

MoMA

Magazine

An Old Crop Gets a New Life

See how artist Fernando Laposse transforms corn husks into art.

Arlette Hernandez



Corn husks. Courtesy of the artist

Design can play an important role in giving new life to community traditions. The work of [Fernando Laposse](#)—currently featured in the exhibition [Life Cycles: The Materials of Contemporary Design](#)—is a vivid example, dedicated as it is to reviving and preserving the ecosystem of ancestral grains while also bolstering economic stability in Mexico's Indigenous communities. His journey began in childhood, when he spent summers in Tonahuixtla, a village in the southwestern Mexican state of Puebla. It was there that he first encountered the Mixtec community and their heirloom corn—farming practices. After completing his studies in product design at Central Saint Martins in London, he returned to Tonahuixtla only to find that the Mixtec people had left. They were searching for new work opportunities, displaced by the onslaught of industrial corn production that had taken over Mexican agriculture and territory after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. New, intensive extraction practices had made the land useless for traditional farming due to soil degradation and the loss of ancient seeds. In a country that adopted the slogan *in maíz, no hay país* ("without corn, there is

no country”), corn is found in more than 80% of recipes and is not only a crucial source of nutrition but also a repository of the nation’s culture. Laposse embarked on a mission to reintroduce native seeds to the village and bring traditional agricultural practices back to life by developing *Totomoxtle*, meaning “corn husks” in native language. The material, crafted indeed from leftover corn husks collected during the harvest, is transformed by the locals into an attractive and versatile veneer inspired by traditional woodworking marquetry, adding an important step in the goal of a circular cycle system of production—of economy and culture.

Recently, MoMA associate educator Arlette Hernandez interviewed Laposse to talk about the importance of Mexican corn and how he’s using corn husks as a new, self-sustaining material.

—Paola Antonelli, Senior Curator, Department of Architecture and Design, and Director, Research and Development



Variety of corn husks. Courtesy of the artist

Cultural significance and origins of corn

You can’t talk about Mexico without talking about corn. Corn is a wonderful crop that produces some of the most abundant sources of carbohydrates and energy, pure energy, starches, sugars. But it’s also a manmade crop. You don’t really see corn in nature the way we know it. The closest relative to corn is something called teosinte, which is a lot more like wheat. It’s little, with not many seeds, and definitely without all the benefits of corn’s high amounts of starches and sugars.

When we look at how we went from teosinte to modern-day corn, it's a story of collaboration between humans and nature. It's estimated that this story began 9,000 years ago in the central valleys of Tehuacán, in the state of Puebla, in modern-day Mexico. An ancient Mesoamerican came across a teosinte that was a freak of nature. It was a hermaphrodite, having both male and female organs, and it could self-pollinate. It had an abundance of the female organs, which are the seeds. This ancient Mesoamerican took a grain of that freak teosinte and planted it. By doing that, he or she started an incredible process of selective breeding, which led to the diversity of all the varieties of corn that we have today.



Fernando Laposse. *Totomoxtle*. 2017. Corn husks and glue on MDF board

Totomoxtle

Totomoxtle is the name of my project. It's one of the words used to describe the husks of the corn in several of our Indigenous languages. When you're talking about *Totomoxtle*, people here immediately know what part of the corn you're talking about, and I thought that was really poetic.

Totomoxtle is a new material. It's a veneer made with the husks of heirloom corn. The grains and leaves of heirloom corn from Mexico have all of these wonderful colors. We take the leaves at the end of the corn's life cycle, once they're fully dry, and work with the material as though it were wood veneer. We flatten it, iron it, and glue it, and laminate it onto paper, and then we have a variety of methods to cut it into shapes and to reassemble it to create continuous surfaces.

Wood veneering means creating very thin sheets of wood from a tree trunk. Commercial veneering producers basically take a whole log and effectively put it into a giant pencil sharpener that shaves off a thin layer of wood, about a millimeter thick. Historically, this was a technique used to create furniture that looked like it was made out of solid, expensive woods, but was produced more cheaply, using a thin layer covering a more common variety of wood. More recently, it's also used a lot with plywood, to put a layer of hardwood over a core of MDF to make it look more "premium."

I don't think *Totomoxtle* will ever replace wood veneer, but it uses the same principle. It's a decorative surface on a piece of furniture or a wall covering like the one that you might be looking at right now. It's a way of taking a very precious material and spreading it out across the plane that you're going to see the most.

The *Totomoxtle* technique is inspired by traditional woodworking marquetry. I thought it was interesting to work with marquetry because it usually deals with very expensive tropical woods, and traditionally it was used to create decorative surfaces for furniture using very precious woods. Because with corn you're limited in size, you can't get a four-by-eight veneer sheet. So marquetry became a good practical technique to be able to create continuous surfaces. The result is a little like a jigsaw puzzle. You cut little pieces of different colored corns and assemble them to create a continuous surface.

Totomoxtle is also a social project. It's not about only creating the material, but also about creating a self-sustaining system that looks at small-scale farming economies, Indigenous rights, land rights, and erosion. It really tries to shine a light on diversity.

[Life Cycles: The Materials of Contemporary Design](#) is on view at MoMA Through July 7, 2024.