

# Cornstalk Paste Imagery

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The cornstalk paste sculptures come from an ancient technique, where we can observe that strangely, since those times to today, the goal has been to represent or venerate the different deities, either from precolombian or christian cults.

The ancient "purepechas", inhabitants of the mexican state Michoacan, used to make sculptures of their main deities, like Kurikaveri, god of the sun; mother moon Shataranga; corn goddess Kueravaperi; all of them were worshipped in her special festivities. There were too representations of the war gods, called Pungarecha and Pungaracha.

Cornstalk paste images were preferred to the others ones made on stone or wood, because of the lightness of the materials. Purepechas took their gods to the battle field, in order to have good luck, and if they lost the battle and have to run away, it was considered a sacrilege to leave them in enemies hands. It was always easier to run away with a cornstalk paste god than with one made of stone.



## Chapter 2

# Preparation techniques

Cornstalk paste was prepared in the following way: once the corn's canes were cut and dry they were boiled with posioned herbs to kill the moths; then they were dried on the sunlight, unbarked, and only the core was used, and carefully grinded. This was blended with begonia and orchidea rubber (called "Tatzigui").

The bulbs were boiled in water and they expelled the rubber resulting in a maleable paste, very light in consistence and of great endurance; it took the purepecha's name for the orchidea: "Tatzingueni", and with this paste the priests made the idols, either with clay moulds, either sculpting them with their own hands. The investigations has proven that the "Tatzingueni" paste was a blend made of two parts of cornstalk and five of orchidea

This orchidea is known in Uruapan (Michoacan, Mexico) "Aroracua", in Morelia "Limoncito" ("Little lemon") because of his particular odor; it is an abundant specie in the mexican state of Michoacan, and is also known as "Itzumakua", "Flor de Corpus" ("Corpus flower") y "Lirio de San Francisco" ("St. Francis Iris").



# Chapter 3

## A brief history

When spaniards arrived at Michoacan, the material was much of his liking, but not the representations, as Fray Matias de Escobar quotes in his chronicles: "the same core of the cornstalk that were used to make demons is now the material used in the fabrication of crucifixes"

In XVI century a series of Christ imageries made on cornstalk paste appeared, mostly from Michoacan, others from the capital's workshops (Mexico City)

About 1540, Vasco de Quiroga, impressed by this art, commanded the fabrication of "Our Lady of Health" - one of the most venerated today - with an "indian" priest that worked sculpting cornstalk's paste idols, helped by a franciscan sculptor.

"Fray Antonio de Segovia, one of the first missionaries in the province of Jalisco, acquired in Michoacan in 1531 one image of the Madonna, 34 cms tall" ... "In 1541 he tithed it to the indians of Jalisco, who named her 'Our Lady of Zapopan'. For ten years the brother wore it pending at the neck, as a protection".





## Chapter 4

### More about technique

The techniques for the Christ elaboration differs a little in structure, while someones are made on 'goldfinch' woods, others on cane 'bagazo', 'emptied cardboard', etc., the paste preparation is the same essentially. Mr. Carrillo explains to us about the "Christ of Mexicaltzingo" elaboration, that is in exhibition in "Museo de Historia" (History's Museum), El Carmen, San Angel, Mexico City: "In this images we found a great cavity that comprises all the body and even a part of the extremities, obtained with a cardboard skeleton made with leafes of glued paper, worked moisted to give correct form to the torax, abdomen and thighs, so it was obtained a totally void interior."

On top of this primitive skeleton, that once dry acquired a natural stiffness, were put little pieces of unbarked cornstalk, in a way that the roughly required volume was obtained and ready to mold the figure with finger pressure

When the core was not made in Zompantle, the head was constructed with little pieces of cilindric box to form the main skeleton, it was covered with marrow's fragments to define the fine details of face and hair.

In this sculptures, hands and feet, and sometimes arms and legs too, were made with the soft wood of Zompantle, but, in one way or another, once the model in general was finished, it was covered with stucco, wich supported the final polychrom. It's not strange to find models of this sort, where, in order to emphasize realism, a piece of glass is incrusted. This piece, with his characteristic brightness looks like fresh and bloody flesh.

The lightness of this sculptures is exceptional, the Christ of Mexicaltzingo, 1.30 meters tall, weighted 4 kgs and 310 grs.



## Chapter 5

### Places where you can enjoy this works

Imageries made with this materials were sent to different churches around Mexico, and Philipines and Canary Islands in Spain. In Amacueca, Jalisco (Mexico) are some "sleeping Christs", called so because they have his eyes closed. In Charo, Michoacan, "Museo Regional de Arte Popular" (Regional Museum of Popular Crafts), in Patzcuaro, Michoacan; in the sacristy of Morelias' Cathedral; and anothers noteworthy ones in Estado de Mexico (State of Mexico, near Mexico City).

There are two in Ayotzingo's Convent; in Malinalco, Sultepec, Tecaxis, Tejupilco, Tlalnepantla and Tlalmanalco. In Tepoztlan's Convent exists one that is ranked by specialists among the most beautiful, in renacentist style. In Zinacantepec we find the "Cristo de las animas" (Souls' Christ) or "Señor del veneno" (Poisons' Lord), a very special sculpture.



## Chapter 6

# Modifications to the old techniques

The technique applied by today's craftsmans differs in some materials that has been substituted by commercial products of easy acquisition. They are prepared in the following way: the canes, once dry and unbarked are tied together with a mix of "yerba de mule" and "nopal", replacing orchidea's glue, this will make the structure. Once the figure is finished, paste is put. Paste is made combining white of zinc, mirra, incense and 'white glue'. Then we proceed with polish, barnish and blood staining.



# Chapter 7

## Restorers

Restorers know also the technique. They have helped to restore damaged imageries; we can mention here Enrique Luft (Patzcuaro).





# Chapter 8

## More about techniques

Nowadays there are different techniques in the realization of cornstalk paste sacred works, describe all of them would extend this work considerably. Nevertheless, we think it is important to state the technique used in this course:

First, before beginning we prepare all the materials, the corn's canes are cut when the corn is ready, it is unbarked and put to dry in a shadowed place.

The blend is made grinding orchideas' bulbs in a 'molcajete' (a typical mexican recipient made on stone) or in a juice extractor. In a 'metate' (another typical mexican instrument for cooking) it is grinded fig tree leaves and 'Nochebuena' (also known as 'Poinsetia' in the USA). A mass is formed mixing both substances, and put to rest in a 'cazuela' (casserole) for 3 to 12 days, then is cured with linseed oil. The juice of this blend is spread onto the canes, functioning as a natural fungicide, that preserves the cane without degrading.

The canes are put in a way that they form the figure; this take his place over a structure made with wood's splinters and the mix obtained, or with "baba de nopal" (the secretion of nopal's leaves). They are tied together and put to dry. The definitive form is sculpted with 'gubia' and knife, it is covered with linen fabric, glued with "rabbit's tail". Finishing touches are made with 'Spanish's white' and matt plaster ('yeso mate'), until all the wrinkles and fabric edges are totally covered, ready to be painted with oil painting.



# Chapter 9

## Conclusion

We hope this material to be of help, not pursuing to give the final information on this theme, but to awake your interest to learn more about this beautiful craftwork



# Chapter 10

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