

various

amber

A fossilized form of tree resin, amber is usually set in gold and silver to make jewelry. Since pre-Hispanic times, Chiapas has been an important source for this material, which may be hard or brittle, opaque or transparent, and, occasionally, veined.

obsidian

Usually black, gray, green, or brown, with a glassy appearance, obsidian is an ancient vitrified mineral formed from cooled volcanic lava. Artists use manual and power tools to shape the stone. Once the desired shape has been obtained, artists polish the stone to make its veins stand out.

shell

Abalone shells are widely used in Guerrero to make figures, boxes, and other objects for decorative and utilitarian purposes. Miniature musical instruments, mirrors, and wooden boxes are made with abalone in Hidalgo.

Usually abalone and sea snail shells are decorated with carved fretwork (ornamental work with interlacing, cut-out parts), cameo (a method of producing a design by cutting into the outer layer to reveal an under layer of a different color), and inlay. Abalone and sea snail shells are also worked with the same techniques as stone: percussion, pressure, and abrasion.

coconut shell

This tradition originated during Spanish rule, when coconuts were used as coin banks and as vessels for drinking chocolate. Then and now, the shells are usually framed with silver stands to ease handling.

Artists in the Tabasco area still produce carved coconut shells. The craftsmen go directly to palm groves to obtain the fruit, which is cleaned to remove the meat. After being scraped smooth, it is sanded, and designs are drawn on it. The shell is sanded again, and lines are scored, removing several layers of the shell to highlight the design. Finally, the carved shells are polished, oiled, and smoked to create their characteristic dark finish.

horn

Traditional horn work is done mainly in the State of Mexico, where artists make animal-shaped combs. Containers for mescal (liquor made from distilled maguey) are made in Guerrero, as well as handles for machetes. Horn figurines are made in Chiapas and Guerrero.

Horn must be heated so it can be stretched and cut. Artists also use pressure and abrasion to work the material. Fretwork is done with small electric or manual drills, sanders, and fine drill-bits.

ancient reproductions

Throughout Mexico, artists are recovering lost craft techniques to reproduce the art of ancient Mesoamerica. The distinctive pottery of pre-Hispanic Tarascans is being reproduced today in Michoacán, where artists have rediscovered traditional ways of making *ollas pipa* (pots with a spout), *patojos* (long, oval shaped vessels), and pitchers decorated with geometric shapes. In the Yucatán, artists are reproducing pre-Hispanic Mayan pottery, making cups and serving plates decorated with images of popular figures, hieroglyphics, and mythical birds. In eastern Mexico, artists are following the pre-Hispanic tradition of making pottery that captures vignettes of daily life.

gold and silver

Filigree is made by filling frames of gold or silver with threads of the same material to create leaves, broken lines, and spirals. Many of these works are complemented with carved amber.

The works *Nacimiento* (Nativity Scene) and *Carabelas* (Caravels) — shown in the exhibition — are also made in filigree. Other examples of filigree from the Yucatán include the gold and silver rosaries, the bracelet, the earrings, and the necklace.

The necklaces and the pin in the exhibition were made using the lost wax technique. In this process, the piece is carved in wax and covered in plaster to create a cast. Hot metal is poured into the cast. When the wax melts, it drains through a hole, and the metal takes its shape. Later the cast is broken, and the piece's details are refined.

knives and daggers

A great master from Jalisco made the steel knives and daggers in the exhibition. The handles, which have engraved designs, are made of reindeer horn, bone, and wood. The dagger handles are inlaid with a variety of materials.

figures for "curing the air" illness

Made near Tlayacapan, Morelos, these small clay figures are used in healing rituals, specifically one called *curas de aire*, or "the air cures." Some of the figures represent snakes, toads, scorpions, and other animals. There are also figures of men riding bulls or donkeys, long-eared female figures, and a healer, kneeling by a sick person.

In some cultures it is believed that the "air" comes from anthills where coral snakes live; thus both ants and snakes are thought to cause the illness. To alleviate it, a healer must cleanse the patient four times. Before the last cleansing, the healer dreams about the offering to be carried to the anthill: a boiled black hen, salt-free bread, tamales, fruit, cigarettes, and the 12 clay figures. A cigarette is tied to the figures with red thread. Once the offering is ready, the fourth cleansing is completed. The healer presents the offering to the anthill, lights several candles, and prays to the animals that live in the anthill.