

The Preservation of a Pre-Hispanic Craft: The Artisans of *Tatzingueni* Also Known as the Corn Cane Paste

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Abstract: *The corn cane paste - or Tatzingueni- known as a very important pre - hispanic sculpture technique in Mexico that emerged during the evangelization process in the 16th century. In the Novohispanic period, this technique was used for the manufacture of religious images, but it was forgotten after the 19th century. There is currently a rescue project for this technique that started just a few years ago in the state of Michoacan, where artisans share the sculptural process of cane paste. In this sense, during this essay is intended to publicize this project and the process as part of the study for its historical and cultural protection.*

Keywords: Corn cane paste, Pre-hispanic craft, Novohispanic artisans, Sculpture techniques

1. Introduction

“Artisans are historians, although they do not write books, their stories and the stories of their people are told through the crafts and the materials that make them up”.

Mario Agustín Gaspar

In the anthropological practice that some researchers have carried out in the study of pre-Hispanic cultures, they point out that there have been various changes in the function of crafts throughout history, mainly for the benefit of capitalism. Néstor García Canclini comments: “if anthropologists or sociologists depended on the histories of peoples, handicrafts would seem like some invention of the theorists of marginality.”¹

Initially in the history of cultures and art, craft activity was responsible for the creation of most tools, instruments, garments, images to worship, among others, which was displaced with the construction of machines and the industry that capitalized on said production.² In this sense, the craftsman was forced to simply carry out decoration or repair work on objects that required manual precision, human creativity, and the ability to handle certain tools that machines or mass production could not do.

However, despite the above, and the fact that the work that was believed to be “minimized” when it was granted to the craftsman, some techniques and objects that were represented with them - which, furthermore, could only be executed by the hand of those who knew how - generally it was done under a spiritual, social, cultural, family, ethnic belief, etc., which gave objects a special value.

The craftsman Mario Agustín Gaspar has said it well, there are techniques that are the heritage of a lineage, of a town and there are stories that only its inhabitants can tell.³ When you have appreciation, respect and also understand the value of this knowledge of the trade, you have the commitment to keep it alive and teach your children to value it and continue it.

Delving into Mexican popular art requires an attitude of social responsibility and the will to support an activity that means for its creators, not only a sublimated form of artistic expression, but a way of life in the broadest sense of the word.⁴

Despite the fact that the argument with which we began this text has contradicted itself throughout history, due to the constant increase in artisanal production, it has now become impossible to maintain that artisans - especially in Latin American countries - continue being a marginal group that opposes capitalist development. Not all craft techniques survive or increase their production; there are many that have had to undergo a process of rescue and appreciation for their recent discovery of the true historical and cultural value they possess, such is the case of the *Tatzingueni* or “cane paste” technique, currently in force in the Purépecha territory from the state of Michoacán.

2. Brief Historical Background

The cane paste sculptures have their origin in the Pre-Hispanic period, and they were probably given an utilitarian use in the warlike encounters of the different indigenous groups, since the images could represent forms of intimidation of enemy groups. On the other hand, some chroniclers such as Fray Alonso de la Rea, assure that the technique has Purépecha or Michoacán origin, the fact is that

¹Canclini, Néstor García. Investigación y política artesanal: propuestas metodológicas. *Boletín de Antropología Americana*, 1984, no 9, p. 127-134.

²Canclini, Néstor García. Investigación y política artesanal: propuestas metodológicas. *Boletín de Antropología Americana*, 1984, no 9, p. 127-134.

³ Interview with Mario Agustín Gaspar, in the *Seshisha* workshop in La Casa de los Once Patios, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán.

⁴ Presentation by Mario Agustín Gaspar at the virtual conference: Crafts, a transcendental heritage: lacquer, maque and cane paste. INAH TV. 2021. 3rd slide.

there is no exact news about the origin of the method used.⁵ Later, with the arrival of the Spaniards to American lands, the technique was adopted by the different religious orders such as *franciscanos* and *dominicos*, who saw in the technique and materials of corn sculpture, an easy method of making light images that could be adapted to the process of evangelization through images and to be able to use them during the processions.⁶ That is why the 16th century was the period of greatest production of Christological sculpture in corn cane, highlighting the regions of Oaxaca, Michoacán and Mexico City. The technique became so popular that it was used to make mariological and hagiographic images, distributed throughout the New Spain territory and even reached other latitudes as offerings, donations or gifts to different convents, chapels and temples both in the Spanish regions and in the rest of the world. rest of the regions that made up the different kingdoms of Hispanic America.

Currently, although it is little used by artisans from the different regions of Michoacán, the *tatzingueni* technique is still valid. Some demanding consumers see their invoice as a way of obtaining a product made with ancient techniques that can be used for private devotion.

The local craftsmen of cane paste and the preservation of the pre-Hispanic technique

Pátzcuaro

During the field research that has been carried out in some communities adjacent to the municipality and city of Pátzcuaro in Michoacán, with the aim of locating where and how the Tarascan *Tatzingueni* technique - or cane paste - and its artisans were born, has led us to the origin of a rescue process led by a guild or association of image makers and artisans of Purépecha origin who have organized themselves to keep this activity current.

We know, appreciate and work with cane paste, but it is an excessively heavy activity that requires the help of the whole family when working on it. The cane paste does not feed us, the pieces that are sold are special orders from the nuns or some other person who values this work, our hands are running out and there is no workshop large enough and adequate to work it, the crafts in maque, lacquer and gold profiling is what feeds us and supports our families.⁷

In the case of the city of Pátzcuaro, this process began approximately twenty years ago, with many interruptions, which today is a real struggle to keep the activity current. One of the pioneers in this rescue project is master Baldomero Guzmán,⁸ who recognized a technique on the

verge of extinction and summoned the artisans of the region to learn the legendary technique of the *Tatzingueni*. Many people attended the call, they were interested in the technique, however, the group was reduced when they realized the complexity of the process.

We had to be in season first to collect the cane, in this workshop we did not start from the harvest because the land did not belong to us, we chose the dry but not broken cane that was still "full", we made piles and we were already thinking about the ways that we needed for our sculptures, since it is done in parts like a big puzzle.⁹

The process of making cane paste sculptures goes beyond the work in the workshop, a cane worker must have knowledge about agriculture, herbalism, livestock, mineralogy, sculpture, painting, etc., to be able to carry out a piece from start to finish, which takes a lot of physical work. This craft depends on the seasons and climatic conditions, in addition to the processes that the material itself needs (such as hardening and drying) and it takes the sculptor considerable time to complete a piece.

In traditional or academic sculpture, it is known that the processes for the manufacture of a work also involve physical work and slow methods. However, it offers a piece in a material that promises perpetuity or is intended to be so. Herbert Read writes that the sculpture is created so that it lasts for centuries and thus also be able to perpetuate who is represented in it,¹⁰ for this reason it is believed that this may be the reason why his work would be worth it, in addition to the time spent for its manufacture. However, cane paste is a material that is fragile and vulnerable over time, but was appreciated for providing its most important characteristic: lightness.

Mario Agustín Gaspar and his wife Beatriz Ortega, together with other artisans from Pátzcuaro, attended the workshop taught by Master Baldomero, however, they lacked various materials and the knowledge of preparing some pastes and binders as the Tarascans prepared them before the conquest, and therefore they resorted to the rubbers and paints that were used for commercial crafts in the elaboration of their pieces, such as industrial glues and oil paints. It was then, when the artisans of the "*Seshisha*" workshop resorted to the knowledge of other techniques of pre-Hispanic origin, such as maque to complement the cane paste.

When Vasco de Quiroga arrives and learns about cane paste, he asks Matías de la Cerda to analyze it and correct it for the elaboration of saints and Christs, then the sculptor teaches the Tarascans to carve more human figures and reinforces the technique with woven fabrics and linseed oil-based

⁵ Ortega Ordáz Alfredo Adolfo, La escultura de caña de maíz: una invención purépecha. La reafirmación de una atribución por costumbre.

⁶ Valero Collantes, Ana Cristina, Cristos "tarascos". Un ejemplo custodiado en el convento del Carmelitas descalzas de Santa Teresa de Valladolid.

⁷ Interview with Beatriz Ortega at the *Seshisha* workshop at La Casa de los Once Patios, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. March 2022.

⁸ Last *achaecha* who seemed to be in 1972 the last craftsman of the "assembled" cornstalk paste sculpture, originally from the Tarascón ranch oriented on the Uruapan railway. Baldomero calls himself

Purépecha, not Tarascan. See Luft, Henry. "Images of cornstalk from Michoacán." *Arts of Mexico* 153. Año 1972. p. 15-26.

⁹ Interview with Mario Agustín Gaspar, in the *Seshisha* workshop in La Casa de los Once Patios, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán.

¹⁰ Read, Herbert. *El Arte de la escultura: conferencias AW Mellon sobre las Bellas Artes 1954*, Galería Nacional de Arte, Washington. Editorial eme, 1994.

paints. In addition to also including the decorated cloths of the virgins with gold applications.¹¹

Also, thanks to other pre-Hispanic decorative techniques of Tarascan origin such as maque, they were used for the incarnations of the cane sculptures and the pieces were able to remain intact for many years with this polychrome.¹² These artisanal techniques were worked in family workshops and thus the preparations and the trade were inherited to the generations of the families, that is how they came to learn it.

Tzintzuntzan

The city of Tzintzuntzan was the cradle of the Tarascan empire and the place where the great cane paste works were built. Currently on the Pátzcuaro – Quiroga highway, sculptures made of various materials, most of them carved in wood or stone, can be seen at the entrance to the city of Tzintzuntzan (on both sides of the road). However, cane paste is not the main material of Tzintzuntzan handicrafts despite its legendary origin, other handicrafts such as glazed ceramics, basketry, embroidery, furniture and tule objects; They are the ones that can be purchased in its traditional market or around the main square.

The artisan Angélica Morales is in charge of keeping alive the artisanal tradition of Purépecha origin in the “*Echeri Ka Itsi*” workshop, printing the particular style of drawing where Purépecha characters (especially female) predominate, selling regional products such as fish or pumpkins; to the handicrafts it makes, focusing above all on the production of lead-free ceramic crafts.¹³ Other recurring themes in his crafts are mermaids and traditional dances, using a monochrome palette (black and white), as well as some drawings made on amate paper.

Although Angélica's workshop constantly produces this type of craft, it is also in the process of rescuing cane paste sculpture. Her husband was part of the group that was trained to learn this technique in the workshop of master Baldomero Guzmán in the city of Pátzcuaro, the same one who taught the artisan and who continued to make after her husband's death.¹⁴

Tupátaro

On the Pátzcuaro-Morelia highway, there is a deviation a few kilometers from Pátzcuaro that goes to the town of Cuanajo in the municipality of Huiramba, Michoacán. On this road we find the community of Tupátaro, a place where cane paste was also a trade and a tradition of the Purépecha civilization.

There is a temple of Santiago Tupátaro that houses a cane paste piece that is not a sculpture, it is a front that is possibly manufactured in the 18th century, considered until now as the only piece made using this pre-Hispanic technique. During the Viceroyalty of New Spain, the most common was to have the fronts made in silver repoussé or polychrome wood carving. However, during the 18th century, the economic resources of the Tupátaro community were scarce to make a work with the precious material, so the inhabitants of the region resorted to the knowledge and mastery of the Tatzingueni and to be able to build the front in cane paste with a silver-plated patina. This piece has the peculiarity of being one of the few pieces in this technique that is signed by its workshop.¹⁵ The front was restored by the National Coordination for the Restoration of Cultural Heritage (CNRPC in Spanish) of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH in Spanish) in 2001.¹⁶

As a result of this discovery, the sculptor Pedro Dávalos Cotonieto, who participated in the restoration of the frontal as commissioned by the INAH, realizes the importance – materially and historically speaking- of cane paste in the community, and requests to carry out the rescue of the technique for the town of Tupátaro: "No one expected that the front would be made of cane paste and what is also surprising is that the deterioration is not as serious as would have been expected from a material that dissolves with humidity, without a doubt. , the people who made it appreciated and knew the technique".¹⁷

The sculptor of the Tatzingueni, in addition to teaching and directing the workshop for the recovery of techniques and trades of corn cane paste, has trained image sculptors (men and women) to have their own workshops, in addition to the corresponding steps to maintain the craft until it can transcend itself again. To continue with the preservation of the technique, he has built his workshop and house in the community where today he is committed to continue training the inhabitants of the community, investigate the investigation of the Tarascan technique and its scope in contemporary sculpture.

¹¹ Interview with Víctor Hugo Guzmán Vázquez at the *J'atzingueni* workshop in La Casa de los Once Patios, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán.

¹² Interview with Mario Agustín Gaspar, in the *Seshisha* workshop in La Casa de los Once Patios, Pátzcuaro, Michoacán.

¹³ One of the crafts that are also part of the cultural, historical and purépecha heritage of the town of Tzintzuntzan, also known as "white ceramics."

¹⁴ Interview with Angélica Morales Gámez, at the *Echeri Ka Itsi* workshop, Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán.

¹⁵ Sofia Irene Velarde, *Imaginería Michoacana en caña de Maíz*, ed. CONACULTA. 2003, p. 138.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁷ Interview with Pedro Dávalos Cotonieto, in the workshop for the recovery of cane paste techniques and crafts in Tupátaro, Huiramba, Michoacán.



Figure 1: Image in cane paste. Casa de los Once Patios. Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. Photograph taken by Verónica Santoyo García.

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- [10] Interview with Angélica Morales at the “*Echeri Ka itsi*” workshop in Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán. March 2022.