

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



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Above: Seventeenth-century cornstalk paste crucifix.

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

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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.

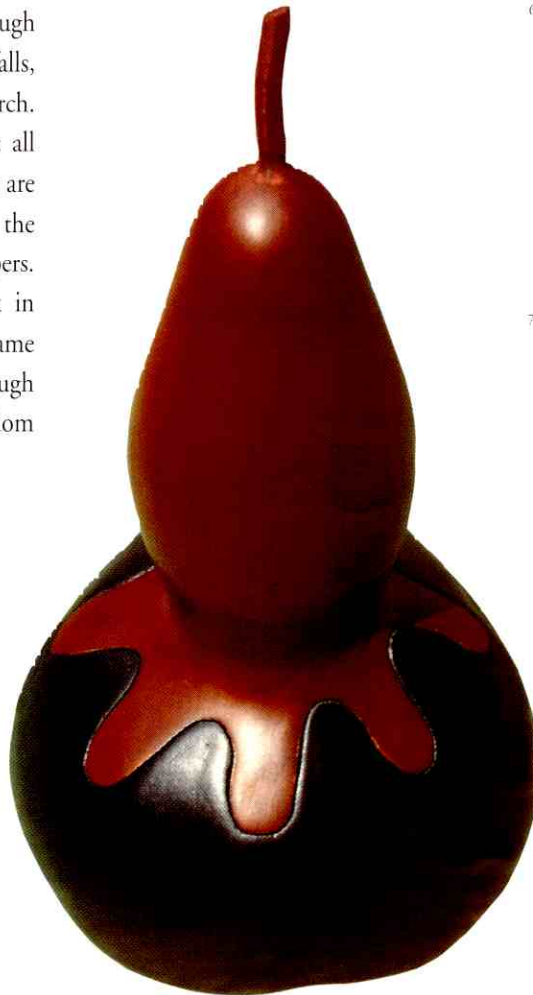
colored vessels in which the Aztec lords drank *chocoátl* (chocolate), gourds traded with the Purépecha region or brought as tribute.⁴

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.