



Lords of Lino

EDUCATION Over the last decade **Gini Wade** has introduced a range of printmaking techniques at La Academia de Arte y Cultura Maya in Guatemala, leading to more economic and creative freedom for local artists

In 2000 I met Dr Hans Guggenheim, who had been the Associate Professor of Anthropology at MIT. He set up a charity (Projectguggenheim) whose aim is to support artists from traditional cultures. When I met him, he was helping two young Mayan artists to improve a dilapidated building to house an art and educational centre for indigenous people in Guatemala, La Academia de Arte y Cultura Maya. The artists, twins Juan and Miguel Leon Cortez, are K'iche Mayans from the Highland town of Chichicastenango. Their choice of career is unusual as most Mayan men are farmers or labourers. Juan and Miguel are self-taught, since educational opportunities for indigenous people are extremely limited. The twins' inspiration and exemplar is the Guatemalan artist, Alfredo Galvez Suarez (1899–1945). His fine historical murals, influenced by Diego Rivera, and his more intimate paintings of Mayans were radical in that they showed indigenous people in a sympathetic light for the first time in the European-influenced Guatemalan art tradition. Dr Guggenheim has given the twins books on Classical Mayan art – not normally available to indigenous people – that have also had an important influence. Juan and Miguel's paintings depict traditional Chichicastenangan scenes and their cosmivision in a most spirited way.

Guggenheim invited me to assist him with the inaugural project, a short film about Mayan culture, and in 2001 I spent three weeks working with Juan and Miguel making the costumes and props for the performances. We enjoyed working together, and became friends. I grew aware of how important La Academia is for the local community as both an educational resource and an affirmation of Mayan culture that has been

undermined by the dominant ladino population (descendants of Spanish colonialists).

I knew part of Juan and Miguel's small income came from selling paintings to passing tourists and thought it could be useful to introduce them to printmaking. Prints would not only be cheaper than their large canvases but also easily portable; and therefore potentially more saleable. Despite its grand name, La Academia is housed in two simple rooms with very basic equipment. In 2006 I returned for two weeks, with materials for printmaking without a press. I brought lino and polystyrene sheets, cheap but good Japanese cutting tools, water-soluble relief ink and rollers. First I demonstrated mono-print techniques, which Juan and Miguel tried, but showed no desire to develop. Relief printing was a different matter. Carving came easily to the twins and their siblings. They all took to linocutting, and we soon ran out of lino. Mayans are resourceful and used to recycling, so next day they arrived with oddments and sheets of wood to carve. Their prints were fairly crude, but bold and unusual. Juan and Miguel and I also ran relief workshops for local children using polystyrene sheets. They produced some lovely work, and we finished the week with an exhibition for their families.

I was able to return the following year to share more techniques. My son-in-law made two screen-print frames that I flat-packed and re-assembled at La Academia. I also brought two squeegees, water-soluble inks, parcel tape and fine net curtains for the screens. I planned to use stencils, as I knew there was no exposure unit available. I brought a two-colour image of a jaguar (an important animal in Mayan mythology) that I made for demonstration purposes. Hans commissioned a

fire ceremony to ensure good fortune for the project. My demonstration intrigued the twins, who had no prior knowledge of screenprinting.

I never thought it appropriate to try to influence the twins' subject matter. They are very involved with the Mayan religion as an expression of their cultural identity, and this motivates their art. I saw my role as that of collaborative printmaker, enabling them to express their vision in print. However I did suggest a series of prints about the 20 Day Lords. The idea appealed to them, as the Day Lords are important entities in Mayan culture. They symbolize the qualities of each day of the sacred Mayan 260-day calendar. I had also brought (coincidentally) 20 small sheets of lino which Juan and Miguel and three of their seven brothers threw themselves into carving. They also cut stencils for screenprinting colour borders to frame the linocut images of the Day Lords. This combination of decorative border and black and white central image worked very well. Mayans have a strong sense of pattern and colour, which comes from the strong tradition of weaving and embroidery, practised by women but completely familiar to men. On my return to the UK, I sold as many prints as I could for the twins. I also sent them a couple of barens, as an improvement on the spoons we had been using to transfer the prints from the matrices.

Printmaking is an ongoing project at La Academia. Screenprinting has been abandoned, probably because the directness of relief prints is more suited to the twins' way of working. They continue to make exciting and powerful woodcuts. Their style has developed and refined, and they use the medium with a sophisticated understanding of balancing black and white areas. Every two years, they send me prints, which I sell to help support La Academia. I hope to return to Chichicastenango to share more techniques, such as reduction and multi-colour prints.

Contact

www.giniwade.com

Images

Main picture, Screenprinting at La Academia

Right, Images created by students during Gini Wade's workshops