

Friar Bernardo Padilla Museum



Located in Nuevo Chupícuaro, a short distance from Acámbaro in the state of Guanajuato, the Museo Fray Bernardo Padilla (Friar Bernardo Padilla Museum) preserves fragments of the history of a community expelled from a virtual paradise in the name of modernity, fragments recovered thanks to collective memory and action.

Inaugurated in 1993, this small community museum's three rooms fulfill two objectives: 1) they bear witness to the grandeur of the Chupícuaro culture that flowered between the Michoacán lakes and Guanajuato's River Lerma region about 2,500 years ago through its ceramics and items of daily use; and 2) it narrates how, in the twentieth century, Chupícuaro residents had to leave their homes, their lands and their memories because a dam was built. This change brought them uncertainty and poverty, and the museum shows



The museum preserves fragments of the history of a community expelled from a virtual paradise.

how their relocation in an inhospitable region ended up by turning them into a migrant people who managed to hold onto their past.

THE FLOODING OF PARADISE

Located on a strip of land between the Lerma and Tigre Rivers, the Chupícuaro community ventured into the first decades of the twentieth century without want: fishing and hunting in abundance plus fertile agriculture made for plenty. However, when construction on the Solís Dam began, things would change. Chupícuaro and 17 more communities were located in the 7,700-hectare area the dam would flood. Most of the communities were small hamlets and it was not difficult to convince their inhabitants to relocate, but Chupícuaro had more than 2,000 residents who did not want to move.

It took 10 years, from 1939 to 1949, to build the dam; during that time, despite protests, residents were relocated. By 1949, the community found itself in a very different new home: a line



Photos by Daniel Munguía

A Small Cultural Adventure

of small concrete houses on top of a barren hill, without land or animals for their survival.

They brought us to a barren wilderness where only mesquite grew. They assigned us houses according to the ones we had had before, different kinds of houses, but in the end, they were all the same. We always got lost and had to ask which house we lived in. They were cold and there wasn't even any firewood. In the street we asked each other who had something to eat; the crops, the grass and the fruit trees had been lost; the chickens we brought with us had been snatched by coyotes; there were so many coyotes that we were afraid to go out at night. Those were hard times. (Testimony of a resident exhibited on one of the museum's displays.)

Nuevo Chupícuaro would survive thanks to community efforts. Today, some still demand land and reparation payments, but many lost hope very quickly and decided to go north. From there they sent money to help those who remained to build houses, the church, parks

and even a museum to tell their story. Every year they come home for the fiestas bringing their children with them so they do not lose their links to the land that saw their fathers and grandfathers grow up.

This is the story that part of the museum tells with photographs, letters, diaries, maps, furniture, clothing and other objects from that time, all gathered and donated by the community. Photos from the nineteenth century showing the way of life in old Chupícuaro: its inhabitants, the centuries-old church (from which a stone cross was rescued and placed in the esplanade in front of the new church), tools, typical dress. Photographs of the dam at different stages of its construction, diaries and a small jewel: a map of old Chupícuaro between its two rivers, with the names of each family inscribed on their plots. Nothing is left of the houses originally built by the authorities but

All the pieces on exhibit were donated by the community of Nuevo Chupícuaro.





the memory and a few photographs in the museum cases.

TESTIMONY OF A GLORIOUS PAST

The construction of the dam brought not only desolation, however. During the excavations, anthropologists from the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), who knew of the existence of vestiges of pre-Hispanic societies in the region, requested permission to open up their own digs. They dug in the plaza, behind the church, in the graveyard and in the area around an old bridge; soon they found nearly 360 graves. Thanks to this, they recovered innumerable vestiges of the grandeur of the culture dating back to 450 B.C. next to the human remains were hundreds of receptacles of different forms, sizes and colors, human figures of different kinds, from miniatures to larger hollow, polychrome figures and objects made of obsidian, precious stones, necklaces and conch and spiral shells.

These finds were decisive in giving the Chupícuaro culture its own identity. The remains of monumental architecture were not necessary: inhabitants of the Chupícuaro culture lived in reed, grass and mud huts; they practiced agriculture, hunting and fishing and carried on intense trade with other regions of Mesoamerica.

Most of the objects found were sent to Mexico City and others enriched the collections of different museums throughout the country. The pieces exhibited in the Nuevo Chupícuaro mu-

seum were recovered by inhabitants of the old town or found by those who participated in the excavations before the INAH officials prohibited individuals from keeping pieces. So, with community collaboration and the help of experts, the museum exhibits a small but varied and rich collection of registered pieces that help describe the culture's glorious past.

The museum also boasts three murals painted by Don Pedro Cruz from the neighboring city of Acámbaro, paid for with community funds, depicting different moments from the pre-Hispanic past and old Chupícuaro.

SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

In addition to its testimonial character, this museum is a community center, with guided tours for school children, artistic and cultural activities and different kinds of workshops for the general public. It also supports students and researchers who come to study the museum's collections; they repay this help with lectures and the development of catalogues or museum inventories. Nuevo Chupícuaro is probably not on most tourist maps, and its museum is probably not in the catalogue of Mexico's greatest museums, but for local residents that is not the important thing. The idea is, above all, to keep alive the community spirit that has allowed people to use their own resources to make this small cultural adventure possible.

Elsie Montiel
Editor