

Mexico: Land of Pyramids, Kaleidoscope of Mysteries

This country has attracted large numbers of foreigners, many of whom remain here, fascinated by the history, the culture and the contradictions of Mexico. Colombian writer Eduardo García Aguilar asserts that Mexico is an endless source of inspiration for both national and foreign artists, as well as a means towards understanding the modern world.



Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.

Mexico is, for artists, one of the most attractive and inspiring countries in the world. With its ancient mysteries and contemporary contradictions, it has provided astonishingly exotic raw material for novelists, poets, sculptors, film-makers, and musicians. No best-seller stand in the world would be complete at the moment without journalist Alan Riding's *Distant Neighbors*, Gary Jennings's *Aztec*, Carlos Castaneda's mystical adventures, or some representative of the current spate of biographies of painter Frida Kahlo.

A whole galaxy of foreigners of various nationalities — photographers, painters, musicians, writers and politicians—, has helped disseminate Mexico's mysteries throughout the world. The idea commonly held of Mexico is of a country closed in upon itself, xenophobic even; yet B. Traven and Carlo Coccioli, Garcia Márquez and Luis Cardoza y Aragón, Paul Westheim and Jacques Soustelle, are only some of the names that give this idea the lie. Mexico has won the hearts of the world's adventurers, and the journalist or artist who has never been here has missed more than she or he will ever know. Even at the risk of losing oneself, like Ambrose Bierce, Mexico is an experience necessary for understanding the contemporary world.

An Assembly of Pyramids

For a foreigner, Mexico's first attraction is, without a doubt, the energy emanating from its pre-Columbian cultures. Throughout the length and breadth of Mexico, the traces of an age-old human activity, solid and diversified, emerge out of the depths of land and jungle. Only a small percentage of the cities, temples, and art of Mexico's native peoples has been discovered. And nevertheless, nobody can ignore this culture, such is its beauty and its significance. Post-Conquest European literature contains hundreds of memoirs and works of art to do with Mexico. Humboldt wrote of New Spain's archeological treasures and stood in wonder before Teotihuacan and the colossal figures of Tula. Those European missionaries who traveled south until they penetrated the secret cities of the Mayas kept readers in their native countries on tenderhooks with unforgettable tales of fantasy.

The two main Mexican cultures to inspire world-wide interest are the Aztec, of the central tableland, and the Mayan, which developed in the thick southern jungles. The richness of the Aztec culture derives from the variety of its ancestors: old Teotihuacan, colossal Tula, and the cultures of the South. The identification of all these different strands is a life-long task for the scholars engaged in it. The Aztecs excelled in the creation of monumental stone sculpture: their culture was militarist and war-like, their art at times terrifying. The statue of the goddess Coatlicue, for example, in the National Anthropology Museum, is an awesome figure arrayed in serpents, which fully conveys the goddess' fearful power over life and death.

The Mayas, on the other hand, built ornate battlements and covered the walls of their gay temples with vivid stucco murals. This was the culture of peaceful people, devoted to the pursuit of the arts and sciences and to the contemplation of their exuberant natural environment. Nineteenth century travelers were the first to become caught in the webs of this culture, whose enchantment lies in its luxuriance and complexity.

Foreigners of various nationalities have helped disseminate Mexico's mysteries throughout the world

In the present age of freeways and space flights, the voice of these unknown artists calls us even more imperatively. The pilgrimages to these temples from all over the world provide convincing proof of their strange vitality. Mircea Eliade, for example, the great French student of religion, wrote a number of works relating his journey into the Mayan and Aztec past; he regretted not having been able to stay there longer, to give free rein to the doubts and questions that besieged his brain during his sojourn amongst the serpents and the pyramid steps.

life and culture

Soustelle, the French specialist in pre-Columbian Mexico, also wrote a book in which he recounts his first arrival in Mexico, and the growth of that attraction which in the end made him decide to devote his life to the infinite kaleidoscope of its symbols.

The Acapulco Tradeship and the Adventurers of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

New Spain —as Mexico was known in colonial times— constituted the most aristocratic Spanish colony in the New World. It was here that the most powerful families chose to settle, and it was here that the most complex bureaucratic and religious colonial world was forged. Undoubtedly, the chief reasons for this were the vastness and richness of the territory, and the impressive size of its native population. Mexican journalist and historian Fernando Benítez has chronicled this world in several books. A city dotted with convents and churches, agitated by the ceremonies and burnings of the Inquisition, Mexico City —or “the City of the Palaces”— was the metropolis of the New World. The paintings from the period on display at Mexico City’s Colonial Art Museum demonstrate the vigor of the schools of art and sculpture that flourished during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And in the Museum of San Carlos are extraordinary European art works, which undoubtedly once graced the drawing-rooms of the Spanish-born aristocracy.

Colonial art and architecture were stimulated by travelers who, in search of the exotic, fell headlong into the webs of this world of syncretisms. Unlike other lands less endowed with native population, in Mexico a syncretic art could emerge. Even today, in certain celebrations such as the Day of the Dead, this art still flourishes with all the vitality of the centuries. Skulls of sugar and chocolate; *fiestas* in the cemeteries; bells ringing throughout the nights of November; Altars of the Dead in village houses. Soviet film-maker Sergei Eisenstein, in his Mexican footage, captured this exciting autochthonous art where pagan roots mingle with Catholic ones.

Certain religious ceremonies and the *pastorelas* performed at Christmas are creations of this autochthonous imagination. Biblical passages come to life as they are acted out by people who could well have emerged from the Middle East or from

provincial Spain. In the feast-day dances outside the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City, pagan figures blend together in a kind of witches’ Sabbath; and for hours, groups come streaming into the plaza out of the depths of Mexico. Eisenstein’s footage renders that mysterious atmosphere which has attracted to Mexico the world’s artists, students of culture and social scientists. Crucible and crossroads of the races, age-old alchemy that changes the nowadays into the ancestral and plays havoc with the march of time.

For centuries, there were two sites that constituted focal points for this encounter of different worlds.

One was Acapulco, to which the tradeship of the same name brought the exotic products of the Orient, returning thence laden with the merchandise of New Spain. The other was the

An autochthonous art where pagan roots mingle with Catholic ones

narrow Isthmus of Tehuantepec, between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. European commerce passed across this Isthmus, leaving its traces in the lands of the ancient Olmecs, Zapotecs, Mayas, and Mixtecs. On the Gulf side of the isthmus, countless travelers, merchants, and adventurers settled down on the banks of the Coatzacoalcos River to found families of mixed race.

On the opposite side is the present —day state of Oaxaca— a country within a country, dominated by the majestic ruins of Monte Alban. Its deep-rooted traditions take one by surprise: the women of Tehuantepec, in their colorful costumes and braids, dancing proudly to the music that enlivens the *fiesta* of the *Guelaguetza*; the tasty, complex, strange-smelling meals to be found in the market of the state capital; an art characterized by variegated syncretism. The baroque churches of Santo Domingo and San Felipe Neri; La Soledad, with masses where the old art of the Indians hides behind the incense; vividly-



Photo by Rafael Bonilla.

Chac Mool, Mayan Salon, National Anthropology Museum.

colored flower garlands; religious vestments resembling the folk dress of the region; and centuries-old saints fashioned by the heirs of a culture that has withstood civilization's onslaughts. Oaxaca —land of Vasconcelos, Porfirio Diaz and Benito Juárez— has produced two of Mexico's most important contemporary artists: Rufino Tamayo and Francisco Toledo.

The Twentieth Century in Mexico: Crossroads of Contemporary Art

With the revolution, Mexico became an even more impressive presence on the world scene. The images of revolutionary leaders Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, and of the hosts of men and women who followed them through mountain and desert, were seen around the world, and are still as vivid today as they were half a century ago. The *corridos* and other songs of the revolution have lost none of their appeal either. The song *Adelita* is the *leitmotiv* of this adventurous era. Hollywood created, through countless movies, the image of a violent, cruel Mexico, whose temperament attracted seekers after the exotic.

With the consolidation of the revolution during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), Mexico became the meeting place for the vanguard of the international art world. Extraordinary things were included in a recent exhibition of surrealism in Mexico, held in the imposing National Museum — just a few blocks away from the Great Temple. There were photographs of the enormous and mysterious surrealist city built in the depths of the jungle by English millionaire aristocrat Ed-

glishmen, Armenians... The new-comers' cultural contribution to contemporary Mexico was to be invaluable. Many of these exiles' Mexican-born sons and daughters are more nationalistic than their compatriots of criollo or Indian ancestry. Film-maker Paul Leduc, one of these first generation Mexicans, has attempted, in his recent film *Frida*, to capture the feel of that Mexico of the thirties and forties, so crowded with the exiles and dreamers, the dissenters and defeated of the entire world. Writers Elena Poniatowska and Margo Glantz, both of European parentage, devote their literary efforts to unraveling that strange new Mexico they first saw through children's eyes. That metropolitan Mexico in which there flourished publishing houses such as the *Fondo de Cultura Económica* and where the literary group *Los contemporáneos*, led by Salvador Novo, Xavier Villarrutia, Jorge



Photo by Rogelio Cuéllar.
Poet Octavio Paz.

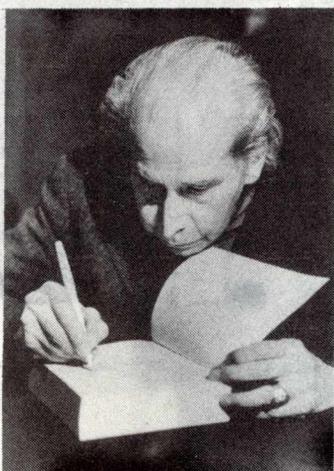


Photo by Rogelio Cuéllar.
Writer Luis Cardoza y Aragón.

ward James, with no other purpose than that of entwining it with the exuberant vegetation; photographs of the delirious Antonin Artaud, peyote-seeker and chronicler of the Tarahumaras; dream paintings by Remedios Varo and Frida Kahlo; the volcanic landscapes of the mysterious Mexican painter Dr. Atl; poems from Peruvian César Moro's *La tortuga ecuestre* (The Equestrian Turtle); works by Guatemalan poet Luis Cardoza y Aragón; paintings from the easel of Diego Rivera; texts by Octavio Paz and his excellent essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Just a small sample of the prolific artistic activity of the time.

While the surrealists met to present their irreverences, Malcolm Lowry was writing one of the century's most important novels and perhaps the most intense text ever written about Mexico: *Under the Volcano*. John Huston has adapted it for the screen with impressive authenticity: in legendary Cuernavaca, an English consul —alcoholic and, needless to say, delirious— undergoes a personal crisis which blends into the catastrophic winds of the world.

From a Europe devastated by the Spanish Civil War and then by the Second World War, floods of immigrants arrived in Mexico. There were Germans, Russians, Jews, Spaniards, En-



Photo by Rogelio Cuéllar.

Film-maker Luis Buñuel.

Cuesta, and others, opened its windows to the world, under the attacks of a nationalism that was sometimes blind.

Out of the tension between the muralism of Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco, and the contemporary art movement, something new emerged: a Mexico which has kept its roots, but which is also open to the world. It would be virtually impossible to map out so abundant a cultural activity as that which Mexico has inspired. Apart from those already mentioned, we would have to include D.H. Lawrence, John Reed and photographer Tina Modotti; Mayakowsky and Breton; English sculptor Henry Moore's *chac mool*; Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (The Forgotten); stridentism as well as surrealism; the exile of the Venezuelan novelist Romulo Gallegos and the Mexican memoirs of Valle Inclán. We would also have to mention that it was here that Trotsky spent his last days of exile; that Gabriel García Márquez wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; and that the great Spanish poet Luis Cernuda created *La realidad y el deseo* (Reality and Desire), one of the masterpieces of contemporary poetry. And to these, we would have to add the hundreds from South and Central America and other regions of the world who have produced some important creative work during their exile in Mexico.

What is the mysterious force in Mexico which stimulates such rich creative activity? Like a sphinx whose oracles are indecipherable, Mexico denies all possibility of certainty. And it is there, in the mystery, in the contemplation of the indecipherable and the ancient, that artists find themselves stimulated to relate the inexpressible. Nobody can explain Mexico. Its facets are countless; its abysses, bottomless. A better environment for creativity could not exist. Perplexity is the mother of great works of art, and for any foreigner life in Mexico is a never-ending kaleidoscope of questions without answer and of answers that have no question.★