

Dr. Atl, maker of myths

An excellent cook, promoter of other painters, dedicated herbalist, knowledgeable geologist, ill-tempered politician and ultra-rightist, the Mexican muralist Dr. Atl was also a volcanologist who never tired of painting eternal peaks, who climbed the snowy summits of Popocatepetl innumerable times, followed the birth of Parícutín, wrote a splendid monograph on the subject and, working with pencil and paintbrush, came to understand the fury of this volcano.

Today, few people remember that Dr. Atl was the author of many books. Some of these books were devoted to promoting Mexican art; among them were team efforts such as the six-volume series *Iglesias de México* (Churches of Mexico), which included watercolors by Atl and photographs by Frida Kahlo's father Guillermo.

Atl said he provided important assistance to Guillermo Delhora (an odd personage who came to Mexico from Italy and unexpectedly committed suicide) for the publication of *La Iglesia ante la crítica, en el pensamiento y el arte* (The Church in light of criticism, in thought and art). This 400-page book was published in an edition of 10,000 copies which, despite their high price, sold out quickly.

Atl promoted handicrafts through his research for *Las artes populares en México* (Folk art in Mexico, 1921), which went through a second edition in a larger format, with numerous illustrations. He published pseudo-scientific essays such as *Oro más oro* (Gold and more gold, 1936) and *Petróleo en el Valle de México* (Oil in the Valley of Mexico, 1938).

In "Eight pages from Dr. Atl's unfinished autobiography" (published posthumously in *Novedades*' "México en la cultura" supplement, No. 829, February 7, 1965), the painter ventured into the realm of memoirs, achieving one of his most notable literary successes. The same can be



Dr. Atl. Portrait by Edward Weston.

What the Mexican Renaissance owes Dr. Atl:

- The first blush of enthusiasm —both in Mexico and abroad— for mural painting, which meant returning to a feature of what we now call public art, civil art, new muralism. This occurred within an art world created by domesticity for domestic appropriation, with all the fatal consequences this implies for the intrinsic value of artwork, its scope and social significance.
- The second key revolutionary assault on the fake academic pedantry of the old San Carlos school, now known as the Institute of Fine Arts. The first campaign for the intellectual regeneration of this school was undertaken by his own students, who went on strike in 1911. Without the nihilism of this movement, it would have been difficult to establish the current doctrine of a new classicism, which rightly considers any teaching that does not conform to the daily process of production for a functional and social requirement to be intellectual suicide on the part of the teacher and intellectual assassination of the student.
- The first direct political activity by Mexican artists within the ranks of the Revolution —which was the focus for uniting our national cultures. In other words, our renaissance owes Atl the beginning of the demise of that apocalyptic bohemian parasite, the typical Montparnassian or pro-Montparnassian, typical of the present-day intellectual snob-world. Thus it is indebted to him for the birth of the artist as a citizen, the civil artist in the widest possible meaning of the term, similar to those who created the most outstanding epochs in the history of art.
- The first, clearest and most public admiration for Mexican folk art —which had been underestimated and often unappreciated by the pro-French oligarchical intellectuals of the pre-Revolutionary period— and the first government policies aimed at encouraging such art. There is no doubt that Atl preceded the later coterie of admirers and defenders, both governmental and private, of Mexican folk art who emerged as a result of the political transformation of the entire country.
- The first questioning of traditional media in Mexico. In other words, he is responsible for the first concern for finding the correct physical media for his time, in a world mired in a mystical, backward-looking, archaic domain controlled by traditional methods. Thus he is the forerunner of efforts stressing the importance of the materials and instruments used in the production of plastic art, as opposed to the feeling, the routines of purely sensualist speculation, that characterize snobs and academics, together with the pseudo-Modern and pseudo-Classical movements of contemporary Europe.
- He was the first Mexican to take a stand against the academic routines of composition and perspective. This occurred in a world where the physically domestic and chic character of artistic production prevents artists from finding dynamic solutions corresponding to developments in science.
- A systematic distancing from museumism, from primitivism, from retrospectivism. In short, from all the basic characteristics of plastic arts production throughout the world at the moment, whether created by the so-called academics or —what a shocking thought— the modernists.
- A persistent spirit of the monumental, or more precisely of rejection towards the homey, the domestic, and the lack of a powerful lyrical aspect, in a world where such domesticity sets the general tone for tastes and determines the production of plastic art. His firmness in physically heroic and seriously professional work, in the era of the apotheosis of informal work and snobbish dilettantism, was an exemplary act for artistic production in our country and the world as a whole.
- The contribution of a sense of the cosmogonic and panoramic, if such terms really apply, in landscape. This is a direct consequence of his understanding of the poetic aspect that, for example, the aircraft gives to still life in a world populated by immobile academics and moderns; or the monocular view of the confined space formed by a window opening out onto the countryside... or better still, to a detail of the countryside, a group of trees, a cow... your own small yard. This is a path —the path shown by Dr. Atl— which leads to true modernity in the poetic-plastic contemplation of the universe.

David Alfaro Siqueiros.

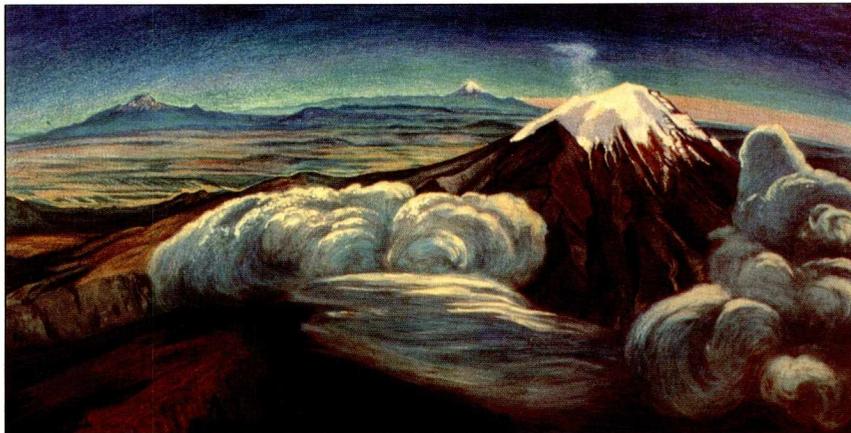
said of *Gentes profanas en el convento* (Blasphemers in the convent), a curious work which is dazzling in some parts, moving in others, and readable throughout.

In *Gentes profanas* Atl recounted a number of stories from his youth, including a long stay at the Convento de la Merced, which he turned into his personal fiefdom, using it entirely according to his whims as the scene for his tumultuous love affairs, painting exhibitions and sumptuous banquets.

Of particular interest to students of Mexican literature and mythology are the chapters relating the most violent passion of his life, chapters which include excerpts from the letters



Crater and Milky Way, 1960, mixed media on masonite.



The volcanos, 1950, Atlcolors on masonite.

sent to him by Carmen Mondragón, a painter, poet and artist's model often pictured with a blonde pageboy haircut. Atl gave her the name Nahui Olin (in the Nahuatl language this means the fourth sun or fourth movement). She moved in with Atl, who did several portraits of her capturing the depth of her gaze and the striking beauty of her madwoman's looks.

In *El padre eterno, Satanás y Juanito García* (The eternal father, Satan and little Juan García) he gave a fictional form to his atheism and his idea that man is an accidental force of nature. Atl said he was excommunicated because of this



Volcano with clouds, 1941, oil on masonite.

novel, a claim that may have been part of the myth he built around himself. In *Un hombre más allá del universo* (A man beyond the universe) he sought to explore the possibilities of science fiction, which had captivated him since childhood, but the story's 124 pages are overloaded with speculations and descriptions of futuristic scenarios.

He paid homage to his most beloved volcano in his book of poems,

Dr. Atl is one of the strangest people to have been born on the American continent in modern times. His is the most picturesque history of all painters, and it would be impossible to tell the whole story without filling many volumes. When Atl returned from Europe, he immediately stirred up the waters of all of old Tenochtitlan's swamps; he threw methylene blue into the eyes of those he said suffered from blindness; he preached aesthetic theories, used his paintbrush to create incredibly fine color sensations, led strikes, wrote scathing criticism, aroused the people, swindled a bunch of fools, pawned the cameras of all his friends and acquaintances, organized exhibitions and, without a cent to his name, served up pots of excellent pasta and provided financial assistance to dozens of young artists. He championed the color divisionism of the Neo-Impressionists and reinvented the solid oil colors of Raphael, using domestic copal resin.

He planned business deals, formulated government programs, educated presidents, got all the paintings in an exhibition of mine sold, so that I could go to Europe; he captivated intellectuals, even Don Justo Sierra; he lost respect for Fabrés, Ruelas and Gedovius, taught the young people to be insolent, proved himself as a prose writer and poet, volcanologist, botanist, miner, herbalist, astrologer, magician, materialist, anarchist, totalitarian—all with a speed greater than that with which Frégoli, then at his peak, changed clothes.

Before accompanying Don Venustiano [Carranza] to his final defeat, he edited newspapers, organized Red Battalions, sacked churches, invited beautiful ladies to tea in the sacristies, and drew around him a group of the greatest young artists of the day. Among them were José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who spoke favorably of him in their autobiographies. There were other important critics, but they have all died. Atl is definitely the creator, or at least the animator, of one of the greatest figures in Mexican painting: Joaquín Clausell.

Diego Rivera.

Excerpt from *El Dr. Atl, hombre del renacimiento artístico mexicano*, by Antonio Luna Arroyo; recently published by Salvat, Grollier and Hachette.

Las sinfonías del Popocatepetl (The symphonies of Popocatepetl) and in the monograph *La actividad del Popocatepetl* (The activity of Popocatepetl), of which only 24 copies were sold in 24 months.

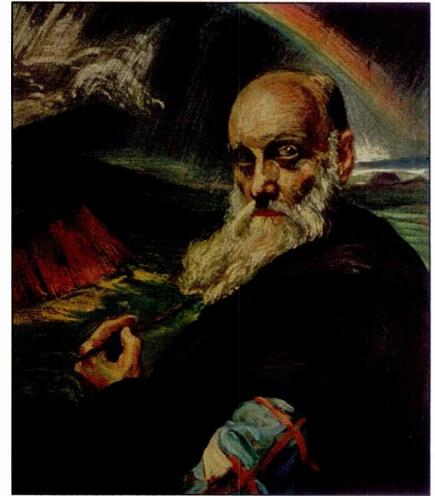
In contrast, many copies were sold of *¡Arriba! ¡Arriba!*, whose twenty brief chapters sum up Atl's views on the family, free will, death and life.

Anybody who reads this book, a sort of credo, sees that Atl lived in

accordance with his beliefs. Like his work and his life itself, Atl's writings range over a wide variety of interests.

His collections *Cuentos bárbaros* (Barbarous tales, 1930) and *Cuentos de todos colores* (Tales of all colors, in three volumes: 1933, 1936 and 1941) were widely read, translated and imitated.

The American writer John Steinbeck based an entire novel on the plot of "The man and the pearl." One of B. Traven's stories was inspired by



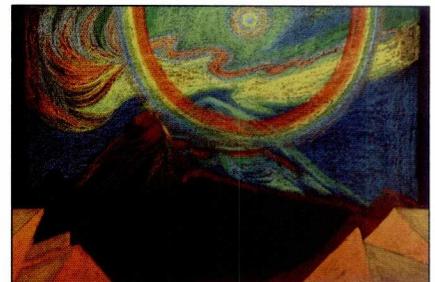
Self-portrait.

IIE / UNAM.



The ray on the wave, Atlcolors on plywood.

IIE / UNAM.



Dawn in the mountains, Atlcolors on cardboard.

IIE / UNAM.



The volcano on a starry night, oil and Atlcolors on plywood.

IIE / UNAM.

A brief biography of Dr. Atl

Gerardo Murillo was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco in 1875, and died in Mexico City in 1964. He studied painting in his native city until 1890, and while in Mexico City he was a student at the Fine Arts and Preparatory Schools.

When Murillo finished these studies, Mexican president Porfirio Díaz sent him to Europe on a scholarship, to study painting. However, instead of devoting himself to art, he attended classes given by the philosopher Antonio Labriola and the sociologist and penologist Enrico Ferri at the University of Rome.

He participated in the Italian Socialist Party and wrote for the party newspaper, the daily *L'avanti*. He travelled from Rome to Paris on foot, taking classes given by the sociologist Emile Durkheim, as well as attending classes in psychology and the theory of art given by Henri Bergson at the School of Higher Education.

Leopoldo Lugones gave him the name Dr. Atl (Nahuatl for "water") in Paris in 1902. Atl then travelled from Paris to Madrid, once again on foot, for exercise.

He returned to Mexico in 1904, and in 1906 organized an exhibition of paintings called *Modern sap*, in which the works of Ponce de León, Francisco de la Torre and Diego Rivera were exhibited for the first time. The exhibition sparked great interest in Impressionism and the death of the *pompier* style.

In 1910 he helped organize the Artistic Center, the purpose of which was to obtain wall space in public buildings for mural painting. This initiative was soon frustrated by the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution that same year.

Atl returned to Europe in 1911, founding the newspaper *Action d'art* in Paris, which served as a vehicle for publicizing his artistic theories and the social objectives of the Mexican Revolution. For several months, he also published the magazine *La révolution au Mexique* and carried out several duties on behalf of the Constitutionalist faction of the revolutionary forces.

When Atl came back to Mexico in 1914, Constitutionalist leader Venustiano Carranza commissioned him as an intermediary in the negotiations with Zapata aimed at unifying the revolutionary forces. Nevertheless, his efforts failed, and he was on the point of being executed by a firing squad. (The correspondence between Zapata and Dr. Atl dealing with their talks and disputes has been preserved.)

During Carranza's stay in Veracruz, Dr. Atl founded *La vanguardia*, in whose pages José Clemente Orozco's caricatures and illustrations were published. He also organized the Revolutionary Confederation, comprised of ten civilians and ten military men, which was later dissolved because it was regarded as too influential, although it did give rise subsequently to the Bloc of Intellectual Workers.

During this period, Atl was director of the Academy of San Carlos, general treasurer of the Constitutionalist forces, and head of the Department of Fine Arts. At the end of the armed struggle, he dedicated himself to painting full time, promoting the appreciation of popular art, studying volcanology, and writing.

His inventions include innovations in encaustic, oil-fresco, as well as the "Atlcolors." These are dry, resin-based and are worked like pastels, but without the latter's fragility. Like pastels, they can be used, according to their creator, for painting on paper, canvas or stone.

Explorer and tireless walker, he settled in the ex-convent of La Merced, where he painted a good part of his work, above all the large canvases of the Valley of Mexico.

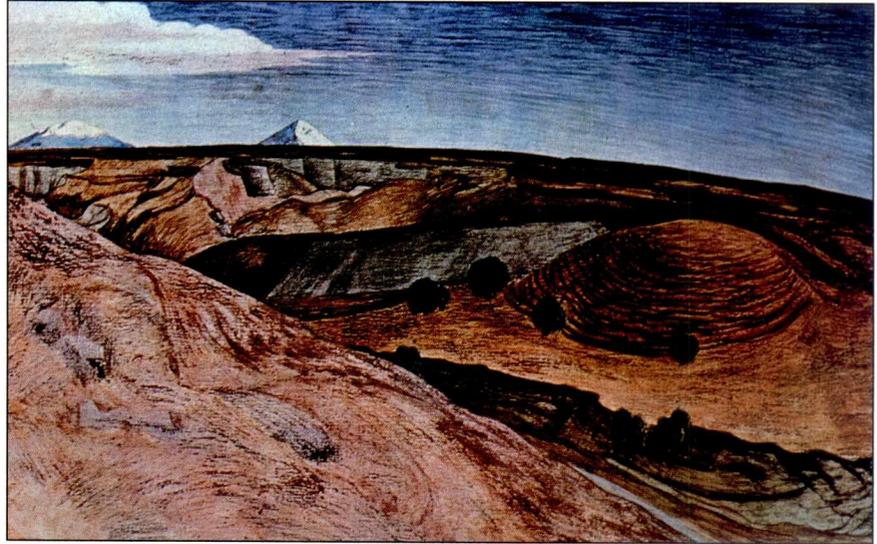
In 1943 he was present at the birth of the Parícutín volcano, taking notes and painting. His canvases on this phenomenon were exhibited at the Palace of Fine Arts in 1944. In addition to a number of portraits, architectural drawings and sketches for murals, his works include hundreds of drawings and a large number of landscape paintings.

He adopted the curvilinear perspective proposed by Luis G. Serrano, a technique which adds a constant note of monumentality to his work. In his last years, he spent long periods of time in Pihumo, Tepoztlán and the Santiago river gorge, recreating landscapes and working on his project for Olinca, a world cultural city—a dream which was never realized. He began the genre of aerial landscapes, that is, large-scale views of geographical features as seen from the perspective of an airplane.

He was named a member of the National College, an honor he declined because it had been granted in the name of Gerardo Murillo rather than Dr. Atl. He is buried in Mexico's Rotunda of Illustrious Men.

“The unknown philosopher.” Ramón del Valle Inclán copied terms, entire sentences and the basic story line from “The *ki*’ boy passed that way,” presenting them with a greater literary sensibility and more streamlined style in his famous novel, *Tirano Banderas*. William Spratling translated 45 of Atl’s stories into English, while General Juan Azcárate, director of the EMA film company, wanted to make movies out of several of them.

As its title indicates, *Cuentos de todos colores* is made up of a number of widely diverse stories. Many are autobiographical, relating childhood or adolescent memories. All the stories are short. Most revel in a



A landscape from his curvilinear period.



The rain, 1945.

crude form of realism. Many dialogues phonetically imitate the speech of the Mexican people. Taken one by one, they have made worthy components of anthologies. Taken together, they seem repetitive due to the constant use of the same plot device: the heroes’ violent death.

In his literary work, more than a stylist of novels and stories, author of striking images, cadences and metaphors, or builder of structures, Atl was a creator of myths.

He captivated his readers with the plots of his stories, not the way he presented them. He specialized in scenes from the “barbarous” side of Mexico, scenes of poverty, of *machismo* and *hembrismo* (*machismo*’s female equivalent), of vendettas and vengeance. He belonged to the old school of smiling narrators dedicated to relating what they had seen and heard.

Perhaps this is why I always imagine him as an old man, with lively eyes and unruly hair, facing head-on the tempests of his long, complex and prolific life **M**

Beatriz Espejo

Excerpt from an article published in
Universidad de México, No. 508,
May 1993, pp. 45-49.