

# Jesús Helguera and Aztec mythology



Eagle warrior\*.

**J**esús Helguera was born on May 28th, 1910 in Chihuahua, Mexico. When he was seven, his family moved to Spain, where he began painting from an early age.

The headmaster of the primary school where Helguera studied noticed his skill at drawing and when he was

*Every year, for three decades, thousands of Mexican families bought calendars illustrated by Jesús Helguera. What was this painter's secret? How did his paintings find their way into so many homes, becoming a tradition in their own right?*



Jesús Helguera in his studio.

\* Ma. Luisa de la Helguera de Popoca collection.

nine, put him in charge of the art class. It was at this time, that he began to illustrate history lessons and draw huge wall maps.

He received his artistic training by studying fine arts, observing nature and studying the works of the great masters at the Del Prado Museum.

As his work became better known, he was hired to illustrate books and magazines for prestigious Spanish publishers. Some of the well known works he illustrated were *Great deeds and great men*, *Brilliant historical*

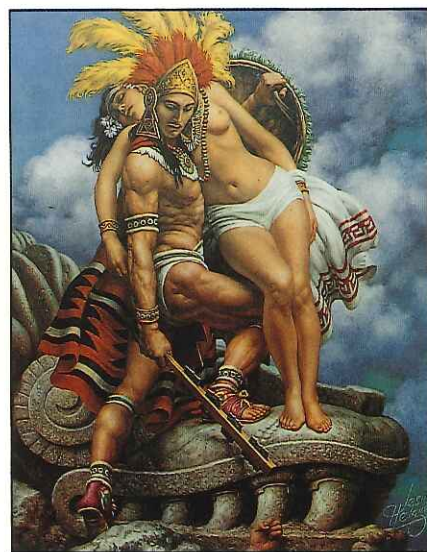
Text based on the biographical sketch of Jesús Helguera by Ismael Popoca Salas in *Jesús Helguera*, published by Galas de México, S.A. de C.V.



*The celestial archer\*.*



*The legend of the volcanos\*.*



*An Aztec hero\*.*

### The legend of the volcanos (Nahoa myth)

In *Teocozaucó* —the Fourth Heaven, in the yellow mansion of *Tonatiuh*, the shining one— there was a golden palace surrounded by marvelous gardens.

In this kingdom that was never in darkness, *Izcozauhqui* —Blond Yellow light, Golden Light—, son of *Tonatiuh* the Sun, lived happily.

One day the Sun's child heard that beyond his father's kingdom existed the gardens of *Tonacatecuhtli* and *Tonacacihuatl*, Lords of Sustenance. Wishing to know them, he headed in their direction and discovered, beside a lake, a beautiful maiden named *Coyoxauhqui* all dressed in silver. She was the one adorned with spring flowers, the daughter of *Metzli*, the Moon.

These two, young as they were, fell so deeply in love that both constantly abandoned their celestial kingdoms to meet in other heavens.

The gods who discovered this idyll gave their blessing, since they loved each other intensely. However, they were warned never to leave the kingdom of heaven, for if they did, they would be severely punished.

Then one day *Izcozauhqui* and *Coyoxauhqui*, who had travelled through all the celestial beauties hand in hand, became curious about the world that existed below the gods' mansion. Without thinking of the consequences, and in mutual agreement, they left the roads in heaven to take the path leading to the earth.

How different was this world so far from heaven! Here there were neither gardens of gold nor gardens of silver! The fields were full of multicolored flowers that seemed like huge cloths woven with threads from the rainbow!

So he, full of strength, pride and will, and she, full of gentleness, sweetness and love, neither regretting nor fearing, entered the woods and fields.

When the gods learned of their disobedience, they decided to punish them: they could never go back to the celestial mansions!

So the son of the Sun and the daughter of the Moon reached the Valley of the Lakes where, in love with its beauty, they decided to stay.

Where else in the world was such beauty assembled?

Inside the blue crown of the mountains the quiet lakes were turquoises, and the woods looked like upraised emeralds longing to pierce the sky.

Broad fields full of green and showered with a thousand fragrant flowers spread out at the feet of two giants that seemed to watch over the Valley like its lords and masters.

Amazed, the son of the Sun and the daughter of the Moon gazed at everything. Birds sang in the groves, and flowers shone next to babbling brooks flowing here and there.

Close by the lakes, clouds of butterflies fluttered their colors on fragile wings, and the breeze, filled with aromas, delightfully kissed the springs' freshness.

The down-slanting slopes were covered with majestic green crowns of maguay leaves.

Everything here was wonderful, and alive!  
How could they not think of staying in such a lovely valley?

True, there were no stars nor heavenly bodies here. There were no mansions of the gods, but this solitary world rivaled the kingdom of the heavens in beauty and greatness.

So, Izcozauhqui and Coyoxauhqui decided to stay forever in this enchanting place.

Unfortunately their joy was not eternal, for Coyoxauhqui fell ill with a strange sickness. Time passed, and since she did not get well and feared a tragic end, she told her dearly beloved companion in a voice filled with sorrow:

"Izcozauhqui, my beloved Golden Light, I know that I am going to leave you alone, because that is how the gods have punished our disobedience. Eternal life has ended for us, for I sense that my death is at hand. Izcozauhqui, if I die, in the name of our great love I ask that you put me to rest on top of that blue mountain, the one that seems like a bed, so that my mother, forgiving me, can come every night to kiss me."

Coyoxauhqui died several days later.

Izcozauhqui's grief knew no bounds.

His sobs and his supplications echoed on wings until they broke on the rocky mounds of the mountain giants.

The cries of love became softer, more delicate, more like whispers, until they tapered off, gently disconsolate.

When his heart accepted her loss, resolved to fulfill his beloved's wish, he lifted her gently in his arms and took the path to the mountains.

Thus he walked days and nights, never resting, never crying.

The birds grew quiet at his passage. The flowers closed their petals and the rivers hushed in pain, while the maguey and the trees bowed silently and reverently as he passed.

When he reached the top of the blue mountain, the one that looked like a bride's bed, he lovingly placed her on the crest.

She lay with her head motionless on the rock, her lifeless hair tumbling over the precipices, her breasts uplifted, her knees half-bent in deep rest, and she slept chastely inert under her *huipil* embroidered with threads of early morning light.

Afterward Izcozauhqui, desiring to warm his loved one, lit an immense torch of perfumed wood and, sitting down beside it, motionless, suffering, he stayed at her side.

The gods were so moved by such a beautiful love that they decided to reward his faithful tenderness by agreeing never to separate them.

So that they could be at each other's side for eternity, they were changed into rock and covered with snow.

Today, many centuries later, two volcanoes still adorn the Valley of Mexico, two beautiful gems set in the blue mountains, one all whiteness, the other all fire.

In the sweet Náhuatl tongue she is called *Iztaccíhuatl*, meaning the woman of snow or the sleeping woman; he is called *Popocatepetl*, the smoking mountain.

This is the beautiful legend of the volcanos in the Valley of Mexico!



*Cuauhtémoc\**.



*Aztec grandeur\**.

*episodes and A selected collection of folklore from many countries, published by Editorial Araluce of Barcelona, which set the standard for similar editions.*

Helguera married Julia González Llanos, a native of Madrid, who was the model and inspiration for many of his paintings, and mother of his two children.

After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and following the death of two of his brothers, Luis Felipe and Fernando, of tuberculosis complicated by malnutrition, Helguera decided it would be best for his family to return to

### The idyll of the volcanos

Iztacíhuatl traces the reclining figure  
Of a woman asleep in the Sun.  
Popocatépetl has blazed through the centuries  
Like an apocalyptic vision;  
And these two solemn volcanos  
Tell a love story  
Worth singing with all the intricacies  
Of an extraordinary song.

Iztacíhuatl —thousands of years ago —  
Was the princess who looked most like a flower,  
And, in the tribe of the ancient *caciques*,  
Fell in love with the most gallant of captains.  
Her father opened his majestic lips  
And pronounced to the courting captain  
That if he returned one day with the head  
Of the enemy *cacique* on the point of his spear  
He would find at one and the same hour  
A feast for his victory and a bower for his love.

And Popocatépetl went to war  
With this hope in his heart:  
He quelled the rebellions of the wildest jungles  
The crags in mutiny against his victorious passage,  
The audacity of the rushing streams,  
The snares of the treacherous swamps;  
And against hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers  
For years and years he valiantly strove.

At last he returned to the tribe, with the head  
Of the enemy *cacique* bleeding on his spear.  
He found the victory feast all prepared

But his love bower was not there;  
Instead of the love bower he sighted a burial  
mound  
Where his bride, asleep in the Sun,  
Awaited to receive, in death, the kiss on her brow  
From the lips that had never kissed her in life.

Popocatépetl broke across his knees  
His quiver of arrows, and, with one voice,  
Conjured up the shades of his ancestors  
And waxed against their unfeeling God.  
It was his life, his very own,  
Because he had conquered death:  
He had won victories, riches, power,  
But he had no love ...

Then he made twenty thousand slaves  
Erect a mighty mound to the Sun:  
He piled up ten summits  
In a stairway of his illusion;  
He took his beloved in his arms,  
And placed her on the mound;  
Then he lit a torch and forever more  
Has stood there kindling the sarcophagus of his  
grief.

Sleep in peace, Iztacíhuatl: time will never  
Efface the silhouette of your chaste expression.  
Watch in peace, Popocatépetl: hurricanes will  
never  
Dim your torch, eternal as love ...

José Santos Chocano (1875-1934)  
Peruvian poet.

Mexico, particularly since the Mexican government was repatriating its citizens.

In Mexico City, he was immediately hired to illustrate the magazine *Sucesos para todos*. Keen to discover and understand more about his native land, he travelled throughout the country on weekends. He was impressed by the beauty of the volcanos, and the country's rivers and lakes. He fell in love with the State of Veracruz, (where he had lived between the ages of two and seven) and which he included in several of his paintings.

He also spent time studying Mexican history and values. This provided the basis for his accurate depictions of pre-Hispanic and Colonial Mexico and the country after its independence. Aware that his work would be printed in offset, Helguera used bright colors for many of his paintings.

Toward the end of 1940, he finished the famous *Legend of the volcanos* based on Aztec mythology, reproductions of which have been seen by millions all over the world.

Numerous large printings have been made of Helguera's works,

especially of the *Legend of the volcanos*, *Indian love*, *The celestial archer* and *Aztec grandeur*.

His work has also been plagiarized for "pirate" editions and copied by artisans in ceramics, stone, metal and wood, with mixed results.

Helguera's death, at 61, brought to an end his traditional calendars with which Mexicans had come to identify and which were a phenomenon in his lifetime. ❧

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Managing Editor.