

Photos by Dante Barrera

Cornstalk Paste and *Maque* Two Symbols of Survival

Many craft traditions in the world of Michoacán go back to pre-Hispanic times. Two notable cases are *maque*, or sumac lacquer, and cornstalk paste. The impeccable craftsmanship, mysticism and vitality their creators infused into the figures and objects made with these materials and techniques centuries ago still survive today.



Shortly before the Spanish arrived to Mexico, the Purépecha people had one of the most efficient and politically and socially best organized kingdoms in Mesoamerica.¹ The abundance and variety of natural resources allowed the Purépechas to make an infinite number of objects for religious and daily use, as well as trade. Periodically, the lords of the powerful Mexica empire carried out ferocious military campaigns to conquer them and take their riches, but they were never successful.

According to oral tradition,² the Purépechas used everything possible to fight their battles. The men—and if necessary, also the women and even the children—went to war taking their gods with them.³ If luck was not with them, above all they had to prevent their gods falling into enemy hands. All this would have been impossible if the gods had been made of clay or carved out of stone or wood. That is why they were made with cornstalk paste, which was very light.

There is no proof that these figures ever existed, nor that the traditions have a basis in fact, but the Spaniards must have seen something on their arrival that



impressed them. During their campaign to spread the Gospel, the friars taught the indigenous peoples to make religious figures from the Catholic world—crucifixes, virgins and saints—using this

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same technique and its novel materials. Despite the imposition of a new religion and the violence that often accompanied it, the indigenous people managed to preserve their profoundly mystical spirit and imbue these images with it to invoke a divine being.

The results can be seen in life-size figures of Christ made of cornstalk paste, some of which date from the sixteenth century, scattered in different towns in Michoacán. The images are of outstanding realism and beauty. Their fine texture looks like porcelain, but without its coldness, since they are covered with *maque*, or sumac lacquer, another technique dating from pre-Hispanic times, which consists of a covering of lime-leaved sage oil painted with natural pigments based on ground earth and local flowers applied with the fingers. This technique also waterproofs the surfaces, allowing the figures to withstand the passage of the centuries and conserve their original colors. From before colonial times, *maque* objects like wooden trays and gourds, normally for daily use, were very sought after. There are written records of references to the Spaniards' surprise at seeing the brightly



Previous page

Above: Seventeenth-century cornstalk paste crucifix.

Below: Platter with *maque* finish. Mario A. Gaspar, House of Eleven Patios, Pátzcuaro.

This page

Above: Cornstalk paste virgin before being painted with *maque*.

Below and Right: Gourds painted with *maque*, made by Don Mario A. Gaspar, House of Eleven Patios, Pátzcuaro.

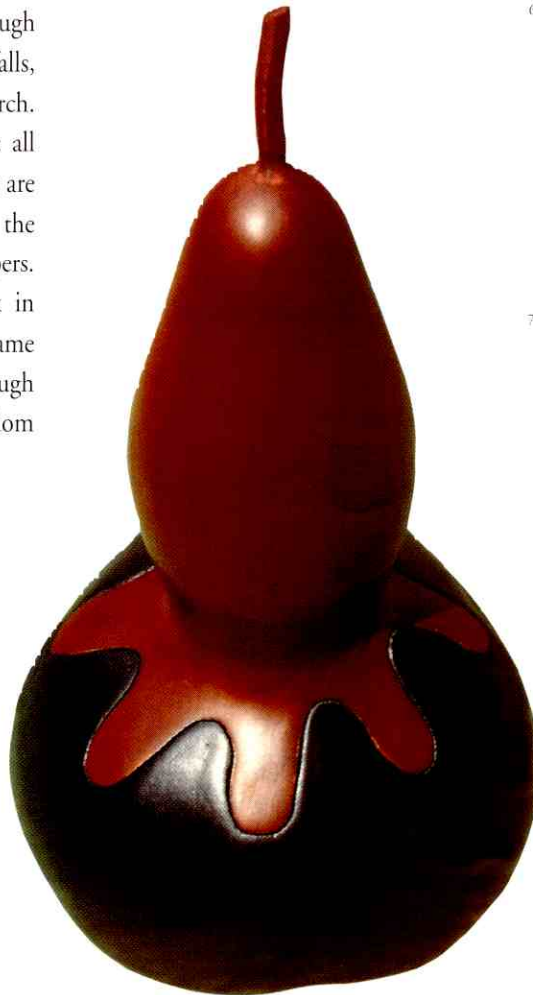
colored vessels in which the Aztec lords drank *chocoátl* (chocolate), gourds traded with the Purépecha region or brought as tribute.⁴

Myths and stories have arisen around the cornstalk paste Christ figures, which have become objects of veneration. Soledad Church in Tzintzuntzan⁵ has a Christ dating from the sixteenth century; according to legend, it has grown. People say the proof is that its crystal and wood urn covering is now too small for it. The visitor can see that an addition has been made to the urn to accommodate the feet and that, on the other end, the figure's head bends toward its chest as though forced to.⁶ This Christ is venerated and every Holy Week it is taken out of its urn, crucified and carried through the streets of the town until night falls, when a wake is held for it in the church. The ceremonies are very impressive: all night long the old-fashioned prayers are murmured and praises sung and the faithful carry thousands of lighted tapers.

Today, the craftsmen who work in cornstalk paste and *maque* use the same procedures their ancestors did. Although totally lost in some towns, the wisdom

passed down generation to generation is still practiced in Pátzcuaro.⁷ The surprising thing about their work is that neither the passage of time nor modernity have brought the use of new materials in these figures and objects which need only the hands of their creator and the raw materials provided by nature in their area. But even more surprising is the power of artistic expression that, almost without intending to, Michoacán artisans of yesterday and today display. ■■■

Elsie Montiel
Editor



NOTES

¹ The Purépecha kingdom covered part of what now the states of Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, Mexico and Querétaro, totaling approximately 70,000 square kilometers, according to Carlos Romero Giordano's article "Un viaje hacia el pasado" in *Michoacán en sus manos, Guía México Desconocido* no. 36 (January 1998), p. 18.

² Much of the information in this article comes from an interview with Don Mario A. Gaspar, who now lives in Pátzcuaro and is one of the few craftsmen today who make figures in cornstalk paste and *maque*.

³ Mesoamerican societies were theocratic. People lived and died according to the will of their gods, who ruled over all aspects of the universe and in whose hands the people placed their fate.

⁴ Carlos Romero Giordano, "Tierra de Grandes Artífices" in *Michoacán en sus manos*, op. cit., p. 26.

⁵ Tzintzuntzan was the capital of the Purépecha kingdom before the Spanish arrived.

⁶ And this is not the only known case. "With small images, very strange things happened. The Christ in San Francisco Church here [in Pátzcuaro] was straight and it moved. It pushed its hip out to one side and bent over. The beard almost reaches his chest. And the funny thing, or the strange thing, is that it didn't break anywhere. If I raise an arm on a figure, it breaks, but this one bent and there isn't a crack or anything. That's the mysterious thing about it, and it's made of cornstalk paste, too." Interview with Mario A. Gaspar (June 1988).

⁷ In the city of Uruapan, there are also craftsmen who work in cornstalk paste, although with a different technique. According to Mario A. Gaspar, in Uruapan they use plaster, which makes the figure less resistant to humidity and more likely to crack or break.



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Virgin made of cornstalk paste decorated with *maque*.

The Miracle of Cornstalk Paste

Creating figures out of cornstalk paste is a laborious process requiring very precise knowledge of the material and the time needed between one step and the next. This only comes with experience. A single figure measuring 80 cm can take up to 18 months to complete and is usually only made on commission.

Today, private and public institutions are carrying out intense efforts to recover this technique, and that of *maqueado*, or sumac lacquering, where the tradition survives, like in the towns of Uruapan and Pátzcuaro in Mexico's state of Michoacán.

The first step in the process is to make a figure using peeled cornstalks, binding them together with cord and using a glue made by boiling prickly pear leaves. When the figure dries, the cord is removed. To give the figure the desired form, it is carved with a tiny wedge and then covered with a paste made from cornstalk pulp ground with wild orchid bulbs. The paste should be left to sit for several days in a clay pot; no metal recipients must be used. Later it is covered with cotton cloth and allowed to sit again; when it has exuded a layer of slime, it is uncovered. This process is very important since if it is not covered and uncovered at exactly the right time, the paste fills with worms or dries out and is useless.

To refine the figure and correct imperfections, the process is repeated; the leftover paste is ground twice more, making it finer and finer. By the third time, the paste is very fine. Its humidity level must be perfect; it can seem like it has spoiled with time, but it has not, and it is up to the artisan to know when it is just right. The finishing touches are made with this fine paste: the details on eyelids, nose, hands and feet, lips and the waves in the hair. The completely detailed figure must be left to dry thoroughly; otherwise it will rot and disintegrate. As it eliminates humidity, it becomes lighter; the finished, dry figure is very light, although it would not seem to be just by looking at it. To test whether it is ready, the craftsman weighs it in his hands.

Finally, the figure is lacquered with *maque*. The face and the hands are the most delicate part of the *maqueado* process because several layers are applied and that thickens the figure. The craftsman must take care that the expression is preserved and the nose, eyelids and fingers are not broken. When the figure is finished, he etches the date into it.

The result is always surprising, regardless of the level of technical perfection achieved; within every figure beats the heart of its creator and the memory of times past in which both —artisan and figure— were one.

Source: Explanations by craftsman Mario A. Gaspar Rodríguez, who has his workshop in the House of the Eleven Patios in the city of Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, and has been working almost 30 years in *maque* and cornstalk paste.

A Timeless Craft

A trip to Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, necessarily includes a visit to the House of the Eleven Patios, a converted convent with exhibits of crafts from different parts of the state. On a quick tour, the *maqueados*, or sumac lacquered objects, could get lost among the abundance of other lacquered items. Often they are taken to be the same. However, the other kinds of lacquer began to be used with the influence of Asian art that came from trade between New Spain and China's *nao* vessels, while *maqueado* was already known in the land conquered by the Spaniards.

Today, the difference between them is marked. The lacquers have incorporated industrialized products: glues, varnishes and paints, and are applied with brushes. *Maque* work uses only natural products to cover wood with colors, and it can only be applied with the fingers.

Maque comes in five basic colors, obtained naturally and combined to create many others. Red is extracted from the cochineal grain; black from the soot formed under a griddle placed on the fire; yellow is made from the *cempasúchil* flower, species of marigold, or another plant known as "cow gut" that grows locally during the rainy season; for white there are many earth deposits to choose from and the good craftsman knows which is the best for dyeing; lastly, the indigo plant yields blue.

These colors and their combinations are made into a powder and applied on an oil base extracted from lime-leaved sage, which makes the wood waterproof and gives it its peculiar sheen. The colors cannot be applied simultaneously; the craftsman must wait for one to dry before applying another. Therefore, the more colors included on a piece, the longer it will take to finish. Twenty days, a month or two: it is never certain.

Painting the *maque* on by hand is the only way to know when a piece is finished and many applications are needed before the work is done.

But it is not only the technique that makes *maqueado* unlike any other art. Form, decoration, colors, texture and sheen express the harmony between artisan and his work, creating an irreplaceable, unique relationship between him and each piece he makes.

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