

SERGIO LÓPEZ OROZCO

The Revolution of *Amate* Paper

*Raquel Tibol**

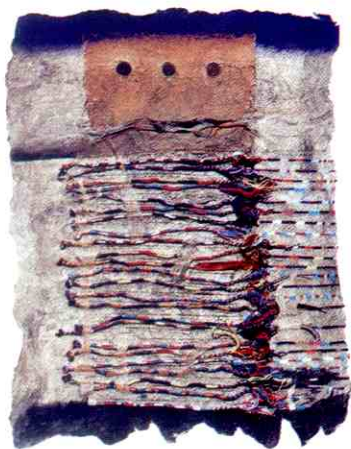
With his series *Adventures in Amate*, Sergio López Orozco uses a diversity of resources to restore votive or propitiatory qualities to paper objects, not as a pre-established ritual, but with material created with poetic tensions. The raw material has no expression whatsoever. It must be transfigured through invention. In that effort,

the soul leaves its mark and the result is unintentionally related to the most remote and inscrutable origins of a tradition as old and deeply rooted as the use of *amate* paper cut-out figures for healing or witchcraft ceremonies.

This custom originated in pre-Hispanic times and has lasted until today, when the paper made from *amatl* bark has become popular for paintings, coverings and other decorative or artistic uses.

The ritual to frighten away the afflictions of the body and the spirit with a great ring of interwoven deities cut out of paper is not practiced just anywhere. The shaman, be it man or woman, must carry out his/her office in consecrated caves or corners of the home specially organized for the purpose around a central brazier with its purifying blaze. Although today we know that the power of suggestion and psychosomatic effects make convic-

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tion a wonderful remedy, the question still remains: why the paper? This question has no answer; the enigma is indecipherable. Forty centuries ago the Egyptians already painted ideographs on papyrus (that is, paper) to defend themselves from death or to provide the dead with a guide to journey into the unknown. The pulp of a swamp plant, transformed by humans, became the solemn intermediary with the enigmatic forces of the life cycle.

Who used tree bark first to make paper? Perhaps it was produced simultaneously with the white mulberry-tree in China and the *amatl*, or fig tree, in Mexico. But while the Mexicans' technique was limited to certain communities in the Sierra Madre Occidental, the Chinese procedure spread through the world and revolutionized communications. More than 1,000 years ago, the Asians learned

it (first the Persians and much later the Japanese), and only half a millennium ago it was disseminated and industrialized in Europe, where the first paper mill was said to have been set up in Fabriano, Italy, in the mid-fourteenth century.

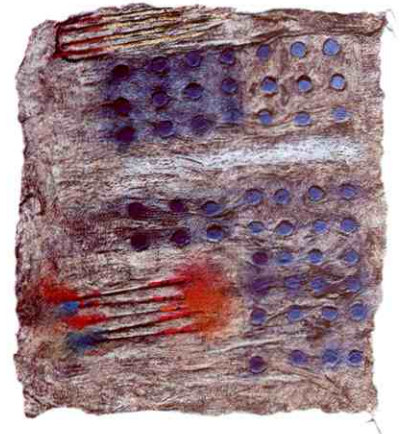
The Persians learned from the Chinese how to make paper with hemp fibers and perfected the quality to the point that they dared to call it "pharaoh's paper," since it could compete with the oldest and most resistant papyrus. In Samarkand and Constantinople, the language of colors was established in paper. A blue sheet meant mourning; a red one, pleasure and happiness; pink expressed a high rank capable of granting or denying favors. Even before the paper was written on, it expressed ideas as general as they were unequivocal: mourning, condemnation, authority, benefits, joy.

Sergio López Orozco already painted and worked in the graphic arts when five years ago he decided to penetrate the mysteries of paper itself, that foundation for paintings, sketches and prints that seemed on more than one occasion to take on a life of its own.

He was in Japan; he was in Egypt; and he went through Nepal. For a very intense year, with an exaltation that bordered on the mystical, he became increasingly familiar with the specific attributes of fibers and pulps, of glues and special tools. The result of this stage were works in which the representation and the foundation or background merged without either losing their specific differences.



It would not be until his arrival to the mountains of Puebla, to the small, isolated village of San Pablito, the most famous and orthodox in its production of *amate* paper, that he would understand that the foundation could achieve all the terms of visual eloquence. His teacher was the Otomí Camila Hernández de Santos, wise repository of knowledge for making the best Mexican papyrus. She taught him all the steps for transforming bark into an unmistakable paper: cooking it for a whole day with lime and ash; washing it until all impurities are swept away; laying it out on a board of fiber netting, filling up the board with more fibers; rhythmic beating with a small flat stone until the fibers adhere. The sun does the drying. The long cooking pro-



cess frees the fibers from their vegetable prison. The villagers call them *manitas*, or "little hands." These *manitas* have the virtue of sticking together without glues or adhesives. With the blow of the stone that fits in the hands of men, women and children, the *manitas* interlock.

Far from what civilization incites them to, the inhabitants of San Pablito do today the same thing they did before the Europeans arrived to the hemisphere. Not even their product's success in the curios market (when indigenous people from the state of Guerrero began to paint and draw on sheets of *amate* made precisely in San Pablito) has changed them. At the most they changed the size of the paper on the request of the artists and architects who wanted to use these rough surfaces as bases or applications and needed larger sheets.

The revolution of *amate* paper occurred to Sergio López Orozco. Having assim-

lated all the implications of Camila Hernández' teaching, he understood that the *manitas* could be called upon to interlock not only with the blow of the stone, but that they also responded to pinching, twisting, marriage to paper made of other fibers and still other procedures. Multiple variants and textures could be introduced into the long, hand-made process, as many as the knowledge and inventiveness of the artist would allow. That was how *amate* paper stopped being a base or a flat texture and became very expressive, soft reliefs. The flexing of the *manitas* produces different degrees of intensity on a spectrum of emotions unknown until now. Its fully formal existence gives *amate* paper symbolic force. The material itself is impregnated with all the prodigious poetic substance deposited by the fantasy of the creator. The material itself transmits and arouses emotions. **MM**