



Florencia Espinal Ramírez and Vicente Castillo | Mexico | Wood
Preserving the lacquer traditions of Olinalá



Long before the Spanish arrived in Mexico, indigenous people created artworks as ingenious as they were visually appealing. Continuing that tradition today are master woodcarvers Florencia Espinal Ramírez and Vicente Castillo, a veritable creative dream team. Together, they make a range of extraordinary lacquered boxes designed to hold any number of treasures. "Our community is difficult to access, and it's small," says Florencia. "And yet, the name of Olinalá is known nationally and internationally; it is the Mexican capital of lacquer."

pigments are meticulously painted onto the wood surface with a deer-tail brush. The dazzling lacquer coating on each one-of-a-kind box adds a spectacular luster; though these boxes are suitable for holding treasures, in truth each one is a treasure unto itself.

"Previously our community had greater tourist affluence," says Castillo, "but due to the constant activities of the narco-traffickers of the area, tourism has diminished considerably." The unfortunate economic uncertainty here has necessitated creative means of making a living, and Florencia and Vicente are answering that call. In addition to their own success, they want to keep the name of Olinalá alive for many generations to come.

In this part of southwestern Mexico, located in the state of Guerrero, artisans use the same wood as generations before them: durable olinaloe and piñon varieties. After selecting choice pieces from local wood purveyors, the artists procure a special stone found in the hills surrounding Olinalá. They grind this down to a fine dust and mix it with chia oil to make a paste-like base coat which is applied all over to the wood surface and allowed to dry. Next, earth

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST