

Looming Large

Wence Martinez has taken his traditional craft honed over centuries into the world of contemporary art and become a dream weaver

BY HEATHER STEINBERGER

Since 2008, the prestigious annual Architectural Digest Home Design Show has incorporated a special section—MADE—for artists and designers of limited-edition or one-off art objects and furnishings. These gifted artisans come from all backgrounds and walks of life. When next year's event opens on March 22 at New York City's Pier 94, the group will include a master weaver from Oaxaca, Mexico. Wence Martinez, a Zapotec Indian, learned to weave from his father at the age of 9—and in the years since, he has taken the traditional craft to a new level. In Martinez's hands, weaving becomes contemporary art, at once captivating and startling.

He was born and raised in Teotitlan del Valle, a village of approximately 7,000 people in the mountains of Oaxaca. The village has been celebrated for its textile weaving for centuries, and his extended family still lives and weaves there. When Martinez was 15, Oaxacan painter Edmundo Aquino recognized his talent and sponsored a scholarship for the young teenager to attend the renowned Taller Nacional de Tapiz (National Institute of Weaving) in Mexico City. "This was an incredible opportunity for me," Martinez recalls. "The school focused on training weavers in more difficult and detail-oriented Gobelins tapestry techniques, technical wool dyeing with vegetal and aniline dyes and design. Its team wove

pieces for internationally recognized artists such as Aquino and Carlos Mérida."

Mexico has a strong tradition of painters commissioning weavings of their work, and according to Martinez, this is a highly demanding enterprise. "Replicating the effects of painting requires careful dyeing and blending of colors," he says.

At the age of 18, Martinez wove two pieces for artist Francisco Toledo. The contract, however, notes the name of the weaver who took the credit for those pieces, not the name of Martinez, who was his subcontractor for this commission. This, he says, was typical: "It was frustrating. Even at this level of achievement, many weavers would never see any credit for their work. I wasn't allowed to weave in my signature, and my name never appeared in exhibition catalogs."

Martinez had a strong mentor in Aquino, who hired the young man to work in his Mexico City studio. Although Martinez didn't receive credit for weaving Aquino's paintings either, he says the artist taught him well. "He instilled a commitment to quality materials, he encouraged me to work on my own designs, and he was proud of his Indian heritage," Martinez explains. "That was important, because Mexico still is very much a caste society, and outside of tourist promotion, indigenous roots aren't celebrated.





Martinez, who learned his craft growing up in Oaxaca, still buys wool from Mexico.

Most people may not know that," he continued. "To this day, Indian heritage remains an obstacle in Mexican life."

Martinez returned to Teotitlan del Valle, but never forgot Aquino's encouragement to follow his dreams. Those dreams had to be

Then, in 1988, his world changed. A young Milwaukee woman named Sandra Hackbarth sent one of her designs to his weaving company, and Martinez took the commission. It was, he recalled, a challenging design. A few months later, after seeing her finished piece,

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put aside, however, as he rose to head weaver with an American company, overseeing 40 weavers. He spent his days teaching them how to weave difficult designs, how to adapt designs, how to hand-dye wool—all without an avenue to develop his own work and nurture his own creativity.

Hackbarth traveled to Oaxaca to meet the talented young weaver and show him her recent series of 15 drawings. He executed the drawings in tapestry; the finished collection was featured at Convergence, an annual textiles conference in Chicago, and at a series of events in what is now called the National



Buffalo Robe, phase VIII

Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago's Field Museum and various galleries.

In 1992, the young couple married. In spring 1994, they cleaned up an old chicken coop in Door County in Wisconsin—a popular tourist destination and longtime arts community—and started their business, the Martinez Studio. Finally, Wence had an opportunity to pursue his passion on his own. "I've always been driven by challenge, and honestly, I was easily bored by repetitive traditional design," he explains. "I also was frustrated by the stranglehold that powerful dealers have over weavers. The dealers designed that system of weavers working anonymously, and I couldn't wait to have a chance to develop my own name."

In the 17-plus years since the Martinez Studio opened, Wence has garnered

international acclaim for his one-of-a-kind contemporary artwork. He carries on the Zapotec legacy by using hand-spun, hand-dyed wool, weaving his original contemporary and traditional designs into museum-quality tapestries for the floor or wall. His work reflects the influence of his Zapotec tribe's traditional designs, combined with North American Indian, Persian and Turkish elements. The looms he uses are hand-made in his village.

"The family of spinners we work with in Oaxaca is the same family from which my father and grandfather have been buying for generations," he says. "In the village, local families raise the sheep and shear them; grade and sort the fleece; clean and scour the wool to remove any contaminants; card the fibers to straighten and blend them into

slivers, which also removes residual dirt and other matter; and draw the carded wool to compact and thin the slivers. Then they spin the fibers to create yarn."

Wence and Sandra frequently travel to Teotitlan del Valle to carefully select the yarn that he will use in his new work. Then, at their Wisconsin studio, he hand-dyes the yarn himself. A gifted colorist, he approaches the dyes much the way a painter would approach his paints. He mixes and plays with the colors, creating a palette of unique, rich hues that cannot be found elsewhere.

Adding additional flavor to the hand-dyed wool is the fact that this wool is unbleached. "Since each sheep has slight color variations in its wool, the yarn itself features variations that add extraordinary depth and texture," Wence explains.

Since the Martinez Studio is a working studio as well as a gallery, a visit gives guests a glimpse of the ancient traditions, years of careful study and masterful skill behind Wence's contemporary weavings and Sandra's artistic creations—wearable art, handbags, designs and paintings. "In our increasingly technological society, the well-crafted things, the handmade, provide spiritual warmth when we wear them or when we use them to decorate our homes," Sandra says. "When we use and display these pieces, the long, patient processes of craft comfort us, and we realize how deeply those things feed our souls."

"It's amazing how handmade art is resonating with people these days," she adds. "More and more collectors are telling us that they are so touched by

the slow, intense, soulful work involved in making these pieces.”

The couple frequently collaborates on tapestry designs, incorporating her signature ethnographic figures and glyphs. One series of paintings-turned-weavings is titled *Semillas*, the Spanish word for seeds. Sandra says she was inspired by the indigenous plant movement—the efforts of local Oaxacan farmers to preserve indigenous seeds that are being systematically destroyed. “The drawings of roots became broader talismans, symbols of the spirit of the plants,” she says. “They are meant to honor, uplift and energize the sacred and the natural in the face of a tenacious assault by corporate, genetically altered, experimental food crops.”

“Teotitlan del Valle is a farming and weaving village, in an area where corn is sacred,” she continued. “On our visits, I am surrounded daily by people who would be impacted by these issues. The threat and the mounting evidence broke my heart and was reflected in my work.” The results are striking.

“The [works] use bold, elemental designs to explore the interdependent relationship between human beings and the land upon which their survival depends,” writes Shan Bryan-Hanson of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, who curated a 2008 exhibition of Wence and Sandra Martinez’s work. “Paradox is at the heart of this work, which represents both past and present, interconnection and independence. The strong graphic designs and large scale of the work [is] demanding that the viewer spend time with each work and rewarding those who do.”



Lluvia Gold

“In the words of Leonardo da Vinci, ‘There are...those who see. Those who see when they are shown. Those who do not see,’” she continued. “[This] art asks the viewer to be one who sees. The works are beautiful but not easy, not rooted in one place, one time or one identity, but instead, in a timeless, quiet moment of presence.”

The black wool in *Semillas* is naturally black, the color of the Oaxacan sheep from which it was taken. Martinez hand-dyed the red wool, mixing the colors to create a full palette of reds. “I work on the dyes for a couple of days, one color at a time,” Wence explained. “Then I have a range to choose from. The tone of the red in *Semillas* actually was determined by the natural black we chose to use, by the way those two colors work against each other.”

“Watching him work on *Semillas*, I felt like I did two decades ago,” Sandra says. “I could watch him for hours and hours. With all those curves, it was exciting, and I was constantly reminded of how much talent it takes. He brings a gracefulness to the work.”

“Whenever Wence weaves a piece of mine, it evolves,” she continues. “I love how it changes from the wall to the floor, with all the different angles and perspectives. And we are always having a conversation about that translation.”

With a smile, Wence says, “It’s fun. The lines of authorship are blurred after 20-plus years of our close collaboration. Whether the designs originate with me or with her, side by side we adjust composition, scale, color and detail as the designs are prepared for the loom.”

“It’s become a natural dance for us to weigh in on each other’s work,” Sandra adds. “Wence is still thriving on challenge, and he sees the next piece in his mind even as he weaves the first in any given series.”

“I’m still amazed at the life we’ve built together,” Wence adds. “It just goes to show that nothing is impossible.”

Wence Martinez’s work will be on display in MADE at the Architectural Digest Home Design Show from March 22 through 25, 2012 at Pier 94, 55th Street at 12th Avenue, in New York City. In addition, at press time, the artist had just learned that a client will be gifting one of his pieces to the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago for its permanent collection. To learn more about Wence Martinez, Sandra Martinez and their work, visit MartinezStudio.com.