

Between Art and Artifact: Archaeological Replicas and Cultural Production in Oaxaca, Mexico.* Ronda L. Brulotte. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014. 215 pp.

Reviewed by Stacie M. King

As an anthropological archaeologist, I was thrilled to accept the invitation to review Ronda Brulotte's book on the production and sale of ceramic archaeological replicas at archaeological sites open to tourism. The book chronicles the differential valuation of different craft industries in the global folk art and tourism markets. The book is interesting and engaging, and as ethnography of craft production in Oaxaca, I read it with great enthusiasm. In the end, however, the argument has flaws.

Between Art and Artifact is the result of a dissertation research project based in the town of Arrazola in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, known for its rich and deep indigenous cultural heritage. Each chapter starts with an ethnographic vignette that helps illuminate issues that will be addressed in the subsequent text. Rather than examining one of the more popular contemporary folk art genres of Oaxaca—such as painted wooden animals, woven textiles, or black pottery—Brulotte focuses her attention on the less desirable archaeological replicas being sold at the famous archaeological site of Monte Albán, which was named to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1987. In Oaxaca, ceramic replicas, like most folk art industries, are made by hand by self-taught artisans with locally sourced materials. Nonetheless, they have enjoyed far less economic success, and have been derided by government representatives, archaeologists, and even some tourists. Brulotte's book questions why replicas have engendered such notoriety, while other industries enjoy material success. She contends that archaeological replicas are undervalued and delegitimized through a process of “discursive moves” that have pushed replicas into a category that falls outside the realm of “authentic” goods. This devaluation, she argues, is primarily the result of systemic power differentials between the global tourism industry, UNESCO, INAH (the Mexican government institution in charge of protecting cultural heritage), archaeologists, tourists, and indigenous craft producers. All, save the indigenous craft producers, have helped define what is considered safe and consumable heritage. This heritage does not include archaeological replicas, even when many would contend that indigenous craft producers are the legitimate inheritors of the archaeological past and should be able to have some control over it. For this reason, Brulotte concludes that replicas could instead be viewed as subversive and, therefore, uniquely positioned to provide a space for social critique about what counts as Oaxaca culture.

Chapters two and three do an excellent job of tracing the history of the replica trade during the last century and providing an ethnographic account of the lives and work of replica producers. Most replica makers and vendors in Oaxaca live in the town of Arrazola. Ironically, Arrazola is also the town whose residents have enjoyed enormous success over the last several decades by producing Oaxaca's famous and enduringly popular, whimsical painted wooden animals. The

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history of the town and the resident's involvement in painted animal craft production is described in chapter two. We learn in chapter three that many of the same families also produce ceramic figurine replicas, Arrazola's "other craft." Male members of the family sell the pieces either inside or just outside the archaeological zone of Monte Albán. Nonetheless, when tourists visit Arrazola's craft producers' home workshops (a common tourist activity in Oaxaca), painted animals are on display and replica production and their products are hidden from view.

Brulotte also outlines the history of the relationships between replica makers, replica sellers, and the managers of the archaeological site of Monte Albán, where most of the replicas are sold. It is here that we learn about the conflict and political maneuverings between replica sellers and government officials working for INAH, who are charged with managing the archaeological site of Monte Albán. I found these histories extremely compelling and thought provoking. This section spans the modern history of Monte Albán itself, from when Arrazola residents once farmed the central plaza of the archaeological site of Monte Albán at the turn of the century, worked as laborers in the long-term excavations undertaken by Mexico's most famous archaeologist, Alfonso Caso, from the 1930s to 1950s. It concludes with today's vendors' ongoing struggles with INAH officials to maintain a presence at the site to sell their wares.

Subsequent chapters focus on the reasons why vendors continue to produce and sell replicas in spite of these difficulties, which entails discussing the positioning of Arrazola's producers/vendors relative to ethnic classifications of indigeneity in contemporary Mexico, and the difficult notion of "authenticity" that replicas engage. Replicas occupy this difficult territory because they are, on the one hand, reproductions, but hold the allure that they potentially might be "real" pieces. Brulotte examines the motivations of buyers (tourists) who purchase replicas, concluding that Mexican tourists are less concerned with the "manufactured authenticity" of replicas, while foreign tourists more often deem them "fakes" and therefore consider them undesirable.

Brulotte's ethnographic attention to detail and careful accounting of Arrazola's replica producers/vendors is counterbalanced by a far less detailed and critical accounting of buyers (tourists), INAH, and archaeologists. The interpretations that she makes about the latter are based on a small number of interviews and observations on site at Monte Albán and in Oaxaca City. To gather buyer/tourist data, Brulotte accompanied tourists on guided tours of Arrazola, attended some lectures geared toward ex-pats and tourists, and interviewed tourists at Monte Albán. The interviews with INAH officials and archaeologists are limited to two (two Mexicans, one a former director of the regional INAH office, and the other a former director of the archaeological site). Thus, the conclusions that Brulotte draws regarding INAH and archaeological narratives of the past and the management of vending activities on site seem to rely largely on these two interviews and outside stereotypes of INAH as an institution and archaeology as a discipline. It is perhaps telling that these two interviews came at a later point in time than the initial fieldwork; they seem to have been added to provide more grounding for the statements being made about INAH and archaeologists. Sadly, the data are woefully slim.

To Brulotte, INAH is a colonialist political machine that has a particular hegemonic cultural agenda, which has operated (and continues to operate) against the indigenous peoples of Mexico, with whom replica sellers might be considered aligned. Archaeologists and archaeological

science too, Brulotte argues, benefit from labeling ceramic replicas as “fakes” and complaining about their sale at archaeological sites, because doing so helps to support their (colonialist) master narrative. While I understand the troubled history of the discipline, archaeological science most certainly does not adhere to a single narrative with a single interpretation, nor has it ever done so. Further, as a good friend once reminded me, INAH is not one person or one being—there are lots of people working within the institution, many of whom who support and encourage thinking outside the box. Is INAH and archaeology political? Sure. What Brulotte does, however, is paint with much too broad a brush-stroke in her characterization of INAH and scientific archaeology, without creating space for multiple views and change through time. This, then, results in problematic conclusions that lack the rigor of her ethnographic accounting of replica vendors and sellers. Further, while she argues that replicas provide a space for social critique, it is unclear from her interviews with producers/vendors that any of them really interpret their craft as such.

In conclusion, as an ethnography and history of replica producers and sellers in Oaxaca and a thought-provoking account of the handicrafts that lie at the margins of economic success, I would highly recommend this book. I think that Brulotte’s account of replica production will be useful to people who work with handicrafts, folk art, and archaeological artifacts, including museum professionals interested in the history of collecting and object valuation. I would, however, beg caution with reading too much into Brulotte’s overly essentialized characterization of INAH as an institution and the field of archaeology. It is here that I find this book and its conclusions most problematic.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v10i1.20599>