

PAPER SEA ROUTE:
THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE CULTURE
ON THE FORMATION OF ELEMENTS
OF MEXICAN FOLK ART ACCOMPANYING
VARIOUS CELEBRATIONS

There are a number of ideas regarding the first human migrations from Asia towards the new and unknown territories of the prehistoric America.¹⁾ Presumably, initially they occurred via the sea and later through the land. It is worth recalling the hypothesis concerning the migration of people from Asia, who – in the search for food and new land – moved over the Bering land bridge and continued their journey to the south of America, towards the Andes.²⁾ Hence the affinity and even physical similarity between the native Indians of America and their Asian ancestors. There is also a theory regarding human expansion via the sea route, which presumably took place along the shoreline of North and South Americas. With time, people started to travel across oceans and these migrations intensified approximately around the 12th century. At that time China already possessed highly developed sailing and

¹⁾ The last glaciation took place approximately 12,000 years ago. This marked the period of the migration of people and animals via the land bridge from Asia to America. The most recent archeological discoveries indicate also an earlier presence of human on these territories.

²⁾ <http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beringia>.

navigation technology.³⁾ Intensified intercontinental trade led to the route of these migrations being named the “Silk Sea Route”, which was later also referred to as the “Paper Sea Route”. In the 16th century the trade of goods obtained in conquests and transported *en masse* through Asia to Europe developed rapidly in this territory.⁴⁾ Throughout the following centuries, Chinese-Mexican relations strengthened thanks to numerous dealings and increased intercontinental trade. However, the real expansion of the people of China occurred in the second half of the 19th century, together with the ban on Chinese immigration into the United States. The Mexican government willingly accepted the Asian refugees from the USA and also the native Chinese with the intention of populating the northern territories of Mexico. Due to the desert climate, European people were unwilling to live there. The Chinese migrants included mostly young men, who rapidly assimilated with the Mexican society by intermarrying and introducing Chinese customs and items into everyday life.

When taking a closer look at folk and popular art in Mexico, it is impossible to overlook the abundance of Asian inspirations. Paradoxically, the greatest amount of oriental motifs of Mexican popular art prevailed in the form of elements made of a very delicate material – paper. These are numerous figures of dragons serving the function of various kites or *Alebrijes*, paper cuttings and other *paper-mâché* or *papel de China* handicraft. Even the famous Mexican *piñata* is of Asian origin.⁵⁾ In China this custom was celebrated on the arrival of the New Year. The Chinese version of *piñata* took the shape of a cow or an ox, was filled with seeds and was broken open with the intention of producing a favorable climate for the coming growing season in spring.

Chinese emigrants, as opposed to the Japanese, quickly assimilated into Mexican society, which prevented the creation of separate hermetic enclaves. This resulted in a mutual exchange of traditions, thus enriching the vibrant native Mexican culture. The Chinese, initially employed by the government of Mexico as workmen, quickly changed their jobs and started up small services businesses and trade. They sold various goods, among others colorful decorative paper – *papel de China*, popular also in China, which attracted considerable interest in Mexico for a long time. It was used by the local people to create festive decorations.

³⁾ The Song Dynasty’s merchant navy ships of that period were extraordinarily technically advanced, much more than those built in Europe – Fairbanks (1996: 123).

⁴⁾ Rodziński (1974).

⁵⁾ Cordeo (2003).

Papel de China, that is – translated literally – Chinese paper, was first introduced in Mexico most probably in the 16th century. The China-Manila-Acapulco sea route had existed from the year 1565. It was created at the height of the trade of precious metal ores plundered during conquests. Disappointed with the resources of Latin America and possessed by the vision of setting a new sea silk route, the Spanish headed towards Southern Asia, where in Manila a transshipment port was established on a route between China, Mexico and Europe.⁶⁾ The goods transported by sea, such as silk, japan, and – in particular – china, were wrapped in Chinese tissue-paper, which evoked considerable interest among the inhabitants of Mexico. *Papel de China* was also used in Asia in folk art as a perfect, cheap material for creating paper decorations; it was often covered with engravings or various drawings, which constituted ready cutting templates. In such form the paper accidentally reached Mexico.⁷⁾ Fascinated with this artistic material, the people of Mexico started to use *papel de China* in many ways. The availability of such decorative material favored the popularization of Asian motifs and techniques among the artists who used materials of Chinese origin. This probably accounts for the plentiful similarities between the paper-cutting techniques used in China and Mexico. Today, despite time lapse, *papel picado*, that is Mexican paper-cut, similarly to the Chinese paper-cut, is created with several or even several dozen layers of *papel de China* paper.⁸⁾ A design is drawn on the first layer and most often it is cut out with a sharp chisel, which punches through all the layers.⁹⁾

Papel picado is – in its literal meaning – perforated paper. Generally speaking, it is an ornamental paper-cut commonly displayed for both family celebrations and religious occasions, especially the Day of the Dead – *Día de los Muertos*. *Papel picado* paper-cuts decorate the streets, doorsteps, home interiors and are incorporated into small home altars. Made of a delicate material, regardless of the atmospheric conditions, the paper-cuts flutter in the wind,

⁶⁾ Rodziński (1974: 318).

⁷⁾ Presumably, it got to Mexico in the form of a wrapping for ceramics and other items – it was a cheap material, not suitable for reuse. This story recalls the circumstances in which Japanese woodcuts reached Europe.

⁸⁾ Obviously, today also other materials are used, for example metal or plastic foils, which are simply more resistant to damage; however, a traditional Mexican paper-cut is primarily made of colorful tissue-paper. Depending on the material different names are used: *papel de china* (colorful tissue-paper) *papel metaliko* (colorful metallic gloss paper) and *papel folien* (plastic foil).

⁹⁾ The whole pile (approximately 50 sheets of paper) is placed on a leaden or wooden plate, which absorbs the impact from the tools.

signaling a time to celebrate. This is an ephemeral craft emerging and vanishing in a myriad of colors depending on the type of celebration. Certain colors of paper-cuts are assigned to particular celebrations. Shades of violet are common at Easter, whereas colors of the rainbow are displayed on Christmas. Red, white and green – the colors of the Mexican flag – are chosen to commemorate Independence Day on September 16, and to honor La Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron of Mexico. The Day of the Dead is primarily associated with orange, purple or pink (Fig. 1). Used widely on *Día de los Muertos*, *Papel picado* depicts most often various symbols of death: *calaveras* – skulls and *calacas* – skeletons. The motif of death strongly correlates with the everyday life of the Mexicans and the comical depiction of skeletons and laughing skulls softens the inevitable process of the decline of life. The *calaveras* motifs, already known in the pre-Hispanic times, were popularized at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries by a Mexican graphic artist and illustrator, Jose Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913). The celebration time served as a perfect pretext for presenting the less likable and respected characters in a derisive and sarcastic way. Social criticism and a somewhat peculiar “Memento Mori” reminded people that we are all equal in the face of death. One of the most commonly depicted character was Catrina, a woman of the upper class, an aristocrat, a skeleton wearing a huge hat and a colorful feather boa (Fig. 2). *La calavera de la Catrina* has established itself permanently in Mexican iconography and has become one of the most significant characters of the Day of the Dead.

Día de los Muertos is a time of Mexican fiesta, when life meets death in the form of various *ofrendas* (offerings): countless versions of paper skeletons, sugar and chocolate skulls and the Dead Souls’ favorite foods and liquors. Some Mexicans deal with death by paying tribute to the dead in the form of especially prepared for this occasion small home altars. Aromatic *ofrendas* serve as invitations for ancestors to meet and celebrate. The spirits consume the aroma of the countless dishes. Huge altars dedicated to important figures of Mexican history and culture are built in public places (Fig. 3). On this occasion, in October 2007 in the National Ethnographic Museum, a Mexican artist, Sergio Otero, built an altar to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Frida Kahlo’s birth and the 50th anniversary of Diego Riviera’s death (Fig. 4). The altar and the room were ornamented with various paper decorations (Fig. 5),¹⁰⁾ including *papel picado*, *cartonería*¹¹⁾ figures and orange flowers made of crepe paper symbolizing *flor*

¹⁰⁾ made of tissue-paper, crepe paper, cartboard, papier-mâché.

¹¹⁾ Cartonería – traditional Mexican spatial form made of papier-mâché.

de muerto – the flowers of death. Paper decorations have accompanied the Mexican people for a long time in celebrating certain customs connected both with the Day of the Death as well as with the beginning of life.¹²⁾ In pre-Hispanic times, a prototype of paper in the form of *amate* was used to make ritual decorations.

Various technologies which use tree bark to produce material similar to paper have been known in Asia and Mexico for centuries. In Asia it was *tapa*, and in Mexico – the *amate* mentioned previously. These materials served not only the ritual purpose but were also used as a foundation for writing or painting. They were also used as outerwear,¹³⁾ wall tapestries, bed covers and other objects of everyday use.

Tapa was first used as a foundation for writing in Mesoamerica. The Maya called it *huun*. The Toltecs and the Aztecs named it *Amatl*.¹⁴⁾ The word *amate* comes from the Aztec language Nahuatl and denotes the name of the wild fig-tree *amate* or *amacuahuitl*. The *amate* paper was obtained as a result of processing the inside of the fig-tree bark¹⁵⁾ or paper mulberry.¹⁶⁾ According to the most recent research, the Maya paper was different than the presently produced *amate*. Most probably, with respect to technology, it was more similar to the goods made of *tapa*, however, undoubtedly, the Maya civilization greatly contributed to popularizing the process of producing material from the fibre of trees in the territory of Mesoamerica¹⁷⁾. There is no evidence, however, whether the skill of bark processing was adopted from the Asians. Presumably, this craft developed on its own, maybe even earlier than the Maya culture.¹⁸⁾ We know for certain, on the other hand, that the Mayans developed and popularized the technology, which later evolved and gave rise to the large scale production of *amate* paper.

¹²⁾ According to pre-Hispanic beliefs, the dead take care of nature coming to life. This is why still today the first crops are offered at cemeteries to win the favor of the gods. The gods associated with the land of the dead due to the contact with the underworld at the same time represented the guards of crops and fertility.

¹³⁾ For example by one of traditional Maya tribes – *Lacandon*, who inhabited the territories on the border of Guatemala and Mexico.

¹⁴⁾ Amate is *amatl* in the Aztec language – *Nahuatl*. See: Dąbrowski (1991).

¹⁵⁾ *Moraceae, ficus family tree*. *Moraceae* is a general name for more than 1,000 species of trees and shrubs, also referred to as the family of fig or mulberry plants.

¹⁶⁾ *Moraceae, mulberry family tree*.

¹⁷⁾ In Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and Salvador.

¹⁸⁾ Dąbrowski (1991).

In pre-Hispanic times, the greatest demand for *amate* paper was observed during the period when the Aztec Empire flourished.¹⁹⁾ Approximately 480,000 sheets were produced annually during that period.²⁰⁾ The *amate* paper was a significant carrier of historical, astronomical and medicinal knowledge; it was used in archiving and communicating important information. The paper was intended mostly for the elites and the upper class – it was an attribute of power. In theocratic empires it was used by priests, warriors and scribes. *Amate* played a particularly significant role in various religious and magic rituals. Nowhere else in the world at that time did paper serve such a significant ritualistic and cult purpose. *Amate* was used in a complex way and served several functions. It was a symbolic decorative element of statues of gods and priests' robes. It also appeared in the form of ritual objects: among others, it imitated a human skeleton offered to the gods as a sacrifice, and also symbolized the rebirth of vegetation. The oldest trees used for the production of the *amate* paper were especially cared for and were perceived as the places of cult. Even today in Mexico it is not unusual to see old fig-trees surrounded by candles and other ritual objects. According to the Aztec calendar, the solar year commenced in the dry season on the spring equinox, when people were awaiting the first rain that would revive plant life. Flags and chains with *amate* paper-cuts were hung in temples, in the streets and in the fields.²¹⁾ In houses and on trees long strips of paper were hung, which symbolized thriving greenness. The strips were also dyed blue, which symbolized the god of rain – Tlaloca. Depending on the needs and the type of celebration, images of different gods were painted with a dark plant gum extract on *amate* scraps.

Amate was produced in two colors: pale – from the inside bark of a relatively young tree, and dark – from an older potted fig tree.²²⁾ White paper was used in purification and healing ceremonies, whereas dark paper symbolized demons. Dark fetishes were usually burned after the rituals and white ones were left as cult or protective objects. The Warsaw Ethnographic Museum has a collection of *amate* paper fetishes (Fig. 6). These figures represent people and animals.

¹⁹⁾ From around the 12th century till 1519–1524.

²⁰⁾ Today around 2,000 sheets are produced daily.

²¹⁾ Paper-cuts were created with primitive tools made of obsidian.

²²⁾ The differences in color may be connected with the material used for the production of paper. *Amate* produced from the bark of the wild fig is darker and *amate* produced from paper mulberry – paler. The soft inside bark is preferred, however, for the production of darker *amate* the elements of the outside bark are also used.

They mainly played a protective, agrarian and cult role; they prevented and cured diseases as well as favoring a rich harvest.

The art of *amate* manufacture began to disappear with the Spanish conquests. *Amate* production was banned as a result of Spanish attempts to “civilize” the local people and destroy important documents belonging to pre-Hispanic culture. Also Christianization contributed to this process as it prohibited magic rituals, in which *amate* was used. New settlers brought the technology of paper production from Europe which quickly replaced the traditional craft. However, the skill of making the *amate* paper never vanished despite the ban on its manufacture. Many a time the Spanish were forced to use this material as European workshops could not keep pace with the increasing demand for paper. There are also sources which state that the Otomi Indians never ceased to produce *amate* due to its significance in various shamanic rituals, which are performed even today.

However, the real rebirth of *amate* paper production occurred in the mid-20th century (Fig. 7). People started to use *amate* for purposes other than rituals and, as a consequence, it was legitimized as an artistic and decorative product.²³⁾ Presently, the major centers of *amate* production are the north-west part of the state of Veracruz and in San Pablito on the border of the Puebla and Hidalgo regions. These are mostly the Otomi Indians and the descendants of the Nahua Aztecs who are involved in *amate* production. The techniques known from the pre-Hispanic times are still used in *amate* manufacture, however, now they have been improved by innovations in the form of industrial chemical processes.

Tree bark is collected in early spring in order not to harm the trees and to facilitate the debarking process without causing any damage. Mature tree species, that is those of approximately 25 years of age, undergo this process without any damage. When dried, the bark can be stored safely for approximately a year, that is till the next harvest. In the beginning of bark processing, the bark is submerged in water for about 24 hours. Currently, this procedure is shorter and lasts only a few hours thanks to a process which involves stirring and cooking the bark with some ash or lime. Recently caustic soda has also been added to the mix. After boiling, the bark needs to be thoroughly rinsed. Depending on the needs, the fibers may be additionally whitened or dyed any color. Next, the softened strips of fibers in the form of a slightly coiled thin string are placed

²³⁾ Modern fetishes produced for commercial purposes are also made of the colorful *papel de China*.

on wooden panels.²⁴⁾ The surface of the panels is protected with a layer of soap, which prevents the fibers from sticking together. Thus begins the process of compacting and smoothening the fibers with stone cubes of volcanic origin.²⁵⁾ The process of fibre maceration releases dissolved carbohydrates which act as a bonding agent to bind the fibers, thus creating a quite thin and even form. Then, the surface of the sheets is smoothened with rounded pieces of orange skin. As the last step, the panels are exposed to the sun. The process of drying, depending on atmospheric conditions, lasts from one hour to a couple of days.²⁶⁾

Several years ago, the government of Mexico commenced a program to support and produce *amate*, as it is a significant element of the national heritage. Souvenirs made of *amate* paper are currently one of the most popular touristic products in Mexico. From its limited manufacture as a banned material, it has transformed itself into mass scale industrial production. Today chemical ingredients improving the effectiveness and accelerating the production time are used in *amate* production. Unfortunately, many of the improvements are burdened with real risk. Ecological issues concern not only the use of poisonous chemicals, which cause skin irritation, but also the mass exploitation of fig-trees.²⁷⁾ Therefore, numerous attempts at replacing them with other plants suitable for paper production have been made.²⁸⁾ Another way of using a cheap ecological material in Mexican popular art is the recyclable *papier-mâché*, which is gaining popularity among artists.

Paper has always played an important role in the culture of Mexico and the art of *amate* manufacture has undoubtedly influenced the significance of its role throughout the centuries. *Alebrijes*, *papel picado* and *piñata*, the modern icons of paper inclinations, regardless of their Asian, Indian or Christian origin, today constitute a portrayal of the Mexican love of paper. This delicate material, paper, has survived throughout the ages, representing a significant element of Mexican culture, encapsulated between the ephemeral and the eternal.

²⁴⁾ Adjusted to certain sizes, usually 40x60cm-sheets.

²⁵⁾ From the Tlaxcala region.

²⁶⁾ On dry and sunny days it lasts for approximately an hour, in humid conditions – even a few days.

²⁷⁾ Before they reach the proper age (approximately 25 years), after which there is no harmful effect on a debarked tree.

²⁸⁾ Binnqüist (2003).

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Fig. 1. Sergio Otero, *Papel picado*, traditional paper cut-outs, the State Ethnographic Museum 2007



Fig. 2. Sergio Otero, *La calavera de la Catrina* (Catrina skeleton), collection of the State Ethnographic Museum



Fig. 3. *Altar de muertos* (altar of the dead) dedicated to Carlos Fuentes, made in Warsaw



Fig. 4. *Altar de muertos* (altar of the dead) dedicated to Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, made by Sergio Otero in the State Ethnographic Museum 2007



Fig. 5. Sergio Otero, *Flor de muerto* (marigold) and *calaveras* (skulls), the State Ethnographic Museum 2007



Fig. 6. *Fetish*, amate paper, collection of the State Ethnographic Museum



Fig. 7. Contemporary book cover made of amate paper, decorated with cut-out papel picado, the State Ethnographic Museum Library