

The Treasure of *Tamulté*

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Lodged between the swamps formed by the González and Jo-lochero Rivers north of Villahermosa, Tabasco, we find the Yokot'an

indigenous town of Tamulté de las Sabanas. Here, a group of indigenous painters live who have created an original artistic movement called the Treasure of Tamulté. The group was founded in 1989 by several families, coordinated by Don Emilio Hernández and Timoteo Salvador, who convinced the local indigenous center's artistic initiation teacher, Leandro Soto, to help them

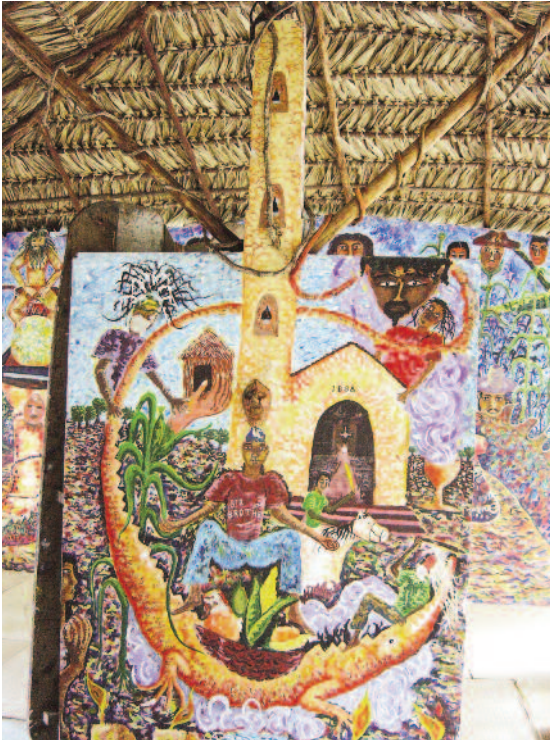
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Photos by Rodolfo Uribe.



Ricardo Hernández Morales, *The Head is a World in Itself*, n.d. (acrylic on paper).



Feliciano García Salvador, *Traditions* (mural), n.d. (acrylic).



Jaime Salvador García and David José Domingo Velázquez, *The People's Traditions* (mural, detail), n.d. (acrylic).

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found a “painting school.” Soto, a Cuban artist and then cultural promotor of a government-run Montessori educational project, accepted the challenge and designed a creativity workshop in step with the community’s life and the initiatives of the young students.

The project has been a success, particularly considering that it is independent of any public or private institution, it has no permanent structure and the teacher himself has been absent for the last 10 years. Nevertheless, a third generation of young painters has already come into being, keeping the process alive, a process mainly made up of painting and teaching to paint, as well as in developing creative capabilities in all kinds of artistic endeavors.

The project’s survival can be explained by the young people’s determi-

nation to keep painting and giving creativity classes despite the non-existence of any formal institution. At the same time, this refusal to be absorbed by official institutions has been what has allowed them to give their work continuity. From the beginning, the workshop was registered as a civic association, with the support of the regional UNESCO committee and the Foundation for the Protection of Children, enabling it to get both public and private funding. Thanks to one donation, the group was able to purchase a piece of land where it built a multi-use thatched pavilion that serves as its headquarters. However, the group’s real headquarters have been the homes of the young people themselves, established from the beginning as satellite workshops. However, for several years, an



Emmanuel García Salvador, *We are Crazy* (sequence in four formats), n.d. (acrylic on paper).

alternative school called Young Art of Tocoal functioned in a shed loaned to them in the town of the same name, coordinated by René Germán Maldonado with the support of Carlos Velásquez and Héctor García.

Also from the beginning, the group tried to integrate itself with local and regional community and social life. It has painted the facades of houses and

stores in the community, the local health center and the central park, as well as the church, for patron saint activities; a temporary mural on the wall of the Carrefour shopping center in Villahermosa; and, more recently, designed the municipality's float for the 2004 state fair parade. In addition, several workshop members are painting teachers in public and private schools.

Among current Treasure of Tamulté members are Carlos Enrique Velásquez, 28; Enrique Valencia, 25; Ricardo Hernández, 18; Emmanuel García de Salvador, 19; Héctor García Salvador, 28; and Eleazar Valencia, 25. They are all studying high school or university and working in the city, like any other young person in the community. For the moment, they are in charge of getting funding, organizing and teaching summer courses each year to community children in the town's plaza, and gathering the materials sent to the different exhibitions they are invited to participate in.

The strong feeling of individuality characteristic of the Yokot'anob people is clearly seen in the intentions and themes of each of these young artists' work.

Eleazar prefers to paint landscapes hinting at the presence of local fairies, the masters of surrounding areas. That is why he says that more than copying nature, he seeks to invent things and



Javan Velázquez and Mauricio García Morales, *Indecision* (mural), n.d. (acrylic).

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fill them with color so that the colors “invent other angles that do not exist in real life.” Ricardo has chosen abstract landscapes, saying, “Short brush strokes were hard for me, and I leaned toward large brushes,” which is where his style comes from. He prefers conceptual works because, “The public can enter into a painting when motivated by the theme; I want people to think about what I want to express.” Emmanuel, in contrast, wants to “be a builder” and leans toward finding ways of integrating sculpture and painting, as he studies architecture in the local university. And Héctor, a pioneer of the first generation, says his moods show up in his work, explaining, “Lately I paint about life because it makes me sad that the wrong people die.”

Viewers immediately note the chromatic intensity with which they work and the dynamism of their figures. On the one hand, they show the technical influence of their teacher, but there is also an appropriation of styles and an individual development all their own that allows them to deal with the themes and feelings they want to express in an individual way. This is the consequence of the content of all the workshops, which always aim to develop each artist’s sensitivity to desires and their own condition. The result can be seen in the paintings, sculptures in wood and other materials and collages that deal with indigenous life without surrendering to the lure of anthropological folk art.

The young people use both the local landscape, the swamp, and local legends, ceremonies and beliefs, particularly those linked to the local “lord” K’antepec, as their starting point. Thus, in the dance “The Little White Horse,” we see maize becoming a person, a

golden lizard, the spirit of the earth, who lives under the local church, and a naked old man, K’antepec, the master of the animals and the spirit of abundance. But, we also perceive the contradictions of life today, a product of the urbanization of a community near the capital in an oil-producing state, where media penetration has had a big impact. All the work testifies to an indigenous generation that is going through a period of social and cultural transition, with the resultant loss of its own culture and the abandonment of their elders’ main occupations: fishing and agriculture. In the work of these young people, the recovery of indigenous content becomes a means for becoming aware of the current situation of their community, state and youth.



Eleazar Valencia Valencia, *Magic Dawn*, n.d. (acrylic on canvas).



Carlos Enrique Velázquez García, *Human Values*, n.d. (acrylic on canvas).



Ricardo Martínez Morales, *Evolution*, n.d. (enamel on carved wood).

On the other hand, a great deal of the work they have produced has been fleeting, in accordance with life today and Tabasco's humidity and heat, which make it necessary to repaint walls every few years. All the murals, except the one in the association's pavilion, which is protected, have disappeared. If we add to this the fact that their work has sold very well at exhibitions both in Villahermosa and in the United States, it is difficult to bring together a retrospective, especially of those who participated in only a few workshops and have since stopped painting. This is the natural result of an autonomous, flexible organization.

The other price that has to be paid for this freedom is a certain "invisibility" because they are indigenous, which means that the media and local cultural institutions do not recognize them (their funding has come mainly from social relief institutions). But this has not prevented them from being applauded abroad, where the artistic merit of their work has been fully recognized.

The young painters of the different generations of the Treasure of Tamul-té have participated in collective exhibitions outside their native state in Mexico City's Carrillo Gil Museum (1989) and El Chopo University Museum (1989); at the New York University at Buffalo (1998); in the cloister of the Veracruz Cultural Institute (1989); in the Augusta Savage Gallery at the University of Massachusetts (2000); at the Eleana Ortega Cultural Center at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts (2001); in the Ardent Music Studio/Gallery in Milwaukee; and in the University of Arizona library in Phoenix (2002), just to mention a few. In addition, their multi-disciplinary training has allowed them to participate in events like the International Hispanic Theater Festival (Miami, 1994), where they won the Carbonell prize for set design; and in the Intersection events in the University of Massachusetts in 2000 and the Phoenix Hispanic Festival (2004). Also, in 1994, five members of the first generation gave a multi-disciplinary workshop in El Paso, Texas. **NMM**