

# The Amate Tradition

*Innovation and Dissent in Mexican Art*<sup>1</sup>

Jonathan D. Amith\*

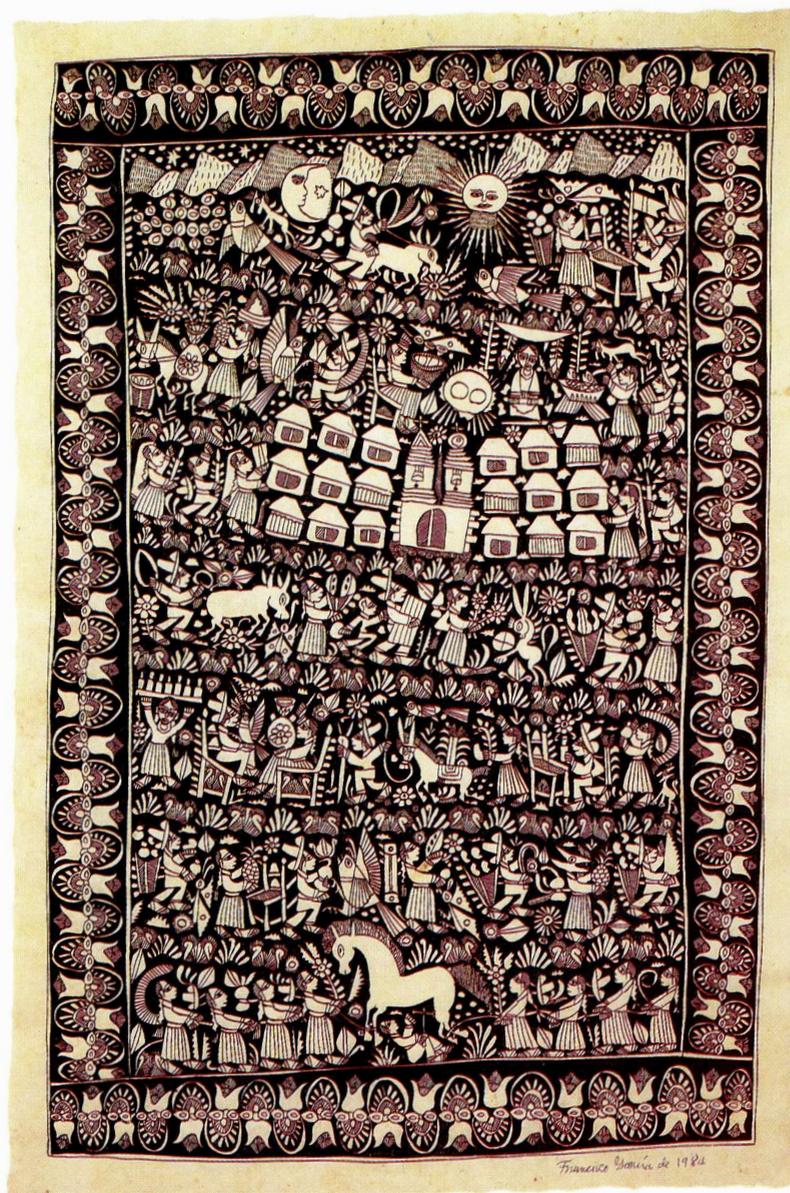


Photo: Jesús Sánchez Uribe

In early 1961, the anthropologist Peggy Golde left Ameyaltepec after a year of fieldwork. Had she stayed a few more months, she would have witnessed a phenomenon that would have changed the course of her long-term research on aesthetic values: Ameyaltepec artists began to paint on *amate*.

Since pre-Columbian times *amate* has been made from the bark of various moraceous trees including the fig (*amatl* in Nahuatl), which is crushed, pounded into flat sheets and dried. However, by 1961 *amate* was only produced in San Pablito Pahuatlán, Puebla, an Otomí-speaking village where it is still used in rituals. *Amate* had also made inroads into Mexico's crafts market. Traditional cut-out figures were sold in Mexico City and Russell Davis, the owner of a handicrafts shop, was using *amate* to make lampshades.

By the early 1960s, Mexico City had attracted a great number of Ameyaltepec peddlers. One of these was Pedro de Jesús, a skillful painter who traded in ceramics. Among De Jesús' clients was Max Kerlow, the owner of a folk art shop. One day in mid-1962, instead of simply buying pottery, Kerlow hired De Jesús to decorate small, carved wooden figures in his

\* American anthropologist.

<sup>1</sup> This essay is taken from "The Creation of Indigenous Images: From Private Nightmares to Public Protest," in *The Amate Tradition: Innovation and Dissent in Mexican Art* (bilingual edition. English-Spanish) edited by Jonathan D. Amith, Mexico City, La Casa de las Imágenes, Chicago, Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 1995, pp. 41-100. Distributed in the U.S. by University of Mexico Press.

Black and White Frieze-Style, Francisco García Simona (Ameyaltepec), 1984. Francisco Alvarez Collection (Mexico City).



Photo: Jesús Sánchez Uribe

PABLO Cirenio de la ROSA de Ameyaltepec Gto.

Fish on a Blue Background, Pablo Cirenio de la Rosa (Ameyaltepec), 1985-1990. Gomi Stromberg Collection (New York).

store. After about a week De Jesús returned to Ameyaltepec. The pay had been good and on subsequent trips to Mexico City he brought his brother Pablo and then a neighbor, Cristino Flores. Over the next few months, Flores and the De Jesús brothers painted in the back of Kerlow's store, often accompanied by Kerlow's assistant, the artist Felipe Ehrenberg.

These months were ones of experimentation and a search for new forms of expression that would be both aesthetically and commercially successful. The three Nahua artists were given a variety of objects to paint: carved wooden figures from Ixtapan de la Sal, in the State of Mexico, and Taxco, Guerrero; ceramics from Ameyaltepec and Oapan as well as Tonalá, Jalisco; wooden boards; cotton-fibered watercolor paper; cloth, small pieces of leather and bristol board. Colored gouache was often used on the paper and bristol board, whereas acrylics were used on the other materials. The three-dimensional objects were decorated with flower and animal motifs. Human figures first appeared on leather and paper as simple, free-standing decorative elements. Yet the paintings still did not tell a story.

Two major innovations soon took place: the adoption of *amate* and the beginning of narrative painting. In the search for new materials on which the Ameyaltepec artists could paint, it is not surprising that Ehrenberg and Kerlow soon tried bark paper. Ehrenberg frequently visited the house where Pahuatlán merchants stayed in Mexico City, and Kerlow's shop was close to the *Bazar del Sábado*, a well-known weekly market for folk and popular

Photo: Kathleen Culbert-Aguilar



EL AMATE FUE LANZANDO EN PERSECUCIÓN DE LA MUJER Y VOYÓ DETRÁS DE ELLA COMO RÍO DE AGUA PARA QUE LA RESERVARA, PERO LA TIERRA VIÓ EN SOCORRO DE LA MUJER ABAS LA BOCA Y DETRÁS.  
EL 802, APOC. 12, 15-18. EUSEBIO DÍAZ ALEJANDRO, AMEYALTEPEC, ORO, 18 DE ABRIL DE 1992.

But faith overcomes destruction and earth harbors hope, Eusebio Díaz Alejandro (Ameyaltepec), 1992. Aaron Kerlow Collection (Chicago).

art where Pahuatlán *amate* cut-out figures were sold. The first public exhibit of painted *amates* opened on February 28, 1963 in Kerlow's Galería del Centro de Arte y Artesanía.

Although it included works on cloth, leather, paper and wood, the show was dominated by *amate*, which soon eclipsed all other media. *Amate* captured the public's imagination as no

ther material had. It produced an aura of authenticity by spontaneously evoking an association with the pre-Columbian past.

At first, narrative painting depicted daily life in Ameyaltepec. In late 1962, Pedro de Jesús, Pablo de Jesús and Cristino Flores painted together in Kerlow's store. Their works show that *amate* painting did not develop as often imagined: from the transfer of pottery motifs onto paper followed by the gradual evolution of narrative representation. The opposite is more the case: despite having learned to paint on ceramics, the artists quickly adapted themselves to the new medium's expressive potential. As a result, many

early stylistic elements and formal designs were innovative. Neither human forms nor landscapes had been regularly employed on pottery. Their presence in the very earliest *amates* from 1962 suggests that even during this embryonic stage the Nahua artists began, however uncertainly, to introduce new elements into their work.

*Amate* paintings enjoyed immediate success in galleries, stores and directly with private buyers. The Misrachi Gallery, the José María Velasco Gallery (connected to the National Institute of Fine Arts) and a gallery run by Antonio Souza bought *amates* and held exhibits in the mid-1960s. Mary Price, sister of the late actor and art collector Vincent

Price, lived near Kerlow's store in San Angel and was a major buyer during the very first months. By 1963, San Francisco-based Anthro Imports was purchasing a considerable number of *amates* from Kerlow; Las Palomas, a Mexico City folk art shop, was soon dealing directly with the painters.

An increasing number of Ameyaltepec painters shifted from pottery to *amate*. Several of them participated in the August 1963 exhibit held at the José María Velasco Gallery. That year, painters started buying *amate* directly from Pahuatlán merchants in Mexico City and making their own professional contacts. Other artists began to sell directly to the public.



Family Painting, Pablo de Jesús (Ameyaltepec), 1962. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA.



Photo: Jesús Sánchez Uribe

Variation on Spring, Pablo Nicolás Parra (Xalitla), 1983. Betty Perkins de Warman Collection (Mexico City).

From 1964 to 1968, Ameyaltepec painters continued to explore new styles, forms and themes, as they had in 1962 and 1963. Moreover, they now shared ideas within a growing Nahua artistic community and received suggestions from an enthusiastic circle of patrons and promoters.

In the mid-1960s some artists used acrylics to imitate natural pigments. However, bright colors soon dominated *amate* paintings and continued to do so until fine line drawings in India ink appeared in the mid-1970s. Several artists were unusually innovative. Francisco García radically changed his style over time, especially between 1965 and 1975, when he frequently visited

Mexico City and Cuernavaca. By the late 1970s, he started to develop “frieze-style” paintings: horizontal bands of elaborately detailed and somewhat repetitive scenes of village life. Pablo de Jesús painted a personal vision, not only in his playful erotic fantasy, but also in a searching autobiographical account of sin, repentance and suffering. De Jesús had killed a man who repeatedly tried to sneak into his house while he was away and his wife was asleep.

*Amate* surpassed industrial paper in beauty, strength and resilience. Moreover, *amates* captured the fancy of a national and international public by endowing the paintings with the aura of an authentic and ancient indigenous

art. Nevertheless, for several years artists continued to use bristol board. Part of the reason was a shortage of *amate*. Pahuatlán was unable to increase production fast enough to keep up with the new demand, and a direct distribution network had not yet been set up (Pahuatlán merchants did not take large quantities of *amate* to the major painting villages until the late 1960s). Because of this shortage, bristol board paintings continued to be sold in Mexico City, Cuernavaca and Acapulco through the mid-1960s. Artists occasionally reverted to industrial paper after they had started painting on *amate*. Not surprisingly, bristol board painting exhibited stylistic develop-



Photo: Jesús Sánchez Uribe

*Still Life on a Table*, Alfonso Lorenzo (Ameyaltepec), 1991. Gomi Stromberg Collection (New York).

ments similar to those of early *amates*: see-through legs and the dominance of floral and animal designs; the use of a ground plane and narrative painting; and increasingly elaborate frames.

Nevertheless, the allure of *amate* was overwhelming and once the supply problem was resolved, the distribution of painted *amates* expanded dramatically. By late 1967, the Ameyaltepec merchant Juan Celedonio was selling *amates* to stores along the United States border. He often took friends along and soon Nahua merchants were distributing *amates* throughout Mexico, from Tijuana on the border to Cancún on the Caribbean coast. By the late 1960s FONART, the Mexican govern-

ment agency for promoting handicrafts, had started buying thousands of *amates* and was exporting them all over the world. Buyers' tastes and expectations had become more stable. Hundreds of new painters met the increased demand and narrower consumer preferences with less imaginative and more standardized *amates*.

However, this was not always the case. At the same time that trade expanded, important changes were occurring in the formal composition of *amates*. Increasingly elaborate floral and geometric frames began to decorate the perimeter of *amates*. The problem of "floating" figures was solved by laying out a blanket of color and flowers upon which

human and animal figures were grounded. Still, disconnected decorative flowers occasionally intruded into the narration. Perhaps the most challenging problem was spatial: how to integrate different scenes and activities into a single composition.

Other villages soon began to paint *amates*: first Xalitla, then Oapan and finally, in the 1970s, Maxela. It is interesting that *amate* painting did not develop in the remaining Balsas River Nahua villages. A variety of factors influenced where *amate* painting spread beyond Ameyaltepec: intercommunity social and cultural contacts; alternatives to painting as an income source; and distance from potential markets.



Photo: Jesus Sánchez Uribe

*The Life of a Village Called San Agustín Oapan*, Abraham Mauricio Salazar (Oapan), 1984. María Teresa Cárdenas and Jorge E. Aceves Collection (Mexico City).

Unlike Ameyaltepec and Oapan, neither Xalitla nor Maxela had a pottery or painting tradition. However, since Xalitla residents were merchants, they already possessed the skills needed to market *amates* and they soon learned how to paint them. Maxela's close social contacts with Xalitla and Ameyaltepec were key to its adoption of *amate* painting. In Maxela most artists are women who paint to supplement household income. Unlike Ameyaltepec, Oapan and Xalitla, the men in Maxela have good jobs that make *amate* painting a less attractive economic option.

*Amate* painting is usually learned in a family setting. First a child just watches older relatives paint and then begins

painting by coloring in designs that those relatives have outlined. Families develop distinctive styles which they often share with more distant kin and neighbors. As a result, villages develop their own artistic styles, much as they do in clothing, food, language, agricultural technology and social practices.

For example, Ameyaltepec paintings are often highly detailed, with little sky and much ground. They tend to portray an idyllic village of the past: the thatched-roof huts are a far cry from the stifling, cement-roofed buildings that now dominate this prosperous community. Like the artists, Ameyaltepec merchants are also innovative: several have started hiring talented painters to draw in India

ink. In Mexico City, the merchants have silkscreens made of these original drawings and then print hundreds of copies on *amate* in Ameyaltepec. Finally, they sell these prints to families whose children color them in.

Xalitla paintings often include fantastic figures, at times combined with striking Mesoamerican motifs. Ink drawings by Xalitla artists are more open and flowing than the relatively dense work from Ameyaltepec. Xalitla painters are also the most innovative in terms of the materials on which they paint.

Paintings from Maxela are usually extremely dense. Winding paths connect different scenes, and space is crowded with people and animals instead of

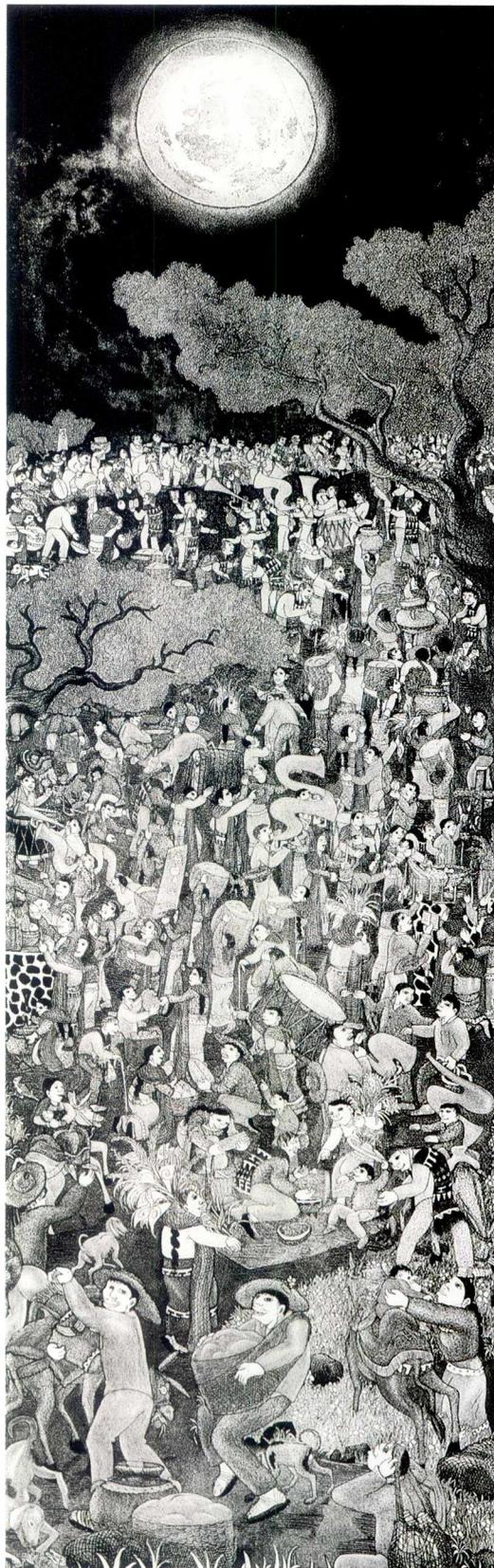


Photo: Kathleen Culbert-Aguilar

*Offering to the Earth*, Nicolás de Jesús (Ameyaltepec), 1990.  
Judy Boruchoff Collection (Chicago).

the flora commonly used by artists from other villages. Maxela artists rarely leave the village to sell their paintings; instead, Xalitla and Ameyaltepec intermediaries go to them and later resell the work in urban and tourist markets.

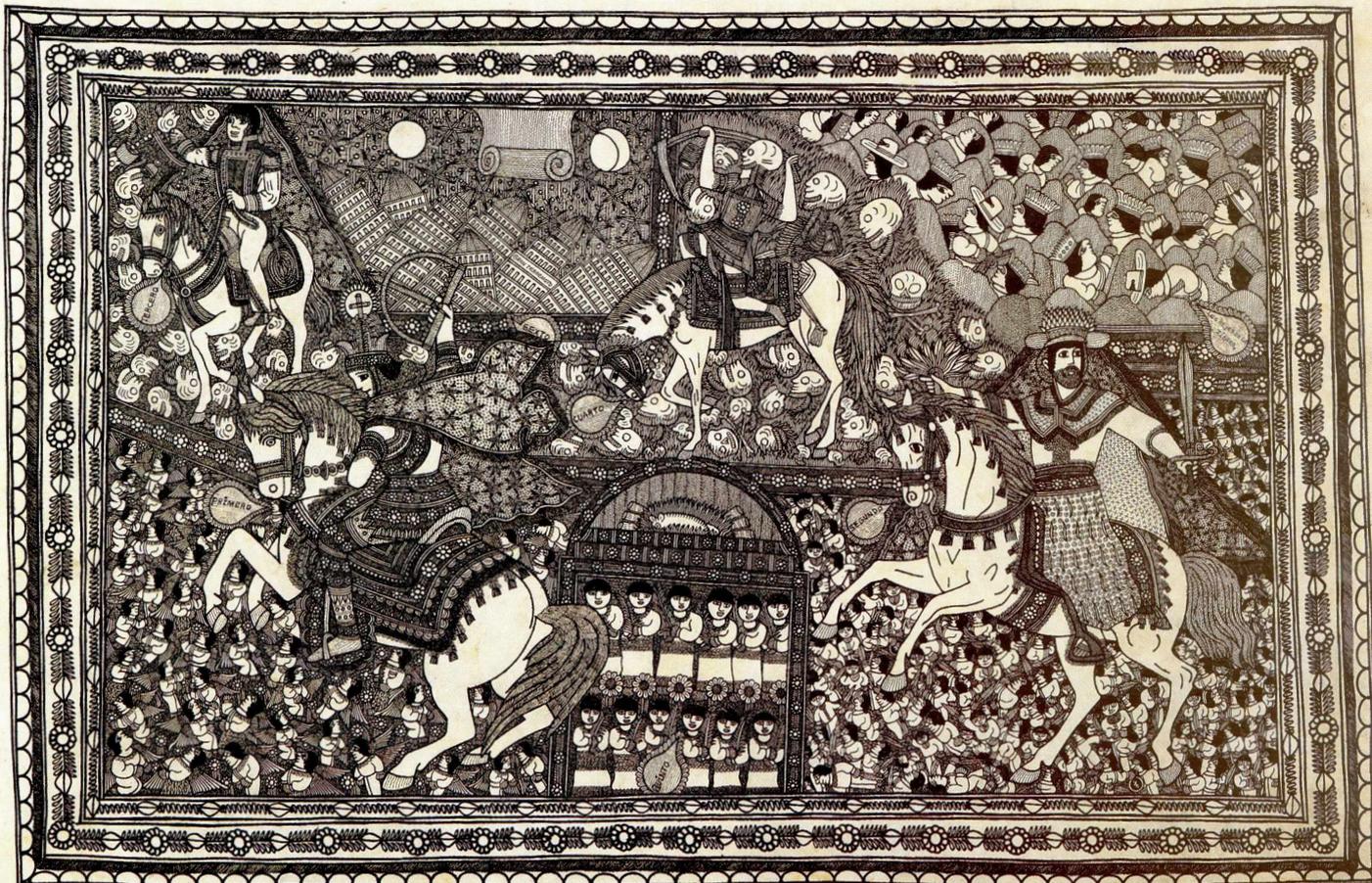
Finally, Oapan artists are the most ethnographic and realistic; their drawings depict contemporary daily life and the physical environment more closely than painters from other villages. The Oapan painters Marcial, Félix and Juan Camilo, Félix and Inocencio Jiménez and Roberto Mauricio started to work on masonite in the mid-1970s. They have had a profound influence on local artistic expression in terms of materials, techniques and thematic content.

The personal preferences of Balsas River Nahuatl artists often lead them to defy conventions and subvert established categories. Their art encompasses a fascinating range of expressions: private nightmares, personal dramas, reinterpretations of European imagery, pastoral utopias, social commentary and public protest.

Art from Ameyaltepec alone, a small, 200-family village in the Sierra Madre, is brilliantly diverse. Recent paintings by Eusebio Díaz, Pablo Cirenio, Gabriel de la Cruz and Cristino Flores are mere samples of the creative force of artists from this village. Equally extraordinary works can be found in Oapan, Xalitla and Maxela. In particular, three singularly talented Ameyaltepec painters exemplify the constant search for new forms of aesthetic expression among Balsas River Nahuatl artists.

Jesús Corpus Aliberto could be taken to embody the romantic ideal of an artist oblivious to the market. The energy and violence of his work reflect his isolation from everyday interaction, and art became his principal means of communication. By the late 1970s Corpus had left Ameyaltepec for Mexico City, where he often sold his singular paintings, some over six feet wide, for a pittance. Many of them briefly graced the walls of upscale stores in the Zona Rosa, where they commanded high prices from a small group of buyers. His sharp, woodcut-like lines suit a bramble-bodied couple grappling with an imaginary beast. A remarkable self-portrait as man-lion and a ferocious reptilian struggle, both set against atypical flat color backgrounds, suggest a torment that we can only begin to imagine. Corpus has not painted for close to five years now. Instead, every day he spends hours diligently writing endless columns of numbers in scores of ledgers: the account books of an imaginary money factory where he seems to compensate for earnings lost during the years he undersold his work.

Another fascinating artist is Alfonso Lorenzo. In the mid-1970s, before he fell victim to a sudden and severe mental illness, Mexico City artists circles had started to recognize him as a promising painter. Two of his works are particularly enigmatic. A dinner table loses only some of its mystery when it is rotated 90 degrees: the place setting immediately in front of the viewer then assumes an upright position, but the table and chairs still test our sense of perspective. Likewise,



LOS CUATRO CABALLEROS DEL APOCALIPSIS CAPITULO 6, VERSICULO 1. 17. EUSEBIO DIAZ ALEJANDRO, AMEYALTEPEC, OAX, MEX. DISEÑADO EN 1991.

... and the apocalyptic end of the world, Eusebio Díaz Alejandro (Ameyaltepec), 1991 (Private Collection).

the background and frame in his still life on a flowered and checkered cloth do little to orient the images spatially. A unique version of a standard crucifixion scene uses color to resolve problems of texture and perspective in a fascinating way. Lorenzo painted all three works after he was released from a psychiatric hospital and before he lapsed back into the severe mental disorder that has afflicted him for most of the years since 1982. His anguish is most clearly expressed in the last painting. A shrouded figure carries a remembrance of traditional Nahuatl society: a Tulumán water jug from which Lorenzo's ubiquitous flowers spring.

Nicolás de Jesús, son of the pioneering painter Pablo de Jesús, learned etching and other graphic techniques from Felipe Ehrenberg. After a sojourn in the United States that took him to San Francisco and Los Angeles, De Jesús settled in Chicago where he joined an artists' collective and print workshop. He frequently travels between the United States and Mexico. Two drawings depict contrasting dimensions of his experience: a Nahuatl village in Guerrero and an inner-city barrio in Chicago. Other artists from the Balsas River basin... responded with an equally powerful and political message

[when] their own region [was] threatened by a government development project.<sup>2</sup> ❧

<sup>2</sup> In October 1990, the inhabitants of the Balsas River Basin founded the Nahuatl Peoples Council of the Upper Balsas to organize opposition to a hydroelectric dam planned for the area. The project, which would have destroyed two dozen communities and displaced 40,000 people, was canceled in 1993 because of insufficient funding. As a way of getting the protest movement's message across, several painters from Oapan, Ameyaltepec and Xalitla created *amate* paintings illustrating a text about the history of the Nahuats and their opposition to the dam. These paintings were used in an exhibition and the book upon which this article is based.