



Juárez by Toledo¹

*Carlos Monsiváis**

For more than a century now, the only way we •Mexicans have been able to picture Juárez is in his hieratic regalia, clad in frock-coat and top hat, travelling from one corner of the Nation to another (with a capital N), a nation in the throes of agony and resurrection—and he incapable of dishonor, supreme commander in the face of supreme patriotic duty. His character is made of steel, his powers of decision lucid and his image unfathomable, or at least that is how it seems to us. What would make this *Benemérito de las Américas*, this exemplary leader of the saga of Liberal Reform, this definitive hero of our history, this visionary who contributed more than anyone else to the consolidation of our nation flinch? What could make him stir? Photographs and paintings always portray him the same, imperturbable in any setting, whether on a cliff, by the presidential carriage, heading the nomadic Republican powers, defying the rebels with a curt gesture, or quelling the treachery of the conservative faction and its attendant French imperialist invasion.

Juaréz' inapprehensible appearance goes beyond the solemnities of his time, the customary stiffness of all grandees before the painter or photographer, the observance of the by-laws for facial deportment set by history and society, the admonitions of severity that each and every individual portrayed (whether minister or peasant) felt compelled to convey. Don Benito went further: his enigmatic quality is intensely individual. From the outset, according to witnesses, he was a live statue, his distant expression seemingly pointing toward the source of ancestral forces, toward (if the term had not become meaningless) atavism.

Even the resources of psychology and sociology cannot unveil the secret of the Sphinx. The Zapotec indian who learned the Castilian language and became an undecipherable mestizo will not yield his secret. We know everything about him: writings, laws, correspondence, suffering, human failings, unutter-

able virtues, unlimited courage and persistence, even the frailties of his ambition. But in the last instance, before we can condense what we have learned of him into an image both new and modern, an image removed from the Bronze History of our Bronze Race, the irresistible pull of habit, amounting to national behavior, steps in to prevent the slightest modification of the classical representation of Juárez, The Impassive One. The demythologizing effort has been substantial, but it has come late. Don Benito is the most heroic of heroes: he cannot be reduced to fragments, he never cracks or breaks down. Even if we learn by heart all the criticism inveighed against his authoritarian personality and his lust for power, in the end his figure will remain intact. What is "human" in Juárez, according to both historical interpretation and popular feeling, are his immutable features. His image is so monolithic that it does not require marble, bronze and concrete to be marble-like, bronze-like and crushing. Juárez' head watches over the Republic, Juárez' bust presides over the pageantry on the motherland, Juárez' statues (the institutions' "dragon teeth") strengthen the links between historical reckoning and individual trust in the political system.

2. Is there anything we have not tried to put Juárez in-his-place? In Porfirio Díaz' times, while the century was closing, throughout the country priests committed the upholder of the Laws of Reform to variegated torments of hell, while the "scientific," positivistic Francisco Bulnes wrote *El verdadero Juárez*, wherein he listed all his failings, errors and obfuscation. According to the right, Juárez should be held responsible for the loss of the Golden Age: his hated figure and his abominable name deserved systematic, over-exact and almost mystical detestation. Juárez drew all kinds of fire: jingles in private schools ("May the scoundrel Juárez die"); the hysteria of conservative households that, even during the 1940s, not wanting to utter "I'm going to the toilet," piously muttered, "I'm going to see Juárez"; taunts and slander from Catholic historians, among them no less than José Vasconcelos,

* Mexican art critic, chronicler and cultural analyst.
Translation by Mathew Lane.

Previous page: *The Christ of the Bakers*, 81 x 61 cm, 1996 (oil/encaustic on wood).



Photos by Gilberto Chen. Reprinted courtesy of Galeria Juan Martín

Juárez in the Middle East, 56.5 x 59 cm, 1998 (mixed techniques, woven paper).

who in his *Breve historia de México* called Don Benito “gloomy” and accused him of being the protector of Yankee intervention (according to him, since there was no such thing as Indian-ness, Juárez could not be an “indigenista,” and therefore became a straw-man for Protestants and Masons).

Contumely and detestation came to a head in 1947, during a march of the right-wing National “Sinarquista” Union to the Juárez Monument in Mexico City. Puerility and fetishism took over. Each speech kindled the flame of the next, and the successors of the nineteenth century Conservatives and the twentieth century *cristero* Catholic insurgents laid charges, spewed insults, became exasperated in word and grimace and addressed the civic sculpture in an animistic mode. As their fury decomposed, they spit at the effigy and covered it with

a hood: Juárez, they claimed, “does not deserve to face decorous, right-minded people.”

3. There is no way to “demythologize” Don Benito, and his fellow Oaxacan Francisco Toledo is not unaware of this. Who could modify such unquestionable, deeply rooted language? And, since the legend does not give way or even change, Toledo approaches it sideways: he animates the surroundings, he includes the Idol in fantastic goings-on. If Juárez is *ad perpetuam* the face/mask, the very mien of protocol, he who will never tolerate emendation, then what must be subjected to the vivification of art are his landscapes and his daily activities. Juárez is inalterable: nothing he does and is made to do will make him any less Juárez. He is beyond both respect and lack of respect, and therefore he can and he must, at his ease, go fishing and skating, take part in community fiestas, scru-



Reform Avenue, 50 x 40 cm, 1995 (mixed techniques, woven amate).



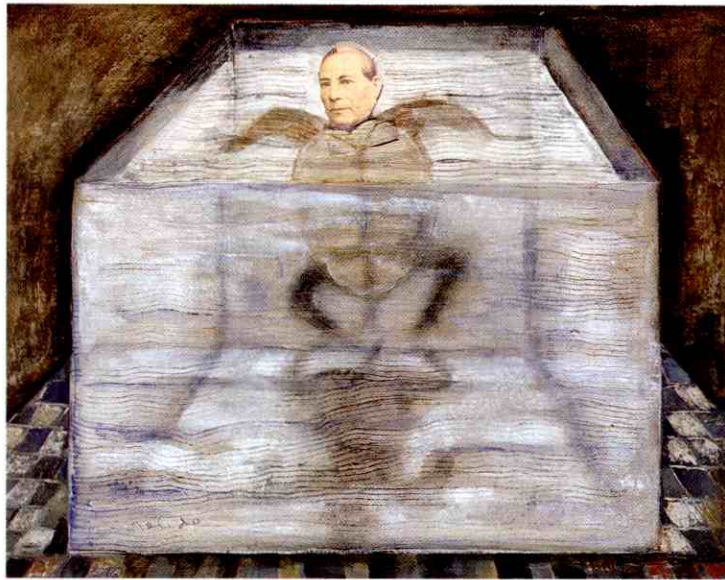
Juárez as a Sleeping Gypsy, 1986 (mixed techniques/paper).

tinize newly-wed women and women giving birth, reduce his size or become a giant at will, suffer reverential treatment from iguanas and crabs and turtles and deer, go through the looking-glass, allow himself to be followed by women-folk, as well as lead Nature to seduction or to agitation.

Confronted with the omnipresent head and busts of a never-changing Juárez, Toledo addresses his subject by means of a formula whereby admiration necessitates irony and irony is founded upon admiration. The panoramas of our Bronze History and the grudges of anti-history are now abolished. If the place of heroes cannot be modified, what must change is our perception of their visual reach. If the Sacred Industry of Heroism has littered the country with stony horror and with paintings which serve as lay votive offerings, then it is now time to see Juárez not only as the sym-

bol of History, but of popular culture. For the purpose of this re-creation, Toledo diversifies and uses gouache, engraving, lithography, experiments with fossil stone, collage. Juárez is the ubiquitous presence, the wake of civil apparitions opposing the celestial monopoly of miracles, the exceptional being in whose traditional strictness iconographic renewal inspires itself.

As a child —and like everyone in this country more secularized than is thought and more religious than is admitted— Toledo fed himself on a hagiographic culture made up of daily and Sunday small stamps and prints, of catechism booklets and official textbooks, of child heroes and children of Atocha,² of sainthood divided between the walls of churches and the walls of the mayor's office. Today, with both thankfulness and revenge, Toledo restores the powers of imagination to his culture; he threads through places



Juárez in a Tank, 26 x 35.5 cm, 1998 (mixed techniques/gouache/paper).

hitherto unexplored; he combines what was never before granted to any nation and what was never before recorded by parliamentary chroniclers. Knowingly and unknowingly, Toledo blends parallel stories and fantasies: San Felipe de Jesús before the fig tree and Juárez with his reed-grass flute dazing the sheep, San Martín de Porres watching a parade of brooms and Juárez up in the heavens of the motherland. Scenes of the joyful wedding of the corridors of hagiography and the visions of nineteenth century Mexican liberalism.

4. Once, Toledo says —opposing the official view— Don Benito, angered by the rebelliousness of Toledo's countrymen, the Juchitecs, ordered Juchitán burnt. This deplorable act does not raise vindictive intentions in our artist, but it does explain something of the mistrust that we perceive in his apotheosis of Juárez, the very symbol of himself. According to Toledo, for his people, Juárez also represents the violence of the natural elements; he is power incited to the igneous, General History razing Local History. Such an experience increases even further the distance between Juárez and the mythical and real Juchitán that surrounds him here, fauna and flora, families and individuals, signs and legends.

Never before in his extraordinary body of work had Toledo come close to History and to an illustrious personage. Surely this new insistence stems from a prolonged personal and collective obsession with a man who, for the Indian sector where he was born, is both the culmination and the deferment of possibilities. In these thousand and one Juárez, Toledo also reveals his position regarding the relations (the extreme fusion) between collective development and Nature.

Juárez seen, tracked, exalted, "humanized" by Toledo. Respect for another man's right —Juárez' byword— becomes the immutability of the figure. Among individuals, as among landscapes. In the end, everything, including these opinions, had as much effect on our mythology as the wind did on Juárez,³ to use a mythological phrase. It jiggled his hat and that's all. ■■■

NOTES

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² The Infant Saint of Atocha is one of Mexico's most venerated saints, thought to perform enormous numbers of miracles. [Editor's Note.]

³ The phrase "as much as the wind affected Juárez" is a common Mexican saying meaning that something had no effect at all. [Editor's Note.]