

# **A MODEL OF CULTURAL INCLUSION THROUGH THE INTERACTION BETWEEN ARTISANS AND PRODUCT DESIGN STUDENTS**

**Mariano GARCÍA**

Architecture, Art and Design School, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico

## **ABSTRACT**

Although handicrafts are recognized nationally and internationally as part of the identity and popular culture of Mexico, artisans, due to their condition of economic, educational, and geographical penury, find themselves in unfavourable conditions to sell their products in attractive markets or negotiate important contracts, normally carried out in spheres inaccessible to them [1]. Artisans are forced to sell their handicrafts at very low prices in the streets of the country's tourist cities, suffering discrimination from potential customers who have the economic capacity to buy their products, allocating insufficient value to their work because usually handicrafts design does not satisfy their functional or aesthetic needs, haggling over the price.

Tecnológico de Monterrey is a private educational institution ranked number 1 in Mexico [2] which has a high social commitment and seeks to reverse these types of situations. Therefore, professors and our courses can be agents of change and promote healthy and productive relationships. This article describes a proposal to motivate inclusion and cultural co-habitation, with a teaching-learning model developed in the Design and Handicrafts course, which is part of the minor in Art, Object and Fashion of the 2017 programme of the bachelor's degree in industrial design, that was taught at Campus Querétaro in the semester of August-December 2022. The course promotes that artisan teaching the basics of traditional techniques to future designers, to letting them know the origin and tradition that artisan work represents while appreciating the cultural heritage and manual dexterity, generating a relationship of respect and empathy, which could trigger healthy and fairer future working relationships for artisans and future designers.

*Keywords: Educational innovation, higher education, cultural inclusion, cultural co-habitation, design entrepreneurship, design for value, handicrafts, social innovation, social development, design workshop*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Since time immemorial humanity has learned to live hand in hand with nature. Humans learned how to feed, how to heal and how to predict the weather to take care of themselves. Our ancestors discovered how to work the materials of their environment manually elaborating utensils and tools that increased their strength and facilitated their tasks. They created farming tools and developed agriculture, built boats and with the help of the stars, they ventured to conquer the seas, thus discovering every corner of the world. All, with the help of nature and the objects they designed and manufactured with the raw materials they obtained from it. Today, in our industrialized world, we call those objects handicrafts. Throughout history, every social group on the planet has felt the need to express their way of life and customs, thus inheriting all their knowledge to their descendants. The product of this expression is embodied in different ways and through different activities, such as language, writing, dance, music, painting, gastronomy and of course handicrafts, which together conform part of the essence of the culture of people.

## **2 TRANSITIONS FROM HANDICRAFTS TO INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTS**

In 1775, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and the first steam engines were to be incorporated into the production lines, artisans, who manually produced the consumer products of that time, were

able to produce more and at a lower cost thanks to machines. During these early years of transition, the shape of the first industrial products tried, clumsily, to emulate what was once made by hand. Fortunately, around 1845, the efforts of Henry Cole, and later of the Arts and Crafts Movement, led by William Morris, took it upon itself made it their objective to retake the principles of purity and honesty in the appreciation of handcrafted materials and techniques, incorporating them into the nascent mass manufacture of products [3]. Craftsmanship, which was the technological basis of industrialized production, was diluted as the volume of production increased, but its cultural and aesthetic essence has been maintained and is mostly respected to this day. There were plenty of European manufacturers of furniture and household appliances that had have their origin before the industrial revolution [4]. This was not the case in Mexico, where handicrafts and industrial production followed separate ways. Nowadays, industrial products are usually imported and sold in department stores and large commercial chains of foreign origin. Handcrafted products are marginalized to local markets or tourist's stores, of much lower volume and outside the usual points of sale for urban consumers with better economic capacity.

### **3 CULTURAL VALUES OF HANDICRAFTS IN MEXICO**

In pre-Hispanic Mexico, the period before the Spanish colonization, that is, before 1519, handcrafted objects occupied a very important place at all levels of the social structure, satisfying all kinds of domestic, labour and spiritual needs, giving rise to the development of the diverse techniques we know today. According to Fonart (National Fund for the Promotion of Handicrafts), a handicraft is an object or product of community cultural identity, made by continuous manual processes, aided by rudimentary implements and some of mechanical function that lighten certain tasks. The basic raw material transformed is generally obtained from the region where the artisan lives. The mastery of the traditional techniques of community heritage allows the artisan to create different objects of varied quality and mastery, imprinting them, in addition, with symbolic and ideological values of the local culture [5]. Fonart declares as branches of Mexican craftsmanship pottery and ceramics, textiles, carved wood, pottery, metalwork, goldsmithing, jewellery, vegetable fibres, cardboard and paper, saddlery and leatherwork, lacquer, called maque, lapidary and stonework, Huichol art, work with shells and snails, glass and feather-work. It was not until the end of the Mexican Revolution, in the 1920s, when the social and political situation began to stabilize and the need of the governmental, artistic, and cultural sectors to provide the country with its own authentic cultural elements, that handicrafts were seen as an important sign of national identity. However, this affection for handicrafts, which seemed to give artisans a safe and hopeful alternative for the future by giving them recognition as true artists, was overshadowed by industrialized products, and by the hurried way of life to which consumerism that modern México brought with it. That deserved opportunity to give origin to the aesthetic and shape parameters that may have guided the line in the style and identity of Mexican design during the last century has been slow to arrive.

### **4 CURRENT SITUATION AND DISCRIMINATION OF ARTISANS IN MEXICO**

The situation of the artisan population in Mexico is complicated. In 2019, handicrafts employed only 489,890 paid jobs [6]. This represents 0.39% of the country's total population of approximately 125 million people. According to the General Direction of Analysis and Prospective of the Welfare Ministry of the Government of Mexico, in 2008, 67% of the artisans were in poverty. It also indicates that 69.6% of artisans live in rural localities of less than 15 inhabitants and 44.1% speak an indigenous language [7]. This situation jeopardizes the continuity of handicrafts and Mexico's cultural legacy. Artisans living in poverty do not have the level of schooling that would allow them to efficiently calculate manufacturing costs and set a fair price for their products. Emma Zapata, from the Indigenous University of Mexico, indicates that the income artisans receive from the sale of their products is destined to cover the immediate basic needs of their families [8]. It is very common for artisans to travel from their communities to nearby tourist cities or state capitals to sell their pieces, walking through the streets, suffering from the harassment of people and the local police who prohibit them from selling on the street, which further undermines their dignity. Dr. Juan Pablo Aguirre Quezada defines discrimination as acts of segregation of different people based on gender, race, language, religion or other physical, cultural or social differences. These conditions prevent the individual from achieving full social integration, violating his or her fundamental human rights. [9] In Mexico, close to 7 million people of indigenous origin are likely to suffer some type of mistreatment, marginalization or rejection, due to

their physical appearance or ethnic origin. The Mexican firm Gabinete de Comunicación Estratégica (GCE) conducted a survey indicating that 87.3% perceive a lot or very much discrimination in Mexico, and that the most discriminated social group is the indigenous people. The survey implies that the origin of discrimination is the lack of values, with 36.3%, lack of education, 32.3%, inequality in social classes 13.1%, prejudice 7.6% and the lack of laws that protect everyone equally 6.7% [10].

## **5 SOCIAL COMMITMENT AND VALUES OF GENERATION Z**

The generation of people born between 1995 and 2015, many of whom are currently in college, has been frequently named as Generation Z. Its members are the first digital natives and do not remember the world without internet, iPod, iPad or iPhone. For this reason, Jean M. Twenge refers to them as the iGen [11]. More than any other generation, iGen'ers have had first-hand, real-time contact with the most relevant social, political, and climate change events in the countless sources of information they have access to. Many of these young people actively participate in their close circle, are well aware of the situations, but mainly take part in online discussions in their various social networks. Their consumption habits are influenced by their awareness of self-care, respect for the environment and concern for the right to diversity, inequality and social problems.

Young activists such as Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai or Elijah McKenzie-Jackson, are a clear example of the ideals of this generation and are referents for the defence of justice and transcendent causes for today's world. I believe this group of people will be pivotal in the future of the relationship and co-habitation between artisans and handicraft buyers who, in addition to appreciating craft products per se, value their origin, respect for nature and the symbolism and culture that represent.

## **6 THE PROPOSAL**

With the objective of fostering the co-habitation of artisans in poverty with people of middle and high socioeconomic level, to which our students belong and are those who can buy and participate in the design and marketing of handicrafts, the proposed model of inclusion is to allow artisans to take the position of university professors. Artisans directly explain their cultural background and later their techniques, but mainly, they will be personally involved with the students, stimulating an exchange of ideas and creative processes.

## **7 METHODOLOGIES**

The Design and Handicrafts course was taught in the August-December 2022 semester to a group of 19 students. It was developed over 16 classes, one class of 3 hours per week, where the following topics were taught:

1. Introduction.
  - 1.1 Taxonomy of the creative activities: typology of the arts, design and handicrafts.
  - 1.2 Cultural heritage (tangible and intangible).
  - 1.3 Analysis and interpretation of handcrafted pieces.
  - 1.4 History and evolution of handicraft production in Mexico and the world.
2. Development of proposals.
  - 2.1 Inspiration, research, management and context analysis.
  - 2.2 Production of tests and experimentation of materials.
    - a) Cardboard and papier-mâché.
    - b) Metalwork and tin leaf.
    - c) Textile embroidery.
    - d) Saddlery and leather.
    - e) Carved wood.
    - f) Vegetable fibres, wickerwork.
  - 2.3 Development of product proposals.
  - 2.4 Production of final pieces.
3. Museography.
  - 3.1 Design of museography.
  - 3.2 Production of exhibition and museographic materials.
  - 3.3 Development of communication materials.
  - 3.4 Assembly.

The topics of point 1 were developed under a lecture scheme, where after the teacher's explanation, a debate was opened so that the students could express their points of view about the situation of handicrafts and artisans in Mexico. This, in turn, prepared them for the topics seen in point 2 of the course. Here they had the challenge of designing and handcrafting a piece with each of the techniques seen.

In order to select the artisans invited to the course, we gave preference to the most representative traditional techniques in the state of Querétaro, so that the students would have a closer connection with the local culture. The techniques selected were textile embroidery, saddlery and vegetable fibres, in this case, rattan. Subsequently, I approached to the two most important institutions in the protection and promotion of handicrafts in the state. CEDAI, (Artisan and Indigenous Development Center) and Casa Queretana de las Artesanías, (Queretaro House of Handicrafts). Both government offices offer artisans spaces for the sale of their products, organize workshops and contests to promote good quality.

For the textile embroidery technique, we invited artisans Remedios Vázquez and Daniela Ruíz, from the municipality of Amealco. To teach the saddlery and leatherwork technique we had the participation of the artisan Yarizel Olvera, from the municipality of Cadereyta, and for the weaving technique with vegetable fibres (rattan) we invited María Refugio Asunción Cruz and Manuel Jiménez.

All of them had an independent 3-hour session that was organized as follows. First, (30 min) they talked about the origin of the technique in their community, its origin and symbolism and how they inherited it from their ancestors. Secondly, (60 min) they explained the artisan technique, for this, it was necessary to previously buy and prepare the raw material with which each one of the students followed the instructions of the master artisans and elaborated a simple product to learn each one of the techniques. Finally, the artisans oversaw advising the students face to face to have a direct contact between them.

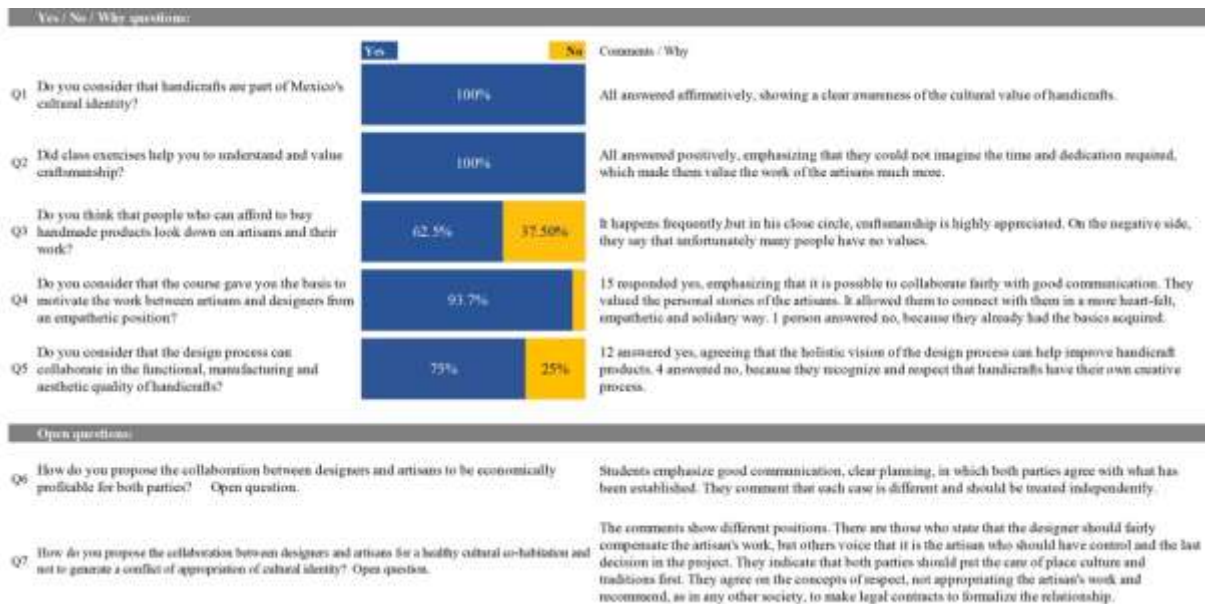
Since it was the first time that the students had contact with the techniques, they were not able to finish their piece during that session, so they could finish it during the week and present it in the following session. When presenting their work, students explained the expressive concept of their pieces, and how they had reinterpreted what the artisans had taught them. In this way, the students were allowed to have their own point of view and take responsibility for justifying it.

With the techniques learned during the semester, as a final delivery, the students designed a collection of pieces that expressed a personal statement about fashion, where they were able to combine materials and techniques according to their needs and requirements.

In point 3, curatorial and museography topics were taught, and with the active participation of the students, we designed and prepared an exhibition of the final projects, which was presented at the Museum of the City of Queretaro. The students participated in the museographic assembly of their pieces.

## **8 RESULTS**

At the end of the semester, 16 of the 19 students enrolled responded to a survey, that showed the following results:



## 9 CONCLUSIONS

During the semester, and with the development of each of the topics and techniques seen, I could notice that the students gradually became involved in the problems and social situation of the artisans. They showed their interest in the cultural heritage of the communities, trying to understand the origin of the sources of inspiration that each technique represents.

One of the most provocative points in the final comments was the great manual effort that craftsmanship represents. Having made each piece with their own hands, showed them that the price at which artisans sell them is not fair.

It is interesting to find comments that say that it is the artisan who should have control and authorship of the project, be the one to request the services of the designer to help him/her resolve technical issues, which from my point of view, is a sign that the course sensitized the students, breaking any barrier or colonizing posture.

The exchange of ideas and personal involvement created an atmosphere of empathy that can considerably lessen discrimination. Students listened to the problems of the artisans and felt able to help them by proposing design and marketing strategies. The artisans felt empowered as they shared their knowledge with the students. They identified themselves as transmitters of the culture and heritage of the indigenous peoples, of whom we are very proud.

I am confident that by repeating this model in this and other subjects, future designers will continue to develop the empathy and cultural co-habitation skills that Mexico and the world need.

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