

Mexican Folk Art

Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca: Color Alchemy

Oaxaca has towns that invite us to marvel at their art and creativity. Touring the towns and visiting the family workshops, small cooperatives and galleries is a rich experience. Teotitlán del Valle is located only 26 kilometers from the Oaxacan capital and it is a delight to meet its weavers who intertwine years of history and experience in their colorful wool carpets.

Teotitlán has a fantastic, bustling, and dynamic market. This is where I first met Eugenia Mendoza 10 years ago. She immediately introduced me to her friends and we bought some yolk bread, flowers and incense for her Day of the Dead altar. Then we walked to her house and she gave me a tour of her garden full of delicacies. She showed me which plants were medicinal and which ones she used as coloring for her rugs.

In the courtyard of her house, she had prepared all the natural dyes that she uses to dye the skeins of wool that she has hanging all over her workshop. She explained to me where each color came from and how many people were involved in the process. Her husband Antonio, her niece Lupita, her mother-in-law Alfonsina and her son Luis all work together.

Mexican Folk Art



Alfonsina, the matriarch of the family

Alfonsina has a wonderful skill. She showed us how to card the wool and then use the spinning wheel to spin it. Her fingers glided gently over the wool until they joined the threads that formed the skeins in natural shades. She smiled all the time because she does not speak Spanish, but she addressed us with a few words in Zapotec that Eugenia then translated. She let us know how happy she was to show us the traditions of Teotitlán del Valle.

Mexican Folk Art

Eugenia shared with me that when she had visited Mexico City to give a demonstration of her dyes in a high school, the chemistry teacher told her: "Eugenia, by preparing the colors you become an alchemist." And yes, she combines all the elements, leaves, minerals and lemon drops, in such a natural way that it is difficult to realize all the knowledge that is behind this tradition.

This is the recipe for the colors:

| Color | Plant or mineral |
|--------|--|
| Black | Jet |
| Blue | Indigo |
| Red | Cochineal grain |
| Yellow | Rock moss for a variety of yellows or pericon flowers (Mexican marigold) |

Mexican Folk Art



Hanks of wool in various colors ready to be used

These four colors are used to dye the wool. As a fixative, they use salt, ashes, lye and lime lye. To achieve other shades they often mix colors, for example, moss green is created with indigo. The tone will depend on the color of the yarn. When the yarn is white, beige or gray, the green tones are achieved, while purple is achieved by mixing the cochineal with indigo, blue with red.

Mexican Folk Art



Detail of one of the rugs from Teotitlán del Valle

The process is long and meticulous, but the results are fantastic. The artist must have patience and learn the craft from an early age. The time required to make a rug can vary from 3 to 6 months, working up to 6 hours a day. I remember that on one occasion, when I returned to Teotitlán, I saw Antonio teach a young American woman how to card the wool. The student told me that she was a specialist in textiles and that she would spend the entire summer in Teotitlán learning from Antonio and Eugenia. The following year when I returned to Teotitlán, I asked Antonio about his student. And he told me: “Well,

Mexican Folk Art

she didn't last long here. She was only with us for a week because she didn't get used to carding the wool.”

The art of making carpets is an activity that requires a deep passion and a great determination to achieve a precise work.

The traditional design of Teotitlán del Valle's rugs are geometrical designs such as Mitla's greca, which we talk about in another article. The artisans are also inspired by the iconography of Monte Albán and the seals of pre-Hispanic Mexico published by Jorge Enciso in his book *Diseños del México Antiguo*.



Detail of one of the fretworks of Mitla, Oaxaca

Mexican Folk Art

Today it is possible to visit the extraordinary Community Cultural Center in Teotitlán del Valle, which exhibits the cultural and material wealth of the area, highlighting a collection of archaeological pieces, as well as a collection of ancient and contemporary textiles from Teotitlán.

Zapotec artisans have made inroads since the '70s and '80s with designs by accomplished artists such as: Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and Joan Miró. This gives us a sample of their extraordinary skill and ability. The more conservative workshops prefer to continue with traditional greca and other geometric designs. In any case, it is a delight for the senses to admire the designs produced in Teotitlán.

I invite you to visit these workshops that tell stories that unite up to four generations around the looms, the threads and the geometric designs that evoke ancient times.



Live this experience on your trip to Oaxaca. [Book now.](#)

Between Murals and Stained Glass Windows



by Dr. Marina Aguirre

Available now at BucketlistMexico.com

Click on the eBook
to see the Table of Contents