



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.