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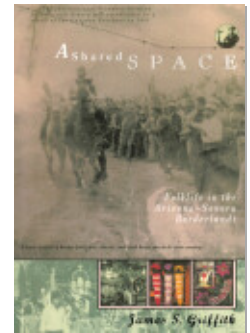
Published by Utah State University Press

Griffith, James.

Shared Space.

Utah State University Press, 1995.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/9320.



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CASCARONES

A Florescent Folk Art Form in Southern Arizona¹

We now move to an examination of one minor form of traditional art—cascarones. These are basically party supplies—they are decorated eggshells that have been filled with confetti, and are intended to be broken over the heads of partygoers, thus increasing the celebratory atmosphere of the occasion. Cascarones have been a part of Mexican culture for at least 150 years, and are made and used all over the borderlands. In the Tucson area, cascarones have become elaborate works of art, colorful confections of paper, paint, glitter, and eggshell. They have also been adopted by some Anglo Americans as decorations symbolizing southern Arizona's regional culture. This interest on the part of members of the dominant society may well be one of the elements that has led to the cascarones' elaboration in form.

Some Background

Cascarón is Spanish for “eggshell.” The word is related to *casaca*, a “shell” or “outer covering,” and to the verb *cascar*, “to break or shatter.” In traditional Mexican culture, *cascarón* also refers to eggshells which have been emptied of their contents and then refilled with confetti. They are intended to be broken over the heads of fiesta or party goers, adding to the festive *ambiente*, or atmosphere, of the occasion.

Cascarones have been a part of Mexican culture since at least the early nineteenth century. The earliest accounts I am aware of describe them being used at Carnival, that time of feasting and partying just before the austerities of Lent. An account of a Carnival ball in Monterey, California, in 1829, describes an animated scene where young men and women broke cascarones over each other’s heads and splashed each other with vials of red, green, and black paint. The cascarones were filled with tiny bits of gold and silver paper, and each participant brought his or her own. It is unclear whether or not the eggs themselves were decorated in any way.²

A much later nineteenth-century Carnival ball, this one in a California mining camp, featured rather more elaborately decorated cascarones. In the words of the author,

They were egg shells, emptied of their contents by means of a small hole in one end, over which was pasted a patch of bright paper, cut in various forms, a star, a flag, or many pointed sun. The egg was painted in gay colors with spots or stripes, or circled with bands like rings of Saturn. Some of them were colored, one half blue, the other yellow or red. Altogether they were a gorgeous collection. No sober-minded, respectable hen would have claimed them; she would never have dared to set on them for fear of hatching a brood of frivolous chicks, too erratic in their tastes to earn a living by plain scratching.³

In these examples, the users of cascarones were young adults, and the cascarones had been made by the various families attending the ball, and brought along as their contribution to the merriment.

U.S. Army Lieutenant John Bourke, author and early ethnographer, described the use of cascarones in Tucson, Arizona Territory, in the early 1870s. The setting was a dance, but the occasion could take place at any time of the year.

The moment you passed the threshold of the ballroom in Tucson you had broken over your head an egg-shell filled either with cologne of the most dubious reputation or else with finely cut gold and silver paper. This custom, preserved in this out-of-the-way place, dates back to the "Carnestolenda" or Shrove-Tuesday pranks of Spain and Portugal, when the egg was really broken over the head of the unfortunate wight and the pasty mass covered with flour.⁴

Anthropologist Frederick Starr observed and purchased cascarones in central Mexico in 1897 while collecting material culture and folk art for the Folk-Lore Society of London. Women would bring great baskets of eggshells to market in Guadalajara at Carnival time. There they would color the shells using a rag or their fingers dipped in different colored paints, and fill them with bits of colored paper (*amores* or *gasajo*), candies (*colación*), or even perfume or ashes, before selling them to prospective partygoers.

Starr collected other, infinitely more elaborate cascarones that same year in Mexico City and Puebla. The eggshells were mounted on cones or sticks, covered with foil or fringed tissue paper so that they resembled flowers, or surrounded by paper wreaths, or even surmounted by wax faces or figurines.

Starr illustrates two of these elaborate cascarones in his book, *Objects Illustrating the Folklore of Mexico*. One, described in the catalogue as "comic," represents a stout soldier in a white uniform. The egg constitutes the soldier's body; his head, complete with kepi, is modelled of clay. He wears epaulettes and a Sam Browne belt, carries a rifle slung over his left shoulder and a bugle in his right hand. The other, more elaborate, is described by Starr as "fancy," and a "careful and delicate piece of work." The egg is covered with embossed tinfoil. Atop the egg rests a bull's head which in turn supports a foil-covered lyre. A bull-fighter, fully dressed in his *traje de luces*, "suit of lights," stands within the horns of the lyre, his right hand raised. Tiny wax flowers adorn both the egg and the lyre. Complex works of art such as these would

cost far more than the simple cascarones, and were usually purchased as gifts. They may well not have been intended to be broken.⁵

Cascarones are still made and used all over Mexico and in Mexican communities in the United States. In most localities I know of, the cascarones resemble those seen by Starr in Guadalajara: they are colored eggshells filled with confetti or glitter. The users of the cascarones and the occasions on which they are used appear to have changed over the last several decades, however. Today's cascarones are almost without exception used by children.

One family I know, a family with strong roots in the eastern Arizona mining community of Clifton-Morenci, makes and uses cascarones at Easter time. During the last days of Lent, the entire family decorates the eggshells it has been saving throughout that season. The shells are painted in one or two colors, filled with confetti made from cut-up newspapers, and sealed with a scrap of kleenex glued over the hole in the end. Then on Easter Sunday, after Mass, the fun—characterized by one family member as “egg wars”—begins. There are well-understood rules to the game: the activity takes place out-of-doors, for instance, and older family members must bow their heads at the request of younger and smaller relatives.⁶

The change from a courtship ritual to a children's activity seems to have taken place fairly recently. One Tucson cascarón maker remembers her mother talking about making cascarones in the mid-1930s to be sold at special fiestas at her family's dance hall in Coolidge, Arizona. Each was purchased for a nickel by adults attending the dances. The cascarones consisted of decorated eggshells placed on short stems or cones of rolled paper. Some were filled with perfume-scented confetti, while others (kept in a separate container or marked in a special way) were filled with ashes or flour.⁷

The Form Becomes Complex

In Tucson and southern Arizona in the 1990s, cascarones are a popular commercial craft item. They are no longer associated with Carnival or any other specific time of year, but appear for sale at the outdoor fairs, festivals, religious fiestas, and church bazaars that are important parts of southern Arizona's annual cycle. Cascarones cost little to make and sell for between one and three dollars apiece, depending on their complexity.

Cascarones in the Tucson area have gotten complex indeed. Simple filled and decorated eggshells are still occasionally sold, but most locally made cascarones are mounted on newspaper cones twelve to sixteen inches long. These conical stems are covered with cut and fringed *papel de china*, or colored tissue paper.⁸ The paper work on the stems can be simple or complex. Rows of paper fringes may be arranged in bands of brilliantly contrasting color. Paper streamers, ribbons, or even feathers often hang from the end of the cone, or are inserted in one of the fringes of paper partway up from the end. For many artists, the paperwork on the cone is the most elaborate part of the cascarón, while the eggshell is painted with plain colors or relatively simple designs of bands or dots. There are numberless ways in which the colors of the egg and the colors of the tissue paper around the cone can be played off against each other.

Other artists concentrate on the eggshell itself, leaving the paper covering on the cone relatively simple. I have seen cascarón eggshells with representations of cactus, flowers, landscapes, and even the baroque, eighteenth-century facade of nearby Mission San Xavier del Bac painted on them!

Some artists paint faces on the eggshells. Sometimes these are simply generalized people—blondes, Indians, cowboys, clowns, or even monsters. Sometimes they are characters out of Mexican or Anglo American popular culture, like Pancho Villa or Adelita the revolutionary *soldadera*, or Fat Albert or Batman or Dick Tracy or, perhaps inevitably, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Bart Simpson.

A few makers create animal cascarones as well as human ones. When creating animal forms, many cascarón artists set the eggshell at right angles to the cone. Animal cascarones I have seen include snakes, rabbits, squirrels, cats, pigs, and skunks. These latter, as created by Ángela Montoya of Tucson, are especially charming. They have blue eyes and a broad white stripe down their backs, while a wispy black-and-white tail made of plastic fiber arches over all.

Cascarones, like piñatas, can be made to conform to seasonal themes. For Hallowe'en, witches, devils, and pumpkins. (In October, 1992, I saw a series of Dracula cascarones, complete with bloody teeth.) For Christmas, Santas and Santa's helpers. For Easter, bunnies and baby chicks. And at graduation time in June of 1989, one enterprising cascarón maker turned out male and female graduates and sold them outside the ceremony at Tucson High School.

Occasionally the cascarones are even more elaborate, becoming actual figurines. The most striking of these figurine cascarones are

made by a young Yaqui Indian woman named Feliciano Martinez. She told me she had long thought of creating something different in the way of cascarones and finally did so in 1990, for a raffle to raise funds for a Yaqui arts education program.⁹ The cascarón figurines she made for this occasion represented *folclórico* dancers from the Mexican state of Jalisco. Great attention was paid to details of make-up and hairdo, and the full, tissue-paper skirt of each figurine had appliqued embroidery in the form of cut paper of a contrasting color. In place of a cone, the cascarones had legs. The following winter, she made a series of angel cascarones for sale at Christmas time. These were complete with long white dresses and gold haloes. The elaborate figurines sold for around \$7 apiece, considerably more than the price of ordinary cascarones at public events.

In October, 1994, a traditional paper artist living in Nogales, Sonora, gave me two equally elaborate figurine cascarones she had made. Each one represented a woman dressed in a long paper gown and holding a basket made of folded scraps of slick paper. The baskets were filled with tiny paper flowers. Each woman's hair was done into an elaborate pompadour, the curls being of colored paper. The base of each cascarón was an inverted newspaper cone.

Cascarones Across Cultural Boundaries

Mexican Americans are not the only folks in Tucson who make cascarones. Yaquis and Tohono O'odham also make and sell the colorful, ephemeral objects. I have yet to isolate a specifically Tohono O'odham style of cascarón. The outstanding O'odham cascarones I have seen seem to be the results of individual creativity, rather than reflections of a specifically O'odham cultural tradition. Thus Frances Manuel of San Pedro Village made cascarones in the shape of blossoms, while members of the Moreno family of San Xavier Village concentrated rather on elaborately wrapped, elongated cones. The only constant feature I have observed in regard to O'odham cascarones is an emphasis on the paperwork rather than on the eggshell—I have yet to see an O'odham-made cascarón with any representational painting on the egg.

Yaqui cascarones are a different matter. One prolific Yaqui cascarón maker, Ernesto Quiroga, may have had a major influence on the southern Arizona cascarón scene. Mr. Quiroga was raised in Summerland, California, and as a boy made stemless cascarones with faces

painted on the eggshells and sold them on the street at the Old Spanish Days Fiesta in nearby Santa Barbara. When he moved to Tucson's Old Pascua Yaqui community as a young man, he started making cascarones to raise funds for community projects. Learning to make stems from friends, he combined these with his faces. Later, he started using specifically Yaqui designs such as sun symbols and pascola dance masks. He began putting Yaqui phrases on his cascarones so that Yaqui kids would become familiar with elements of their own culture.¹⁰

Mr. Quiroga, by the way, has made a strong start towards integrating cascarones into Yaqui culture. For him, the confetti inside the egg has much the same meaning as the confetti used at the dramatic climax of the annual Yaqui Easter ceremony.¹¹ On this occasion, the confetti represents flowers, which for many Yaquis are the visible manifestation of God's grace. When Christ died on the cross, according to a common Yaqui belief, His blood changed to flowers as it fell to the earth. It is with this meaning in mind that Mr. Quiroga always waits until Good Friday night to take his cascarones to the plaza to sell. In his words, he doesn't bring the cascarones out until after "Jesus Christ turned the world into flowers."¹² By the same token, having a cascarón broken over one's head is to have blessings conferred upon one.

This very Yaqui interpretation of the use and meaning of cascarones is not pushed at purchasers, it simply exists, in Mr. Quiroga's mind. That the confetti constitutes a blessing of sorts may not in fact be a uniquely Yaqui notion but one shared by some Mexican Americans and Anglos who also sometimes refer to the good luck or blessings the eggs bring.¹³ The importance of flowers in Yaqui culture may go far towards explaining the fact that one frequently finds cascarones in the shape of flowers being made and sold by Yaquis.

As a male cascarón maker, Mr. Quiroga is definitely in the minority. Most people I know of who make cascarones are women, and in many cases, making cascarones for sale is a family affair. Children and grandchildren help out on many of the stages of manufacture and often suggest new ideas for cascarones. Incidentally, Anglo Americans often express surprise at so much work and creativity going into the creation of an object whose destiny is to be broken. Most of the cascarón makers with whom I have discussed the subject have told me that, aside from the money they earn, the whole point of their work is to make kids happy. If that happens, the work is worth it.

It is difficult to judge these things, but it does seem that the major consumers of cascarones at Tucson's fiestas are children. Bits of



A cluster of Santa Cruz Valley-style cascarones. From left, a representation of a Yaqui ceremonial *pascola* mask (made by Yaqui artist Ernesto Quiroga), Mickey Mouse, a plain eggshell decorated with strips of colored paper, Bart Simpson, and Spider Man. The last two were made by Angela Montoya. The long stems typical of this style may be clearly seen. Photograph by David Burkhalter.



Three cascarones. On the left, an elaborate figurine made by Gloria Moroyoqui of Nogales, Sonora. The head is an eggshell; all other details, including the elaborate coiffure, are of paper. The basket is plaited of tiny strips of newspaper and filled with tiny paper roses. Center, a flower cascarón, also made by Doña Gloria. It has an egg in its center. On the right, a Yaqui cascarón with a thick stem and a painted egg. Photograph by David Burkhalter.

shattered eggshell, scatters of confetti, and broken paper cones are a common sight on the ground at most of these occasions. As I suggested above, most cascarón makers with whom I have discussed the matter see children as the ultimate consumers of their product. However, a small but growing number of adults—mostly Anglo Americans—are purchasing cascarones as art objects. I often see them in homes, hung on walls or bundled up and thrust into Mexican or Indian pots and baskets. Thus displayed, they add a regional touch to the decor of many kitchens and living rooms in the Tucson area. They are colorful, make excellent conversation pieces, and are supremely inexpensive as well. Regional folk art at \$2.00 is hard to resist. Cascarones don't keep their brilliant colors forever, but when they start to fade, one can always give them to some kids and let them fulfill their original destiny.

In fact, at least one cascarón maker has started making a new kind of larger cascarón strictly for decoration. Lou Gastelum saves L'EGGS stocking and pantyhose containers and makes outsize cascarones from them. When I asked her what would happen if I tried to break one over somebody's head, she hastened to explain that these cascarones were for decorations only. Red and blue cascarones (the colors of the University of Arizona, located in Tucson) are especially popular in this decorator size. Some of these even bear the legend "U of A," painted on the plastic egg.

Another innovation has been made by a local Yaqui woman who substitutes cardboard cylinders from paper towel rolls for the paper cone on which the eggshells are mounted. The cylinder is decorated with fringed tissue paper and can then be filled with candies and other favors, thus combining the function of a cascarón with that of a piñata.

Two women in Portland, Oregon—Jan Wheeland and Elizabeth Johnson—have independently carried out a similar adaptation. Far from being brought up with cascarones, they were unaware of the tradition until 1986, when *Sunset* magazine published an article on how to make Tucson-style cascarones.¹⁴ Intrigued by what they saw, they started making cascarones for their own children's parties. They then got the idea of combining the cascarón with the English party cracker tradition, creating what they call "Egg Bonkers."¹⁵ Each bonker consists of a decorated eggshell mounted on a stubby cone of stiff, colored paper. The eggshells are usually painted to represent faces. While obviously derived from Tucson-style cascarones, the bonkers actually look quite different. The cone is stubbier, for one thing—about four

inches long, as opposed to the eight-inch or longer Tucson cones—and is made of stiff gift-wrapping paper. The real difference appears when the eggshell is broken, however. In addition to confetti, each bonker contains a toy, a balloon, candy, and a printed joke (or “yoke”). A sample of the latter: “What kind of gum do chickens chew?—Chickleets.” Oof.¹⁶

There is evidence that the Tucson style of cascarón-on-a-cone is spreading into other parts of the Southwest. A Tohono O’odham man whom Ernesto Quiroga taught to make cascarones has recently moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. There he has introduced the style to his friends, including members of several of New Mexico’s Pueblo communities. It remains to be seen whether or not the style catches on there.

But Why in Southern Arizona?

The question remains of why all this creative activity has taken place in Tucson in the 1980s and 1990s. In the first place, the Tucson calendar typically includes a number of out-of-doors festivals and fiestas. Yaqui Easter is celebrated in three communities in or near the city. Many Catholic parish churches have annual fund-raising events, which are typically held out-of-doors. The annual Tucson Festival, an important local celebration from the 1950s to the early 1990s, included The San Xavier Fiesta and La Fiesta del Presidio which featured regional Native American and Mexican American cultural traditions respectively. The Mexican patriotic and cultural holidays of the Cinco de Mayo and the Dieciseis de Septiembre draw large crowds to the city’s parks. Other annual open-air events which have a strong Mexican flavor have been started in comparatively recent years: Tucson Meet Yourself, the Norteño Festival, the Mariachi Conference, the Fiesta de San Agustín, and the Tumacacori Fiesta.

Each of these events attracts large numbers of families in a festive, money-spending mood; each provides a setting in which cascarones may be purchased and also broken.

There is a good chance that the fact that Tucson is a university town also enters into the equation. The university attracts graduate students and faculty, many of whom are culturally liberal, interested in regional traditions and celebrations, mildly affluent, and have young families. Just the folks to buy cascarones for their kids.¹⁷

Just the folks, also, to buy them as decorations, or even as objects of casual collection. Some of the university people I know who buy cascarones do not break them right away, but hang them on their walls at least until the paper fades. These people are often attracted to new and innovative cascarón designs.

These various commercial settings and markets seem to have led to a degree of competition. If one has something new in the way of cascarones, one's work may well sell better. So it is that this may be one of the reasons for the remarkable "cascarón explosion" that has taken place over the past few years in Tucson. Not that I believe this to be the entire explanation. The arrival of certain key individuals such as Ernesto Quiroga, the natural desire of many artists and craftspeople to keep experimenting and produce something different, suggestions from the artists' children and grandchildren—all these seem to be factors as well.

Whatever the explanations, and I am sure they are far more complex than I have outlined here, it remains that the cascarón tradition in Santa Cruz and Pima Counties in southern Arizona is currently in a state of florescence.