

# Olga Costa

## A Brief Look at a Serene Life

Carlos Magdaleno\*

It was early summer 1993 when José Chávez Morado invited a small group of friends to witness a solemn ceremony in the Arcos House at one end of the Pastita neighborhood in Guanajuato. In the patio, near a curved stone bench on a small cement pedestal was an enormous honey-colored flower pot whose base had

already set. The ceremony began once everyone was there.

Accompanied by an assistant, Chávez Morado slowly emptied fresh earth from the base of holm oak and pingüica trees from the Santa Rosa mountains into the flower pot. Suddenly, he stopped and his assistant began mixing it slowly. Chávez Morado then went into the house to the dining room table where he picked up a small polished bronze urn.

---

\* Director of the Gene Byron House-Museum, Guanajuato City.



Photos reproduced courtesy of Guanajuato State Cultural Institute

*The Fruit Seller*, 195 x 245 cm, 1951 (oil on canvas). Modern Art Museum collection, Mexico City.

When he returned, the assistant had finished making a hole in the dirt inside the pot. There was a profound silence as Chávez Morado took a small folded piece of paper out of his pocket. After reading a brief, hand-written message, more loving than sad, addressed to a single person, he prepared to carry out the ceremony we had been invited to witness. The silence now was tense and emotional. José Chávez Morado slowly and delicately deposited the contents of

After all this, one asks oneself who Olga Costa had been, was and is.

The Kostakovski family residing in Odessa abandoned Russia and set up housekeeping in Leipzig at the beginning of the twentieth century to avoid the difficult political situation that heralded what would later be the October Revolution. Don Jacob Kostakovski continued his violin lessons there at the same time he began his career as a composer. Olga Costa was born

It would be impossible to scrutinize  
the entire cosmic tumult that occurs naturally  
in the objects Olga Costa illustrated, with no other  
tools than your eyes.

the urn in the earth, taking care that not even the slightest speck of dust was swept into the air. When he finally finished depositing the ashes, he covered them with another handful of dirt and then a *siempreviva* plant (*siempreviva* means “forever alive”). He did all this alone. With that, the ceremony had come to an end.

The flower pot, a sturdy, sober piece of thick clay, had been thrown especially by ceramist Gorky González. The inscription is a name and two dates in black paint: Olga Costa 1913-1993.

It was the end of a painful pilgrimage that had begun in November 1988 and had meant the intermittent voyage through hospitals, clinics, convalescence, vigils, diets, abstention from many pleasures, frequent bouts of sadness and the melancholy of a person who had known, extracted and shared a myriad of pleasures and delights, permanent residents of the most lively part of her sensibility.

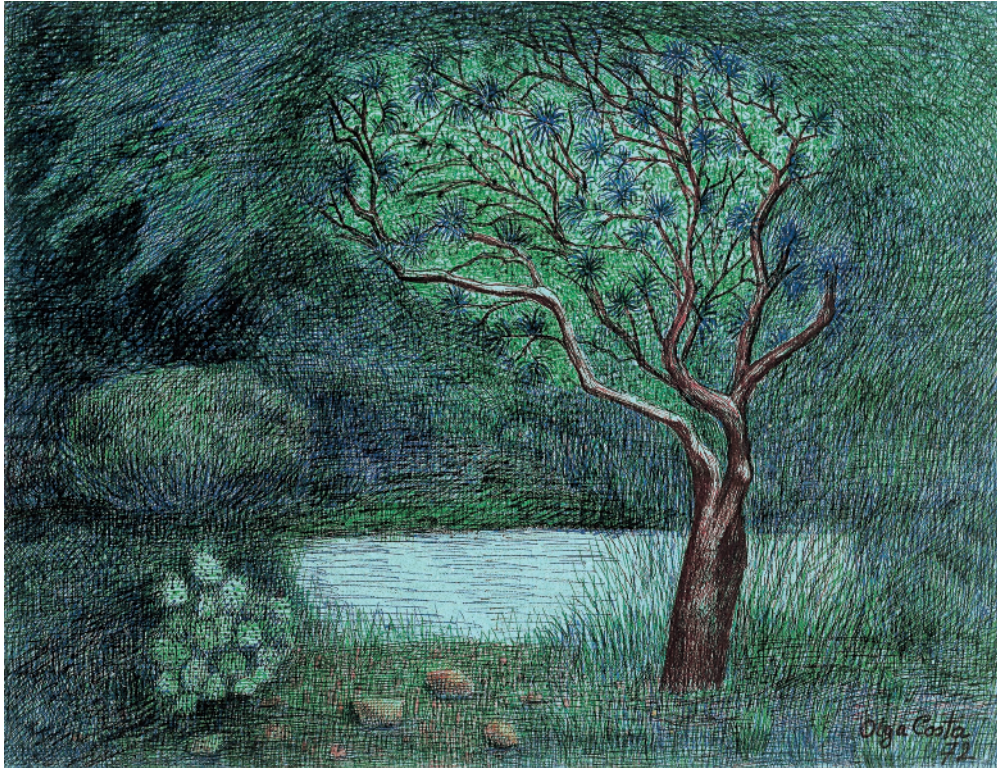
When we left what had been the home of the Chávez Morado-Costa family, since April 1992 the Olga Costa-José Chávez Morado Art Museum thanks to their legendary generosity, one would like to think that we all took with us the inspiring impact of having been privileged—though sad—witnesses to a good-bye to a very dear loved one.

in that German city, August 28, 1913. The Kostakovskis went to Berlin with their two daughters Lya and Olga in 1914, when World War I was breaking out.

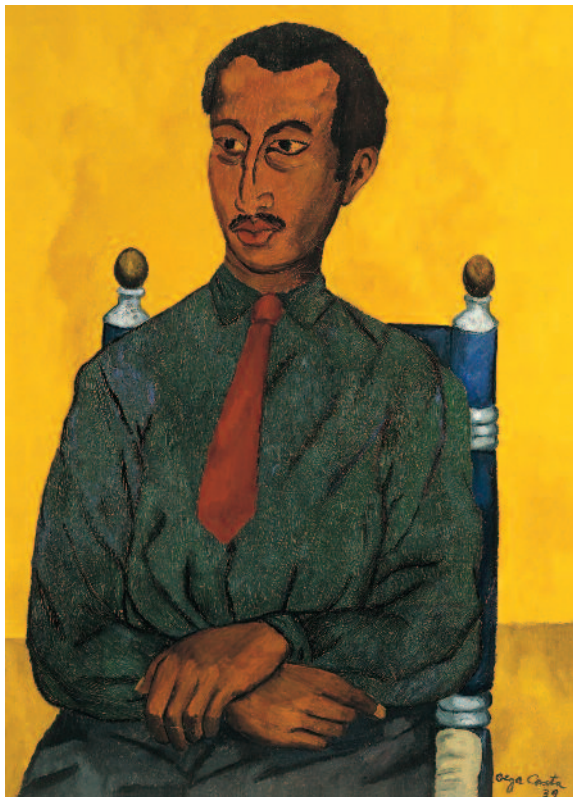
Also for political and economic reasons—and perhaps also ethnic reasons, for they were Jewish—the Kostakovski family decided to move to Mexico when Olga was 12 years old. They arrived in the port of Veracruz in 1925. Let us stop here a moment.

During their stay in the port of Veracruz, two things happened, one real and the other hypothetical. The real event: the family was robbed of all its belongings when it arrived in Veracruz and for that reason—because of the legal investigations involved—they had to stay there for about a month.

The hypothetical event is that perhaps the child Olga Costa perceived the existence of another world for the first time in her life, a world bursting with a surprising and explosive variety of vegetation, men and women with dark skin and curly hair, undoubtedly diametrically opposed to what she would have seen in what was then a poor, rabidly hostile, aggressive, grey Europe. This other world was intensely warm and voluptuously rich in fruit and floral aromas. When I use the term hypothetical, it might just



*Landscape in Penumbra*, 30 x 38 cm, 1972 (felt pen). Artist's collection.



*Portrait of José Chávez Morado*, 55 x 40 cm, 1939 (oil on canvas). Artist's collection.



*Bejeweled Woman*, 64 x 49 cm, 1965 (felt pen and ink). Artist's collection.



*Pilgrims*, 50 x 60 cm, 1968 (oil on masonite). María Asúnsolo de Colín collection.



*Green Vase*, 40 x 30 cm, 1971 (oil on canvas). Private collection.



*Red Quelite*, 120 x 100 cm, 1980 (oil on canvas). Moisés Djaddah collection.

mean that it is a leisurely lapse of reflection, since this seizing of intense color, that sudden accumulation of the goods of nature are what best represent the vast body of work that came out of Olga Costa's soft, kind brush. She would develop it in full in the 1930s after her 1935 marriage to painter José Chávez Morado and having Mexican-ized her last name.

Once the Kostakovski family set up house in Mexico City, while Don Jacob gave his violin and music lessons and continued maturing as a composer, Olga and Lya enrolled in the German College. After that, Olga's life continued without incident until the early 1930s when she began studying with her first teacher, Guatemalan painter Carlos Mérida, who said something we still consider valid: "Olga Costa is the white angel of Mexican painting."<sup>1</sup>

When exactly was Olga Costa's desire and affinity for painting born? It is difficult to pin down a date: it has been said that she was interested in Diego Rivera's murals, which she may have watched being painted for a good time, increasing her interest in colors. She also remembered moments of political upheaval expe-

rienced by artists of the time, such as Diego himself and Siqueiros, just to mention two. Olga Costa would had to have seen the creative side of these public figures, even if at the same time she noted the political events of the times.

Sergio Pitol has commented that in 1936, already married, on a trip to Jalapa, Olga painted some good canvases, even though she did not take herself very seriously. However, her stay in Jalapa has left us with some notable paintings like *Bathers*, *Bouquet with Blue Background*, *Lady in Green*, *Women Bathers*, *Nude*, just to mention a few. They are a brief but firm example of the explosive chromatic form of her painting. This experience was the beginning of a long, successful road that she would abandon only a couple of years before her unfortunate death.

Her career from 1936 on is known to all of us. Sergio Pitol defined Olga Costa's great themes as follows:

- a) Scenes laced with humor, which she called "the irony of the cure;"
- b) still lifes and portraits;



*My Garden*, 120 x 70 cm, 1979 (oil on canvas). John Nevin collection.

- c) scenes of Mexican customs, such as a dead child, pilgrims, etc.; and
- d) her final period: an immersion in the open spaces until she arrived at the fantastic gardens of her last years.<sup>2</sup>

In each of these stages, with the distinct forms created by her visual personality, her profound individuality, her paintings never attempted to be more than that: painting.

It would be impossible to review and scrutinize the entire cosmic tumult that occurs naturally and simply in the objects Costa illustrated, painting by painting, sketch by sketch, without any more inspiration or emotional tools than just your eyes. The selection of each of the objects to be reproduced—in this case, re-created—might be explained perhaps in the urgent yearning for seeing and feeling the extension of her own skin. That profuse and varied chromatism comes about in Olga unsurprisingly, as she proceeds with her routine of taking care of her plants and flowers, that is, in the accidents of everyday life. But they also occur when she discovers things there and even when they are not

really there, such as in the case of her imaginary pieces. Here, I am talking about paintings like *Green Vase* (1971); *Golden Fish* (1980); *Untitled* (1981); *Stained Glass* (1982); and especially in this example, *Island of the Air* (1963) and *The Puddle*. These are works that form a whole of smiling riddles, visual explosions in which she never stopped using what was always a constant: temperance and a playful, comic air; firmness and a smile.

Olga fits, as no other artist, Pitol's definition: "Olga Costa's life is her painting."<sup>3</sup> And even if cloistered—or more aptly, confined to—the Mexican school of painting—which Olga neither denied nor flaunted—Pitol's comment can be emphasized even more, but in the opposite sense, in the case of other women of her generation, such as Frida Kahlo or Tina Modotti. Their creations, their artistic endeavors were rudely surpassed and sometimes absorbed by peripheral activities, mainly political struggles. In Olga Costa, any attitude on the margins of painting (except for, of course, her unequivocal solidarity with the political and social causes that her generation and her fellow painters defended,



*Two Profiles*, 44 x 59 cm, 1964 (oil on paper). Artist's collection.



*Plain Landscape Planted with Marigolds*, 36 x 83 cm, 1977 (oil on wood). Dr. and Mrs. Luis Muñoz Castellanos collection.

particularly those that activist José Chávez Morado championed) would have been a simple intellectual accessory. They would have separated her irremediably from her only possible task, painting. Costa, one might add, is her own serenity.

In 1944, Fernando Gamboa, Mexico's greatest museographer, commissioned Olga to paint a canvas that is still one of the fundamental icons of great Mexican painting. For her, in addition, it represents her own visionary panorama. That painting is *The Fruit Seller* that has belonged since then to the Modern Art Museum.

Anyone who has the good fortune to stand in front of this masterful canvas will have felt the surprise and satisfaction of recognizing his/her own piece of identity. The joy in viewing it manages to banish all our analytical, technical or academic pretensions. With this canvas, Olga Costa has reached a plateau; there she affirms and unfolds everything she had ever painted throughout her entire life as an artist, characterized by her obsessive, detailed, laborious recreation, celebration and consecration of the mysterious gifts of nature.

In 1990, Olga was given the National Prize for the Arts and attended the ceremony pushed in her wheelchair by José Chávez Morado, who had received the same prize in 1973.

That year she had gone through several severe health crises. A little while later she had her last exhibition at the People's Museum of Guanajuato, which she had founded with Chávez Morado in 1979. Her last show consisted of a small group of paintings, among them a white porcelain vase with thousands of tiny, different flowers. Chávez Morado named the work *The Resurrection*. It could not be more eloquent: it combines the vitality of that kaleidoscopic turbulence that made up the total, absolute creative act of Olga Costa, who left us two years later, on June 28, 1993.

But that is not completely true. Olga Costa cannot leave us, nor can she be very far from us. The portentous chromatism revealed in her untiring creative efforts will be a perennial presence and the certainty of the premise that, "Olga Costa's life is her painting." And her painting is more alive than ever. **MM**

---

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Olga Costa mentioned this comment when talking about the time when Carlos Mérida was her teacher; it was one of her favorite phrases.

<sup>2</sup> Sergio Pitó, *Olga Costa* (Guanajuato: Ediciones La Rana/ Instituto de Cultura de Guanajuato, 1998), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Pitó, *op. cit.*