

Osterwald
Elena Osterwald



From Earth

*Modern Art from Traditional
Hispanic Papermaking Roots*

From the Earth: Modern Art from Traditional Hispanic Papermaking Roots

December 3 - 28, 2007

Rhodes Tower, 30 E. Broad Street, Columbus, OH

On a trip to Oaxaca in Southern Mexico, I visited the art paper workshop "Los Artesanos del Taller Arte Papel" where I saw for the first time paper handmade from cotton, local plants and dyed with organic colorants. I followed that visit by attending two one-week seminars at the workshop where, in addition to making handmade paper, I learned the dyeing process with cochineal and native plants, flowers and even soils and minerals. I was fascinated with the organic colors as well as the texture and wrinkles of the paper when it dried after the dyeing process. They opened a whole new scope to my art vision — a world that brought centuries-old methods to the contemporary art scene and built empathy between my upbringing in Mexico and the Hispanic artisans.

I was awakened to a world peopled with artisans who for centuries have labored, and still do, to bring out from common earthly elements brilliant works of art that attest to the richness of their culture. I discovered that there is a world in which by simply using ecologically friendly ingredients and processes we do not need to destroy the environment.

It was then that I came across the grant application invitation published by the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC). I was awarded a grant supported in part by the Ford Foundation and J.P. Morgan Chase for the "creation of a floor installation made of 100% cotton and/or Amate paper, dyed with organic colors using century-old artisan methods to convey the beauty, strength and frailty of the earth."

This project has been a challenge to me as an artist to introduce centuries-old practices into an installation of modern art. But beyond the artistic challenge there is to me, as a person born and raised in Mexico, the emotion and excitement to share the indigenous art values of my fellow countrymen and women. It is my hope that this installation will bring Columbus and Ohio to the forefront of ecological Hispanic Art. What better way, than through dissemination of art, to enrich all cultures and make the world a better place to live in.

Elena Osterwalder, artist



This exhibition was produced with support from the Ohio Building Authority and the Ohio Arts Council's Riffe Gallery.

Final Installation Design

The Floor Installation consists of 475 pieces of Amate dyed paper spread over an area 25 ft long, 9ft wide. It is complemented by more than 100 pieces on the surrounding walls of the main lobby of The Rhodes Tower.

The entire Installation is designed to blend with the granite on the floor and walls of the lobby. Between the floor and the wall installation lies the path of some four thousand people who daily walk through the tower.

The three Wall Installations designed as paper pieces drying on clothesline are made of Amate, cotton and waxed paper, all by-products of the Floor Installation,

Size of the installations:

12 ft x 3½ ft- Amate Paper.

32 ft X 4 ft- Amate, Cotton, Waxed Paper, and Dyed Hemp

8 ft X 7 ft tall Amate, Cotton, Linen Paper





The Media

The installation utilizes Amate (100% hand-made paper from wood bark) and 100% hand-made cotton paper dyed with organic colors. The Otomis, natives of what is now the State of Puebla in Mexico have made and used Amate paper, which they call Amatl, since Pre-Hispanic times. They ascribe to it spiritual and healing properties which transcend its biological nature. Centuries old existing documents attest to the Otomi artisans' skills in working the Amate paper and dyeing it with organic dyes.

Some of the organic dyes used in the Installation Project are:

Cochineal – a parasitic insect that grows on the cactus, known as Nocheztli by the natives or Grana Cochinilla in Spanish. When dried and ground it gives a wide range of colors depending on what it is mixed with: bright red with lime, beautiful Mexican red purple with limestone, purple with alum.



Dried Cochineal Beetles

Indigo, Xiuhquilitl or Hierba Azul from Yucatan mostly known as Maya Blue.

Palo de Campeche (Campeche Wood) from Campeche gives black or navy blue colors.

Turmeric (Carcamo) yellow flowers from different areas gives orange and gold colors.

The dyeing process simply consists in placing the dyes in a given combination in water, which is then brought to a boil to release the color. It is an ecologically friendly process.

The color/texture relationship of the dyed paper gives an image of poetic elegance to the Earth and its natural features of colors and reliefs.



Principal Reference Sources

Colorantes Naturales (Natural Colorants) by Yoshiko Shirata – Ms. Shirata, a Japanese Lady, went to work in Mexico in 1956 as a botanist and anthropologist. Has resided in Mexico ever since. Wrote a comprehensive treatise on the many colorants and different methods of dyeing used by the Mexican natives. One of the few copies of this treatise is kept in the Library of the Anthropological Museum of Mexico City where I was privileged to read it and take notes.

Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva Espana - (General history of the Things of the New Spain) - Tome II, Chapter XI – by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun. Friar Bernardino was one of 12 Franciscan Missionaries from the University of Salamanca who arrived in Mexico soon after the Conquest to convert the natives to Christianity. They took it upon themselves to learn the local language Nahuatl and be able to converse with the natives. Friar Bernardino is the author of the Florentine Codex written in the sixteenth century. The Codex covers – among many other aspects of the lives of the natives - the medicinal plants with pictures, names and uses. The Codex is still extant and available in most good libraries.

Artes de Mexico - (the periodical Mexican Arts). In number 35 of this periodical entitled “Textiles de Oaxaca” (Textiles of Oaxaca) appears an excellent article by Marta Turok on “Trama Natural de Fibras, Gusanos y Caracoles” (Woof of Cloth of Natural Fibers, Worms and Snails). The accompanying photographs show in full colors the colorants used and the cotton fibers dyed in an amazing array of colors.

The Unbroken Thread - Conserving the Textile Traditions of Oaxaca – edited by Kathryn Klein and published in 1997 by the Getty Conservation Institute - Los Angeles. On pages 57 through 71 appears an article by Arie Wallert on “The Analysis of Dyestuffs on Historical Textiles from Mexico”. An excellent overview of the many natural dyes used historically in Mexico with full color photographs and a facsimile of the Florentine Codex.





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Catalog Design and Photography: Todd Yarrington



Elena Osterwalder 2006-2007 NALAC Fine Arts Grant Recipient



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