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# The Village People

## RURAL MEXICAN WOMEN EMPOWERED THROUGH RUG HOOKING

by Lori Myers



The group with Charlotte Bell.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLOTTE BELL

Some rug hookers create because they want to share their work with others or they yearn to preserve a family memory in fiber art. For others it is a hobby they adore or an outlet after a hard day's work. Then there are the entrepreneurial types that have established successful businesses as an extension of their fondness for the art. But for some rug hooking is more than a passion—they literally depend on it for subsistence to buy food, clothing, or paper so their children can do their schoolwork. Such is the case of the *Rancheritas*, a group of 19 women from a small town in Mexico, whose hand-hooked rugs are being discovered by folk art collectors and others enchanted by their simple designs.

The women live outside of San Miguel de Allende in the tiny village of Agustin Gonzales, nestled in the central Mexican highlands. The village was moved to its current location in the 1930s when the building of a reservoir forced its relocation. Here 100 families exist by farming the land, planting and weeding by hand, and growing corn and beans to feed themselves.

Their meals are as simple as the rugs they design; yet they are particular about the freshness of their food. Corn is the staple of their diet, which they dry and grind by hand to make tortillas or simply sauté with salt and eat as a warm meal. Sometimes chili peppers and onions are added to make a dish called *huillacoche*. Goats provide the homemade cheese that they use.

Even their homes—long narrow brick structures—tend to be simple and sparse. Inside there may be a kitchen table, a corner cupboard, and a little stove or fire pit for



**PIGS**, 30" x 24", wool on jute. Designed and hooked by Bonifacia Tovar, Agustin Gonzales, Mexico, 2003.

cooking. It is not unusual to see chickens and dogs running in and out of these usually windowless buildings.

Many of the men living in the village work in chicken factories across the border in Arkansas, but since 1997 hooked rugs made by the Agustin Gonzales women have been benefiting their local economy and have meant self-sufficiency for those creating these original works of art.

The story of how these women were discovered and their success is the stuff of dreams. Six years ago, Mary Kay, a Canadian woman, became involved in the volunteer organization called *Mujeres en Cambio* (Women in Change), dedicated to the empowerment of women. Because secondary education is not free in Mexico, the organization provided scholarships to girls who could not afford to continue schooling past the sixth grade.

While visiting a school attended by the girls in San Miguel de Allende, Mary noticed the elegant crocheting and embroidery work done by their mothers. That talent formed a good foundation for what Mary had in mind for the women. She had been hooking rugs for many years and was captivated by what she saw knowing that the women had the ability to learn to create rugs. For the next three winters she traveled to the small village and taught the women how to hook rugs. In time they began to create rugs depicting the life around them—mountains, cactus, cows, horses, burros, flowers, small houses, churches, ducks, rabbits, chickens, roosters, and fish.

But *Mujeres en Cambio* didn't stop helping the women once they learned the fiber art. Charlotte Bell makes her home in Texas and has been a self-employed textile artist for 27 years. For the past three years she has shifted her focus to photography and is presently creating a book that is a photographic essay of *Semana Santa* (Easter) in San Miguel. As an organizational aide with *Mujeres en Cambio*, Charlotte spends her summers in Agustin Gonzalez, living among the families. She helps the *Rancheritas* market their rugs by giving them donated material, and photographically chronicling their rug work. Through this the women have become friends with Charlotte and she was even named godmother to one of the

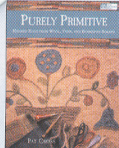


**CHURCH**, 16" x 16", polar tech and sweatshirt material on jute. Designed and hooked by Pueblito Gonzales, Agustin Gonzales, Mexico, 2003.



**DANCER**, 14" x 14", wool, polar tech, and sweatshirt material on jute. Designed and hooked by Petra Ramirez, Agustin Gonzales, Mexico, 2003.

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*Bonifacia hooking in her yard.*

women's sons. "They like me," Charlotte remarks. "They kiss and hug me a lot. They give me food."

It's no wonder. Charlotte became the springboard by which these Mexican women were able to realize the financial fruits of their labor. About four years ago, Charlotte approached a woman she knew who operated a shop outside of Austin, Texas, and showed her about 25 rugs created by the Rancheritas. The shop owner was immediately enamored of the simplicity and attention to detail that the Mexican women had put into their rugs. "She bought all of them paying about \$800," recalls Charlotte. "I was amazed."

To date, the Mexican women have made a total of about 500 rugs with price tags ranging from \$18 to \$300, with the majority costing approximately \$35. Other places where the women's rugs are being shown and sold include an art institute in Mexico where four art shows are done each year. There the rug hookers have been able to display and sell their work. Within the last two years, two stores in San Miguel have been buying and selling the Rancherita's rugs. These local outlets have provided more nearby opportunities for the women artists.

Although Mary, the women's original teacher, urged the hookers to only use wool, they have had to use whatever was available to them, such as sweatshirts, T-shirts, polar fleece from the United States and other recycled woolen goods. "Anyone interested in folk art finds these rugs absolutely charming," Charlotte explains. "They have a lot of imagery that's simple—like children's art. People are buying them for their grandchildren because they are wonderful for children's rooms."

These rugs have changed the lives, but not the culture, of these Mexican women and their families. Charlotte says there are personal stories that have touched her heart, made her smile, and made her proud...and



## HEART IN HAND RUG HOOKING



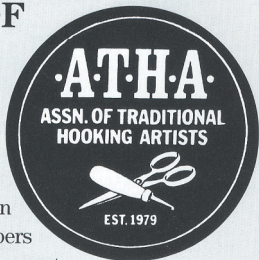
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**BURRO AND FLOWERS**, 14" x 14", wool and polar tech on jute. Designed and hooked by Petra Ramirez, Agustin Gonzales, Mexico, 2003.



**ABOVE: KISSING CHICKENS**, 30" x 24", wool on jute. Designed and hooked by Bonifacia Tovar, Agustin Gonzales, Mexico, 2003.

**BELOW: PETRA'S ROOSTER**, 14" x 14", wool and polar tech on jute. Designed and hooked by Petra Ramirez, Agustin Gonzales, Mexico, 2003.

it's all because of their hooked rugs. "There's a very quiet 16-year-old girl that has sold seven rugs," she says. "She has made \$350 and the money goes to the whole family. These people have kept their tribal roots. Everything is shared and they are kind and generous to each other."

There are also other stories which show the giving and nurturing nature of the *Rancheritas*. Bonafacia Tovar, a resident of Agustin Gonzalez in her 40s, comes from a family of three brothers and three sisters who have a talent for doing creative work. All of the brothers are stonecutters and a niece and sister-in-law who, like Bonafacia, hook rugs. Her mother-in-law is a beginner rug hooker who recently completed a rug showing a horse drinking at the river: "You can sense the family's intelligence," Charlotte remarks. "Bonafacia has very little education but she's an organizer. On one of her most recent rugs, she added the words "Las *Rancheritas Famosas*" (the famous *Rancheritas*). She has a sister that had her jaw removed due to cancer and part of their rug money is going towards her chemotherapy."

Although the Mexican rug hookers continue to depict simple yet charming pictures on their rugs, the images also show their increasing skill level. Charlotte has instructed them to put "a lot of stuff" in their rugs, to fill them up with interesting pictures, and the women have complied. "The subject matter has gotten more exciting," remarks Charlotte. "They are showing cows with pink udders, chickens coming out of eggs, and chickens with different feathers on them. One woman made a rug with a lady in a

fancy dress wearing a hat that she said was a dancer. Another rug had a little man in traditional clothes leading a burro with a pack filled with flowers."

More and more, the women are hooking words onto their rugs and even picturing Halloween characters like ghosts, witches, pumpkins, and bats in their work. "They don't celebrate Halloween, but they watch television and look at magazines for ideas," Charlotte explains. "I'm astounded with each thing they come up with."

With the popularity of their rugs on the increase, the women have found themselves in an unusual predicament. What has become the biggest challenge for the *Rancheritas* is that, for the first time, many of them have to deal with finances, paying back money when fabric is purchased for them, and keeping track of rugs made and sold. Many have never made a list before and don't know anything about bookkeeping because most have not even graduated from elementary school. "The concept of organization is difficult with people that have never done it," Charlotte explains. "It's a new way of thinking for them, but it will happen."

In a country where women are second-class citizens and their legal rights are way below those of men, there are other and more important changes taking place because of the rug work of the *Rancheritas*. These women's self-sufficiency, self-esteem, and self-worth has risen by simply knowing that their rug hooking is helping not only their own families but also their village. They are showing their daughters the art of hooking rugs and proving to them that the work of



women and the rugs they complete can pay well. When Charlotte first began taking photographs of the women, they were shy, would hide behind each other, and be reluctant to look at the camera. Now there is a sense of obvious pride and self-confidence as they gather for pictures, laughing and showing each other their latest designed rug. "These women are using their creative abilities to do something special that people in the United States are buying. It is affecting the whole village. Everyone has to pull his or her weight," says Charlotte. "The country is changing. The feistiness of some of the younger educated women is heartening."

Those interested in viewing or purchasing any of the rugs of the *Rancheritas* women of Agustin Gonzalez can log onto their web site at [www.rughookproject.50megs.com](http://www.rughookproject.50megs.com) ■

Lori Myers is a freelance writer based in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.