Unmasking Mexican Culture

Alejandro Garcia is filled with stories. Inside the Community Folk Art Center, he walks among the displays of Visions of Mexico/Visiónes de México, an exhibition featuring his folk art collection and photography. There are carvings, paintings, costumes, and, most notably, hundreds of ceremonial masks. Garcia, a professor of social work in the College of Human Services and Health Professions, fondly recalls the excitement of locating a mask maker's remote home. He talks about the tradition of mask making, the festivals the masks are used in, and their significance to indigenous cultures. "We use masks to hide ourselves, to hide who we are, to be someone we’re not," he says. "We use masks as a form of empowerment, so that we can become jaguars, saints, devils, or deer."

For Garcia, the son of Mexican immigrants, every mask tells a story. But perhaps there was no more deceptive mask than the one he encountered growing up in the south Texas border town of Brownsville. It hid Mexican culture from him, only revealing the country as a poverty-stricken, destitute place, barren of culture. In school, it cloaked the contributions of Mexicans who fought alongside the American heroes of the Alamo and gave Garcia little reason to celebrate his heritage. The mask, however, vanished forever when Garcia visited Mexico City as a young man and discovered a vibrant culture. "What I saw contradicted everything I had learned in my childhood about Mexico not having any culture," says Garcia, now in his 27th year of teaching at SU. "I confronted a reality that I had not known—it was different and wonderful. I made connections and discovered a part of my heritage that is quite beautiful and celebratory."

For nearly four decades, he has continued this exploration, building on his connections and knowledge and digging deeper into the country's indigenous cultures. He relishes the bright colors of the artwork and cherishes the festive celebrations with their dances and songs, costumes and masks, savoring the stories and folklore behind them. Two-horned devil masks, for instance, didn't exist until the Spaniards arrived to spread the Gospel. Ultimately, Garcia says, there was a fusion of cultures, evidenced in festivals that celebrate both Christianity and native reverence for the natural world. "There's a compromising success," Garcia says. "One culture wasn’t dismissed for the other. You combine the two, and there’s no perception of incongruity between them."

Garcia takes special delight in the creativity of the mask makers, who rely on their imaginations and available resources and pass on their skills from one generation to the next. They use native woods, such as zompantle, pochote, and copal, and other indigenous materials, such as armadillo and tortoise shells, javelin bristles, horsehair, snakeskin, coconut shells, and plant fibers. One of his masks is made from an animal's pelvic bone; another was fashioned from an old leather punching bag. "The mask makers do it more for pride and tradition than for money," Garcia says. "I have the greatest respect for them."

Looking back, Garcia isn’t sure why he began collecting the masks and other items, but now sees it as a way that connected him to the rich and colorful culture of his ancestors. "I concluded that I was trying to put the pieces together of who I was and determine who I am," he says. "It’s a journey of self-discovery of one’s culture and antecedents."

—Jay Cox