

The José Luis Cuevas Museum



*Martín Luis Guzmán Ferrer**

The José Luis Cuevas Museum is the happy result of a combination of wills and means. Fortunately, this was not done in the name of posterity, but in the interest of art and as a possibility of offering another cultural alternative to the inhabitants of Mexico City in particular and Mexican society in general.

The “means” which were brought together include Mexico City’s Historic Center, colonial and modern Mexican architecture, urban planning, and, obviously, the art collection which painter José Luis Cuevas and his family—his wife Bertha, and his daughters Mariana, Ximena and María José—generously donated. This combination formed a work of art, a complex synthesis which speaks for itself. Whoever enters the museum is captivated by its beauty. There are those who say it is a magical place. It is, in reality, the result of rationality and efficiency; though creativity, like human existence itself, always contains a wonderful mystery.

Perhaps the best symbol of this antithesis between art and reality is “La Giganta,” which, in my opinion, is

Cuevas’ masterpiece. This spectacular sculpture with a phantasmagoric face on one of its knees (Cuevas the enfant terrible, or the boy-artist who contemplated life with anguish?) is the museum’s axis. From this sculpture, those strangely harmonic elements which weave the substance of this new museum radiate.

The museum is housed in the former convent of Santa Inés, in the heart of the city’s Historic Center. The convent was built at the end of the sixteenth century, and by the beginning of the 1700’s, it housed nuns of the Isabelline Order. Two hundred years later, the building was in danger of collapse; it was saved thanks to a reconstruction in which the famous Spanish architect Manuel Tolsá may have participated. Under laws enacted to curb ecclesiastical power (1859), it was disentailed and became government property; later it was owned by private concerns. As was the case with hundreds of other formidable buildings, it fell into abject disrepair and was turned into a tenement house and later a warehouse for old rags. But, miraculously, it was saved from being torn down.

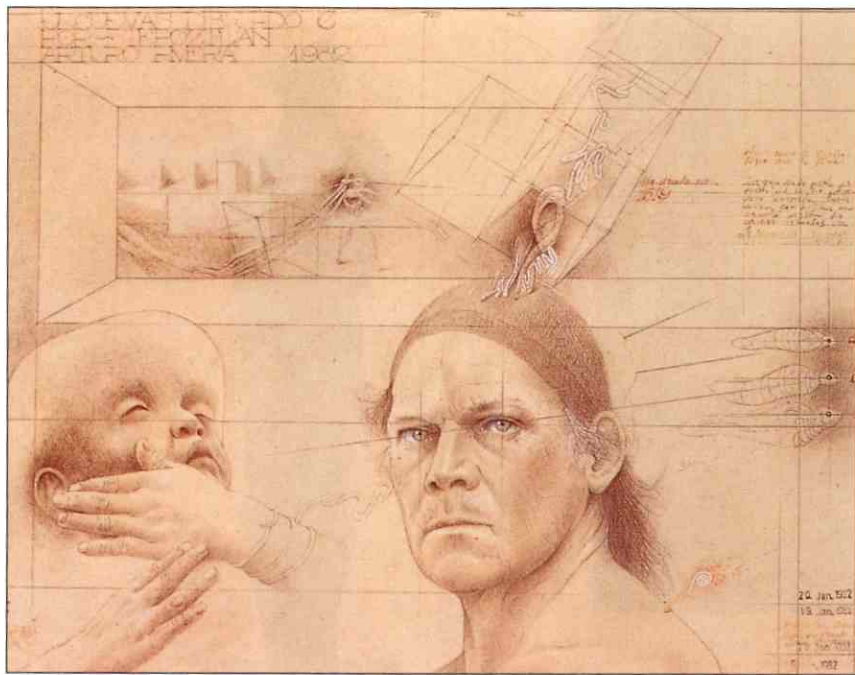
Its rescue, however, was not spontaneous. It was part of the movement, sponsored mostly by private enterprise, to save Mexico City’s Historic Center from decay. José Iturriaga, Fernando Benítez, Guillermo Tovar y Teresa and, in the



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Yvonne Venegas.

* Director of the José Luis Cuevas Museum.



Arturo Rivera, Portrait of José Luis Cuevas.

case of the convent of Santa Inés, Bertha Cuevas, were among those who recognized that it was possible to save the ancient convent and transform it into a unique museum.

The José Luis Cuevas Museum was also conceptualized as an example of the importance of salvaging, for present and future generations, the historical and urban legacy of this megalopolis, the City of Palaces. Its restored beauty was thus linked to the chain of public buildings in downtown Mexico City—the National Palace, the Cathedral, the Bishop's Palace, San Ildefonso (originally a Jesuit college, then an army barracks, and later the National Preparatory School), the Aztec Main Pyramid (Templo Mayor), and San Carlos (a sixteenth century hospital which was turned into a school of fine arts in the 1700's)—and the private Colonial and nineteenth century buildings which survive only precariously and are in constant danger of disappearing.

The Department of the Federal District was aware of the intrinsic value of the Santa Inés convent, and was convinced of its urban value to

the community. Thus, it contributed funds, and assigned professional and technical personnel to work on the museum. The results have been exemplary: the architectural restoration is stunning; the museography is state-of-the-art, and the convent, as a whole, forms an efficient and artistic setting for the permanent collection.

The synthesis may be noted in the ancient walls, the stone columns, the remains of Colonial frescoes, the chapel (which was turned into a library), the ambulatory and the nuns' cells (now modernist museum spaces), the extraordinary but inornate cloister, dominated by the statue of "La Giganta", the contrasting but functional ultramodern dome, and the church cupola which provides a crowning touch to the whole. Good taste is evident in the work of architects, restorers, museographers, artists and artisans who contributed to this project.

The collection

All of this, however, would merely be a marvelous stage design without any practical purpose. Santa Inés'

utilitarian function, if you wish, is the result of the Cuevas family's generosity: in donating their private art collection, they gave the building a new usefulness. Thanks to Cuevas, the museum was born with a clearly defined but flexible vocation, which reflects this artist's free spirit. José Luis Cuevas conceives the marriage of museum and collection in the following terms: "When [the convent] was the scene of religious callings, either genuine or those imposed by family intolerance, its cells echoed with prayers and sobs. Today, these same cells contain the colors and forms of artists I have chosen... because I admire them." For Cuevas, the artwork displayed in the museum is a sort of personal anthology, "Like a collection of poems edited by a poet."

The collection's aim, today and for the future, is to form a museum of contemporary Latin American art, both representational and abstract, emphasizing Mexico but also including the rest of America and Spain. It opens up into several independent parts. Throughout the gallery and in the storerooms, Cuevas has deposited a fundamental part of his own works, originals and engravings, which make up the best



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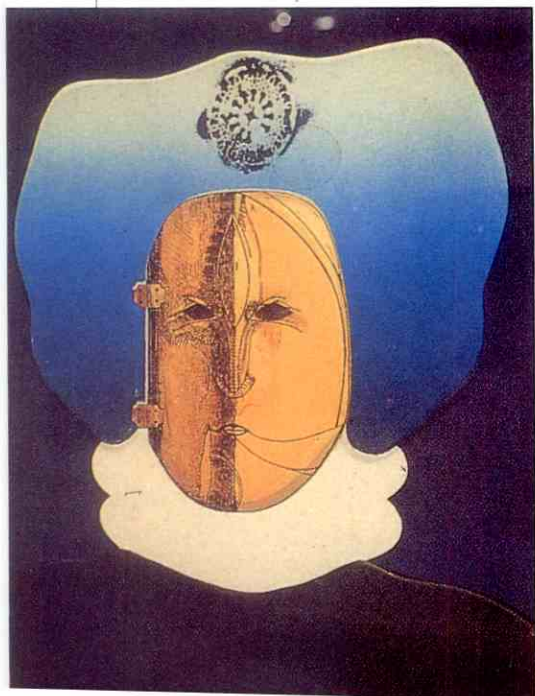


Juan Carlos Liberti, Mysterious cosmos.



*Maria Eugenia Bigott,
Expelled from paradise #23.*

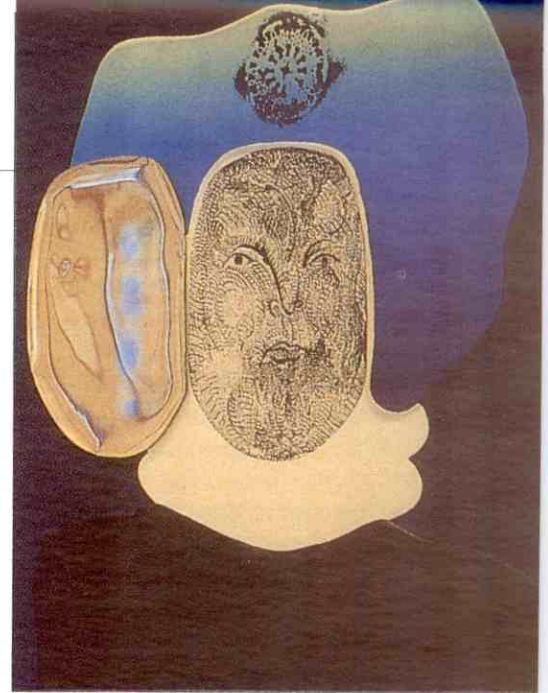
José Luis Cuevas, The closed mask.



Gonzalo Endara Crow, Staining dawn.



David Manzur,
Saint George in hell.



José Luis Cuevas, The opened mask.



Yvonne Venegas.

The museography is state-of-the-art.



William Wagner Granizo,
Homage to José Luis Cuevas.

extant collection of his development over the course of several decades.

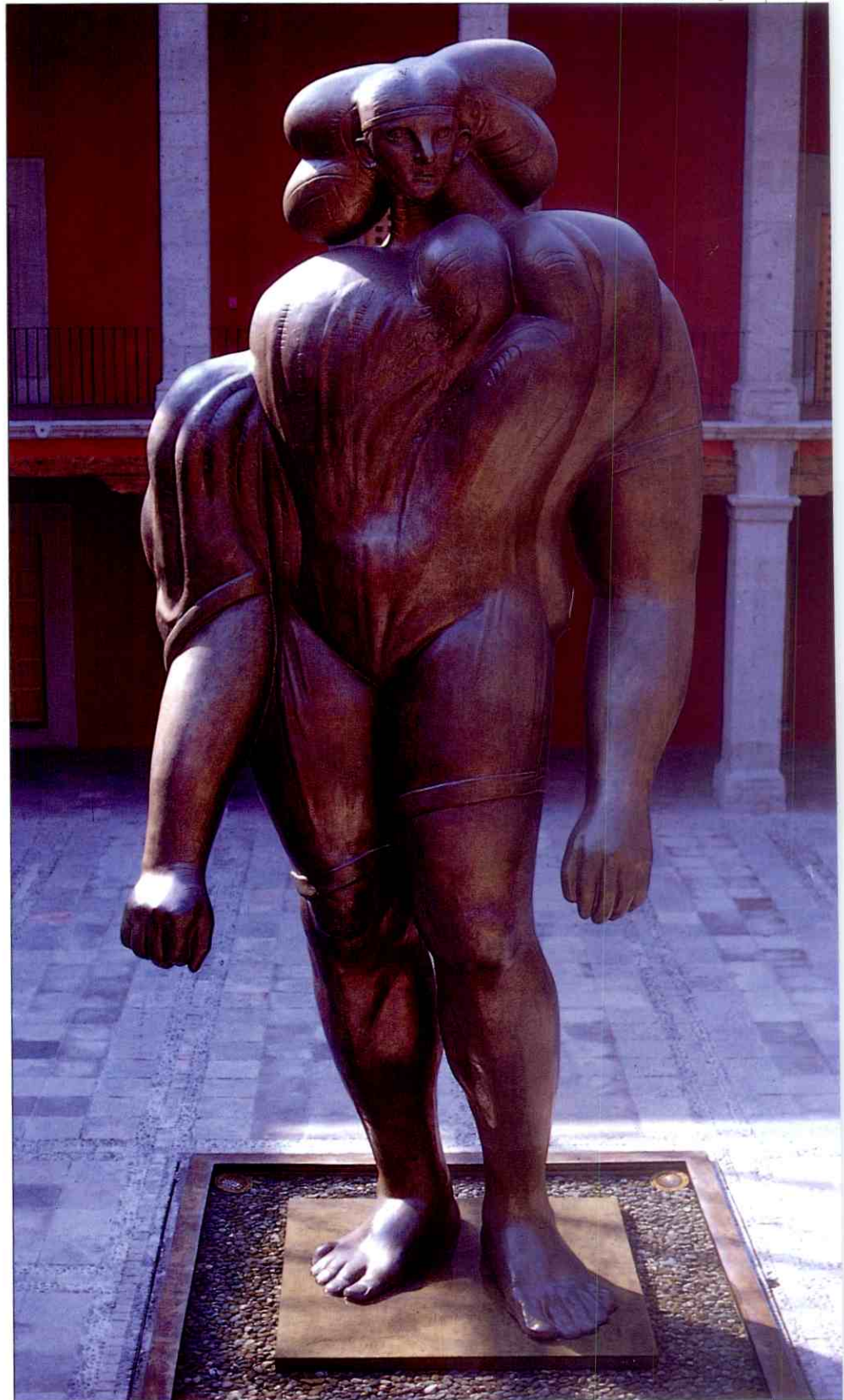
The collection also includes artists from the so-called "Break-Away Generation"; that is, those artists who in the mid-19th century, went against the impositions of the Mexican School in search of a multiplicity of styles that were modern, cosmopolitan and, at the same time, nationalistic. Works by Francisco Corzas, Manuel Felguérez, Alberto Gironella, Carlos Mérida, Benito Messeguer, Brian Nissen, Vicente Rojo, Arnold Belkin, and Matías Goeritz are examples of this trend; the museum hopes to enrich this part of its collection.

Cuevas, in his manifesto *Cortina de nopal*, opposed the dictate of Siqueiros that "there is no path but ours," and declared himself in favor of the *other* Mexico, "...the universal and eternal Mexico which opens itself to the world, without losing its essence."

"In the most heterogeneous spheres of artistic and intellectual life," writes Enrique Krauze, "Cuevas' generation imposed its critical boldness on the preceding culture." Indeed, the artists of that generation, many of whom are represented in the museum, "...were to transform Mexican culture, leaving their imprint through a rigor, an exigency and universality of themes and techniques which only the [generation known as the] Contemporaries and the solitude of Octavio Paz, [Rufino] Tamayo or [Juan] Soriano would have assumed."

But Cuevas, Krauze continues, "has always been generous. The fight between the "Break-Away" artists and the "academy" had been a clean one. The unanimous decision in favor of the former group did not establish a new cultural hegemony, but rather a liberation, an opening in which the muralists did not have a unique, exclusive position, but rather, their just position."

The work of young Mexican artists of the end of the 20th century is



José Luis Cuevas, La Giganta (front view).

Yvonne Venegas.

José Luis Cuevas, *La Giganta* (rear view).

added on this basis, following no other canon than the talent that Cuevas discovers in them. Thus, Alberto Bellón, Alberto and Francisco Castro Leñero, Pedro Friedeberg, Enrique Guzmán, Gabriel Macotela, Irma Palacios, Susana Sierra, Eloy Tarcisio, and Jazzamoart Vázquez are included, as well as artists who do not belong to any specific generation: Abel Quezada, Lucero Issac, Vlady, Raúl Anguiano, and Jesús García Ocejo.

The international section does not seek to represent trends or currents; it contains exclusively contemporary art. Among the Latin Americans, there are Argentines —Carlos Gorriena, Ricardo Gutiérrez Goñi, Juan Carlos Liberti, Ricardo Machado, César Paternosto, Rogelio Polesello, Francisco Ruiz, Kazuya Sakai and Lesner Tavarez—, Chileans —Roberto Matta and Guillermo Núñez—, Uruguayans —Ignacio Iturria and Clever Lara—, Paraguayans —Carlos Colombino—, Peruvians —Oswaldo Sagástegui, Fernando de Szyszlo and José Tola—, Ecuadorians —Gonzalo Endara Crow—, Colombians —David Manzur, Edgar Negret, Leonel Góngora and Gustavo Zolana—, and Venezuelans —María Eugenia Bigott.

While traveling through the rest of the continent, Cuevas acquired outstanding works by Guatemalan Rodolfo Abularach, Nicaraguans Alejandra Aróstegui and Armando Morales, and Salvadorean Margarita Alvarez. Contemporary Cuban painting is represented by Jorge Camacho, Miguel Cubiles and Baruj Salinas. As regards American artists, there are splendid works by James Sicner, Lucas Johnson and Leonard Baskin.

The Spanish part of the collection contains characteristic works by Josep Bartoli, Roser Bru, Josep Guinovart, José Hernández, Andrés Nagel, Antony Peyri and Albert Rafols-Casomada. In addition to these examples of European art, the Cuevas bequest included two collections of

engravings and prints: one of Pablo Picasso's works, and another of Rembrandt van Rijn's, with two hundred photoprints from the end of the 19th century.

The number of catalogued works totals 1,040, and will gradually increase. Besides their value as museum pieces, we hope that all these works of art will minister to the needs of art students.

Exhibitions

The José Luis Cuevas Museum was also planned as a space for temporary exhibits. The first of the 1993 season,



Felipe de la Torre Villalpando, Ulama.



Lucas Johnson, Monument of the desert and its shadow.

is a posthumous tribute to Fernando Gamboa, one of the world's greatest museographers. The show, entitled *Mexican Painting: 1950-1980*, was one of his last works; it was exhibited at the IBM Gallery of Science and Art in New York. It includes 41 great Mexican painters, and painters who made Mexico their artistic home; 47 works of exceptional quality make up the display.

Two of the museum's larger rooms, the "Fernando Gamboa" and the "José Gómez Sicre," display works by artists such as Gilberto Aceves Navarro, Lilia Carrillo, Arnaldo Coen, Rafael Coronel, Olga Costa, José Chávez Morado, Enrique Echeverría, Enrique Estrada, Fernando García Ponce, Gunther Gerzo, Jorge González Camarena, Luis López Loza, Agueda Lozano, Ricardo Martínez, Guillermo Meza, Rodolfo Nieto, Luis Nishizawa, Juan O'Gorman and Francisco Toledo. Among the foreign-born artists are Leonora Carrington, Joy Laville, Brian Nissen, Wolfgang Paalen, Antonio Pelaez, Alice Rahon, Antonio Rodríguez Luna, Remedios Varo and Roger von Gunten.

Next on the 1993 calendar of events are two shows dedicated to José

Luis Cuevas himself. The first is the inauguration of the "Erotica Room," thus designated because it contains Cuevas' sensual drawings, disturbing yet playful, which stand on their own merit. They will become part of the permanent collection donated by the artist. The second show is a large, temporary exhibit of his recent, large works on canvas and paper, which were enthusiastically received at the International Fair in Seville.

The Tamarind Institute's *Collaborations, Artists and Printers* exhibit will be shown in the "Alaide Foppa" room. The Tamarind Institute, of the United States, is one of the world's greatest engraving centers. This exhibit is especially important because one of the museum's goals is to become a forum for contemporary art on paper, and so contribute towards dignifying and increasing appreciation for this age-old material as a vehicle for artistic expression of the highest level.

Finally, the museum has programmed exhibitions on toys as *objets d'art* and Mexican women sculptors. Besides these, the museum plans to organize exhibits of Cuevas' art in Spain, Belgium, Chile and the Dominican Republic **M**