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From Mesoamerican Codices to Twentieth-Century Otomí Artists' Books: Amate Papers in Rare Book Libraries and Special Collections Departments

Amate, a proto-paper traditionally made from the inner bark of trees from the Moraceae family of flowering plants, has an extensive history with origins in ancient Mesoamerican cultures from the region of present-day Mexico. In the 1500s, Spanish invasion of the region prompted rapid cultural loss and transformation resulting in devastating consequences, including the systematic destruction of Indigenous books. To further suppress Indigenous cultures, Spanish authorities prohibited the production of amate and replaced it with European papers. However, the tradition of creating amate survived, was passed down through generations, and remained significant among Indigenous communities of Mexico. In the twentieth century, amate became a popular substrate for paintings, artists' books, and bookbindings. Because of amate's fragility, uniqueness, and hand-made nature, many rare book libraries and special collections departments own various significant manuscripts and documents composed of it. This article examines amate at ten such collections and provides suggestions for related future outreach and exhibitions. From Mesoamerican codices to twentieth-century Otomi artists' books, amate materials provide opportunities to promote meaningful community engagement, enhance collective expertise, preserve cultural heritage, and enrich researchers' understandings of the book- and paper-making practice in Mesoamerica and Mexico.

Introduction

Amate (Spanish: *papel amate, Nahuatl*: *amatl*) is a proto-paper traditionally made from the inner bark of native trees from the *Moraceae* family of flowering plants, including wild fig and mulberry trees.[1] Amate has an extensive history, with origins in

1. Sidney E. Berger, *Rare Books and Special Collections* (Neal-Schuman, An imprint of the American Library Association, 2014), 81–82. The language spoken in Tenochtitlan and surrounding areas was Nahuatl, an Amerindian language of the Americas. In twenty-first-century Mexico, particularly the central region, this language is spoken by about 1.5 million people.

ancient Mesoamerican cultures from the region of present-day Mexico.[2] In the 1500s, the Spanish invasion of the region prompted rapid cultural change, loss, and transformation resulting in devastating consequences, including the systematic destruction of Indigenous books. To further suppress Indigenous cultures, Spanish authorities prohibited the production of amate and replaced it with imported European papers.[3] However, the tradition of creating amate survived, was passed down through generations, and remained significant among several Indigenous communities of Mexico. In the early twentieth century, amate became a popular substrate for paintings, artists' books, bookbindings, and other works of art.[4] Because of the fragility, uniqueness, and hand-made nature of amate, many rare book libraries and special collections departments own various significant manuscripts and documents composed of it. This article examines amate at eleven such collections, including The Latin American Library at Tulane University, Newberry Library, and the Thomas J. Watson Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; a survey conducted for this article found amate in over one hundred collections worldwide.[5] From Mesoamerican codices to twentieth-century artists' books, amate materials provide opportunities to foster meaningful community interactions, preserve cultural knowledge, and deeply enrich researchers' understandings of pre-Hispanic cultures, languages, and customs.

Amate Production

Although amate is described as "bark paper," several scholars, such as Dr. Sidney E. Berger, categorize it as a "proto-paper." Proto-paper is defined as "a material that is not paper (i.e., it was not produced from macerated and matted fibers) but that looks like and can function like paper."[6] The process of making amate has several steps.[7] Once the inner bark is stripped from the tree, it is boiled until it is pliable.[8] The clumps of string-like fibers are then sorted, with the lighter and darker fibers separated. A stone is used to pound, soften, and flatten the moist fibers to create an even,

2. Both terms—*amate and amatl*—are used in scholarly literature, though the former is more familiar and more commonly used. The Spanish term derives from *amatl*, which refers to both the paper and the tree it came from, a species called *amacuahuitl* (*cuahuitl* means "tree" in Nahuatl).

3. Bodil Christensen, "Bark Paper and Witchcraft in Indian Mexico," *Economic Botany* 17, no. 4 (1963): 360–67, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4252464.

4. Other works of art include drawings, cut-paper figures, and collages. In Indigenous traditional practice, collages are composed of amate cut-out shapes pasted onto an amate substrate.

5. The author acknowledges that, while their survey found amate in over one hundred collections worldwide, this estimate is likely higher, especially considering private collections, museum art collections, and smaller institutions.

6. Sidney E. Berger, *The Dictionary of the Book: A Glossary for Book Collectors, Booksellers, Librarians, and Others*, 2nd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 366.

7. Mustafa Eck, "Watch: Two Thousand Years of Paper Making Continues," Getty News, November 15, 2022, https://www.getty.edu/news/amate-codex-paper-video-aztec-maya-mexico.

8. The bark was soaked for a day or more. In the twentieth century, the fibers were boiled in ash-water or lime water.

thin sheet or strip.[9] Customarily, the stone (Nahuatl: *amahuitequini*) has an "ovoid or rectangular shape with a slot on each side for easier handling."[10] Afterward, the sheets and strips are laid out carefully on a wooden board and set out to dry naturally in the sun and air. The sheets are produced as solid, or "woven" with strips of amate fibers that create an open framework consisting of a pattern (e.g., crisscrossed or circular). The fibers are "woven" by separating vertical strips from each other, with distance between the horizontal strips, as well, to form small holes throughout the sheet. In praxis, amate is created in three colors—a standard light cream, a dark brown (or "chocolate amate"), and "one version mixing light and dark pulps into what is called "marbled amate."[11] Contemporary amate may be dyed in a variety of colors, including pinks, reds, or light blues. In addition to colors, amate is sometimes produced in long strips to create patterns, such as a large circle made from dark- and cream-colored radii extending from the center.

Despite the introduction of European technologies and papers in the colony of New Spain, amate production endured. In his study of *Mexica* and Maya papermakers, Victor Wolfgang Von Hagen included a detailed description of the process of making amate.[12] This description, written by Francisco Hernández de Toledo (ca. 1515–1587), provided insight into similarities between historic and then-contemporary processes of producing amate. Under the orders of Philip II of Spain, Hernández, a naturalist and court physician, embarked on a seven-year expedition to Mexico.[13] During one of his frequent visits to Tepoztlán, he studied Mexica papermaking and the process of manufacturing amate. He wrote:

> To fashion the paper, they cut the larger branches from the tree . . . these are softened in water and allowed to soak all night on the river banks. On the following day, the outer bark is removed and cleaned of its outer crust with rock 'plances' shaped for the purpose, grooved with striations, and with a bunch of willow twigs passed through a hole and twisted for a handle. The bark is beaten out thoroughly with these stone beaters. It is thus rendered pliable. After this it is cut into strips, which are easily joined together by beating the bark again with a smoother stone. They are then polished (by means of a *xicaltetl*—a certain varnish of white stone, upon which was painted or gilded; or a certain smooth stone which served for

9. This was an ancient technique. Paper beaters have been found in many archaeological sites across Mesoamerica. They are often found in households, which indicates that papermaking might have been a household activity.
10. Bodil Christensen and Samuel Martí, *Witchcraft and Pre-Columbian Paper / Brujerías y Papel Precolombino*, 2nd ed. (Ediciones Euroamericanas, 1972), 70.
11. Berger, *Rare Books and Special Collections*, 81–82.
12. Victor Wolfgang Von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers* (J. J. Augustin Publisher, 1943), 36.
13. Von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers*, 35.

> polishing) and so finally fashioned into sheets of two dodrans [18 inches] long and one and one-half dodrans [13.5 inches] wide.[14]

The process of producing amate remains largely unchanged since its Mesoamerican origins, with only a few contemporary adaptations. With Indigenous artisans in Mexico—such as Alfonso García Tellez (Mexican/*Otomí*, active 1970s–80s), Camila Hernández (Otomi, b. 1937), and Marcial Camilo Ayala (*Nahua* [San Agustín Oapan], 1951–2016)—drawing upon millennia-long practices, amate demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of Indigenous paper- and book-making customs in Mexico.[15]

Mesoamerican Origins

Using amate represents an enduring Mesoamerican convention of recording knowledge and conducting ceremonial rites.[16] Tracing back to at least the Classic Period (250–900 CE), Mesoamericans encoded information into books and manuscripts composed of amate.[17] In the pre-Hispanic Basin of Mexico, the Mexica empire controlled a vast expanse. Built on an island in the middle of the western swamps in the shallow Lake Texcoco, the capital, Tenochtitlan—now known as Mexico City—was the "hub of an urban network" and "the cynosure of the [Mexica] empire."[18] To manage this political, economic, and religious center, the imperial administration relied on paper for documentation, communication, and transmission of knowledge.[19] The books and docu-

14. Von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers*, 36.

15. In 1995, the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago hosted the exhibition "The Amate Tradition: Innovation & Dissent in Mexican Art," which showcased sixty contemporary amate paintings created by Nahua artists. See Jonathan D. Amith and Mexican Fine Arts Center–Museum (Chicago), *La Tradición del Amate: Innovación y Protesta en el Arte Mexicano,* Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum; La Casa de las Imágenes, 1995. Further, in 2021, the Museo Nacional de las Culturas Populares in Mexico City hosted the exhibition, *Nzahki. Espíritus de la Milpa*, which showcased ceremonial uses of amate alongside contemporary artists' use of amate as a medium. See "Papel Amate/Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares," *Proceso,* April 2021, https://www.proceso.com.mx/cultura/2021/4/24/papel-amatemuseo-nacional-de-culturas-populares-262670.html, *North American Women Artists of the Twentieth Century: A Biographical Dictionary*, (Taylor & Francis, 2013), and Pierre Déléage, "Les livres d'Alfonso García Téllez" in: *Traverser*, Chantier littéraire, Bois-Colombes: Carnets Livres, 2015: 118–129. (Also: https://pierredeleage.wordpress.com/2015/11/08/les-livres-dalfonso-garcia-tellez/.

16. Residents of Tenochtitlan referred to themselves as "Mexica," rather than "Aztecs."

17. According to scholars, the earliest recorded date of papermaking in Mesoamerica can be traced to the beginning of the first millennia, C. E. The earliest book remains come from the Maya site of Uaxactun. See Nicholas P. Carter and Jeffrey Dobereiner, "Multispectral imaging of an Early Classic Maya codex fragment from Uaxactun, Guatemala," *Antiquity* 90, no. 351 (2016); Hayley Woodward, "The Codex *Xolotl:* The visual discourse of place and history in early colonial Mexico," (PhD diss., Tulane University, 2023), 23, https://library.search.tulane.edu/discovery/delivery/01TUL_INST:Tulane/12440754560006326.

18. Barbara E. Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (University of Texas Press, 2015), 1. Many scholars described Tenochtitlan. See José Luis de Rojas, "De Tenochtitlan a La Ciudad de México," *Mélanges de La Casa de Velázquez* 53, no. 2 (2023): https://doi.org/10.4000/mcv.19643, and *Tenochtitlan: Capital of the Aztec Empire*. (University Press of Florida, 2012); Clementina Battcock and Jhonnatan Alejandro Zavala López, "La Conquista de Tenochtitlan: Multitud de Voces, Visiones y Elaboraciones En Torno a Lo Real," *Korpus 21: Revista de historia yy ciencias sociales* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.22136/korpus2120212; and Leonardo López Luján and Judith Levin, *Tenochtitlán* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

19. Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan*, 1.

ments created in Tenochtitlan were often connected to the management of the empire. They were created with various materials such as animal hide, *maguey* (agave), amate paper, and, later, European paper. After preparing the substrate, scribes, or painter-scribes (Nahuatl: *tlahcuilohqueh*), recorded information using "a complex graphic communication system of heavily standardized drawn forms."[20]

Within the Mexica empire, amate was predominantly used for religious documentation, trial records, annals, calendars, and ceremonial dress.[21] Significantly, it was integral to lists for the tribute system: apart from its expansive trading network, the city of Tenochtitlan required immense quantities of tribute from regions it had conquered; amate was one of the most valued tributes.[22] Imperial administrators kept a record of "precisely written tribute lists" of what was due.[23] For example, the *Codex Mendoza* (ca. 1541),[24] created by sixteenth-century Nahua scribes, specifies that "twenty-four thousand resmas of [amate] are to be brought yearly to the storehouse of the ruler of Tenochtitlan."[25] (fig. 1.)

Further, *Codex Mendoza* identified "forty-two centers of papermaking and records that two cities, Amacoztitlan (literally, *amatl-* [paper], *coztic-* [yellow], *tlan-* [place of], i.e., "Place of the Yellow Paper") and Itzamatitlan (*itztli-* [obsidian], *amatl-* [paper], *tlan-* [place of], i.e., "Place of the Obsidian, or Black, Paper") paid a tribute of nearly half a million sheets of paper every year."[26] Although not composed of amate paper, it is one of the "earliest, most detailed, and most important post-conquest accounts" documenting imperial tribute lists, historical narratives, and practices of daily life among the Mexica.[27]

20. Woodward, "The Codex *Xolotl*," 2. The Nahua scribes were "highly skilled intellectuals, artisans, and priests who were literate and likely multilingual." See "Mesoamerican Painted Manuscripts at the Latin American Library," Tulane University Digital Library, https://library.search.tulane.edu/discovery/collectionDiscovery?vid=01TUL_INST%3ATulane&collectionId=81432618320006326.

21. Beyond historical narratives and cartographies, amate was used in the documentation of "methods of divination, cures for diseases, methods for learning to read the codices, information on plants and animals, paintings recording land ownership, poetry, songs, and agricultural calendars." Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1986). https://ia800301.us.archive.org/16/items/traditionalpape00sand/traditionalpape00sand.pdf.

22. Von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers*, 9.

23. Von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers*, 9.

24. MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1 – Part A (fols. i-ii, 1–72), 'Codex Mendoza': Mexican pictorial manuscript. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/2fea788e-2aa2-4f08-b6d9-648c00486220/.

25. Von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers*, 9. Twenty-four thousand resmas, or rolls, of amate is equivalent to 480,000 sheets of amate.

26. Christensen and Marti, *Witchcraft and Pre-Columbian Paper*, 53. Supplies for amate came from the state of Morelos, and the towns of Cuauhnāhuac (Cuernavaca), Amatitlán, Tepoztlán, Amatlán, Oaxtepec, Yautepec, and Itzamatitlán on the Yautepec River were production centers. Additionally, Amacoztitlán was the first to produce paper in sheets. Omar Arroyo Arriaga, "El Papel de amate," *Artesanías de América*, no. 41–42 (1993): 268–285, http://documentacion.cidap.gob.ec:8080/handle/cidap/872.

27. Daniela Bleichmar, "Painting the Aztec Past in Early Colonial Mexico: Translation and Knowledge Production in the *Codex Mendoza*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2019): 1362–1415, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26897304.

Figure 1. An illustrated catalog of the annual tribute paid by the towns of the empire to the last empire, Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin (Montezuma II, 1466–1520). The catalog includes the amount of amate required as tribute in the lower right corner. Folio 23v of the *Codex Mendoza*, ca. 1541, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1: https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/2fea788e-2aa2-4f08-b6d9-648c00486220/. Photo: © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, CC-BY-NC 4.0.

Apart from recording bureaucratic processes, the Mexica used amate to create documents recording authorized accounts of their history and official cartographies.[28] The *Codex Xolotl* (<1542) is a significant example of "Nahua history-writing and mapmaking."[29] Throughout ten pages of amate, it records "three centuries of migration,

28. Barbara E. Mundy, "Books in the Contact Zone: Between Amatl Papers and the Printing Press, Mexico, 1500–1600," The Sol M. and Mary Ann O'Brian Malkin Lecture, June 23, 2023, posted November 13, 2023, by Rare Book School, YouTube, 56 min., 42 sec., https://youtu.be/isE9vJbLA34?si=YbbsyZ6O4kvLZj0x. In many cases, historical annals were set along long strips of paper called Tira, which were "long strips of amate paper covered with gesso upon which figures were set."

29. Mexicain 1-10. Codex Xolotl. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Paris. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b103038228. Woodward, "The Codex Xolotl," 1.

community foundations, genealogies, ethnic alliances, and martial conflict, amongst other events."[30] Another notable example is *Ordenanza del Señor Cuauhtemoc* (*Ordenanza*, 1520), housed at the Latin American Library at Tulane University.[31] The *Ordenanza* includes a map of properties in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco copied from an ancient original. The manuscript also features drawings and texts regarding land and fishing rights dating from about 1430 and reaffirmed by Cuauhtémoc (1497–1525) in 1523. Further, the *Ordenanza* includes a migration map tracing the history of the Mexica to the rule of Itzcóatl (1380–1440).

Within the worldview of the Mexica, amate was sacred. Mundy explained that amate "was conceived of as a kind of skin—a place where things happen, an essential to the being."[32] The recognition of amate as a type of "skin" derives from the material used in its production: tree bark. In the religious thought of the Mexica, the 'skin' (paper) enabled one to transform into a sacred being. Priests and ritual specialists often used brightly colored and folded amate adornments to transform themselves into powerful supernatural entities.[33] For example, in the *Codex Borbonicus* (ca. 1519–1521),[34] one of the screen-folds that preserves knowledge of the priests provides an image of "a ritual specialist who's been carefully dressed to become the embodiment of a deity. Most of the costume that enables this [embodiment] . . . is made out of amate paper."[35] (fig. 2.)

The costume and adornments included an "*amacalli*, an amate crown on the head, and *amacuexpalli*, long colored streamers that descend from the headdress meant to imitate hair."[36] In their research on papermaking traditions of Mexico, Sandstrom and Sandstrom expanded on the notion of amate as a sacred material and noted that Mesoamerican peoples

> used [amate] to make books concerning their religious beliefs, adorn statues of the deities and decorate temples, fashion priestly regalia, accompany the dead on their journey to the afterlife, dress sacrificial victims before putting them to death, make offerings to the deities in their pantheon, and divine the future.[37]

30. Woodward, "The Codex Xolotl," 1.
31. *Ordenanza del Señor Cuauhtemoc*, 1520, https://library.search.tulane.edu/discovery/delivery/01TUL_INST:Tulane/12432943610006326, LAL Manuscripts, William Gates Collection 2, The Latin American Library, Tulane University, New Orleans.
32. Mundy, "Books in the Contact Zone."
33. Mundy, "Books in the Contact Zone."
34. La Bibliothèque et Ses Chefs-D'oeuvre, Le Fonds Ancien, *Codex Borbonicus* (fin XVe siècle), https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/7gf-borbonicus.asp, Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale, Paris.
35. Mundy, "Books in the Contact Zone."
36. Mundy, "Books in the Contact Zone."
37. "Aztec Papermaking," Mexicolore, September 26, 2016. https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/writing/aztec-papermaking. Sandstrom and Sandstrom, Traditional Papermaking, 9–12.

Figure 2. Festival of Ochpanitzli, detail of priest wearing amate costume and adornments. *Codex Borbonicus*, p. 30, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Codex_Borbonicus

Indeed, throughout the Mexica empire, amate was regarded as a highly prominent and sacred material. It was used in various ways, from cartographies to ceremonial costumes, to manage the empire's vast political, religious, and economic activities.

The Spanish Invasion and Survival of Amate

In 1519–1521, the Spanish invasion of the region prompted significant cultural loss and transformation, including the systematic destruction of Indigenous books. By 1521, Tenochtitlan and the Mexica political state were toppled by Spanish conquis-

tadors. During their eradication of pre-Hispanic objects from this region, Spanish colonists and Roman Catholic clergy recognized the significant role of amate and worked to systematically destroy it by confiscating and burning thousands of sacred books.[38] Upon the 1529 arrival of Juan de Zumárraga (1468–1548), the first Bishop of Mexico,

> books from every quarter [were collected], especially the 'royal library' at Texcoco, and [Zumárraga's agents] had them brought to the marketplace at Tlatelolco. There, the [books] were piled mountain-high. Monks approached from all sides and set the torch to this gigantic pile of [knowledge]."[39]

To further suppress Indigenous knowledge and culture, Christensen explained, the Spanish authorities prohibited the production of amate and replaced it with imported European forms of paper.[40]

In the colony of New Spain, Indigenous artists and writers adopted many new European technologies, including alphabetic writing, European papers and inks, and bookbinding structures.[41] Throughout the Colonial Period (1521–1821), Indigenous artists and writers created hundreds of manuscripts. Surviving examples from this period, including the "Codex Aubin" (ca. 1576)[42] and the *Codex Azcatitlan* (1530),[43] demonstrate that artists and writers deftly learned new technologies, languages, and writing conventions. However, while some conformed to European standards, others employed historical techniques, signifying resistance.[44] A fascinating example that illustrates the complexities of cultural contact is *Siguense unos sermones de dominicas y de santos en lengua mexicana* (ca. 1540–1563, a.k.a. the "Newberry manuscript").[45]

38. See Sandstrom and Sandstrom, *Traditional Papermaking*.
39. Von Hagen, *The Aztec and Maya Papermakers*, 32. These destructive book-burning programs resulted in only fourteen surviving books from this period, as of 2024. Mundy, "Books in the Contact Zone."
40. Christensen, "Bark Paper and Witchcraft in Indian Mexico," 361.
41. Mundy, "Books in the Contact Zone."
42. *Object: Xiuhpohualli of Tenochtitlan Codex | Códice Aubin*, 1576, The British Museum, Museum number Am2006,Drg.31219, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?keyword=codex&keyword=aubin. The British Museum offers the following on the naming used for this item "Associated Title: Aubin Codex (Manuscript formerly named after Joseph Aubin, who owned the book in the 1800s and published a reproduction in 1893. Change of name proposed by Raul Macuil Martínez, Nahua archaeologist. 'Xiuhpohualli' refers to the pre-Columbian calendar used by Nahua Peoples and used in this book.)"
43. *Codex Azcatitlan,* [Place of Publication Not Identified: Publisher Not Identified, 1530], Pdf. National Library of France, World Digital Library collection, The Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/2021668122/.
44. The Newberry manuscript contains sermons, written in Nahuatl, which were created in order to impose Catholic doctrine on Indigenous peoples. See Bernardino de Sahagún, *Siguense unos sermones de dominicas y de santos en lengua mexicana* (Ayer 1485), ca. 1540–1563, Edward E. Ayer Collection, (Chicago, Newberry Library).
45. This essay refers to the work as *Siguense.*

The creation of this codex was overseen by Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan friar who organized the creation of the *Florentine Codex*.[46] Although the Indigenous co-authors used the format of European codices, they demonstrated subversion by using native materials, likely amate, as the substrate.[47] Despite the destruction of books and the prohibition of amate, the methods continued, were passed down, and survived among Indigenous cultures, including the Otomi.

The Otomi of San Pablito, Pahuatlán, Mexico: From Tourist Items to Artists Books

In the rural, mountainous town of San Pablito, Pahuatlán, located in the state of Puebla, Mexico, generations of Otomi artisans continue to manufacture amate.[48] For the Otomi, this is an "expression of indigeneity, an assertion of the collective rights of the community, and a connection to the past through techniques passed from one generation to the next."[49] Samuel Correa, coordinator of the association *Ya Mumpot Ei Pati* ("those who make the healing amate paper"), emphasized the ways in which amate production is maintained through oral legends and contemporary artisanry by Otomi healers (*curanderos*) in San Pablito.[50] Curanderos cut amate into intricate representations of figural spirit entities (*muñecos*, dolls, or figures; singular: *muñeco*) for cures, treatments, rituals, and religious ceremonies.[51]

Beginning in the late 1960s, Otomi artisans began making materials and crafts composed of amate to sell in Mexico's tourist markets.[52] The artworks presented in the markets included amate-based paintings, drawings, and collages. Amate became a highly commercialized staple within the local economy which led

46. The *Florentine Codex* is an encyclopedia of Mexica life and provides detailed information on the ceremonial use of paper in Mesoamerican civilizations. Bernardino de Sahagún and Indigenous collaborators, *General History of the Things of New Spain,* also called the *Florentine Codex,* vol. 1, 1575–1577, watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding, open (approx.): 32 x 43 cm, closed (approx.): 32 x 22 x 5 cm (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy). Mundy pointed out that the manuscript was "most likely not authored by Sahagún himself but rather co-authored with a group of highly trained Nahuatl-speaking intellectuals who worked in a Franciscan friary within Mexico City." Barbara E. Mundy, "A Treasure Trove of Rare Native Paper," The Newberry Library, August 2022, https://www.newberry.org/blog/a-treasure-trove-of-rare-native-paper.

47. Mundy, "A Treasure Trove of Rare Native Paper." The materiality of the manuscript has not elicited any comment by scholars because, Mundy wrote, "it is unobtrusive . . . almost as if one of the goals of the papermaker was to perform a disappearing act."

48. Eck, "Two Thousand Years of Paper Making Continues."

49. Stephanie J. Beene et al., "Tomes! Enhancing Community and Embracing Diversity Through Book Arts," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 112 (2018): 55–66, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48694676.

50. Lizeth Gómez De Anda, "Papel amate, arte curativo," *La Razón*, September 4, 2010, https://www.razon.com.mx/cultura/papel-amate-arte-curativo/. See also Beene et al., "Tomes!"

51. Robyn Fleming, "Power Paper: The Amate Manuscripts of Alfonso García Tellez," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 17, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/in-circulation/2019/power-paper.

52. María Eugenia D'Aubeterre Buznego et al., "Producción de papel amate y migración a estados unidos: los otomíes de San Pablito Pahuatlán, Puebla, México," *Iberoamerica,* 15, no. 1 (2013): 271–312. https://www.lakis.or.kr/upload/userFile/2015/4/30/09-Maria_Eugenia_DAubeterre_Buznego_Produccion_de_papel_amate_y_migracion_a_estados_unidos3.pdf.

to an overharvesting of native *Ficus* trees.[53] The Otomi learned that *Ficus* trees needed time to regrow the bark until another harvest. In response, the community sought alternative methods for creating amate: changing types of bark used, logistics of bark collection, and treatment of the bark fiber.[54] Additionally, the people of San Pablito adapted to using other types of trees, such as the Jonote tree (*Heliocarpus appendiculatus*), which can be debarked and processed into amate all year.[55]

Otomi artists, including Alfonso García Tellez, created artwork that expanded beyond the demands of the tourist market. Between the 1970s and 2000, García Tellez, a self-described curandero, produced a series of bound books made from light-cream and dark-brown amate with cut-out muñecos pasted onto amate substrates including *Historia de la Curación de Antigua de San Pablito Pahuatlán Puebla*.[56] Each muñeco is a mirror image, the result of "a long-established technique of folding pieces of amate in half and then cutting them to the desired shapes."[57] These artist's books include handwritten descriptions of the muñecos, the spiritual entities they represent, and the ceremonies in which they were used.[58] According to Fleming, "Over nearly four decades and with the help of members of his family, García Tellez made hundreds of copies of each book . . . however, no two copies are exactly alike—each copy is, by design, unique."[59] Thus, throughout his work, García Tellez demonstrated the intrinsic relationship between amate and the preservation of ancestral knowledge.

Conclusion: the Significance and Challenges of Amate in Rare Book Libraries and Special Collections Departments

The examples discussed herein are a few among many in institutions that own amate materials. As a delicate, unique, and hand-made material with ancient and contemporary uses, amate will take many forms in library collections—including fragments, documents, manuscripts, cut-out figurines, artists' books, and bookbindings.[60] These collections illustrate "the important connections between the spoken word, hand-

53. Rosaura Citlalli López Binnqüist, "The Endurance of Mexican Amate Paper: Exploring Additional Dimensions to the Sustainable Development Concept" (PhD diss., University of Twente, Netherlands, 2003), 172, https://ris.utwente.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/279526376/thesis_Lopez_Binnquist.pdf.
54. López Binnqüist, "The Endurance of Mexican Amate Paper," 102–103.
55. López Binnqüist, "The endurance of Mexican Amate Paper," 174.
56. Alfonso García Tellez, "*Historia de la Curación de Antigua de San Pablito Pahuatlan Puebla (History of the Healing of the Ancestors of San Pablito Pahuatlán),* L.2019.19," private collection, Princeton University Art Museums collections online, https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/135868. See also Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Two manuscript amate books of Alfonso García Tellez, MS. 17014/1, https://archives.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/repositories/2/resources/3488.
57. Fleming, "Power Paper."
58. Fleming, "Power Paper."
59. Fleming, "Power Paper."
60. It is important to note that amate is "shelf stable" with no inherent vice and will last a long time in a collection under proper conditions—the same conditions recommended for books and manuscripts.

made substrates, and cultural memory—in books and artworks."[61] However, one significant challenge arises when these materials become institutionalized in rare book libraries and special collections departments. Although these institutions prioritize the preservation of fragile and valuable works, this practice inherently "disrupts access to collections."[62] For example, because of the fragility and significance of the material aspects of *Siguense*, it is one of few items for which the Newberry Library restricts access. The Newberry Library mitigated some access restrictions by fully digitizing the manuscript and making it accessible online.

Stephanie J. Beene, Lauri M. González, and Suzanne M. Schadl challenged museums and cultural heritage stewards to rethink their approach to diversity and inclusion, asking:Instead of viewing rarified collections as dusty wares to be carefully preserved, how might we, as stewards of communal spaces and artworks, provide better access and outreach so that communities can interact with pieces that richly symbolize their homes, their traditions, their native languages, and their families? Many universities, museums, libraries, and archives write mission statements that speak to multiculturalism, inclusion, and diversity, but words on the page mean little without context. How do we leverage these noble goals into performing better outreach and engagement with our communities and their collections, which are entrusted to us?[63]

Pegno and Farrar took this a step further. They advised that institutions turn toward

> collaborating with partners and individuals in ways that do not privilege singular or dominant narratives [where] individuals become producers of knowledge, where exhibitions are being planned through a constellation of perspectives, and the objects displayed are created as a product of dialogue and collaboration.[64]

Another way for institutions to increase community interaction and engagement is through workshops and activity days. For example, the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* (Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology) offers workshops encouraging children and adults to engage with amate traditions. In one workshop, participants learned about the journey of the Mexica from Aztlán to the Valley of Mexico and the formation of Tenochtitlan and were also taught how to create a

61. Beene et al., "Tomes!"
62. Eva Athanasiu, "Belonging: Artists' Books and Readers in the Library," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 34, no. 2 (2015): 330–38. https://doi.org/10.1086/683388.
63. Beene et al., "Tomes!"
64. Marianna Pegno and Chelsea Farrar, "Multivocal, Collaborative Practices in Community-based Art Museum Exhibitions," in *Visitor-Centered Exhibitions and Edu-Curation in Art Museums*, ed. Pat Villeneuve and Ann Rowson Love, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 169.

small replica, using amate, of the *Boturini Codex* (ca. 1550, also known as *Tira de la Peregrinación*).[65]

Rare book and special collections librarians should provide enhanced access to amate materials through digital collections, collaborative partnerships, and community empowerment. To increase accessibility, rare book and special collections librarians should reconsider approaches to exhibits and outreach initiatives.[66] The Latin American Library at Tulane University uses its extensive collection of Mesoamerican, colonial, and modern amate materials in exhibitions and class instructions. By incorporating amate materials in object-based library instruction, librarians can create interactive experiences that encourage critical engagement and active learning. As Arnold pointed out,

> Given its long history in Central Mexico, paper can serve as the point of orientation for examining radically different worldviews. Paper serves as the material point of conjunction that navigates between Indigenous and colonial contexts. The place of paper in materially orienting these distinct worldviews moves us into a direct, and often uncomfortable, confrontation with the otherness of Nahua understandings.[67]

Furthermore, the use of amate materials can enhance understanding and appreciation of Nahua, Mesoamerican, and Mexican cultural heritage, identity, and history.

Amate was, and continues to be, an integral element in Indigenous religious systems, the transmission of information, and the preservation of knowledge and cultural heritage. It is essential for rare book and special collections libraries—particularly those specializing in Latin America—to prioritize the collection of amate in all its diverse forms. As both physical and cultural objects, amate materials offer rare book and special collections librarians the opportunity to promote meaningful community engagement, enhance collective expertise, thoughtfully preserve cultural heritage, facilitate the transformative use of primary sources by researchers, and enrich our understanding of the book- and paper-making traditions in Mesoamerica and Mexico.

65. *Códice Boturini / Tira de la Peregrinación*, Lorenzo Boturini: Coleccionista, http://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/repositorio/islandora/object/codice%3A605, Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Dr. Eusebio Dávalos Hurtado, Mexico City, Mexico. For an example event, see: Museo Nacional de Antropología, "Comunicación Educativa. Códice Boturini: taller familiar I.," https://mna.inah.gob.mx/agenda_detalle_v3.php?pl=Codice_Boturini_Taller_familiar, archived August 31, 2024, at https://web.archive.org/web/20240831195945/https://mna.inah.gob.mx/agenda_detalle_v3.php?pl=Codice_Boturini_Taller_familiar.

66. Beene et al., "Tomes!" The authors recognized the significance of collaborating with communities and using multisensory components in the design of their exhibition at the University of New Mexico.

67. Phillip P. Arnold, "Paper Ties to Land: Indigenous and Colonial Material Orientations to the Valley of Mexico," *History of Religions* 35, no. 1 (1995): 29.