

HISTORY OF COMICS IN MEXICO

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This first volume of *Puros Cuentos* is a delightful journey through six decades of Mexican history, seen through the eyes of three generations of creators of cartoon characters. This survey begins with turn-of-the-century lithographs and culminates with the first comic strips from Post-Revolutionary Mexico of the 1930's. Parallel to the genealogy of the Mexican cartoon is the historical development of a people in search of their identity. *Puros Cuentos* tries to probe the quicksand of a barely studied popular genre, while it also tries to rescue well-loved images that were features of an incipient Mexican culture.

In spite of the proportionally large editions of cartoons, of their wide distribution among different social groups and their invaluable role as the written medium of greatest dissemination in the country, a systematic, well-documented chronicle of the comic book has been lacking. It was in December of 1987 when the exhibition *Puros Cuentos: La historia de la historieta de México* (Pure Comics: The History of the Cartoon in Mexico) presented work carried out over more than two years by a group of researchers from the National Museum of Popular Culture on this vast, barely explored field. Three volumes were to be published from this exhibition, which "covered more than nine hundred square meters with comics from diverse sources," and the first of these tomes is already on sale.

The first part of the book deals with what may be considered the prehistory of the Mexican comic, the roots of which go back to religious prints brought by the Spaniards to America. Their recurrent themes were demoniacal images with which the missionaries inaugurated an exaggerated style that permeated an entire era of popular Mexican journalism. From the beginning the Spanish style adopted itself in New Spain and gave rise to a type of picaresque illustration that the Inquisition was responsible for persecuting, albeit unfruitfully.

There are abundant references to outstanding engravers such as José G. Posada, who in publications of the Popular Publisher (Antonio Venegas Arroyo) revealed an unmistakable aesthetic style, summed up daily life and mixed it with the magic of the extraordinary. He created the famous

dandyish skeletons that constituted the most accurate allegory for the decadence of the Porfirian period.

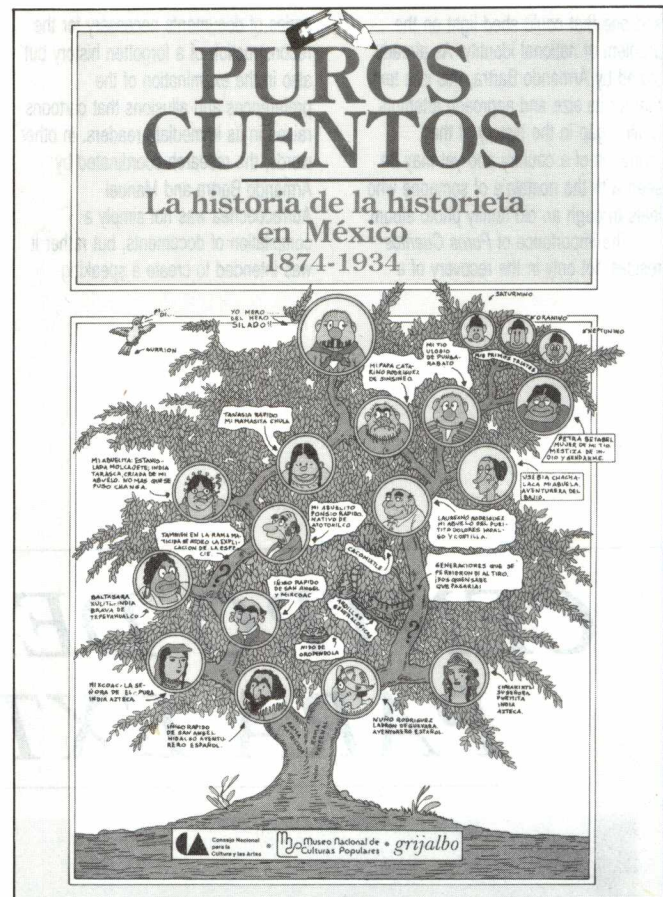
Accompanying him was an outstanding generation of cartoonists, who in exercising their right to criticize, risked their freedom, if not their very lives. Draftsmen such as Jesús Martínez Carreón and Santiago Hernández who from *El Hijo del Ahuizote* (Son of the Otter) lashed out with ferocious satire against the ineptitudes of the Porfirian regime.

The newspaper *El Imparcial* (established in 1896), began the use of graphic supplements in Mexico. With these, a new space was opened to the following generation of cartoonists, who were more interested in cultivating a pornographic humor aimed at a mass public than in illustrating their own political ideas. Ernesto García Cabral, Rafael Lillo and José Clemente Orozco began their careers in these supplements and in frivolous magazines.

During the armed movement of 1910 Mexican journalism changed radically. The strict enforcement of the Law of the Press forced most of the opposition newspapers to close. *El Diario del Hogar* (The Home Daily), *El Sufragio Libre* (Free Suffrage), *Redención* (Redemption) and *El Constitucionalista* (The Constitutionalist) ceased publication. Political agitation had repercussions in commercial press cartoons which openly became Porfirian supporters and at the fall of Díaz they brought about a counter-revolutionary campaign. Protected by the opening that the new government granted to the press, newspapers became dedicated to mercilessly caricaturing Francisco I. Madero and his cabinet. Lilo, Cabral and Orozco illustrated the most reactionary criticisms with a well defined style that enriched the aesthetic conception of the Mexican cartoon. The tragic ten days (when Madero was assassinated) and Victoriano Huerta's rise to power left them without themes and without the possibility of continuing to publish satirical drawings against the government.

In the heat of the dispute, newspapers were created that served as mouthpieces for the different factions in conflict. *La Vanguardia* (The Vanguard), *La Cucaracha* (The Cockroach), *El Zancudo* (The Mosquito), in spite of their ephemeral existence opened the doors to cartoonists, who years later would distinguish themselves for their role in developing formal and thematic aspects of the Mexican cartoon.

The second part of *Puros Cuentos* is an exhaustive inventory of the new cartoon and its authors, who from 1919 under the influence of revolutionary nationalism, included local details in



their cartoons. Immersed in a renewed cultural spirit characterized by the emergence of the masses as protagonists and recipients of social change, cartoonists participated in this collective enthusiasm by using popular figures in their drawings. Sunday supplements began to substitute services that had provided them with foreign cartoons for the work of Mexican cartoonists who were given the enormous task of transforming the prototypes from the United States with native imitations that in some cases surpassed the original.

In the 1920's the great muralists executed outstanding works as cartoonists. Orozco collaborated with the newspapers *L'ABC*, Rivera was a well-known creator of vignettes in popular publications, Siqueiros held a public exhibition in the Iris Theater in which he drew sixty different caricatures in September of 1927. The public paid two pesos per person to see such an extraordinary act. From *El Machete* (The Machete), José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and Xavier Guerrero began producing popular prints aimed at the growing urban proletariat.

This first great boom of the Mexican comic was characterized by the

proliferation of cartoons and the acclimatization of foreign prototypes of aseptic language that slowly were displaced by popular picaresque characters and their colloquial language. Two major currents dominated local production: one that was devoted to caricaturing the simple life of the common people represented by series such as "Chupamirto" (Hummingbird) by Jesús Acosta or "Mamerto y sus concociencias" (Mamerto and his Know How) by Hugo Tiighmann, and the other current that expressed the dreams and adventures of that same group of people, including for example "Segundo I Rey de Moscavia" (Second I King of Moscavia) by Hipólito Zendejas. Series belonging to these two currents were also published, such as the celebrated "Don Catarino y su apreciable familia" (Mr. Catarino and His Considerable Family) which continued until the 1950's.

Today, after a daring struggle between national and foreign production—which will be the theme of volumes II and III—cartoon characters have learned to share the universe of the imagination. After years of indifference on the part of scholars of culture, cartoons have merited attention in the form of a book that analyzes them as a unique phenomenon of popular culture,

and one that could shed light on the problem of national identity. As already stated by Armando Bartra, this is a text that for its size and approach attempts to fill a gap in the history of the formation of a country and yet may be seen with the nostalgia of someone who leafs through an old family photo album.

The importance of *Puros Cuentos* resides not only in the recovery of a

series of documents necessary for the reconstruction of a forgotten history but also in the examination of the preferences and allusions that cartoons raised in its immediate readers. In other words, the research coordinated by Armando Bartra and Manuel Aurrecochea was not simply a compilation of documents, but rather it was intended to create a speaking

portrait of the different generations that grew up reading and learning to read through cartoons. The result is an immense gallery of well loved portraits of two hundred ninety one pages and more than four hundred illustrations that tell the story of a Mexico that no longer exists, or of a time already past and of a society that lives through constant changes.

Puros Cuentos I. La Historia de la Historieta en México, 1874-1934 (Pure Comics I: History of the Cartoon in Mexico, 1874-1934) by Juan Manuel Aurrecochea and Armando Bartra. Editorial Grijalbo, Dirección General de Publicaciones del Conaculta and Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, Mexico City, 1988. □