

PICTORIAL STATE OF THE CULTURE REPRESENTATIONS
IN TEPOZTLÁN, MORELOS

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In her essay on “Pictorial Documents and Visual Thinking in Post-Conquest Mexico” Elizabeth Hill Boone (1998) concluded “to put it simply, [after the Conquest] the Nahuas continued to think in visual terms and to express ideas pictorially.” This is still very much the case in the formerly Nahuatl-speaking town of Tepoztlán. Indeed, the practice of presenting visual messages in public ritual context has recently intensified and constitutes an aspect of Tepoztecan efforts to sanctify, communicate and perpetuate statements about the value of Tepoztecan autonomy and the integrity of Tepoztecan culture¹. Two significant but contrasting, forms in which this process occurs, Portadas de Semillas (Seed Mosaic Murals) and painted banners produced for Carnival, form the subject of this essay.

Tepoztlán occupies a significant place in the history of anthropology in Mexico, for it was in 1926 that Robert Redfield (1930) undertook there the first ethnographic study of a Mexican community, and it was there, commencing in the early 1940s, that Oscar Lewis (1951) produced the first restudy of a community previously studied by an anthropologist. In 1982, Lomnitz-Adler published yet another extended ethnographic description, and the flow of anthropological studies of Tepoztlán continues to this day (e.g, Corona 2005, Martin 2005, Perez y Zavala 2005, Stolle-McAllister 2004).

Opened to the surrounding world by its location at the epicenter of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, by requesting a paved road to Cuernavaca, the capitol of the State of Morelos, in 1930 (Waters 1994:197), which connected to the Mexico City-Acapulco highway and by an accelerating inflow of Mexico City weekenders, wealthy retirees, tourists, and New Agers who believe it to be a mystical power center, Tepoztlán nevertheless remains a remarkably cohesive and traditional community.

Attractively situated close to Mexico City, Tepoztlán has repeatedly become the target of entrepreneurs intent on developing its tourist potential - development, as Tepoztecs see it, very much at the expense of their environment and the preservation of their traditions. In each instance, such developers have been driven off. The latest and largest project, promoted by powerful Mexican and transnational corporations and involving a business complex, shopping center, 700 luxury residences each with a swimming pool, and a golf club with a golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus, all to be constructed on illegally obtained Tepoztecán communal lands, was successfully resisted in the so-called "Golf Club War" of 1985. (Rosas 1997, Demesa Padilla 1995, Monroy 1995, Stolle-McAllister 2000 and 2004, Weinberg 2000)

Many factors account for the Tepoztecs' ability to protect the uniqueness of their community and culture. They are, for one thing, skilled politicians. (Martin 2005, Perez y Zavala 2005:154-193) When Cortez conquered Mexico, he encouraged his brother to settle in Tepoztlán. Ever since, Tepoztecs have been dealing face to face with powerful outsiders (Lewis 1951). In fact, it is documented that when the emperor of Mexico first heard rumors of the arrival of strange pale persons on the Veracruz seacoast, he chose the god-like ruler of Tepoztlán to be among those he sent to investigate (Gisele Canto in Lane and Wahrhaftig 2005a)

Another factor is Tepoztecán unity in the face of threat. For generations, the upper four barrios of Tepoztlán have been inhabited by a more Indian and peasant-like folk population² while a more educated entrepreneurial and commercial population is settled in the lower four barrios. Although at times there has been bitter rivalry and blood-drenched feuding between the two, in times of threat, the community unites around a shared mythology, shared symbols, and a shared sense of peoplehood symbolized especially by the legendary feats of el Tepozteco, their heroic local god³. (Stolle-McAllister 2004). In the 19th century, Tepoztlán was known as "the Athens of Morelos", in tribute to the presence of its educated class, largely resident in the lower barrios (Flores Ayala 1998:62-5). This elite - Redfield (Redfield and Singer [1954] (1962) called such people "literati" - at times of crisis are gifted at defining Tepoztecán problems and proposing Tepoztecán solutions through words and, especially, visual images drawn from the corpus of Tepoztecán myth.

Tepoztlán is a place of talking walls (Wahrhaftig 2001) where immediate dangers produce immediate communications in word and image - graffiti, posters, handbills and the like - but then, as in times of lesser emergency, serious discourse, be it in words or pictures, occurs in the context of ritual, using a rhetoric of traditional and, in some cases, ancient and sacred symbols.

There are two periods of ritual intensity in Tepoztlán. One, in the Fall, is the celebration of the town's patron saint on September 8th; the other, in the Spring, is the pre-Lenten celebration of Carnival. Each involves strong visual statements, one in a sacred mode, the other secular, about Tepoztlán's culture. Both invoke the Tepoztecs' strongly held moral values.

THE PORTADA DE SEMILLAS

Each year in the evening of September 7th, the people of Tepoztlán erect a thirty two by twenty foot *portada de semillas* as an offering to the Virgin of the Nativity, Tepoztlán's patron saint. The portada is a giant mosaic mural created by gluing tens of thousands of seeds, one by one, sixty five varieties of them, in their natural colors, to a plywood backing. It is produced by *coatequitl* (communal labor) over a period of several weeks. It will stay in place on the portal leading to the main church throughout the year until the time has come to remove it and commence construction of the next year's portada. It is thus an example of ephemeral art and of art that has become deeply traditional yet is recent, for the first portada de semillas was dedicated in 1991.

The portada is an act of devotion, organized and largely financed by the town's vendors' union. It was originated by vendors in the plaza who felt disrespected as the alleged source of clutter and garbage in the town center and sought to demonstrate their good character through this annual offering. Over a period that, in part, encompassed the "Golf Club War", the portadas have evolved into a deliberate communally supported effort to consolidate and communicate the value of Tepoztlán's traditional culture in the context of the present day world. Each constitutes an annual public visual declaration about the current state of Tepoztlán as measured against the ancient and sacred roots of Tepoztecan culture. The makers are, in effect, analogues to the pre-Colombian *tlacuilo*, "the Aztec pictographic poet, whose wall art draws the past into the present through recourse to reds, blacks, and ochres..."(Campbell 2003:198).

Rafael Carillo who from the very first selected the seeds and supervised their placement described how the first portada came into being in 1991.⁴

We marketplace vendors were a little upset... We met under the trees in the atrium to plan how to organize. We were looked down on. We were considered a negative element that created garbage and disorder. After a year [of our meetings] I proposed that we decorate the archway leading to the church, not all over like now, but with ribbons and plastic figurines. There were four lines of them from the church tower to the top of the arch, very pretty, and very allegoric.

Then, in order not to have to buy so many figurines, we went to the state of Mexico to learn from the people who do arches made from nothing but flowers, and we were successful in doing a complete arch that way. The base was of wood and rice stalks with a layer of *zacate*. It was covered with plastic flowers attached with wire. We couldn't cover the whole thing with flowers, just the major figures.

The first Portada de Semillas, 1991



The first Portada de Semillas. 1991

The first portada, featuring images made from plastic flowers, was crude and featured generalized Mexican Catholic images: the Lamb of God, angels, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus surmounted by the Christian cross.

The 1992 Portada de Semillas



The Portada de Semillas in 1992

In the space of just a year, the design of the portada evolved remarkably and daringly. It is assertively Tepoztecan.

Rafael Carillo recalled that

There was some controversy about whether we should continue. I told them that it was necessary to preserve this tradition. It is something that can...eliminate the

negativity with which we are viewed by those who find us something to laugh at. When they see us doing something beneficial, they aren't going to be so negative about us.

While a Christian cross and the medallion of the Dominican Order remain at the top, purely Mesoamerican and Tepoztecan symbols cover the body of this portada. It depicts, on the bottom of the left side an image of el Tepozteco, Tepoztlán's local god, as painted in codices and a monument which stands at Axitla, the site where el Tepozteco is said to have been conceived and, later, baptized. On the right side there are two rabbits, standing for the literal translation of *ome tochtli*, el Tepozteco's name in Nahuatl. The lower and upper layers are connected by two great Mesoamerican deities, Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli, in the form of serpents.

Alfredo Martínez, who designed this portada recalled,

The second year, we met to plan the work and the guy who did the drawing did not come. They were going to draw the same lamb as the year before, the lamb that is on the priest's altar. 'No problem. I'll draw it'

I wanted to begin to prove to the 'religiosos' the astuteness the intelligence, to see what they would say on returning to what they had killed, what they had buried. I tried to compare the two religions. For me it was important to compare the two. I think they didn't care about it. Nobody told me 'This is good' or 'this is bad' or 'take this out'. The priests didn't intervene.

For me, this is a chance to find out what I feel. I want to put a thermometer into the pueblo to see how they will accept these things. They thought it was very pretty. I liked the comments.

The 1993 Portada de Semillas



The Portada de Semillas in 1993

Each year the Tepoztecan artisans self-consciously strive to surpass the work of the previous year. The 1993 portada introduced two innovations. It was the first to be made of seeds glued to a ply backing, and it initiated the practice of distributing at the time of its dedication a printed program folder explaining the motive for the composition and its symbolism.⁵

Alfredo Martínez recalled that

I had seen work in Metepec, Mexico, near Toluca, in the procession for San Isidro Labrador with ox teams decorated with pictures made of seeds, and even cars and tractors decorated with big ones, but not well defined. I thought that one could take advantage of the range of colors of seeds, but do much more with them, and I noted that sometimes it took a lot of imagination to make out the figures represented [by using flowers].

Rafael Carrillo reflected that

In one meeting, someone said why don't we make a decoration from seeds. I had never seen anything like that at the time, but I said if we are really artisans let's use our ability as artisans to do something like this. There were ten of us who made that decision.

This work fulfilled me. I began to identify personally with the seeds. I remembered anew my childhood when I made seed necklaces [to sell in the market]. Now I see that seeds have something magnetic, something special. All of them, once they are glued down, invite you to touch them. I saw how we could play with the colors and the forms.

This portada strikes an equation by placing the pre-Conquest indigenous and the post-Conquest Catholic versions of Tepoztecan devotion on an equal footing

Speaking of the design, Alfredo Martinez said

I remember we put the encounter of the two cultures. We put an angel in the center, the shield of the Dominicans, the glyph which represents Tepoztlán, and a Virgin, and the Goddess Mayahuel, and a priest baptizing el Tepozteco, and I began to see that the most elegant was not the Spanish culture, it was the Tepoztecan culture which could communicate more.

At the lower right el Tepozteco is shown as a warrior king along with the monster which according to legend he slew at Xochicalco, freeing Tepoztlán and neighboring kingdoms from a despotic rule. At the bottom left el Tepozteco's baptism by the Dominican friar Domingo de la Asuncion and the monument commemorating that act are shown. Above are corresponding symbols of greater generality: Marian and Dominican on the left, the all-powerful Sun and Tepoztlán's place glyph on the right, all surmounted once again by the Marian symbol and Christian cross.

The program distributed that year suggests a connection between its iconography and the Tepoztecan's potentially rebellious character:

The majority of Tepoztecan are Christians in their own way. We like to share our seeds in green mole sauce and in warm tamales. We are merry and peaceful, but also we are rebels when someone abuses our beliefs, when they wish to manipulate us religiously or politically, when those in power disguise what they are doing with what they are saying.

The 1994 Portada de Semillas

Continuing the progression of increasingly assertive statements about the importance of Tepoztlán's identity, the 1994 Portada de Semillas depicted the legendary feats and struggles of Tepoztlán's ancient god-king, a culture hero who exemplifies ideal Tepoztecan behavior. El Tepozteco's story is depicted as though written in a codex.



The Portada de Semillas in 1994

Rafael Carrillo explained that

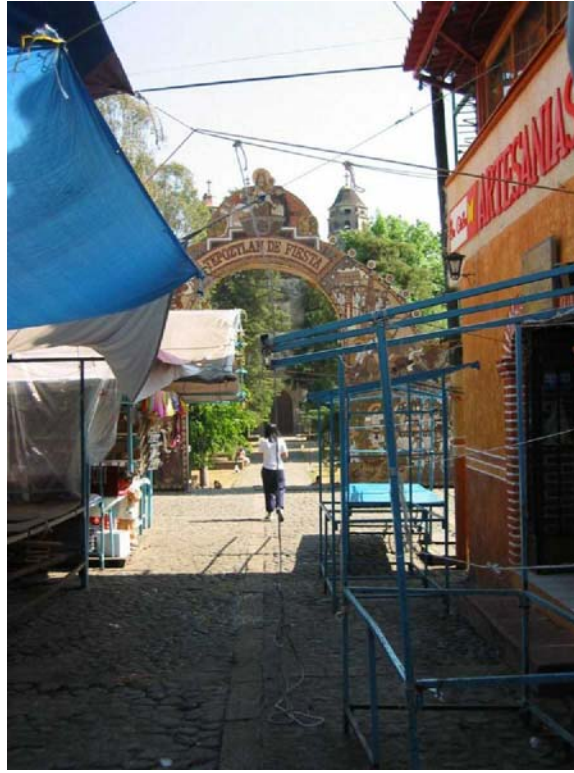
The seed mural we make is a recuperation of a language we have lost, that of writing in codices....We are offering a message with a double purpose, that of communicating and that of recovering this language which we are losing

From Alfredo Martínez's point of view

it was very important to use the means of communication which the very Tepoztecos had used, the glyphs. I ask children about [the portada] and they can interpret the sequence of images. I ask old people about it and they explain it exactly the same way, as though I, the children, and the old people were the same person narrating this story. The language of the codices is alive.

The theme of maintaining and communicating Tepoztecan tradition was underlined by Professor Inocencio Roríguez, a local historian, in the accompanying program.

Through spending time sifting through our cultural roots and our unique manner of being Tepoztecos, we are beginning to remake our history. Hopefully we are not encountering it too late to rescue it, to restore archaeological zones and care for the rock paintings left principally by the Tolteca-chichimecas. If, in 1895, our ancestors who were fewer and with less resources restored the pyramid and with the pieces found there created a museum, today we are more and with greater resources. We must organize to initiate these tasks and reaffirm the identity of our roots. Hopefully we shall not be conquered, as some have been, by violence, egoism, the desire for power and money. We do not reject foreign culture, but more so do we feel our own. We are not closed to receiving influences from the cultures of today; they will aid us in understanding ourselves and communicating better as a community, and will enrich our own as well.



The portada stands in liminal space

One might be tempted to say that in these four years, the balance of the portada's meaning has shifted from Catholic devotion to indigenous contentiousness, but that is far too simple a proposition. Just as Tepoztlán lives on a boundary between tradition and postmodernity, so too does the portada which, placed as it is on the liminal space of the arch marking the boundary between the secular market plaza and the sacred churchyard, mediates between ancient precedents and contemporary realities. That this is so became intensely clear in the portadas situated during the years of resistance to the Golf Club project.

The Portada de Semillas in 1995

During their resistance to the imposition of an unwanted Golf Club project, Tepoztecan unified and in a process of militant opposition strengthened and reinterpreted their identity⁶. In this process, the legendary feats of el Tepozteco became a metaphor for the soul of Tepoztlán's resistance.

The Golf Club project was no small thing. To be constructed on 463 acres of illegally obtained Tepoztecan communal land, located over the aquifer supplying a town already desperately short of water, consisting of a high tech business park, a shopping center, seven hundred luxury homes each with a swimming pool, a heliport, and a golf club with a course designed by Jack Niclus, the project was backed by the most powerful of national and transnational corporations. While benefiting the ultra rich, the project

promised jobs to Tepoztecan, but as peons making beds and mowing lawns. Worse, Tepoztecan foresaw an onslaught of neighbors who would denigrate their culture and interfere with their traditions.

The legend of el Tepozteco contains a formula for this kind of crisis (Lane and Wahrhaftig 2005a). Historically this region was once dominated by a powerful state centered at Xochicalco. Legend records that when el Tepozteco, abandoned as an infant by his mother and her family and adopted by an elderly and hitherto childless couple, discovered that his adopted father was to be taken to Xochicalco to be eaten by a monster who ruled there, for a diet of old men was part of the tribute Xochicalco demanded, he insisted on going instead. As a result of this courageous substitution, and as a result of a strategy of deception and trickery through which he gained advantage over the monster and slew him, el Tepozteco not only saved his kin, but also freed all the kingdoms of the region. El Tepozteco, as boy-hero and liberator, stands for the ability of astute and courageous folk to overcome the illegitimate demands of powerful external oppressors.



The Portada de Semillas in 1995

In 1995, the legend depicted in 1994 served as a metaphor for Tepoztlán's confrontation with an equally dangerous Xochicalco in the form of the Golf Club project. In a visual retelling of the legend, the events of el Tepozteco's birth and youth are shown on the left. The panel on the right climaxes with his confrontation with the monster of Xochicalco. While on the surface a straightforward retelling of the legend, the accompanying program makes it clear that the portada is a tribute to the Tepoztecan men, women, and children who barricaded their town and barred "foreigners" from interfering with their affairs:

The two knotted serpents of the upper part are watched over by the sun. They descend threateningly, their jaws open, toward the edges of the portada, as symbols of the necessary prudence in the face of the problems concerning the destruction of plants, animals, and our identity which afflict us because of the power, the ambition, and the willfulness of the few. In their agony they are destructive because faced with the birth of new men who are less unjust. The pangs of childbirth spread through all of Mexico and in all social classes. Tepoztlán, being in the center of the nation, is not remote from this

problem. The answer to this dehumanization we wish to share with you in seeds and in colors in this second version of the Legend of Our Grandfather, el Tepozteco, whose dignity, pride, and valor encourages us to continue to be united, to solve our problems through legal means.

With great love and respect for the ancients and for adult Tepoztecans of both sexes, but above all for all the young people and children who at the tolling of the bells of Santa Maria Natividad and at the bursting of rockets in the skies come forth like a single person ready for anything in the defense of their town and their dignity. Thanks to all the social organizations of Morelos and Mexico for their generous assistance. Thanks to the media of Italy, Holland, Switzerland, and the US which have informed the world and detained for now a repression of huge proportions, for El Xochicalcatl is a monster which does not accept justice.

The Portada de Semillas in 1996

In 1996, Tepoztlán was fully in revolt and the portada's retelling of the legend is no longer a matter of metaphor. It has become a militant, specific, bellicose, statement laden with an intense sacred symbolism. On it, once again, the Tepoztecans, unified by their *tlatoani*, a leader who governs by listening to the people, are shown on the left, this time standing in front of their sacred mountains, while on the right, Conquistadores, representing the directors of the Golf Club project bribe the governor of the state of Morelos while their soldiers torture political prisoners. At the top, where Christian symbolism was previously placed, el Tepozteco with war club raised shouts his battle cry.

This portada, carefully composed by Arturo Demesa, adds new elements to the genre's symbolic vocabulary. Horizontally, it is binary, with the good Tepoztecans at the left and the evil "foreigners" at the right. Vertically it is tripartite. Earthly events unfold in the lower layer. El Tepozteco, rising above the root and leafs of a maguey plant, source of *pulque*, the Nahuas' ritual drink, and associated with the feminine force of the goddess Mayahuel, is at the apex of sacred power. Between, the twin serpents are intermediaries between the divine and the human. They twine around eight golden disks bearing animal figures that represent the eight barrios of Tepoztlán, each with its respective symbol, united in the embrace of a shared religion.



The Portada de Semillas in 1996

In the program for 1996, Professor Inocencio Rodríguez titled the portada “Y Seguimos Siendo Tepoztecos (And We Go On Being Tepoztecos) and amidst a scholarly exposition of the portada’s various symbols again associated Tepoztlán with struggles for greater liberty throughout Mexico.

It is the legendary Tepozteco who freed his people from the Lord of Xochicalco. Today it is a collective Tepozteco who says "no" to cheating and to the ambition of the few who concentrate power and money. But this evil is not just in them but also in some Tepoztecos who try to take advantage of this crisis, forgetting the honesty and prudence of the plumed serpent. The people of Tepoztlán along with the rest of the nation live through difficult moments of great definitions and great learning.

The Portada de Semillas in 1997



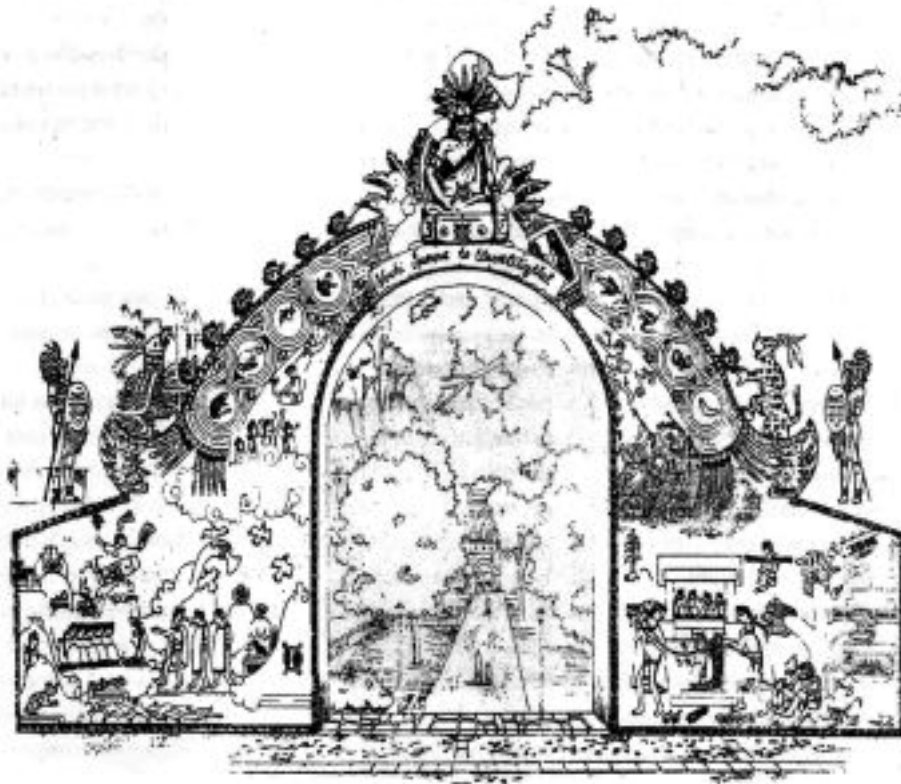
The Portada de Semillas in 1997

1997 was a year of standoff during which the portada reminded Tepozteicans of their devotion to the Virgin, yet el Tepozteco is very much present, at his baptism, on the left, and on the right converting the kings of the four neighboring kingdoms to Christianity in an event annually reenacted in a pageant called “El Reto del Tepozteco.”

The brothers Isidro and Víctor Flores Ayala concluded the program text with:

When we know our history better
When there is light in place of shadow
Then Tepoztlán will be the glory
Of all the legends which amaze us now.

The Portada de Semillas in 1998



The Portada de Semillas in 1998

The Tepoztecan resistance proved successful and the Golf Club project was withdrawn. In the portada of 1998, el Tepozteco celebrates the victory by triumphantly playing his *teponaztle* (slit drum), itself a relic of a previous victorious confrontation in Cuernavaca. Below, the governor’s palace in Cuernavaca is in flames and the governor, a noose around his neck, is taken to be sentenced a panel of judges. Meanwhile, Tepozteicans resume their peaceful life, their barrios united, in their natural and magically powerful environment.

The 1998 program explains that

[A] braided ribbon forming circles around the symbols of the barrios along its length joins at the crest in a joyful expression of joy, serenity, and above all, faith. It reaches the legendary el Tepozteco, seated on the mountain of Tepoztlán, pounding the *teponaztle* which he has just won in his fight against those invaders who tried to go above the heads of the sovereignty and autonomy of the Tepoztecan people. The symbol "*Ollin*" which symbolizes "movement" is engraved on the *teponaztle*, the name which was given to the liberating struggle against the "golf club", because of which this figure is playing the drum in a symbol of mockery against the investors, the bad government, and the traitors who have been defeated. It is also a sound of joy for the people who can feel proud and satisfied in their effort to prevent outsiders from profaning the hills and sacred mountains of Tepoztlán, because of which we have added a scroll with the words "*Nochi Ipampa to tlacatilizcatlal*" (All for our homeland).

Like many events in those years, these portadas “helped to reinforce the importance of [Tepozrtlan’s] cultural core by affirming community members’ dependence on one another and by adding another chapter to long-running narratives concerning justified rebellion and local autonomy” (Stolle-McAllister 2004).

Recent Portadas

With the dramatic issue of the Golf Club project resolved, recent portadas, increasing in complexity and technical perfection each year, have emphasized the value of various aspects of traditional Tepoztecan culture.



The Portada de Semillas in 1999



The Portada de Semillas in 2000

The portada for 1999 extols the strength and value of traditional Tepoztecan social organization, using the making of the portada itself as an example. On the bottom of the right side, just to the right of the pyramid (which is actually a stage prop annually built for the performance of El Reto del Tepozteco), a figure representing Arturo de Mesa is seated, paint brush in hand and a pot of pigment in front of him is drawing the design for the portada. Above Arturo stands a figure representing Rafael Carrillo who is directing the placement of seeds (in baskets) on a plywood backing laid horizontally, just as it is in actuality.

The portada for 2000 makes a statement about how governance should be during the local and national elections in the year of the millennium. In the central circle at the left, candidates from the five political parties are making their campaign speeches. Campaign workers carry the promises along roads and trails to all the communities within the municipality. In the central circle at the right sits the newly elected municipal president with his staff of officials. The workers now have heavy pack baskets as they carry the benefits of good government and promises kept to the various communities. At the top, in front of the all-powerful sun, El Tepozteco, shakes hands with Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, as Tepoztecan tradition takes its rightful place within the larger culture of Mexico.



The Portada de Semillas in 2001



The Portada de Semillas in 2002

“Tepoztlán in fiesta” is the title of the portada for 2001. In a work that even now many of the artisans regard as their finest production, the annual cycle of fiestas (among a people who are regarded as, and regard themselves as, *muy fiesteros*) is depicted. In the program that year, Professor Inocencio Rodriguez expressed the deeper theme that underlies the color and commotion of Tepoztecan fiestas:

This Portada de Semillas (the seed-mosaic archway) of the parish of the Virgin of Nativity, is part of a spiral of traditions which are transformed and refashioned every year. There are voices in the streets which say that "the Tepoztecos are more into fiestas than they are into Catholicism" to the point where sometimes it seems that there aren't enough days for all the fiestas. Tepoztlán is a place as religious as the rest of the country, undergoing a transition in its fiestas, beliefs, and customs from agrarian to urban, from a medieval syncretism with prehispanic elements to capitalistic ones, in order to arrive, perhaps, someday at the simple essentials of human thought, with awareness of their own self consciousness and of nature, for both are united in life on earth.

A relatively simple portada contrasting the processions of the prehispanic past with the processions characteristic of Tepoztecan Catholic ritual was produced for the year 2002.



The Portada de Semillas in 2003

The year 2003 marked the tenth year of fashioning portadas from seeds and the tenth portada designed by Arturo DeMesa. The portada of that year celebrated that anniversary, recognizing the fact that in a decade the portadas evolved from their crude folk art beginnings to national recognition as a fine art, a commissioned full size specimen of which now resides in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.



The Portada de Semillas in 2004

The portada of 2004 returns audaciously to the theme of the parity of Tepoztlán's prehispanic practices and post-Conquest Catholicism, the mutual practice being a blood offering. On the left an Aztec priest offers a beating human heart to the sun while on the right the a Catholic priest offers the sacrament of communion.

In the sequences of images reproduced here, one can trace the invention or perhaps reinvention of a visual rhetoric with a basic vocabulary of symbolic elements: the seeming opposition of past and present unified and reconciled within a single structure, the binding force of the Mesoamerican deities that

stand between man and the cosmos, the continual presence of a supreme power, be it in the form of the Sun, of the Cross, of the Virgin, or of el Tepozteco who, after all, is the son of Ehecatl, the God of Wind. Especially when Tepoztlán is under threat from outside interests, the portadas associate the town's struggle to maintain its autonomy and integrity with the exploits of their hero-god, el Tepozteco. The challenges of the present are thus associated with the victories of the past and the supernatural sanctions that protect the Tepoztecan way of life.

These portadas are a deliberate attempt to reinforce Tepoztecan identity in the face of an ever-increasing intrusion of the globalized world into Tepoztecan autonomy. Serving as an annual visual public "state of the culture" address, they are a reinvention of the ancient Mesoamerican practice of sacralized visual communication on ritual occasions.

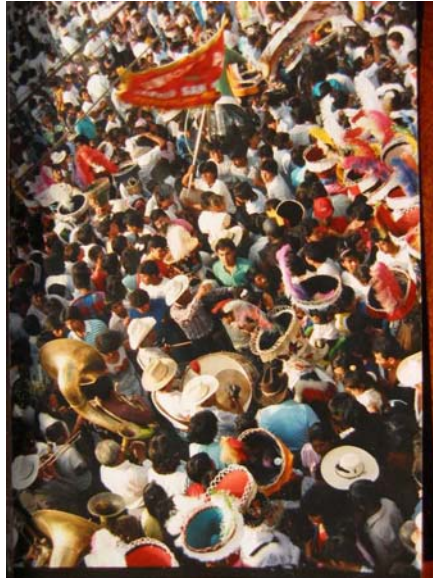
CARNIVAL BANNERS



The face of a Carnival banner

In the Spring, visual messages of a contrasting order appear in the form of complex and barbed compositions that comment satirically on the events of the year, burlesquing the foibles, and sometimes the crimes, of public officials.

The pre-Lenten celebration of Carnival appeared in Morelos towards the end of the 18th century and in Tepoztlán, has grown in scale and intensity ever since (Rodríguez 2001). During Carnival, *comparsas* (dance groups) of *chinelos* (robed and masked dancers with a unique headdress) appear. Each *comparsa* parades into the public arena accompanied by its own band and preceded by a banner, painted new each year and hidden until unveiled on the second day of Carnival. There are presently four *comparsas* based in San Miguel, Santo Domingo, Santa Cruz, and La Santísima, the four lower barrios of Tepoztlán. Their banners are full of caricatures, hidden visual jokes, and, quite often, rude critiques. The themes expressed generally fall into one of four categories: images of cooperation, of competition, of social criticism, of memorials.⁷



The band, banner, and Chinelos of a Carnival comparsa are vitually lost among the multitude of Celebrants

Images of cooperation

When under threat, as was especially the case during the resistance to the Golf Club project, Tepoztecanas unite, as a people, as individuals, and as a congeries of barrios. At such times, Carnival banners reflect the barrios cooperating towards a common cause.



Artist: Arturo Demesa, Barrio Sto. Domingo

During the resistance to the Golf Club project, Tepoztecanas occupied the town hall, barricaded the town, established an independent government, and repelled attacks by state riot police intent on retaking the hall. In this banner from Barrio Santo Domingo, the barrios are united in front of the town hall, each barrio represented by its respective animal or plant symbol. They are led by a king-like frog (the symbol of Barrio Santo Domingo). They have stoned the riot police to the dismay of a would be golf player who

is surrendering. In the background, the church bells are tolling to summon citizens to defend the barricades⁸.



Artist: Luis Strempler, Barrio San Miguel

In 1993, Tepoztecos defeated a project to tunnel a scenic railway for tourists through their sacred mountains. In this image, the barrios, led by the lizard of Barrio San Miguel, cooperate to dump the train into a trashcan.

Images of Competition



Artist: Luis Strempler, Barrio San Miguel

In 1990, there was a campaign against alcoholism in Tepoztlán. In Barrio San Miguel's banner that year, the lizard (the symbol of that barrio) behaving properly remains sober and dances in his elegant chinelo costume while the degenerate animals representing the other barrios are very drunk and pass out. Illustrating the rivalry between Barrio San Miguel and Barrio Santo Domingo ("the frogs"), this artist never missed an opportunity to poke fun at the frog by showing it farting.



Artist: Melitón Villamil, Barrio Santa Cruz

The chinelos of Santa Cruz, a barrio of proud artisans, formerly danced with the *comparsa* from Barrio Santo Domingo, but concluding that Santo Domingo was “in it for the money”, they broke away and, to the great displeasure of the *comparsa* in Santo Domingo, formed a *comparsa* of their own. Here they dance with friends (one of them an obvious caricature of a local figure) from other barrios and wave a banner reading “Us? Purely for Pleasure. Fuck it!” to express their view of those who celebrate for lucre.

Imagers of social criticism

Lázaro Rodríguez from Barrio Santo Domingo, elected to a three year term as Tepoztlán’s municipal president, can be instantly recognized by his “Zapata” moustache and his habit of always wearing a peasant’s broad hat and red neckerchief.



Artist: unidentified, barrio La Santísima



Detail of same banner

Toward the end of Lázaro’s term in office, an expensive project to repave the downtown streets remained unfinished. In Barrio La Santísima’s banner, a wounded, bedraggled, exhausted Lázaro sags against an unfinished row of paving blocks, an unfinished excavation and wheelbarrow full of concrete in front of him. Just behind, his fair weather friend, the ring tailed cat from barrio Santa Cruz, his hip pockets stuffed with graft in the form of peso bills, abandons him and a furious and buxom lizard (his mistress?) strides towards him.



Artist: Melitón Villamil, barrio Santa Cruz

“Violencia, no!” reads the inscription at the bottom left of this banner from Barrio Santa Cruz. Near the center, a fountain at the center of the town plaza can be seen. A lizard child and a frog child each in boxing trunks and gloves, are fighting. At the left, under the notes of a Chinelos tune, the ring tail cat of Barrio Santa Cruz and his friend the ant from Barrio La Santísima are happily dancing, but to the right there is a terrified adult lizard, his knees shaking, while a frog with the hat and moustache of President Lázaro hops backward away from the fight and has no idea what to do about it, as indicated by the question mark over his head. In reality, Tepoztlán has a significant youth gang problem and the two most troublesome gangs are in Barrio San Miguel and Barrio Santo Domingo. This banner suggests that the adults in Barrio San Miguel are too intimidated by their children to do anything about the problem and, worse, the municipal president is avoiding having anything to do with it. Exemplifying the kind of barbed joke that may be hidden in these compositions, the painter of this banner commented “Lázaro is a friend and a good man, but you have to admit he is politically immature. That is why I painted him with his pollywog tail still on.”

Memorial images

Luis Strempler painted banners for Barrio San Miguel for twenty two consecutive years. When he died in 2002, the *mayordomos* who are responsible for the barrio’s Carnival celebration met with Rubén Villamil, a young artisan who specializes in the restoration of religious artifacts, and asked him to paint their banner in the style of don Luis, as a tribute to him.



Artist: Rubén Villamil, barrio San Miguel

Don Luis stands at the center with the wings of an angel. In a Chinelo costume, San Miguel’s lizard bids farewell to don Luis. Around them, some of the barrio animal symbols are overwhelmed by grief. The *comparsa*’s band plays, and a trumpet player who died that year is honored with a halo.

Carnival is a time of abandon, of riot, of excess, a time when one can speak that which at other times cannot be spoken. The visual messages of Carnival are humorous, often satirical and biting, and always contemporary. They are, in a uniquely Tepoztecan way, very much in the longstanding tradition of Mexico’s “combat cartoonists” (Barajas 2000). What is more they are multiple, both in the sense that they are displayed by four *comparsas* and also in the sense that on the first day of Carnival the banner from the past year is once again revealed, on the second day the new banner is displayed, and on the last day a *comparsa* may choose to display a final banner, secretly painted during the week, responding to a tweaking received from some other *comparsa*’s bandera. They mark a sort of interbarrio dialogue about the diversities and commonalities of Tepoztecan life.

The contrast between Tepoztlán’s two modes of ritua visual communication is evident:

	PORTADAS	BANNERS
Season	Fall	<u>Spring</u>
Construction	Public and Communal	<u>Private and secret</u>
Scale	Macro	Micro
Location	Fixed	Mobile
Origin	Recent (1991)	Traditional
Modality	Sacred	Secular
Epoch	Mythic	Contemporary

Mood	Solemn	Comic
Theme	Unity	Diversity
Message	Single	Multiple

The visual messages of the portadas in the Fall urge a communal morality through the timeless context of mythic history and religiosity. The visual messages of the banners in the Spring emphasize individual morality and the here and now. Together they remind Tepoztecan of their obligations as a community.

TEPOZTECAN ARTISTS AS LITERATI

A topic for further research has to do with the life histories and characteristics of the artists and artisans who design the portadas and banderas. Though the people of the upper barrios have been long been considered the more traditional population, the creators of the portadas and banners come exclusively from the lower barrios, the barrios associated with commerce and entrepreneurship⁹. It would appear that these advocates for the communication and preservation of Tepoztecan culture come from the seemingly “more acculturated” sector of the population. Two heritages account for this: descent from lineages of artisans and cosmopolitan attitudes emerging from contact with the intelligentsia of Mexico City.

Artisans

The maternal grandfather of Rafael Carrillo was the caretaker of the pyramid of el Tepozteco. It was he who originated the art of carving tiny houses and temples from *pochote* bark, artifacts that now appear by the thousands in the stalls of Tepoztecan souvenir vendors. His brother perfected that craft and everyone in the family carves, each in a distinctive style. As a child of six or seven, Rafael collected beans and *higuerillo* in the countryside with which to make necklaces to sell to tourists. He traces his ability to locate, select, and design with seeds to this childhood experience.

Literati

Many Tepoztecan fled from the 1910 Revolution and sought refuge in Mexico City where they formally organized themselves as a “Colonia Tepozteco”. In 1920 in an atmosphere of “Indigenismo” (Martin 2005:40) they created a society one aim of which was to “devote special attention to the spread of public education to the end that illiteracy no longer exists in Tepoztlán, employing for this result, without prejudice to the perfection of the Castilian language, the Nahuatl or Mexican idiom, an efficacious means of bringing the masses of the people to understand the transcendence of civilization, and, furthermore, to

bring it about that our native tongue be preserved for transmission to the future generations” (Redfield 1926:210). The following year, they issued a newspaper, *El Tepozteco* with the motto: “*Nochi impampa to laatilztlas*”¹⁰. (All for our native land) containing no news, “but only editorial sermons on sobriety, patriotism, and especially on reform in Tepoztlán (Redfield 1926:211). The impact of these ideas within the lower barrios of Tepoztlán was strong, and some members of the Colonia returned to Tepoztlán after the Revolution bringing with them not only connections to the Colonia but also friendships with prominent non-Tepoztecan residents of the capital.

Alfredo Martínez, nationally famous for his carved and painted sculptures and furniture, designed the first three Portadas de Semillas. In his youth in Tepoztlán he knew the famous poet Carlos Pellicer, talked with him about Quetzalcoatl, and ventured into the hills looking for the pyramid of Chimalma (personal communion). Through Pellicer he came to know Dr. Atl, the famous painter and volcanologist and accompanied him on excursions through the countryside. Martínez recalled that

One day he began to talk to me about the *chaneques*...One day when he was drunk he said to me ‘I have seen lots of *chaneques* around here. One day I am going to catch one and I’ll give him to you, but you have to be prepared so I can give him to you’Then one day he said, ‘I am going and I won’t come back’ and he left me some National Savings Bonds, and my mother and I saved them for hard times....and I think that those were the *chaneques*.

Professor Inocencio Rodríguez, now a professor of history in a Mexico City college who maintains his natal residence in Tepoztlán authored virtually all of the explanatory programs distributed at the inaugurations of the various portadas. He, too, was mentored by Carlos Pellicer, who supported his studies in Mexico City and lodged him in his home there from 1967-1972 (Rodríguez Flores 1998:113). Professor Rodríguez is the uncle of Arturo Demesa, designer of all the portadas from 1994 to the present.

These are not the only cases of connection between Tepoztecan artists and artisans, and no doubt further fieldwork will uncover more. It is evident that such persons fit Redfield and Singer’s ([1954] 1962) model of the literati, men of the city who “transform the implicit ‘little traditions’ of the local non-urban cultures into an explicit and systematic ‘great tradition’” (330), carrying forward “into systematic and reflective dimensions an old culture” (332).

To investigate in the future is the question of whether perhaps the flair with which the people of Tepoztlán maintain their tradition of visual communication has to do with the co-existence of “folk” and “literati” in one small place.

Notes

1. I here use “sanctify” as explicated by Roy Rappaport (1999).
2. It was in Tepoztlán that Redfield developed his concept of the folk society as an ideal type.
3. The legend of El Tepozteco, the performance of rites dedicated to him, and his influence as a model of normative Tepoztecan behavior is depicted in the video Lord of the Cormic Mountain: A Defender of His People. (Lane and Wahrhaftig 2005a). For detailed treatment of the legendary life of El Tepozteco, see Brotherston 1999:27-56. For the canon now accepted in Tepoztlán, see González Casanova 1989:209-250
4. Many varieties of these thousands of seeds must be collected anew each year because their colors fade. The making of a portada is shown in the video “The Language of the Seeds: The Seed Portals of Tepoztlán, Mexico” (Lane and Wahrhaftig 2005b). Photographs of all the portadas dedicated between 1991 and 2004 appear on “Las Portadas de Semillas: A Spectacular New Art Form” Anales de Tepoztlán. <http://www.sonoma.edu/anthropoloy/portadas>.
5. The text of all the programs produced from 1991 to 2004 appear on “Las Portadas de Semillas: A Spectacular New Art Form” Anales de Tepoztlán. <http://www.sonoma.edu/anthropoloy/portadas>.
6. Rosas (1995) provides a vivid account of daily life during the period of resistance. Stolle-McAllister (2000) describes the contestation for public space in which participants attempt to plead their case by attempting to resignify public symbols. Curiously, though he deals with a great variety of public performances, including graffiti, he makes no mention of the portadas.
7. One side of a Carnival banner bears the name of the comparsa, as show beneath the title of this section. The other side bears thematic paintings like those illustrated throughout the remainder of this section

8. This banner, a copy of the original, is on permanent in display in the Ex-convento Historical Museum in Tepoztlán.
9. Redfield (1930:68) referred to the people of the upper barrios as *los tontos*, "the 'ignorant' people and to the "shop keepers and artisans" who are "richer, better educated, and more accustomed to city ways" as *los correctos*, "the 'correct' people". .In Redfield's day, as now, the people of the lower barrios manage Carnaval. Although Lewis asserted that "race is not an important factor in Tepoztlán, and racial prejudice hardly exists," he also stated that "many refer to the inhabitants of the smaller and poorer barrios of San Pedro, Los Reyes, and San Sebastián as *indios*" (1951:53).
10. No doubt it is not a coincidence that this motto appears on the 1998 portada.

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