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Fantastic Figures of Ocumicho

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Rosa, a young potter, painting one of the figures

Fantastic Figures of Ocumicho

Potter visitors to the exhibition 'The Life of the Dead in Mexican Folk Art' (Serpentine Gallery, London, December 1987 - January 1988) were delighted and intrigued by some colourful ceramic figures from the village of Ocumicho. Joe Molinaro whilst at the Art Department of Broward Community College, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, travelled to the village and reports on what he saw and photographed.

Heading west out of Mexico City, some 8½ hours by train, 3 hours by bus, and still another 45 minutes by local transport, you will arrive deep within the Mexican state of Michoacan at a village called Ocumicho. This small village (about 300 families) is built on a series of dusty dirt roads that sharply move up and down and squeeze in tightly between rows of small adobe houses. The mountains in the near distance provide a scenic backdrop for a village that is slow-paced and quiet, except for the occasional grinding sound of a farm truck filled with workers, animals, or goods, bouncing across the rough terrain. After strolling through the streets of the village, making conversation with the locals and enjoying the relaxed pace of their daily activities, one is certain to notice the quick attention given to the questions concerning the location of the small group of potters (approximately 60-70 families) who make the celebrated

clay work referred to only as "figuras fantasticas" (fantastic figures) of Ocumicho.

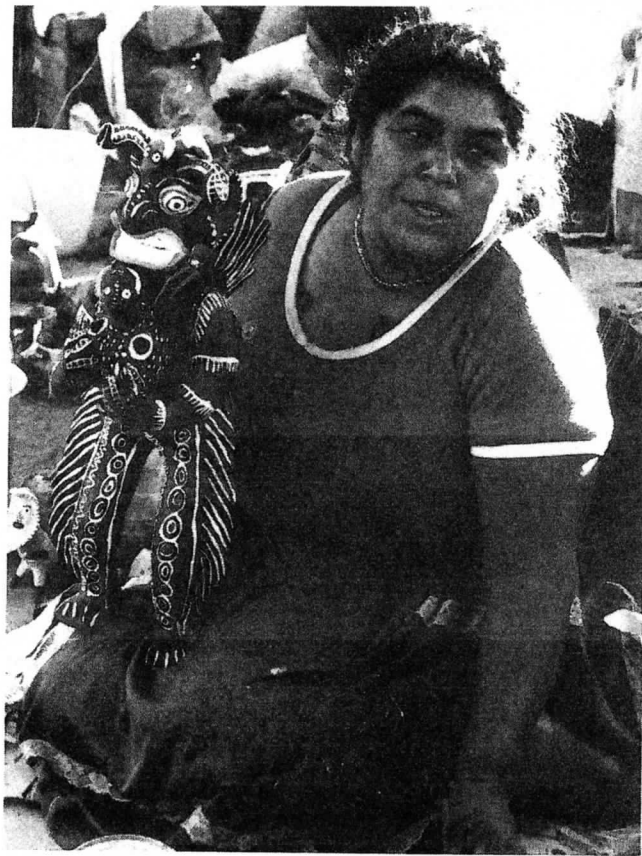
These ceramic pieces, all hand built out of terra cotta clay from the nearby village of San Jose, are once fired in small round wood burning kilns and finished by painting with water-based paints and then varnished. The unique qualities in these pieces, aside from their extravagant use of bright colours, are the rather surrealistic scenes depicted in so much of the work.

There appear to be three general categories of scenes produced in this tiny village, which is the only place in Mexico where they are made. The first is the manger/shrine type which usually has some religious reference, be it baptism, crucifixion, gathering of saints, or even a last supper in which all the disciples are sitting around a table, each holding a slice of watermelon, or even bananas (all brightly coloured). These are often sold during the Christmas or Easter season and have a holy reference, even though there appears to be an interesting blend of Christianity and paganism playfully intermixed within so much of the work. (This blend of Christian and pagan elements being woven together is quite common in Central America.)

Another variation in the type of scene produced by this small group of potters is that of animals. These are perhaps the most original, as they were some of the first created, going back several generations. In the beginning they were made in moulds and then brightly coloured; however,

Opposite page: Devils in the classroom

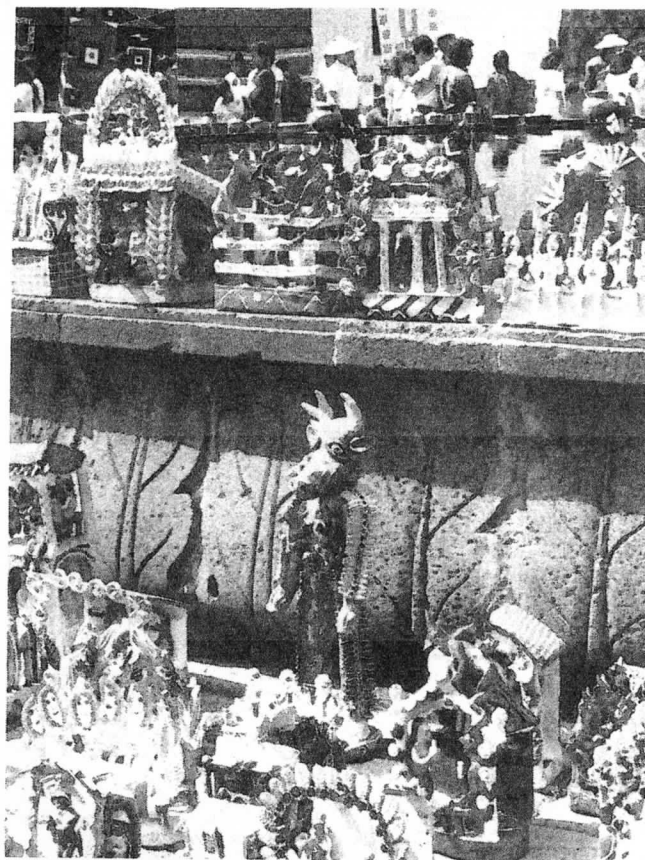
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Marta, one of the potters, with decorated figure

through the years the potters have turned entirely to hand-forming the pieces as well as developing other subject matters. These animals – cows, donkeys, pigs, and other more surrealistic creatures – are all made to be in a variety of positions and scenes, many of which double as flutes and whistles. These, too, are playful in their positions and certainly function nicely as a child's toy. It is with these animals that the tradition of claywork began in Ocumicho years ago (date unknown) and eventually became the work that is known throughout Mexico today.

Lastly, the third, and perhaps most interesting work done by these people today, are the surrealistic devil figures (complete with fangs, horns, tails, etc.). These devils, which are symbolic of Judas, were first made about 25 years ago and have become increasingly popular. The devils are found in a variety of comic situations, from driving VWs and motorcycles while wearing backpacks and goggles, to sitting in rows on benches while being taught to read and write. Other situations in which one might find a group of these mischievous yet funny characters is hanging onto the rear of a Coca Cola truck (complete with bottles and logo), with their eyes wide open and devilish smirks that suggest they are up to no good. These surrealistic devil scenes are regularly sought after by collectors. The increase in production of these devil scenes is the result of the demand the tourists and collectors are now making for them, thus accounting for their all year round popularity. Although the devils started out as being symbolic of Judas and were originally used as minor characters with the animal figures (i.e. devils riding on the backs of large pigs), you will now find them in many different situations, most of which have little or no meaning for their makers. They now claim that the devils sell well and are what the tourists want. Despite this lack of meaning and departure from any real sense of symbolism, the pieces are indeed a pleasure to have and enjoy.



Wares on display at Patzcuaro

The figures themselves are usually made by the mothers and daughters of the village, most having learned from a handed-down tradition going back several generations. It is quite common for them to have the work area in the house (houses having a floor space not much larger than 10ft. x 10ft.). Within this rather confined living space, it is usual to find a shrine of holy pictures complete with flowers and religious statues, as well as a bed for sleeping. An additional sleeping area might be found in the loft above, which is often accessible only by a ladder. It is in this narrow space that much of the painting of the clay pieces is done. There are usually larger outdoor areas separating one small structure from another which serve as a small courtyard and workspace when the weather is satisfactory.

All in all, living and working is integrated into one total environment and is oftentimes shared by not only the immediate family, but neighbours as well. One might find two or three daughters, some even nursing infants of their own while they work, painting and varnishing the figures for long hours, seven days a week. The mother will most likely be the main producer, with the daughters assisting with the completion of the pieces. It is not so common to have the husbands producing the work (even though some do), yet they are instrumental in winning the clay and gathering wood for the kilns, and for selling the figures in the markets. Since the women seem to stay close to home, it is not surprising to learn that many of them still speak much of their native Indian dialect and not so much Spanish as do their husbands, who have reason to travel outside the village more often.

Over the past several years, and despite their increased popularity, these figures have sometimes been difficult to find. This is largely due to the fact that the Indians making them are comparatively isolated (geographically), being in a rather remote and inaccessible location. Selling the work can be a problem, since very few visitors ever make it to the



ABOVE Amelia decorating while feeding her child. *RIGHT* Ocumicho's cobblestone street.

village. They therefore have to travel to markets in Morelia, the capital of Michoacan and its largest city, where buyers from Mexico City come to purchase goods. It would be common for a family to make about 8 to 10 trips a year in order to sell their wares.

Another way of selling is during the many festivals which are so common throughout Mexico. The most important festival time for these potters is during the famous celebration of the Night of the Dead (Noche de Muertos). This fiesta, which takes place on November 1st, is traditionally celebrated on the Island of Janitzio (within Lake Patzcuaro) and the small town of Tzintzuntzan. The nearby city of Patzcuaro (pop. 40,000) becomes the centre for tourists who have come there from all over the world. There is candy in the shape of skulls on every corner and music filtering through the small cobblestone streets, as well as many traditional crafts being sold. The lively carnival atmosphere lends itself nicely to the colourful and bizarre scenes made by the potters of Ocumicho, which are now spread out on the ground everywhere in the town square. It is during this celebration that the potters can sell their fantastic figures firsthand.

While the tools are simple (brushes made of human hair, as well as sticks and gourds for shaping), their products have a unique quality and charm all their own. The work is alive and playful, with bright colours that vibrate against



a landscape that is dominated by the hues of terra cotta, brown and gold – with fields of grass and dry corn. They are truly fantastic figures and are certain to be around long into the future for the enjoyment and admiration of all.