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CRIZMAC Art and Cultural Marketplace

Oaxacan Woodcarvers Fashion a Whimsical World from Wood

Hi! The name's Artzy. Pleased to meet you. I'm a zebra—in case you couldn't tell—and I'm from Mexico. Oh, I know what you're thinking—that guy doesn't have his stripes on straight. Everyone knows that zebras are from Africa, not Mexico! But the truth is, I'm from Oaxaca (pronounced *wa-ha-ca*), Mexico, and I'm part of a very special zoo—Zeny's Zoo. Let me introduce you.

This is Zeny Fuentes. He lives in the village of San Martín Tilcajete, in the mountains of southern Mexico not far from Oaxaca City. The people who live here farm the land, raise animals, and make art.

The tradition of carving began years ago when the poor people of the region made toys for their children out of wood. Over time, some carvers became very skilled and began creating finely crafted pieces. Zeny began carving when he was just eight years old. He learned the craft from his father, Epifanio, who is one of the best-known carvers in San Martín.

Oaxacan woodcarvers use a special type of wood called copal. When the wood is green, it is soft and easy to carve. After it dries, it does not spilt or crack as many other types of wood do.

To begin a carving, the bark is removed from the wood with a machete. The general form of the figure is also carved with a machete, and then a smaller knife is used to shape the contour and create the details. Most carvings are made of several pieces of wood that are joined with small nails.

Depending on the size and complexity, carving and assembling a figure can take from several hours to several days. Next, the surface is sanded and then painted. Painting is the final step—and the most time consuming. Detailed patterns in bright contrasting colors are typical.

Zeny Fuentes is following in his father's footsteps to make beautiful woodcarvings in the artistic tradition of his village. He carves a lot of different animals: armadillos, coyotes, frogs, roosters, and much more. (Don't tell the others, but I'm pretty sure that zebras—like me—are his favorites!) He's always looking for new animals to carve and paints them with new and different patterns and designs. In this way, our zoo keeps growing and becomes more interesting and colorful every day!.

