

Making a Match before Tinder: Traditional Graffiti in Torrenueva¹

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Abstract

Traditionally, on the night of April 30th, marking the beginning of popular May celebrations, young men have gone out to write graffiti in the town of Torrenueva (Ciudad Real, Spain). This original graphic phenomenon is locally called “pintar los mayos” and consists of writing the word “MAYO” (“May” in Spanish) followed by the year of the execution (i.e., MAYO 98) on the façade of a girl's house as proof of interest and as an excuse to strike up a conversation. It is hard to confirm the origin of this custom with precision, but the tradition might date back from at least the 1940s. Today it's on the verge of disappearing; only one “mayo” was found in 2020 and none in 2021 or 2022. The ritual has evolved over the years in terms of purpose, location and medium and can be analyzed in the category of “love graffiti”².

Keywords

Outsider graffiti, rural graffiti, love graffiti, May traditions, exposed/alternate writing, extinct graphic traditions, Torrenueva (Ciudad Real, Spain)

1 This article is an extended version of the previous article: “Grafitis de mayo: Pintadas de amor en Torrenueva” published in *Ensayos Urbanos*, 3-9-2020 <http://www.ensayosurbanos.com/2020/09/03/graffiti-de-mayo-pintadas-de-amor-en-torrenueva/> and an update and translation of “El amor antes de Tinder” (29-41) published in *Besana. Revista de estudios e investigación de la casa regional de Castilla-La Mancha en Madrid*, No. 40 March 2022. Translation of the Spanish version by Rosalie Wheeler.

2 Regarding the methodology, the field study is based on the documentation and analysis of *mayos* found in the last 3 years. These have been compared with a tour of the town via Google Maps, making it possible to capture some of the walls in their previous states, since most of the photos on Google Maps date from 2009 and some from 2014. Some people have also shared their memories and anecdotes about this practice in interviews, and I take this opportunity to thank them. I encourage anyone who has more information about the *mayos*, who wishes to rectify some of the ones mentioned here, or who knows of any other similar tradition, to please write to me at: isabelakis@yahoo.es

1. Introduction

On entering Torrenueva via the Valdepeñas road, one of the first façades that welcomes visitors is that of the old winery, now in disuse. The word “mayo”, in capital letters of different sizes and colors, is repeated on the wall [Fig. 1] The words were all written on the same day of different years as part of the rituals that mark the beginning of the May festivities. From the night of April 30th to the morning of May 1st, gangs of boys would wander from door to door

of the homes of single girls. They ended the night by writing on the façades of their houses. Today it is difficult to determine when this tradition appeared in the town. When asked, the local people, some in their 90s, remember it happening “always”. It follows that the custom could have already existed in the 1940s. Ángel Sánchez Carrero, describing the customs of the municipality in the 1950s, also alludes to this (142).



Figure 1. Various mayos on the old winery, Carretera de Valdepeñas, Torrenueva 2020.

In the popular imagination the term graffiti is associated with a certain level of otherness, from the word itself to the specific aesthetic and artistic connotations that are usually attributed to it. Because of this, the word in the Spanish vernacular, *pintada*, could well be a more descriptive, normal and familiar way to speak of local traditions or pranks¹. *Pintada* is the name used for a rushed piece of writing of low quality, usually by non-professional artists. Such is the case of the *mayos* in the town of Torrenueva² for which the town does not usually employ the word graffiti, preferring to refer to this activity as “pintar los *mayos*”³ (in English, “painting the Mays”), and to the end result as *mayos*.

As with political graffiti, *mayos* appeal to a broad audience, and their value lies in the readability of the message. In the case of love graffiti, although directed at a particular person, they are intended to be understood by the whole community. In this sense, the *mayos* correspond to Armando Petrucci's definition of exposed writing: designed to be used for social purposes in a public space and, therefore, large in size and easy to read (25). Among the numerous local graffiti traditions, the *mayos* of Torrenueva, the subject of this article, are relatively unknown within the tradition of love graffiti⁴.

1 Interestingly, the Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española, RAE), dedicated to the standardisation of the Spanish language, only uses the word “graffito” for historical cases: “Graffito. Writing or drawing, by hand, on ancient monuments.” (Graffito. m. Escrito o dibujo hecho a mano por los antiguos en los monumentos.)

2 Torrenueva is a municipality in the province of Ciudad Real that historically belongs to the region of Campo de Montiel. According to data from the National Statistics Institute (INE) in 2020, it had 2667 inhabitants. Miguel Antonio Maldonado Felipe has written about the variations on this custom in other towns of Campo de Montiel. His article can be found in the bibliography, and is well worth a read.

3 The psychosocial perception of the term corresponds to the RAE's official definition of *pintada* as: “The act of writing signs, generally with political or social content, on walls.” (f. Acción de pintar en las paredes letreros preferentemente de contenido político o social.)

4 Torrenueva is also home to New York Graffiti style, but this article will focus on the traditional type, as reflected in the title. According to Maldonado Felipe (73-74), in Torrenueva there was also a tradition of “throwing the bouquet” (in Spanish, “echar el ramo”), which consisted of throwing the bucket of paint on the wall once the mayo had been finished, as a prank and a way of leaving one's mark.



Figure 2. MAYO'15 MONERÍA TQ on the ground, Santa Lucía St. Torrenueva, 2020.

2. Description, analysis and interpretation of the mayos

In general, a *mayo* consists of the word “MAYO” in capital letters followed by an apostrophe and the last two figures of the year it was done (MAYO '08), although the year is sometimes written whole (MAYO 2002). *Mayos* sometimes include the name of the girl (MAYO '20 ÁNGELA), a pet name (MAYO TQM JENNY – the English equivalent would be something like: MAYO I LUV U JENNY) or a term of endearment (MAYO MI REINA, MAYO '15 MONERÍA – in English, MAYO MY QUEEN, MAYO '15 PRETTY THING) [Fig. 2]. Sizes vary, but they are usually larger than a palm's length, and sometimes double that, since they must be visible at a certain distance. There are slight variations in the spelling of some *mayos*, such as “MAYETE”, “MAYA” or adding a heart or a “TQ”, “TK”, “TK”⁵ to signify “I love you” (in Spanish, “Te quiero”/ “Te Kiero”). *Mayos*

are usually written with paint and a brush⁶, although some more recent ones have been sprayed on with an aerosol can. With regard to the colors chosen; white, blue, brown and black are the most common, very possibly because these are the colors of paint that people have around the house. White and indigo⁷ are the colors traditionally used to whitewash façades and to cover skirting boards. The brown “paint” could come from a mixture of water and the soil of the area, which contains a very reddish pigment because it is rich in iron⁸. Finally, black is the color used on the window bars that people touch up periodically. The above description is based on the *mayos* that remain in Torrenueva in 2021. The oldest one could date from 1997 (it is not very legible), although there is photographic documentation that could date from the 1980s or earlier. The most recent one is from 2020⁹. No *mayos* from 2021 or 2022 have been found. However, in May 2022 children and young people painted a group mural on the façade of the bullring as part of an initiative by the local government of Torrenueva¹⁰.

To understand this custom, it is necessary to consider the way things worked in a rural society of the past. In this context, personal relations between men and women were supervised by the family and the community. This explains the importance of making the declaration public, so that not only the girl mentioned would find out, but also her whole family and the rest of the community. According to the cultural association El Candil, in the past, mourning was a very long process and mainly fell to the women. Painting a *mayo*, and thus forcing the girl to go out to the

5 It is understood that this type of simplified language is influenced by the fast typing used on mobile devices in recent years.

6 The word + number formula, and the use of capital letters, which are easier to write with a brush, are also reminiscent of some of the first tags in New York in the late 1960s.

7 According to Maldonado Felipe, “In terms of the colours used, popular belief established different connotations and meanings for them. Thus, in general, the colour blue, the most commonly used, expressed loving and affectionate feelings towards the female recipient of the *mayo*” (71).

8 Sánchez Carrero claims that it was painted with clay and water (142).

9 Although I have not been able to find any examples from 2021, this does not mean that none exist. The case of the 2020 *mayo* is particularly curious because at that time Spain was in confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

10 The mural is intended to be a tribute to the tradition of painting *mayos*, but it lacks a context, which reduces it to a merely decorative piece.

street to clean it up, was a way of bringing about a meeting¹¹ and an opportunity for the girl in question to give a response¹². The mayo could also be a territorial marking, warning the competition that the girl already had a suitor; although, according to Miguel Antonio Maldonado, sometimes several hopefuls would write on the same façade¹³. The absence of a *mayo*, on the other hand, would indicate that there was no interested party. In the words of Sánchez Carrero: "On the first of May/ in the morning, / the girl without a *mayo* / is dismayed" (142)¹⁴. In that sense, there were families who took pride in the *mayos* on their house. Other families, especially those in which there were many single daughters, stayed up all night to scare off the *mayistas* (the boys who painted the *mayos*), making that house a particularly appealing challenge. Despite a certain tolerance of this custom due to its social function and tradition, it has always been punished by local authorities. In this regard Figueroa says, on the subject of love graffiti: "Its social acceptance is normally positive and is justified by its

emotional value and traditional practice, an almost obligatory part of the process of sexual initiation or the love ritual." (2004: 20)

It should also be noted that in La Mancha in times past, and for reasons related to the local climate and health, most of the façades were whitewashed. The downside of this was having to *jalbergar*¹⁵, or whitewash, once a year, usually on the first few spring days of good weather. Consequently, the *mayos* did not stay on the walls for long and their presence would not pose a major problem. However, from the 1970s¹⁶, with changing times and fashions, façades became more individualized, with various designs involving exposed stone or tiles, and the *mayos* began to cause discontent¹⁷. Some recent designs include a gated area set back from the street that prevents access to the façade. These circumstances gradually caused the *mayos* to move to a few concrete façades where activity has become intense. Recently, *mayos* have started to appear on

11 There are numerous customs related to the ways in which women and men could communicate and send coded signals at times when the public space was dominated by men, and the different genders could not meet freely. This is the case, for example, of the lenços do namorados (lovers' handkerchiefs) in the northern part of Portugal.

12 Maldonado Felipe clarifies that, although the girl could not take the initiative, she could choose not to accept the proposal: "Depending on the place, different ways have been used to notify the suitors of the rejection of their proposed relationship; from sending third parties to communicate the refusal to the suitor, to the curious female practice of being seen in public with her apron the other way round, an unequivocal sign of non-acceptance' (71).

13 "Exclusivity was not always maintained and respected, since the same façade could have more than one suitor wishing to adorn it. This caused many of the suitors, once their pictorial declaration was complete, to stay up all night to defend their canvas from other possible candidates" (67-68). Although the author refers to May traditions in several different villages, we can presume that such cases also occurred in Torrenueva.

14 The original words in Spanish express this better: "El uno de mayo/ por la mañana, / la que no tiene mayo/ está desmayada", the verb *desmayar* meaning both to faint and to lose heart.

15 This is a variation of the Spanish word *encalar* (to whitewash) used in La Mancha. Although the elimination of the *mayo* in the annual whitewash is relevant to those times because the wall was whitewashed in any case for reasons related to hygiene, the action does not cease to be significant, as Figueroa indicates (2017: 168) because the purifying and symbolic character of lime and the colour white in relation to cleanliness and order are opposed, by definition, to the concept of graffiti. In this way, cleaning up the wall could also be seen as a kind of moral censorship.

16 From the 1960s there was a drastic decline in population that could also have contributed, together with the relaxation of social norms, to the progressive decline of the *mayos* trend.

17 The concept of public and private space differs from that of the city. In the traditional one-family houses of the villages, people feel that the façade belongs to them. That sense of privacy also extends to the section of the street that each neighbour is responsible for cleaning.



Figure 3. MAYO'15 MONERÍA TQ on the ground, Santa Lucía St. Torrenueva, 2020.

other surfaces, including the ground [Fig. 3], where they now tend to last less time¹⁸.

At present there are still some walls that have accumulated mayos over the years, forming a kind of safe space and living museum for them, albeit provisional. The aforementioned winery on the road to Valdepeñas, several houses on Calle Arjona, or a warehouse on Calle Cordón, among others, are unused spaces that heroically serve as a provisional and improvised hall of fame where the *mayos* have been renewed year after year. Just as in the centers of cities the spaces between buildings are usually the target of graffiti writers taking advantage of the absence of surveillance and the legal vacuum derived from their provisional status, the uninhabited houses of the village, in most cases waiting to be bought and demolished, become a temporary exhibition space for mayos. Some curious surfaces on which we can find *mayos* are light poles [Fig. 4], trash cans [Fig. 5] or traffic signs. One notable example can be found in the Plaza Uno de Mayo, in which someone has



Figure 4. MAYO 2002 on a light pole, Carretera de Valdepeñas, Torrenueva 2020.

taken advantage of the name of the square and a 20-km speed limit sign to simply add two numbers resulting a less obvious “MAYO 2007” that the viewer must put together in parts.

Although a *mayo* on the ground in front of a house tends to disappear faster, it maintains its original contextual value. This is not the case with other locations such as the bullring, the park or the small square at the back of the church, where the link to the home of the person the declaration is aimed at is no longer so obvious. This shows that the

¹⁸ In this sense, the *mayos* have become part of the growing use of the ground as a space for writing on, as Morant-Marco explains in his study of several municipalities of Valencia in "La escritura sobre el pavimento callejero: los mensajes de felicitación" (Writing on the Sidewalks: Birthday Greetings), where he reflects on the symbology of this space: the physical base and, therefore, the foundation of the community, but also a space that is also subject to the action and metaphor of being stepped upon (134). The author also observes that, along with congratulatory messages, love messages are the ones most frequently found on the pavement (135)



Figure 6. Various mayos on San Sebastian St. Captured by Google Images in 2009.



Figure 5. MAYO'14 on a trash bin, Constitution St. Torrenueva, 2021.

custom is evolving by changing its context. It is no longer necessary to bring about the encounter with the girl, but the declaration can appear in another symbolic, or, simply, less crowded, space. Similarly, there are many cases in which the *mayos* of years gone by are recycled¹⁹, by writing on top of the previous number to update it [Fig. 6]. Thus, for example, a MAYO' 03 becomes a MAYO' 14, or one from the year '97 is updated to '07. Although this tactic makes it difficult to read some dates, it is also a manifestation of one of the fundamental values of graffiti; its open and palimpsestic character (Figueroa: 2017, 141-146). On the other hand, it explains one of the new functions that the *mayo* could have acquired, which has more to do with celebratory graffiti: each *mayo* is used to honor an anniversary or a serious relationship throughout the years. For this reason, the *mayos* can be viewed as similar to other forms of love graffiti, such as scratching the names or initials of the lovers united by a “+” or an “and” next to an important date for the couple, or writing these inside a heart,²⁰ on the trunk of a tree or any other surface.

19 Another type of recycling has to do with using the letter O of a *mayo* to draw a peace symbol, or writing MAYA with the last A inside a circle, like in the anarchist symbol. In this way, love graffiti gains a political tone.

20 The recent custom of installing a padlock with the names of the couple is in the same vein. According to Figueroa (2014: 87), the padlock custom is popularised in the novel *Ho voglia di te* by Federico Moccia, 2006, later made into a film in 2007 by Luis Pietro. In the scene in which the main characters go to the Ponte Milvio in Rome, the padlocks placed there by lovers are visible.

3. Love graffiti

Erotic impulses and the celebration of love have always driven people to write in public spaces. Enrique Montero has collected and translated numerous graffiti found in Pompeii and with romantic or sexual themes, which are among the most popular. Soldiers, gladiators and other ordinary people²¹ gave free rein to their erotic fantasies and perversions, or took the opportunity to make a declaration, as if the ritual of capturing their wishes in writing would help them to come true: "When I write, Love dictates to me and Cupid guides my hand (...)" (Moreno, 97). Drawings of phalluses were also frequent, separately or next to another message. These originally had a religious significance, and continue to be common today, albeit with a different meaning²². On the other hand, Brassai's photographs of graffiti in the slums of Paris, taken between 1930 and 1960, show that love is one of the most frequent themes found in the street. Brassai himself reflects on this in his classifications and explanations. An abundance of love graffiti can be found at the entrance to Juliet's house in Verona, in public baths, on the façades of buildings in any urban space, or carved on trees and wooden benches²³. These are all examples of the well-established custom of leaving a tangible mark to express one's feelings towards another person²⁴.

An older version of the mayos appears to have existed in Ancient Rome. Figueroa mentions a text by Plautus²⁵

that shows that one of the courtship rituals of the time involved writing graffiti on the façade of a girl's house. From the world of declaratory graffiti, like the mayos, comes an anecdote from Cornbread, one of the first writers in Philadelphia. He reminisces about his schooldays, before he became famous for writing his own name. In 1967 he wrote "Cornbread loves Cynthia" on the desk of the girl he liked, the façade of his block and on the school bus route, because he did not dare talk to her (Haegele, 249). Other writers of the time describe the same initial incentive for writing on walls: to attract the attention of girls.

In Petrucci's analysis of this human need that has been present throughout history, he points out the desire to externalize what is private. The act of making the feelings that belong to one's intimate world evident, visible, tangible and public can even involve breaking a rule, he adds (205). In this sense, the wall has two functions: in addition to providing a background for the declaration of love, it acts as a separation and connecting axis between the private domestic space that is invaded and sullied, while making the message public, thus exposing the privacy of the agents on both sides of the wall.

3. Interpretation in the context of the spring festivals

As mentioned earlier, the dates and characteristics of the traditional graffiti in Torrenueva lead us to the May festivals that celebrate the arrival of spring, originally an occasion

21 Montero says that women also participated in these intimate and private expressions that became public. On the role of women in the story of graffiti, vid. Figueroa, 2020.

22 "The cult of the phallus (...) is based in religion. The genitals, a symbol of the creative impulse, were regarded with religious fear as a veneration of the mysterious forces of creation itself. At the same time, they were used as an apotropaic amulet to rid man of all fascination, of all human or divine evil ... The divinity of conception took from the genitals all malice. Only the decline in primitive customs made the phallus a symbol of pleasure. With the elimination from the religious realm of the worship of the phallus and its erotic consideration, the door is open to mockery and to erotic play" (Montero, 15).

23 Figueroa provides a literary example from Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It* (1599-1600), in which Orlando carves on tree bark as a way to express his frustrated love (2014, 89).

24 As Morant-Manco (134 and 144) recalls, there are several songs that mention this custom. We need look no further than the Spanish pop-rock group Radio Futura: "If I see you again painting/ a chalk heart on the wall/ I'm going to beat you for having/ written my name inside" (from the album *Veneno en la piel*, 1990). Original lyrics in Spanish: "si te vuelvo a ver pintar/ un corazón de tiza en la pared/ te voy a dar una paliza por haber/ escrito mi nombre dentro".

25 It comes from the comedy *Mercator*, or *The Merchant* (a character complains about the possible suitors of a slave who lives in their house): "to plaster painted verses on the doors of my house" (13). Enriquez González, J.A. (ed.) *Comedias II* (3-30) Madrid: Gredos, 1996.

to worship Venus, and associated with love and fertility. The May rituals were aimed at guaranteeing the harvests and the cycles of nature. In many parts of Spain, young men open the celebrations on the night of April 30th by placing a tree, a trunk or a greasy pole called a “mayo” in the square. Dances and games take place around this vertical element, and it is decorated with plants. This decoration sometimes extends to other parts of the village, especially to the doors and balconies of the girls of marriageable age. These pre-Roman traditions still survive today, mixed and syncretized with Christianity. Depending on the area, the tree can be replaced or accompanied by the cross²⁶, which is covered with flowers, and the month is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and, by extension, to all mothers. The celebrations are often accompanied by purifying elements, associated with renewal and necessary for life, such as fire and water²⁷. In the case of Torrenueva, as we have seen, that night some village boys go to the church to sing the first mayo²⁸ to the Virgin Mary, before wandering around the doors of the single women. A little later, they paint.

Despite local variations, the gender binary seems to be a prominent element of the festivals. This means that girls tend to take a more passive role as the recipients of visits, and their activities are limited to decorating the cross inside the houses or around the churches. Boys, on the other hand, travel longer distances to look for the tree²⁹. They compete, and do the rounds singing or painting the mayos. In this context, painting mayos is also comparable to other aspects of graffiti in which game, attitude and swagger play a fundamental role³⁰. In any case, in recent years mayos have appeared with boys' names such as: JESUS, MAYO '19 or MAYO JUANJO.

In general, May celebrations have always had a more festive, popular feel, seeming less institutional than other religious festivals. In fact, their predominantly pagan character has been the cause of several conflicts with the church over the centuries³¹, but this has not stopped the celebrations from being held. After all, in its anthropological dimension, a festival is essentially a temporary break from daily life and its norms. This explains, in part, the complex status of these mayos, which occupy a grey area

26 The Day of the Invention of the Holy Cross is celebrated on May 3rd and commemorates the discovery of the Cross of Christ by St. Helena.

27 Due to space limitations, this paragraph is only a very general summary of the many variations on the May festivals within the Iberian Peninsula and Europe. There are many publications on the subject, especially on the *mayos* in Andalusia, but the classic reference used by most of them is the text by Julio Caro Baroja: *La Estación de amor. Fiestas populares de mayo a San Juan* (1979). (Seasons of love. Popular May festivals dedicated to San Juan).

28 These songs are also called mayos and are popular songs accompanied by string instruments. The lyrics vary in each place. They usually consist of four verses with rhymes in the second and fourth. They are traditionally sung by men and dedicated to women, with the first one normally dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The patron saint of Torrenueva is Our Lady of Cabeza, whose image is found in the chapel of the same name.

29 Notice how the central figure of the tree, and later the cross, is somehow reminiscent of the tree where lovers carve their names, as Paris did with Oenone (Figueroa, 2014: 85-94; 2020)

30 In many areas, the male participants in the May celebrations were also the young men required to do military service, known as *quintos* in Spanish, so it could be deduced that the *mayos* had some relation to *pintadas* by the *quintos* in other places. However, this theory does not seem correct in the case of Torrenueva, where the *quintos* have celebrated their festivals on other dates, and have not shared the custom of writing on the façades. In any case, both types of graffiti share certain visual aspects such as the formula of “LONG LIVE THE QUINTOS OF”, usually abbreviated to the word “QUINTOS”, or even to “Q” or “K” in capital letters followed by the year. As Molina Luque explains, the festivals of the *quintos* are a kind of rite of passage to adulthood in which a traditional type of masculinity is performed through various activities where the participants demonstrate gallantry, courtship skills, physical and mental strength, or risk seeking. In this way, originally, it would reinforce the binary meaning of the celebration oriented to perpetuation in the most primitive sense (*passim*).

31 In addition to several official calls to order to maintain the proper decorum of the feast day, at the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII removed it from the liturgical calendar.

between tradition, what is unregulated, what is relatively tolerated and what is punished. Unfortunately, people are abandoning the tradition of the mayos, so photographic documentation, description and analysis becomes increasingly necessary to preserve its memory. In any case, and despite the existence of multiple media with which to communicate both privately and publicly (social networks), for now the faded mayo remains on the wall. It manifests the unique and irreplaceable value of handwriting in public spaces, adding to the richness of popular traditions of exposed writing. We must eliminate prejudices about this in order to recognize its aesthetic, anthropological, historical and social value.

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