

## Article

# Beyond *Barniz de Pasto Mopa-Mopa* Objects: Artisans and Harvesters in the 21st Century

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**Abstract:** This article intends to highlight and reconstruct the relationships between humans (harvesters, woodworkers and master artisans) and non-humans (raw materials, tools, places, products, etc.) in the *Barniz de Pasto mopa-mopa* tradition. These relationships were lost when the focus came to be primarily on the objects, as happens in most popular art forms worldwide. This text is organised in ethnographic overviews: the home workshops of masters of *Barniz de Pasto*; woodworker workshops; *montañas-selvas* (Andean rainforest highlands) and *mopa-mopa* harvesters; until we reach the objects. Unlike a conventional article, it does not end with firm and immutable conclusions. Our reflections from our eleven years (2013–2024) of accompanying men and women artisans and collectors, during the process of including the traditional knowledge and techniques associated with *Barniz de Pasto mopa-mopa* as Intangible Cultural Heritage (*patrimonialización*) and its safeguarding, are always open for discussion.

**Keywords:** *Barniz de Pasto*; *mopa-mopa*; home workshop; workshop; *montañas-selvas*; Putumayo; Intangible Cultural Heritage ICH; humans and non-humans



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“*Barniz de Pasto* fabrics not only decorate wooden objects, they also hide women and men artisans and harvesters of *mopa-mopa*”.

Giovany Paolo Arteaga Montes

## 1. Introduction

*Barniz de Pasto* is an artistic technique of pre-Hispanic origin, which is unique in the world, and involves the collection of *mopa-mopa* from shrubs in the rural area of Mocoa in the Andean–Amazonian piedmont of Putumayo. It is then transformed into thin coloured sheets that are applied to wood; this technique is currently only practiced in the city of Pasto, Nariño, in the southwest region of the Colombian Andes. However, as is the case in several other crafts worldwide, research on *Barniz* continues to be focused on the technique and objects [1–15]. There have also been publications about *mopa-mopa* in Putumayo that focus on its taxonomy, the main one being by Luis Eduardo Mora Osejo [16], who classified the shrub from which *mopa-mopa* is picked as *Elaeagia pastoensis* Mora.<sup>1</sup> Others relate to the history [17], location, physico-chemical characteristics, cultivation and innovation for processing [18–20], while warning of its imminent risk of disappearing [21].

That is why, with this paper, we want to reveal and relate what has so far gone unnoticed, through ethnographies of the production process of the objects made with *Barniz de Pasto*. The aim is to reassemble the relationships between the humans (harvesters, woodworkers and master artisans)<sup>2</sup> and non-humans (raw materials, tools, places, works, etc.), as expressed by Bruno Latour [22], and fragmented by a fascination with objects.

Usually, in the chronicles, articles, books, dissertations, theses, user manuals, images and videos, the harvesters or artisans are only present silently in the background. Texts and audiovisuals found in various physical and virtual repositories have in common that the woodworkers, cabinetmakers, turners, carvers and harvesters are kept hidden behind

sheets of *Barniz*, with the exception of the *Expediente y Plan Especial de Salvaguardia PES* (nomination file and special plan for the safeguarding) that was prepared in 2019 [21], where they were taken into account and named by some of the masters in the marketing of their works, as the home workshop of the Granja family has been doing for four years.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the history of decoration with *Barniz* has been looked at through analyses that focus on a fascination with or a seduction by the technique and works of pre-Hispanic or colonial origin that can be found in private collections or in the most prestigious museums in the world. These pieces have not been located in Pasto, as the city still does not have a permanent exhibition space for *Barniz*, perhaps because the technique is alive and is part of the daily life of the inhabitants of Pasto.

These studies include chemical, microscopic, conservation and design aspects. This results in the recognition of a hybrid amalgamation between Europe, America and Asia, which ends in a gratefully welcomed syncretism—a sort of co-creation—that produces forgetfulness and silence, which erases tensions and agencies between subjects. It almost seems that the objects are (self-)created without any relation to places, home workshops, workshops or *montañas-selvas*, vegetation (*mopa-mopa* and wood), tools, women and men, circumstances, etc.

Among the few exceptions, we can highlight the research carried out by the anthropologist Yolanda Mora de Jaramillo in 1963 [23], who, in addition to taking into account the history of the technique and *mopa-mopa*, the workshops, the decorative process and the change in the style, alluded to the socioeconomic relationships between the artisans, as Joseph Michael Stuckart did in 1982 with his Ph.D. thesis in philosophy [24]. Here we must also distinguish the anthropologist Nina Friedemann, who, in 1985, states that *Barniz* is subject to the “annihilation of indigenous aesthetic expression during the colony and the contempt for any aboriginal element” [25] (p. 16). For its part, the *Museo de Artes y Tradiciones Populares*, in 1992 [26], presented on the technique, problems, needs and accomplishments that were achieved with the formation of the *Casa del Barniz de Pasto* cooperative in the last two decades of the 20th century.

In 2007, Erki Narváez [27] also wrote about the technique and its history. As a varnish craftsman and lawyer, he exposed the associative failures, including the most recent: *Casa del Barniz de Pasto* and the role of the intermediary, highlighting the work of the masters and two women decorators: Irene de Granja and Rosa Mejía. In 2017, Armando Oviedo and Jesús Cabrera [28] carried out a biographical approach to the life and work of the late Master José María Obando. However, they again had a long and confusing journey to describe the *mopa-mopa* collection techniques and the decoration.

During the process of the *patrimonialización* of *Barniz de Pasto mopa-mopa* (2013–2020)<sup>4</sup> and its safeguarding (2021–2024), the sociologist, historian and anthropologist Giovany Paolo Arteaga Montes—author of this article—was the coordinator for the team of the Fundación Mundo Espiral<sup>5</sup> that developed the UNESCO applications (see below) through research and the creation of written, visual and audiovisual discourses, among other activities and products [29]. Ruth Flórez Rodríguez, from the Dirección de Patrimonio y Memoria del Ministerio de las Culturas (the Colombian Directorate of Heritage and Memory of the Ministry of Cultures), together with the sociologist and historian María Mercedes Figueroa Fernández—co-author of this text—who initially served as the Director of Mundo Espiral, then as an official in the Governorate of Nariño, and currently serves as the Secretary of Culture of Pasto, also participated in this process.

That is how, with 45 artisans from the Department of Nariño and 10 *mopa-mopa* harvesters in Putumayo, the team achieved the recognition of their knowledge and these techniques of pre-Hispanic origin, which are unique in the world, as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) at the departmental (2014), national (2019) and global levels (2020). Therefore, on 15 December 2020, the traditional knowledge and techniques associated with the *Barniz de Pasto mopa-mopa* of Nariño and Putumayo were included in UNESCO’s List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

Lately, as a result of these inclusions, studies, exhibitions and the development of sound and audiovisual content have increased from design, the use of digital platforms, 3D printing, dissemination, tourism, teaching, innovation and co-creation between artisans and professionals [30,31]. However, in most cases, the artisans are erased under devices of fading and hierarchy, by professionals and cultural agents, after being used.

The interesting thing about these processes of *patrimonialización* is that they gradually led us to realise that we were engaging in ethnographies that summarised journeys, crusades or missions from the centres of learning or power to the ‘ends of the earth and time’, now known as ‘territories’, where we were the protagonists and the authority that planned, observed, controlled and were ‘immersed’ in this always extraneous reality, in order to develop an idea that created a contrast between a past, a present, a future and fragmented networks of ‘Others’, which were then described, valued and influenced by our voice as travellers [32] (pp. 23–26).

Thus, we decided to turn around and carry out ethnographies that would take the form of spatial and experiential journeys, insofar as they involved moving and walking in company, talking, being attentive, allowing ourselves to be taught and living with the people who participate in the production of *Barniz de Pasto* (harvesters and artisans), in the places where their daily lives take place: the *montañas-selvas* of the Andean–Amazonian piedmont of Putumayo, carpenters’ workshops and home workshops of the craftspeople in the Nariño Andes, specifically in Pasto.

These journeys were also lived experiences. They had their own rhythms and time-frames that left traces or scars from the shared moments, which pierced our bodies and souls with their energy, taking place from within to without and the other way round for those who experienced them, because we walked together, and gave our all without holding anything back, like a large family. This is because everything around us passed through us (sometimes unnoticed) and was passed through by us in turn, without a clear destination, without a clear horizon, as it is in life.

In this way, we carried out ethnographies at the ground level by getting our hands dirty, as was proposed by the anthropologist Luís Alberto Suárez Guava [33], where past(s), present(s) and future(s) are merged through the multiple relationships between the humans and non-humans, i.e., subjects–objects, which allowed us to make the people and scenarios visible in order to understand the *Barniz de Pasto mopa-mopa* from another perspective: ‘behind the objects’. This treatment was similar to that done by the conservator Dana Melchar, scientist Lucia Burgio and curator Nick Humphrey at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, with a *Barniz* cabinet that was decorated around 1650 and revealed a skeleton of death hidden beneath its ornamentation, which was imperceptible to the naked eye [34].

In our case, to reveal what goes unnoticed in the production of a *Barniz de Pasto* object, we will turn to the ethnographic reviews that are organized as follows in the text:

2. The home workshops of the masters of *Barniz de Pasto*;
3. The workshops of the woodworkers;
4. The *montañas-selvas* and the *mopa-mopa* harvesters;
5. The objects (works, products, pieces and merchandise).

The latter will be assessed in their current dynamics in order to understand what is happening with them, the people involved—together with those who are becoming involved—and the changes that are being implemented in the technique. Unlike a conventional academic paper, we will not end with closed and immutable conclusions. Our reflections from our eleven years of accompanying men and women artisans and harvesters during the process of including *Barniz de Pasto mopa-mopa* on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (*patrimonialización*) are always open for discussion.

## 2. The Home Workshop of the Masters of *Barniz de Pasto*

It is a September morning in 2013, accompanied by an immaculate blue sky and a radiant sun that rises in front of the Galeras volcano while it enlivens the mountain walls that surround the Atriz Valley, which is the seat of the city of Pasto and its inhabitants (Figure 1). A bright morning that anyone would say is hot, but which can be summarised as warmly cold due to the roar of the icy wind, or just a typical Andean autumn morning. We arrived at the home workshop of the Granja masters located in Tamasagra—a neighbourhood that commemorates a local *cacique*—a place somewhat distant from the city centre, and which has its difficulties related to violence and crime. After wandering through its pedestrianised streets for a few minutes, we rang a bell at a modest house with white railings and a light green façade.



**Figure 1.** The Galeras volcano and the municipality of Pasto, Department of Nariño, Colombia. Photo: Giovany Arteaga Montes, 2022.

The door was opened for us by the young artisan Óscar Granja, who greeted us with a big hug, while his elderly father, Gilberto Granja, examined us in detail before stretching out his hand to shake our hands. The scene that met us comprised the following: a dog by the name of Oso and two ceremonial chairs around a small table, on which a portable stove was placed, heating a pot containing *mopa-mopa* buds, which exhaled their welcome steam. In addition, there was an old sound system that transmitted the news in AM, under the exclusive authority of master Gilberto, a kind of hammer with incisions called ‘buzarda’, ready to macerate the buds on a trunk with a rectangular plate on top and a wide piece of sacking, ready to rest on the legs, in order to facilitate the cleaning of the raw material through the friction of the hands, the use of the nails, the cooking and the shaking. Everything rested close to the light radiating from the window in the room, behind a white curtain that served as a lamp shade.

In the background, several wooden objects could be seen on two shelves made of the same material, arranged by size and shape, patiently awaiting their turn to be decorated. The hands of the masters are coloured orange, red and blue from the ‘El indio’ [35] anilines used to give the *Barniz* sheets their hues. These are delicately stretched between the fingers and mouths of two working partners looking at each other intensely, until the desired thickness is achieved. The masters take on an oblique body posture, as a mark of their work in which they use a ‘magic knife’ that was adapted by each of them from the fragment of a saw. The surgical scalpel is the protagonist in the decoration of the objects as it is an extension of their body and mind, whether it is a craftsman or a surgeon who seeks to do his work well (Figure 2). On their legs they also have a blanket or coverlet, and on top of it,



the object on which they will leave the trace of their skin, to the extent that the pressure of their fingers, hands and forearms is needed to adhere the *mopa-mopa* sheets to the wood. There is a close connection between nature, body, soul and tools that denotes concentration, coordination, skill and cooperation, as Richard Sennett would put it [36] (pp. 31–263).



**Figure 2.** Maestro Gilberto Granja. Photo: © Fundación Mundo Espiral, 2014.

Once we came back to ourselves, after passing through that magical place, we talked about Cultural Heritage, thanks to the invitation made to us at the time by the conservator, and now councilman of Pasto Álvaro, José Gomezjurado Garzón. From that moment on, we started to walk alongside Óscar Granja to look for the 5 master craftswomen and 31 master craftsmen who dedicate themselves to this artisan practice in the city of Pasto (Figures 3–6), alongside a few officials as they recognize they workers and a tiny number of family apprentices. It took us 12 months to carry out a census, which was a part of the process of *patrimonialización* that lasted six more years.



**Figure 3.** *Barniz de Pasto* home workshop; masters Jhonatan and José María Castrillón stretching a sheet of *mopa-mopa*. Photo: © Fundación Mundo Espiral, 2023.



**Figure 4.** *Barniz de Pasto* home workshop; master Alfredo Zambrano and family. Photo: Giovany Arteaga Montes, 2023.



**Figure 5.** *Barniz de Pasto* home workshop; master Óscar Ceballos and his apprentice María Camila Muñoz. Photo: © Fundación Mundo Espiral, 2023.



**Figure 6.** *Barniz de Pasto* home workshop; master Mary Ortega, master Mario Narváez and their apprentices. Photo: © Fundación Mundo Espiral, 2023.

### 3. The Workshops of the Woodworkers

Around October 2019—six years after the meeting with Óscar and Gilberto—the master artisans told us one of their many ‘secrets’,<sup>6</sup> in this case relating to the ten suppliers of the wooden objects: five turners, three cabinetmakers and two carvers, who work with cedar, pine, sajo, red balsa and urapan, among others. The first are elderly men who have their workshop mainly in the classic Obrero neighbourhood of the city of Pasto and two of them—the youngest—have their workshop in the municipality of El Peñol, Nariño.

Here, a home-made electric lathe is the main tool used to shape round and oval objects, such as vases and bonbonnières, with the force of the body that is impressed through gouges, chisels and cutters (Figure 7). As Efrén Taborda expresses it, these workshops are characterised by their modest size and the absence of apprentices, as it is considered a complex and risky job to teach, because it can cause accidents ranging from small cuts to the amputation of fingers. This is in addition to the practically non-existent work safety conditions, which generate respiratory problems due to the dust by-products from the manufacturing of the objects. Apprenticeships could bring more difficulties than benefits.



**Figure 7.** Workshop of turner; master Efrén Taborda. Photo: © Fundación Mundo Espiral, 2019.

At the same time, in San Felipe, a sector near the Obrero neighbourhood, there is an old one-storey house, built with adobe bricks and clay tiles, that looks more like an old-fashioned grocer’s shop. Right there, there is a long, thick table decorated with a fine dust that sticks to everything, a floor padded with sawdust on which footprints are left, along with boards of various types of wood, resting in a vertically leaning position against the walls while waiting to be worked on. Here we spoke with the cabinetmaker Ricardo Mauricio Bolaños, who designs, makes and finishes square or rectangular furniture such as desks, chairs, bedroom sets, dining rooms, kitchens, wardrobes, *bargueños*<sup>7</sup> and ‘secret boxes’, so called because they have a hidden opening mechanism (Figure 8).

In the middle of the conversation, master Mauricio was emphatic in expressing that the carpenter helps to assemble the product but does not start or finish it, as the cabinetmaker does, using electrical tools to shape the wood, such as the router, gluing machine, drill and auger. In his work, he also needs saws, jigsaws, planers, glues and tape measures, among others. Furthermore, in addition to selling his works to *Barniz de Pasto* artisans, he uses his knowledge to offer them to multiple clients and, as turners and carvers do, he works to order.

At the end of the same year, we arrived with the audiovisual production team at the La Minga neighbourhood in the south-east of the city of Pasto. This is the place where master Guillermo Cuaces (Figure 9) and three other people carve wood. In this space, it was striking to meet the young Elizabeth Rosero Chicaiza, who used to be an apprentice and helper, but now is dedicated to other tasks. Here, in the midst of gouges, chisels and



crowbars of different sizes, there are unique hammers, sandpapers of different grades, and brushes, which are indicative of the force that is impressed on this substrate. These hands amazingly made masks, *ñapangas* (representations of peasant woman from Nariño) and animals of various sizes, to be decorated.



**Figure 8.** Workshop of the cabinetmaker Ricardo Mauricio Bolaños. Photo: Giovany Arteaga Montes, 2022.



**Figure 9.** Workshop of wood carver; master Guillermo Cuaces. Photo: Carlos René Quintero Montes, 2019.

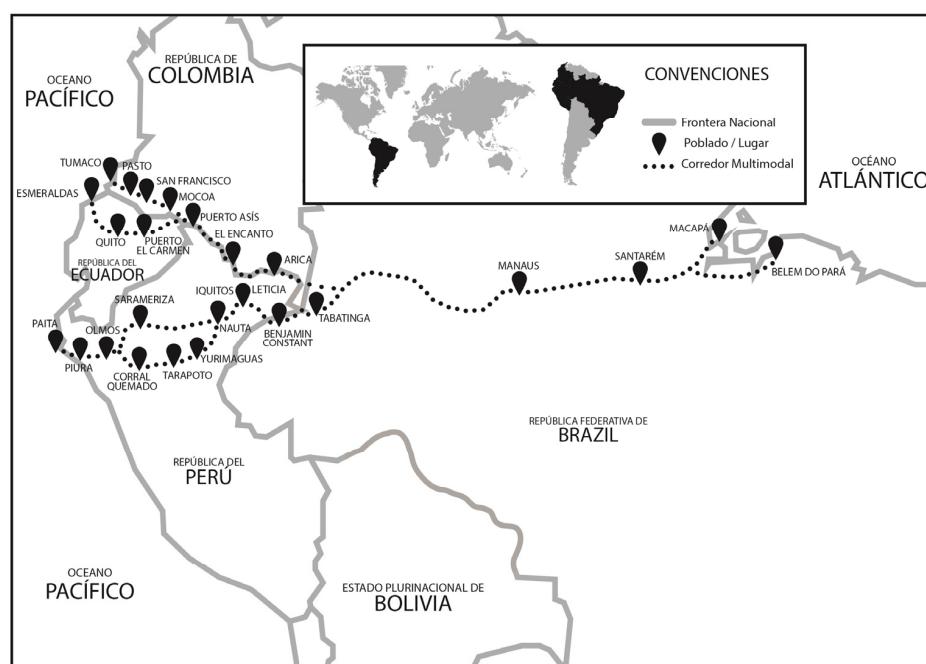
During the conversation, master Cuaces told us that only some of the carpenters—in his general definition—sell their work directly to the artisans, because there are three agents in Aruba who market the wooden and decorated pieces for sale. They have been taking care of a large part of the production process for several decades, with an excellent profit margin for them—the ‘resellers or intermediaries’—reflected in dollars, thanks to their sales strategy that concentrates on the cruise ships that arrive at the tourist port in the Caribbean.

#### **4. The *Montañas-Selvas* and the *Mopa-Mopa* Harvesters**

During 2019, we also travelled along the ‘Trampolín de la muerte’ (‘road of death’), an unpaved road in the middle of imposing abysses that connects Pasto with Mocoa. This road will be replaced by the construction of the San Francisco–Mocoa road section, part of the Multimodal Corridor Tumaco–Pasto–Puerto Asís–Belem do Pará (Figure 10), which seeks



to promote the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America ('Integración de la Infraestructura Regional Suramericana', or IIRSA). The main objective of the Multimodal Corridor is to promote the 'development' of southern Colombia, northern Ecuador, Peru and Brazil, by strengthening trade and facilitating the connection between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. At the same time, it will extract the riches of the Amazonia, linking the latter to the global economy even more. Under this plan, the section between the municipalities of San Francisco and Mocoa will cross the forest reserve area of the upper basin of the Mocoa River, which is home to non-human beings, some peasant families and the headquarters of mining companies. The few *manchas* ('patches') *de mopa-mopa* that exist in the Andean–Amazonian piedmont, and that are to be transformed into varnish, are found here in particular (Figures 11 and 12).



**Figure 10.** Proposal: Multimodal Corridor Tumaco–Pasto–Puerto Asís–Belem do Pará. Map: BIC, Bank Information Center (2014), Miguel López and Giovany Arteaga (2015).



**Figure 11.** *Montañas-selvas* habitat of *mopa-mopa*. Photo: Giovany Arteaga Montes, 2022.



**Figure 12.** Mountains and forests of Putumayo; *mopa-mopa* harvesting process. Photos: © Fundación Mundo Espiral, 2019.

Once we crossed the famous ‘Trampolin’ to Mocoa, we visited 10 ‘barniceros’ or ‘cosecheros’, as they call themselves, renamed modernly as *recolectores* (harvesters), who obtain the *mopa-mopa* from the scarce bushes scattered in areas with the specific characteristics of altitude, humidity, sunlight and soil conditions that give life to the ‘*manchas de mopa-mopa*’. ‘There where the clouds are’—as the *barnicero* Pedro Pablo Zuin says (Figure 13)—only his wife Marciolina Gaviria and their children climb the steep trails, as well as the married couple Evelio Bravo and Isabel Cerón, Mery Cerón (Figure 14) and her son Juan Eliceo Gelpud, Jesús Cerón, Armando Becerra and the father and son pair Jorge and Edinson Macías. *Campesinos* survive with their families with only rubber boots, a machete, a *garabato* (a stick that ends in the shape of a hook), a small backpack and a humble hut. It is a family tradition that does not generate economic profit, for which it is always necessary to walk uphill for 5 to 8 h, from 800 m above sea level to 1600 or 2200 m, to find the buds that will be transformed into *Barniz*.



**Figure 13.** Pedro Pablo Zuin harvesting *mopa-mopa* (left) and *mopa-mopa* ‘block’ (right). Photos: Giovany Arteaga Montes, 2022.





**Figure 14.** Harvester Mery Cerón on the way to *mopa-mopa*. Photo: Giovany Arteaga Montes, 2022.

It is necessary to carry more than one *arroba* (a traditional unit of measurement equivalent to approximately 12 kg) of food to spend 10 to 15 days in the *montañas-selvas*, in an effort to collect a maximum of 15 kilos of buds called bull horns (because of their shape). There is a commercial relationship in which each kilo is sold directly to the artisans of Pasto for COP 200,000, equivalent to just over 40 GBP (at the exchange rate of spring 2024). Currently there are two harvesting seasons: May and November. There have been changes due to global warming, as these are places where the following complex global–local environmental situations affecting the rainforest have to be overcome: the advance of deforestation, climate change, the presence of crops for illicit use, the violence present in the area, large-scale mining, the scarcity of the *Elaeagia pastoensis Mora* bush and its respective pests (cutworm or weevil), along with the expansion of the frontiers of agriculture, livestock production and Indigenous reservations. This is compounded by the solitary work that the *barnizeros* do, insofar as they are older adults whom young people do not want to accompany to learn; they consider it arduous and dangerous work, and not at all profitable, which adds to the non-existent recognition of the people who carry out this work and the undervaluation of the *mopa-mopa*.

## 5. The Objects

The decorative technique, and even more so the finished works, are what most attracts the attention of scholars and customers (Figure 15). Generally, hardly anyone pays attention to the people who create the objects and much less to the sacred places where they collect and transform the raw material, with the exception of the texts by Yolanda Mora de Jaramillo, from 1963, [23] and Joseph Michael Stuckart, from 1982 [24]. Nina Friedemann [25] and Erki Narváez [27], among others, who, in addition to taking into account the history of the technique and the *mopa-mopa*, the workshops, the decorative process and the change in style, alluded to the relationships and socioeconomic conditions of the artisans.

However, a fascination with the technique and objects has accompanied the *Barniz* throughout its history and has accompanied us since 2013. To reverse this, with the team, we organised several exhibitions at the local and national level involving women and men harvesters and artisans. As is the case in the production of these crafts—and probably in others—the existence of the works and a few men linked to the decorations are still almost



exclusively recognized, thanks to the discourse they have created about themselves, which are now strengthened by the *patrimonialización* process.



**Figure 15.** Flowering mushroom vase; author: Maestra Claudia Ximena Mora (**left**); Andean vase; author: Master Eduardo Muñoz Lora (**right**). Photos: © Fundación Mundo Espiral, 2019.

These masters, together with their families, have vehemently fought for these spaces of recognition in the market in order to overshadow their rival colleagues and thus shine within the guild, among the civil servants and institutions. However, the master craftsmen who work with wood and *Barniz* in the city of Pasto, as well as those women and men who are dedicated to the harvesting of *mopa-mopa*, remain hidden behind the *mopa-mopa* sheets in their home workshops, workshops, and *montañas-selvas*, which has both advantages and disadvantages.

As mentioned above, most texts and research projects are dedicated to the analysis, conservation and history of objects decorated with *Barniz*. Many scientists, curators and conservators have been doing this [1,2,5,9,11–17], including María Cecilia Álvarez-White (2022), Lucía Sánchez Monzón (2020), Álvaro José Gomezjurado (2017) and the comparative study carried out by the art historian Yayoi Kawamura (2018), which compared this artisanal technique with Japanese lacquerware [6–8], among others. Microscopic analyses and spectroscopy or X-ray fluorescence have also been carried out on the varnished works found in various museums around the world, such as the one done in 2015 by Richard Newman, Emily Kaplan and Michele Derrick, with the *queros*, or pre-Hispanic, ceremonial vessels [3].

In 2018, a *Barniz* cabinet from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was investigated, and calomel, a white pigment containing mercury, was found [10]; a similar discovery was made in 2020, by Pozzi et al., in a seventeenth-century work [11]. These were analyses that astonished the small academic world interested in *Barniz de Pasto* due to the complexity of the techniques involved. However, it would be equally, if not more, surprising to find today the large quantities of mercury and other chemicals that are permeating soil, streams and rivers in the Amazon, which leave their scars as a result of agriculture and indiscriminate mining extraction by multinational companies from the same countries that cry out for the environment and boast about the status of their 'Development'. These include States with institutions that, in some cases, dedicate their efforts to understanding the physico-chemical benefits of the *mopa-mopa*, a motivation that Colombia does not yet have.

Changes in design have also been studied, nurtured by practices that were previously called '*mingas*' (voluntary gatherings of people to carry out construction works and repairs or to establish guidelines that benefit the community). The *mingas* are now viewed as collaborative and co-creation methodologies, representing innovative processes that end up legitimising the opinion of the professionals. In what is always a hierarchical relationship, the professionals emphasise their own judgement and sense of importance in the elaboration of objects that are fully conceived before they are even started. These novel designs therefore have been projected, oriented and submitted for the pre-approval of experts. The master craftsmen and craftswomen are themselves one more object to decorate and exoticise, and can serve as a means to give a face to the technique; in order to claim collaboration between artists and artisans, the masters are used in photography or videos for exhibitions or reports. Having said that, this relationship is mutually beneficial, and is used to generate debates and increase recognition, which cannot be measured by the same yardstick.

Technology adds to these processes, as the officials of the Secretary of Culture of Pasto said in 2023: "to drive the evolution of the technique" and generate "more functional goods that meet the needs of the market and customers, nothing traditional or pre-Columbian". If so, hopefully the technology comes from a designer, artist or recognised brand, and includes innovations in the centrifugal machines and mixers that can speed up the process of cleaning the raw materials and allow for production in large quantities.

At the same time as the announcement of the inclusion of *Barniz de Pasto* in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Paris on 15 December 2020, publicity also began to circulate for decorated bottles of a world-famous brand of liquor decorated with *mopa-mopa*, which—according to various sources—fetched hundreds of dollars on the national and international market. However, the artisans were paid COP 70,000, equivalent to about GBP 14, for their efforts. None of them made a profit. However, they were still satisfied because the important thing was recognition, even if only Germán Obando, son of the charismatic master José María Obando, was given visibility.

This recognition has increased the number of visits by renowned designers and companies to home workshops. This has expanded the use of *mopa-mopa* to different types of decorations, including souvenirs and furniture finishes in houses and flats, such as doors, countertops and cabinets, etc., which can be decorated. The works are charged per square centimetre and there are even dreams of requesting volumes of thousands of objects and filling shipping containers that circle the seas. These are dreams that could never be achieved, even if the small number of people who dedicate themselves to this work toiled 24 h a day for the rest of their lives, without forgetting the difficulty in obtaining the raw materials.

Driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent supposed need to jumpstart the economies, it is also considered necessary to strengthen commercialisation in the virtual world. This, together with the visualisation of works in 3D or augmented reality, and the use of laser cutters to improve the quality of the decorations, will probably turn the 'traditional' *Barniz* towards other dynamics of manufacturing, such as *maquila*<sup>8</sup>, and industry that is now linked to tourism that does not take into account the local hosts, only the travellers. It is worth noting that, like all seemingly uncertain futures, we cannot predict the positive or negative impacts that such processes may generate, although the reader can clearly sense which way we believe it is going to go.

'Performances' of artisans and crafts manufactured by external professionals ignore the intimate, alchemical and profound relationships between subjects–objects or cultures–natures and vice versa. These are relationships that we have shared for many years and that are constantly transforming us, but that now seem to be guided solely and exclusively by the needs of the cultural industry.

In short, without the scarce *mopa-mopa* or wood, there will be no harvesters and artisans who work the *Barniz*, and without the Amazon there will be no life. Perhaps, the journeys we propose are an opportunity to let ourselves be transfixed by every word, feeling or

sensation in order to share what happens in these magical places: the home workshops of the *Barniz*, the workshops of the woodworkers and the *montañas-selvas* of *mopa-mopa*. These are spaces in which apparently only objects, techniques, tools and raw materials existed in the absence of humans. As Richard Sennett proposes [Sennett]: “‘Craftsmanship’ designates an enduring and basic human impulse, the desire to perform a task well” [36] (p. 20). For this reason, we also want to do our task in the best way: as historians, that we describe together the women and men harvesters, woodworkers and artisans and how the relationships between humans–non-humans, subjects–objects and cultures–natures were manifested; as anthropologists, that we narrate what these relationships look like today; and as sociologists, that we project what it could become in the future.

That is why we want to encourage people to leave their mark, and to find different alternatives that improve the possibility of existence for humans and non-humans, who, since that morning in 2013, have also become our family. It only remains to say that the harvesters and artisans make the objects, just as the objects produce the harvesters and artisans. It is there, in these complex networks of production, diffusion and marketing that are established between subjects–objects and cultures–natures where it is necessary to trace the multiple relationships that allow us to better understand what was, is and possibly will be the *Barniz de Pasto mopa-mopa* as an intangible cultural heritage with urgent safeguarding needs and thus avoid its risk of disappearing.

Final note: we would like to emphasise that in the last paragraph we intentionally have not written ICH in capital letters in an institutional way, but we write ‘intangible cultural heritage’ in full and in lower case. This is because the situation should be reassessed, that is, where and how are the human and non-human beings that allow the existence of *Barniz de Pasto* today. The integral view of the relationship between subjects–objects and natures–cultures is necessary; these are words that must be joined, without any hierarchy, with the same importance and prominence [22].

Please note that the original Spanish version of this article is available as Supplementary Materials (S1).

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/heritage7090238/s1>, Supplementary Materials S1: original text in Spanish.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this article, ‘*mopa-mopa*’ is used exclusively to refer to the buds obtained from *Elaeagia pastoensis* Mora, while in other publications the term also refers to the material obtained from *Elaeagia utilis*.
- <sup>2</sup> In this case, artisan or master refers to the turners, cabinetmakers, carvers, or decorators using *mopa-mopa*. All four can receive these two connotations interchangeably; what changes is the activity they carry out.



- <sup>3</sup> For this article, we elaborated the category ‘home workshop’ as follows: a sacred place, where the master artisan works daily and lives with his or her family; and a symbolic space within the same dwelling house that is under his or her authority and has a connotation of respect. It is usually located in the living room, dining room, kitchen, courtyard or terrace. This term differs from ‘house workshop’ (which emphasises the physical aspect), school workshop and workshop school (institutional proposals of the Ministry of Cultures and AECID) and workshop (a space completely separate from the dwelling house that is dedicated exclusively to craft work).
- <sup>4</sup> We have chosen to use the unifying expression ‘*Barniz de Pasto mopa-mopa*’ to refer to the technique and raw material with equal importance.
- <sup>5</sup> This included the master decorator Óscar Granja, anthropologist Julián Piedrahita, graphic designer René Quintero Montes, sociologist and audiovisual producer Pablo Vladimir Trejo Obando.
- <sup>6</sup> This is confidential information that the masters refrain from discussing with outsiders in order to avoid others copying their work, and to secure the market and increase recognition of their own label. These ‘secrets’ are passed on by the craftspeople to their apprentices and relate to the procurement and particular transformations of the raw material, as well as the decoration and sale of the products.
- <sup>7</sup> This term refers to a type of antique furniture that has several small drawers, compartments and shelves.
- <sup>8</sup> In the “maquila”, workers assemble parts that will be joined by others to create the final work. This reduces costs.

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