

FILE

EXHIBITION OF THE GUATEMALAN NATIVITY IN ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY

ERNESTO CHINCHILLA AGUILAR

Remarks by Ernesto Chinchilla Aguilar, at the opening ceremony of the Nativity Exhibition that the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala has opened to the public in the Special Exhibition Hall of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Building No. 3, La Aurora.*

Anthropology and History of Guatemala, faithful to its tradition of studying our cultural heritage in an artistic and scientific manner, and now with new inspiration and a desire to bring to the national soul something of its own breath, which seems to touch and wound it with the sense of its own being: is proud to present to the public attending this hall an exhibition of the motifs of the Guatemalan Nativity and a version of that Nativity in its original and authentic form.

As soon as Spain brought its ways of life and thinking to the New World, as soon as the arts of Europe flourished here —the so-called Noble Arts and the Popular Arts that form the daily bread— America became Spain.

And as soon as the rich indigenous stock took root in Western culture and transcended it in spirit and art, Spain was contaminated by the divine breath of the vernacular races and ignited into that precious flower called Hispanic America. Among us, Spain becomes indigenous, like our volcanoes and our lakes, because the cross wounds the landscape and the dome crowns the village, and the hat and the petticoat, the cart and the donkey on our roads, and the flocks of sheep, become brothers of the earth, as much as the cornfields or the chicozapote forests can be.

It is useless to try to separate here what is foreign from across the sea and what is foreign from beyond the historical horizon, since both are so much ours.

Here, historical meaning is lost and artistic meaning is smoothed out. Nationality emerges in all its authenticity and beauty: a colorful heart, strength in its very simplicity and in the depth of its message, a mixture of form and whimsy that confirms our own spiritual youth, so naive at times that the heart that does not become childlike will pass by without understanding the meaning, barely a passing shadow.

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However, it is possible to attempt to distinguish between the Hispanic and indigenous elements of this nativity scene, which is a living example of cultural fusion. It is also a free expression of the creative spirit of our people.

Hispanic is the general setting of the Nativity scene itself, with its portal or manger, its Magi from the East, its paths and sawdust fields.

The indigenous elements are the gourd cymbal, the drum, and the turtle (a musical instrument), which have been preserved for us in the indelible paintings of Bonampak. The indigenous people are the clay whistles and the reminiscences of the ancient art of featherwork that surprise us with the slightest effort. And indigenous is the skill with which the small clay figures have been made, even though it is impossible to find a valid link between these figurines and the archaeological ones.

And it should be noted that our Nativity scene is made of plastic, which is reflected in its form and color, while the literary and musical expressions that usually accompany Christmas celebrations are relatively poor. There is no production of Christmas carols, plays, or mysteries here. Nor has the Christmas theme been exploited by Guatemalan theater, novels, or poetry.

But who and when was able to instill the celebration of the Nativity in the national soul with such force and peculiarities?

Most likely, the simple transplant had its own evolution here, until it acquired, through mere anonymous contributions, its essential characteristics, which have become fixed in objects that are accepted by the natural good taste of our community.

However, some of his biographers attribute the Christmas celebration, insofar as it has permeated the popular soul of Guatemala, to Brother Pedro de Betancourt, perhaps because he was a Servant of God who was especially devoted to the Nativity, even placing the Hospitaller Order, which he founded, under the patronage of Bethlehem.

One of the most modern of these biographers says: "On long evenings, Brother Peter entertained himself by making hills and mountains out of tarred and gathered cloth, which he sprinkled with colored sawdust, giving them green or rocky tones. With glass heated in the fire and cracked by the flames, he made pieces of ice, very natural on that cold night when Jesus was born, barely warmed by the breath of the ox and the mule. Blue or silver paper served as lakes, perhaps the Sea of Tiberias or the Dead Sea, shepherds, who undoubtedly reminded him of his youth on the enchanting island of Tenerife, walked along sandy paths toward the stable to offer their humble gifts to the newborn. On a blue cloth representing the sky, countless stars shone, among which one brighter than the rest stood out, the one that would guide the Three Wise Men to the humble place of worship".

“Contrasting with all this, in a way that was somehow feasible, Indians in bizarre costumes swarmed among crags and forests, high mountains and soft plains, in an anachronistic participation with the children of distant Palestine. It seemed impossible to one who loved the primitive poor of America so tenderly that they should not be there, at the biblical hour, to greet the arrival of the Messiah”.

But it is to be assumed that, in this vivid description, the literature was inspired by the current celebration of the Nativity, and not by any primary source.

Themes such as the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Adoration of the Magi, the Nativity, and the Holy Family were common in Guatemalan sculpture and painting since the 16th century, as they had been in European sculpture and painting during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. And the historian Domingo Juarros, a secular priest of the archbishopric of Guatemala at the end of the colonial period, includes among the main feasts of the Cathedral Church, in first place, the Nativity of Jesus, often accompanied by the foundation of the Aguinaldo Masses, established by Don Francisco Muñóz y Luna with a fund of one thousand eight hundred pesos.

But while the Church celebrates Christmas among us with a simple representation of the Portal, or Nativity scene, and the themes I have already mentioned (the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Adoration of the Magi), and with the so-called Misa de Gallo (Midnight Mass), etc., and while the masters of painting and sculpture are inspired by these same motifs, the modest craftsman, the one who works with clay, for example, takes over all the other simple aspects of the Nativity and even creates them with audacity, perhaps because, during the colonial period, the modest craftsman, the one who works with clay, for example, takes over all the other simple aspects of the Nativity and even creates them with audacity, perhaps because, during the colonial period, the modest craftsman, the one who works with clay, for example, takes over all the other simple aspects of the Nativity and even creates them with audacity, perhaps because, during the colonial era, in some way, the simple amateur was forbidden to produce images intended for public worship. It is worth recalling here the provision of the New Spain Ordinances on painting and sculpture, issued in 1681, which states, among other things: "No Indian may paint any image of saints without having learned the craft to perfection and been examined... and this because of the extreme irreverence caused by the paintings and images they make... but when they do not paint images of saints, they are allowed, without being examined, to paint landscapes on boards with flowers, fruits, animals, birds, Romans, and any other things, as long as they are not images of saints, for which they must be examined and learn this art, so that they may do it perfectly."

But it is understood that this provision does not apply only to Indians, but mainly to Spaniards. It should be noted that it is not purely indigenous artisans who produce this rich and varied range of Nativity objects.

Of course, I am speaking of the Nativity scene of the Guatemalan middle class, the same one that for several decades has been overwhelmed by mass-produced items, first by gold-plated bells, then by strings of colored lights, small silver threads, and plastic objects... until it has been replaced by the most exotic tree in our flora, which is, without a doubt, the Christmas tree.

This is not the sumptuous Nativity scene of wealthy homes, where large sculptures are lined up in a mannered fashion. Nor is it a type of Nativity scene imported directly from Spain, which is beginning to catch on among us.

The Guatemalan Nativity scene is modest but authentic. It is a direct descendant of the one José Milla longs for in his **Cuadros de Costumbres** (Pictures of Customs), with its peculiar and pleasant smell of fruits and flowers, with its water whistles and chinchines, whose absence cannot be replaced.

The animated Nativity scene, with a bullring, puppets, carriages, windmills, and water, all in motion, has now disappeared.

Much of the current Nativity scene in Guatemala is homemade: paper cutouts, fabric skies, cardboard houses... Fresh flowers and fruits serve as decorations: the symmetrical pacaya, the red roosters, and the sumptuous poinsettia; the fragrant peach and strands of chamomile. Moss and paxtles, pine cords and aromatic carpets of the same... Sand and pebbles, seashells, colored sawdust, crushed glass or chayas, as Guatemalans prefer to call them, with an indigenous voice... All this constitutes the framework and landscape on which are placed: small trees made of fiber or pita, with wire stems and clay bases; turkeys made of pine cones, cotton sheep, and a large gathering of shepherds, usually dressed in regional costumes made of rags, paper, clay, or wood... Zibaque and aniline dyes also contribute, as does the spirit of free creation of the people. Not to be missed: the ox and the mule, the three Wise Men, angels and seraphim; tin stars, and, in the background, landscapes on fabric that give the effect of prolonging the nativity scene. The central theme is the Portal or Manger, Saint Joseph, the Virgin Mary, and the Baby Jesus, sometimes only the Baby Jesus.

This is how the Nativity scene remains, mossy and peaceful, like a small village in Guatemala, with its horizon of volcanoes, from December 24 to February 2 at the latest, which is why it is refurbished several times. In the meantime, there is music played on whistles and drums, chinchines and tortugas (musical instruments), lighting from tin lanterns, rockets, tamales, etc.

A review of all these elements shows that most of them come from Verapaz, with its typical Rabinal style in vigorous polychrome stylizations. The capital's crafts contribute a good number of tin and wood objects. Sacatepéquez and Totonicapán contribute clay works... And, to a lesser extent, almost all the other towns in the Republic contribute the rest.

The whistles are made of tin and are known as water whistles, or they are made of clay in the stylized shape of a small duck.

But nothing compares to the magnificent clay shepherds of Sacatepéquez, as expressive as simple fired clay figurines, whether half-painted or already decorated with their naive colors.

It is reasonable to think that decisive protection for these small industries can also be achieved effectively by awakening in Guatemalans a clear awareness of the value of folk arts in our country.

The animator and builder of the Nativity scene you see before you is Guillermo Grajeda Mena, a master of the plastic arts and one of our greatest assets, who spares no effort to capture every expression of the national soul. He takes the small cotton flake between his sure fingers, skilled in modeling bronze and marble. And he does not disregard the precision with which the wire or tin has been twisted, nor does he ignore the unusual joy of the Guatemalan people when they express themselves in the rich colors of clay or in profound pictorial stylization.

Carlos Samayoa Chinchilla welcomes the idea and brings it to life with his frank and friendly enthusiasm. And all the staff at the institute look on with curiosity. What was only a project is injected with life, technical knowledge, and artistic delicacy, until it acquires flesh, bones, and projections.

Allow me to express my deep admiration for those who have gathered these motifs from our Nativity scene and presented them to us with all their artistic grace and the truth of their purity.

It only remains for me to thank you for your presence at this Guatemalan Nativity scene, which the Institute of Anthropology and History is pleased to offer you.