

DOÑA LUZ

Inspiration and Image of a National Culture

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Her to the great Nahuatl tradition, Doña Luz departed from all the stereotypes of her time about indigenous people. From childhood, she wanted to be a teacher, but the whirlwinds of the Mexican Revolution brought that dream up short. Her life was completely transformed when she became a model and took part in three post-revolutionary artistic movements: Mexican muralism, grassroots art education and the renewal of graphic art. In the 1940s she was a resource person for historians and anthropologists; in addition, she worked as an assistant teacher of Nahuatl at a prestigious Mexico City university. Always both noble and humble, with her clearly indigenous demeanor, Doña Luz is an extraordinary case of rebellion against destiny.

Julia Jiménez González, Doña Luz, was born in southern Mexico City, in the Nahuatl community of Milpa Alta, January 28, 1897. At that time

the Porfirio Díaz government was taking formal education into Mexico's rural communities and from a very young age, Doña Luz longed to be a teacher.

At the beginnings of the 1910 Revolution, Milpa Alta had 5,588 inhabitants, the great majority of whom were of Nahuatl ancestry and spoke their traditional language. The children who went to primary school soon became bilingual and learned the trades taught there.

Doña Luz started elementary school in 1904 and entered the Concepción Arenal Upper Primary School in 1908. But, with the outbreak of revolution she was forced to leave school in 1912.

The streets of Milpa Alta became a battleground for Zapatistas and Federal troops. The civilian population weathered violence, thieving and the rape of both the town's women and its churches. Finally, the federal troops drowned the revolt in Milpa Alta in blood by executing most of the men of the town on March 16, 1916. The women and children crept

away under cover of night, fleeing from death.

Doña Luz lost her father to the revolution and journeyed with her mother, three sisters and many other women to eastern Mexico City, where they settled in a lake district similar to Xochimilco. Near her home were the Tlalpan, La Viga and Santa Anita canals, as well as the retail and wholesale market areas of La Merced and downtown Mexico City. Soon they were surrounded by *ahuehuetes* (giant conifers), cypresses, ash and black poplars, watching the canoes go up and down the canals loaded with vegetables and flowers. Doña Luz and her family may well have survived by buying and selling vegetables, fruit, flowers, food like tamales, tortillas, bread and *atole* (a thick traditional beverage, served hot), and hand-made products like girdles, tablecloths, napkins and articles of apparel.

When the Revolution was over, the residents of Milpa Alta began to return, but nothing would ever be the same again. The town was in ruins;

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Doña Luz, 1932.

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Jean and Ann Charlot with Luz and her family, 1946.

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the fields had been reclaimed by the forest and Concepción Arenal Upper Primary School had been torched in 1914.

Two things came together to change Doña Luz's life yet again, however. The first was in 1920, when Alfredo Ramos Martínez, the director of the San Carlos Academy set up the Chimalistac open air school in southern Mexico City. After the Revolution, artists and intellectuals had turned their gaze to the people. The indigenous people were the heroes, the image and emblem of the nation in their work.

The second event occurred in Santa Anita in 1919 or 1920: during the annual celebration of the arrival of spring, Doña Luz won the *Izcalichpochtzintli* (Spring Maiden) contest. Covered with flowers, Doña Luz must have radiated beautiful indigenous youth. Later, she was asked to pose at different painting academies.

In 1920, Fernando Leal, a student of the open air schools, used young Luz as a model for one of his canvases. From then on, Doña Luz would be closely tied to Mexico's artistic and cultural milieu of the first half of the twentieth century through her relationship with several generations of the San Carlos and the La Esmeralda Academies up until 1965.

In 1921, the young French artist Jean Charlot arrived in Mexico. The descendent of a Mexican grandmother, Charlot grew up in France in constant contact with pre-Hispanic figurines, codices, books and traditional Mexican toys from the nineteenth century. When he arrived, he easily fit in with the artistic circles of the time: he went to the open air painting schools and shared his studio with Fernando Leal. It was there that he met Luz, the young indigenous model posing for Leal. She impressed him profoundly and he nicknamed her Luciana. Luz-Luciana

became his muse and the link between the Mexican indigenous culture of the past and the present. Charlot would paint her many times, and she repaid him by introducing him to the traditions of Milpa Alta and the Nahuatl language.

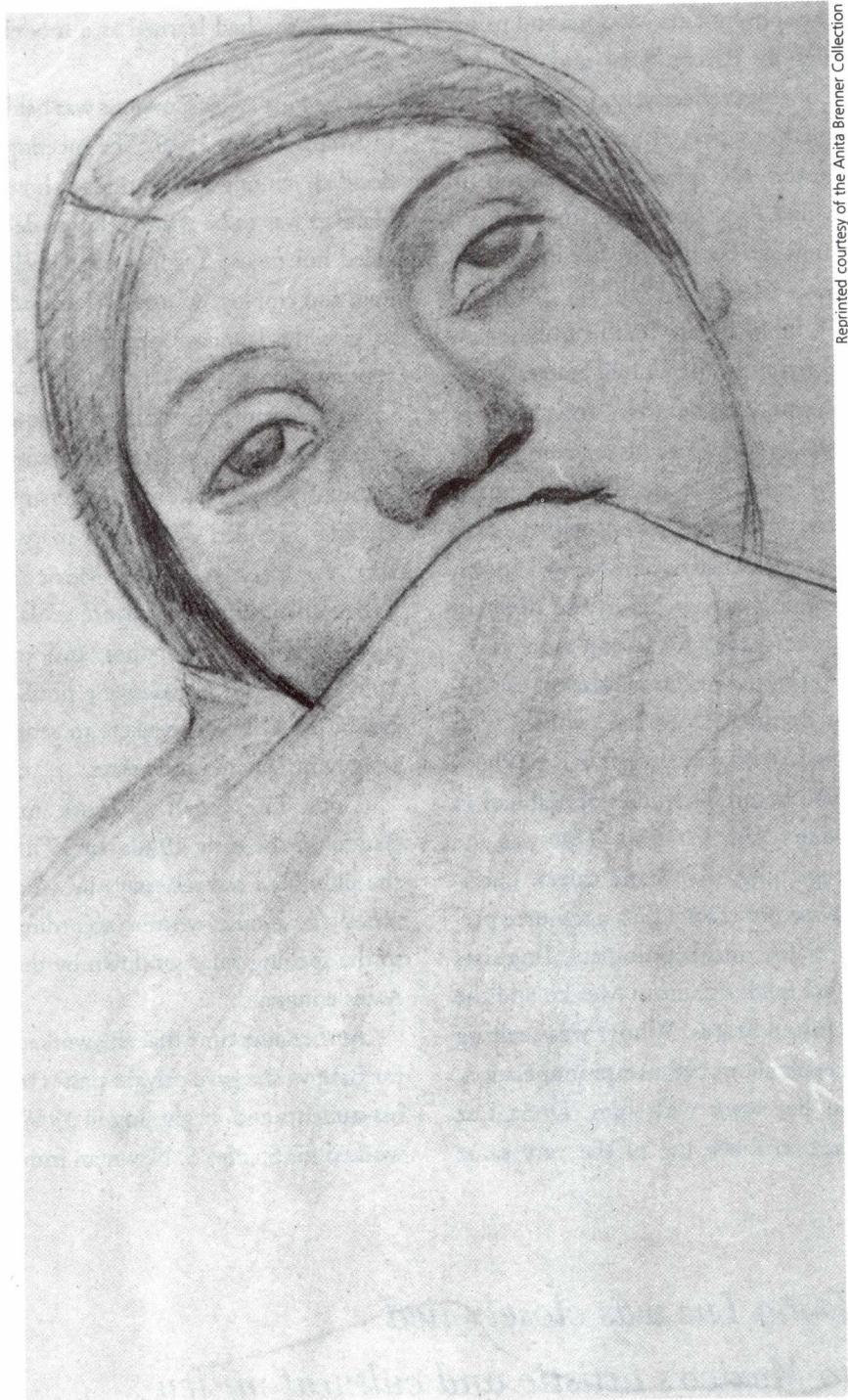
Diego Rivera, having recently arrived from Europe, was commissioned in 1921 to paint several walls of the National San Ildefonso High School. In his mural *The Creation* in the Simón Bolívar Amphitheater, Rivera used Luz as a model for his allegory on Faith. Fernando Leal and Jean Charlot worked as assistants on the project.

Her face appears in *The Festival of Our Lord of Chalma*, an encaustic done by Leal in 1922, and in *Marketplace*, a fresco Rivera did in 1923 at the Public Education Ministry. It is also said that she was Diego Rivera's model for some of the indigenous faces in the murals at Mexico City's National Palace.

Doña Luz modeled for innumerable canvases and etchings; her face and figure were also used by sculptors and photographers. In 1925, she already enjoyed certain prestige in the artistic and intellectual circles of the time. She and her family were excellent hosts for visitors to Milpa Alta. Her profound knowledge of local traditions and the fact that she was bilingual as well as extremely pleasant facilitated her introducing people to Milpa Alta and the customs of her indigenous brethren, people like journalists Anita Brenner and Frances Toor, photographers Tina Modotti and Edward Weston, painters Jean Charlot, Diego Rivera, Alva de la Canal, Fernando Leal and Díaz de León and the sculptor Ignacio Asúnsulo. She worked at many different trades: model, story-teller, tour guide in Milpa Alta and Chalma, cook and even maid.

When work became scarce, she made girdles and other traditional indigenous wear to sell in Mexico City. Since she knew both the city and potential buyers, Doña Luz distributed both her own products and those made by her relatives in Milpa Alta. Her help to others made her even more popular among her people.

While she worked, she lived sometimes in Mexico City and sometimes in Milpa Alta. In Iztacalco she met an inspector named Manuel Hernández and fell in love with him. When she became pregnant by him out of wedlock and he accepted no responsibility for the child, Doña Luz broke off all relations with him and had what was to be her only child,



Jean Charlot, *Luz*, 1922 (pencil on paper).

Conchita, in July 1925. Anita Brenner and Jean Charlot became the child's godparents, giving Luz both moral and economic support. This relationship brought Doña Luz even

closer to them, cementing a friendship that would last for decades.

Now Doña Luz no longer modeled alone; she had Conchita with her, which is how she is seen in pho-

tographs by Tina Modotti and paintings by Rivera, Leal and Charlot. Conchita effectively inherited her mother's part-time work. She received her primary education in Milpa Alta, but forgot the Nahuatl language because she lived in downtown Mexico City.

In 1928, as Charlot sought new horizons in the United States, Diego Rivera became the cornerstone of Mexican art. Currents in painting were changing little by little and many new artistic avenues opened up. Doña Luz continued to pose for well known artists and students of the different art academies for several more years.

On the recommendation of Anita Brenner, Doña Luz worked with the U.S. linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, who began his studies of Nahuatl in Milpa Alta in 1930. This was the beginning of a second career: Luciana became Doña Luz, a resource person for anthropologists, linguists and folklorists from Mexico and the United States. Whorf was seeking details about Nahuatl pronunciation. In her work with him, Doña Luz had to make use of the very same

patience she had learned as a model at the art academies.

The First Aztec Congress was held in Milpa Alta in 1940. The meeting decided, among other things, how Nahuatl was to be written: it was decided not to use Spanish-based spelling, and employ "k" and "w" instead to give the language a non-Spanish appearance.

In those same years, Robert Barlow came from the United States to learn Nahuatl at the National University. He later founded *Tlalocan*, a magazine for sources about Mexico's native cultures; *Mexihcayotl*, a Nahuatl-language newspaper; and, in 1950, *Mexihcatl Itonalama*, a publication for Nahuatl-speakers to send song lyrics, poems and essays.

Doña Luz began to work for Barlow in the early 1940s. In 1950, she published several essays in *Mexihcatl Itonalama*, written according to the spelling rules set down by the Aztec congress.

At the same time that she worked for Barlow, she gave private classes to his students and, beginning in 1948, worked for Stanley S. Newman from

the United States collaborating on his Nahuatl grammar book.

During the 1940s, Anita Brenner edited several books that included stories told by Doña Luz and illustrated by Jean Charlot. These indigenous children's stories were translated to English for children in the United States, but a great deal of the Nahuatl substance was lost in translation.

Around 1948, American anthropologist Fernando Horcasitas met Doña Luz at the Barlow home. Horcasitas rapidly began to participate in the interviews with Luz and in publishing *Tlalocan*.

Horcasitas kept up his friendship with Doña Luz for a long time and in 1957, they taught Nahuatl together at Mexico City College.

In 1961, Guadalupe Solórzano, the director of Galerías Chapultepec, suggested to journalist Maruxa Villalta that she interview Doña Luz on her television program *Working Women*. That was a big year for Doña Luz: on May 10 (Mother's Day in Mexico), the national daily newspaper *Excélsior* published an article about her life, her modeling and experiences as a resource person for Nahuatl; and on December 27, she was interviewed on television.

In 1963, Horcasitas, who worked at the National University, asked Doña Luz to dictate more texts. This time, she told her own life story, her childhood and experiences during the Revolution; it was actually a chronicle of Milpa Alta from the last years of the *Porfiriato* (the thirty-year regime of Porfirio Díaz) until 1920.

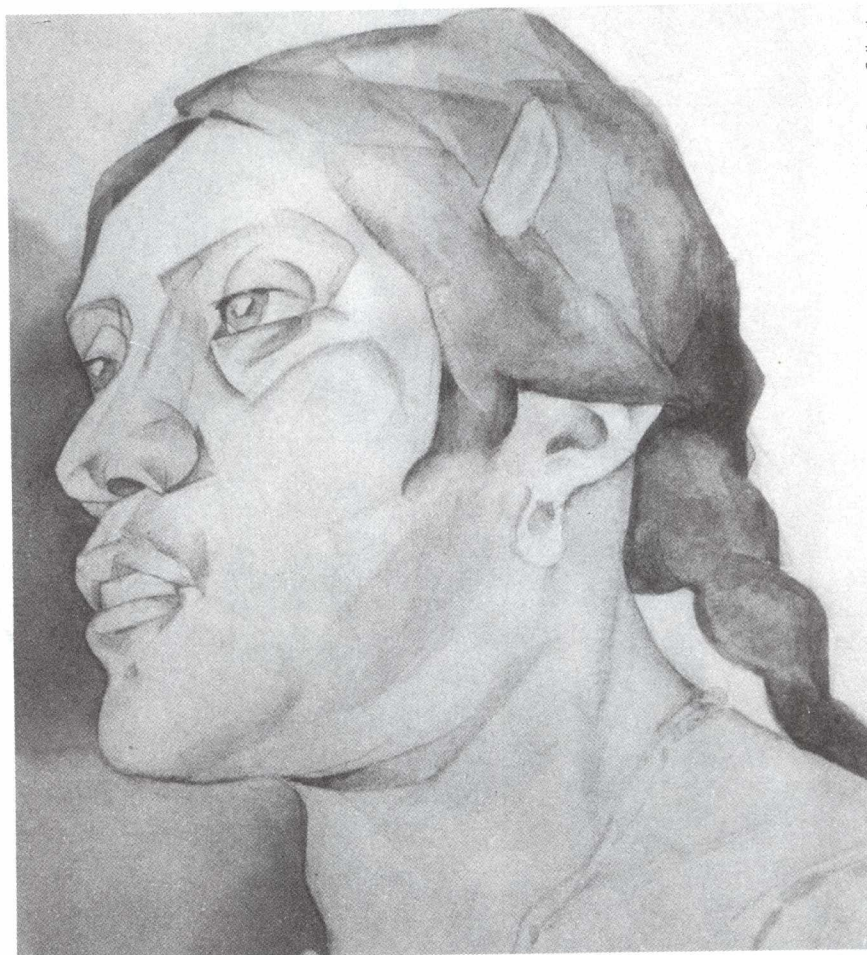
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Doña Luz's family was grown up. Conchita had married. Despite the pleasure Luz took in her grandchildren, innumerable events undermined her strength: in 1958 she lost her mother; in 1964, she lost her friend, her daughter's godfather, Fernando Leal; also, her age took its toll on her physical abilities, weakening her eyesight.

The good times were gone. Sometimes she worked as a resource person, sometimes as a cook or a servant. Her custom of making clothes helped her survive, and her daughter Conchita says that she used to walk the streets of downtown Mexico City crying in English, "Lady, Lady, Mexican curiosities!"

In January 1965, Doña Luz went to work and never returned. She was killed in a traffic accident on her birthday, January 28. Many friends went to say their last goodbyes at the Iztapalapa cemetery in Mexico City. *Mexico This Month* published an anonymous column written in her memory—most probably by Anita Brenner, the magazine's publisher—"Luz, Her Legend", accompanied by a drawing by Charlot and the poem "The Broken Jar" by Octavio Paz.

Fernando Horcasitas also made his contribution: he gathered the stories that Doña Luz had told and published them in the first Nahuatl-Spanish bilingual edition of *De Porfirio Díaz a Zapata, memoria náhuatl de Milpa Alta* (From Porfirio Díaz to Zapata, Nahuatl memoir of Milpa Alta), which renders this indigenous woman's childhood and understanding of the Revolution; in 1979, 44 of



Jean Charlot, *Luz*, 1922 (watercolor).

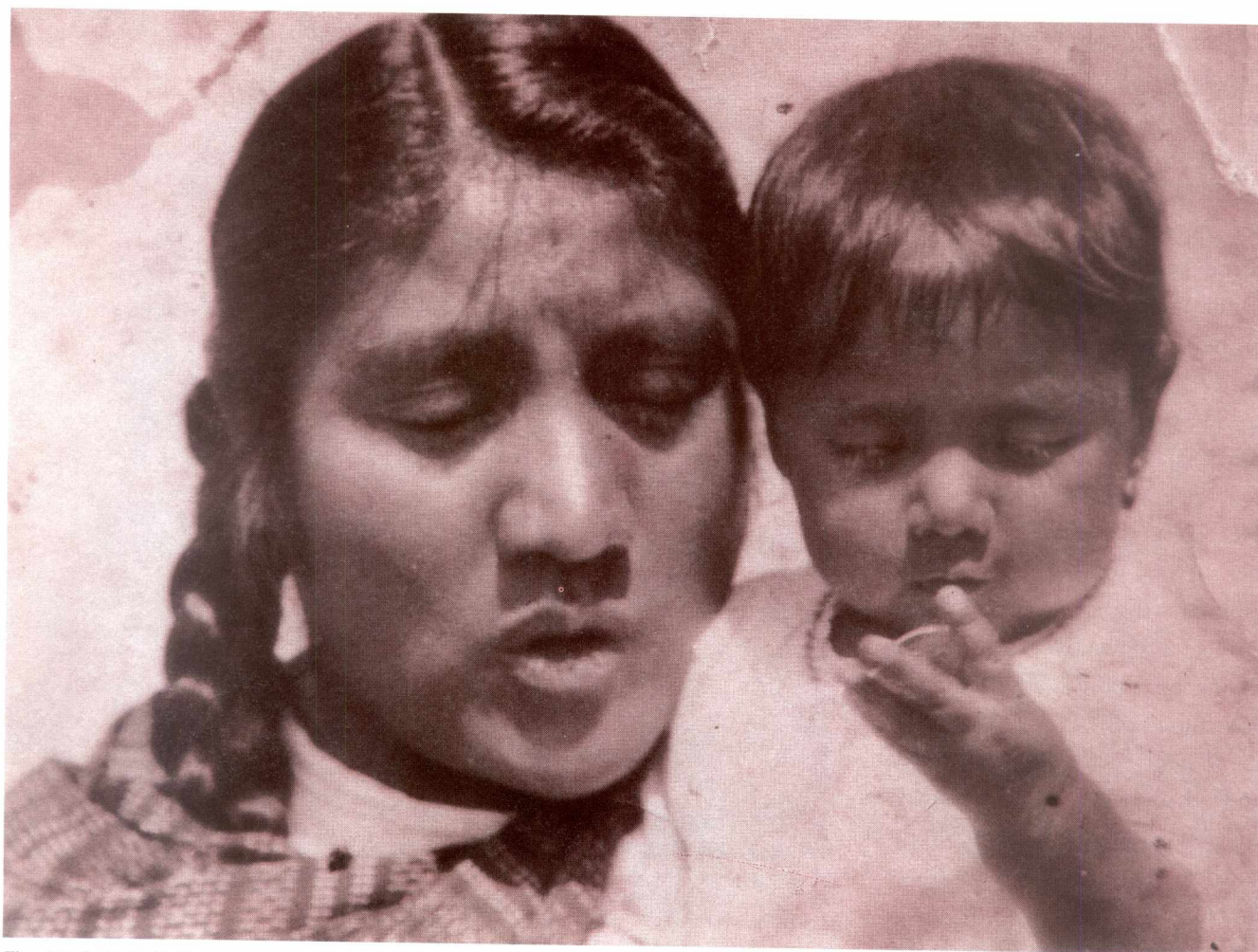
her stories were published in both Nahuatl and Spanish in *Los cuentos en náhuatl de doña Luz Jiménez* (Stories in Nahuatl by Doña Luz Jiménez); and in 1972, a bilingual Nahuatl-English version of *Memoria náhuatl de Milpa Alta* (A Nahuatl memoir of Milpa Alta) was published.

These posthumous tributes were rounded out by research done by Frances Karttunen, from the United States, who wrote Doña Luz's biography, *Between Worlds*, published in 1994 in the United States, completing the biography that Horcasitas had already begun. Karttunen also

wrote several works on the Nahuatl language and different pieces on Doña Luz.

In 1994 the then-Diego Rivera Studio Museum and some U.S. institutions organized an exhibit-tribute to Charlot, "Mexico in the Work of Jean Charlot." Among the 500 pieces in the show were innumerable sketches, paintings and etchings that Charlot did of Doña Luz as well as photos of her and her family.

Frances Karttunen also expressed her admiration for Doña Luz by doing all the paperwork needed both in the United States and Mexico in



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Tina Modotti, *Doña Luz and Conchita*, 1926.

order to put on a pictorial and photographic exhibit in which Doña Luz came through in all her beauty and grandeur.

On the centennial of her birth, the Mexican Museum of Texas inaugurated the trilingual exhibit (in English, Nahuatl and Spanish) “Luz and the Good Teachers,” presenting Doña Luz as a Mexican heroine, model and storyteller.

Luciana, as Charlot called her, or Doña Lucha, as the students at La Esmeralda Academy called her in the 1960s, was really named Julia. No one knows to this day why she

changed her name, or why she did not follow the stereotypical road of the majority of the indigenous people of her time. Doña Luz broke with an almost preordained destiny: she would not be an unlettered indigenous woman.

Artists for much of this century caught Doña Luz in many different images and forms. The past that she represented and that became the present at the moment it was put on a canvas, paper or wood, has also moved toward the future as part of the Mexican people’s iconography. Her gentle face and her corpulent

figure are on exhibit in museums in Mexico and the United States, in private collections, in several art books and in the home she always wanted for herself: the Ministry of Public Education and the Old National Preparatory School. Her words have nourished scholars and specialists in the Nahuatl language from the world over and her stories can be read by young and old alike in Nahuatl, English or Spanish. Doña Luz could never have imagined the rich legacy she would leave behind when for the very first time she lent her indigenous beauty to a canvas. *Wi*