

Nicolás Moreno

Six Decades Interpreting Mexico's Landscape

Alicia Moreno*



Dead Ahuehete, Architecture V Series, 95 cm x 123 cm, 1969 (oil on canvas and wood).



Eccide II, 47 cm x 160 cm, 2007 (oil on canvas and wood).



The Lightning Bolt, 95 cm x 123 cm, 1969 (burin and dry point).

Nicolás Moreno has never stopped capturing the shadows and volumes of nature, the silhouettes of its mountains, the depths of its gorges, the shrouded secrets of its vegetation, as well as the paths showing the way forward to new, noteworthy possibilities in its extraordinary landscapes. That is why he is known as one of our country's best established artists.

FELIPE SOLÍS

Catalogue of the exhibit "Nicolás Moreno and His View of Mexico's Landscape"

Nicolás Moreno Orduña is one of Mexico's most diligent and prolific landscape artists. His body of work has been admired and praised by art critics, poets and writers like Justino Fernández Márquez, Guillermo Rivas, Andrés Henes-trosa, Salvador Elizondo, Juan José Arreola and Elisa García Barragán, and the sheer volume of work can be summed up in poet Carlos Pellicer's comment after leaving his workshop: "My eyes hurt from walking so much."

* Curator of the work of Nicolás Moreno.
Photos property of Nicolás Moreno.



Light in the Jungle, 76 cm x 60 cm, 2004 (oil on canvas and wood).

Moreno was born December 28, 1923, in Mexico City's modest Santa Julia neighborhood. He was the first of 16 children born into a poor family. His paternal grandfather, Don Sixto Moreno, a rough but affectionate man, was the first to encourage Nicolás's love of nature from a very young age. An untiring, ingenious conversationalist, his grandfather filled the little boy's head with detailed narrations of episodes that took place in the vast reaches he covered daily as a muleteer. A keen observer, he took advantage of the slow going set by the rhythmic beat of the mules' hooves to store up images: territories and climes, depressions and hills, erosion and humidity, valleys and volcanoes. Nothing escaped his attention. Then he would fascinate his grandson with detailed accounts of his observations; and, once alone, young Nicolás would recount them, embellished with fantasies of his own. For years, these images stayed in his mind, until he brought them to life through his painting.

When Nicolás was 10, his family moved to Celaya, Guanajuato. The rural scenery surrounding the city nourished his passion for nature even more. Enveloped by family affection, he also learned the importance of being productive: in his home, people did not work to live; they lived to work. His life in Celaya is today a safe harbor of transparent emotions.

His return to the capital city was sad: he neither despised nor felt attached to his humble neighborhood. He wanted

to get back to the countryside, to the scenery. His family's modest income meant they could only pay for his basic education. Their difficult economic straits forced him to go out to work, but at the same time he was eager to learn to draw, perhaps to capture nature on paper. He wanted to learn to use the pencil as a magic wand that would open a door to other as yet undefined worlds.

A few years after finishing primary school, Nicolás enrolled in a night course in sketching at the University Cultural Center, catering to workers. He soon became skilled in his chosen field and won a cash prize that he used to enroll in the old San Carlos Academy, today the National School of Visual Arts. Tuition was only one peso, which meant that his prize money was enough for him to study the entire major of master of visual arts. Learning to sketch was exactly what he wanted and he began his studies at the academy in 1941 without consulting his family. At the age of 17, armed only

with his predilection for sketching, he joined artist Benjamín Coria's workshop, telling the teacher of his aim of drawing rural scenes, only to be disappointed to find that landscapes were not part of the curricula.

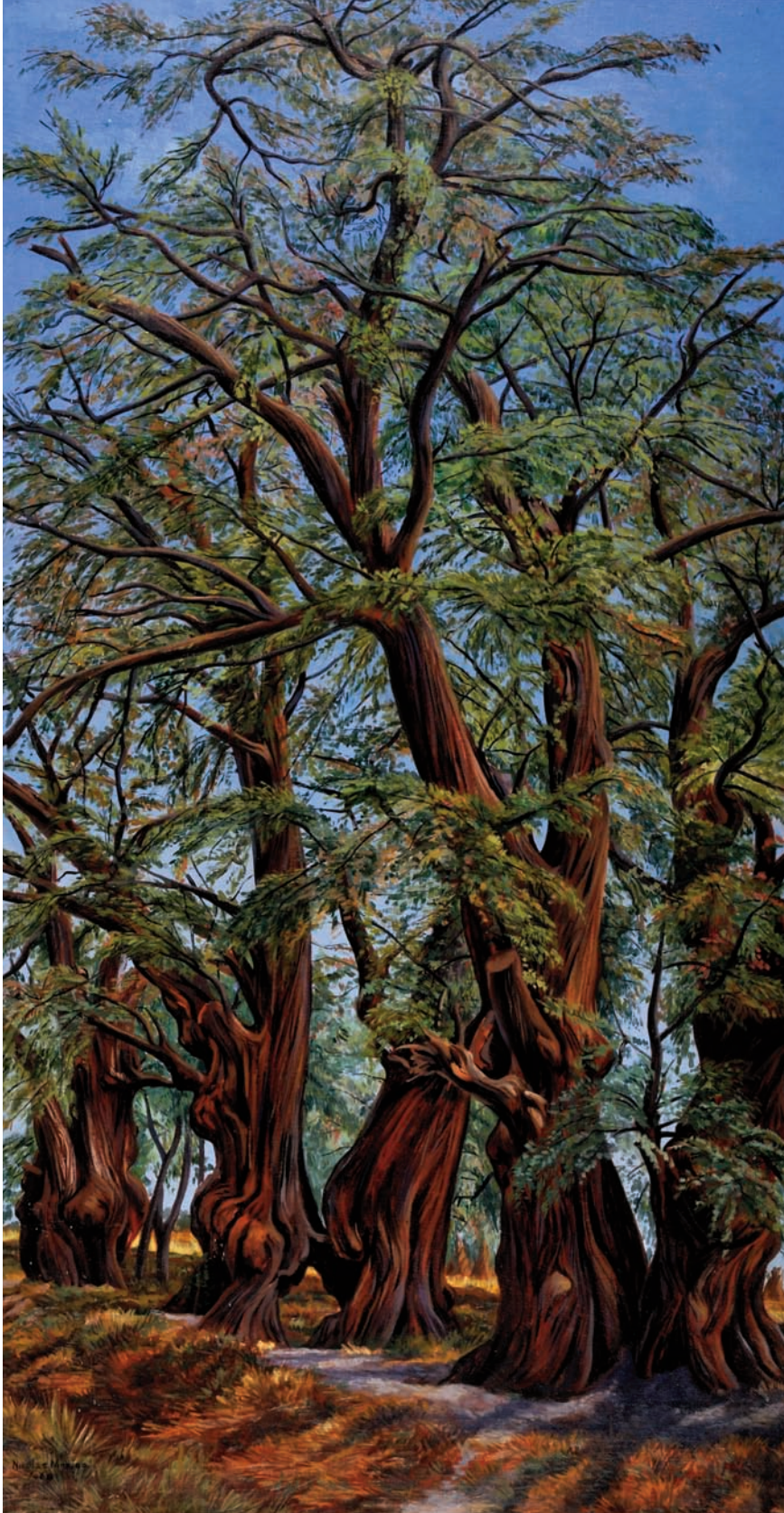
In his five years at San Carlos, he came into contact with established and fledgling artists and made the most of their teachings and innovations. He attributes his teacher and friend José Chávez Morado with giving him his start with technique. He also became friends with Alfredo Zalce, who especially interested him in engraving and introduced him to the diversity of approaches to pictorial art.

Nicolás Moreno has never stopped learning and analyzing. In 1946, he became an art teacher at the Mexe National Rural School in the state of Hidalgo. This would be the beginning of a long teaching career. In 1947, he was given a position to teach introduction to art, commissioned to the Normal School for Young Ladies, and he also gave sketch-

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Singed Tepozanes, 70 cm x 120 cm, 1990 (oil on canvas).



Ahuehuetes, 120 cm x 60 cm, 1969 (oil on canvas and wood).

ing classes in different junior high schools. A year later, he plunged into an adventure involving the National Autonomous University of Mexico's Cultural Dissemination Department, the National School of Visual Arts (ENAP) and a group of enthusiastic colleagues and friends: the organization of the ENAP's Traveling Exhibits. Between 1950 and 1953, he was awarded a National Fine Arts Institute (INBA) grant to paint, with a professor's salary.

In 1953, the ENAP hired him as a full-time professor of landscape art and sketching. This was an achievement since the ENAP was Mexico's most important art school at the time. That year, he also received the Annual Grand Prize of the *Salón de la Plástica Mexicana* (Mexican Visual Arts Salon).

It was a time for reaping the rewards of all his efforts. Nicolás Moreno would receive many other awards for his work. Over the three decades between 1954 and 1983, he would participate in several exhibitions abroad, invited by the INBA: in Poland, Germany, England, France, Italy, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Japan, China, the United States and Peru. Thanks to these achievements, his work is among the Mexican paintings represented in Europe, since several of his pieces were acquired by different governments there.

He has also had individual exhibits in Mexico City and the rest of the country, and has received innumerable prizes and honors from governments and art institutes. In his travels through Mexico, he never forgets to visit painting schools and participate in activities and shows organized by different cultural organizations.

In his long life as a painter, Moreno has met many of the great representatives of Mexican visual arts. Some were his teachers, like José Chávez Morado; others, his colleagues, like Luis Nishizawa; and others, his friends and mentors. Among the latter is Gerardo Murillo, better known as Dr. Atl, who respected and admired his work, to the point of recommending him as his replacement on several occasions. In 1961, for example, Dr. Atl sent a letter to the director of the El Ángel Gallery, recommending to her that Nicolás Moreno take his place, saying, "The vacuum I am leaving in your gallery can be superbly filled by showing the work of Nicolás Moreno, an artist who has achieved what very few painters do, creating images of the grandeur of the landscape on canvas." Without a doubt, Dr. Atl's recognition sprang not only from their mutual friendship, but from the admira-

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The Giant, 100 cm x 49 cm, 1990 (mixed technique).



Damp Roots, 61 cm x 122 cm, 1990 (oil on canvas).

Moreno has worked continuously for 67 years and his successes and honors are a natural part of a career rooted in talent, resolution, simplicity and his unchanging love for landscape. His most recent exhibits show that his palette has never stopped portraying the changing colors and chiaroscuros of our national landscape.



The Eternal Drought, 75 cm x 156 cm, 2005 (oil on canvas and wood).



The Little Cliff, 102 cm x 122 cm, 1995 (oil on canvas and wood).

tion for his work as an established artist. In 1964, in another letter, Dr. Atl gave Moreno an important commission:

My dear Nicolás Moreno, I am very happy to tell you that the director of the [National] Museum of Anthropology now under construction in the Chapultepec Forest has asked me to paint a 20-meter-by-3.5-meter panel depicting the prehistoric Valley of Teotihuacan. But, as I do not have the time to paint it, I implore you to replace me and take on the commitment to do this large-scale landscape. To be crystal clear: I want you to paint this landscape so that your appearance on the scene is magnificent.

In the end, the museum officials asked Moreno for two more murals: one that recreated the Landscape of Juchitepec with the classic house from that region, and another

depicting a view of the Mezquital Valley, one of the region's most arid areas that Moreno knew quite well. These two panels decorate the museum's Otopames Room today. By the end of the 1960s, Nicolás Moreno was an indispensable figure on the national painting scene.

It is now 2008. Moreno has worked continuously for 67 years and his successes and honors are a natural part of a career rooted in talent, resolution, simplicity and his unchanging love for landscape. His most recent exhibits, "Drama and Poetry in Mexican Landscape: Pictorial and Graphic Works", at the Contemporary Mexico Cultural Center in 2006, and "Nicolás Moreno and His View of Mexican Landscape", in the National Museum of Anthropology in 2007, show that his palette has never stopped portraying the changing colors and chiaroscuros of our national landscape. **NMM**