



La Huatapera Museum of the Four Indigenous Peoples

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The word “huatapera” comes from the P’urhépecha expressions “uandajperakua,” from the high plateau region, or “uantajperakua,” from the region of the lakes and canyons, meaning “meeting place” or “place where

one can arrive or meet.” These spaces, founded by the Franciscan friars on their first missions in different parts of Mexico, were created in the sixteenth century during the contact between the West and the Mesoamerican civilizations, and are a cultural symbiosis between Spaniards and indigenous. At that time, they were used by both groups as places of reference, by the Spaniards in their evangelizing activities and by the indigenous for the preservation of their community

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Photos by Mauricio Degollado.

identity. Today, they still have important uses and meanings both for the community of Uruapan and for the indigenous communities living in the P'urhépecha Highlands, who consider the site an important part of their relationship with the city of Uruapan and their cultural identity.

Uruapan's La Huatapera is one of Michoacán and Latin America's oldest historic sites because of its origin as a Spanish settlement dedicated to attending to the indigenous. The construction has very close to a vernacular, popular architectural style, erected with simple materials found in the region (essentially adobe, wood and stone). Founded by Friar Juan de San Miguel in 1533, its aim was to offer the Indians a place that would serve as a shelter and hospital, as well as a meeting place and inn. It became a central element in not only religious, but also civic and social cohesion. La Huatapera was the first building of

its kind in the region and Uruapan's first colonial structure.

The complex was made up of the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, two naves, to the north and the west, each with rooms, the Holy Sepulcher Chapel at one end (also known as the Little Hospital Chapel), and an atrium in which a stone cross is still preserved. La Huatapera was organized in three departments: one for the sick and pilgrims, another for the *semaneros* (indigenous authorities in charge of the building) and another for the indigenous local government. In general, these places are the reflection of the indigenous religion, social policy and humanity, since it was there that they showed how devoted they were to their faith, the most sociable aspects of their republic in the assemblies they held and how charitable they were to their brethren.

At the death of its founder, the build-



Details of *maque* work and its materials in the permanent exhibit room.

ing was left to the city's nine neighborhoods, with each taking a turn in caring for it. One of the most important things that happened in La Huatapera's history is that, since it was the most important hospital in the region, Don Vasco de Quiroga, Michoacán's first bishop, spent his last days there until his death in 1565. It was then that, because of the creation of the *maque* artisans' cooperative, La Huatapera became the main exhibition hall for this beautiful work.¹

Although the entire region was assigned to *encomenderos* in 1524,² in 1540 the system was changed to an indigenous republic, confirming the indigenous population's autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Spanish government. Nevertheless, throughout the entire viceregal period, the population of Uruapan rebelled and revolted frequently.

The building was abandoned at different times and in the nineteenth century, the Holy Sepulcher Chapel mural was covered over with a new decoration. In the mid-twentieth century, a fire damaged its wooden ceiling, and in 1954, the building was turned over to the National Indi-

genist Institute that proposed using it as a trade school and regional museum. In 1999, new adaptations began to prepare it for its use as a museum and as the Regional Information and Documentation Center.

LA HUATAPERA TODAY

Currently, the building is home to the Museum of the Four Indigenous Peoples.³ It also houses the Regional Information and Documentation Center (CRID), whose aim is to concentrate and disseminate materials regarding the 62 indigenous peoples of Mexico's cultural mosaic, with particular emphasis on the peoples of this state. There is also a library which hosts different cultural activities.

The place is used for artistic exhibits of the peoples of Michoacán, and is an important venue for the celebration of traditional fiestas. That is why La Huatapera is important in Uruapan's cultural context as a meeting place, a place for re-



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search, for the preservation and dissemination of our regional heritage. That is also why its murals must be preserved as one of its most characteristic and valuable expressions.

The museum has a permanent exhibit of Michoacán *maque* work. This room summarizes the cultural value of a historic line of artistic production of the P'urhépecha people, as well as the aesthetic and technological differences among the state's different *maque*-producing areas: Uruapan, Quiroga and Pátzcuaro, each with its own particular characteristics, both in terms of the items produced and in terms of the techniques, designs and finishes used.

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Another of La Huatapera's most important spaces is the Holy Sepulcher Chapel, which boasts the mural *Angel Musicians*. In recent years, people have begun to understand the value of this work again thanks to the discovery of different

characteristics that until then had been hidden because of the lack of maintenance, the little formal use of the chapel and, the fact that many people did not even know it existed.

The work, dating approximately from the sixteenth century, is an unfinished mural done both as a fresco and in tempera on the three walls of the presbytery (the central and two lateral walls). The work's current name is taken from the elements it contains: eight full-sized angels in the foreground carrying musical instruments situated symmetrically in niches like architectural arches.

According to the scant amount of documentary information that has come down to us, the work seems to have remained unfinished because of an indigenous revolt during evangelization which spurred the abrupt departure of the missionaries and therefore of the mural's painters, probably Spaniards, judging from their technique. A while later, when the conquistadors returned, the building was once again occupied and its interior remodeled using much less interesting decorations. With the passage of the centuries,



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this cycle repeated itself two or three times, until, by the end of the 1950s, the chapel's ceiling was lost in a fire, leaving it victim to the inclemency of the rain that began to wash away what was on the walls, finally revealing the existence of the original images that can be seen today.

THE GILDARDO GONZÁLEZ
RAMOS REGIONAL INFORMATION
AND DOCUMENTATION CENTER

The center has a place for students, researchers and the public at large to comfortably consult books, magazines, videos, recordings, maps, etc. It also has up-to-date information magnetically stored so that users can print any information they need.

The new La Huatapera Museum thus contributes to the state's educational and cultural development, as well as promoting respect and tolerance for Mexico's cultural diversity. **MM**

NOTES

¹ *Maque* is a pre-Hispanic craft technique using earth and natural colored paints. See "The Craft Market. A Glimpse of the Essence of Michoacán," in this issue.

² The *encomienda* was a trusteeship labor system imposed by the Spanish crown from 1493 to 1791 in New Spain whereby overlords were granted the guardianship of indigenous people's souls with the responsibility of converting them to Catholicism in return for the right to tax them and command their labor. [Editor's Note.]

³ Four indigenous peoples inhabit the state of Michoacán: to the east, bordering on the states of Mexico and Querétaro, live the Mazahuas and Otomis; on the coast are the Nahuatl people; and in the mountains, the highlands, Zacapu's swampy, lake region and in the east live the P'urhépechas.

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