Arts and trades

The Purépecha peoples already worked wood, clay, metal and textiles. The decisive influence of Don Vasco turned typical survival tasks into professions, introducing new techniques that improved the workshops. His main contribution was to make each community specialize in one specific trade. Trades fostered commerce and exchange, and with that wealth, the new world he dreamed of flourished.

Today’s craftsmen continue to be the guardians of the complex techniques of the trades of the past. Musicians from all over the world come to Paracho to buy guitars. The delicate lacquer work is exhibited in art galleries. The art of manual work is not just a thing of the past: it is the future.

There are many villages that have benefitted from the ‘skillful hands’ of the famous Spanish Mexican Utopia: Uruapan, with its lacquers, gourds, tubs and masks made using the pre-columbian lacquer technique; Paracho, with its guitars and other musical instruments as well as furniture; Santa Clara, with its utensils -sickles, hoes, axes, candelabra- made of copper; Jaracuaro and Paracho, with their straw hats and mesh seine fishing nets; San Felipe, with its ironwork and locksmithing; Nurío, Capacuaro and Aranza, with their woolen textiles; Teremendo, with its leather tannery and footwear; San Juan Parangaricutiro, with its embroidered quilting; Tzintzuntzan, Patamban, Santa Fe de la Laguna and Capula, with their pottery work; Pátzcuaro, with its painting with colors diluted in oil and paintings of mosaics with hummingbird feathers and colored woods; Quiroga, with its tubs; Oponguio and Yotátiro, with their grinding stones and mortars; and finally, the lake islands and coastal villages, with their mesh and net technique for fishing whitefish.

Teremendo’s activity is referred to by Vasco de Quiroga in one of his letters when he reported that its inhabitants’ trade is “… to tan leather and make soap and leather horse saddles and shoes and slippers and other things that provide them with a living.”

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Trades fostered commerce and exchange, and with that wealth, the new world he dreamed of flourished. Trades such as the following: woodcutter and worker (from whom carpenters derived), barn makers (wooden houses), home furniture, canoes, carts, tubs, barrels, spoons, knives, kitchen utensils and luthier activities (guitars, violins, double basses, vihuelas, etc.) He also fostered the cutting and working of quarry stone, tezontle, stone, bricklaying, textiles, weaving of different fibers, embroidery, blankets, overcoats, hats, satchels, basket work, saints’ images or sculptures, gold and silver work, pottery in all its expressions and ironwork such as the kind Santa Clara del Cobre has made universal.

Another trade must be remembered, traditional Mexican cooking, recently declared by Unesco (November 2010) Intangible World Heritage, which is an acknowledgment of its diversity, authenticity and richness. From their homes or ‘paranguas’ (a type of cooking in pots on stones) decorated with enormous bunches of flowers, Purepecha cooks have kept alive the gastronomic traditions (men tend to call their women “tzitzikicha”, which in Purepecha means flowers). There, amid earthenware bowls, jugs and clay pots, the burners are made ready for the encounter between pork and corn, cecina with nopal (cactus paddles) and corn with all foods. Food follows the rhythm of the seasons. In the rainy season, the different varieties of quelite are foremost; at Easter time, once platos (eleven dishes) dominate whereas in Spring, the main ingredient is squash flowers, the daughters of the sun. Next to them are the cheeses, candies, soups, vegetables, stews, meats and white fish. In the forest areas near the lakes there are over forty varieties of edible mushrooms. And always, beans, zucchini and chilies accompanying a large number of dishes, such as corundas (corn dough tamales filled with cheese and seasoned with cream) or chile de árbol sauce (hot red sauce), chicken from the plaza (market) (enchiladas from the plaza accompanied by a piece of chicken, vegetables, cheese and crispy potatoes), white or red pozole (a type of soup), quesadillas on the grill or deep fried, sopes, tacos, gorditas or uchepos (sweet or savory tamales made of corn, sweet or savoury). To accompany these dishes, you can choose from plain or flavored atole, tamales, fresh water prepared with fruits of the season and buñuelos, crispy fried pancakes with brown sugar syrup.