

# Luis Nishizawa

## Heir to Two Ancient Traditions

Merry Mac Masters\*



*Cholula*, 37.5 x 87 cm, 1995 (suiboku ink on paper).

The director of the Urawa National Art Museum, Homma Masayoshi, referred to Nishizawa as “an Asian heart submerged in the Mexican humanism that belongs to the aesthetic of sacrifice.”

Although painter Luis Nishizawa (1918) has worked in all genres, he has a predilection for landscapes. He attributes this to being born on a hacienda in the State of Mexico and spending his youth as a shepherd. As a boy he noted the intricate veins of every leaf, every piece of grass, every corn field.

He also noticed the play of light of the sun’s rays through the tops of the trees, in the shadows, on the flowers, the fruit and even the animals themselves.

Living in the country influenced Nishizawa so much that even when he painted abstract works, he never stopped going back to the countryside. He and his friends Amador Lugo, Manuel Echauri and Manuel Herrera Cantoya would get on a bus with their canvases and bean and egg sandwiches to go into the moun-

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Unless otherwise specified, photos by Daniel Murguía

*Don Hermilo... My Friend*, 92.5 x 73 cm, 1952 (mixed techniques on masonite).





*Shrimp*, 54 x 116 cm, 1987 (mixed techniques on canvas and wood).



*Strawberries*, 62.5 x 79.6 cm, 1995 (distemper on canvas and wood).



*Orange*, 34.8 x 44.2 cm, 1995 (distemper).



*Charales*, 59 x 120 cm, 1980 (mixed techniques on canvas and wood).

tains. Nishizawa's taste for landscape also linked him to Gerardo Murillo —better known as Dr. Atl— whom he admired very much and deferred to in some things.

When Nishizawa enrolled in the National School of Visual Arts in 1942, Mexican muralism had reached its zenith. José Clemente Orozco had already painted the murals in the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara, Jalisco. It was a difficult influence to avoid for the young painter and his fellow students.

Art critic Teresa del Conde says that part of Nishizawa's art "can be called dramatic, adding the impact produced by Orozco's art."<sup>1</sup> Another aspect, "lyrical and subjective, never distances itself from the evocation of the natural world, above all the geographical elements to which this painter seems to render a moderate, rhythmic veneration."<sup>2</sup>

Heir to two ancient cultures, Nishizawa did a series of 50 sketches in 1972 called *Hard Times and Broken Dreams* with hippies as the



*Tlayacapan*, 64 x 122 cm, 1994 (distemper).



*Dry Fish*, 70.2 x 22.5 cm, 1999 (distemper on canvas).

central figures. Later he exhibited some pieces of this series in Japan where they were a great success, prompting comments about how they had a Japanese photographic cast. This surprised him because in Mexico people said he was very influenced by Orozco.

The comments continued, however. And Nishizawa argued that his calligraphy was made of figures while those of the Japanese were letters, although he admitted that what he had wanted to present had been interpreted correctly. After that he began a series of landscapes with Japanese techniques, something he would not have done before because of the great respect he had for the masters of the technique.

Once the director of the Urawa National Art Museum, Homma Masayoshi, referred to Nishizawa as “an Asian heart submerged in the Mexican humanism that belongs to the aesthetic of sacrifice.”<sup>3</sup>

As a young man, Nishizawa was attracted by Mexicanist realism, influenced by the refinements of Julio Castellanos’ execution and by his affection for common figures painted without resorting to the picturesque. Later he would break—but not abruptly—with the Mexican school’s neorealism and his work would display a more allegorical realism, an Asian form of calligraphical synthesis in his landscapes, a certain expressionistic violence in his large sketches. Nevertheless, he has always said he was not interested in being part of any particular trend.

Spanish critic Margarita Nelken was one of the first to write about Nishizawa’s work, when he had his first one-man show at the Mexican Visual Arts Salon. In 1951, she wrote, “It would be fruitless to deny Luis Nishizawa’s gift as a painter; just as it would be fruitless to deny seeing in his paintings and sketches the appear-





*Cauldrons No. 1*, 61 x 118 cm, 1995 (distemper).

ance of being excessively influenced by other painters... We think that Nishizawa is proficient enough to be able to escape these too noticeable habits.”<sup>4</sup>

A year later, Justino Fernández would write that Nishizawa “achieves fine work, wrought with clean, quality objectivism.”<sup>5</sup>

Raúl Flores Guerrero commented that, “As a result of his constant travel through Mexico, [Nishizawa] has done many landscapes that have justly placed him in an outstanding position among Mexico’s young painters.”<sup>6</sup>

A founder of the Visual Arts Integration Workshop in 1949 directed by José Chávez Morado, it was only nine years later that Nishizawa had the opportunity to paint his first mural. In 1957, when Fernando Gamboa began coordinating decorations at Mexico City’s Medical Center complex, then under construction, he called on Nishizawa —among other artists— to

develop the theme “Air Is Life” in the main vestibule of the Pneumology Unit’s Hospitalization building.

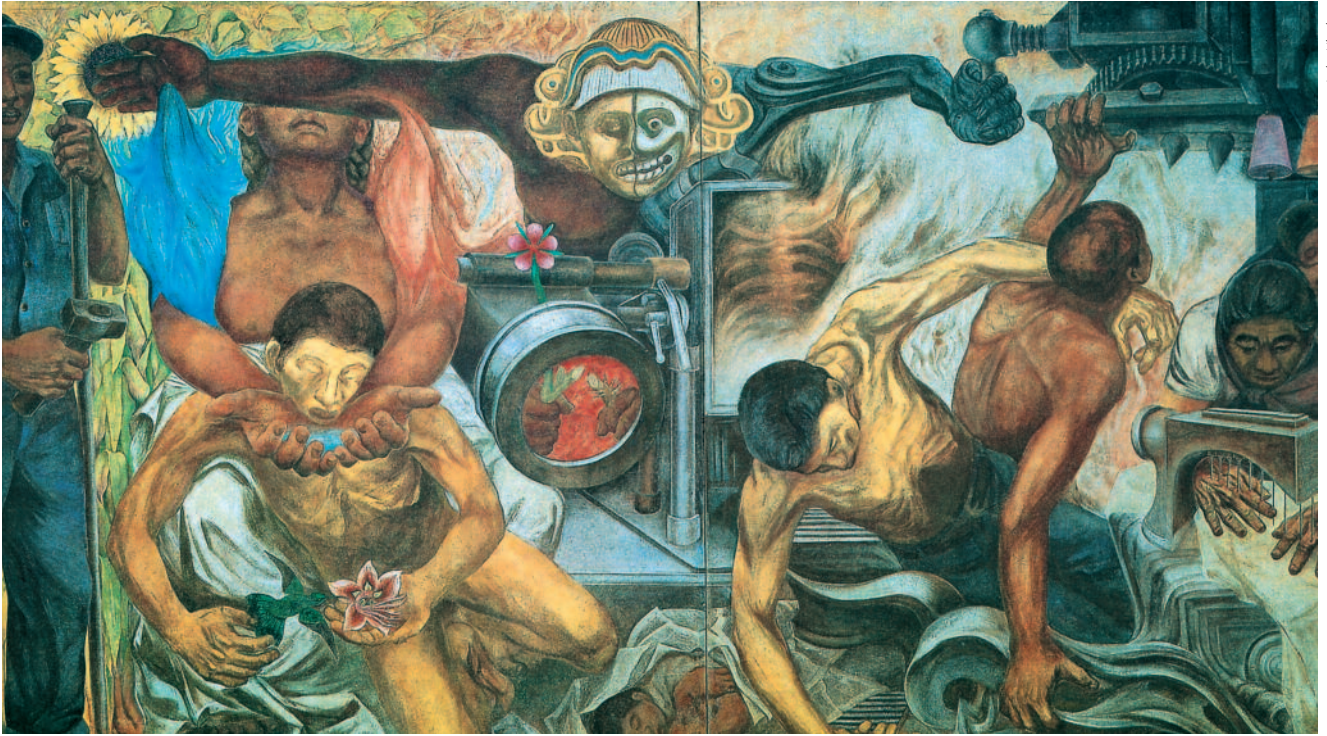
This mural was the occasion for many different anecdotes, including one involving Alfaro Siqueiros. Once, Nishizawa was working in the construction site; since it had no windows, Siqueiros —or “El Coronelazo,” as he was called— who drove by there every day in his car, saw what he was doing, stopped and went to meet the young man. Nishizawa came down off his scaffolding and introduced himself to the master painter and from that time on they were great friends, Siqueiros giving him much appreciated advice.

Raquel Tibol wrote about his mural, saying “Nishizawa has given birth to the symbol through metaphors, through stanzas of sweet, tender, jovial, sensual allegories.... In developing his theme, the painter divulges his artistic fore-



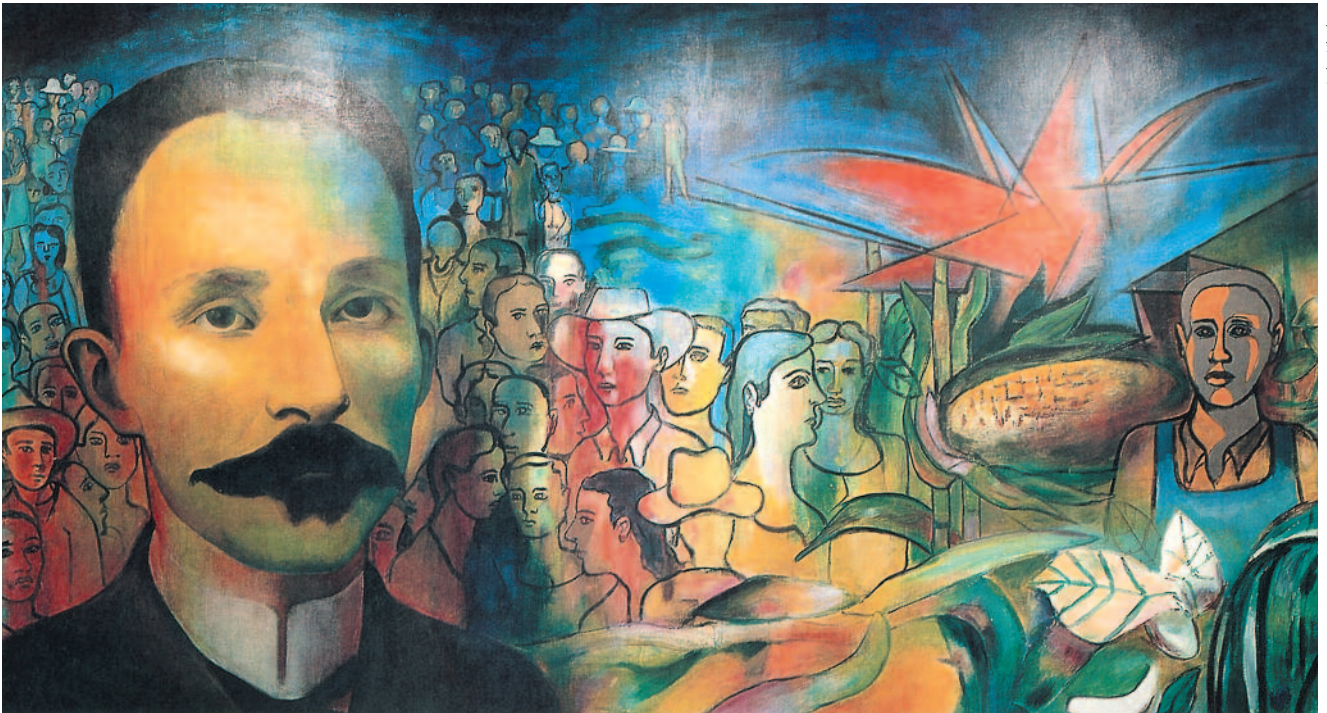
*Butterflies*, 73.2 x 20 cm, 1999 (distemper on canvas and wood).





Javier Hinogosa

*Air Is Life*, mural, detail, 1957-1959 (acrylic on dry plaster).



Javier Hinogosa

*Letter to Martí*, collective mural, detail, 1976 (acrylic). José Martí Cultural Center, Mexico City.

Photographs on this page are taken from the book *Nishizawa* (Mexico City: Talleres de Litógrafos Unidos, no date), pp. 113 and 118.



bears: there is a Rivera-like conception and certain emphases reminiscent of Orozco. But what authenticity of color! What respect for his own sense of sensuality!...Leaving to one side any absurd sense of delicacy, his attitude is one of being a continuer of the Mexican school, but to the delight and enjoyment of the viewer, he did not remain stuck in any pedestrian or scholastic imitation.”<sup>7</sup>

Antonio Rodríguez wrote, “Luis Nishizawa, always fluctuating between the dramatic passion of Mexico and a tendency toward the great abstractions of Japanese art that he inherited from one of his parents, has created in the central part of the Medical Center one of the most poetic, fine and delicately, yet wisely painted murals of the Mexican School.”<sup>8</sup>

This building was so severely damaged by the 1985 earthquake that hit the city that the Social Security Institute gave orders to have it dynamited. Although it was very difficult to take the mural off the wall, it was finally salvaged using a technique whereby the technicians from the National Institute of Fine Arts removed the film of color from the wall and then mounted it on glass fabric. It is now once again on display in the new, rebuilt Twenty-first Century Medical Center.

Nishizawa has also done murals on ceramics fired at high temperatures, such as *A Song to Life* done in 1969 at the Social Security Unit in Celaya, Guanajuato. This first incursion into ceramics was an adventure because he worked with a ceramicist who knew nothing about murals, while he knew nothing of ceramics. He later used the same technique to do his *The Creative Spirit Is Ever Renewed* in 1981 for the Tokyo Railroad Company (in Japan, where they have great mastery in ceramics) and for another mural in the State of Mexico Cultural Center.

Nishizawa once said that his relationship with Japanese painters had been a strong one since they took great interest in him. So much so that he dared to say that they have been influenced by the Mexicans in form, though not



*Haiku No. 9, 1997 (encaustic on wood).*



*Haiku No. 4, 1997 (encaustic on wood).*



*Haiku No. 8, 1997 (encaustic on wood).*



*Rust*, 194 x 145 cm, 1971 (sumi on paper).

content. Under that influence, they have begun to paint murals in public places.

For Nishizawa, a man is a man before he is an artist; he creates his work and expresses himself for or against and under the influence of day-to-day circumstances, political and social situations. In 1976, he painted the mural *Song to Martí* with a team of painters, including Cubans Mariano Rodríguez and Fayad Jamís and Mexican Mario Orozco Rivera, in the vestibule of the José Martí Cultural Center, coordinated by Raquel Tibol. Nishizawa considered that the theme united them and they achieved their aim. The mural is neither obvious nor didactic; it is read visually; it is an exaltation of the Martí who continues among us.

Luis Nishizawa is an artist who has never stopped learning. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Teresa del Conde, *Catálogo de la Sección Anual de Invitados* (Mexico City: Salón Nacional de Artes Plásticas, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are taken from the promotional kit prepared by Sociocultur for the October 1997 homage to Nishizawa.

<sup>4</sup> *Excelsior* (Mexico City), April 1951.

<sup>5</sup> Justino Fernández, *Arte moderno y contemporáneo de México* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas-UNAM, 1952).

<sup>6</sup> Raúl Flores Guerrero, *Pintores. Antologías de artistas mexicanos del siglo XX* (Mexico City: Buró Internacional de Arte, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> *Excelsior* (Mexico City), 2 August 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Rodríguez, *El hombre en llamas. Historia de la pintura mural en México* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970).