

An Award to Culture and Principles

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The presidential award to one of the deans of Mexican culture invites a thoughtful reflection on his achievements

On June 6 Fernando Benítez received the National Culture Award from President Miguel de la Madrid. Benítez is a journalist, writer and historian, as well as the founder of several of the most important cultural supplements published in Mexican newspapers. He founded *Mexico in Culture*, the supplement appearing in *Novedades*, and later a sister publication which appeared in the magazine *Siempre*, called *Culture in Mexico*. He is also the founder of *Sábado* (Saturday), which appears in *Uno más Uno*.

Speaking for the jury that awarded the prize, the well-known Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska stressed the courage of those who struggle through the media against absolute power and who "rabidly" stand by what they write. There is no doubt that Fernando Benítez fully meets Poniatowska's description.

Through Benítez, the award is a tribute to the work carried out by several Mexican intellectuals in developing, questioning and criticizing important aspects of national culture. The cultural supplements that Benítez founded and has directed since 1949, have been an important vehicle for their work, along the lines expressed by Benítez in the 500th issue of *Culture in Mexico*:

"This is not the time and place to attempt an inventory of all that has been done over these years. But we must emphasize the fact that we have sustained our efforts to develop a critical spirit without which all cultural, social and political activity turns stupid and unjust..."

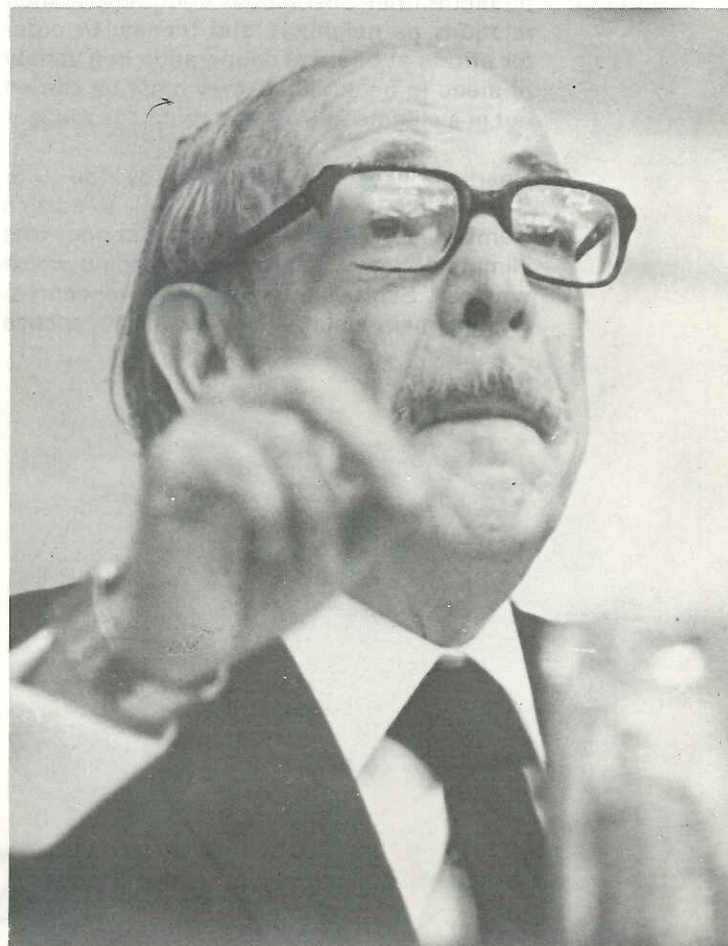
The distinguishing trait of *Mexico in Culture* when it first appeared in 1949, was precisely its critical spirit. It was often said in those days that in Mexico there was a lack of honest criticism based on a solid knowledge of the facts. Thus, the new supplement set out to recover, by means of interviews, the positions that different cultural groups had debated throughout the twenties and thirties, concerning culture and its sphere of work and activity.

All of this is expressed in *Mexico in Culture* as the desire to develop a national culture rooted in the different points of view on the subject debated during the post-revolutionary period. In the same vein, the new generation of writers developed during the post-war period also shed light on the issues. Among them were Octavio Paz, Juan José Arreola, and Rosario Castellanos.

Additionally, *Mexico in Culture* did not limit its coverage to information, criticism and essays on art. To the contrary. It was understood that since culture develops within a given social framework, it is

necessary to cover political issues as well. Benítez once expressed this idea in the following way: "We understand the possibility of a critical existence not only as the opportunity to criticize and still be published, but also as a social framework of the kind that has not existed in Mexico since the time of the liberals."

in intellectual circles, and to reach more readers than any other cultural supplement ever had before. This magazine launched young writers such as Carlos Fuentes, Elena Poniatowska, and the poet from the southernmost state of Chiapas, Jaime Sabines. Storm-clouds appeared on the horizon just as



Fernando Benítez; 40 years of first rate journalism.

Photo by Uno más Uno

Faithful to these principles, the supplement opened its pages to social and political developments in Mexico and the world, from a rational, democratic perspective. Creative works of literature by writers old and new appeared in *Mexico in Culture* along with essays, reporting, literary criticism and theater reviews.

By the end of the fifties many believed that *Mexico in Culture* was the best supplement of its kind in all of Latin America. No doubt it was the best in Mexico. Its light, readable style helped it become a point of reference

everything seemed to be going full steam. In late 1961, it was announced that Fernando Benítez was resigning his position as director of the supplement because of political differences with the publishers of *Novedades*. In an unprecedented act of solidarity, all of the remaining founders, section heads and main contributors resigned with him. The supplement soon lost its intellectual and political importance, and disappeared.

From the moment of their resignation, the same group of intellectuals set their minds to creating a new

cultural publication and began to consider a series of alternatives. One idea was to finance their publication through subscriptions, so that it would have more freedom of expression. It was even said that many readers subscribed to *Novedades* because of the supplement.

The discussion was finally settled when Benítez decided to accept the offer made by José Pagés Llergo, director of the magazine *Siempre*, to create a cultural supplement for his weekly. The new supplement, *Culture in Mexico*, was produced by most of the former staff and contributors of *Mexico in Culture*, and appeared in *Siempre* as of 1962. The publication follows the same editorial line, and gains additional enrichment from the presence of the newest young writers, among them 48 year-old Carlos Monsiváis, an essayist, historian and journalist, 47 year-old José

Emilio Pacheco, and the so-called "child prodigy" of Mexican literature, today an outstanding poet, newspaperman and historian, Héctor Aguilar Camín, who was born in Quintana Roo in 1946.

Additionally, a new and interesting phenomenon arose with the new publication. *Culture in Mexico* allowed for a harmonious working relationship among writers from the most diverse ideological tendencies, from Marxist José Revueltas to semiotic Salvador Elizondo.

Culture in Mexico introduced its readers to the diversity of intellectual currents that arose during the sixties, including those represented by Jorge Luis Borges, Michel Foucault, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Yukio Mishima, Julia Kristeva and Leonardo Sciacia. The new currents in Mexican and world literature were also analyzed and criticized. And coverage of social and

political events continued as well. *Culture in Mexico* opened its pages to commentary on the homosexual movement and on dissident intellectual currents. It also condemned U.S. intervention in Viet Nam as well as the murder of Mexican peasant leader Rubén Jaramillo. The publication came out in support of democratic labor struggles, and denounced attacks on state universities, as well as against the newspaper *Excelsior* in 1976, when its editor Julio Scherer, was dismissed for having defended a democratic, independent tendency in the labor movement. The supplement stands for a cultural outlook that is open to the world, devoid of false and narrow nationalism, yet at the same time is quick to denounce all attempts at intervention or aggression.

It is important to note that the supplement has continued its line despite changes of editors over time.

Fernando Benítez left the magazine in 1970, and his position was taken over by José Emilio Pacheco. A collective editorial council, composed of Héctor Aguilar Camín, José María Pérez Gay, Rolando Cordera and Adolfo Castañón, followed Pacheco. Today, Carlos Monsiváis edits the publication.

Fernando Benítez pioneered the journalistic school of imparting culture based on social, historical and political commitment. This whole current of thought and action is recognized through the award bestowed on Benítez, who continues his enriching work as the head of *Sábado*, the cultural supplement of *Uno más Uno*. There is no doubt that Fernando Benítez could stand his ground and say to president De la Madrid, "this is an award that I deserve."★

Emma Rizo

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Mr. Benítez receives his award from President de la Madrid.