

A Lifetime Dedicated To Pre-Hispanic Art

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UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research Photo Archives

They say that sometimes you cannot see the forest for the trees. I think that in the case of the life's work of a woman as outstanding as Doña Beatriz de la Fuente, the forest of her many achievements is so conspicuous that it is very difficult to focus attention on a single aspect.

Beatriz de la Fuente, the academic researcher, the incomparable teacher, the wise and generous woman with whom I had the privilege of sharing the last 30 years of my life.

I first attended her seminar in the so-called University Print Shop where she was the director. At that time, I was

just beginning my master's program and the thesis I had in mind was about cave painting in Baja California. Besides being my teacher, she was the advisor for both my master's and doctoral theses.

From that time on, I was always impressed by her clarity of mind, her exceptional intelligence and her always finished appearance.

Paying homage to her academic work means situating oneself in the dense forest of her many publications, her innumerable lectures and the many projects she directed, such as the theses she was advisor for, the research seminars she led and her master work on Mexican pre-Hispanic mural art.

Thinking about her once again wounds my heart because exceptional people in

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everything they took on in life should not depart, at least not so soon.

As her oldest disciple, as her colleague, as her friend, as her partner in so many undertakings and adventures, memories surge forward, choking the mind and disturbing the spirit for a very simple reason: thinking about her work and trying to review it is practically impossible on the confines of a page.

Some things are indispensable. For example, that Doña Beatriz taught several generations of Mexicans to actually see the messages, often difficult to perceive for the untrained eye, in pre-Hispanic art. Untangling the forms, perceiving them in their plasticity, in their aesthetic values, in their dimension as a work of art in the context of the world's civilizations. Pointing to a road of its own for art history, in which astronomy, biology, chemistry, physics, architecture and archaeology were all mixed was one of her many merits.

I do not know precisely when we were overcome by the eagerness to classify, so in vogue in the nineteenth century, when everything had to be seen as differentiated categories stored in static compartments. Doña Beatriz, our dear teacher, taught us that the art history we had to practice did require a formal analysis; as proof, we have *Las cabezas colosales olmecas* (The Colossal Olmec Heads), *Los hombres de piedra* (The Men of Stone) and *La escultura de Palenque* (The Sculpture of Palenque). But she also taught that it had to be filtered through the complex world of meanings, the history of religions, the cultural and comparative methodological studies that would produce new ways forward through which we could understand the human beings that in another time and another space felt and foresaw that their transcendence lay in the possibility of shaping in any way, in clay, in stone,

on paper, the messages of their minds, those *Peldaños de la conciencia* (Rungs of Consciousness) that she taught us to review without ever forgetting “criticism and self criticism” to constitute a true Mexican school of history of pre-Hispanic art.

In addition to her innumerable publications and lectures, her many national and international awards (the National University Prize; being named UNAM Researcher Emeritus; the National Prize for Science and the Arts in the Area of History, the Social Sciences and Philosophy; the Tatiana Proskouriakoff Award given by Harvard University that she did not live to receive; and having the privilege of being until now the only woman member of the National College), she was always generous as a teacher, with her hand and heart open to the concerns of dozens of students who passed through her classes.

At the pinnacle of her career as an art historian, she took on what would be her posthumous work, the enormous project “Pre-Hispanic Mural Painting in Mexico”, which she directed intelligently and lucidly until the very last moment of her life despite her body not obeying the dictates of an untiring spirit avid for knowledge.

Doña Beatriz de la Fuente has left an indelible mark on dozens of students, on hundreds of readers of her works, on hundreds of listeners at her lectures. Her impressive legacy leaves a void difficult to fill. The most her disciples can hope for is to not forget her friendly smile in the face of vicissitude, her indomitable spirit, her tenacious energy when faced with new challenges, her immense capacity for work, and the monumental body of work that we have as a legacy and a challenge, to try to follow through with her mission of bringing together pre-Hispanic art and the minds and hearts of the generations of university-goers who will come after us.

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In pre-Hispanic Mexico, it was said that the wise man is the one who can dialogue with his own heart, he who in his dialogue is able to know and dominate his polarities or, as Carl Jung would say, his shadow and, therefore, his light.

When time passes after a person's death, the logical thing is that those who loved him/her tend to think he/she was perfect. I think this is a great injustice, because there are no perfect human beings. Doña Beatriz had her faults. That is why she was wise, because through her self-knowledge, through her dialogue with her own heart, she conquered her polarities and thus her light conquered her shadow. And I know, as do many who knew her very well, that her life was a long search, the tortuous road of inner knowledge.

Her academic work can be seen in a thousand ways. We do not have to go very far: the most recent issue of *Arqueología*

Mexicana (Mexican Archaeology) includes an article about the Ixcaquixtla tomb recently discovered in Puebla and it is, point for point, a mirror of the publications Dr. De la Fuente began about pre-Hispanic mural painting.

Beatriz de la Fuente initiated a Mexican school of pre-Hispanic art history. Her catalogues, her descriptive methods, her ways of analyzing the structure of a work of art have been traveled of necessity by hundreds of scholars basing themselves on our teacher's work.

This means that as an academic, she undoubtedly earned herself a place on her own. But it was not with all that knowledge, with that enormous torrent of achievements in her intellectual life that she achieved wisdom. No. I am here to bear witness. Her wisdom was the result of a prolonged, profound dialogue with her own heart. **MM**