



Wence and Sandra Martinez.

weaves homeland into his work

By Donna Marie Pocius
Photos by Christine Nesheim

For Wence and Sandra Martinez, art honors tradition and brings fantastic color schemes and intricate patterns into rooms.

Wence weaves one-of-a-kind wool tapestries, which can be beautifully displayed on walls or practically placed on hardwood floors. He takes pride in his commitment to using only hand-spun wool, which he personally selects in Mexico and hand-dyes outside the couple's Martinez Studio, 5877 Highway 57, Jacksonport.

"The yarn comes from Mexico, from Oaxaca; it is hand-spun, and there's no store to buy it. I get up early to catch the people," Wence said of his trips beyond. "I go from house to house to buy the yarn. A lot of them have dealt with my grandfather and my father."

Wence, a Zapotec Indian from Teotitlan del Valle, Oaxaca, is a master weaver and a photographer of Oaxaca village life,

who made the move to the Peninsula in 1988 after he met Sandra. She hails from Milwaukee and creates drawings resembling ancient writings and symbols for display on the tapestries and her hallmark scarves and shawls.

She also designs her own line of vinyl handbags and is excited about the warm response she has garnered for her figurative watercolor and acrylic paintings.

Martinez art is sold at the couple's Jacksonport studio and gallery — a work of art in itself. After finding a 5-1/2-acre property on the market in 2000, the couple repurposed its 3-1/2-car garage to a two-level workspace.

A cool corrugated steel exterior, beamed wood ceilings and radiant floor heating emerged from the rubble.

People can also see tapestries for sale at Fine Line Designs Gallery, Ephraim.

Martinez



Sandra's handbags may be found at Monticello, Sturgeon Bay.

They established the studio and gallery in 1994 and have built a regular clientele of "savvy people, who recognize good work and support it," Sandra said.

The handwoven tapestries, in three-by-five-foot size, range in price from \$1,500 to \$5,000, depending on pattern complexity. Also available are larger works at higher price points. People are investing in "heirloom quality" pieces that are also easy to maintain, according to Sandra.

"This is art that will be around forever. It's a special thing. They are so beautiful. They are heirlooms," she said.

"Wence does the dyeing or his father does the vegetal dyes. We can guarantee our colors will never run off, never run. We wash them with water before they leave here."

Beauty and durability are also synonymous with Sandra's foray into vinyl handbag design — an art form which she believes harkens back to her work as a potter.

"To me, the bags are like containers. For me, in a strange way, these things all feed each other," she said.

One element pulling pieces together at Martinez Studio is Sandra's primitive-looking patterns.

"They look like little spirit figures, and I've been doing work like that for 30 years," she said. "So whether it's a tapestry design or a print on a scarf or a cutout appliqué on a bag, it all has those kinds of figures, those kinds of drawings. And it's really fulfilling for me."

The artists recently talked about their art and plans.

TAPESTRY PROCESS

WM: It's a long process. My loom is handmade and was shipped from Mexico. I'm from a village where almost everyone knows how to weave. I make decisions about patterns as I am weaving. I do that all the time unless it is a commission. But otherwise I just go for it.

SM: When Wence does weaving of my designs, he uses a drawing and reads it as he goes.

DESIGNS AND PATTERNS

WM: I never repeat. Each is different.

SM: We do a huge range of styles. We have modern and contemporary things, things a little more Turkish, and that look a little more Asian. There are some heavy patterns, and some have subtle color changes.

All my work is based on drawings that are very intuitive, kind of ethnographic. They look like they can be ancient figures, ancient symbols.

HALLMARKS

SM: When I look at Wence's work what stands out are the rich colors — like a painter. Wence dyed all those colors in the first place. So it's the richness of color and the choices he has made about combining color.

WM: It is also using traditional material; that is one of the things I will never change. I like to keep the tradition of using hand-spun wool and buying direct from the same people, from the same village. I want them to benefit from the work.

CARING FOR TAPESTRIES

WM: You can use it on the floor. It has a natural oil in it, and the dirt doesn't grind into it. You can vacuum it. If you spill something, blot it right away. It sits on top and doesn't soak in. Wash the rug with water — not very often, about every five years.

SM: The biggest enemy to weaving is dust, so vacuum and beat the rugs outside — that's the best way to take care of them.

DECORATING TIPS

SM: You can have a special piece that fits in your décor. Another way they are used is on the wall. In a lot of rooms with cathedral ceilings, a tapestry, instead of a painting, does wonders for the sound in the space because it absorbs sound. A handmade thing has a warmth and quietness that feeds us in this day and age of technology.

WM: People often decorate around the work. I've done quite a few commissions like that; people say, "I want to do this before I buy the furniture."