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NOTES ABOUT THE GUATEMALAN ALTAR-MAKER*

Gonzalo Mejía Ruiz

"(...) the little girl, Natividad Quintuche, (...) glided along a corridor, (...) snooping at the silver flower papers, the starched rag leaves, the tin wings of the angels, the wax and cotton doves, the candelabras, lecterns, palm branches of martyrs, chests, saints wrapped in sheets, wooden sheep, virgins of fine fabrics, all smelling of humidity and incense (...)"

Miguel Ángel Asturias

The Spanish Empire imposed Christianity. The shamans infused the passion for the sacred. From that violence, the Guatemalan popular tradition emerges. The indigenous folklore and the ladino folklore. Both are hybrids, with more or less of a Western or Indian influence.

Both aspects are very rich in terms of religious traditions. In the Ladino world, the popular religious tradition created a profession, the altar-maker, by creating an element: the altar.¹ The theater, for the world, did the same: scenography and stage designer. The altar, as we

¹ It also occurs in the indigenous world but always due to the influence of Ladino groups.

Altar-maker: person in charge of making wooden altars and dressing them for festivities and processions.

know it, is the heir of an essential baroque art: provisional architecture. It is the prolongation in time of those funeral pyres so beloved of Mannerism and Baroque.²

The most ancient mention of an altar that I have found corresponds to the 18th century. On June 13, 1701, the Recollects took possession of their first temple and convent. For this occasion, a procession was made with the Blessed Sacrament from *El Calvario* Church to *La Recolectión* Church. "The City Council was associated with this act, setting up a beautiful altar in the corner of the palace, with great luxury of curtains, flowers and candles, which costed three million maravedises."³

This is already a clear allusion that makes us think of our altars. The period and the spirit coincide with the provisional architecture,

On the other hand, these transitory altarpieces must have been favored by frequent earthquakes. Such catastrophes would make it necessary to celebrate the most solemn ceremonies in richly decorated temporary altars.

2 Don* Ramiro Arujo, altar-maker, informs of the catafalques that until recently were used to arrange in the solemn masses of the deceased, which were prepared by the most renowned altar-makers, and in the composition shows in allegoric figures such as Hope, Faith, etc. are shown. It is inevitable to think of funeral pyres.

3 Quoted from *Libro de Cabildos*, 1701, with Pedro Pérez Valenzuela, *Los Recolectos*, publications from the *Comité de celebraciones* of the second of the Archbishopric of Guatemala, Guatemala, *Tipografía Nacional*, 1953, p. 47. Underlining is mine.

More ancient allusions exist to the altars (or thrones, which is another way of naming them when they are inside of the temple) of a temporary nature. For example, in the 18th century, Friar Francisco Vásquez, in his *Chronicle*, mentions altars in the stories of the Virgin of the Choir and of Loreto. (Friar Francisco Vásquez, *Crónica de la Provincia del Santísimo Nombre de Jesús de Guatemala*, Guatemala, *Tipografía Nacional*, 1937. (Second Edition.). See, for example, p. 229 of volume IV. Nevertheless, it is impossible to determine their appearance or how similar they were to the current altars. However, the kinship between them cannot be denied.

Another reference from the decoration that the altar-maker makes can be consulted in Domingo Juarros, *Compendio de la historia de la Ciudad de Guatemala*, Guatemala, *Tipografía Nacional*, 1936, p. 125. And alludes to the consecration of *Jesús de La Merced* on August 5, 1717: "his ceremony was carried out with extraordinary pomp and display (sic); the entire church was decorated inside and out." See, as also, the decoration of the *San Francisco* temple described by Milla in his novel *Los Nazarenos* (Guatemala, *Tipografía Nacional*, 19335. Second Volume, p. 215) for the "Oath of the Defense of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin." This vow was made by the City and the Kingdom's authorities on August 30, 1654. (Cf. in the *Archivo General de Centro América*, dossier A1.22 file 1508 of the catalog of religious festivities).

The mentioned altar by Pérez Valenzuela suggests a rest (a Corpus Christi altar) for the Eucharistic processions. Cf. Gonzalo Mejía, "El huerto", in *La Semana*, época II, No. 42. (N. 5, p. 25).

Don: commonly used today for addressing senior people in Guatemala, the English variation is Mr.



Altar of Backdrops (*Velación de Jesús de la Merced*. La Merced church, Antigua Guatemala) 1971



Ramiro Araujo, Ornament for the Immaculate Conception (San Francisco, Guatemala City), 1963.

In any case, it was already in *Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción* (official name of Guatemala's city) where the idea took hold with more force.⁴ From there the idea spread throughout the republic.

The altar, when it is made by an altar-maker, is the result of the space-form confrontation. The "aesthetic" way of solving the problem. The altar-maker is an artist.

The altar is made of curtains. Sometimes decorative details or auxiliary elements made of other materials (wood, cardboard, iron, etc.) are added to the structure. And it is usually adorned with images that are subordinated to the center of attention: the venerated image or the Sacrament of the Eucharist itself.

At present, two kinds of altars exist: backdrops and curtains.⁵

The curtain altar is the true "medium" of the altar-maker. The artist's ingenuity must be put to the test to produce effects and solve problems. It responds to the general description above, because, since it is the altar par excellence. The other modalities are variants of this one.⁶

The altar of backdrops is the painter's proper and in it the altar-maker's work is reduced to a minimum. The effect is that of traditional scenography.⁷ In other words, curtains are painted in a such a way that they represent a picture, a "scenario", where the object of veneration is set.⁸ This type of altars still subsists in the interior of the republic. From *Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción* its center was displaced to *Antigua Guatemala* (previous capital of Guatemala), when the ecclesiastical authority prohibited such expression. In *Antigua* there are excellent examples of this trade. Such is the case of the vigil altar of Jesús de la *Merced* on holy Mondays.

4 This is an express concept of the main informant: *Don Ramiro Araujo*.

5 The **altar of backdrops** receives its name from the popular world. The **altar of curtains** is called this way because of the lack of an adequate differential nomenclature. It is obvious that the **altar** par excellence is the one of curtains because it doesn't have a restrictive note in the daily speech, as it happens with the "of backdrops.")

6 See the previously quoted article in No. 42 of *La Semana*. The description of altars mentioned there corresponds, in general, to the altars of curtains. They are **Lenten altars** that are complemented with an orchard.

7 All curtains are figurative. No curtains with abstract content are given. Archbishop Rosell y Arellano prohibited this manifestation -among many others- because of its theatricality.

8 The word "veneration" has the meaning attributed to it by the Second Council of Nicaea.

One more class can be separated, that in which the altar-maker makes use of the painter's art and combines backdrops and curtains. This type corresponds to the Nativity with "scenery", a very well-known example. The backdrop serves to give deepness or to add decorative details.

In short, the altar-maker uses whatever their ingenuity indicates and can be useful to obtain a form, a texture, a color, etc. The altar will vary by its theme (figurative value) and its motif (occasion on which it is made). From there the division that the population uses: altars of Lent, of Corpus Christi, of Nativity, of Saints, etc. Each class has differentiating figurative elements. The art of the altar-maker is in obtaining adequate and aesthetically beautiful prints.

The splendid spirit of the Council of Trent forced to give a pompous appearance to the temple. It was added, with curtains, adornment for the solemn ceremonies.⁹ This can constitute a unit with one of the altars described above, or it can be independent, without an altar to complement it. In Guatemala, the art of curtaining the temples evolved into a characteristic form. It is also the job of the altar-maker. Its objective is to vary the architectural appearance of the temple or to add grace to it.

The curtaining is placed on movable wooden beams (crossbars) that cross the width of the nave. These beams are pulled up and supported by cables or ties to the proper height.

The beams are placed one after the other, separated by equal distances. The rest of the complementary curtains can be supported from the cornices or from the crossbeams themselves. These curtaining are true expressions of ingenuity and audacity in the rhythm and movement of lines. It is a challenge to the altar-maker. Based on nails, folds and creases, it should produce the full effect.

The third area of work of the altar-maker is the processional floats. These are as old as the previous ones,¹⁰ has been maintained and

⁹ See footnote 3. In Vásquez the existence of curtains inside of the temple is suggested, as well as in Juarros y Milla.

¹⁰ This statement is generally valid. The processional floats of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception have always been adorned, since her festivity has manifested from the beginning a marked popular character. The Holy Week processional floats weren't adorned until a few years before the earthquakes of 1917. The "Nazarene" went out under a canopy on a small processional float and over a cushion. This was due to the great respect for the Passion and its images. The first Nazarene that was adorned was of *Candelaria*. Subsequently, the Holy Week processional floats have come to constitute a rich expressive field of the altar-maker. For example, it is still remembered the processional floats of *Jesus de la Merced* of Guatemala City, which was adorned until the death of *Don Gerardo Soto*. The fame that they achieved has no equal.

Alfredo Monge, Altar of the Heart of Jesus (Party of the musicians, La Merced, Guatemala City)



Gerardo Soto, Processional float of the Sacred Heart of Jesús (*Candelaria*, Guatemala City)

enriched until the present day. On a wooden framework a decoration is raised, a portable frame in which the venerated image is placed to be carried in the procession. The decoration will change according to the celebrated saint and the commemorated mystery.

The different expressions of the altar-makers that we can contemplate nowadays are the product of a tradition that goes from the end of the 18th century to the present day. This tradition can be called the metropolitan school¹¹ and its influence reaches the limits of the republic.

At present, a new school is being born: the "*antigüeña*", which has yet to prove its vitality. Its action field is limited, until now, to processional floats. The rest is the domain and influence of the oldest school: the metropolitan.

On the margin of these, there is another movement that maintains close relations with the metropolitan school: the school of backdrops. This has had such famous creators as Friar Angel Cabrera, Franciscan and *Don* Ernesto Bravo. The first one was a sculptor and painter (he sculpted the magnificent pastors of St. Francis of Guatemala, most of them lost nowadays). Before the earthquakes of 17-18 he painted very good backdrops for Good Fridays of Lent, dedicated to the *Jesús de Santa Clara*. The other one was an acclaimed stage designer of Teatro Colón. Together with them was Belisario Prado, who also belonged to the metropolitan school. Nowadays, for example, Eduardo Rogel, "*antigüeño*", still cultivates this art.

The tradition of the metropolitan school is linked to the 18th century, a period in which famous names such as José Serón already appear. He made all the altars sponsored by the City Council and died in 1799. José Serón was succeeded by Marcos Barrera, who opened the 19th century. At the end of that century appears the "Mr." Patrocinio,¹² whose activity lasts until the 20th century. Closer to our times is José María Romero whose characteristic was the excess of luxury and,

¹¹ Grouping into "schools" and naming them is a classification of mine. It is an influence of art history that in this case I consider practical. They are called schools for locating the authors that offer common characteristics: metropolitan and "*antigüeña*". And, a geographical center. But speaking of schools doesn't imply teacher-apprentice relationships. It is an individualization of styles.

¹² Mr. Patrocinio is so old that in the memory of *Don* Ramiro Araujo he appears confused and does not remember the surname. The above names were obtained in the *Archivo General de Centro América*. For José Serón Cf. A1.2.1 5435 file 236 and for Marcos Barrera A1.2.1 5518, file 241, both from religious festivals.



María Romera, Immaculate Conception processional float (Cathedral of Guatemala City)

somewhat, the lack of taste. Both survived the earthquakes of 1917-18.

More modern in their scope, although their work is ahead of 1917, are *Don Alfredo Monge*, with great artistic value and who made very good artificial flowers, and *Don Gerardo Soto*, a true "genius" for the creation of processional floats and the workmanship of flowers. Also, *Don Vicente Hernández*, *Don Belisario Prade*, of exquisite taste.

The metropolitan school is nowadays crowned by the last of the great altar-makers: *Don Ramiro Araujo*, a true innovator in the plastic composition of the ensemble, in the position of sculptures and in the dressing of the images (Note, for example, the influence of the paint in the dressing of the Immaculate Conception), undoubtedly thanks to his condition as a carver.

Very lightly seen, these are some details of a rich vein of popular Ladino tradition in Guatemala and of a trade: the altar-maker. The adornment is a fundamental point in all religious festivities. The main enemy of its survival is the recent movements of the Catholic church.

INFORMANTS:

Ramiro Araujo, altar-maker of *Guarda Viejo*, 60 years old. Information obtained through unscheduled interviews during the years 1965-1975. (Manuscript record).

René Flores, 58-year-old priest, chaplain of *San José*. Unscheduled interviews during the years 1965-1968. (Manuscript record).

Augusto Pineda, firefighter from *la Recolección* neighborhood, 40 years old. Unscheduled interview, 1970-1975. (Manuscript record).

Julio Peralta, office worker of *Guarda Viejo*, 1969-1975, Unscheduled interview. (Manuscript record). 40 years old.

13 A qualifying term with which several informants connoted him: *Ramiro Araujo*, *Augusto Pineda* and *René Flores*.

14 It should be clarified that the altar-maker comes from a different social background. However, they usually belong to the middle classes. As an individual, they acquire an indispensable character and thus a strong social prestige. This, even though his works are anonymous for the majority (to this anonymity the altar owes part of its popular character).

Jorge Estrada, printer from *La Recolectión* neighborhood, 70 years old. Unscheduled interview, 1969-1975. (Manuscript record).



Ramiro Araujo, Immaculate
Conception float (San Francisco,
Guatemala City) 1975