

ROOTS AND WINGS OF MEXICAN ILLUSTRATION

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▲ *Mayan Codex.*

Mexico is a visual country. Some countries are literary, like Argentina; others are discursive, like France; still others are musical, like Germany or Mali; but although Mexican culture expresses itself through different media and in many ways, it is a fact that Mexico is a predominantly visual country. Almost all Mexico's cultural expressions have strong roots in the field of the visual. Let us just mention, for example, the aesthetics and colorfulness of our cuisine: some dishes on the Mexican table have a true artistic touch, in addition to an exquisite taste; they look "yummy." The same is true of different forms of

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▲ Leaves 8 and 9 of the Dresden Codex.



▲ José Guadalupe Posada, cover of *The Disappointments of Bato and Bras, or an Amusing Scene*, 14.8 x 20 cm (photo-relief on paper).



▲ José Guadalupe Posada, *The Magical Boy*, 23.4 x 16.8 cm (burin etching on lead).

The popular nationalist illustrations of José Guadalupe Posada situate him as the precursor of the nationalist movement in the visual arts.

folk art, in which drawing and color concentrate the essence of their manufacture. It is no exaggeration to say, then, that what is Mexican is perceived through the use of color, of texture, through the patina, the contrast, a taste for the expressive that is overwhelmingly expressionist, and in a natural, idiosyncratic inclination for great expressive force, and —why not say so?— sometimes, paradoxical and contrasting manifestations.

Through a series of reflections on contemporary illustration in Mexico, I want to explore here the universe of this artistic activity, which is relatively recent —recent in terms of its being recognized as such, but not in terms of its origins—, but which has rapidly acquired presence and vigor in the pantheon of the Mexican visual arts. I want to explore, for example, where it comes from, its foundations, and where it has taken flight to, the impetus that has projected it even beyond our borders: the roots and wings of Mexican illustration.

THE HANDS THAT FIRST DREW MEXICO

In a diachronic sense, we can ask ourselves about the first images depicting Mexico. They were drawn by the inhabitants of Mesoamerica, whose declared communicational intent was to put forward their knowledge and world view, describing their surroundings through images in what have been called codices.¹ The pigments used were extracted from coal and certain plants, and the illustrations were then made on pieces of cured skins or on parchment made out of tree bark, called *amate*. The codices were the first manifestations of Mexican art, and some of their elements, like glyphs, fretwork, shades of color, or profiles, have later been used as graphic references by different illustrators and visual artists, right up until today.

In this introductory article, it is not my intention to do an entire historical review of illustration. However, the visual discourse, just like any other narrative, emerges as it interacts with the historic events of any specific time, which imprints its canons on it. The predominant artistic references during the colonial period were European, classical, and for the most part religious, while those stemming from the pre-Hispanic tradition moved into the background, latent, like watermarks, behind the visual veils imported from Europe. With the arrival of the first printing press to Mexico in the mid-sixteenth century, print shops proliferated, and the town criers who sang out the news were replaced by broadsheets, gazettes, and newspapers, where illustrations were introduced to accompany the texts: thus was born the illustrated periodical.

AN IMAGE IS WORTH MORE THAN A THOUSAND ILLITERACIES

As images stopped being merely “ornaments” to accompany the texts, that is, at the moment that the visual discourse became autonomous, illustration began to play an important role in transmitting ideas and political criticism and social denunciations in a country with an extremely high illiteracy rate and a tumultuous political scenario. In this context, as the expression of a time and era, we must mention two notable precursors

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▲ Miguel Covarrubias, Jacket painting for the book *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec*, 1946.

of Mexican illustration, who exercised enormous influence in our country's graphic repertoire: José Guadalupe Posada and Miguel Covarrubias.

José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913) was a master of black and white, a shrewd commentator on his times, the turbulent early twentieth century. He began his graphic career at the age of 15 and, after a brief stint at the Aguascalientes Municipal Academy, entered the "El Esfuerzo" (The Effort) workshop as an apprentice to master printer José Trinidad Pedroza. Soon, he was using his sketching skills to make socially critical caricatures that he published in the *El Jicote* newspaper.² Posada consolidated his career in Mexico City, where he used engraving on metal with printer and editor Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, editing gazettes, broadsheets, comic books, and *corrido* lyrics, as well as publishing in 20-odd newspapers. His work depicted national events, symbolizing with his sketches the values and contradictions of the society of his time.

The popular nationalist illustrations of José Guadalupe Posada situate him as the precursor of the nationalist movement in the visual arts, headed up by Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, among others.

PRODIGIOUS SKETCHES

Equally outstanding is the work of Miguel Covarrubias, nicknamed "The Kid," a contemporary of Diego Rivera, and whom Diego himself considered the best sketch artist of the time. Extremely well-versed in pre-Hispanic art, which he admired enormously, Covarrubias began his graphic work at the age of 14, illustrating articles in a newspaper. His versatility means that we can find his sketches in cartoons, illustrations for books, newspapers, and in stage scenery. Outstanding among his multiple illustrations are those for Ministry of Public Education textbooks; this is important because they constitute an entire narrative promoting Mexican identity, and with his illustrations, Covarrubias underlined national aesthetic values.

In addition to his work in Mexico, he was an illustrator in the United States for prestigious publications like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, to mention only two. With that penchant for exploring popular culture, when he was in the United States—specifically in New York—he became very interested in African-American culture and made several illustrations dealing with this topic; these works contributed to more value being placed on the expressions of African-American culture. Covarrubias was an international, multi-faceted illustrator, but above all, he was profoundly Mexican.

Both these artists are considered precursors of graphic art and points of reference for the genre; they are unequivocal representatives of Mexican identity, the renewed value of which has been time and again, at different moments, the touchstone of illustration in Mexico. **MM**

NOTES

¹ After the Spanish Conquest most of these documents were destroyed; those that were recovered like the *Dresden Codex* or the *Aubin Tonalamatl Codex* are now in European museums and libraries, except for the *Colombian Codex*, now part of the National Anthropology and History of Mexico library collection.

² This newspaper published only 11 issues because it was censored by the state governor.