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TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA



**SAN CARLOS DE GUATEMALA UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR FOLKLORE STUDIES**

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Guatemala, Central America. University Press.

THE WOODEN CLOWN

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INTRODUCTION

Among the many toys currently available for children's enjoyment, I have chosen "THE CLOWN" because, although its construction is not particularly simple, it leaves an indelible memory in them. They associate it with the circus, which brings them much joy and, due to its movement, an endless array of fantasies. For the father of the family, it is a very low-cost investment, yet it holds immense value for the child.

There are various toys referred to as "clowns," such as one that spins on a wheel, another that rotates on parallel bars, and another resembling a carousel, only instead of horses, there are clowns. However, in this work, my focus is on the "Trapeze Clown," about which I will explain some details below.

MATERIALS

Wood: To make or construct this "Trapeze Clown" or "Bar Clown," wood is preferably used. This wood is of the type called *cajete* (which is used to make boxes where traditional sweets are sold, white pine wood, or "*palo de pique*.)" This wood is fibrous and, for that reason, easy to turn into slats or small boards with a thickness of about three or four millimeters, which is possible thanks to its lack of knots. Additionally, this same wood is prepared in small sticks that are one centimeter thick on each side and about 25 to 30 centimeters long.

Hemp or sack string: This material is also used in the construction or making of the "Trapeze Clown" and is intended to tie its arms and legs and to place it on the bars.

Nails: This is the only mineral material used in the making, as two "one-inch or half-inch nails" are used to join the vertical bars to a smaller horizontal one.

Aniline dyes: This product is used to prepare dyes in various colors, preferably red, blue, yellow, and black, in small quantities, which are used to decorate the clown, as this makes it look more attractive than leaving it "raw" (unpainted).

Tools: A "carpenter's bench" can be used, along with saws, knives, a hammer, and glue.

Usually, a carpenter's bench is not necessary, as a simple table, a "bow" saw, and a small hammer are enough. A small tin basin can be used to prepare one color of aniline dye, another basin for another color, and so on. Since the wood on which the clown's pieces are drawn is very thin, a "bow" saw is not necessary, and a very sharp knife will suffice.

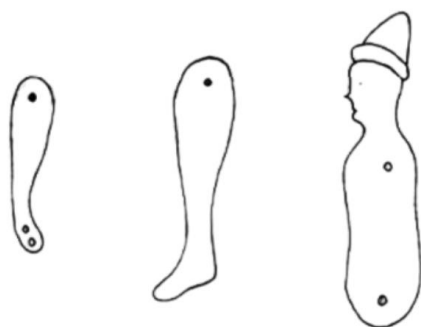
CONSTRUCTION PROCEDURE

Once the slats and small sticks are prepared to make the "clown," the molds for the different parts are then prepared, preferably made of tin, since this material allows for constant use. These molds are traced onto the wooden slats using a pencil. A large number of small sticks and nails (one inch or half an inch) are also ready, along with the final materials, **aniline dye in various colors**.

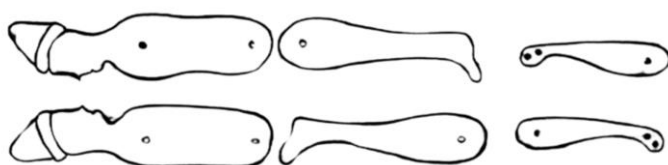
The molds: there are only three, which in the drawing will be identified as: a) the part corresponding to the body; b) the part representing the arm; and c) the part representing the legs. The molds are placed on the wooden slats in such a way that the wood fibers run vertically (from head to toe) to prevent the finished pieces from splitting, which would occur if the fibers ran in a horizontal direction. Additionally, the pieces are arranged on the slats to minimize material waste. Once the outlines are drawn, the cutting of the rounded parts of the figure is done using a knife or saw. These cuts don't need to be perfectly smooth—it's enough to give the impression of a semicircle or a straight cut in small spaces. Since these toys are made in moderate quantities, many pieces (bodies, arms, and legs) are made at once. Then many sticks are prepared to the chosen size, and once there are enough parts, they are assembled one by one until a good production is achieved.

Next, the drawings will explain this process.

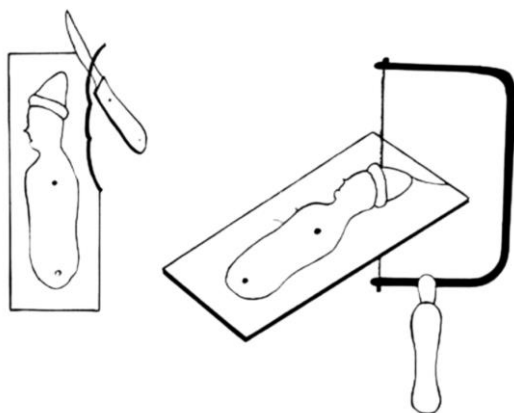
TIN MOLDS



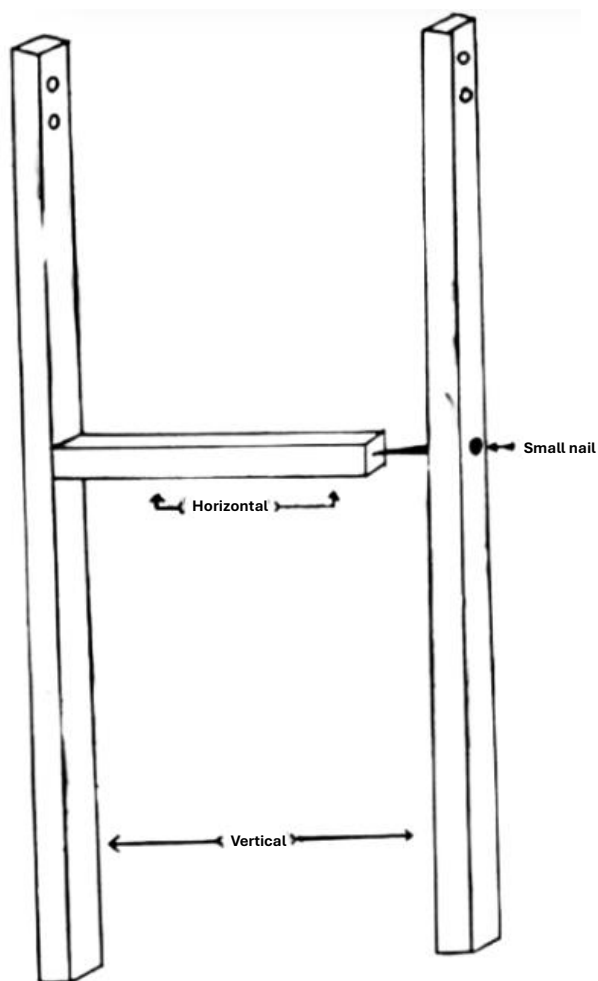
HOW THE MOLDS ARE APPLIED TO THE SLATS



HOW THE CUTTING OF THE THREE MAIN PARTS IS CARRIED OUT



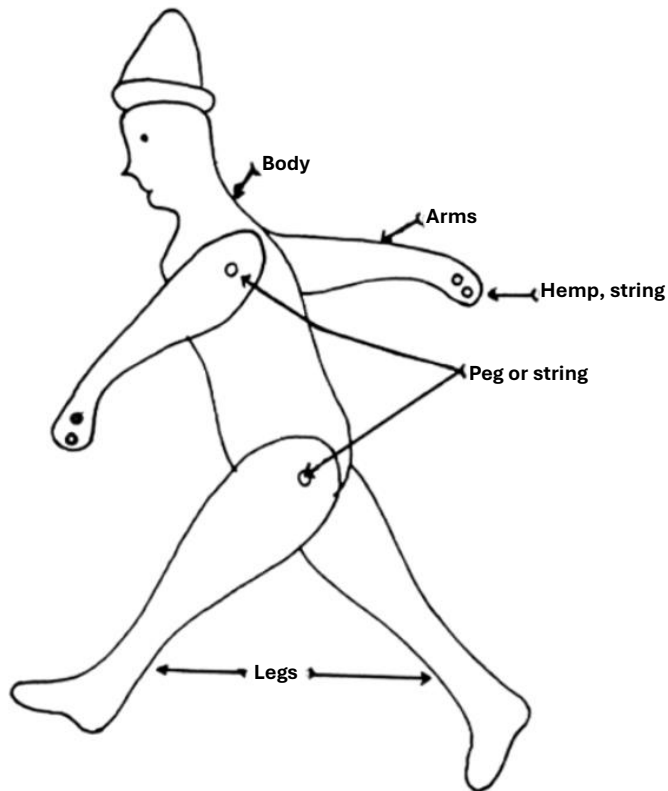
HERE WE PRESENT THE CLOWN'S THREE 'BAR' PIECES.



ASSEMBLY OF THE TRAPEZE CLOWN OR BAR CLOWN

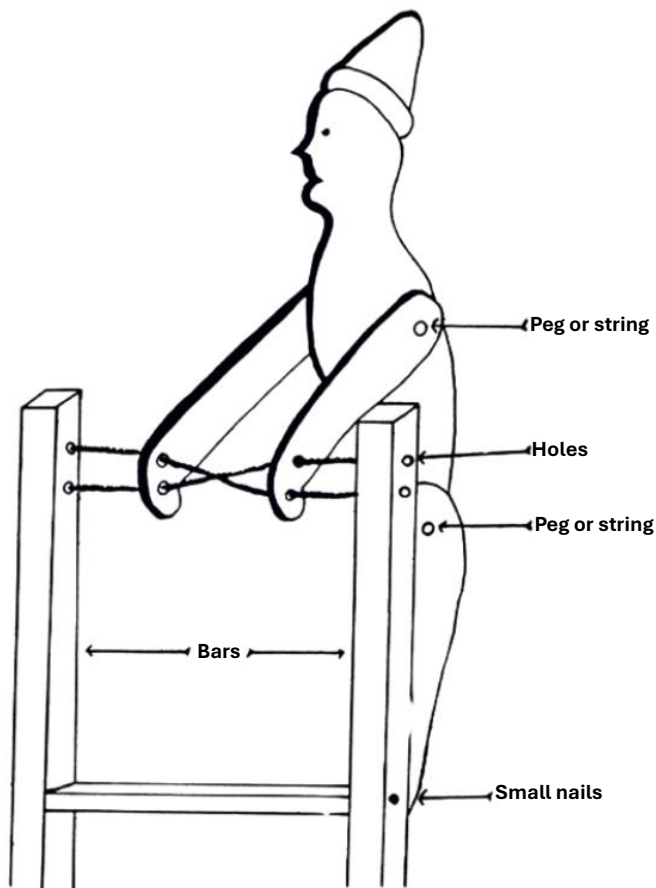
To form the clown, the following are needed: a) one piece that we will call "the body," two upper pieces that will form the "arms," and two final pieces that will form the "legs," and b) two small pieces of hemp or fiber that will be knotted at their ends.

Clown assembled in this way:



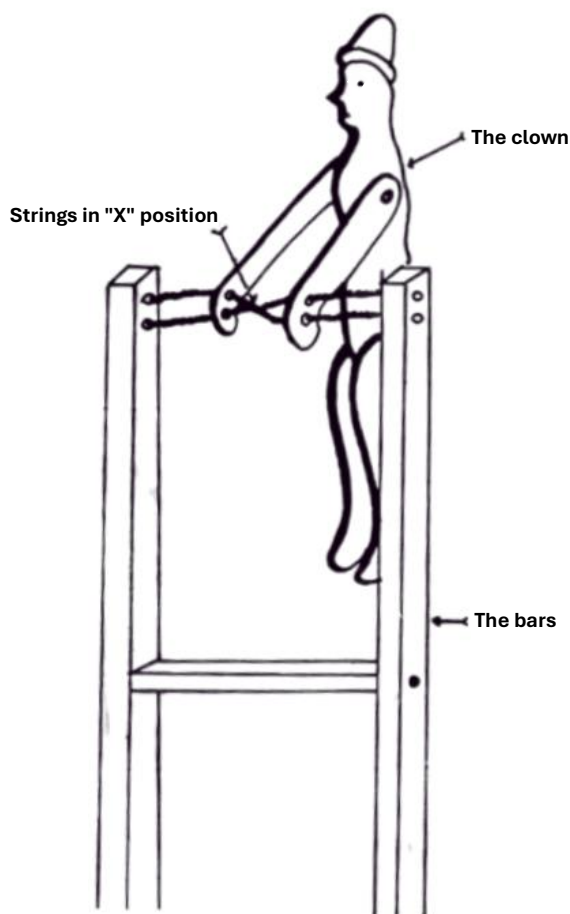
HERE IS THE ASSEMBLY OF THE BARS

As can be seen, the assembly of the bars is a simple and straightforward procedure: it is enough to attach the vertical bars to the ends of the horizontal bar using a small nail at each end. Then, two small holes are drilled at the upper ends of the bars so that the string or hemp can pass through to hold the clown in place.



ASSEMBLY OF THE CLOWN

In the illustration, you can see the assembly of the clown, which is also simple, although it's important to ensure that the strings holding it are crossed. This allows for the movement created by the tension they apply to the parts, enabling the clown to spin. Otherwise, it would never be able to turn from one side to the other.



CLOWN DECORATION

The decoration can be done in two ways: 1. by applying regular paintbrush strokes soaked in the desired color of aniline dye, and 2. by immersion, that is, taking the piece and dipping it into a container with aniline dye.

For decoration, usually a single color is used for the legs (red, blue, green); a single color for the arms (red, blue, green); and finally, a single color for the body (yellow). The body is decorated with touches on the hat and face (the hat in a bright vermilion red; and the face with a small dot to mark the eye, ears are not painted). Some clowns have painted circles all over the outfit.

To operate the toy, it's enough to apply pressure on the lower ends of the bar. This pressure causes the strings that pass through the clown's hands to stretch into a straight position, lifting the clown up. It then spins on its hands and flips to face the opposite direction. Pressing again makes it return to its previous position, although the “crossed” strings always maintain that position.

Its cost is not high, they can be bought very cheaply: ten or fifteen cents, or more, depending on the material used.

According to information I gathered from the people whose data I include in this work, these are made in Amatitlán, in the department of Guatemala, and in the capital of the department of Totonicapán.

INFORMATION GATHERED

Mr. Roberto Palomo Sarti explained in the interview he granted me that: “Back around the year 1920 in this capital city, I often played with a toy we used to call “the bar clown”, and I knew that they were made in Amatlán from a thin wood extracted from the “*cajeta*” tree. He said that this toy was sold painted in bright colors, especially green, red, blue, and yellow, using aniline dyes, and other times it was sold unpainted. This little clown had movable arms and legs, which were held together by a small hemp cord with two knots at the ends to prevent the arms and legs from coming off. From the ends of the arms, it was suspended from a vertical bar using two crossed hemp cords, which were attached at their ends to the bar. The bar was nothing more than an “H” structure loosely nailed, and when pressure was applied to the lower ends of the bar, the hemp cords holding the clown would stretch, causing the clown to move and spin. This motion occurred because the hemp cords holding the clown’s arms were placed in a cross shape, and regardless of which way the clown turned, these cords would always remain in a crossed position. He also remembered a “parallel bar” clown around the year 1925, but he couldn’t provide any details since he doesn’t recall it very well.

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Mr. Pablo Vásquez Quiñónez says he is 47 years old, originally from the city of Quetzaltenango, and works as a shoemaker. From 1935 to 1945, he lived in the departmental capital of Totonicapán, when he was around eleven years old. During those years, he observed that in that town, most people were carpenters scattered across various neighborhoods such as “*Palín*,” “*Cantón Aguas Calientes*,” “*El Calvario*,” “*Cantón Paqui*,” etc. In those small workshops, they made all kinds of furniture, chairs, tables, wardrobes, trunks, etc, and specialized in making wooden and clay toys. There, he saw a toy called “clown,” which was mounted on a kind of “forked frame” and tied with hemp at the hands. It moved its legs and body; they were painted with

aniline dyes in colors like red, brown, yellow, and blue, in other words, the brightest colors. As a child, he played with them, but nowadays he hasn't seen these toys, although he knows they are still made in Totonicapán using pine wood, which is lightweight. He believes they are made in regular quantities in Totonicapán.

Mr. Simón René Sandoval Soler, a resident of Santa María Cauqué in the department of Sacatepéquez, tells me that he is 35 years old, married, and has two children (a boy and a little girl). He has bought his children a variety of toys, especially inexpensive ones, because he believes that expensive toys are abandoned more frequently than simple and cheap ones. That's why, for his children, he looks for affordable, simple toys, especially those that feature bright colors like red, yellow, and blue, in other words, primary colors. For the August festival of the past year, which is celebrated on the 14th, 15th, and 16th of this month, he saw a clown that spins when operated by hand at the small market stalls set up by the Indigenous people in Santa María Cauqué. The clown was made of wood and painted with aniline dyes in the three primary colors. He bought two for ten centavos for his children, and based on their expressions, he could tell they liked the "little clowns," especially because of their spinning movement and the articulation of their arms and legs. He also says he has seen these clowns here in the capital, sold by street vendors during neighborhood festivals or Corpus Christi celebrations, as they are very well known. He remembers that when he was a child, perhaps six years old, he used to play with them, and for that reason, he considers the toy to be very old.

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Mr. José Felino Zarazúa Girón, when interviewed, explains that he is originally from San Martín Jilotepeque in the department of Chimaltenango. He is currently 51 years old; he spent his childhood in his hometown and now works in an office and lives in the capital.

During his childhood, around 42 years ago, his parents used to buy him a toy called *volatín*, made of wood, during the Corpus Christi celebrations at the church and El Calvario of San Martín Jilotepeque, or during the town's patron saint festivities. The *volatín* was simply a wooden clown, painted in bright colors. When operated by hand, it would spin like the volatines (acrobats) in circus trapeze acts. He says he never saw how they were made but remembers clearly that during those celebrations, the *inditos* sold them for a few cents, and his parents would buy them at the market stands. When asked, he replied that since he has no children, he hasn't paid attention to these toys for a long time and does not know whether they are still sold today.

Mr. Ildefonso Orellana y Orellana, originally from Santa Rosa and currently residing in the capital, states that he is 38 years old and has two children: a girl and a boy, aged eleven and ten respectively. He is a merchant dealing in corn, beans, sugar, and other products, which he transports to various places using his pickup truck for business purposes. Mr. Orellana explains that during his many trips, and for the past 25 years, he has occasionally seen in markets a toy called a clown, which moves along wooden bars. It is held together with hemp and loose string, and its arms and legs can move. It spins along the bars doing little "twirls." When he was young, he wanted to buy one, but since he was very poor, he was never able to own one and settled for just watching them in the Santa Rosa market. When his son was younger, he tried to make a similar toy like the one he had seen long ago, and although he managed to build it, he couldn't replicate it exactly, as he couldn't remember some of the details.

He mentions that he has also seen another kind of clown toy that rides on a wheel, which is pushed using a stick, and as the wheel turns, the clown goes up and down. However, he has never been curious enough to find out how these toys are made or where they are manufactured, he has only seen them being sold by *inditos*. He has nothing further to add.

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Mr. José Luis Batres González was interviewed and stated that he is originally from Huehuetenango and lived for a long time in San Miguel Acatán, in the same department. He is 41 years old, married, and has grown children. He has worked as an officer in the Treasury Guard and, because of this, knows many places throughout the country. He told us that many years ago, he came across a very beautiful toy known as the trapeze clown, just like the one he was shown. He said this clown was made entirely of very thin wood with small sticks that were “pressed,” and when doing so, the clown would spin like an acrobat in a circus trapeze. Although he never saw how they were made, he knows they are crafted in Totonicapán. He saw them at several departmental fairs and occasionally bought them to entertain his children. These clowns were painted in bright colors with a paint that was not oil-based.