

DANCES OF MEXICO

*Water colors by
Jean Charlot*



Festival near Mexico City in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Celebrated in Aztec times for the Goddess Timonantzen.



Chorus of girls welcome the Christ Child in The Mystery of the Nativity.

Most folk dances, exploited for their picturesqueness, have degenerated into vaudeville. Fortunately, this is not true of the dances of Mexico. While they are picturesque enough, they remain high art. For one thing, they are not really folk dances. Developed by the great civilizations before the conquest, they still retain much of what must have been the dignity and sensibility of that time.

The accompanying illustrations by Jean Charlot give a vivid idea of the gorgeousness of their costumes and imagination. Mr. Charlot, moved by the fineness of this art, became also an authority on the concepts behind the dance, and his are the following interesting conclusions:

The Indian dance proceeds from a taste for beauty and proportion. If the essence of

painting is of simultaneous proportions, and that of literature of successive ones, the essence of the dance is of simultaneous and successive. The Indian dance satisfies these two conditions. Stable elements, which do not vary through the course of the dance, are built especially by masks and costumes, and are related to the movements of the dance itself.

The Indian dance, like a delicate instrument, can express the frankly comic and the highest religious ideas. The Indians have not lost that special sense, moribund among us, which enables them to transpose emotion to the artistic plane by taking out of it accidentals.

The strength of the particular beauty of their dances is in the non-deformation of natural gesture. The Indians amplify natural gesture and beautify it, without crushing it under parasitic gesticulations in presence of art. The dances employ not only the most impressive sources of beauty, but also the most delicate. The children's dances conserve the qualities of childhood, even that most inaccessible of them—purity; but the dances are transfigured to the plane of art. Children translate their sentiments by gestures, in their own way, with a certain indecision because of the few contacts of their little souls with the external world.

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JEAN CHARLOT, WHO PAINTED THESE PICTURES OF MEXICAN FOLK DANCES, IS A FRENCHMAN BY BIRTH BUT SINCE HIS EMIGRATION TO MEXICO HAS BEEN ONE OF THE LEADERS IN THE MODERN ART RENAISSANCE THERE. HE EXHIBITED IN NEW YORK LAST SPRING.



With the masks and costumes, as with the gesture, the whole interest lies in proportion. The costumes and masks have a certain finality to distinguish the dancer from the spectator; to place him in a supernatural atmosphere suggestive of the emotion he is depicting. In our dances, dress stresses human appearance; for example, in a Greek dance the gauze accentuates the woman's femininity. The Indian dress on the contrary tries to suppress the man as much as possible and to substitute a living symbol.

The dress creates new equilibriums of human architecture. For example, the head pieces of feathers destroy the importance

of the face; the masks are smaller or bigger than the natural head, sometimes double faced, sometimes with horns and tusks; and all the ornamentation of the dress—the belts and the rings, the beads and bronze ornaments, are calculated to make the dancer a symbol rather than an interesting personality.

Of the illustrations, two have possibly a special topical interest. The one showing a man ringing a bell and prancing under a canopy is a scene from the only Aztec festival still celebrated as Aztec. It is to Tepozteco, who was King of Topeztlan in the fifteenth century, and the instrument held in the dancer's hand is called a Te-



Feast of Tepozteco; the only purely Aztec carnival in Mexico that is still celebrated as Aztec.

Dance of Arabs at Chalma. Previously celebrated as the feast of Ostoc Tehotl.

ponastle, and itself belonged to the King.

The one in which the men are wearing huge ox horns on their heads is called *The Dance of the Arabs*. This is a dramatization of the story of the crusades and also a sublimation into Christian symbols of an original dance of these Indians, the Ocuitecas, to their god Ostoc Tehotl, ruler of the caverns. It has a particularly dramatic climax. The chief of the Arabs, after having fought alone against six Christians, reeling and bleeding, enters in agony. Here, thinking all facial expression too weak to reproduce this agony which is symbolic of his race, he veils his face with a cloth, and it is only the balance of his body, first wide, then gradually reduced and hesitant until the final fall, which tells of the racial tragedy.

Corrections supplied by Jesús Villanueva Hernández.

Timonantzen = Tonantzin

Ostoc Tehotl = Oztoteotl

Topeztlan = Tepoztlán

Teponastle is the Spanish form of the Aztec *teponaztli*.