Las Alfombras of Semana Santa Antigua, Guatemala

By Carol L. Bowman

We sat in the plaza facing *La Escuela y Iglesia del Cristo* and watched as the participants for the day's event arrived by foot, taxi, horse, scooter and bicycle.
Women, young girls and elderly matrons, all clad in funeral black suits, dresses or miniskirts and black lace veils secured with barrettes or clips, ready to cover their grieving faces, hurried into the church to prepare. Some donned high-heels to endure greater penance while walking over the uneven cobblestones, while others wore more sensible flat shoes. Their somber expressions revealed a sense of honor and responsibility.

Of the nine processions that we had witnessed so far during *Semana Santa* in Antigua, Guatemala, we anticipated this one, the Virgin of Loneliness Funeral March, on the last day before Easter Sunday's jubilant Resurrection Parade, to be the most sorrowful. A hand-crafted wooden platform float, called an
anda
carrying a larger than life image of the Virgin Mary waited inside the sanctuary.

Faithful parishioners, tourists and indigenous people crammed the stone steps, eager to offer blessings to the Virgin Mary, before she began her journey through the streets for the multitudes to view. Mary held her son's crown of thorns and tears inched down her porcelain face, atop the 40 ft. long *anda.* Other floats transporting sculptured images of Mary Magdalene waited around the square to follow the Virgin in the procession.

Eighty women, forty per side, assembled to carry the 7,000 pound float on their shoulders from the church vestibule, down the steep steps and onto the cobbled streets. Only female followers, called *cucuruchos*, may carry the Virgin Mary's *anda* on this day. Hundreds of recruits walk along side the procession, waiting to provide relief and take up the sacred privilege of bearing the burden, representative of the loss Mother Mary had endured.

We slipped in the church's side door to witness the preparations. Funeral March band members, dressed in black suits and white shirts, stretched out in the courtyard, resting up for the parade route lasting 8 hours. Men cloaked in wizardry costumes, with pointy hat head garb that covered their faces except for eye-slits, took their lead-off parade positions.

While activity mounted within the church, a frenzied commotion escalated outside homes around the square. A Maya woman emerged from the shadows of her *casa*, wearing traditional skirt and brightly colored embroidered apron. She carried large dried pods from
Coroza
flowers, filled with natural materials to make an
alfombra
(carpet).

Antigua residents design natural carpets from colored sawdust, flower petals, fruits, vegetables and other materials to soften the rocky path underfoot for the religious processions during *Sema na Santa*
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The couple's carpet needed to be finished before the procession began, to provide cushion for the slow heaving motion as the women carried the Virgin through the *Via Dolorosa.* They started strewing pine needles in a long rectangle, measuring the length of their house frontage.
La senora
kept rearranging
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outer edges of the carpet. She lined up corncobs in a crisscross pattern of Maya geometric design.

With time lapsing, the woman quickened the placement of bougainvillea blossoms. Sensing her distress, onlookers waiting for the procession, offered to assist. As the carpet masters directed their foreign helpers, the tourists soaked up this opportunity to participate. The last petal fell into place as the church doors opened and the
anda
with the grieving Virgin Mary carried by the women dressed in black, emerged.

Within minutes of completion, the carpet, tendered with devotion, looked like a rumpled mass of needles and petals kicked about in a disarray of dust. The *anda and the cucuruchos* walked through this and every carpet lain throughout the processional route in Antigua. Only the floats carrying religious sculptures of either Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary may tread on these pieces of art. Even dogs instinctively circumvented the carpets that waited for the sacred passage. After the carriers passed, bystanders flocked to grab intact remnants for their personal altars at home. They believe that discarded
alfombra
materials are blessed.

The Clean-Up Brigade - men with shovels and brooms, front end bobcats and large trash haulers- followed behind, scooped up all vestiges of the masterpiece, wiping the cobblestone slate clean. Every procession during *Semana Santa,* depicting the entire spectrum of the last days of Jesus Christ, required fresh carpets. As soon as one vanished into the garbage truck, another took formation.

The swaying of the burdensome *andas* through the streets and the revered dedication by the participants ranks Antigua, Guatemala's spectacle as the most magnificent in the Americas. It earned the distinction of a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1979. Thousands of Christians and non-Christians flock to Guatemala during Holy Week to witness the event and viewing the carpets remains a stirring part of the experience.

Visitors roam the streets at 3 or 4 AM to watch groups forming their masterpieces, to snap photos of the art before the processions turn them into heaps. The designs express religious as well as contemporary themes and competition amongst carpet makers wafts through the streets. Sawdust, dyed in brilliant colors acts as a base, using large wooden stencils to set the

scene.

Many are touched off with bougainvillea, carnations, roses and other native plants. In the smaller villages outside of Antigua, residents make their carpets from modest materials. Water sprinkled on finished products keeps patterns in tact and flowers and pine boughs fresh and crisp, ready to soften the way for the floats carrying Jesus and Mary at various stages of their journey.

The images of the *Alfombras* of Antigua remain ingrained in my mind. If you haven't seen them first hand, make plans to be in Antigua, Guatemala next year during
Semana Santa.
You will never forget it.