



Nicolás de Jesús, "Comierdalismo" (Shitty Commercialism), 75 x 60 cm, 1993 (line and color etching on amate paper).

Half a Century Innovating Tradition The Frontiers of *Amate* Bark Paper Painters

Martha García*

After almost 50 years of creating the famous paintings on *amate* bark paper, Nahua artists have been given yet another well-deserved award for the tradition they have zealously preserved from the beginning: the 2007 National Prize for Science and the Arts in the category of folk arts and traditions. One of the most important characteristics of the continuity of their work has been the innovations they have introduced without abandoning their roots. This has allowed them to enter into the twenty-first century with themes alluding to the day-to-day life of society, like migration, touched on by the work of Tito Rutilo, Nicolás de Jesús, Marcial Camilo and Roberto Mauricio, shown on these pages.

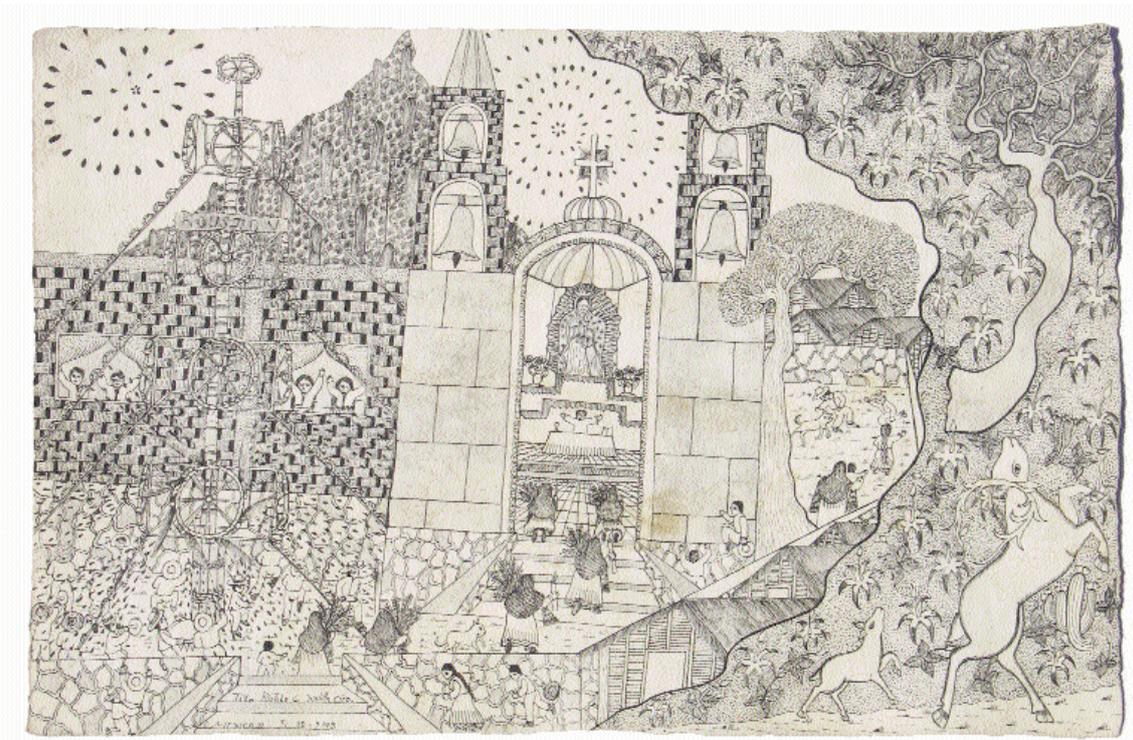
In general the Nahua painters of the Alto Balsas in Guerrero state have accustomed the assiduous consumer to their colorful “sheets” —as they call the pieces of *amate* paper— to classic scenes of religious festivities, customs and peasant life that are called “histories”. The other kind of sheet is the “birds and flowers” variety with stylized animals and plants or reproductions of Nahua myths.

In part, the national prize given to the Nahua painters and shared by artists who work in lacquer and lead is one more encouragement added to other prizes awarded individually and collectively both in Mexico and abroad.

As one of the great legacies of this ancient town, located in the Balsas region for more than a millennium, the communities’ paintings have become a window through which to talk to the world about their profound past and their stirring contemporary experiences. For that reason, mixtures are important and influences are decisive in the transformation of their artistic expression. Ceramics have been another ideal means for transmitting part of their cultural values.

Their art presupposes exchange since the painters of *amate* paper say they “tell” their experiences with their paint brushes and colors. Since this singular cultural form first emerged in the

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Photos of *amates* by Mauricio Degollado.

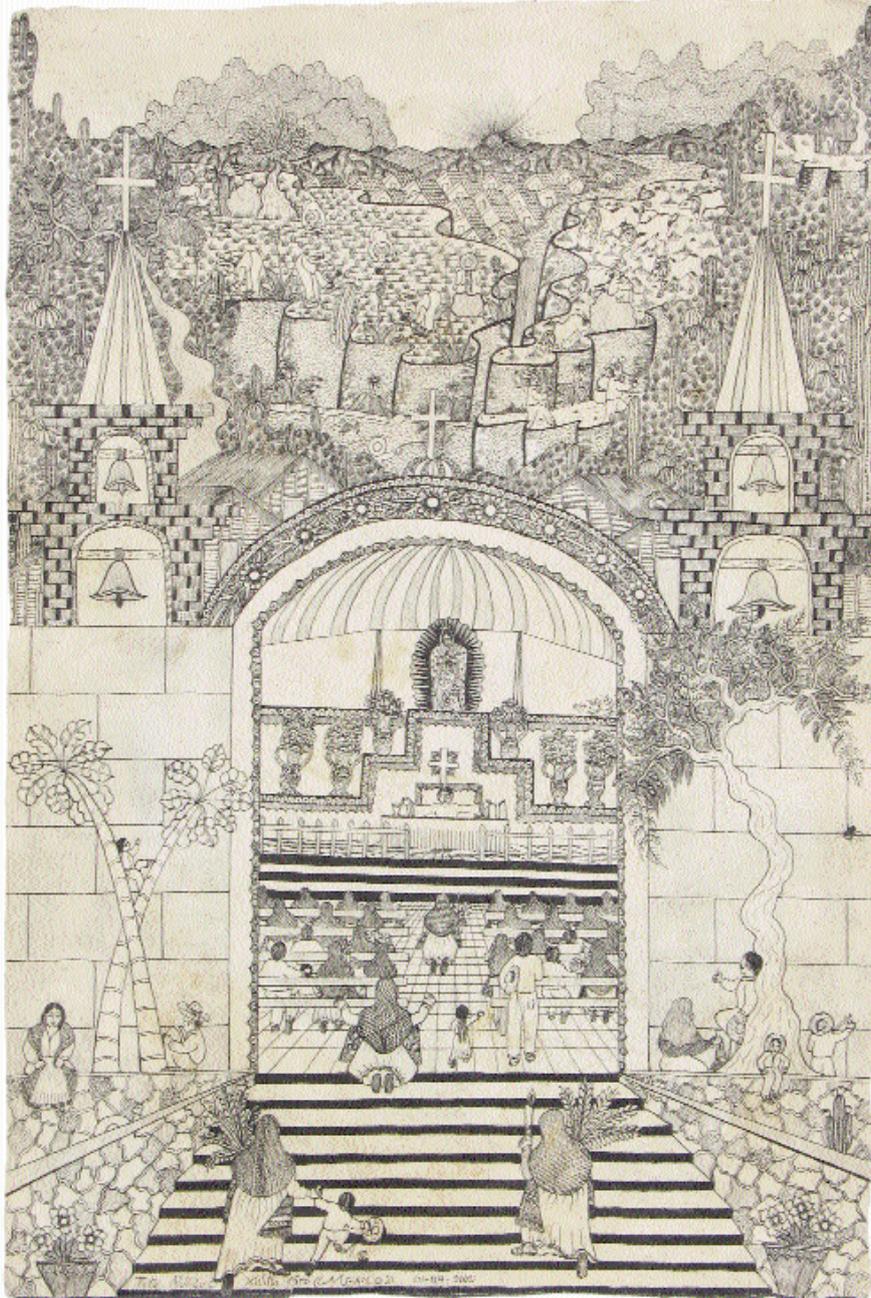


Tito Rutilo, *Town Fiesta*, 60 x 40 cm, 2005 (ink on *amate* paper).

Since this singular cultural form first emerged in the early 1960s, it has diversified artistically. Thus, ancestors and deities appear side by side with images of the northern border and the *migra*, the colloquial name for the U.S. border patrol.



Nicolás de Jesús, *Little Village*, 55 x 75 cm (line and color etching on amate paper).



Tito Rutilo, *Town Mass*, 60 x 40 cm, 2005 (ink on amate paper).

early 1960s, it has diversified artistically. Thus, ancestors and deities appear side by side with images of the northern border and the *migra*, the colloquial name for the U.S. border patrol. In this nearly half a century, according to Nicolás de Jesús (Ameyaltepec, 1960), the painters have become modern *tlacuilos*, the artists who illuminated pre-Hispanic codices. De Jesús and other Nahuatl intellectuals have reworked this notion, since they think that if the ancient Aztecs preserved the memory of society through the codices, then the contemporary artists also narrate and tell their stories in their *amates*. “Neither we nor the *amate* paper paintings are heir to the *tlacuilos*, but we do the same thing. That is our legacy and in some way, we are the *tlacuilos* of our culture.”

We should remember that in addition to being a Nahuatl tradition, the paintings on *amate* paper have another ancestral reference point: the manufacture of the sheets by the Otomís in San Pablito Pahuatlán, in the state of Puebla. That is, two indigenous traditions have converged for almost five

decades in the *amate* paper paintings. Therefore, an inter-ethnic cultural expression unfolds behind the “histories,” to which can be added Oaxaca’s Mixtec traveling sales people who have sold *amates* as far away as on the Tijuana border.

As a common patrimony, *amate* paper paintings have been produced and handed down for several generations. During the time since their creation, an elite group of painters has been consolidated, their work recognized by the community as “very good” because people say “they know and can do more.” These artists stand out because they have an individual seal, though their style is respectful of the traditional norms, even when they risk experimenting in colors, formats (*amates* of up to two and three meters in size), materials (rattan, sheet metal, glass, wood and fiberboard), techniques (etching) and designs (incorporating non-traditional themes). Both personally and collectively, this group has established links with artists from other parts of Mexico and the world, an experience that is a source for renovating proposals.

“TRAVELING” AND “NORTHERN” PAINTERS

The inhabitants of Nahua communities have been crossing the borders of their regions every day for more than half a century, making arduous trips from Cancún to Tijuana, from Los Angeles to Chicago. Among themselves, they call the men and women emigrants who travel through Mexico “travelers,” and those who go to the United States, or to “the North”, “Northerners.” Since “traveling” is considered yet another Nahua tradition, it should not come as a surprise that some paintings depict “travelers” and “Northerners,” even though they are not part of the traditional motifs of *amate* paintings displayed in museums, galleries and craft shops.



Roberto Mauricio, *Good-bye*, 60 x 40 cm, 2002 (acrylic and ink on *amate* paper).

In addition to being a Nahua tradition, the paintings on *amate* paper have another ancestral reference point: the production of the sheets by the Otomís in San Pablito Pahuatlán, in the state of Puebla.



Tito Rutilo, *Life in Los Angeles*, 60 x 40 cm, 2006 (ink on *amate* paper).

The communities have drawn a migratory map of almost 100 places in Mexico and the United States: half a century of intense travel has left its mark. In fact, the mythical or stereotypical images of “the North” or cities like Mexico City go through the powerful filter of their world view, which is why they re-conceive symbols, objects, places and people. This is why it is unusual to find engineers, teachers, anthropologists and legislators depicted in *amate* paper paintings.

All the works published with this article are a sample of how the paintings depict social experiences and a multiplicity of themes. It is a series of *amates* dealing with the theme of migration and is part of an independent project created five years ago, coordinated by the author. Marcial Camilo and Roberto Mauricio (from San Agustín Oapan), Cristino Flores (deceased) and Nicolás de Jesús (from Ameyaltepec) and Apolinar Celestino and Tito Rutilo (from Xalitla) all participate in this project.

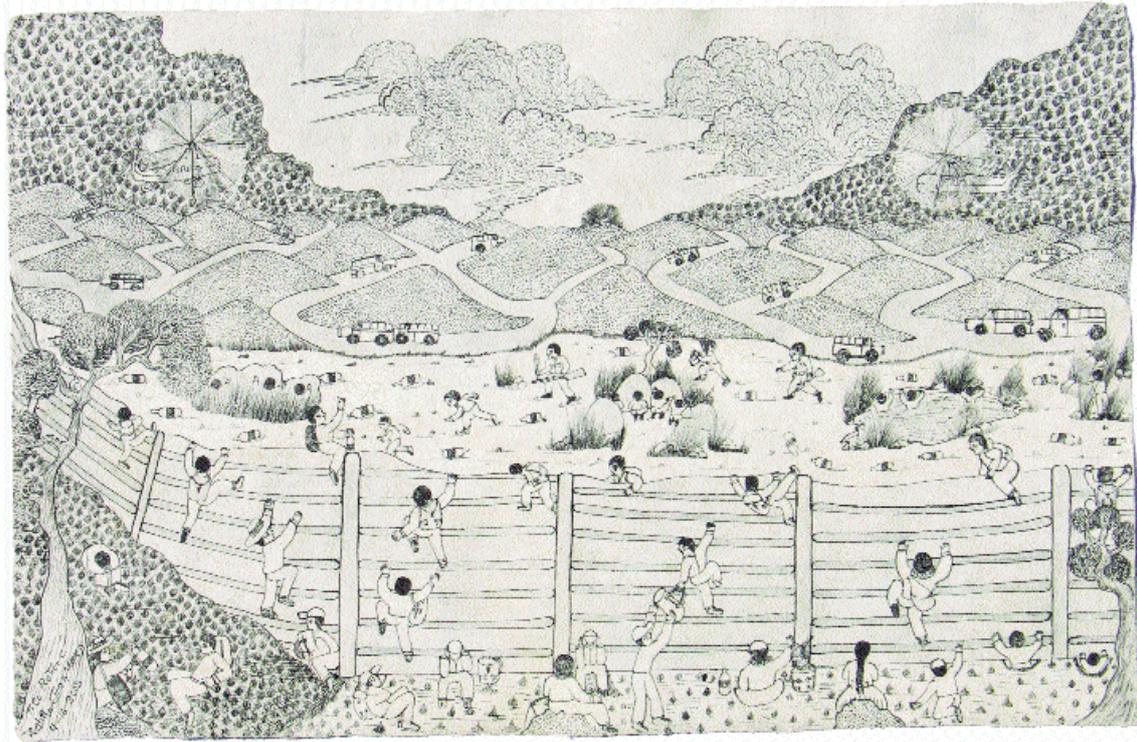
AMATES ABOUT THE BORDER

These Nahuas’ main routes go to California and Texas, and from there they have spread out to other places in the U.S. All the combinations of places and individuals are rendered on *amate* paper, whether as testimony of the artists’ own experience or what they have been told. Unauthorized border crossings are a significant theme in these oral and aesthetic testimonies.

Nahua artists include border crossings in their repertory, reproducing in the collective imaginary the experiences of hundreds of men and women who, risking death, are trying to rejoin their families, get a job to support themselves in their new homes and, if possible, help out their relatives and community in their places of origin to alleviate and remedy some of their historic deficiencies.



Marcial Camilo, *The Trip to Acapulco*, 60 x 40 cm, 2004 (acrylic and ink on *amate* paper).



Tito Rutilo, *The Fence*, 60 x 40 cm, 2005 (ink on *amate* paper).

Thus, these paper “histories” have been brought up to date with modern versions of men and women “Northerners” who talk about the *jale* (work) in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Houston, where these indigenous emigrants have gone. Today, the chronicles about “the North” are yet another reference point among other images disseminated by television, radio, magazines, newspapers and film. From these complex representations, the painters have created their own versions. This is why certain designs recreate the vicissitudes of the lives of *braceros*, like saying good-bye as depicted by Roberto Mauricio as told to him by his father, or undocumented migrants crossing the border, whether over the Rio Grande or the fence in Tijuana, as narrated by Marcial Camilo or Tito Rutilo’s brushes, or over the iron railings of Texas, in the work of Apolinar Celestino. The critical vision of unauthorized crossings is supplemented by Nicolás de Jesús’s perspective. Another variation can be seen in the scenes portraying “the journey” of Nahuatl merchants along Mexican beaches as they sell their *amates* and ceramics.

Still swimming against the current of the low value placed on their work, the prize-winning artists continue their struggle, as they say, in a small commercial milieu, insisting on telling their “histories” to anyone interested in knowing about their culture. As protagonists in the transitions of their “travelers” and “Northerners,” men and women both, they have put fragments of their lives onto the *amate* paper paintings.

And these artists and their brushes take responsibility for recreating the memory of the new experiences that ushered this indigenous people into the twenty-first century. Behind them, the fourth generation of men and women painters follows. Enormous challenges are in the making and no one knows for certain if the tradition will see new horizons or to what point they will create other proposals just as they have been doing for almost 50 years. **NMM**