University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2020

From Birth to Death. The Silk-Flower Industry in Mexico.

Adriana Sanromán Peyron

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Digital Commons is part of the Art and Materials Conservation Commons, Art Practice Commons, Fashion Design Commons, Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Museum Studies Commons Network.

Logo

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

From Birth to Death. The Silk-Flower Industry in Mexico.

Adriana Sanromán Peyron
asanromanp@gmail.com

Since very early times, humans have needed to depict the world they live in. We seek to own those beautiful things we see, make them permanent, make them stay, even though we know they're ephemeral, by imitating them with sturdier materials that can be preserved for a longer time.

Flowers, both natural and man-made, have diverse meanings in daily life and are essential during the rites of passage in every corner of the world, they accompany individuals from birth to death. With vibrant colors and fragrant smell, flowers are one of our favorite things. But, how can you make permanent, something such as a flower?

In this paper, I will talk briefly about how humanity made this possible, and how a craft, or as I call it, a productive tradition traveled from the far East to the west and its transformation to keep it alive in the post-Industrial Revolution world. Finally, I will delve into a family story to understand how these complex artifacts are still part of our modern life.

Let's begin in China, where near a millennium ago, the Chinese civilization found a way to imitate natural flowers. Using complex materials as woven silk fabrics, natural dyes, and animal or plant glues, they recreated what they saw. The oldest silk-flowers that I have found evidence about were recovered along the Silk Road trail and are dated back to the 4th Century. Surely this technology was not new, but the material characteristics of this object make decay their worst enemy.

It was through this commercial route that the silk-flower-making techniques arrived in Europe, where, as in China, the harsh weather during winter makes nature dormant until spring comes again. There, these artifact's popularity was huge among the elites who could afford to buy silk and having specialized artists to assemble beautiful adornments, both for spaces and themselves, or maybe even buying them as exotic imports directly from the merchants.

At least from the 14th century, one of the most desirable activities for elite maidens, along with embroidery, singing, and drawing was the knowledge of silk-flower making.

Up to the 18th Century, silk-flowers remained as part of the elite's exotic delights; where they used them as house decor, bouquets and corsages, in fashionable dresses, and hats.

In the New World, silk-flowers were also used by the elites, and we should take a brief look into the Spanish monastic life and the Mexican feminine cloisters where the nuns, before being ordained, made headdress and bouquets to accompany them through the passage ceremony and, re-used at their funerary services. Archaeological evidence of these objects has been found in Mexico and has been on exhibit at the Santa Monica Museum in Puebla City.

A timeline for the silk-flower history, digitally assembled by Adriana Sanromán.

For more than ten centuries, both the use and manufacture of silk-flowers remained mostly unchanged. Nevertheless, Queen Victoria and the Industrial Revolution changed the world together. Her royal majesty's style as well as the way she thought the world should work, made a huge impact on how people around the globe did things. The industrialized fabrics and the discovery of artificial dyes, glues, and a greater assortment of metallic alloy wires, made the world of silk-flower making a dream come true. From then on, every color, form, and flower were possible, even those which were merely works from the imagination. The processes mechanization resulted in lower prices and a sort of massive production that allowed not only elites but the growing bourgeoisie, to have access to such goods.¹

Once an all made-by-hand craft, the silk-flower makers adopted and adapted machinery and new products to their trade and invented a whole new way of craftsmanship. Even though it was not one of the most important industries, silk-flower making was big business and it allowed a great part of their workers to do their tasks at home. Due to the manual skills needed for almost all of the processes, the factories, at least in the USA and in Mexico, hired mainly women with better wages than other fields, being then a pioneer industry in women empowerment in the 19th Century.

During this boom, our story begins. Judith Deschamps and Etienne Pucheu, both of them florists and entrepreneurs, met at the State Fair of Texas and International Exhibition and there they got married. They lived in San Francisco, California, and after the 1851 great fires, they decided to settle down in Mexico City, where a friend of theirs had established a couple of decades back, the first silk-flower factory in the southern country.

¹ Alphonse Blanchon, *L'Industrie Des Fleurs Artificielles*, vol. Bibliothèque des Connaissances Utiles (Paris: Ballière et Fils, 1900), 5-13.

Virginia Penny, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman's Work* (Walker, Wise & Co., 1863) 292-295.

Political and social instability caused by the constant internal warfare left Mexico with an ever-growing debt and the traditional industries were practically paralyzed. Therefore, the government, to revive the local economy, gave facilities to immigrants to settle and start businesses and industries all along with the Mexican territory. One of the most prominent migrant groups were the Barcelonnette, from France. For the late 19th Century the Mexican elites preferred French goods and style, making them a sign of good taste and quality, propelling the construction of Paris-like buildings in the Mexican capital. All this assured the acceptance and success of the silk-flower industry.²

It is important to notice that one of the most reckoned feminine education institutions in Mexico City, San Ignacio de Loyola – Vizcaina´s school, held special artificial-flower making lessons. Nowadays we are trying to identify if some of those students were also once workers at the factory or if the techniques taught there were similar to those used in our case-study.³

Alphonse Ducasse established the first silk-flower factory and he located it in the very heart of the city. When the Pucheu arrived, they associated and, after a few years, changed the site a few blocks to the south, on the same street other Barcelonnettes had their businesses; finally, they bought the establishment and changed its name.

Logo designed for the factory, EP Collections.

Being entrepreneurs, Judith and her husband Etienne took the business in their hands and made it stronger, inventing and patenting machines for different processes and products of their trade, being reckoned even by the British Royal House, but also engaging in the vibrant and hectic life of the constantly growing Mexico City, which then, more than now, seemed to acknowledge migration and multiculturalism in a very different way. Silk-flower making was not their only trade, and they also engaged in cultural societies such as the philharmonic orchestra patronage, the Red Cross activities, and even with canoeing clubs in town.

² Walther Bernecker, *De Agiotistas y Empresarios. En Torno de La Industrialización Mexicana (Siglo XIX)* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana – Departamento de Historia, 1992), 13-21.

³ Josefina Muriel, *Los Vascos En México y Su Colegio de Las Vizcaínas* (Mexico: UNAM, 1987), 54-55.

Now, returning to the silk-flower-making, they also had to adapt to those materials that were available in this country, with a brand new national mechanized textile industry and with a wide variety of materials that had never been used for this activity before.

Etienne, lead the distribution and merchandising of the goods, while Judith lead the silk-flower production and, as I stated earlier, they hired mostly women as workers. On the records, we have found that the factory had more than a hundred workers both on and off-site, and also gathered women from all ages, cultural backgrounds, and social classes; the youngest started at age 8, and the oldest left at age 90. As a young couple, Judith and Etienne had two children, Henri and Adrienne, who were also engaged in the family business.

The Pucheu family, EP Collections.

As for any other trade, specialization was desirable; the newest and youngest laborers had the easiest tasks, whilst the more skilled – which not all the times were the oldest – had the most complex ones. Wages were reciprocal to both, productivity and specialization, ranging from some cents a day to around 8 pesos, which was way higher than for any other industry, and especially for women.

We know that one of the employees, Èlodie, started working on this first stage of the factory and worked through the second half of the 20th century; she was not only a laborer but also a part of the family as she was the godmother of both of Henri's offspring.

But, how did they made the flowers?

The production process can be divided into six separate stages which include the base material preparation using sizing and other concoctions; the cutting process which could be made by hand – as traditionally – or using a special cutting machine with pre-form cutting molds; the staining

or dyeing process which could be applied to the whole fabric, the cut pieces or even adding details with small brushes; the gauffering stage where each cutout was given its tridimensionality by pressing them inside a mold or by hand using special irons, the monture or first assembly process where flowers and leaves individually are put together and the final assembly where bigger and more complex arrangements are set. The most specialized jobs were those which involve the sizing and dyeing of the materials, the monture, and the final arrangement assembly.⁴

The six stages of the silk-flower production process, Adriana Sanromán.

For this time, they manufactured at least three different types of artificial flowers and plants: textile-based, paper-based, and wax-based along with many combinations. It is also known that then, both in Mexico and other latitudes, other materials were used for artificial flower-making like horsehair, conch shells, resin, eggshells, metal, and a wide variety of processed fibers but they were not as profitable in the industry. There is also evidence of Etienne developing machinery and processes to exploit wooden fibers and making artificial flowers with them.

We know that in Mexico City, for 1900, six establishments imported silk-flowers, three manufacturers and five houses specialized in funeral flowers. For 1905, there are no commercial records except our case-study, and also, in the factory's facilities, we found both catalogs and tools that once were part of the other two manufacturing facilities. There is no clear data on what happened to those establishments, but they disappeared from the commercial scene. We also know that the Pucheus exported and imported both materials for manufacture and ended products, selling those too to at least two of the establishments listed as importers and to some of the other Barcelonnette establishments specialized in clothing and accessories.⁵

One of the most representative works of the factory is the one done during the festivities for the centennial of the Independence during September 1910, where the Pucheu factory services were hired for the décor of a diversity of buildings, among them the Government Palace where the official ceremonies were held. Using both natural and artificial flowers and foliage, they dressed buildings, hallways, “festive” cars, table centerpieces, and also made corsages for the assistants. With this huge assignment, the business was successful and growing; nevertheless, health issues caused by the use of materials, now known as highly toxic, caused a big tragedy in the Pucheu

⁴ Adriana Sanromán, “Propuesta Metodológica Para El Estudio y Recuperación de Una Tradición Productiva Semi-Industrial: La Floristería Artificial Decimonónica Mexicana.” (Dissertation, Mexico: ENCRyM-INAH, 2016), 67-100.

⁵ “Artificial Flowers,” in *The Massey – Gilbert Blue Book of Mexico, a Directory in English of the City of Mexico* (Mexico: The Massey-Gilbert Company, 1901), 191.

family. In the space of fewer than five years, Adrienne, Judith, and Etienne passed away, leaving the young Henri in charge of the business.

Festive cars during the Mexican Independence Centennial celebrations, EP Collections.

By himself, it took some months for Henry to get the hold of the business. A couple of years later, he married and, as the rent costs of the building – that served both as the factory on the lower level, and as housing on the upper level – went up, he decided to buy some land in a newly established industrial sector, Colonia Obrera, which now is quite near the city's downtown. At the same time, he opened a store where they sold directly to the public which was later closed around the 1940s. Henri and Refugio, his wife, had two children: Enrique and Maria Luisa.

In the newly bought land, the second generation of the Pucheu family, designed and built a special building where each one of the productive stages had a specific space. As far as I have researched this is, at least in the American continent, the only building designed specifically for silk-flower making. This construction also was the family's house.

The Pucheu building ca. 1930 and 2010, EP Collections.

Opened around 1927 and 1930, this new space witnessed the massive growth of the business, having direct distribution to the public, continuing with its former clients, and also new ones from the big screen and distributors from around the country.

They manufactured jungles for movies, accessories for Catholic and Jewish religious ceremonies, corsages and bouquets for social parties, funeral flowers, and also flower arrangements for buildings. They distributed silk-flowers from northern Mexico all way to the southern region, amongst haute-couture tailors, hat makers, assemblers, and specialty shops. For at least another thirty years, the production thrived as Henri continued visiting the distribution routes and looked for new clients.

The seasonal production for Christmases was so big that they even had to hire more offsite workers, usually from the same neighborhood, to perform simple tasks and help to carry materials and loading packages for shipment.

Henri fell ill and passed away in the 1960s decade, leaving his wife Refugio and his offspring in front of the factory. None of them had the same merchant vein as their predecessors, but they decided to open again a store for direct distribution to the public. Both the production and the number of workers slowly started to decline, as well as the range of clients. For the late 1960s, there were only 20 workers on site and about a dozen off-site. Nevertheless, it was still a good business and they managed to keep some of the regular clients that made it profitable. We also have to notice that, by this time, the fully industrialized Asiatic artificial flowers started to take over the market with great advantages on mass production and price.

The workforce and Refugio's family ca. 1965, EP Collections.

Enrique, the eldest offspring, was not very interested in the business, leaving his mother and sister, Luisa, with all the responsibilities to keep the business running. None of them were neither experts on sales nor administration and for the mid-1980s, the working force was reduced to a dozen employees both on and offsite. They still kept those good clients, but the market had almost completely changed and after Refugio's death, Luisa stood in front of the business, not letting anyone but her brother "help".

Profits and production continued to decay and by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, there were only three employees on-site and two offsite. It was not a profitable business anymore even though they still had regular clients and whole families that went to the store to buy because by then, they had a tradition of wearing Pucheu's artificial flowers for generations.

María Luisa Pucheu at the storefront, 2009, EP Collections.

I remember as a child being at the factory helping my grandmother with some orders and somewhat learning some of the techniques.

Both Enrique and Luisa passed away in 2010, leaving a dying enterprise and a lot of problems with the property and with the business. The children of Enrique and Maria Luisa were not very interested in learning the techniques or participating in the business, except Luisa's youngest offspring, Adriana Peyron.

A couple of years before my grandmother's death, I started a research which would become my grade dissertation. From then, my mother – Adriana Peyron - and I, gathered information from the archives, made some informal interviews with some of the surviving oldest employees, and started collecting examples of different materials, types of flowers, and tools, and researching more in-depth the business' history.

Adriana Peyron and María Vanegas, former worker at the Pucheu factory, 2012, EP Collections.

Nowadays, after having divided the family's heritage with the other family members, we're trying to re-establish the business using those traditional techniques in the new market, where tradition, fair trade, and craftsmanship are valued again.

This productive tradition has survived more than a millennium and since then artificial flowers have accompanied individuals from birth to death.

Assortment of textile, paper and wax flowers, EP Collections.

Bibliography

“Artificial Flowers.” In *The Massey – Gilbert Blue Book of Mexico, a Directory in English of the City of Mexico*, 191. Mexico: The Massey-Gilbert Company, 1901.

Bernecker, Walther. *De Agiotistas y Empresarios. En Torno de La Industrialización Mexicana (Siglo XIX)*. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana – Departamento de Historia, 1992.

Blanchon, Alphonse. *L'Industrie Des Fleurs Artificielles*. Bibliothèque des Connaissances Utiles. Paris: Ballière et Fils, 1900.

Muriel, Josefina. *Los Vascos En México y Su Colegio de Las Vizcaínas*. Mexico: UNAM, 1987.

Penny, Virginia. *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman's Work*. Walker, Wise & Co., 1863.

Sanromán, Adriana. “Propuesta Metodológica Para El Estudio y Recuperación de Una Tradición Productiva Semi-Industrial: La Floristería Artificial Decimonónica Mexicana.” Dissertation, Mexico: ENCRyM-INAH, 2016.