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CHICLE AS AN EXPRESSION OF POPULAR ART

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Popular art in Guatemala is far from well researched, it is therefore not uncommon to find expressions of this art, even spectacular ones that are not practically unknown or at least studied. With greater reason, this usually happens in El Peten, an unknown part of the country.

Therefore, we have considered it interesting to write about a cultural manifestation of this department, poorly known not only in Guatemala but also in its own department. There are many reasons to write about this, firstly because it is only found in a given region which belongs to the exploitation called *chicle* and because it is becoming less and less common to make this work of popular art which is destroyed by its owners, as well as why the time of this expression is relatively short.

We collected this information used for the article in 1960, when we were working on the archaeological site in the Penn Museum. We have several informers, all of them were old *chicleros*, but the most data we were provided by Manuel Soler, and old man, -over 50 years old- who had worked in the entire production area of *chicle* and Santiago Cifuentes, a young man, but with a lot experience in the area.

The *chicle* has been relatively important since the pre-Columbian era in the southern part of Mesoamerica. Offerings have been found, use even today, the Lacandones of the jungles of Chiapas use the offerings for certain ceremonies. The wood of trees that produces latex was also used in pre-Hispanic times for the construction of houses, beams, and lintels of the most important buildings. Some of these buildings are still in fairly good condition because it is some wood is extremely resistant against time and wood-destroying insects. Indirectly, in the modern era, the search for tress of *chicle* has greatly encouraged archeological research in the Maya area to the point that a writer has dedicated his book on that culture, and says “To the tireless consumers of chewing gum... whose persevering demand has made the search for tress of *chicle* increasingly take place in the jungles, giving it a chance that over the years countless Mayan ruins have been discovered” (1). The *chicleros* have discovered new archeological places and have given this information to professional archaeologists.

The manifestation of popular art that we will study below consists in the manufacture of a small mock-up of *chicle* measuring 6 cms long, 5 cms wide, and 2 cms thick. The bars are made of *chicle* named *de primera* or *chicle blanco* and are decorated with birds and flower figures, and other vegetable motifs with colors and framed with geometric motifs. Although we will make a more comprehensive description later, we are interested in making clear that these mock-ups of *chicle* have not been studied in other regions where *chicle* is produced. However, it is known that other expressions of popular art use this raw material.

We know, for example, that the Mexican state of Jalisco, specifically in Talpa makes *chicle* figures that are called *chicle*, as well as in the Mexican state Tabasco, also gets used to make these figures, according to this information that the known archeologist gave, Frans Blom (2). Also in Campeche and Quintana Roo, where the *chicle* of high quality is produced, I have been informed that they make these mock-ups,

(1) Von Hagen, Victor W. **EL MUNDO DE LOS MAYAS**. México Editorial Diana, 1964.

but for you to know there aren't been described.

As we said before, it's been required the use of the *chicle* called *de Primera* or *chicle blanco*, which corresponds to their area of exploitation in Guatemala, a region that goes from Lago de Flores to the north, in the direction to Tikal, Uaxactún, Carmelita, till *Paso de Caballos*, and to the East of the ancient *Fallabón*, now called Melchor de Mencos. The area of *chicle de Segunda* o *Chiquibul* does not provide the raw material required to make the little mock-ups of *chicle*.

The tree of *chicle* which is known in El Petén by the name of *Chicozapote* is a plant very plenty and has characteristics of the rainforest, whose large dimensions and leafy treetop are found everywhere. Its botanical name is *Achras Zapota L.* and there are two types, one of them called *Zapote blanco* already mentioned, and there's another one called *Zapote Colorado*, which corresponds to *Chicle de Segunda*. The distribution region of both types can be appreciated on the map (fig. 1) developed by the North American botanist Cyrus L. Lundell, who points out in a small but significant article that we use strongly in this research the importance of the *chicle* for this area.

The manufacturing process of the *chicle* is strongly related to the *chicle* mock-ups of Petenero popular art, the reason why we will give a brief review of this process is that cross-shaped incisions are made on the tree trunk, and a container of canvas is

(2) Letter from Frans Blom, dated 12 May 1960. In it he told us that, at the home of some elderly people from Tenosique, he had seen a basket of white *chicle* with flowers in colors, as well as a scene in which a *Chicozapote* tree and a *Chiclero* appeared on top of the tree. This type of work is quite similar to that done in Talpa, Jalisco, where small religious images and other varied figures are made. An informant said he saw a small piece of furniture made of gum in the City of Flowers, which was presented to President Carlos Castillo Armas. This activity seems to have been common in the century but has now disappeared.

(3) Lundell, Cyrus Longworth. *Chicle Exploitation in the Sapodilla Forest of the Yucatán Peninsula*. FIELD AND LABORATORY. November 1939, Vol 1. We also used the previous author: THE

VEGETATION OF PETEN, Washington, D.C., Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1937.



FIG. 1

placed in the ground, next to the tree, so that the sap runs through the open slots and is deposited in this container. Each tree normally produces one pound of chewing gum, although there are cases where it can be obtained up to five pounds. The latex obtained is boiled over a slow fire for three to six hours until it begins to make hard when placed in cubic molds which can hold mock-ups of 15 to 30 pounds; between 6 and 16 of these mock-ups, already packed, constitute a mule load, which is the most common means of transport in El Petén. The sap of *chicle* trees should be drained at intervals of not less than 5 years, as otherwise they may die.

It is interesting to know some traits of the personality of the chewing gum cutter, for being the creator of these manifestations of popular art. He is usually a man accustomed to the hard and lonely life of the jungle, where he must survive long periods by his own forces. It's not uncommon to find among these people fugitives

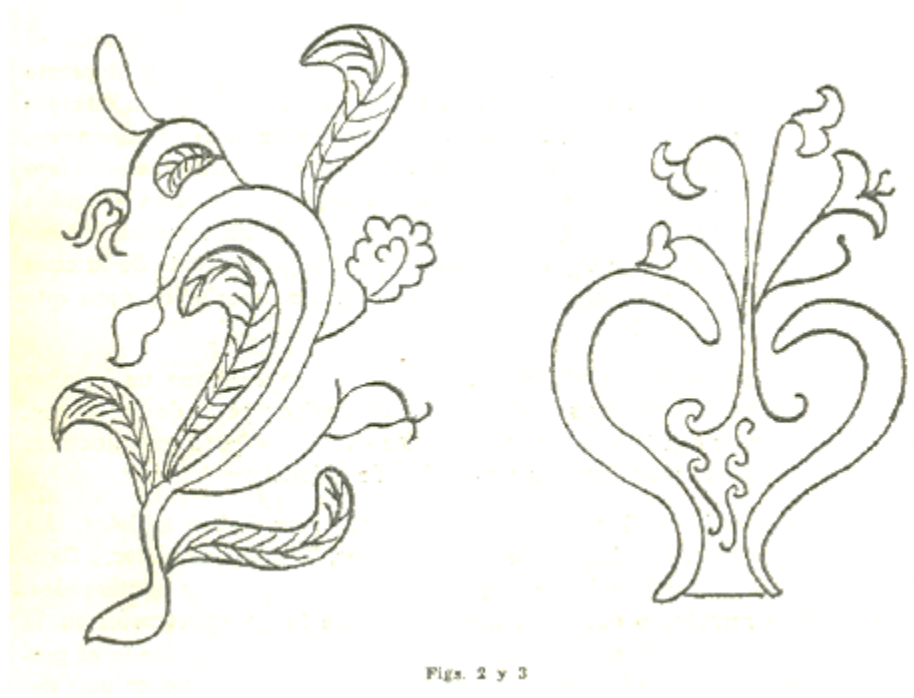
from justice who try to seek isolation but do not suffer the weight of the law. The mowing season and *chicle* extraction season take place in the dry season, from February to June. They usually receive money in advance from the contractor to support their families and buy the necessary equipment. Upon returning from the harvest season, he is given the money that belongs to him, which varies, of course, according to the amount of *chicle* obtained and the price that the same reaches on the market; in a good season and a *chiclero* can earn up to Q. 3000.00. When these gains are obtained, after the privations suffered in the jungle, the enthusiasm of the *chiclero* is manifested by making a series of extravagances characteristic of who has no money and suddenly possesses it with full hands: They use notes to make cigars, buy boxes of perfume to water the front of the bride's house on her birthday or pay several marimbas to play endlessly.

Given the above features, it is not strange that a man with these characteristics has the delicacy to devote part of his time, even buying in advance special dyes to manufacture the so often mentioned mock-ups of *chicle*.

Let's see how these mock-ups are made. In a mock-up made of a soft wood, called *cocolmec* (*Dioscorea bartlettii* Morton), is carved with sharp and pointed instruments, usually knives or razors, the figures that will then appear on the mock-up. The white *chicle* has been prepared beforehand, following the process used to make the large mock-ups; a small amount is boiled over a low heat (4); once it has reached the required consistency, it is placed in a small square mold, with the desired dimensions, and it is a question of obtaining a perfectly smooth surface by rolling a glass bottle over it. Immediately press on the *chicle* mock-up with the tablet made of *cocolmec* wood, thus getting certain sections sunk in, in which small balls of previously colored white *chicle* are applied, that molded by hand, to achieve the designs. The designs we have already mentioned consist of birds, crossed hearts, flowers, and

(9) Some informants has said that only the heat of the hand should be used to prepare "*chicle blanco*".

various plants, all with unusual colors (figs. 2 and 3). These are obtained from several ways.



can be bought in the villages before going into the jungle, coloring or pencils of different colors, whose mines are pulverized and then chewed together with small amounts of gum to impregnate them with the color they want. When they do not carry these dyes with them, they can extract dyes, albeit in a lesser variety, from the vegetables that the forest provides. So, from the botanical, gracious palm that reaches a great height and is located near swamps and water, it takes off a tint of purple tones. Also, from the red stick, you can get red and blue colors. All these colors are usually

called carmine.

The mock-ups, in addition to the colored figures already mentioned, usually carry legends that generally refer to love feelings, since *chicleros* usually make them give

to their girlfriends or wives. However, they are also given away to friends or people of esteem. In some cases, they can be sold to buyers to gift to the desired person.



Fig. 4- Dimensions of the mock-up in centimeters 7x 6.5 x 1.5 of thickness.

They are occasionally given to the children of the family to be used as chewing gum, which in the end is the purpose reserved for these small models. Among the most common legends are: Happy New Year, (fig. 4), Remember, my love, I love you, sweet love, etc. The edges surrounding the model have geometric ornaments, usually in the form of an X or cross, which are done similarly as we noted above, that is, by filling

the sunken sections with colored *chicle*. It is also common to add calligraphic ornaments simply made with colors, without using the colored raw material.

The epilogue for these pieces comes quickly, as we saw before since shortly after receiving and admiring the gift, it begins to be destroyed by fragments of *chicle* that are lustfully chewed.

It is painful to know that this, like many other expressions of art popular in Guatemala, seems to be doomed to disappear, since according to the reports we have, it is no longer customary to make these small mock-ups. If only this short article could serve to make the value of that aesthetic expression felt and kept as curious as a beautiful custom.