

## The Ethnic Community

When we think of American folklife, our thoughts quite rightly turn first to the wisdom, lore and lifestyles of the many ethnic groups whose members came and developed American culture and society. This year the Festival celebrates the cultural heritage of Mexican-Americans, whose hand-wrought objects and craft skills will be presented in several exhibits on the Mall and within Smithsonian museums. Another aspect of ethnic heritage is to be found at the Ellis Island presentation in the Museum of History and Technology's Nation of Nations exhibit, where members of several ethnic groups recount tales of a quintessential ethnic experience: immigration.



## Mexican American Crafts and Household Arts

*Susan Kalčík and Alicia Gonzalez*

The Mexican-American crafts and foodways presentations will explore some traditions transplanted from Mexico and some that were developed or adapted in the United States by a richly creative culture. Both in Mexico and the United States, traditions vary widely; thus the crafts and household arts described here represent only part of the Mexican-American folk culture.

*Talabartería* is Spanish for "saddlery" and Sr. Emiliano Peña of Rosemead, Cal., is a *talabartero* or saddle maker. He has worked with leather since his youth when he learned to make miners' shoes in his home town of Cananea, Sonora. In northern Sonora the western saddle is common and this is the type Sr. Peña makes. His first step is to select and measure the leather needed and to cut it into the various proportions for the different parts of the saddle. If the saddle is to be ornamented, he will select a design from his repertoire and trace it onto the leather. Or he may place a previously engraved piece of leather, design side down, on the new piece and hammer it with a mallet to leave the outline he wants. Then he will engrave or tool the leather, using hammers and special knives or blades. Next the leather is dyed and later molded onto the rawhide and wooden seat prepared by the carpenter and

the tanner or *tanero*. Finally, other parts of the saddle, such as the stirrups, are added.

Sr. Ruben Delgado, a silversmith or *platero*, makes various silver ornaments used by Mexican and western saddlemakers and buyers. He often works with Sr. Peña on the design and production of saddles. He learned his silvercraft (*platería*) in Guadalajara, Jalisco. All his engraving is done by hand, working on a small anvil.

Mrs. Julia López of Los Angeles is a needlecraft artist who does much of the traditional work known in central Mexico. She does *deshilado* or open-work stitchery in which threads are pulled from cotton or linen and then reworked to create various patterns. This is delicate and detailed work which resembles lace and filigree. It is rarely done today because of the eye-strain it causes. The *deshilado* is used on everything from tablecloths to baby's clothing. In Jalisco, tablecloths are often made by a group of people, as quilts might be made in a quilting bee. Mrs. López is also noted for her cross-stitch (*cruzeta*), crochet, and filet lace or *encaje* made on a flat, tin ring. She is an artist in paper too, making *piñatas* and paper flowers.

*Tallado a mano*, woodcarving by hand, is the craft of Sr. Alejandro Gómez of Tucson, Ariz., a craft he has passed on to his children. He makes religious figures, *santos*, carved entirely of wood; and *bultos*, whose faces or busts, arms, and legs are sculpted from wood but whose bodies are shaped with sticks and fabric. The carved head is then cut in half and hollowed out so that eyes made of glass beads can be set into the sockets. The sculpted pieces are then covered with *Blanco de España*, a thin gesso that provides a base for later painting.

Mrs. Rosa Estanislada de Haro is a sculptor too, but her medium is a mixture of glucose, unflavored gelatin, egg white, and powdered sugar. This

---

*Susan Kalčík has worked with the Smithsonian Institution Folklife Programs since 1975. She is a doctoral candidate in folklore and anthropology at the University of Texas, Austin, specializing in American ethnicity.*

*Alicia Gonzalez is a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Austin and a consultant for the Smithsonian Institution.*

*Crochet work is only one of many needlework traditions from Jalisco and central Mexico. Mrs. Julia López of Los Angeles, Cal. continues the tradition, passing it on to her children.*

*Photo by Alicia Gonzalez for the Smithsonian.*





Carving religious figures, santos and bultos, is a typical folk craft of the Mexican American culture in our Southwest. Sr. Alejandro Gomez, senior, also carves wood panels and doors. His son has adapted some of the designs from wood carving to the decorations on leather boots.

Photo by Alicia Gonzalez for the Smithsonian.

sugar paste is called *pastillaje* or *al-fenique*, and her craft is that of the *dulceria*. Her sweets are made in the shape of toys, houses, dolls, and symbols of various holidays and celebrations. These are painted with a fine brush and thick food coloring.

The crafts and household arts of our Mexican American neighbors demonstrate how creativity and the desire for beauty pervade the everyday activities of home and work as well as the special events of holidays and celebrations.



Mrs. Rosa de Haro holds a doll made of candy, an example of the *dulceria* tradition which is the making of dolls, houses, furniture, and other miniatures from sugar paste and marzipan.

Photo by Alicia Gonzalez for the Smithsonian.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahlborn, Richard E. Saints and Brothers, *Americas*, 22:9 (September, 1970), 6-13. (See for brief discussion of Smithsonian holdings of Hispanic ethnographic objects especially religious art.)
- Bourke, John G. The Folk-Foods of the Rio Grande Valley and of Northern Mexico, *Journal of American Folklore* 8 (1895), 41-71.
- Heisley, Michael. An Annotated Bibliography of Chicano Folklore from the Southwestern United States. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology, 1977.
- Shalkop, Robert. The Folk Art of a New Mexican Village. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1969.
- Toor, Frances. A Treasury of Mexican Folkways. New York: Crown Publishers, 1947.