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## MEXICO

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# LITURGICAL ARTS

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*Front and back covers: drawings by Jean Charlot*

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# Saints and Santos\*

JEAN CHARLOT

THREE HUNDRED years of Spanish rule should not be lightly dismissed in a cultural portrait of the Mexican nation. The contrast between Indian and Spaniard has often been emphasized, but there exists also a true affinity.

It is not present-day Spain that Mexico met with, nor even the buttery physiognomies of Goya's grandees, but

the beak-nosed, helmeted Spain of the conquistadors, twin to the proud profile of an Aztec eagle-knight. Amerindian and European, when they did not hack each other to bits, enjoyed traits in common. Kidnapped Montezuma played elaborately polite checker games with Cortés, whose lawyerlike tactics

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(\*) From a book in preparation: *Mexican Mural Renaissance*.

precisely matched the bland complexity of the imperial mind.

Affinities between pre-Columbian and colonial arts are as true as are the more obvious contrasts. The evolution of codices from pre- to post-Spanish shows the native illuminators, the *tlacuilques*, sliding unaware from hieroglyph to santo, from the cubistic line of the native manuscripts, informed with a logic of drill and drumbeat, to the suave chiaroscuro of the "divine" Morales, and from then on to Murillo. (Fig. 1.)

The aesthetic traffic went both ways. Franciscans soon found that, better to reach the native, it was imperative that they learn his language and his picture writing, which also was his art. Born in Mexico and presumably a mestizo, Fray Diego Valadez engraved in the sixteenth century didactic plates that stand halfway between Aztec hieroglyphs and the symbolical theological tableaux that were then the fashion in Europe. As a church was being planned and built, in its translation from paper to stone, things would happen as a corollary of the working habits of the Indian craftsmen, and, more often than not, of Indian modes of thought.

From god to God, plastic affinities eased the religious transition. The divine masks of each were marred and maimed, the one with smears of theological grease paint and tattoos, the Other with thorn wounds and a sweat of Blood. The blood of human sacrifices cascaded down the steep steps of the pagan *teocalli*; Blood brims into the chalice of the mass. The flayed human face that fitted, glove-like over the live face of god Xippe prepared the Indian devout for the pitiful Countenance imprinted on Veronica's kerchief.

For searching souls there must even have been spiritual affinities. Otherwise, how could the Indian Juan Diego, grown to manhood in the shade of Tinomantzin's pagan shrine, effortlessly step close to the ranks of Catholic sainthood, burdened with the roses flung by Our Lady?

**E**ARLY churches were built not only for devotion but also for defense. They were holy fortresses with sparse slit openings. Thick walls guaranteed protection from the outside, and inside displayed unbroken expanses that invited frescoes. For most of the early native parishioners, picture writing was the one form of communication they had been taught to read; and for the friars, painting and sculpture provided

in the end a medium easier to control than the asperities and involutions of the many Indian tongues.

Sixteenth-century Actopan is built along these lines. It is a massive stone fortress, daubed outside with a Matise pink, that catered once to the complex needs of a religious group with a functional efficiency as strictly accomplished as that of a Le Corbusier. From communal latrines to giant chimney to dovecot, from the vast refectory — its lectern and staircase hid in the wall with space-saving ingenuity — this care spread to the many tiny rooms with small windows, with seat and footrest carved in the thickness of the sill, where the monastic body divided into its human cells.

Architectural nudism, satisfying in a Le Corbusier "machine for living in," could not suffice for the aims of Actopan, whose other function was to generate holiness. The "machine for praying" proved as efficient as was the other. In the nave of the chapel, space is funnelled into a vertical ascent sworn to contact Heaven. In the deambulatories, the low-lying ovals and lozenges of the bay windows still frame the surrounding hills into horizontal as soothing as a becalmed sea. The main cogs of this spiritual generator remain the sixteenth-century murals, tender inner lining of the massive stone complex: in each cell a painted frieze divides the wall at mid-height, wherein naked *patti* ride dolphins that taper into acanthus leaves, monsters of a toothy countenance not unlike that of pre-hispanic serpents.

Under a vaulted ceiling of painted plaster faking black and white stonework, its ribs capped by vermillion rosettes, is the stairwell. There, layers of acanthus leaves interlarded with children and chimeras separate strata of monks, doctors, and bishops that repeat in illusion the architectural rhythm of the near-by patio arcades. Drawn with a line of oriental delicacy, the holy men pray, write, meditate among a drunken geometry of embossed stone panels and brickwork floors in slanting perspectives; they sit on stools and work at tables painted as solid blocks of doubtful plumb. The major chord of black and white is softened by light color washes, ochre for woodwork, green earth for drapes, a faint flush of terra rosa for flesh, once only used opaque and full on a cardinal's hat. (Figs. 2-3.)

A large lunette holds a landscape

of rocks honeycombed with grottos, that sprouts a mild flora of wild violets, bulrushes, and dwarf trees, the whole sketched in quick staccato lines. On this tiered stage meant as the Egyptian desert, hermits are seen flagellating, discussing, praying, embracing, dying. The satyr that Saint Anthony will soon meet is on his way as a hooved *caragater*, the burden on his back lashed to his horns. (Fig. 4.)

Only a chastised life led in a communal form can explain the perfect harmony still felt before the murals of this sixteenth century monastery. There the painter was not an intruder. Most often he saw the building grow to answer the needs of his own community. He slept in one of the cells that he decorated. He knelt in the chapel he frescoed, wed to his work until death.

**W**HILE Actopan illustrates the sturdy complexity of early monastic life, many another nuance of Mexican devotion is also to be found expressed in murals. In contrast with sixteenth century Actopan, only the eighteenth century could have devised such a precious theological boudoir as that of the sanctuary of Atotonilco, where the famed Virgin of the Rosary rested between holy choirs. The tiny doll-like Madonnas with pink-lacquered cheeks and jewelled tiara owned an elaborate wardrobe of damasks, of silver lace, and of gold braid, planned to answer the changes of season and the many social requirements — out-of-door processions or visits to neighboring communities to insure rains and crops — with the best robe earmarked to attend as Hostess the many images that paid return calls.

The religious alcove, hollowed with niches and *seil-de-bœuf* windows, capped by a minuscule dome, gay and cosy as a hope chest, is painted all over in full color with pastoral motives and garlands, with medallions that relate the translation of the House of Loreto (a pink toy villa levitating over a toy ocean), and ditties of advice to girls on dress and decency.

**I**N MEXICAN churches — as of today — fabricated plaster saints have not replaced with their inane smile the dramatic effigies dating from colonial times. Through form and color, colonial sculpture preaches in earnest. Its force is centrifugal, radiating from the implied heart and soul of each statue through extensions of contorted limbs, up to the very tip of the eloquent

fingers, and from there into space. To know such a sculpture through tactile tests would prove little more of an aesthetic experience than to frisk a store window dummy. The saints are gessoed, gilded, and polychromed. Their eyelashes and wigs are made of human hair; their teeth and martyred ribs of bone. They are gowned in silks and velvets, and often be-ribboned. Their wooden feet are shod in silver.

While the parist in concern of technique can feel only indignation at such license, one may nevertheless admire the strength of an impulse so exalted that, in the end, it cleared such bastard means, and of an art that overruled all the rules of good taste in its longing to stir, to expostulate, and to convert.

Paramount to the Aztec sculptor, the rules of direct carving meant nothing to the joiner of saints, who glued together the most dissimilar materials if only this could clinch one more point in the visual dialectical argument. Unlike the self-contained, self-sufficient, Indian form, colonial frescoes and statues remain synonymous with public plastic education. How well had the colonial craftsman solved the problem of preaching from walls, and of loud-speaking from ceilings, that were attempted anew in the 1920's by another group of Mexican artists! In truth, colonial art proved heavier than ours. Whereas we skittered in a dilemma between pure form and pragmatic purpose, hoping somehow to save both, the colonial artist rode firmly to function. For him it was axiomatic that what is sculptured or painted must be of use to the people. One could never shy away from even the most risqué means to assure this maximum efficiency.

In the 1910 revolution, the magnetic tensions that crackle under Mexican cultural unity broke into conflict. While the Indian element "ran amuck," the Spanish one, heir to colonial times, was forced underground. Yet, the most enthusiastic persecutors of the Church had their newborn secretly baptized and their dead buried in hallowed ground, just in case . . .

Like the political Marxists, the artists could hardly let go of the Mother they kicked. In his first mural, "Creation," Rivera painted the cardinal virtues—Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance—and the theological ones—Faith, Hope, and Charity—in this last as a repentant Magdalene. In an interview given in 1922, while the work was

in progress, the muralist confessed, "This is nothing more than a big ex-voto."

In the now disused entrance hall of the Preparatoria School, "The Apotheosis of the Virgin of Guadalupe," frescoed by Fermín Revueltas, faces "The Planting of the Cross in the New World," by Ramón Alva de la Canal. Dated 1923, both murals are stamped astonishingly with the hammer and sickle of the Syndicate of Plastic Workers for a signature! (Figs. 6-7) That same year, radical Alfaro Siqueiros painted in the small staircase of the same school a Saint Christopher carrying his Divine Burden, meant as a symbol of the Conquest. In the main staircase, the good anarchist José Clemente Orozco spread, in 1924, his eloquent set of frescoes about Saint Francis of Assisi. (Figs. 8-9.)

Such astonishing departures from orthodox radicalism are proof of the spell that colonial decorations cast over the modern painters.

FROM colonial times on, Mexico's religious impulse needed two distinct genres to display its two main facets. At times, parishioners would crowd into their church to savour the pomp and the fracs of solemn liturgical rites. To these ceremonies corresponded an extroverted art most public in its scope: from altarpieces, walls, niches, and cupolas, God thundered in plastic language His collective blessings over the congregation. At other times, a single devout would kneel unnoticed in the deserted nave, to unburden his soul in anguished solitude. Ex-votos are likewise private prayers, not in words but in paint. They live their span in dark corners of chapels where aesthetes have no flair to linger, where the faithful, taking the little pictures for granted, look straight at the altar. No other collector but God has ever been expected to board and appreciate ex-votos.

Ex-votos run their uninterrupted course from the days of the conquest. A sculptured one, still in place at the entrance of the Church of San Hipólito, shows the Archangel Michael trampling a loot of Indian weapons, swords of hard wood, obsidian axes, slings, nets, bows and arrows, and the war drum, the *tsawlanawit*, whose nocturnal beat gave many a sleepless night to Cortés.

Mexican *retablos* are ex-votos dedicated by the grateful recipient of a grace to the image of his devotion. They are usually small oils painted on tin, piled high against the walls of the

sanctuary around the venerated image, together with other testimonials of thanksgiving, such as crutches, trusses, and silver cutouts that represent the miraculously-cured limb or organ, — leg, spleen, heart, foot, eye.

The *retablo* blossomed naturally in colonial times, in a near theocracy. It became of even more urgency as the War of Independence and succeeding uprisings multiplied such close escapes from death as called for painted thanks. As were the sets of mediaeval mystery plays, the plastic dramas of the *retablos* are tiered vertically. The little pictures, spanning from earth to Heaven, record moments when to the handicap of being human has been added an extra burden of accident or of crime.

Sanguine, booted, and spurred, man is crushed under an upturned horse. Green, naked, and in bed, man dies. Bronzed and mustachioed, man faces a shooting squad. Thrown from a window, crushed between the flanges of a water wheel, stripped by bandits in the country, jailed by judges in the city, drafted to war by day, knifed by drunks at night, man claims redress to God.

GOD answers him under so many disguises as to emulate single-handed the crowds of Indian cosmogonies. At times, He is the blond child of Atotcha, in a Fauntleroy suit, velvet hat with white plume, a be-ribboned shepherd's crook for a wand. Or an Ecce Homo, roped as cattle, flagellated, crowned with thorns, hair matted with sweat and beard with blood. Or the Señor of the Poison, His skin coal black, His loins clothed in purple velvet spangled with gold. Or a Lamb. Or a kerchief. Mary also answers each call as she is bid: as a small pink doll, stiff in pyramidal brocades, nestling in a maguey. Or in widow's weeds, crushing a tear-soaked handkerchief to her teeth. Or in a starry blue mantle, her beige skin dark against the pink of her robe, with the crescent moon underfoot. (Figs. 10-13)

In Mexico, public scribes can still be seen, their table set on a sidewalk, under the shades of arcades. Illiterate recipients of letters bring them to the scribe to be deciphered. People who cannot write rely on him to polish their inarticulate dictation into heart-rending love messages. In older times, these learned men were nicknamed "evangelists," as they looked not unlike the four Evangelists one saw painted

on the church walls, with paper ready and quill pen poised over it, awaiting the dictates of the Holy Spirit.

The profession of *retablo* painter has much in common with that of the "evangelists." They, too, are but the mouthpiece of unskilled, if earnest, fellows. The phrases they turn, however, are wrought with form and color, not with words, and their tool is the brush. The recipient of the missive is no uncouth and impatient sweetheart, but God and His saints. Anyhow, in case God should misread the brushwork, the conscientious artisan adds to the art work elaborate word captions.

The style of *retablos* varies greatly. Some are raw picture writing, the last survival in action of the pagan hieroglyph. Many have the same genteel naïveté that sophisticated addicts of the School of Paris appreciate in the Doanier Rousseau. A few show geometric intricacies and perspective finesse not unworthy of an Uccello or of a Francesca. Still others are caressed with lush free strokes as voluptuousness as Renoir's. Despite parallels one may find in other parts, all *retablos* contain the same rare ingredient of a total humility. The folk painter works at

his trade with no more egocentric pride than would a shoemaker. The little panels are painted selflessly, as gothic cathedrals were built.

Folk art such as that of the *retablo* influenced the modern muralists in regard to mood and social content. The subject matter of folk art is the folk, and this also was the subject of our murals. Folk art corrected the tendency of the fine arts painter to look at the folk from outside, and, finding them of a less pulchritudinous sort than his own, to represent them with the best of intents amidst asbicans or their Mexican equivalent. The folk and their artists had a better opinion of themselves. In the bare interiors shown in the *retablos*, the floor of beaten earth is transformed into the rich red of brickwork. At the tip of the magic brush, necklaces and earrings are conjured that are seldom to be redeemed out of the pawnshop. The straw mat becomes a raised bed, often adorned with dais and curtains of colonial descent that give away the dream substance of this piece of furniture. The menfolk wear immaculate white or brand new overalls; the womenfolk, layers of petticoats out of the eighteenth century. Rags are the badge

of the villain exclusively, he who drains the bottle, ogles the maiden, and wields the knife.

ANATHEMA to Orozco, this sweetened representation appealed to Rivera, matching as it did his preference for gentle colors and round forms. Partly because his aesthetic was preconditioned to it, partly because he relished its tranquil mood, Rivera thus became the painter of a world in which revolution has triumphed already, a Utopia from which the worker has shooed away the bourgeoisie, where sweat is unknown, where overalls are the badge of distinction, where one parades through the cleansed landscape only to oppose the scarlet of banners to the azure of the skies.

A puzzling thing in this would-be Marxist paradise is the religious attitude of the folk who hold guns and machetes as if they were holy candles, and finger sickles and spanners as if they were rosaries. Such thanksgiving, somewhat incongruous in revolutionary pictures, stands as a reminder that the famed mural universe created by Rivera is blown to architectural scale from the tiny world of the Catholic *retablo*.

## The Music of the Church in Early Mexico

LOTA M. SPELL

IT MAY be interesting to those engaged in fostering musical education in American schools and colleges to know that music, frequently regarded as an innovation in our schools, was taught in Mexico by the Spaniards before there was an English settlement on the Atlantic coast. More attention was given to instruction in music than to any other subject. But if, not content with this beginning, we investigate the earliest schools on the American continent of which records exist, it will be found that, before the discovery of America, music held an important place in the curriculum of the Aztec schools. From such data it may safely be said that music is the oldest subject in the curriculum of the schools of North America — not a new-fangled frill, as some people still believe.

The ancient Mexicans — the Aztecs — who inhabited the Valley of Mexico, used music, as did the Europeans, not only in the celebration of their religious rites, but for recreation and inspiration. Both vocal and instrumental music were in common use among the people; both were taught in the schools connected with the temples.

As religion colored all phases of Aztec life, the art of music was especially cultivated in connection with the many religious ceremonies. For the services in the temples there were trained choirs of boys and men. Their songs consisted of hymns and chants; these were usually accompanied by the beating of the *huehual* and *teponaztli*, two varieties of drums. The practice of chanting had developed long before the coming of the Spaniards, for the Toltecs, the ancestors

of the Aztecs, were distinguished not only for their chanting but particularly for their many able musicians.

The means by which the musical culture of the Aztecs was transmitted from one generation to another — their system of education — did not differ materially from that of Europe, except in one respect. The Mexicans had no system of musical notation; all that was transmitted to each succeeding generation was taught by imitation and rote memory, as was the folk-music of Europe. In other respects, such as the control of education by the priests, the location of the schools adjoining the temples, and the adaptation of education to the furtherance of religious ends, the Aztecs differed in no wise from their conquerors. The fundamental material, in each case, consisted of songs

