

PAINTING

SATURNINO HERRÁN: THE EPHEMERAL AND THE GRANDIOSE

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The life of Saturnino Herrán was as short as that of his close friend the poet, Ramón López Velarde. Herrán was born in Aguascalientes in 1887, López Velarde one year later in Zacatecas. The painter lived for 31 years, the poet 33. Both have been the foundations of national identity in their respective art forms.

The Mexican School of Painting, whose most visible leaders are Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, was based on Saturnino Herrán's aesthetic denifi-

tions. Affected by the transition from the Porfirian period to the Mexican Revolution, the painter was able to interpret the country's reality and rescue the banner which the Europeanized artists had trampled into the ground, with the help of Don Porfirio Díaz.

Herrán has many merits attributed to him: he was concerned with Mexican things in spite of the predominating values of that period, he survived as an artist in a state of economic penury (because of a lack of space in his tiny study—according to Manuel Toussaint—he was never able to full extend the six metre long cloth for his plan for the decorative frieze, called *Nuestros dioses* (Our Gods), in the Mexican National Theater), and he set the foundations for the revolutionary period in painting in Mexico. Nevertheless, the painter's actual contribution appears to be simpler: he was an honest artist who discovered, exhibited and painted the Mexico that had been forgotten by the fickle society of the Porfirian period.

Earthy peasant faces, the sadness of the country, our golden, cinnamon indians, *La Tehuana* (The Woman from Tehuantepec), humiliating French exquisiteness, *the Quetzal and the Gallero* (Cock Fighter) of the cunning expression, *El Jarabe* (Syrup), danced to the rythm of brush strokes, and *Las vendedoras de ollas* (The Urn Vendors) among many other themes, are imprinted with the artist's singular mastery. The popular element is portrayed with an unusual tenderness. Those influenced by Europe, who disdained and categorized the humble as vulgar, found themselves in difficulties.

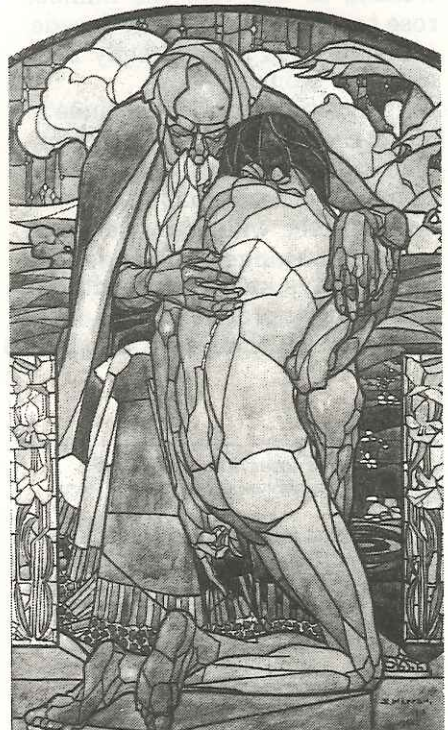
Saturnino Herrán synthesized the

most important developments of his teacher's paintings. "Herran's personality as an artist stated—Raquel Tibol—is delineated by Fabrée, the then director of the San Carlos Academy, who passed on to him the heritage of academic ornamentalism, Izaguirre his interest in the indigenous, and Gedovius the expressive sincerity of simple things."

In its turn, the arrival in Mexico of the Spanish artists, particularly Zuloaga, for the centenary celebrations in



The Creole woman with shawl. Saturnino Herrán.



The Prodigal Son (Stained glass project). Saturnino Herrán.



De feria. Saturnino Herrán.

1910, had some influence on Herrán's work." Nevertheless, —says Luis Garrido— in protest at this deference to foreign painters, Doctor Atl organized a popular exhibition to take place in the streets adjacent to the pavilion, where the powerful creative initiative of the young San Carlos students, exhibited their nonconformity, and the first samples of their art, to the public in the street. Later this art would cover the walls of public buildings, relating the history of Mexico, our roots and the social concept of art. On this occasion Herrán showed *Vendedora de ollas* (Urn vendor), *Los ciegos* (the blind people) and *Paneaux decorativos sobre el trabajo* (Decorative work panels).

Apparently the painter was better known to the printing trade as a book and magazine illustrator than as a painter. This was probably due to the economic needs which every artist has to preoccupy himself with for his own survival. His best known covers are those of the magazines, *El Universal ilustrado* (the Illustrated Universal) and *Pegaso*, as well as the covers of the books, *La muerte del cisne* (Death of the Swan), *Silenter* by the poet Enrique Conzález Martínez and others.

"Fuensanta, give me all the tears of the sea/ my eyes are dry and I suffer/ an immense urge to cry." At another analytical level, the psychological, the constant exaltation of his women is notorious, their bodies and haughty expressions, which almost always contrast with submissive expressions on the part of his men, according to the comments of the critic Fausto Ramírez. This is what, somewhere else, Alberto Cañas defines as "the sensuality of Herrán's work".

Friend of the great poets of the period, Herrán interchanged creative flow with them, particularly with Ramón López Velarde, who appeared to write his poems with the artist's pictures in mind, and vice versa: "You had a shawl where the white/ lay gently on top of the grey/ to make for the eyes that loved you/ a feast of snow in the weeds".

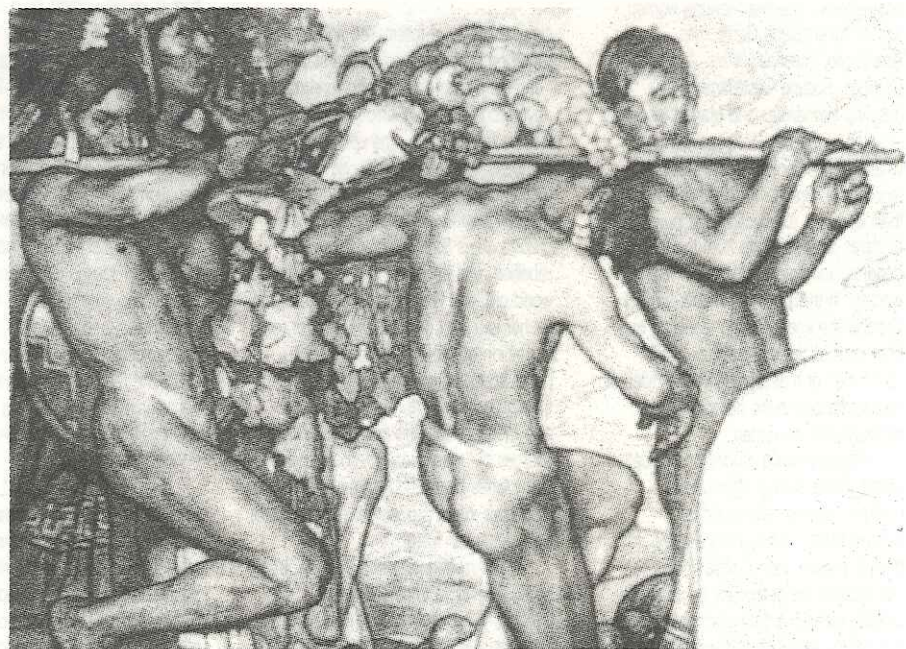
In this way, *La viejecita* (the little old Woman), painted in 1917, appears to have its antecedents in the poem "The Knitter": "Knitter, knit your wool/ the inertia of my dream and your trusting illusion;/ knit the silence; knit the timid syllable/ passing our lips and

saying nothing; knit the fluid voice of the Angelus/ with the creaking of the doors:/ knit the rhythmic dilatation/ of the pained hearts/ that are alert in the shade."

Who got most from whom: There are common themes throughout the entire work of both Herrán and López Velarde. The poem, "The Soft Fatherland", could well be illustrated verse by Herrán's painting, and vice versa: López Velarde's poems would be the best text for a book presenting the painter's work.

Corresponding to the frieze *Nuestros dioses*, with its prehispanic motif, would be the "Cuauhtémoc: young grandfather/ listen to me praise thee/ the only hero reaching the height of art..."

In "The Cowardly Moment", dedicated to Saturnino Herrán, Velarde assembles the significant elements of the painter's conscience: "... Obesity of those moons that went/ rolling, sleepy and flirtatious,/ through an absorbed blue/ over the trees of the pavements... Creole throat of Carmen García/ sending her song even to the streets/ surrounded by vegetable perfume... blockhead chromes,/ hanging by stimulus to the table/ with its water melons and meats/ with exaggeration..." And it was the same poet who wrote the posthumous page in *El minuterero* (the minute hand) "How much have I lost, if truly what is lost is he whose essence we would willingly keep. The painter we are celebrating today is one of the beings with whom I should like once more to spend twenty four hours." □



Study for the frieze, "Our gods". Saturnino Herrán.