

Mexican lacquers from Guerrero

La laca Mexicana de Guerrero



RMV 4908-107 Gourd / costurero

Mexican lacquers from Guerrero

© Ted J.J. Leyenaar

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Introduction

Between 1975 and 1981 Ted J.J. Leyenaar, at the time curator for Meso and South America at the Dutch National Museum of Ethnology, assembled a collection of lacquers, mostly from the Mexican federal state of Guerrero.

In the centre of this state, at a height of about 1600 m., lies the town of Olinalá, that became renowned for its lacquer work in the 1970s. In the dry season, between November and May, with some effort the small community of Temalacatzingo could be reached from Olinalá. Here also lacquer was produced for the market.

Mexican lacquer – both the material and the production method – is typical of the mestizo culture of Mexico. Technical aspects and shapes that date back to the time before the arrival of the Spaniards in 1521 join hands with the later influences of European motives and shapes.

The lacquer from Guerrero shows a wide range of products, from painted gourds and chests to delightful toys, such as cars and helicopters.



A car (RMV 5069-198) and Benigno Santos showing two helicopters, from Temalacatzingo (RMV 5069-179).

By right it is called a popular craft!

I. The Collection

The lacquer collection from the federal state of Guerrero housed at the National Museum of Ethnology consists of about 225 objects, the vast majority coming from Olinalá and Temalacatzingo (only two objects were manufactured in Acapetlahuaya). The collection is characterized by a great variety of objects, reflecting the typical products of the two lacquering centres.

The lacquer from Olinalá (85 objects) is characterized by bigger and smaller chests (31 pieces), typical lidded gourds (22 pieces), gourd dishes painted with a remarkable decoration of flowers and birds (17 pieces) and trays (5 pieces).

Temalacatzingo (133 objects) is represented by painted gourds (23 pieces) – sometimes shaped like a fish or snake – typical dishes and jars (45 pieces), musical instruments (7 pieces) and toys (7 pieces).

Although the bulk of this collection was gathered by Ted Leyenaar between 1969 and 1981, it also contains a few 19th century pieces, among which a dish from Olinalá that was collected in 1896 by the German researcher Arthur Bäßler (1857-1907).



Dish from Olinalá, collected by Arthur Bäßler in 1896 (RMV 1229-147).

II. The 'Collector'

About my introduction to Mexican lacquers from Guerrero I wrote the following in 2000, the year of my departure as a curator:

From the beginning of my museum career as a curator in 1965 and onward, I have been given the opportunity by the National Museum of Ethnology to combine my research with the collecting of popular arts and crafts and clothing from Meso and South America. Out of that whole area, usually called Latin America, Meso America – roughly Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – was and is my 'favourite field'.

Especially in Mexico, where life – by which I mean all aspects of life, be it in the culinary, musical or popular crafts field – has obtained a very interesting character through the mestizising, this blending of by origin mostly Southern European and Indian elements has created a highly distinct mixed culture. Sometimes the indigenous Indian element, leading back to the prehispanic period, is dominant, then again the European contribution is the greatest. Nowadays the influence of the United States of America, the 'American way of life' must be reckoned with.

The Mexican lacquers had highly fascinated us – my wife and me – from the very beginning of our journeys, in 1969. Both the material and the production method had drawn our attention and in many cases the results struck us as typical of the Mexican mestizo culture.

In October 1975, at the beginning of a half year stay, we visited for the first time the lacquer centre Olinalá in the Mexican federal state of Guerrero. Although etymologically of Indian origin – Olinalá is derived from the Nahuatl (Aztec) Ollinallan, place of movement – the town plan of Olinalá is typical of a 16th century European Renaissance town with straight streets.



Olinalá.

At the time, from Chilapa de Álvarez, a town at a distance of less than 100 km to the southwest of Olinalá, the little town could only be reached by driving for an entire day over non-asphalted roads. The journey lead through an impressive mountainous area to Olinalá, which lies at a height of about 1600 m.



Olinalá and Temalacatzingo on the map.



Olinalá, at a height of 1600 m.

We have been received very hospitably and courteously by the Sánchez family on our journeys, which as far as collecting lacquers from Olinalá and the near Temalacatzingo is concerned, took place between 1975 and 1981. We stayed next to the house of the lacquering family of Estebán Ayala at the 'Casa de Huespedes', the guesthouse of Don Mario Sánchez and his wife Doña Ofelia. Many of their children had left for Mexico City, and only returned in the Holy Week before Easter to spend some days with their parents and have a big family reunion. Ever since the eldest children had left, the rooms, built around a little garden with adobe, sun-dried mud bricks, were used as a guesthouse. Although the water supply could be a huge problem in the dry season – from the end of October until

the beginning of May – with only half an hour of water per day, the Sánchez family managed to keep everything spotless.



Don Mario Sánchez, Doña Ofelia, Pancho, Mario and Tulia sitting.

One of my students, Fokko Kool, as a part of his doctoral exam in Cultural Anthropology, has done research among the lacquer workers of Olinalá and stayed three months at the Sánchez house. During our last long (i.e. five months) stay in Meso America, starting with two months in Guatemala, we followed our documentation and collecting trip in Mexico with a visit to Olinalá, where Fokko Kool had discovered the prehispanic past of the lacquer work, shown by finds of prehispanic mortars and metates, rubbing stones used for grinding mineral powders.



Fokko Kool, with prehispanic rubbing stones and metates (1980).

For an ethnological museum, keeper of material culture, of what the hand of man has made and will yet make, Mexican lacquer is so to speak an obligatory part of the collection. It must be remarked that the museum at present mostly possesses lacquers from Guerrero, from the municipalities of Olinalá, Temalacatzingo and Acapetlahuaya. The lacquers produced in other parts of Mexico, in the federal states of Michoacán en Chiapas, are only a minority. The lacquers from Guerrero show, according to me, a wider range and because of the sense of humour shown in the images especially on the lacquers from Temalacatzingo, it may by right be called a popular craft.

III. Lacquers in Mexico

The term lacquer is applied to the making of a protective layer composed of a mixture of vegetable or animal oils, which in turn is sealed by a layer made of a mineral powder called *tierra*. The oleaginous compound endows the object with its finished, glossy appearance.

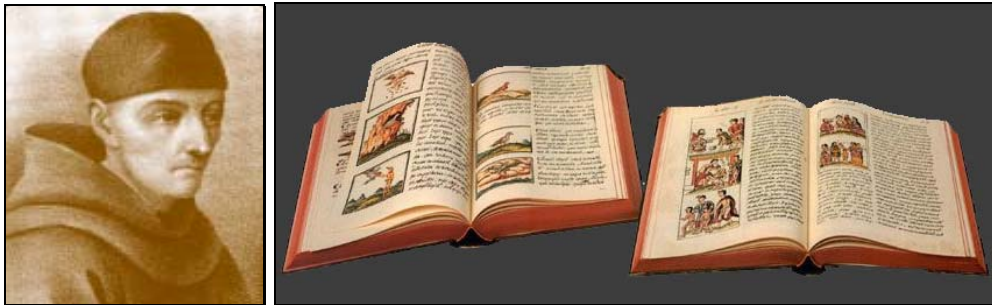
Even before the arrival of the Spaniards, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, lacquer was manufactured on a considerable scale by Mexican and Guatemalan Indians. In fact, the Spaniards encountered many lacquered objects, and around 1540 - less than twenty years after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec state - Sahagún¹, an especially inspired recorder of Indian customs and practices, wrote:

*“Xicalnamacac
in xicalnamacac, ca xicale, xicalnanauhqui, tlanequilo, tlapochquiiotlacani, tlaocac, tlatzotlani, tlacuilo:
in quinamaca pochquioxicali...”*²

This passage can be translated is as follows:

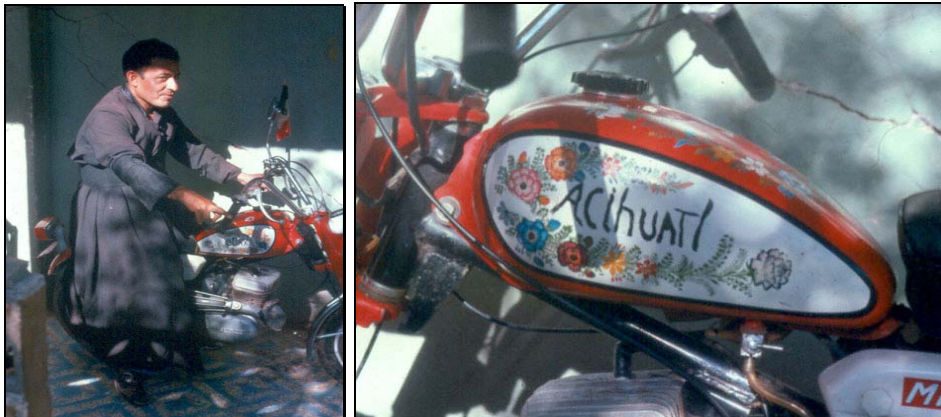
“The seller of gourds (*jícaras*):

The seller of gourds is also the owner of gourds. He stocks the gourds as merchandise, he trades in them; he removes their stalks, rubs oil into them, applies lacquer to them, and paints them; he also sells gourds with engraved designs.”³



A portrait of Fray Bernardino de Ribera (Sahagún, 1500-1590) and two volumes of a facsimile edition of his *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* – also known as *Codex Florentine* – which comprises a description of a seller of gourds in the 21st chapter.

Moreover, archaeological discoveries have established the fact that lacquering was a flourishing craft in Meso America many centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards.⁴ Lacquer was applied especially to gourds and wooden objects, although articles made of onyx and earthenwares were also lacquered. Such work also involved objects associated with the church, and has continued to do so up to the present day, lacquer being applied to marbles or even to metal surfaces, such as the inscription on Father Hector’s motorbike.



Padre Hector on his motor bike with on the fuel tank the lacquered text: *Acihuatl*, “water woman” of Mermaid (Olinalá 1975).

The Spaniards introduced new kinds of article, such as chests supported on legs, termed *baúl* or *arcón*, after their domed covers; trays, or *charolas*; rectangular chests, and large and small containers, the latter being known respectively as *cajas en cajitas*.⁵



Baúles and *jícaras* (left) and a *charola* (right)



Chests on their way to the market (Olinalá 1977)

IV. Lacquers from Guerrero

In Guerrero, one of Mexico's federal states, lacquer continues to be produced in only three places: Acapetlahuaya, Temalacatzingo and Olinalá. Whereas it is only made for local use in the first village, in the other two, Temalacatzingo and Olinalá, the lacquer craft-workers produce it for sale in considerable quantities.



Lacquer from Temalacatzingo on the annual market of Tepalcingo (Morelos), 1976.

Until about 1970, the marketing of such articles could by no means be taken for granted. Lacquers from Olinalá were not in demand, and the craftsmen led a wretched existence. At the beginning of the seventies of the last century, writer Carlos Espejel⁶ started to promote and publicize Guerrero lacquers, especially those made in Olinalá. With the additional help of *Fonart* ('*Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías*', National Trust for the Encouragement of Applied Crafts), a state-supported establishment for promoting popular arts, the lacquer craft-workers of Olinalá were able to transport their wares to Fonart shops in Mexico City, using high-wheeled trucks. Tourists admired and purchased these objects, which also often happened to be easily portable. The inhabitants of Olinalá, who in the 1960s had migrated to Mexico City, now returned, and once more pursued their original craft activity. Thus they benefited from the popularity of their lacquered products, and they have continued to profit from it right up to the present day.

As a consequence of the promotional efforts made by *Fonart*, founded in 1972, Olinalá lacquers have become increasingly popular. Since tourists could easily carry the small containers and gourds (or *cajitas* and *jícaras*), such lacquered pieces were much in demand. Those inhabitants of Olinalá who in the 1960s had migrated to Mexico City, now returned and once more pursued their original craft activity.

Lacquering techniques and lacquers

Depending on place, lacquer has a variety of different names in Mexico. The most commonly used is *laca*, although in Michoacán *maque* is preferred. In Olinalá, a lacquered product is known by an especially local word, *obra*, the work, although *maque* and *laca* are also used.

In Guerrero, lacquers are made using a plant-based oil pressed either from the seeds of the *chia*,⁷ or from a species of linseed, *linaza*, brought from Europe. This is in contrast to other lacquer-producing regions in Mexico and Guatemala, where the oil is extracted from a small insect, a 'scale bug', the scientific name of which is *coccus* or *Ilaveia axin*. In Michoacán, in Mexico, it is called *aje*, while in Rabinal, in Guatemala, the name is *nij*. We know from personal experience that it is not fragrant.

Gourds

Although in pre-Columbian times, objects made of wood were undoubtedly used as bases on which to apply lacquers, the preferred object was the gourd, or *xicalli* in Nahuatl (Nahuatl being the language of the Aztecs and the *lingua franca* or 'English' of Meso America).



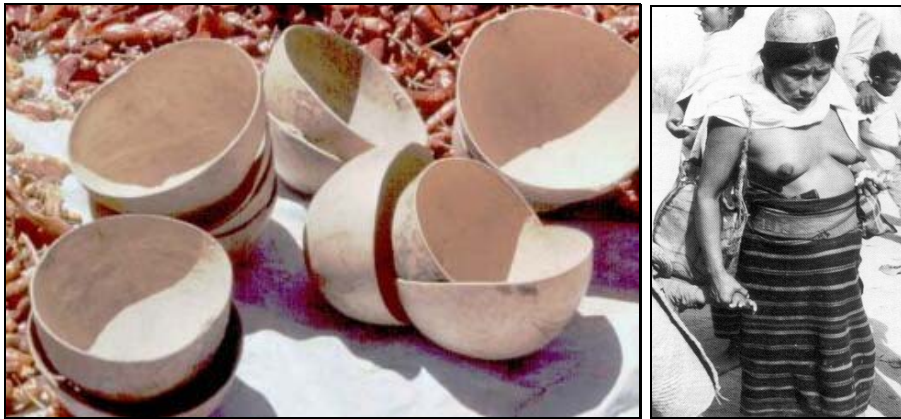
Gourds in all possible shapes

This Nahuatl word, *xicalli* eventually became corrupted into *jícaras* in the Spanish of Mexico and Guatemala. Lacquered *jícaras* are still very popular among the local population. The whole fruit of the gourd can be used for decorative purposes or it can be sliced in two for use as an eating or drinking bowl.



Eating or drinking bowl (RMV 4880-88a).

These bowls are so beautifully lacquered that their functional purposes tend to disappear in favour of their decorative character. The natural or unpainted piece is often used as a covering for the head, protecting the person wearing it from the burning sun.



A stack of unpainted gourds, cut in halves, and a Mixtec woman with a gourd on her head.

Olinalá

In Olinalá the vegetable oil is mixed with *tierras* powders, ground from minerals, or stone fragments. The mineral powders used in Olinalá, up to the present day, are: *tecostle*, derived from the Nahuatl word *tecoztli* for ochre, and which is a yellowish powder; *tesicalte*, a white powder; and *toctel*, derived from Nahuatl *toctli*, and which is a pale greenish-white coloured *tierra*.



Preparation of lacquer: *tesicalte*, adding oil to the powder, the lacquer mixture and the lacquer after a pigment has been added. (foto's: worldexperience.com).

The application of the lacquer layers - or what may better be described as coatings - is almost entirely a woman's occupation, and is carried out in the following manner:

First *chia* or linseed oil is mixed with *tecostle*, an ochre-yellow coloured powder, and often, nowadays, is applied to the surface of the object to be lacquered with the help of a paint brush, although the more old-fashioned manner of using the bare hand certainly still occurs.



Tecastle with green dye, applied by hand.

A mixture, called *tlalpilole*, of white *tesicalte* with a colouring powder is then applied on top of this undercoat using a deer's tail.



Margarita Carillo using a deer's tail (left) and a deer's tail which has been used for lacquering (RMV 5069-111).

With the help of a polished rubbing stone, or *bruñidor*, these two layers are made to adhere tightly to one another.



Margarita Carillo using a rubbing stone (left) and a used rubbing stone (RMV 5069-109).

The *toctel* powder, mixed with a colouring powder, is applied to the object with a cloth. This is repeated several times until the article begins to shine. Thereafter, the article is left to dry for several days, when it is again polished to give it an even greater shine.

Aplicado and rayado

In Olinalá, various techniques are used to decorate this lacquered surface, the most important of which are called *aplicado* and *rayado*. In the *aplicado* technique, the craftsman paints the lacquer with images likely to have been inspired by calendar illustrations depicting European landscapes.

Previously, *aplicado* was known as *dorado*, because a considerable amount of gold paint was used. This last feature has recently been revived, thanks to the influence of Carlos Espejel.



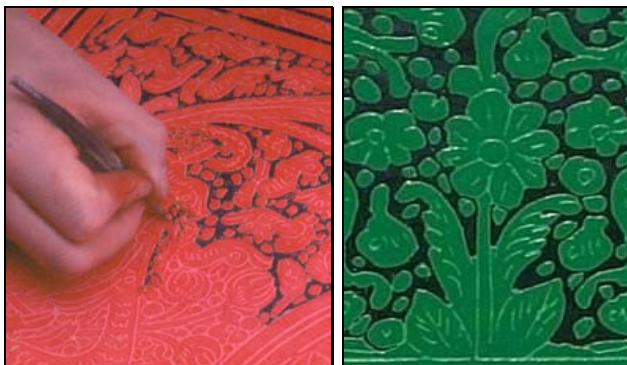
Savás Rendón painting a chest (left) and a set of brushes used for lacquer painting (right).

In the *rayado* technique, a sharp thorn from an *agave* or *huizache* bush⁸ is inserted into a turkey feather and used to initiate the decoration, incising the lacquer surface with the outlines of the design. This task is called *rayar*.



The couple Chucho and Maria Rendón outlining the design, using the *rayado* technique.

Afterwards, that portion of the lacquer layer left without a design, and surrounding the engraved motifs, is removed, a process known as *vaciar*. This enables the underlying layer, usually of a different colour, to be rendered visible, leaving the decoration in relief.



Atelier Juan Rendón: the *rayado*-work becomes visible.

By this means, many kinds of animal may be represented, and also human figures. An unusual illustration of this technique is to be seen in the *cowgirls* (female figures seated on cows) with which Juan Rendón has decorated a *baúl*, - a chest used for storing objects.



Decoration on a *baúl* from Juan Rendón, showing birds, lions and – on the lid – 'cowgirls' (RMV 4880-60).

The *aplicado* and *rayado* techniques are combined in a technique called *punteado*, in which the craftsman paints spots within the spaces left empty between the areas covered with *rayado* engravings, thus giving rise to a kind of pointilism. At the end of the 1970s, this kind of decoration became more fashionable.



A small *baúl* with pointilist decorations (RMV 4908-64).

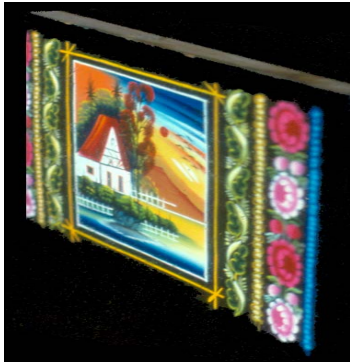
In both techniques, animals and flowers, and also geometrical figures, were employed alike as motifs for decorating the lacquer. Olinaltecs have a taste that favours this filling in of all available gaps, so that we justly speak of a *horror vacui* on observing the results. In *aplicado*, landscapes and city panoramas are also often painted, suggesting a tradition that may go back to the eighteenth century.⁹

Whether or not this is so, the small nineteenth-century *baúl*, purchased at a junk market in Mexico city, is clear evidence of this style.



Small *baúl*, 19th century (RMV 5069-197)

Especially amusing is the fact that calendar illustrations, depicting Alpine or Bavarian scenes, have become a current source of inspiration for lacquer painters, while Oriental motifs are also beginning to be encountered.



(see also RMV 4908-54 of 5069-114)

However, traditional motifs, such as a variety of animals (rabbits for example) and flowers, continue to be painted or “rayardoed”. *Grecas*, the term given in Mexico to meanders, are often painted on chests, *baules*, and are frequently combined with a floral motif. These designs display considerable symmetry.



Grecas on a *jicara* (RMV 4880-61).



The name of the decorator or painter is always mentioned on the lacquer, this being the most important factor promoting its distribution in the larger world. The complete lacquering process - application of the *tierras*, polishing, removal of the undecorated lacquer, and painting - is essentially an activity occupying the whole family. It can properly be described as the occupation of a craft workshop in which the painter or decorator is considered a *primus inter pares*.

The materials on which the lacquer is put, are gourds - *jícaras* - or are made of wood. The gourds grow either on vines (genus *Lagenaria*), like melons, or on trees (genus *Crescentia*).



Gourds of the type *Lagenaria*.



Gourds of the type *Crescentia*.

Owing to their vase-like shape, these arboreal gourds are often called *tecomate*, deriving from the Nahuatl word *tecomatl*.¹⁰



On the left a terracotta *tecomate* (12th – 10th century BC, Mexico, Olmec: Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art), on the right a painted natural *tecomate* (RMV 4908-71).

Other indigenous names for gourds include *guaje* or *bule*, the latter owing to its bottle-like shape. The term *jícaras* is, however, the most generally applied.

Gourds which have been cut open, and thus made into containers with lids, are called *costurero*, a needle-work container, and *polvera*, a powder container, functional descriptions that should be taken with a pinch of salt. In truth, such containers, large and small, are used to store trinkets.



A characteristic bottle-shaped *jicara* (RMV 4984-106a).

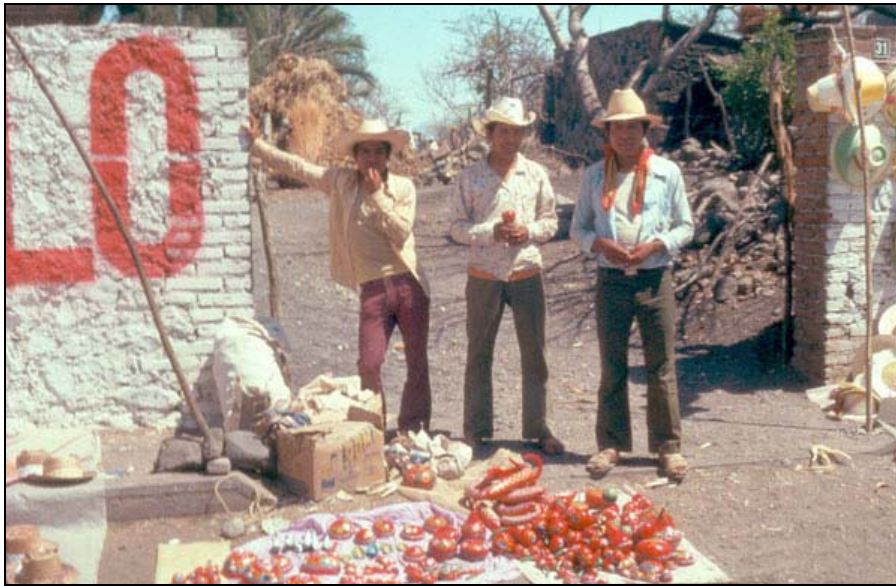
The wood used for lacquering comes from various trees, the most important of which are the *linaloë* (genus *Burseraceae*) and a pine known as *ocote*,¹¹ a word derived from the Nahuatl *ocotl*. The wood of the *linaloë* has a delicious aroma and is harder and more expensive than *ocote* wood. Sometimes, objects made of pine are rubbed with a *linaloë* scent, the odorous object put before the nose of the purchaser, and a higher price obtained for it.



1 Pieces of cut wood left to dry (1); wooden parts are sawed to size and planed (2); building and planing a chest (3); fitting the locks and hinges (4) (photos: *worldexperience.com*).

Temalacatzingo

The popularity of Olinalá lacquer influenced production in the other village in Guerrero where lacquers are made for sale, Temalacatzingo. Lacquer craftsmen from both Olinalá and Temalacatzingo sell their wares over a wide area and for this purpose visit the annual fair held at Tepalcingo in the state of Morelos.

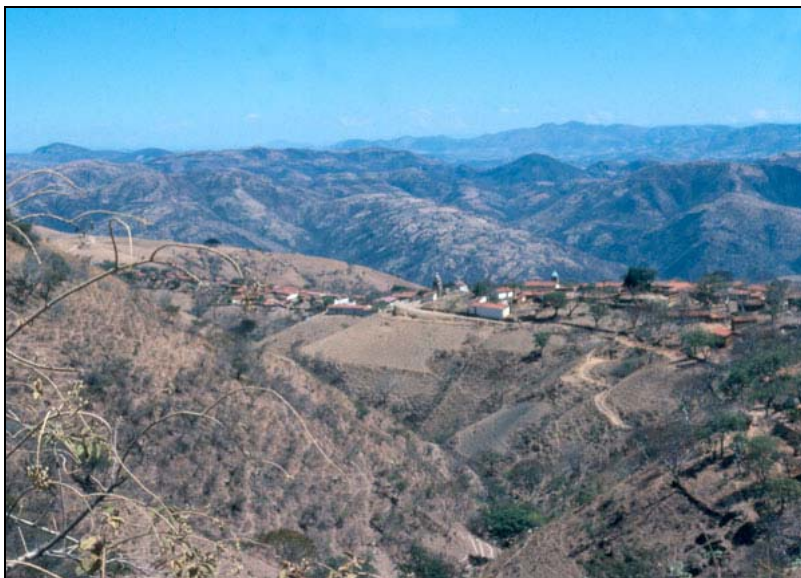


Tepalcingo, annual market: Francisco Rendijo Ibarra – 'Paco' – to his right his cousin Antonio.

This is one of the largest of Mexico's annual fairs and is held in the third week of Lent, before Easter. Although, up til now, we have alluded only to Olinalá as a place of lacquer production, if we should ask about the sources of such lacquers, we would become rather suspicious since we constantly encounter articles less sophisticated and more 'folksy' than those from Olinalá with which we are familiar.

In 1976, during Lent, we visited the annual fair at Tepalcingo. It was here that the origins of the other kind of lacquer were elucidated by Francisco Rendijo Ibarra and his cousin Antonio. To our question "where does it come from", they mentioned Temalacatzingo rather than Olinalá.

Temalacatzingo is Nahuatl for 'In the Place of the Ball-Game Ring', and is a small village reached by car from Olinalá in about an hour during the dry season. In the wet season, roughly from the end of May to the end of October, it can only be reached in a high-wheeled vehicle. The dry-season landscape is remarkably beautiful, with fine panoramic views, at least for the tastes of a lad brought up in the Dutch polders. The road climbs from Olinalá, at about 1600 metres in altitude, to a height of some 1800 metres, only to descend thereafter to Temalacatzingo, which is at about the same height as Olinalá. The unusual situation of Temalacatzingo - lying on a saddle from which the adobe-type housing seems to grow from the earth itself, the roof tiles providing it with a terracotta hue - gives the village an oblong shape uncharacteristic of Mexico.



View of Temalacatzingo.

In Temalacatzingo, where the inhabitants speak both Spanish and Nahuatl, the stone-incised design on a pre-Columbian *temalacatl*, or ballgame ring¹², kept inside the church, shows that in Indian prehistory the place was already inhabited.



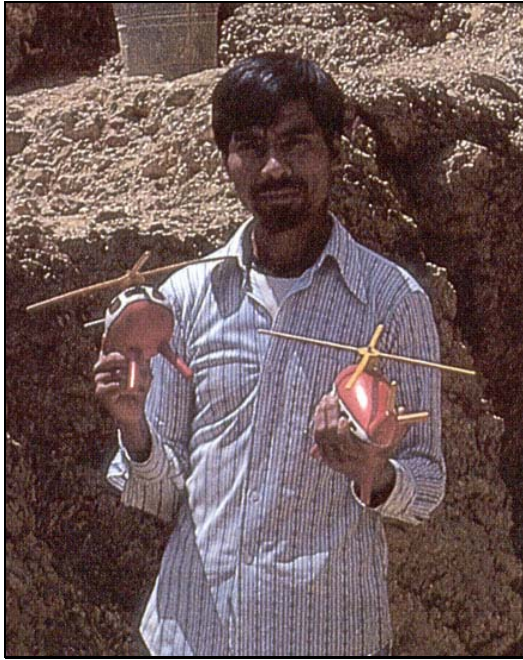
The ballgame ring – *temalacatl* – of Temalacatzingo.

The lacquer craft workers of Temalacatzingo must thus voyage widely in order to sell their wares. For this reason, we encounter them in many parts of Mexico. Like those of Olinalá, they use either oil pressed from *chia* seeds and mixed with mineral powders, or 'eco', a red paint already mixed with oil and purchased retail. In Temalacatzingo, therefore, many lacquers are seen to be painted upon a red background.



Temalacatzingo: unpainted and red lacquered gourds.

This red 'eco' is much more vivid and harsh than the red colour obtained by using reddish soil-based or natural colours mixed with *chia* oil. The lacquers produced in Temalacatzingo have a delightfully folksy character. Besides serpentine gourds, there are also lacquered models of helicopters, buses, cyclists, shoulder bags, and so forth.



Benigno Santos with two helicopters (RMV 5069-179).

As we have said, Temalacatzingo is difficult to reach, there being no public transport serving the village, the result being that people must either have their own transportation or seek lifts from high-wheeled trucks who come to 'Temalá' from Olinalá. Such transportation problems do not affect the other Guerrero village, Acapetlahuaya.

Acapetlahuaya

Acapetlahuaya - 'The Place of the Reed Mat'¹³, and third of the places in Guerrero in which lacquered articles are produced - is situated not far from Teloloapan, on the tarmac road running between Iguala and Ciudad Altamirano. To my knowledge, there are no other places in the state devoted to making lacquers. However, the inhabitants of Acapetlahuaya only produce lacquered articles, such as *jícaras*, for their own use. According to Espejel¹⁴, around 1975 there were no more than six families occupied in making lacquers.



Acapetlahuaya lacquers (RMV 4880-88b)

These are made in the same style as at Olinalá, using *chia* oil mixed with natural [or soil-based] colouring matter, and not the commercial 'eco'. The red colour was often also obtained - at least in the seventies of the last century - from the *cochinilla* insect,¹⁵ this having been already used in pre-Hispanic times.

Since Acapetlahuaya lacquers were not produced for the market, the village is represented in the Museum collection by only a very few pieces, obtained locally from the Martinez family.

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Notes

- ¹ Fray Bernardino de Ribera (Sahagún). Spanish missionary of the Franciscan order, born in Sahagún around the year 1499. Eight years after the fall of Tenochtitlan, Fray Bernardino arrived in New Spain, where he founded and worked in several convents and colleges in different towns. Tlatelolco, Tepeapulco and Mexico City, he gathers invaluable information from Nahuatl elders who came to be known as Sahagún's informants. This information would serve as the basis for his magnum opus called the *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain). Other collections of documents in Nahuatl may be found partially in the Florentine Codex and the Codex Matritense. Modern editions, all of them fragmentary, make evident the enormous labour of the friar to make known the customs and history of the ancient Mexicans.
- ² Sahagún X: 77,78.
- ³ (currently called *rayado*)
- ⁴ Jenkins 1967: 125-138; Stresser-Péan 1971: 590,594
- ⁵ The larger examples, the *cajas*, serve as chests for storing objects, and are often given at marriage by a bridegroom to his bride. It is justly considered one of the most popular products from Olinálá, offered for sale by lacquer craft workers at annual markets held in other regions.
- ⁶ In the 1970s Carlos Espejel was a wellknown writer on the subject of Mexican popular arts.
- ⁷ a plant belonging to the *Salvia* genus
- ⁸ An acacia-like bush, the *Huizache chino* of [Acacia schaffneri](#).
- ⁹ (Kool, 1980: 41)
- ¹⁰ Tecomatl: terracotta or gourd container for a liquid, especially cocoa. Esp. gourd cut in the shape of a pan. From the Aztec tecomate.
- ¹¹ *Pinus oocarpa*.
- ¹² Thanks to Fokko Kool, we were able to locate this ball-game ring, and similarly, by following his suggestions, we should be able to find a second ball-game ring beneath the altar, every ball-game location having two such rings serving as goals during the game. Unfortunately, up to now no archaeological excavation has been attempted in an area that by its very nature should be an archaeologist's feast. However, the difficulties in accessing the place must also have played its part in this.
- ¹³ Acapetlahuaya: El nombre del municipio proviene del náhuatl que quiere decir "Carrizo tendido como petate"
- ¹⁴ Espejel 1978: 68
- ¹⁵ Cochineal (*Coccus cacti* or *Dactylopius coccus*) is a scale insect in the order of Homoptera, indigenous to Mexico. A parasite, it lives primarily on the prickly pear cactus by feeding on moisture in its leaves. Cochineal is also the name given to the crimson or carmine coloured dye made from the dried bodies of the females. Because a lot of cochineal is necessary to obtain one kilo of carmine dye, nowadays usually an artificial dye is used, made from coal.