



La Tradición Popular

Styrofoam in Traditional Altar-making on Guatemala

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Introduction

This current essay is focused on the usage of Styrofoam as a plastic proper material for construction, and manufacture of everyday equipment later turned into an artistic expression on Guatemala, particularly with its introduction to the very particular world of our culture that is traditional altar-making which currently makes up for most of the material used in the popular worship expression.

Description of Styrofoam as a sculpting material

To define this new material in the creation of worship pieces in popular art or imitation of them, going through the existing information within the texts due to its recent invention is quite difficult since there is no history written about it, even though during the science fair organized by the Universidad de San Carlos of Guatemala in the year 2006 it has been awarded as an invention that allows the recreation of this product.

One website defines this product in the following manner:

Styrofoam = Expanded polystyrene:

Styrofoam = Expanded polystyrene. It is a sponge-like plastic material. 98% of its volume is air and 2% is polystyrene.

Qualities and uses

Qualities and uses it is hygienic and doesn't rot nor does it get moldy, it doesn't decompose, it is light, and resistant to humidity thanks to disposable thermal insulation.

Behavior Within the Environment

Its behavior inside the environment: it is not biodegradable, it takes almost 10,000 years for nature to divide its structure into smaller molecules.



Illustration 1 A Styrofoam sheet on its original state, take note that the inferior corner of its consistency has a carved border in this material painted with golden acrylic over a white painted background. (Photograph by Fernando Urquizú, Year 2010)

Styrofoam on Guatemala

Styrofoam arrived to our country in the decade of the 1960s through two commercial routes, one of them as part of the packaging of imported electrical appliances imported from more developed capitalist countries and the other in the construction of false ceilings whose use in a large scale began with the showrooms park La Industria, situated on Zona 9 of Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción.

The information mentioned in this subject can be expanded checking the following Web page: <http://www.authorstream.com/Presentation/nmgiron-164038-el-duroport-en-nuestra-vida-audio-education-ppt-powerpoint/>

This material also arrived as tiny balls used as material for filling packages, starting to be used as imitation snow on Christmas ornaments and shells during Easter season where it replaced confetti for processions limiting itself to this type of usage later on, due to it being discovered that it could cover water pipelines.

During the second half of the 1960s, Styrofoam sheets and in flat tissue that by then were made in different colors started to be used as raw material coating to create small reindeer, bells and other Christmas ornaments, while more and more skilled hands adapted it to the crafting of houses for the traditional nativity scenes where its incursion as raw material began seeping itself into Guatemalan altar-making, bigger lavish pieces presented in the current work.

In this context Styrofoam also used as a raw material in the making of all sorts of ornaments for very many festivities, currently it is really popular within ornaments for *Quince Añeras* in which they're mixed with other materials such as glitter, plastic pebbles to simulate jewelry and cloth.



Illustration 2 A Crowning of a balloon archway for a 15 year old's party in the lounge of the old neighborhood of Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción that adorns the gala with this type of manifestation of popular art done on Styrofoam. (Photograph taken by Fernando Urquizú, year 2010.)

Styrofoam on Traditional Altar-making

The usage of Styrofoam was quickly generalized within the ideology of traditional altar-making of nativity scenes in which it tried to make the quantitative leap to the processional platforms where the use of it by artist Vincent Azurdia in the processions of the church of *Recolección de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción*, found a great obstacle with the little consistency of the material when he used it on a greater scale since there were no supports nor additives that could make solid structures for them to be coated with this material.

The use of Styrofoam for art pieces of a larger scope, such as the processional platforms that during those times, required artistic academic exercises such as essays; mistakes and new uses of the material to be discovered by ourselves, the qualities and defects to achieve the definitive incorporation for external worship where it had to be exposed to external factors such as wind, temperature changes, and rain that required the development of special techniques to be used.

Once these factors were understood by artist Luis Alberto De León who had since childhood developed different artistic manifestations focused on traditional altar-making, serves as an example of the successful use of Styrofoam on a piece of art that survived the entire procession route without damaging the original one done with this material.

The first favorable balance of Styrofoam happened in 1968 when the previously mentioned artist was an adolescent, he was invited to participate with the *Hermanidad de la Consagra Imagen de Jesús Nazareno* and *El Señor Sepultado de la Recolección* by Brother Miguel A. Murcia, integrating the commission of ornaments for the processions that the religious institution was in charge of.

During that year, he was entrusted in the making of a headstone that had to imitate being made of eroded stone with the legend “*Salva a tu pueblo señor*,” (Lord save your people), amazing with the polish for the work he had done that perfectly imitated the natural erosion. The most important aspect of the creation of the headstone was that it could be kept firmly on the platform from beginning to the ending of the procession.

In those times the chemical reactions between different kinds pigments were unknown, and the materials they could be used with, the molecular changes of expansion and shrinkage, were of the same essence with increase and decrease were due to temperature changes were also unknown, issues that were tested by the artist De León.

In this context a vast number of hours were spent exposing painted Styrofoam to the changing temperatures vianatural meanssuch as the sun and high potency spotlights that were utilized on processional platforms, that later were sprinkled with water to verify their behavior through changes in climate, before they were turned into raw materials for the creation of most of the ornaments for the platform that was made with this material whose use is extremely volatile, reason as to why it should be kept adequately away from electric cables due to the occasional temperature raise.

Once they're put to the test through all these factors and establishing a proper security protocol for its use, it was showcased for the first time as raw materials for an ornament on the platform for the procession of *Jesús Nazareno del Consuelo* with the theme of “Christ lives, reigns and prevails” which was showcased on white colors, and with a sculpture of a Papal Tiara, done on Styrofoam, the ornamentation was completed with the sculptures of winged children that was shown for the first time in the procession of *Jesús Nazareno de Candelaria* in 1928 that was under the custody of Mrs. Clarita Soto.

This monumental ornament was designed and made by Luis Alberto De León, was the first one that tested the capacity of Styrofoam on traditional Guatemalan altar-making that reached a higher step in the development where it performed without any mayor damages during the route of the procession of Señor del Consuelo that then passed every Martes Santo.

The Artistic Boom of Styrofoam on Altars and Processions of Guatemala

In the decade of 1970s Styrofoam had become the most used material in the creation of the finishes belonging to false ceilings beginning to appear inside of the first local factories of this material, that over the decade began presenting itself new products to daily life specially packaging to keep or serve groceries such as plates and disposable cups, along Tortilleros that contained special characteristics to survive high temperatures and allowing them to have a longer shelf life, they also had the capacity of preservationiinlower temperature reason as to why the famous coolers gained popularity.

This was caused it to become a cheap and practical material, this was how the Guatemalan ingenuity began to use it on the crafting of altars for the interiors of churches and processional ornaments. In the beginning this material was used for the creation of decorative pieces.

its color and its factory finish are without much detail, where other products became industrialized such as white glue for woodwork, this one also had the interesting trait of being the perfect additive for Styrofoam, starting to use spikes like the ones belonging to antique furniture to stick one piece to another achieving pieces that are sturdier and bulkier.

Within this order the development of alternate industrial products, church altars of church La Recolectión started appearing, the first differently sized angel wings were crafted with Styrofoam. The main trait of these wings was that they were created with the additive technique that allowed layering to create volume, perfectly completing the movement that it's trying to recreate with these sculptures and angelic choirs.

The presentation of the angels was completed with architectural sculptures on the chapter of a column with heraldic motifs completing the birth of a new kind of altar-making that didn't completely change the tradition of this Guatemalan artistic manifestation.



Illustration 3 *Atar de Velación del Señor Sepultado del Templo de La Recolectión of the Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción at the beginning of the seventies when Styrofoam for the first time on the creation of angel wings in different sizes: this is how the chapters of columns, and heraldic motifs an a catafalque of the Lord. (Photograph from the album by artist Luis Alberto de León)*

The next step on the development of the use of Styrofoam on traditional altar-making in our country happened when the outstanding capacity of coloring it with different tones was discovered, this was achieved when other art pieces were wrapped within it, with white glue as the original additive, due to it covering the pieces like skin. The art pieces were waterproof on the inferior layer, the development of this procedure allowed the covering of the pieces with color application through the use of more aggressive pigments on that material if done directly could almost immediately destroy it.

In the other hand it was attempted to give colors to ornaments done in Styrofoam with water based paints, and oil without turpentine, if it was prepared correctly with a base of white glue it can even, be done with oil based acrylics or spray paint to create a variety of tones and diverse finishing touches. The use of different combinations of these elements created a great wave of traditional altar-making pieces that were being done with this material.

However, the frequent use of Styrofoam on altar-making in our country needed, not only in artistic knowledge but also in others that were directly related to science such as chemistry, this also makes us think that the usage of this material on traditional Guatemalan altar-making on an extremely polished manner is a victory reached thanks to the vast cultural knowledge of artist Luis Alberto De León.

This type of use was generalized within popular were it presented itself as the raw material for art pieces, analyzing these descriptions of two completely different gradients: one of academic character and the other of an empiric one.

The first depicts objects crafted that can be classified as art pieces and the second ones done with less command over the raw material and the finishes try to imitate as much as it can the first gradient.

The use of Styrofoam during the 1970s by artist Luis Alberto De León with the ornaments of the processions *Jesús Nazareno del Consuelo y Señor Sepultado de la Recolección de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción* effectively contributed for the public visiting in droves to admire the arrival of the sacred processions of that temple that appeared with a lavishness that had no predecessors on its presentation, without abandoning the traditional altar-making that had been developing since the end of the 19th century when the Catholic Church in Guatemala was being reorganized.

Styrofoam and It's Beauty Within the Hands of Artist Luis Alberto De León

During the 80s the artist Luis Alberto De León had already acquired great experience with the incorporation of Styrofoam as raw material in traditional Guatemalan altar-making whose use obeys the qualities to grow this form of artistic expression rooting its favor, according to the artist in the following:

The light weight of the material, is very important to the representation of items of greater mass, such as architectural elements, and those that have finishes on stone, iron, brick, marble, and others, when these are worked out properly they can reach a great level of realism with their pieces that can be elevated within the processional platforms with great ease, when they are provided the correct frame.

In relation to the volume and dimension of the sculptures or other art pieces where it will be used, Styrofoam is a material that is easy to work with, in different scales since it is also utilized in the creation of mock-ups, however the use should

be studied by the artists, since if they aren't familiar with spacial relations it is inevitable for them to make mistakes on the presentation of the art pieces.

The ease of coloring the Styrofoam when it is worked properly within the branch of painting can imitate any finish, from feathers, to the coldness of marble it all depends on the knowledge and abilities that the artist possess on painting, since this is completely different from sculpting techniques, that on Styrofoam when there larger pieces, smaller details are generally done with a penknife. The finish done with sandpaper that come in different sizes from thick ones to ones that are thinner than paper, it even is rubbed with different types of cloth.

Regarding the limits of expression, any figure can be achieved from architectural monuments to human sculptures, zoo-morphs, mixed ones such as mermaids and angels.

The Complete Triumph of Styrofoam as Raw Material for Guatemalan Traditional Altar-Making with the hands of artist Luis Alberto De León

The aforementioned traits of Styrofoam as raw material on the creation of art pieces within traditional Guatemalan altar-making, discovered by artist Luis Alberto De León allowed him to create the first attempt in which the material was imposed in more than eighty-percent of the ornaments in processional platform's.

This happened with the processional platform of Jesús Nazareno de la Iglesia de la Merced de la Nueva Gutemala of church la Merced of the Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción. the Good Friday of April 4th, 1980, when he manged to showcase the ornament utilizing this material as the base, with the representation of the theme: "Lord, grant us Peace."

During the showcase of it, he took into account the phrase said by Saint Matthew (28,16-20) "Go make disciples of all nations" was materialized artistically with the core of the twelve life-sized

dove sculptures done on Styrofoam that alluded to the twelve apostles with the attitude of their flight as they took off on their mission to teach the scriptures to everyone.

The birds coming out of Christ's feet presented in the sculptures of Jesús Nazareno, completing the ornamentation with two architectonic type handrails, and a lectern with an open book where the letters Alpha and Omega had been highlighted symbolizing the beginning and end of time contained in the Gospel, that are a way of life for Christians that they will always find in this the truth and life written, expressed within its open pages containing the sculpture of a dove carrying an olive branch that alludes iconographically and iconologically to what was described earlier.



Illustration 4 Processional platform of *Jesús Nazareno* de la Iglesia-La Merced de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción decorated under the theme of "Lord, grant us Peace" done with eighty-percent Styrofoam that was showcased in its default coloring. Alternating between architectural motifs with the twelve life-sized flying doves. (Photography album by the artist Luis Alberto de León).

The Color of Styrofoam on Traditional Guatemalan Altar-making

The birds coming out of Christ's feet presented in the sculptures of Jesús Nazareno, completing the ornamentation with two architectonic type handrails, and a lectern with an open book where the letters Alpha and Omega had been highlighted symbolizing the beginning and end of time contained in the Gospel, that are a way of life for Christians that they will always find in this the truth and life written, expressed within its open pages containing the sculpture of a dove carrying an olive branch that alludes iconographically and iconologically to what was described earlier.

The ornament shown in both of the sculptures done in Styrofoam of life-sized peacocks, male and female. These animals according to Ancient Roman tradition were used as symbols associated with immortality, brought to Christianity inside the catacombs used by the first followers of the faith that interacted with Jesus.

The deep impact in the ideology of the public that was interested in these type of artistic manifestations that move the ideas of faith between different social groups due to the establishing of a new basis of materials and techniques, on the artistic creation that have survived in altars and platforms for three decades.

The sculpture of Jesús Nazareno was placed under a shrine that alternated the balanced traditional ways with modern ones that didn't fully break the with its predecessor aesthetics, materializing as a new type of art form that we can now call the artist's style that with this type of architectural representations, created another new stream of expression utilizing a technique and material from the artist's own work, making it unique in the world.



Illustration 5 Ornament that was shown in the platform of *Jesús de Nazareno* de la Iglesia de la Merced in the Good Friday April 17th of 1981 with the theme "Eternally how sweet the name of Jesus sounds" done in more than eighty-percent Styrofoam by the artist Luis Alberto De León, where his art style is evident in the work with this material. (Photography album by artist Luis Alberto De León).

***The Monumental Art-pieces of Guatemalan
Altar-making Done in Styrofoam.***

The development of Styrofoam as a raw material for the creation of larger altars continued its upward march, with the motif of the Centenario de la Muerte de la Madre Encarnación Rosal, on August 24th of 1986, an occasion in which several different religious manifestations where one procession carrying the Santísimo Sacramento became the highlight of the event, that day artist Luis Alberto De León surprising the citizens with a gorgeous carriage done in Styrofoam.

The size of said symbolical carriage with an ornamentation that year, that surpassed everything that was done before with this material in traditional altar-making in our country and having great success in the medium, that conveniently survived the climate without suffering great damages neither in structure nor ornamentation. The success reached also included the preservation of the original coloring, proving that the capacity and utility of this material as the very best to this day for altars, platform and carriage making for religious uses where it grew to be a resource in civil uses such as patriotic altars, publicity signs, and promotional cars.



Illustration 6 Carriage done in Styrofoam by artist Luis Alberto De León with the motif of: *Centenario de la Muerte de la Madre Encarnación Rosal*. (Photograph taken anonymously from the memory album from this artist).

The carriage for the commemoration of the Centennial of the passing of Madre Encarnación Rosal, also included in it's s the incorporation of ornaments that imitated architectural elements that can be seen in the use of buttons done in Styrofoam that featured dangling laurel leaves done with the same material with a golden coloring that resembled metal that were alternated with other elements of antique metal such as: lanterns, surrounded the platform didn't outshine it, discovering with that, another use for Styrofoam that will be analyzed in the following text, when the artist Luis Alberto De León again found a new use for it, destined to complete other severely mutilated art pieces adequately, whether they were destroyed by time or men.

The Use of Styrofoam as a Medium of Restoration in the Showcasing of Antique Art-pieces

The incorporation of Styrofoam use in the traditional Guatemalan altar-making as the main working material brought in its use as a restoration tool for art pieces that came from the era of Spanish Dominion. This also happened thanks to artist Luis Alberto De León who started using it for the creation of white angelic wings of differing sizes that we have mentioned earlier, however, in the last decade of the 20th Century this usage started being studied and adapted to complete other art pieces with their own character creating the optimal presentation of these characters.



Illustration 7 Sculpture of Saint Gabriel from the end of the 19th Century used for the altar of Lent and Holy Week with iconography done on Styrofoam. (Photograph by Ricardo Uriquiz Dávila, year 1994)

The crafting technique used in this new type of angel wings made out of Styrofoam are done in is called: Process of Additive Sculpture since it creates volume, depending on the desired use determines the need for special additives. With thesetechniques artist De León showcases that the angel wings for the external worship, platforms and carriages will be used inside themselves with a special wire net that directly connects them to the base that sticks them to the sculpture so that this way it is able to resist the wind and movements without any risk to take damage.

With the ones for internal worship, the internal structure can be omitted. In showcasing it can imply the use of other materials such as the laminated paper that is used for cooking when utilized properly by skilled hands, it can create the illusion of changing the original technique of simmering it in gold and silver creating a great beauty and quality to the presentation of the art pieces, they can also have details made out of paint with glitter that imitates precious metals, achieving the creation of pieces reminiscent of ancient sculptures.

The use of Styrofoam in the angel wings gave birth to proper iconographic and iconological elements returning the visual speech told by the original sculptures, with a material so well preserved that it can perfectly survive the restoration process for the ancient images that during their original use were for dynamic teaching the Gospel, or as compliments to the church's decoration. The use of Styrofoam in this aspect reduces considerably the costs of returning the figure to its original state, however,



Illustration 8 Sculpture of Saint Raphael where we can appreciate the creation of its attributes done in Styrofoam can be seen in the calabash of the staff and fish. (Photograph by Fernando Urquizú year 2005).

it must be highlighted that the use of this technique is restricted to artists who truly understand the correct application of it, since the when it has been wrongly done, it has led to the disastrous loss of several pieces of ancient art.

Styrofoam and Its Functionality with Other Materials

The creation of iconography through Styrofoam for altar completion where antique sculptures were used has given a way to another new technique by artist Luis De León, who discovered what could be done with the application of Styrofoam on gold or silver colored laminated paper created a resemblance to the real materials.

To slowly appreciate the photographs shown earlier of the angel sculptures carved out of wood originating from the late 19th Century with Styrofoam wings, the first impression produced by said wings is that they're original to the sculpture, this effect is accentuated with the use of laminated paper, commonly

To fully appreciate the photographs shown earlier of the angel sculptures carved out of wood originating from the late 19th Century with Styrofoam wings, the first impression produced by said wings is that they're original to the sculpture, this effect is accentuated with the use of laminated paper, commonly known as aluminum paper with when painted with special techniques create this appearance when placed on Styrofoam. In the sculpture of fish, the attribute on figure 8, the use of this technique is much more refined since the now complete sculpture, possesses Styrofoam as a material for complete support, in which the adhered layer of laminated paper formed the scales in different tonalities that carefully cover it alternating each other with the foam sheet to create the fins, resulting in a final product a 26'7 inches long statue by 9'8 inches that alternates the volume with the sculpture size of Saint Raphael that measures in total around 3'2 ft and 15'7 inches tall.

In the photograph of Saint Gabriel we can notice a pyx also done in gold painted Styrofoam, which had adhered pieces of jewelry that were creating a sculpture that imitated silver jewelry from the 18th Century with another variant of techniques created by artist De León to complete the ornamentation of traditional Guatemalan altar-making that is now missing in this types of pieces, to the point that have been removed from the National Patrimony.

Working with these type of sculptures is extremely valuable within the present, since in a greater scale that fundamentally contributes in maintaining the sense of a "complete artistry," so it doesn't lose any specific aspects in the final version of the art piece, whowill serve as preservation material for the original piece that is showcased in the altars which are visited by multiple people, where curious non-believers might leak in there only to loot the cultural patrimony of our country in which they only see commercial value.



Illustration 9. Ornamental Pyx done by master Luis Alberto DeLeón in Styrofoam, with embedded jewelry pieces that by its artistic value can be alternated between ancient sculptures without changing the final presentation. Photograph by Fernando Uriquízú, year 1996.

In the analysis we have gotten to know some of the creative techniques proposed by artist Luis Alberto De León, who has brought them to light through worship art, this refers to special studies like those exposed beforehand who have generalized the usage of Styrofoam as raw material in traditional Guatemalan altar-making.

Inside this context we also have to take into account that the pieces that have been copied and reinterpreted by other professional artists in other materials for them to be mass produced at a lower cost, due to the demand of this type of art from the masses.



Illustration 10. Artist Luis Alberto De León along with the magnificent piece described before, surrounded by his paintings, his piano or objectsthat inspire his daily life. (Photograph by Fernando Uriquízú, year 2010).

The wings of said angels, were originally created with Styrofoam by artist De León where he copied by master carpenter Miguel Hernández in his workshop in *Ciudad Vieja* in *La Antigua Guatemala*, who carved wooden copies that were later made in mass, these being used in processions of *Jesús Nazareno de la parroquia de la Santa Cruz en la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción* and this sculpture belongs in the same order as the church Santa Catarina Bobadilla en la *Antigua Guatemala*.

The case mentioned earlier leaves the role of Styrofoam as a raw material clear in traditional Guatemalan altar-making and its role on the industrial production of this type of art that requires similar finishes in more solid materials such as fiberglass, that has the advantage of having a higher resistance allowing it to be frequently painted without any previous preparation through cheap dyes. In this context the ornaments done on this material can be used more frequently without rising production costs, a thing that eventually allowed the negotiations for renting the angel wings done in the material.

Styrofoam on the 21st Century in Traditional Guatemalan Altar-making

After other artists continued the development of Styrofoam as a raw material for processional platforms they brought in very interesting proposals that created a particular style, appearing with great force even during the 21st Century. The most recent case was the ornament created with the motif of Golden Weddings of the Hermandad del Señor Sepultado del templo La Recolectión de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción that were celebrated the second Sunday of November 2005

with a commemorative procession, the occasion in which the platform was used at the Good Friday that showcased an interesting decoration done on Styrofoam by artist José Manuel Arreaga.

In this sense the church of La Recolectión de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción has shown that Styrofoam, used by different artists during Good Friday of 2009 such as artist Héctor Abarca who showcased saturated designs with different Neogothic styles with silver coloring having great creativity and lot of patience in the creation of said figures with this material gave place to a singular presentation to the ornament from this year.

The development of this material is an interesting one to highlight, since currently there exist stores specialized on the creation of different articles done in Styrofoam where one can acquire different decorative objects of this material or one can commission one following the per-established requirements.



Illustration 11, A store that sells art pieces and architectonic ornaments made out of Styrofoam on *La Antigua Guatemala*. (Photograph Fernando Urquizú)



References

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<http://www.authorstream.com/Presentation/nmigiron-164038-el-duroport-en-nuestra-vida-audio-education-ppt-powerpoint/>

Informants

De León, Luis Alberto, 60 years old, artist, painter, and sculptor, member of the neighborhood La Recolección de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, informally interviewed in several occasions around 1982-2010.

Espinoza Folgar, Erick Eduardo, 46 years of age, Business Administrator, member of the neighbor Vista Hermosa zona 15 de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, informally interviewed around 2005-2010.



Illustration 12 and 13, Sculptures of the iconographic event in Styrofoam used to deliver message in a didactic manner inside the original art. (Photograph Guillermo Vásquez G.)



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