

***Crafting Identity: Transnational Indian Arts and the Politics of Race in Central Mexico.* Pavel Shlossberg. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015. 268 pp.\***

Reviewed by Ronda Brulotte

*Crafting Identity* is the latest addition to the discussion of the cultural politics of craft production in Mexico. Author Pavel Shlossberg's study focuses on mask makers in the central state of Michoacán who are primarily from the town of Tócuaro and surrounding communities. But his observations and scathing critique of the national and international craft market in which these artisans are obligated to participate could just as well apply to any of Mexico's other indigenous craft-producing regions (Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas, etc.). While this certainly is not the first work to describe a system of unequal power relations, it is unique in that it takes head on collectors, museums curators, editors, and other cultural intuitions for their role in perpetuating racist ideas about indigenous and mestizo artisans.

Given the nature of the topic, it is not surprising that Shlossberg draws heavily on theories and methods from cultural anthropology, in addition to those of his own discipline, communications studies. He opens with a short theoretical chapter in which he situates his findings within the requisite—if now familiar—literatures on artisans and the intersection of race, class, and the Mexican nationalist project. He additionally enlists the concept of cultural citizenship to refer to the dialogic, power-laden relations that shape artisan subjectivity.

The first two chapters introduce readers to the ethnographic context in which mask makers are evaluated—both on the merits of their material products and their ability to adequately “perform” their roles as authentic, folkloric Indians. Chapter one describes a key state-sponsored artisan competition, while the second chapter examines the Tócuaro *pastorela*, or shepard's play. In both, elite investment in maintaining the (imagined) purity of indigenous crafts is evident; masks with innovative (read: non-traditional) design features fail to win contests while the *pastorela* is judged to be “corrupted,” as evidenced by modern pop cultural and political references in the performance (e.g. masked figures represented President Vicente Fox and Superman make appearances). Subsequent chapters critically explore popular and academic writings about Michoacán's mask traditions, museum exhibitions, and tourist and other discourses of connoisseurship that shape understandings of the value and authenticity of masks, and by extension, their makers. In the process, Shlossberg takes on some of the big names that have featured historically in the selective promotion of Mexican masks, including well known, powerful museum professionals, art scholars, and collectors on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

*Crafting Identity* effectively demonstrates how the cultural logic of the transnational Indian arts market creates a racial and class hierarchy that ultimately works to the socioeconomic detriment of the artisans themselves. Vivid testimony of artisans being asked to dress in peasant clothes while kneeling on *petates* (woven mats) only to have their products later deemed “too commercial”—produced for sale rather than to be “danced” in religious rituals—for serious

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study or collection powerfully convey the hypocritical logic of the art-culture system. It is clear that the author is outraged by all that he has seen during his fieldwork, and rightfully so. The cultural racism that undergirds the project of craft promotion and tourism is pervasive throughout Mexico.

Yet the rhetorical strategy that the author employs in his writing to show his outrage at times feels heavy-handed and runs the risk of alienating precisely those readers who are in most need of hearing his arguments. Again and again, Shlossberg mocks what he calls “Indian tales,” the imagined but powerful discourses constructed by cultural brokers who economically and intellectually traffic in Mexican craftwork. Writing about how one university-educated Tócuaro resident turned to mask making after he was unable to obtain decent work in his chosen professional field, he states:

But I guess that the indios and their petates and their masks are so colorful, and perhaps too colorful, because their pueblos are so *retrasado*, so backward, and so, how could their colorful, simple minds handle technical complexity, and how could they possibly be competent or even trustworthy technicians? [73]

The book is rife with such passages. To be clear, I agree with Shlossberg’s assessment of the discriminatory hiring practices facing indigenous peoples and some mestizos. However, the text’s repetitive sarcasm uniformly paints cultural brokers as a monolithic group who do not seem at all interested in getting beyond the “Indian tales” of their industry. At the same time, Schlossberg does not unpack what the categories of “indigenous” or “mestizo” might hold for the artisans themselves.

That said, *Crafting Identity* is an important book precisely because it presents a hard, if controversial, look at how institutional structures create and maintain distinctions about what is “art,” what is “craft,” who is worthy of attention and who is not—which has real material consequences for the people whose “culture” is there to be collected, displayed and sold. Museum professionals and budding material culture scholars may be unnerved by the criticisms presented here, but it is a necessary conversation.

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