

Porfirio Gutierrez

Weaver from Teotitlán Del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico

Porfirio Gutierrez was born and raised in Teotitlan Del Valle, Oaxaca Mexico, an important center of Zapotec culture and weaving tradition. The Zapotec weavings are made of hand spun yarns that are dyed with local plants, minerals and insects. His family is proud to be descended from many generations of Zapotec weavers. From an early age, Porfirio and his siblings helped with simple tasks like cleaning wool, gathering dye plants, or winding bobbins. By the time Porfirio was 12 years old, his prodigious talent for design and weaving prompted his parents to enroll him in painting and drawing classes with local masters. These Maestros helped Porfirio to develop his talent and refine his artistic style.

As important as the authenticity of the work of the Gutiérrez family is the aesthetic fineness of their art. Chemical dyes can never duplicate the beauty of nature's palette which is found in each piece they create. Every weaving tells a story through the Zapotec symbols that have been passed down through the ages. Their choice of colors, the symbols and their order in the piece, all play into the narrative.

Porfirio has continued to grow as an artist. His work has begun to be noticed by collectors and galleries. Many of his pieces have been included in prestigious shows and events such as the International Folk Art Market, Santa Fe, NM and the Smithsonian's American Indian Museum. In addition to being an artist and master weaver, Porfirio is also an educator and cultural ambassador for the Zapotec people, often lecturing at universities, arts foundations and museums.



Bags with gathered plants, minerals and insects to be used to dye the wool yarn.



Porfirio at his pedal loom in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico.

A FAMILY TRADITION



Porfirio and sister Juana with finished weaving and dyed yarn.

Porfirio Gutiérrez and his family are masters of traditional Zapotec weaving and the creative skills associated with their fine art. They have descended from centuries of weavers and have no reason to doubt that their ancestors were weaving in pre-Columbian times. Their village, Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca, has been famous for the art of weaving for centuries. Nearby ruins that date back as far as 500 BC still stand decorated with the same patterns and symbols that are used in today's designs.

Family life has always revolved around the looms, the central courtyard where they spin and dye the yarn, and the family dinner table where they come together at the end of the day and have conversations about their work. Almost always, one can hear the gentle rhythmic sounds of the looms.

Porfirio recalls, "As kids we would play around my father's big loom and watch as a new design would emerge. He would tell us about the symbols he was weaving and our Zapotec heritage. Every piece tells us a story through these elements and weaving each piece



Porfirio's mother Andrea Contreras spins wool into yarn with a spinning wheel.

is like a meditation. These symbols are as old as our civilization. We can see them on Zapotec archeological sites, the stones in our church walls, and the nearby ruins at Monte Albán and Mitla. We have inherited our skills and artistic sensibilities from our ancestors who lived in the ancient Zapotec cities."



Juana uses a stone *metate* to grind the dried cochineal insects to make red dye.

Serious challenges have arisen in the last couple of decades. Cheap chemical dyes have replaced natural dyes for almost all the weaving families in the village. They no longer know where to collect herbal dye plants or how to imbue their natural colors into the yarn. This skill is not being passed on to the younger generations.

It is Porfirio's goal to preserve the family's traditional art and inherited Zapotec weaving techniques. The hope is that the centuries of their rich Zapotec culture is also their legacy to their descendants. In an effort to find appreciation for their art and enough financial validation to sustain it, Porfirio has emigrated to the United States where he exhibits, gives educational lectures, weaving & natural dye demonstrations, and hands-on workshops. All proceeds are shared by the family. All genuine weavings made by their family have a letter of authenticity that includes a list of natural dyes used in each piece and how to care for natural dye weavings. It also has simple tests for detecting natural dyes and chemical dyes.

ABOUT OAXACA

Located in the southern part of the Mexican Republic, the state of Oaxaca (pronounced wa-Hah-ka) is bordered on the north by the states of Puebla and Veracruz, to the east by Chiapas, to the west by Guerrero, and to the south by the Pacific Ocean. The great valleys of the state are located between the Sierra Madre del Sur and the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca. The name of the state as well as the capital City, “Oaxaca” comes from the Nahuatl word “Huaxyacac” (huax-a type of squash, yacac-at the top), meaning “at the top of the squash.”



The City of Oaxaca offers visitors great colonial architecture, including the Santo Domingo Church, the Government Palace, the Basilica of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad and the Rufino Tamayo Museum of Prehispanic Art. You can also enjoy a variety of musical bands performing in the plaza at the center of the Alameda.

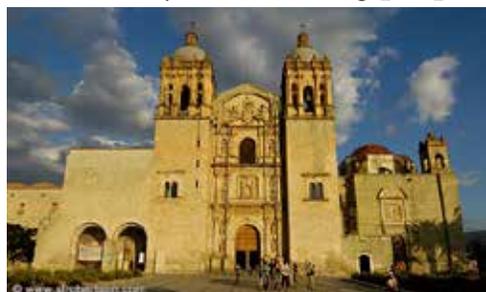
In the surrounding areas of the capital city, visitors can explore several interesting towns, many of which contain important archaeological sites. Throughout the entire state are markets selling crafts and folk art which are a treasure for collectors.

Monte Alban, the storied prehispanic capital of the Mixtec-Zapotec empire, is located 10 km from the city of Oaxaca. Another major archaeological site is the ancient Zapotec center of Mitla, which in the Zapotec language originally meant “place of the Dead.” Mitla is famous for its unique ancient tile work. On the land now occupied by the state of Oaxaca, prehispanic civilizations flourished and attained great splendor. Despite the conquest and colonization by the Spanish, the Mixtec and the Zapotec Indians maintained their language, their culture, and their social organization, the products of a unique indigenous civilization.



[Ruins of Monte Alban.](#)

Oaxaca is considered one of the richest states in Mexico, for its expressions of culture and history and for its mix of prehispanic treasures, as well as for its music, dance, folk art traditions and culinary arts. But more than anything, Oaxaca is enriched by its charming people.



[Santo Domingo Church](#)



[Street vendor on the plaza in Oaxaca city.](#)

TEOTITLAN DEL VALLE

Weaving has been a part of the culture and livelihood of the Zapotec people since about 500 B.C. when plant fibers were woven into backstrap looms to make cloth. Zapotec textiles were considered the finest in the region and traded widely. When the Mixtecs, and then the Aztecs, came to be in control over the modern day state of Oaxaca, part of the Zapotec's tribute to the ruling tribes were paid in cloth.

The course of history and tradition of weaving in the region changed drastically with the Spanish conquest in the 1500's. Dominican friars came to Teotitlán del Valle and in addition to the Catholic religion, they introduced sheep, wool, and bi-pedal standing looms. In the surrounding areas of the capital city, visitors can explore several interesting towns, many of which contain important archaeological sites. Throughout the entire state are markets selling crafts and folk art which are a treasure for collectors.

The Zapotecs adapted to using the new loom and stronger woolen fiber, although many continued to weave their traditional designs. As the new equipment was heavy and harder to handle, and the fact that weaving was a male-dominated trade in Spain, what was traditionally a women's task was taken over by the men. The tasks of carding, spinning and dyeing the wool now fell to the women while the men wove, a dynamic that remained intact until the 1950's. Due to gender equality and necessity, many women have rejoined their male counterparts in their weaving work.

In modern day Teotitlán there have been few changes to the method of weaving that the Zapotecs have employed for the last 500 years. However, the tradition of weaving in the village has been threatened by an oversaturation in the market and dwindling tourism due to political turbulence and drug trafficking in Mexico.



Spools of yarn and weaving in progress.



Natural dyed yarns and plants used in the process.



Porfirio's mother Andrea Contrera hand combs the wool with a carding tool.



Stone mosaic designs at Mitla. The same designs are used in weavings.



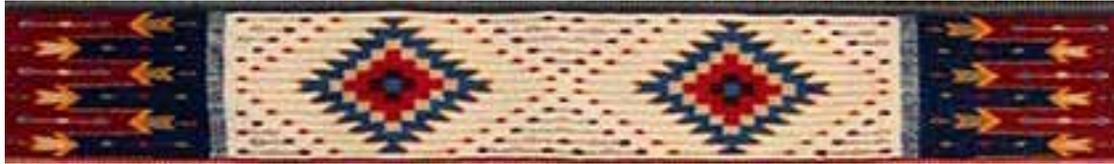
Church in Teotitlan Del Valle is built with stones from nearby ruins.

ZAPOTEC SYMBOLS

The Cycle of Life: Each step in this pattern represents a stage of our lives, starting with the day we are born and going to our last days. The turning points symbolize death and passing on everything to a new generation, allowing a new cycle to beg



Ojos de Dios (center of sample): The eyes of God watching and bringing light and blessings.



Fertility: The spike at the top of corn gives pollination to the ears of corn or maiz, the sacred food of the Zapotec.



Door to the Spirit World: The God's Eye symbol in the middle is the entrance to the spirit world and a sacred place of spirituality. The integrated symbols on the sides represent death receiving corn and lighted candles as offerings.



Sacred Necklace: In the time of our ancestors, corn, beans and squashes were sacred foods. Necklaces were made with their seeds to pay tribute the gods for blessings received.



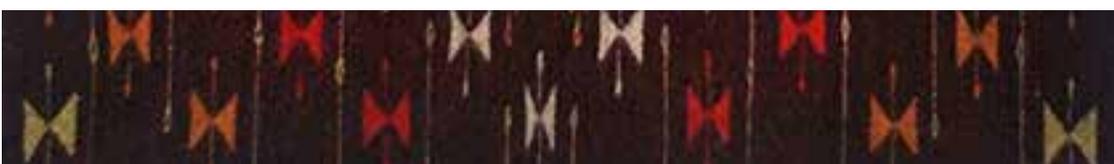
Rain and Seeds: Rain in the diagonals passes by the seeds in the diamonds between the rain.



Abundance: This design represents the corn on the cob and pays tribute to abundant crops.



Butterflies: Butterflies represent life after death and the transformation of souls from a worm that dies to become a winged beauty beginning their journey to the spirit world and then returning every year announcing the celebration of Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead.



ARTIST PRESENTATION

On the day of his visit, Porfirio will have a display of the different plants, minerals and insects that are used to make the colored dyes for the yarn. He will demonstrate his weaving technique and incorporate ancient Zapotec symbols in the weaving design. He will use his natural dyed wool and perform the demonstration on a portable frame loom. Throughout the day as students watch the artist work, all phases of the process will be shown. A display of weavings and textiles from his workshop will be exhibited to show the variety of work produced by this talented family of artisans.

A video portraying the family at work in their village in Mexico will also be shown. The purpose of this day-long visit is to expose students to this neighboring country and present various facets of life in present day Mexico. This experience will allow them to meet and talk with an award-winning Mexican artisan and learn by observing the artist at work while sharing his stories through question and answer sessions. At the end of the day Porfirio will present a small finished weaving to the school. The piece will remain as a lasting symbol from this skilled artisan from Oaxaca, Mexico.

All sessions will be led by Pat Picciano, Margaritas Education Outreach Coordinator and translator for their visit. Pat has lived in Mexico and apprenticed with Mexican wood carvers, beginning in the 1980's. He has led numerous presentations on Latin American craft. Over the past 25 years he has visited schools, universities, museums and libraries allowing thousands of people to observe and marvel at talented artisans as they demonstrate their unique talents.



Zapotec rugs made with natural dyed yarns.



Small rugs (*tapetes*) and jars with plants and minerals used to make dyes.



Display of weavings large and small.



Porfirio presenting with stone *metate* and dyes.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

- * Consult school librarian for books about Mexico and folk art.
- * Spend class time studying Mexico.
- * Have students identify Spanish words they may know.
- * Learn some Spanish words or greetings.
- * Discuss some of the differences between the United States and Mexico
- * Discuss activities involved when traveling to other countries.
- * On the day of the artist's visit observe the display of crafts.
- * Prepare questions for the artists.

SITE PREPARATION FOR GUEST ARTISTS

- * Provide a suitable space for artist and exhibit, such as a multi-purpose room, large classroom or open area to accommodate 50-75 students(or more). This is for all Lecture/Demonstrations
- * Provide a table 2' x 8' and 2 chairs
- * Schedule no more than 5 45 minute sessions (4 hours total contact time)
- * You may videotape all activities for future reference



-SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION-

MEXICO-Mexico is a colorful country inhabited for centuries by ancient civilizations. Since the arrival of the Spanish, the country has blended ancient ritual with European tradition, and the present day country reflects the combination of these two influences. This mixture of pre-Colombian and Hispanic cultures is most evident in the variety of folk art, still being produced in Mexico.

- What are some examples of Mexican culture that you can identify?
- Even though we share a common border with Mexico, why do you think our countries and cultures are so different?
- In what ways has Mexican culture influenced our own?

FOLK ART-Folk Art is the result of the merger of people, tradition and materials, it records the interaction of human beings with each other and with their culture. Folk Art represents the work of individuals who are connected to communities. This program presents the country of Mexico by observing community based artisans; whose life and art are intertwined and nourished by tradition. Many of the crafts produced by folk artists include wood carving, ceramics, basket making, weaving, embroidery, metalwork, etc.

- Can you give some examples of crafts or folk art you've seen?
- What are some of the ways of learning a craft?
- Have you seen hand made crafts from Mexico before?

MEXICAN VILLAGE LIFE- As you may know, much of Mexico is still rural with many cultural ties to its indigenous past. The more isolated the village, the more traditional customs prevail. Agriculture, family and religion dominate activities in many small villages throughout Mexico.

- Can you locate Mexico on a map? Oaxaca?
- What kind of climate does Mexico have? How might that affect agriculture?
- How is village life in the United States different from Mexico?

MEXICAN PEOPLE- Up until the arrival of Europeans, the western hemisphere was inhabited by indigenous cultures. Many great civilizations flourished in what is present day Mexico. The Aztec and Mayan civilizations are the most well known. Our artist's ancestors were Zapotec, and existed before the Aztecs. Their village has been inhabited for around 2,000 years.

- How far back can you trace your family?
- What are some indigenous tribes in the United States? What Native American tribe(s) lived in your area?
- Can you identify Indigenous contributions to our culture?

MULTICULTURALISM- This program focuses on the exploration into the life and traditions of another culture. Our American society is made up of people from various cultural origins. The guest artists will also reveal that their cultural origins are equally diverse.

- What might be some reasons for cultures to mix and influence each other?
- Why is it important to learn about other cultures?
- Can you trace the cultural origins in your family?

VOCABULARY

ojo- eye

boca- mouth

nariz- nose

frijoles- beans

tortilla- ground corn patty

hijos- children in the same family

nino- child

muchacho- boy

muchacha- girl

lana- wool

telar- loom

tejido- weaving

casa- house

artesanía- folk art, craft

tapete- small rug

pueblo- village

comida- food

fiesta- party, festival

campo- field

campesino- field worker

maestro- teacher, master craftsman

Buenos días- Good morning

Buenas tardes- Good afternoon

Como está Usted?- How are you?

Que pasa?- What's happening?

De donde viene Usted?- Where are you from?

Hasta luego- Until then; later

Hasta la vista- See you later

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Oettinger, Marion Jr. The Folk Art of Latin America, New York.
Dutton Studio Books (Penguin Group). 1990

Sayer, Cloe. The Arts and Crafts of Mexico. San Francisco.
Chronicle Books. 1990

OAXACA INSPIRED BOOKS:

Dream Carver- by Diana Cohn and Amy Cordova

The Woman Who Outshone the Sun- by Alejandro Cruz Martinez

Colores de La Vida- Cynthia Weill

WEBSITES:

<http://www.visitmexico.com/en/oaxaca>

<http://www.fofa.us/>