MEXICAN FOLK-ART EXPRESSED IN THE
CUT-OUT DESIGNS OF LOLA V. CUETO,
EXHIBITED AT THE SOUTHWEST
MUSEUM DURING MAY, 1946

INTRODUCTION BY JEAN CHARLOTT

SINCE Lao-Tse stated that the most active part of the
wheel is its hub, made to receive the axle, a philosophy of
the vacuum has underlined the fact that it is not only
by addition that things and people are bettered, but often by
subtraction. What extra matter is flung from the matrix
block transforms the raw stone into a statue; Diogenes is en-
riched the moment he throws away his wooden drinking bowl.
This notion fits well the mores of the Mexican artist, in a
land where the uses of art are as widespread as those of bread,
where art-making is not the privilege of the few, but the
birthright of all.

While only a few may afford expensive materials, the many
know that art value does not depend on the rarity of the
original material. What humbler material than paper, and to
subtract from it should make it still humbler, and yet what
splendid results!

For the true artist, the pleasure of art resides in its making.
Its permanency, its appreciation for generations, its enshrining
in a museum, all are very good, but have nothing to do with
creativity, with the one luxury that the artist knows, art-
making, that is both a collaboration with and a mastering of
his material. The brittleness of paper is not easier to master
than the hardness of marble. It may be the Asiatic quota latent
in the Indian race that made the native artist try his hand on
paper, as the Persian warrior essayed his scimitar on a floating
feather. Also Oriental and Amerindian is the resigned under-
standing that time being short of eternity, a work of art made
to last a day is not much more ephemeral than one created to
last for centuries.

Codices have preserved the features of pre-Hispanic arts
that were not made to last. To play its role in lay and religious
feasts, a paper made of agave fiber was dyed and cut into
fringes and rosettes, as splendid for a day as de luxe head-
dresses and standards; its garlands beautified temple and palace.

Come Colonial days, paper vies with lace to ornament
churches. Impoverished by the Conquest, Indian master hands
turn forever from the shaping of gold, and of quetzal feathers,
to that of the humble paper, with as great a creativeness.

Today, paper has an important place in folk art. There are
pre-Hispanic survivals. In villages, paper is still made from
the fibers of traditional local plants, its use limited now to
sorcery and agrarian incantations. Cut-out silhouettes of gods
are buried in the soil to insure its fertility. Other cut papers,
openly displayed, add beauty to the opening of a pulquería, or,
made into fringes and flowers, will be stretched from house to
house, often filling the air over a whole village, to celebrate the
visit of a famed religious statue to that of the local shrine, or
even the homecoming of a politician.

The cut-outs of Lola Cueto are a valid quintessence of what
ancient art traditions have merged into folk-forms. Paradox-
ically, the mosaic of colored papers is made into the solid ex-
pression of Mexican modes. The grave religious images, the
kneeling devout at the feet of a scourged Christ, remind also
one of the Mayan reliefs, where pagan faithfulness perform blood
rites. The hieratic Virgins, stiff in their brocaded robes, eased
long ago the religious transition by mimicking the shapes of
ancient teocallis.

Lola Cueto preserves a deep understanding of what consti-
tutes the essence of each medium when she transfers to cut
papers the stylized birds that nestle in the leaves of Michoacan
lacquers, or the popular engravings of Posada, that range in
mood from comical tourist whose umbrella is no defense
against a Mexican bull, to sensational dramas that bare teeth,
hearts, and machetes.

The last show of Lola Cueto was that of her needlework,
tapestries of rich and heavy material that competed in splendor
with stained glass windows. The versatile artist turns to the
humbler paper cut-out as one relishes a glass of water after too
rich a fare. Her pictures, as light in weight as they are heavy
with tradition, preserve for a while childish enchantments, all
the more exquisite for eschewing the permanency that marbles
and bronzes rarely deserve.