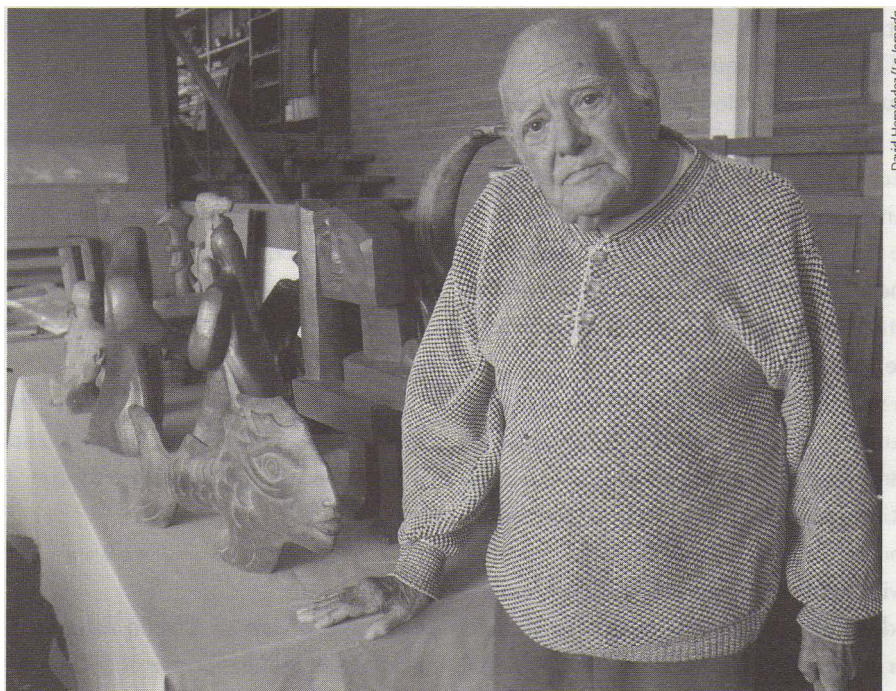


Alfredo Zalce

An Art of His Own

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David Hernández/La Jomada

His extraordinary colors, his confident line and his magnificent composition turned Alfredo Zalce (1908-2003) into one of the greats of the twentieth century, says researcher and Mexican art critic Berta Taracena, author of the book *Alfredo Zalce: un arte propio* (Alfredo Zalce: An Art of His Own).

The painter spent the first months of his infancy surrounded by the blue of the sky, the red of the earth, the green and blue of Lake Pátzcuaro. There, amidst soft hills and slight slopes that give Michoacán's scenery different perspectives; with the soil, rocky with the marks of a volcano; with the water of two rivers that pass by the edges of the city, and a few kilometers away, two lakes (Cuitzeo and Janitzio):

* Mexican sculptress.

amidst all this splendor, in the domain of the Monarch butterfly, surrounded by forests and the human warmth of women, Zalce enriched his life and his art, despite moving to Mexico City with his family at the age of one.

Years later, in his early youth, he began to work as a photographer to pay for his studies at the San Carlos Academy, where he studied painting with Germán Gedovius, sketching with Leandro Isaguirre, perspective with Juan Pacheco and anatomy with Carlos Dublán. At the same time, he joined the student movements for university autonomy and the reform of the Visual Arts School, headed up by Diego Rivera from 1924 to 1929.

In 1930, the School of Painting and Sculpture was founded in Taxco, Guerrero. In those years, Zalce experimented with his painting and did his first mural on the facade of the

Ayotla Rural School, in Tlaxcala, thus beginning his very productive career. In 1933, he was a founding member of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR) and, when that disappeared, together with other artists he participated in the recently founded Popular Graphics Workshop. Later he became part of the Cultural Missions, a movement backed and financed by José Vasconcelos, in which a handful of artists traveled through several states with the sole, transcendental aim of generously supporting the dissemination of culture. It was in that context that the twentieth century's most important pictorial movement came into being, the Mexican muralist movement, with painters like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Ramón Alva de la Canal, Fermín Revueltas, Fernando Leal and Jean Charlot.

In 1935, Alfredo Zalce witnessed one of the most important acts in the history of Mexican muralism: his friend Ramón Alva de la Canal was invited by General Lázaro Cárdenas to paint "the history of Morelos from his birth until his death" inside the statue of Morelos by sculptor Guillermo Ruiz in the center of Janitzio Island. The painter invited Zalce to collaborate with him.

The commission resulted in one of the great masterpieces of Mexican muralism: 56 panels using different techniques (fresco, encaustics and tempera, varnished with wax and copal dissolved in turpentine and then fired). It was a very enriching experience for both Zalce and Alva de la Canal.

The next year, with Pablo O'Higgins, Fernando Gamboa and Leopoldo Méndez, Zalce painted the mural *The Workers at War with Fascism* in the offices of Mexico City's National Print Shop.

In the 1940s, after several expositions, at the same time that he painted, Zalce taught at the La Esmeralda National School of Painting and Sculpture. In 1942, he painted *The Reactionary Press in Mexico* at National High School 2, a mural that was later destroyed.

MORELIA: A BASTION OF CREATION

In 1950, Zalce decided to return to Michoacán. He move his workshop and made the city of Morelia his bastion for creation, choosing it because of its splendid baroque architecture, the chiaroscuro play of the pink stone that illuminates the tall towers of the cathedral and the hundreds of buildings of great beauty and history, with elements of the Renaissance and other architectural styles, ranging from those of the

end of the sixteenth century to eclecticism and the Frenchified styles of the rule of Porfirio Díaz.

Influenced by history and the figures who left the mark of their actions on this city, Alfredo Zalce, in the words of Berta Taracena, became "one of those painters who turn into kings and lords of the ground they walk on."¹ He continued his work using all the techniques available to a visual artist: sketching, silk screening, watercolor, lithographs, etching on metal, wood, stone, copper, and linoleum, pastels, oil painting and frescoes.

In 1962, combining fresco and acrylics, he painted *The Conversion of the Indians to the Christian Creed* in Morelia's Fine Arts Palace.


In 1964, he did several paintings in tempera for the National Museum of Anthropology and History's Pre-Classical and Toltec Rooms: *Daily Life in the Pre-Classical Age*, *Reconstructed View of Cuicuilco*, *The Struggle of Quetzalcóatl* and *Reconstruction of a Toltec Temple*.

In 1983, together with Ramón Alva de la Canal and myself, Zalce founded the "Para el Arte Spacios" (For Art Spaces) cultural movement in Morelia.

In 1986, he did a bronze relief, *The Three Constitutions*, for Morelia's Chamber of Deputies, and in 1989, he painted a mural for the Mexico City Attorney General's Office.

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On my last visit to Alfredo Zalce at his home, I was very glad to see that at the age of 94, he was in splendid health, thanks to the care of his loving daughter Beatriz, who at that time was planning his ninety-fifth birthday party. The party never took place because in those January days, all his projects were to conclude.

Alfredo Zalce died on Sunday afternoon, January 12. His ashes, together with those of two of his children who preceded him in death, will rest in one of his works, *The Stela*, a trio of large stone columns in Morelia. A plaque will be placed on the columns, "sober, like my father's nature," says Beatriz Zalce, "so that when people pass by they can say hello to him and send him a kiss. Zalce is from Morelia and he'll stay in Morelia."² 

NOTES

¹ Reforma.com, 2 December 2002.

² Reforma.com, 20 January 2003.

* For more about Zalce's work, see *Voices of Mexico* 45, October-December 1998.