

Markets and Cultural Voices: Liberty vs. Power in the Lives of Mexican Amate Painters.
Tyler Cowen. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. 189 pp.¹

Reviewed by Alan R. Sandstrom

Tyler Cowen is an economist who has written a book outlining the history and development of *amate* painting, one of the most successful and intriguing folk art traditions to emerge out of Mexico's very creative and ever-changing system of production for the tourist market. Amate is bark paper hand made by Otomí people in the Sierra Norte de Puebla region using methods unchanged from the pre-Hispanic era when the paper played such an important role in religious practices throughout Mesoamerica. The paper itself became a tourist item but the market exploded when Nahua people from the state of Guerrero began painting—first colorful decorative designs taken from their pottery, and then elaborate scenes from village life—on the parchment-like amate. Here is an example of a positive cross-cultural encounter as the Nahua artists produced beautiful folk arts for North American tourist and collector markets. One of Cowen's points is that in the hands of a few Nahua masters, the art form transcended its tourist roots and museum-quality works began to be produced. The best amate masterpieces rival other "outsider art" (that is, works produced outside of the Euro-American fine arts tradition), such as the famous so-called "naïve" paintings from Haiti.

A great strength of the book is its cross-disciplinary perspective. Here we have an economist writing about a topic that has traditionally been of interest to anthropologists and artists. Cowen works in the field of cultural economics and a large part of the current work is dedicated to what he calls "economic biography." He aims to analyze the amate industry in the context of overall patterns of economic development focusing on the twin pillars of liberty and power in the lives of these amate innovators. The author is a serious collector of amate paintings and he knows most of the key players (producers, distributors, promoters, aficionados, etc.) whom he discusses in the book. He traces the development of the art and provides biographical sketches that help the reader understand some of the dynamics characteristic of the artists and an art form that has achieved such unanticipated success. Cowen is an ardent advocate of the creative genius of the best amate painters, but offers dispassionate appraisal of the present conditions and potential for future development of such authentic creations rooted in the village life of the artists who produce them. He provides a very interesting account of how the amate painters were brought to the verge of entering the international art scene only to fail, in the end, to achieve the impact that they had hoped for.

A weakness in the book is that the author does not bring the power of economic analysis sufficiently to bear on his subject. The wedding of economics with anthropology has great potential to enrich both disciplines, however, the account rarely transcends the particular and Cowen leaves the reader hungry for more insight from economics into the material presented. In addition, although the author has consulted with anthropologists who have worked extensively in the region, most of the information that he presents is from interviews, with little observational confirmation that the statements and appraisals that people make are accurate. Emphasis on emic data or self-reported behavior produces, by definition, an incomplete and likely misleading

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account of social phenomena. For example, analyses of actual household budgets in Oapan both before and after the amate phenomenon might surprise the author. Sometimes standards of living and quality of life are actually reduced for people who are being incorporated into the national/international economy, despite the coincidental appearance of cement houses, polyester clothing, electricity, televisions, and the like. Outside confirmation of information obtained from interviews would have greatly strengthened the author's account.

Cowen also appears overly optimistic about the redemptive power of worldwide market forces and development schemes to ameliorate conditions for traditional cultures. He does point out negative as well as positive consequences of changes overtaking Mexico and the rest of the developing world, but on the whole he sees progress. A glimpse at the plight of the world's peoples over the past half millennium who have been victims of Euro-American progress should give the author greater pause. For example, even though he points to potential short-term political problems, it is far from clear that long-term benefits from agreements like NAFTA "dramatically outweigh" any costs, as he asserts (p. 139). Many experts on the matter find NAFTA, GATT, and other international trade agreements to be deleterious to the economies and overall well-being of individuals in developing societies.

The book is well written and extremely informative about the amate painting phenomenon. It also deals with a series of topics that are of significant current interest including economic development, globalization, the tourist industry, the transformation of traditional cultures, and the artificial divide between "insider" and "outsider" art (a product of Eurocentrism par excellence). Cowen has written a valuable and engaging work that should help to revive interest in the amate phenomenon, indigenous crafts work, and Mexican folk arts in general. I sincerely hope that museum curators will read this work and design exhibitions around these remarkable works of art. I applaud the author's use of cultural economics and hope that we will see more of this type of scholarly effort. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in the amate paintings themselves or in the local, national, and international forces that are so important to understanding the dynamics of cultural innovations so ably described in this book.

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