†] but which was referred to by everyone involved simply as the “*marca colectiva*” (collective trademark).¹⁰⁰ The union became the corporate owner of the trademark, and its executive committee negotiated the rules of the union over the next two meetings.

A major initial concern for Tileño artisans were the rules under which it would be governed. At first some had thought that they would be required by ARIPO to join the union in order to retain their certification as artisans, and others were convinced it was a way for the government to keep track of their woodcarving sales, as most do not pay taxes on their earnings. However, artisans were not required to join the union to keep their certifications, although they needed to be certified in order to participate in the collective trademark, and were required to abide by the rules of use.

Other artisans, especially those involved with San Martín’s Artesanos del Pueblo group, were frustrated with the name of the union. The complicated name reflects the fact that there is no properly established name for Oaxacan woodcarvings; as mentioned in Chapter One they have come to be called “alebrijes” by many people, but most artisans themselves do not use this name. Many however accepted that it was pragmatic to have the word “alebrije” in the title of the union, as it was recognisable to their clients and intermediaries. Members of Artesanos del Pueblo were more displeased with the addition of the word “tonas,” which indicated to them the central influence of Miguel and Catalina in the development of the collective trademark, as they are the only ones who use this word in reference to their carvings. Their concerns were reinforced with the subsequent publication of the “rules of use” of the collective trademark, which

¹⁰⁰ Unión de Talladores Productores de Alebrijes Tonas de Oaxaca, A.C. †

describe Oaxacan woodcarvings as “an ancestral tradition of the Zapotecs” and that the woodcarvings are “fantastic nahuales, which are known in the Zapotec language as “tonas”, which means animal protectors or angels” (Unión de Talladores Productores de Alebrijes Tonas de Oaxaca n.d.: 6, my translation).¹⁰¹ As Victor complained, “this word [tonas] doesn’t mean anything to me other than the fact that Miguel and Catalina are in charge of this collective trademark,” and he wondered whether it was worth getting involved with, since he was not, as he put it, “of the same side.”¹⁰² The “rules of use” also stated that the objective of the union was:

“to develop and register a collective trademark, denomination of origin, or any other national or international judicial form of commercial or intellectual protection, that has the objective of the protection, preservation, development and promotion of the techniques of [Oaxacan] woodcarvings” (ibid.: 1).

Significantly, this is the only statement in the documents that were distributed to Tileño artisans that pertains to direct action concerning intellectual property protection. The documents were far more concerned with question of quality and good practice in production; for example, the “rules of use” document describes in detail the materials, tools, and the process of production, including the appropriate ways of treating and drying the wood.

¹⁰¹ Nahuales are people with the supernatural ability to change into animal shapes, for good or nefarious purposes; it is a folk concept common throughout the Mesoamerican culture area (cf. Nutini and Roberts 1993: 43).

¹⁰² This is also, of course, another example of Miguel and Catalina managing to authenticate “their” version of the woodcarvings as ethnic art, interestingly in documents that are only meant to be circulated amongst artisans and state employees, all of which would know about the woodcarvings’ history (see Chapter Three).



Figure 33: Participation in the collective trademark at a fair in San Martín

While in other contexts IP has been observed as a tool of the state to elevate and maintain standards for export markets (Chan 2011: 96-97), in this case it was the artisans themselves who sought to use IP certification to define standards and hence either exclude certain producers from participation in the programme, or adjust their practices. The “rules of use” document also delimits which Oaxacans have the right to produce Oaxacan woodcarvings; it states that only artisans of legal age of majority from eleven named communities are eligible to join the union. These eleven communities are the villages where Oaxacan woodcarvings are currently produced in the Valles Centrales and the Sierra regions of the state. Importantly, the list includes communities such as Santa Catalina Huazolotitlán, which is located far from Oaxaca City in the

Costa region, closer to Oaxaca's beach tourism destinations. It also includes communities like Ocotlán, which are not particularly known for woodcarving production, although occasionally some families make them there to sell in the weekly market.¹⁰³

This delineation of how and by whom "authorised" woodcarvings are made is an example of what Lorraine Aragon has called a "sequestering strategy" (Aragon 2011: 71-73). Successful sequestering strategies, often utilised by Native American and Canadian First Nations groups, generally involve the combination of secrecy and legal tools and are justified by the need for "cultural protection" from outsiders (Aragon 2011: 71). In contrast, the practicalities of the "rules of use" of the woodcarvers' collective trademark is more focused on preventing other Oaxacans from entering the woodcarving market, rather than taking steps to prevent further copies from being produced abroad.

This focus on the appropriate use of the collective trademark became a central feature of discussions amongst artisans as they deliberated joining the union. At a meeting of the Artistas Artesanales group, for example, much discussion surrounded the issue of what should be done about artisans who repaint and/or resell carvings made by other people. Everyone believed that this violated the spirit of the collective trademark, as it was supposed to protect "true" artisans' livelihoods. However, as the repainting of carvings was an open secret that no one wanted to directly address or admit to doing, they decided that there was no way the union could effectively address this problem. Instead they hoped that the existence of the union would encourage artisans to behave fairly and ethically.

¹⁰³ The communities are: La Unión Tejalapam; San Pedro Ixtlahuaca; San Pedro y San Pablo Ayutla; San Martín Tilcajete; San Antonio Arrazola; San Pedro Taviche; Ocotlán de Morelos; Santa María Huazolotitlan; Santiago Juxtlahuaca; and San Mateo del Mar.

Another concern for artisans was the cost and access to the prime materials of the trademark. The trademark was supposed to work by indicating that a piece was made by a recognised member of the union who followed the rules of production and was an “authentic” Oaxacan woodcarver. This certification was to be made visible to buyers via a holographic sticker that could be attached to the base of woodcarvings. While the first batch of these stickers was purchased from a printing company through a grant from FONART, subsequent stickers had to be purchased by artisans themselves. While the cost of each sticker was estimated to be only three to five pesos, for commercial producers, this amount of money might be a tenth of their asking price for each piece, a situation compounded by the fact that commercial producers tend to sell many times more individual pieces than those who make *finas* and *rústicas*.¹⁰⁴ This effectively meant that the burden of cost of the collective trademark would be passed on to the less well-off members of the union, and gossip began to circulate that some people were planning on producing “pirated” holographic trademark stickers, which they could then use without contributing financially to the union. Tileño artisans initially concluded that many commercial producers would not want to join the union, and those who did would not be able to indicate their certification on every piece, thus preventing the certification programme from working effectively.

The collective trademark’s ability to protect the woodcarvings from the resin figures was hindered by a number of issues. On a conceptual level, the collective trademark programme, while certifying Oaxacan artisans as “authentic” can do very little to prevent the InSpiriters from continuing to be sold, for many of the reasons described above. Collective trademarks are arranged in order to prevent the unauthorised use of the name of a product or region in the marketing of a good,

¹⁰⁴ The price of later batches of stickers was still being negotiated with the printing company when I finished my fieldwork; the union wanted ARIPO to help fund the purchase of the sticker press to reduce the cost of stickers in the long-term, but this was apparently quite expensive.

however neither they nor geographical indicators cannot prevent other regions or countries from producing the goods, only from using the designated name (such as Cava rather than Champagne for Spanish sparkling wine) (López 2010: 20). In this case, however, this is not terribly useful to the union since the resin factory copies did not claim to be Oaxacan woodcarvings, alebrijes, or even “tonas.”

On a more practical level, the implementation of the collective trademark programme was not initially very successful. The union was originally mis-registered with Hacienda, Mexico’s Office of Finance, which caused it significant administrative problems and led to members receiving demands for payment of taxes. Further, despite the fact that much time and resources had been spent educating the artisans about the rules and benefits of IP protection, the purpose and even the existence of the collective trademark was not made known to consumers – those who in principle should be persuaded to purchase certified carvings. When I interviewed the owners of a number of galleries in Oaxaca City, most had heard that there were concerns about replica carvings in Oaxaca, but were unaware of the collective trademark programme. Misinformation was also common; the owner of an expensive, high-end, gallery in the heart of Oaxaca’s tourist centre believed that the collective trademark was developed by artisans in Arrazola to prevent those in San Martín from copying their designs, and another believed that the union was formed in order to take the producer of InSpiriters to court in Washington D.C. These complications were compounded by the fact that no information was made accessible to tourists and the union was not effectively linked with actors in the tourism industry.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ According to Tileños who I have emailed with in 2012, these issues persist. When I returned in 2010 to visit, the members of the union had expanded their remit to formally address many of the different issues that concern woodcarvers, such as distribution and promotion, as they saw the union as a forum for “their voice” in working with ARIPO and FONART.

Despite these issues, many Tileño artisans were enthusiastic about the collective trademark and members of both of San Martín's artisan associations, as well as independent artisans, joined the union. For both the artisans and the state representatives, the spectre of resin copies referenced a number of anxieties that seem distant from the issue of intellectual property. In the remainder of the chapter, I explore these anxieties, arguing that Tileños' aesthetic practices, involving authorship, competition and the auras of woodcarvings generated concerns about the possibility of replication, which are essential features in the appeal of IP for artisans. In the next section, I address why the state might be interested in turning to IP protection in response to the discovery of the InSpiriters. I suggest that, unlike artisans' concerns, the state's anxieties about the replicas are related to Mexico's current economic and political difficulties and its situation vis-à-vis China with regards to its relationship to the United States.

Global anxieties: the Mexican state and intellectual property

In recent years, many developing countries around the world have put their faith in intellectual property's capacity to simultaneously protect local cultural producers and advance economic interests abroad (Chan 2011: 91). This faith has been promoted by the same institutions that have encouraged and required neoliberal economic reforms for countries such as Mexico; the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the WIPO suggest that IP can help national economies to be more productive by nurturing creativity and encouraging the sharing of intellectual and creative resources amongst companies and sectors (WIPO 2004: 1-3; Dutfield and Suthersanen 2008: 22). Mexico, in particular, has wholeheartedly embarked on the process of consolidating IP laws, at the same time as it has shifted toward neoliberalism. In the 1990s, during the presidencies of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000),

intellectual property became a central concern for both government and private interest groups that sought to court investment from abroad. In 1991, Salinas signed the Law of Industrial Property, which conformed to the requirements of both the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the WTO's current General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. This formalisation of IP in Mexican law accompanied many other neoliberal reforms, including fundamental changes in land distribution programmes, and the privatisation of many public industries (Hayden 2003: 87-90).

Since the 1990s the Mexican state under PRI and PAN presidencies has directed a tremendous amount of resources towards putting IP law into practice. The Mexican Institute of Industrial Property (IMPI) was created in 1993 as a decentralised institution within the state dedicated to promoting the use of intellectual and industrial property laws. Pressure from the United States in particular has led to more concerns within Mexico over the production of products that do not respect the IP rights of multinational and American corporations, such as the distribution of pirated DVDs. In 2011, it was estimated that 235 million pirated DVDs were sold in Mexico, compared to only 26 million licensed ones. This market is apparently driven at higher levels by the major drug cartels, and is worth millions of dollars annually (Pablos 2011; cf. Gómez Aguiar 2007: 147-152; 178-182).

During my fieldwork, stories in the media, such as the confiscation of hand-made *piñatas* by American border agents because they were characters held under copyright by Disney and other American firms led some Tileño artisans to distrust intellectual property regimes that they felt were changing the rules of artisanal production to the benefit of foreigners (cf. Najár 2010 on the piñata controversy).¹⁰⁶ At

¹⁰⁶ In Mexico many artisanal products like piñatas, cakes, clothing, furniture and woodcarvings (like Miguel García's early piece (Figure 27) continue to be decorated with popular children's characters by

the same time, the Oaxacan state and media has become increasingly concerned with the flooding of Oaxacan markets with foreign goods that appear or claim to be local, and because of these high profile stories of IP working against Mexicans, it also seems to offer the possibility for the protection of Oaxacan culture. At national levels, IP discourses have also become entwined with the longer-standing ideology of Mexican national patrimony, as promoted by Mexican institutions such as INAH, and global ones such as UNESCO, so that claims to national patrimony are now often expressed in the language of intellectual property, thus attempting to “enclose” patrimony from the public sphere (Breglia 2006: 31-35; Colloredo Mansfeld 2011).

For the officials who work in ARIPO, the discovery of the InSpirers copies was yet another example of Oaxacan culture being appropriated by foreigners; like many tourists and collectors, they also view the woodcarvings as authentic and desirable expressions of Oaxacan culture. The genuineness of woodcarvings is amplified for the bureaucrats through their central role in the on-going production of the Mexican nation through their work in the cultural institutions of the state; the discourses that established artesanías at the heart of Mexican nationalism in the twentieth century continue to inform government practices and ideologies today. In an interview with a senior official at ARIPO, I was told that any affront to the craftwork of Oaxaca was simultaneously an offense to the Mexican nation. He explained that “the designs and symbols of the Oaxacan woodcarvings are the patrimony of authentic Oaxaca and that the state is obliged to fight to legally protect them from [pirating]”.

Despite ARIPO’s assertions of appropriation, I argue that the state’s reaction to the discovery of the InSpirer replicas is more complicated than the “cultural

Disney and other corporations. This represents a significant internal market in Mexico on which many artisans depend.

appropriation” reading would suggest. In the summer of 2009, newspaper stands in Oaxaca were selling plastic toys for children called “Alebrijes: Impossible Animals” that were produced by Televisa, Mexico’s largest media corporation, and in 2010, Santo Domingo Animation produced a children’s animated film called “Brijes 3D” in which children discover their animal spirits while reading a pre-Hispanic codex in a museum (see Figures 34 and 35).

Although the artisans had acquired the Televisa “alebrije” toys and had taken them to ARIPO as well, the state representatives were significantly less concerned about these products than they were about the InSpiriters. It gradually became clear to me that the state bureaucrats’ strong reactions to the InSpiriters connected more with national concerns about Chinese manufacturing than they did with cultural preservation. Despite that it was an American businessman who profited from the production of InSpiriters, the fact that the copies were made in China was often highlighted as the most important point of the case in government and media discourses.

Mexico’s economic relationship to Chinese industrial development is of great concern for the government; in 2003 China overtook Mexico as the leading source of imports into the United States, while at the same time it exports approximately \$33 billion USD worth of goods to Mexico annually (Godoy 2010). This loss of primacy in exports to the United States is often attributed in the popular press to unfair labour practices in China (El Universal 2009; cf. Gallagher and Porzecanski 2010). Thus, from the perspective of the state, the factory copies not only represent the cultural appropriation of a key ingredient of Mexican national belonging, but also touch a nerve about Mexico’s position vis-à-vis China in the current global economy.

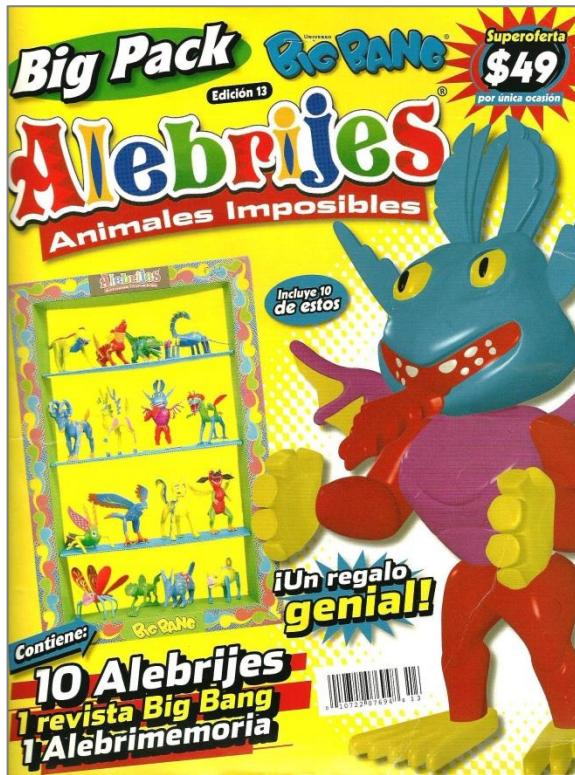


Figure 34: "Alebrijes: Impossible Animals" toys distributed by Universo Big Bang magazine, subsidiary of Televisa, S.A.

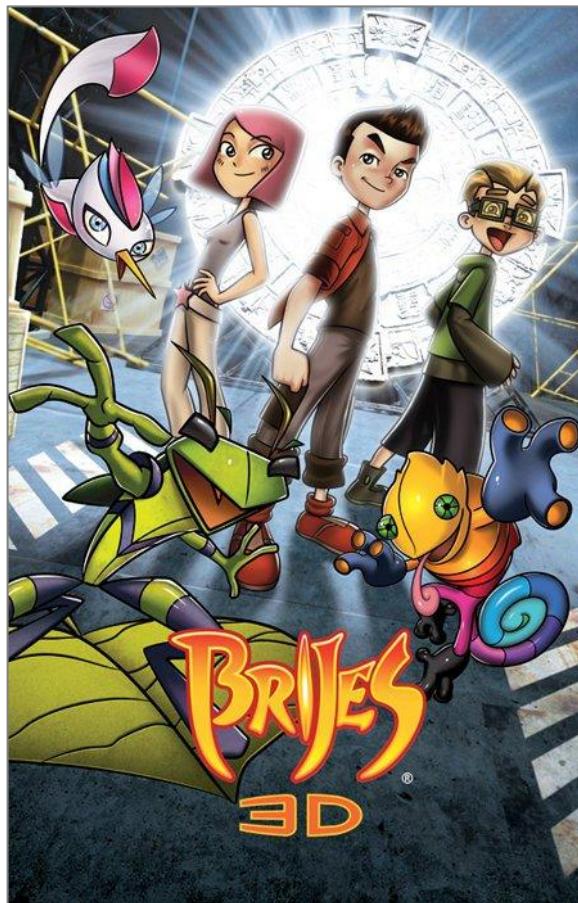


Figure 35: "Brijes 3D" Film Poster. Santo Domingo Animation, S.A.

In August 2009, FONART, ARIPO, and an array of other federal government institutions organised a two day conference in Oaxaca City for artisans from all the craft producing villages in the Central Valleys region. It was a high-profile event with sponsorship from the European Union, and presentations were given by representatives from the WIPO, an indigenous IP lawyer from Panama, as well as state officials from Mexico City. It was covered by many major Mexican newspapers and television networks, including Televisa. The two day event was held in Oaxaca City's Camino Real hotel, which occupies the former convent of Santa Catalina which was built in 1576, and remains a central landmark in the city's cultural tourism landscape.

Throughout the event, references were made to China as Mexico's main competitor in the world market, often accompanied by insinuations that China "does not play by the rules." One federal government representative addressed the issue directly, saying, "Look, China, we now have more legal trademarks than any other Latin American country. You can't just ignore this." More telling, were the closing remarks made by an IMPI director. As he spoke and gesticulated, he held one of the InSpiriter figures in his hand. On almost accidentally knocking it against the wall of the historic building, he exclaimed, "Oh! I don't want to *enchinar* this sacred place." The audience erupted in laughter. "Enchinar" in Spanish means "to make curly", but in this context, the audience immediately understood that the official was playing on the word *china*, or Chinese, saying literally that he didn't want to "enChinese" the sacred building. Furthermore, the audience was well aware that the representative was also playing on the similar word "enchingar," literally, "to fuck up", a point that my artisan friends gleefully reminded me of many times that afternoon. That the audience responded so well to the equation of "making Chinese" and "fucking up" underscores this major

anxiety about what precisely is at stake when quintessentially Mexican objects are copied in China.

The contrast between the state's concern with the InSpiriters versus the animated film, and especially the children's toys (which resemble many commercial woodcarvings) highlights the fact that for state producers, anxieties surround the appropriation of cultural patrimony by non-Mexicans, as opposed to its potentially unfair use within Mexico's borders. As the woodcarvings have been incorporated into the national imaginary, they embody the value and uniqueness of Mexico as a nation for the state representatives whose jobs it is to promote them as such. The fact that the carvings themselves draw on many recognisable symbols and motifs that have circulated for generations in popular art from all over Mexico, makes them even more apt as symbols of the nation, since they invoke the nation of Mexico as a unified cultural space. That the copies were made outside of the country posed a great threat to the aura of the woodcarvings as authentic products of the Mexican nation, since this revealed the possibility that these symbols, and possibly other national symbols as well, could be made to signify something other than Mexican authenticity and belonging, revealing once again that the aura of the woodcarvings might not be as stable as their audiences would like them to be. This instability could generate anxieties about the value of the work the officials do in their daily lives, and it quite obviously combined in a meaningful way with the already existing tensions evident in the media towards China. It is not surprising, then, that when the artisans approached ARIPO for help the government took on the task whole heartedly and with much fanfare.

In the remainder of the chapter, I address Antonio's question directly by considering why the artisans themselves cared that resin replicas of their work were

being produced and sold in the United States. I argue that paying attention to the specific aesthetic practices involved in producing Oaxacan woodcarvings helps to answer Antonio's question. In the next section, I connect some of the issues that were raised during the development and formalisation of the collective trademark to anxieties about the aesthetic and authoritative nature of the woodcarvings themselves. These anxieties are caused by the fact that while tourists and collectors appear to read the auras of the woodcarvings in ways that should allow all Tileño artisans to produce equally auratic pieces the relative success of some artisans seems to call these readings into question.

As certain workshops produce more successful work than others, artisans' experiences surrounding this new divide in the market suggest that what makes the woodcarvings desirable is not so straightforward. The possibility that the woodcarvings are not purchased only for their status as authentic Oaxacan products raises anxieties about the auras and desirability of locally produced woodcarvings that can easily translate into concerns about copies. These anxieties, however, are not the same for all of the artisans involved. As I will show, different groups are worried about the factory copies for different reasons, and thus, there are actually multiple answers to Antonio's question, resulting from the different positions within the aesthetic field of Oaxacan woodcarving, and therefore the woodcarvings market.

Projections of anxiety: unstable auras in global markets of difference

Despite the fact that artisans' and state explanations of the threat of the InSpirers focused on the potential for economic and cultural loss, I argue that the real risk the resin copies posed was that they threatened to reveal the inconsistent and unstable nature of the aesthetic processes that take place in the production and

marketing of Oaxacan woodcarvings. From the perspective of aesthetic practices, rather than intellectual or cultural property, the threat that the InSpiriters posed is palpable and seems to be directed at the level of the genre rather than to any individual or group of artisans. Although the InSpiriters were copies of specific individuals' work, they were executed and promoted in ways that seemed to subtly reference the genre of Oaxacan woodcarvings, and therefore challenged the status of the woodcarvings as an exclusive aesthetic group. Because of this, it is logical that a collective, rather than individualised response took place.

I have shown that the auras of woodcarvings are greatly enhanced through touristic experiences that emplace the production of Oaxacan woodcarvings in locations that appear to be authentic or traditional (cf. Steiner 1995). The “authenticity” of these spaces is often enhanced by artisans by hiding televisions, computers and other “modern” goods and through explanations of kin and compadrazgo relations amongst workshop members (cf. Little 2004: 203-226). These explanations make the production of woodcarvings appear as the aesthetic and material result unalienated and collective family labour that is not disrupted by the capitalistic relationships of employment and commercialisation.

The importance of the emplacement of woodcarving production within the household workshops of San Martín was emphasised in a conversation I had with an American tourist one afternoon. She mentioned that she had recently read a blog online about the woodcarvings that had claimed that most of the commercial carvings in San Martín were “frauds” because they had actually been carved in San Pedro Tavicé, and that Tileño artisans were really just “middle men,” claiming the work of others as their own. Her concern about this situation, she said, was that she did not want to buy pieces

that were made through “exploiting relations,” as she had come to Oaxaca, rather than other tourism destinations in Mexico, in order to practise “fair trade tourism,” and to know the “real Mexico.” She was looking for reassurance that she could purchase carvings in San Martín from “the real artisans.”¹⁰⁷ Given the ways that aura is constructed around Oaxacan woodcarvings, all woodcarvings that are produced by Tileño artisans in San Martín should, in principle, have the same ability to satisfy touristic desires for the “really real” (Handler and Saxton 1988: 245). However, the relative success of some artisans seems to call the readings of the woodcarvings’ aura into question. As described in Chapter Four, Tileños know from experience that not all woodcarvings seem to have the same auratic power to invoke authority and desirability for consumers. The tense social relations that now have crystallised around the problem of competition indicate the kinds of anxieties that this contradiction provokes.

Daily life in San Martín has changed significantly in the past twenty years. This is, of course, only partially due to the introduction of woodcarving production, but participation in the tourist art economy is at the root of many changes, most importantly the perception of increasing inequality amongst villagers. Before the woodcarving period Tileño households had more or less equal access to the means by which they could earn a living. Since around 2000, however, woodcarving production has allowed a few families, like the Garcías and Castillos, to earn significantly more than their neighbours. The past ten years have also seen a greater number of workshops established along San Martín’s principal street, and inside these small workshops, literally hundreds of low and medium-priced woodcarvings sit, waiting to be bought by wholesalers or tourists. Very often, through their open front doors, the less successful

¹⁰⁷ Although I understood very well the complications involved in designating some workshops in San Martín as “real artisans” and others as “middlemen” (or “decorators”), I also could understand the motivations behind her sentiment, and directed her to a family workshop where pieces were entirely produced by the people who lived there.

carvers see tourists in private cars or groups in minivans fly past, heading for the workshops of the most well-known woodcarvers, a situation that, as Chapter Four shows, often leads to resentment.

Despite the fact that tourists believe the artisans produce their carvings through somehow natural or, at the very least traditional, aesthetic sensibilities, the character of the woodcarvings in San Martín has developed through an overt process of learning and experimentation. As I showed in Chapter Three, Miguel and Catalina have been particularly successful at differentiating their work from that of their neighbours by pushing the boundaries of the genre of Oaxacan woodcarving to include the aesthetics of ethnic art. Their ability to enact this kind of agency, whether through new aesthetic forms, or through the enhancement of business practices and relationships, is not the result of inspired genius as Western artistic and entrepreneurial discourses might hold, but rather has been gleaned from knowledge about the aesthetic expectations that already exist within the ethnic art world.

Not all Tileño artisans can access this knowledge equally however; Miguel and Catalina, and a few other successful families like the Castillos and Tomás Santiago, have benefitted from their long-standing friendships with key wholesalers, collectors and state officials, who constitute the woodcarvings' community of practice. These members of the community of practice function as gatekeepers and facilitators for artisans working in the tourist and ethnic art markets in Mexico and the United States and enhance artisans' success at constructing auras around their work. Opportunities to show their work at a wide variety of museums and up-market galleries have also exposed them to experts' discourses on skill and quality, giving them the language and

the means through which to match their work to the expectations of wealthier consumers.

Unsurprisingly, the Garcías have differentiated themselves from their neighbours by producing pieces that are both stylistically unique and very well executed, and therefore command much higher prices. While the source of their achievements became clear to me through my research, to their neighbours, their success was bewildering. Other artisans were aware of their relationships with gatekeepers, but did not know exactly what benefits these relationships provided. Most assumed they just purchased their work at higher prices. Many artisans also seemed genuinely confused about how Miguel and Catalina manage to sell their pieces for much greater amounts than they could. As all of the artisans use the same inexpensive materials to make their pieces, competition has created a large amount of anxiety and generated a lot of suspicion within the community.

Other Tileños also never have the opportunity see the multitude of ways that the Garcías add value to their products though the development of comfortable, yet authentic-feeling workshop spaces. Over time, they have heavily invested in the ambiance of their workshop, painting the walls in typically Mexican colours, landscaping their courtyard with beautiful local plants, and providing comfortable spaces for tourists to rest and, importantly, have a drink or use the washroom. Their demonstrations also clearly work to enhance the auras of the woodcarvings by explicating skilled work processes while at the same time grounding woodcarving production in an authenticating discourse of indigeneity. They have learned well the lessons of cultural tourism, and have in essence developed an event or experience built around the sale of their carvings. In this way they not only increase the prices they can

command, but also reinforce the aura of authenticity that tourists attach to their work, and set the standard for what “good” Oaxacan woodcarving looks like.

Tileño artisans, then, are highly aware that the auras of successful woodcarvings do not actually emerge from traditional capacities and techniques shared by all local people. Artisans operate in uneven and often secretive ways, and the means by which one learns what it is that tourists expect from their purchases are similarly often shrouded in mystery. The template of the successful woodcarving is surprisingly hard for some artisans to access, and direct knowledge of the consumer even more so. For the majority of artisans, the truth about the aura of their woodcarvings is uncertain, and this provides part of the answer to Antonio’s question. The reason that these artisans are concerned about the production of factory copies is that since they cannot be sure about what is actually driving tourists’ desires for their work, they also cannot be sure that the resin copies might not be able to meet these desires as well.

Given this, we might expect that successful artisans would be less concerned about the factory copies, since they seem to have learned the secret of the aura of their own work. Yet, as described above, Miguel and Catalina were major forces in the initial formation of the collective trademark union. Despite the culturalist tone of the discourse surrounding the development of the collective trademark, the Garcías’ enthusiasm is more intelligible when considered in terms of the energy and time they have invested in constructing the fragile aura and aesthetics of ethnic art around their woodcarvings. However, the Garcías are under no illusions that the touristic discourses might be right – that the aura of their work derives naturally from their authentic lifeways in the Mexican countryside. Instead, they know that this aura has been cultivated through hard work and knowledge gleaned from other people and contexts far removed from San Martín,

and that there is nothing stopping others from constructing auras around similar objects in the same way. In a private conversation, Miguel admitted that he was worried because, as he said, “the InSpiriters have even stolen my selling style, this American has learned my moves.”

The Garcías also know that the ethnic and tourist art markets, despite their apparent desires for authenticity, are susceptible to market pressures like costs of labour. For example, the Garcías personally know Zapotec weavers who have produced Navajo blanket designs at a fraction of the cost to sell in the United States (cf. M’Closky 2002: 192-204; Stephen 2005: 189-194). Thus the resin factory copies raise the spectre that their designs, which are not especially unique within the context of Mexican popular art, could move out of San Martín, potentially to a place where they could then be made in similar ways to the actual woodcarvings, challenging their economic positions.

Understandings of authorship in San Martín also contribute to the anxieties evoked by the InSpiriter figures. As I explored in Chapter Two, some artisans are effectively “detached” from the objects that they produce. While explanations of authorship seem to create clear lines between “producers” and named authors of styles, the morality of these processes sometimes is called into question, as in the case of Jaime whose family members worried that his talent was being “absorbed” into Miguel and Catalina’s stylistic repertoire. Another artisan admitted that he went to the regional museum of popular art to look in more detail at the pieces by the García and Castillo families in order to, as he put it “steal their inspirations.” He justified this action by claiming that that the Garcías and Castillos were creating an unfair playing field by keeping ideas to themselves, suggesting that if they had been more open from the beginning no one would steal their actual styles, just take inspiration from them. This

idea of circulating inspirations corresponds to the fuzzy line that other Tileño artisans draw between a common pool of culturally-inspired ideas and more privatised notions of “styles.” The uncertainty of where this line falls means that the morality of copying is up for negotiation, and therefore also produces apprehension amongst Tileños about how to appropriately develop their own aesthetic styles within the genre of Oaxacan woodcarving without crossing these lines.

The appeal to intellectual property protection for their designs, then, is precisely that – an attempt to protect the designs from use by other people, but specifically from other people who may also know how to build auras, which could make their products equally desirable to the tourists who consume the Oaxacan woodcarvings. This anxiety helps to explain the significant amount of attention paid by artisans to the establishment and implementation of rules surrounding production processes and which Oaxacans have the right to produce Oaxacan woodcarvings. Given the fact that they were invented by a single person who was not related to anyone from San Martín, it is clear that the ability to produce both the carvings and the auras that surround them could be easily adopted by anyone living in the state of Oaxaca, as the aesthetics and the genre are connected to the region, not to any specific community, culture or family.

In the case of Oaxacan woodcarvings, it is not immediately clear how the factory InSpiriter copies threaten their position in the tourist art market. For the tourists and collectors who are their primary consumers, the auras of woodcarvings are grounded by their emplacement in ostensibly authentic and traditional household workshops, located in the small rural community of San Martín Tilcajete. The resin copies, in contrast, are not produced under these conditions, nor do they claim to be. Instead, they are directed

towards an entirely different market in which they are desired for their reference to a generalised Native American spirituality.

Despite this, the factory copies generated a large amount of anxiety amongst the artisans who produce them, and I have shown that rather than a threat to the intellectual property of my informants, they rather threatened to reveal the inconsistent and unstable nature of the aesthetic processes that take place in the production and marketing of Oaxacan woodcarvings. For some of the artisans, this anxiety resulted from the fact that although tourists said the authenticity of the woodcarvings was due to their production in San Martín, not everyone seemed capable of producing equally desirable and authoritative carvings.

In this ethnographic context “disjunctures” did not occur so much between indigenous and Western notions of cultural production as in Myers’ work in Australia, but within the notion of authentic ethnic art itself. These disjunctures have frequently been beneficial for those artisans who have learned to add value to their work by enhancing their own pieces’ desirability in comparison to those of their neighbours. However, these disjunctures also made the successful artisans anxious because they are worried that the auras which they have worked so hard to construct around their woodcarvings could also be replicated elsewhere, and assigned to copies. Their knowledge of how the ethnic art market really operates, despite what the tourists think, reinforces this concern, as they know that cheaper labour is capable of producing authentic seeming objects that could then compete with their own work.

The InSpiriter copies also threatened to reveal the ability of the Mexican state to maintain and control its own symbols of national belonging and international

competitiveness; that China became the discursive villain in the story that state representatives told about the InSpirers indicates the force that anxieties about Mexico's position vis-à-vis China currently hold. In this case particularly, these anxieties were paired with the fact that artesanías have such a significant and important historical place within Mexican national imaginaries of belonging which have also favoured Oaxaca as a place of the “national soul.”

For both Tileño artisans and Oaxacan and Mexican bureaucrats, the InSpirers became an easily available symbolic surrogate – or even scapegoat – onto which anxieties about the genuineness of Oaxacan woodcarvings could be projected. Although these anxieties are partially generated by the capricious nature of ethnic art and tourism markets, they are also substantially grounded in the aesthetic practices through which woodcarvings are produced in the first place. By approaching aesthetic production and change as a form of practice that takes place within a relational field, the details of these anxieties could be teased out of more general analyses that lay tensions between local producers and global markets at the feet of debates about “authenticity” and “rights.” In the Oaxacan folktales that local newspaper accounts seem to echo, the Devil always wins. In this case, the artisans and the state officials are still not quite sure exactly what was signed away on those contracts, but one thing is clear; with the insertion of the language of intellectual property into their everyday understandings of their work, they certainly are not interested in making any more deals in the future.

Conclusion:
Art-like Auras for Craft-like Objects.
Or, An Aesthetic Theory of Craft Production

As I was preparing to leave Oaxaca and return to London in September, 2009, a package was delivered to the Garcías' home. Inside was a large carving of a fox, intricately painted in cream and charcoal black with deep red accents. Its body was turned so that the fox was looking over its shoulder, and the quality of the carving was so good, that it genuinely seemed to be peering at us as it sat upon the kitchen table. Although the paint work that cloaked the fox's form was bright, clear and fine across its back, the paint on its haunches and chest was flaking away in large patches, leaving the pale wood exposed. All across the piece, the smooth surface of the wood was gouged by small channels, each ending at a dark, perfectly round hole that bored straight into the heart of the wood.

Catalina sat at the table, considering the fox. It had been a special order from an American couple who gave it to their niece as a wedding gift. Less than a year later the evidence of the insect manifestation had appeared, and the customers were very upset. Their niece had sent the fox back to them, and they were uncertain whether they should have the piece replaced, or give her something else. Catalina was upset too; she could not believe that one of her pieces had been destroyed in this way. Partly, she was embarrassed as the appearance of the insects undermined her status as the producer of fine, high quality work. But she was also upset that the piece itself had been destroyed, that something that was made in her workshop was no longer a beautiful piece of art, but was rather now a piece of rubbish, neither useful nor beautiful. The aura had been broken.

I asked Catalina what she planned to do with the piece, as it was clear that it could not be salvaged or repaired. “I will put it in my living room, upstairs,” she said after a moment. “As a reminder that our pieces are real, they part of us, and that we must always take care with what we make with our own hands.”

* * * *

Daniel Miller and his “material cultures” colleagues have for some time asserted that physical objects are not passive features around which humans enact their social lives. Instead, they have shown in a multitude of contexts that “there can be no fundamental separation between humanity and materiality,” insisting that we take objects seriously as social participants in human lives and worlds (Miller 2005: 8). Taking objects seriously requires analytical strategies that can account for objects, the human worlds in which objects find themselves, *and* the fact that some objects demand more attention than others. Art objects are notoriously demanding. As the epigraph to the introduction suggests, it is their power to “fascinate, compel, and entrap” viewers that makes them so effective as social devices (Gell 1998: 23). I have argued in this thesis that this power to fascinate and compel is best approached through Benjamin’s concept of the “aura” of works of art, which is understood as the impression of “genuineness” and “authority” that a work emanates.

Although Benjamin’s attention was turned to the aesthetic, sensory and political processes of the “West” in the early twentieth century, this thesis has shown that his formulation can be usefully remade to serve the purposes of anthropology today. I have argued that the aura is useful for the anthropological study of art-like and craft-like objects because it allows for a multiplicity of aesthetic readings by many different viewers. It can therefore take into account not only the politics of display and curation,

but also the variety of ways that different kinds of viewers encounter and engage with works of art. At the same time, it provides an analytical link to the aesthetic practices through which artisans produce and establish their work, thus connecting important anthropological research on “the politics of culture” to recent debates on the nature of skilled work and artisanal labour. This ability of the aura to contain this multiplicity is especially useful for the study of craftwork that is now produced all around the world and circulates in global markets of ethnic and cultural difference, as they almost inevitably encounter a much greater variety of viewers than is normally expected within more traditional art worlds.

However, as my thesis shows, the auratic power of aesthetic objects cannot be assumed *a priori*, but rather must be ethnographically explored within a given context. Not all objects are equally able to assert their authority or genuineness, rendering some more desirable than others. Because of this, I have suggested – at least in contexts like Oaxaca where groups of people are dedicated to producing the same kind of objects – that the anthropology of art must also address itself to the level of genre, and not just individual pieces or even individual artisans. I have argued that genres can be understood as relational “aesthetic fields” where objects are never produced as single, independent compositions, but rather are created within an already-existing aesthetic topography that both conditions the aesthetic possibilities of production, and at the same time is generated by aesthetic practices. By addressing genres in this way, artisans’ own creative agency is foregrounded within a topic that often characterises them as reactive to the demands of the market and powerful others.

These others, of course, are very important to the processes that work to define and reproduce genres, but I argue that they cannot be understood as straightforward

“influences on” the aesthetics that artisans produce. Instead, following Wood (2008), I suggest that they join artisans in a “community of practice,” where aesthetic expectations are generated, negotiated and transformed. As communities of practice are synergetic and dynamic worlds, where individual actors may not know (nor even be aware of) many of the other actors, they are often complicated and unpredictable in the ways that they influence the aesthetic practices of artisans.

My thesis, therefore, contributes to the anthropological study of craft objects by suggesting a theoretical model that connects three conceptual levels: (1) the aesthetic and productive practices of individual artisans and the ways these practices render their work authoritative (“aura”); (2) the relationships between the aesthetic practices of artisans, which form genres (“the aesthetic field”); and (3) the generative social contexts in which aesthetic practices take place (“community of practice”). Through exploring these three conceptual levels, my thesis has shown that the “art-like” qualities of craftwork are not incidental to the experiences of artisans in their everyday lives, but rather, aesthetics actually condition and influence the politics and culture of artisanal production.

A number of important themes have emerged in this thesis through my exploration of these processes in San Martín Tilcajete. Firstly, the relationship between aesthetics and politics has been shown not only to be significant, but to play out in very different ways at different social levels or positions. That aesthetic authority can translate quite easily into political authority and vice-versa is not in itself a new point, but my work shows that the mechanisms by which these translations take place are grounded in the varying social contexts in which they occur. The intimacy of the household workshop conditions the relationship between power and aesthetics in ways

very different to the public spaces of the community, the ideological spaces of nation states, and the globalised spaces of tourist and ethnic art markets.

Secondly, the practice of aesthetics has been shown to be intimately connected to experiences of “belonging.” In the case of Tileños, their work as aesthetic producers has drawn them towards articulations of indigeneity which previously had not been important “hues” with which they draw connections to other people. As their work has been increasingly addressed as material representations of indigeneity through the ethnic art market, this mode of belonging has gained importance for Tileños, albeit in divergent ways. At the same time, as producers of artesanías in Mexico, they are also inexorably located at the heart of national processes of belonging, so that their work, their lives and their travails come to be issues of national importance, at least discursively by the state, tourism and culture industries that continue to place Mexican artesanías at the heart of definitions of Mexicanness.

Thirdly, I have shown that Tileños’ aesthetic practices are also linked to the important theme of work and morality. As Tileños do not make woodcarvings from a straightforward desire to produce “art for art’s sake,” aesthetics in this context must be understood as socially relevant features within a more general economy of community-driven notions of “good work” and “good practice.” As the ability to enact aesthetic agency is unevenly distributed amongst artisans, these practices cannot be divorced from the moral evaluations through which others understand and describe them. This is especially important in contexts like San Martín, where the location of the aesthetic field is coterminous with the geographical-historical community, which exists independently of woodcarving production, but is now greatly influenced by it.

Finally, the connected themes of authorship and property in relation to aesthetics have emerged as an important topic within this thesis. Both at the micro-level of workshop production processes, and at the macro-levels of international regimes of intellectual property, the idea that aesthetics can be owned and controlled is an increasingly important issue that anthropologists of craftwork must engage with. Like the relationship between aesthetics and power, my thesis shows that the propertisation of aesthetics plays out in very different ways at different social levels. The concept of “authorship” in San Martín works to maintain inalienable connections between some artisans and their work, while detaching others from their products. The ambiguities in local understandings of “style” show that these processes of authorship are neither consistent nor complete, as artisans struggle to define exactly what constitutes an individual’s style and what is undermined when other artisans copy her or his work.

At the same time, different processes of propertisation take place within the contexts of global ethnic art markets via discourses of intellectual property, as artisans and state actors attempt to draw boundaries around who can legitimately produce Oaxacan woodcarvings. I have argued that the uncertainties in the relationships between aesthetics and property are both generated by, and in turn reproduce, anxieties about the status of aesthetics and competitiveness within increasingly precarious and unpredictable markets, thus encouraging artisans and the state to try to control aesthetics through “sequestering strategies” (Aragon 2011: 71-73). Consequently, these strategies have now become an integral part of the practice of aesthetics in many places around the world, especially those contexts where the aesthetics of subalterns continue to be used by others for their own agendas and benefits.

These four general themes, when taken in the context of my central arguments about aesthetic practice in the production of craftwork, suggest new directions that the anthropology of craft may take. We must be keen to look for new intersections between the anthropology of craft and other fields within the discipline. Through my investigation of the aesthetics of craft, I see new fruitful lines of inquiry that can allow craft scholars to contribute to broader debates about property, morality, power and the nature of aesthetic authority in today's world. Although I have only touched on it in this thesis, the anthropology of craft also has the potential to critically engage with new debates about production, work and entrepreneurialism under regimes of neoliberalism. Soumhya Venkatesan's work on artisans in India is a good example of research that speaks beyond the craft context and engages literatures that are more often focused on industrial and commercial spaces (2009).

The anthropology of craft also can make significant contributions to larger understandings of art and cultural production. Although this seems like an obvious link, it has only been recently that craft anthropologists have begun to take a step back from "the politics of culture" debates to engage with the issues of materiality, value and agency that are raised in the work of Gell, Myers and Miller amongst others. I am particularly keen to explore how the grammars of genre, aesthetics and style work to produce and reproduce objects and subjectivities within the everyday work lives of artisans. Finally, there are also fruitful discussions that are now taking place amongst craft scholars about the methodological problems that we face when trying to understand and write about processes that are difficult to "get at" through traditional participant observation and interview techniques. Apprenticeship-as-research has opened up this discussion and indicates that anthropological insights can be developed

through practice as well as participation, and I would like to explore this in relation to aesthetic practice in the future (cf. O'Connor 2005; Marchand 2010).

The artisans of San Martín Tilcajete see themselves as aesthetic producers whose work has authority and value in its own right. While this authority is derived from their own practices of production in their workshops and is the product of their own creative work, thoughts and ideas, like Catalina above, artisans experience the auras of their woodcarvings as a force separate from themselves. That the woodcarvings have transformed San Martín from an unknown tiny village in the hinterlands of the Valles Centrales, into an important place where foreigners, state officials and others visit, shows the power that these carvings can have. At the same time, this power, or aura, is not completely knowable, and appears too delicate, ephemeral and unstable to be trusted. Many do not really understand why certain carvings seem to be more auratic than others; why certain artisans develop “names,” and whether copies of their work are likely to continue. Despite the fact that woodcarving has given Tileños an important and relatively secure source of economic stability, the fact that their desirability is somewhat mysterious also makes people nervous. Artisans now worry that “there aren’t many roads out of San Martín,” and the futures of the market are uncertain. Just as the fox carving lost its aura through a loss of authority, they worry that the desirability of woodcarvings may not sustain everyone in the future.

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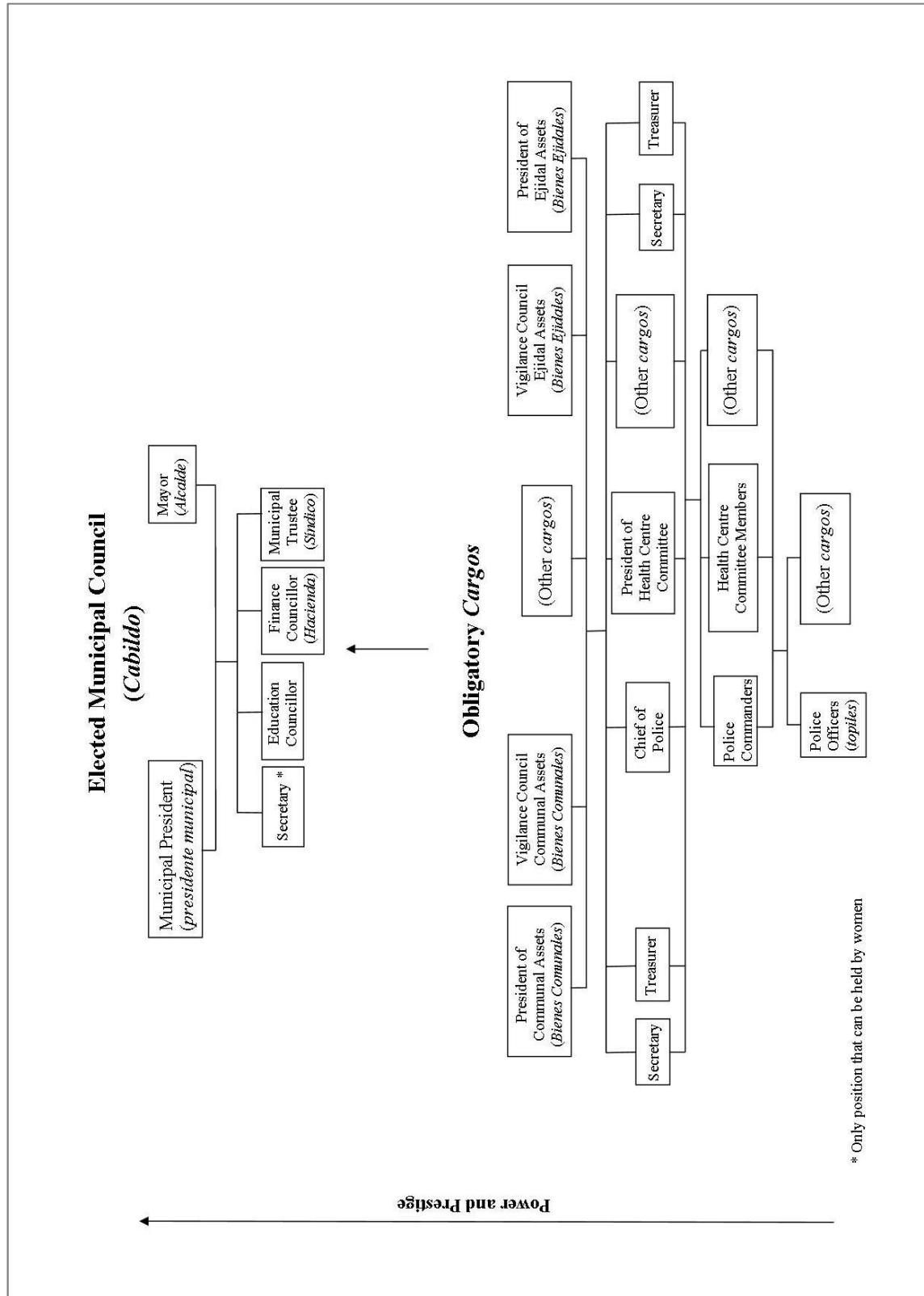
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Appendix 1

Structure of the “cargo” system under *usos y costumbres* in the municipality of San Martín Tilcajete



Appendix 2

General layout of the workshop of Miguel and Catalina García. All workshop/rest areas are “open air.” Arrows indicate the general path of tourists through the workshop during demonstrations.

