

MAGAZINE OF ART

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PAINTING . . GRAPHIC ARTS . . SCULPTURE . . ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING . . DANCE
MUSIC . . THEATRE . . CINEMA . . ARCHAEOLOGY . . PHOTOGRAPHY . . INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

VOLUME 33

NUMBER 7

JULY, 1940

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Postage included in the United States and possessions. Canadian postage 50 cents extra, and to foreign countries, \$1.00 extra. The Magazine is mailed to all chapters and members, a part of each annual fee being credited as a subscription. Entered as second-class matter October 4, 1921, at the Post Office at Washington, D. C., under the act of March 3, 1879. Title Trade Mark Registered in the U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1940 by The American Federation of Arts. All rights reserved. All manuscripts should be sent to the Editor, Magazine of Art, Barr Building, Washington, D. C. Unsolicited manuscripts should be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes, to insure return in case material is not used. The Editors cannot assume responsibility for the return of any unsolicited material.

PREVIOUS ISSUES LISTED IN "ART INDEX" AND "THE READER'S GUIDE TO PERIODICAL LITERATURE"



Goddess and Worshipper.
Terra cotta figurine. Maya.
From Island of Cozumel.
Lent by the Peabody Museum
of Harvard University to the
current Mexican exhibition at
the Museum of Modern Art

TWENTY CENTURIES OF MEXICAN ART

BY JEAN CHARLOT

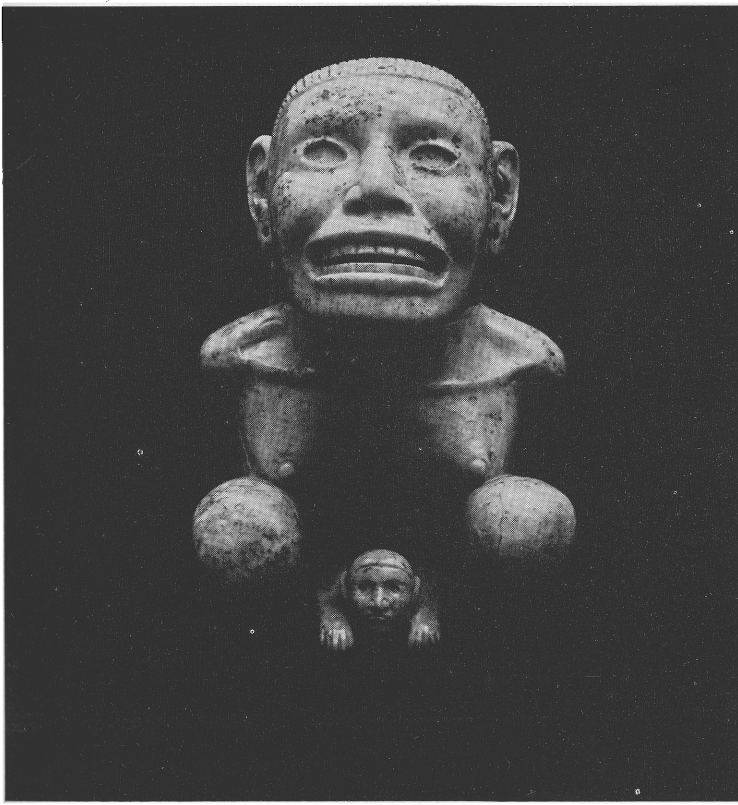
ON MY WAY to the Mexican exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art the words of an elderly Indian came back to me. Speaking of the Spanish conquest, he said: "It was fated. If it had not been the Spaniards it would have been some other tribe." He was thinking, perhaps, of the U. S. tribe. I also remembered an experience in a museum library where I was looking in vain for slides of the magnificent steles of Copan. At last, approaching the librarian I was told to look for them "under P, for Primitive."

The exhibition now in New York may help in smoothing over some similar misconceptions in other quarters. It is well nigh all-inclusive, but leans heavily on both "primitive" and "folk" art. To enjoy it to the full, the Yankee spectator need not stoop to what he may assume to be the level of the Indian and the peasant, for those dead Indians, Aztecs, Mayans, Olmecs, were good Indians; indeed they

were great. And the Mexican peasant is heir to an unbroken tradition dating back a few millenniums. Nor should a desire for a short cut to better understanding result in shaping a roly-poly image of Mexican art closer perhaps to the optimism of our Elmers than to the more important truth.

Through the course of Mexican esthetics, a subjective *leit-motiv* recurs, linking together the three great epochs, Pre-Spanish, Colonial, and Modern, in spite of outward differences. Totally unrelated to the cult of physical beauty which is the mainspring of our own tradition in art, it deals with physical pain and with death. The skull *motiv* is equally dear to Aztec theogony, to the Christian hermit who fondles it lovingly in his cell, and it still runs riot today in those bitter penny sheets sold in the streets of Mexico on the Day of the Dead. It is, however, but the outward sign of a mood of deeper significance.

Lips drawn in an unanesthetized rictus, eyes glazed, teeth clamped in torture, her body spent and strained, a



ABOVE: *Birth Goddess. Aztec sculpture in Steatite. Lent anonymously to the Mexican exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Special permission to reproduce it has been granted by the owner.* BELOW: *Red stone Locust. Aztec. Lent by the National Museum, Mexico City*



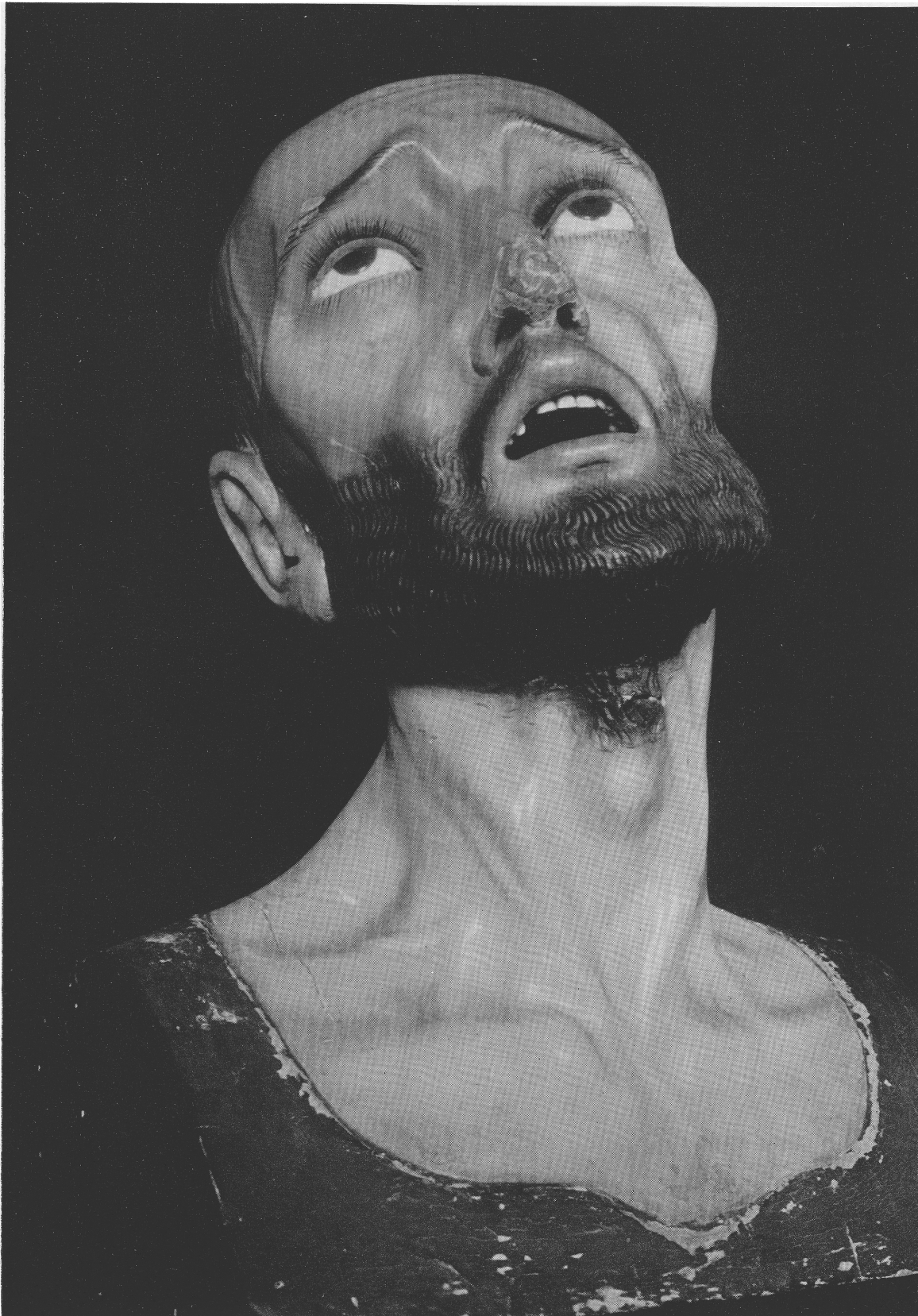
woman gives birth. The sculptor carves the hard stone with furious precision into a symmetry that makes the basin arch and open with the dignity of a church portal. To the Aztec, birth-giving was the privilege of woman. The same goddess who hallowed soldiers killed in battle threw her heroic influence over women who died in child-birth. Pain as a positive asset in the building and cementing of the world is one of the Aztec dogmas, consistent with their belief that the universe has come to maturity through the Four Destructions.

To our deodorized minds, such bold facing of the biological is distasteful. Yet the Church of colonial times in-

sisted, as did the pagans, on this carrying of a cross. We see here the saints, lips drawn and teeth clamped in anguish, ejecting through bloody martyrdom their own soul to be born into eternity.

Again today the great Mexican murals depict undainty subjects, the flagellation of a stripped agrarian tied to a pole, the opening of wounds with pistol and knife, women again weeping, this time over the dead. Those pictures deal with the birth, through revolution, of a new social order, with the tortured parents wishing it godspeed.

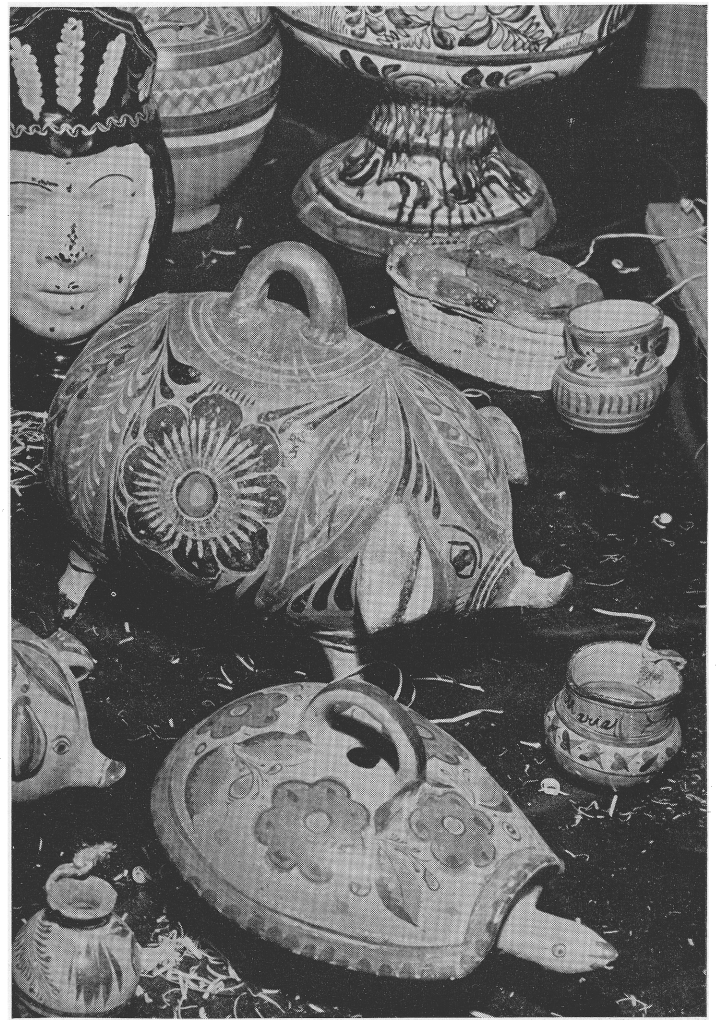
THE SECTION OF Pre-Spanish art is especially strong in Aztec



San Diego de Alcalá. Bust in polychromed wood. Middle of the 17th century. Lent by the Museum of Religious Art, Mexico City, to the exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art



ABOVE: *Vase in Form of Skull. Earthenware. Origin: Mexico City. Aztec civilization. Lent by the National Museum, Mexico City.*
 RIGHT: *Objects in the folk art section of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art surveying twenty centuries of Mexican art*



sculpture which more than any illustrates the loving intercourse that should exist between the sculptor and the material he chooses, a problem of peculiar actuality to the modern partisans of direct carving. The Aztec standard for good sculpture is identical with that of Michelangelo: to be proclaimed beautiful, the statue should roll intact from the top of a mountain to the valley below.

Most admirable are those egg-shaped stones that lack a base and refuse a pedestal as if the sculptor had carved them not for any static display, but to nestle in the palm of a giant hand. In the same degree that the russet "locust" and the green "gourd" mimic a bug and a fruit, they emphasize their quality of being stone, as if the tools of the artist, however successful in their description of the subject, were as naturally attuned to the material as is weather erosion. The same respect for organic laws accounts for the beauty of the Teponaztle carvings, the *ocelotl* as ready to spring as a stalking feline, yet so truly wood that the roughened grain and split trunk do not subtract from but add to the sculptor's achievement.

In the representation of gods and humans, fingers and toes, plumes and fringes cling close to the core of the stone as if sucked in by centripetal forces. Elbows and hands push into the torso, the knees and soles of the squatting females telescope into the main bulk as do the wings and wing-shells of a heavy beetle after flight.

Aztec sculpture is self-sufficient, not intended to convince or to please. It acquires the natural quality of boulders long under water, as if the metaphysical stream that shaped

it used a working logic akin to hydraulic forces. Its emotional power remains crammed within an outer shell as cool and smooth as an engineer's maquette; this sculpture does not require a spectator. To handle its textures with eyes closed is to gain a knowledge keener than what comes through the eye. It seems that, overlooked in a jungle, it would still breathe a kind of hibernated life as a cocoon, that buried underground it would continue to exude a kind of silent existence as a bulb.

The Mayans are well represented by small objects and temple models but—especially after the strong showing they were given at the San Francisco Fair—one misses the grandeur of their bas-reliefs, the elevation of their steles. To round out his knowledge of them the New Yorker would do well to go to the Museum of Natural History and walk among these towering monoliths that opposed to the forest that were their habitat an army of trunks carved in stone.

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THOSE WHO CONSIDER the Colonial section of the show Spanish have probably never been to Spain. A Spaniard is most puzzled when confronted by this "provincial" development and Mexicans are likely to find Spanish architecture dull.

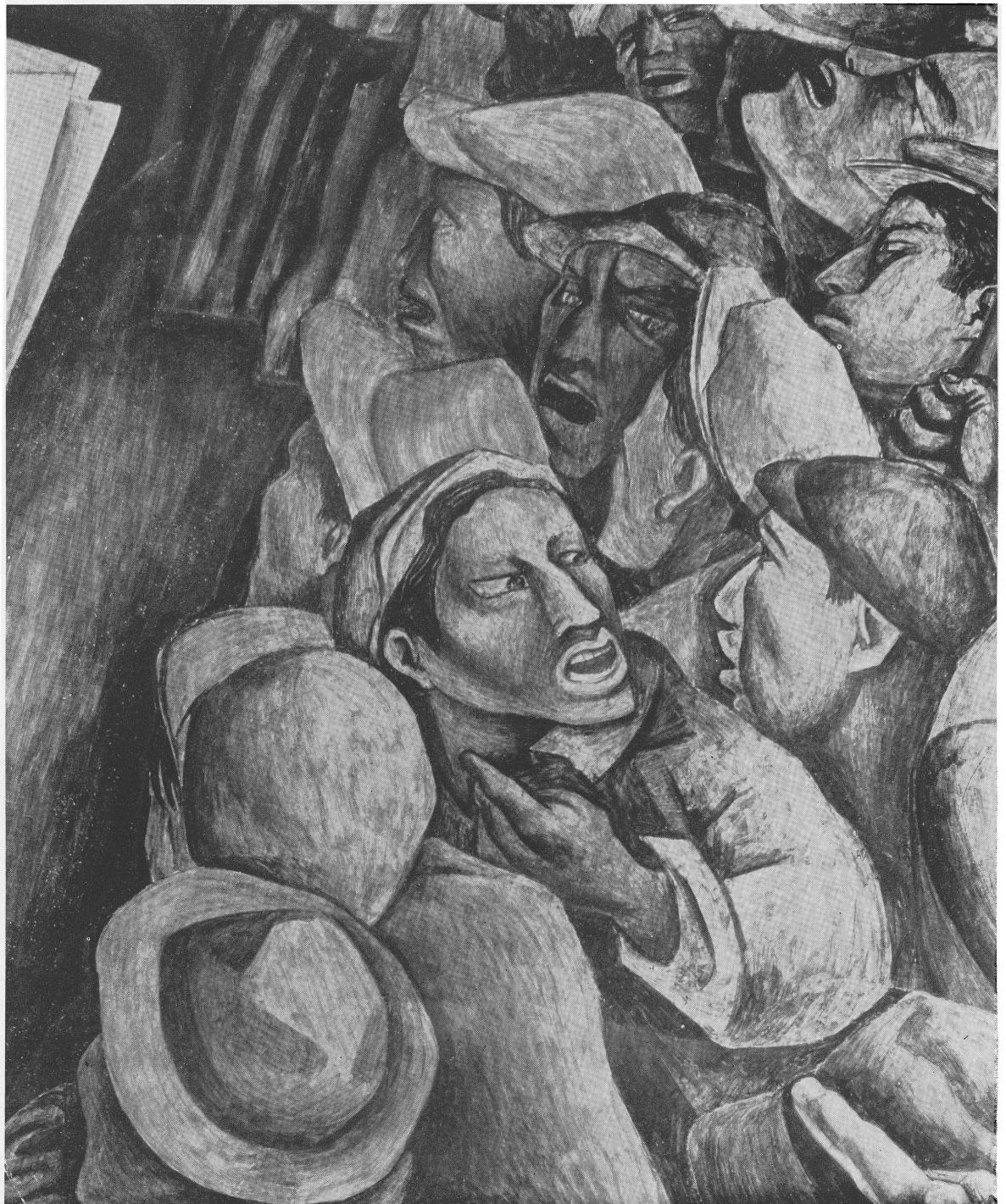
If Aztec sculpture is self-contained, colonial art is, on the contrary, a theatre. Its sculpture preaches to the congregation; its force is centrifugal, radiating from the dummy heart and soul of the effigy through extensions of contorted limbs, up to the very tips of the extended fingers, into space.



To know such sculpture through tactile tests would be no more of an esthetic experience than to frisk a window dummy, for the baroque taste of the colonial masters favored a choice of mixed materials. Wooden statues are gessoed, lacquered, and painted, with eyelashes and wigs made of human hair, teeth, and ribs of true bone, often heribboned and dressed in damasks and velvets, their wooden feet shod in silver. Some of the sculptors, still unsatisfied by the static limitations of their materials, dabbled in cinematography: the skull of the saint was emptied, the orbits gouged out, and eyes on ball-bearings, as impressive as doll's eyes, bulged and rolled in mystic agonies, moved from behind the scenes by a discreet tug at hidden strings. The man who is a purist as concerns technique can only feel indignation at such license, but one should rather admire the strength of an impulse that did not shy at using such bastard means, this art that did break all the rules of good art in its desire to stir, to expostulate, and to convert.

Colonial sculpture may look weak when compared with the Aztec, but one could hardly call it squeamish. Souls sizzling in purgatory, with a pope or cardinal thrown in, windlasses unrolling the guts of martyrs, eyes served on a plate and breasts ditto, Christ after flagellation, skinned to the ribs, bleeding on all fours in his cell like a wounded animal in its lair—such are the favorite subjects of their art. It is strong stuff compared to the sugar-saints sculptured today, sporting their sanctity as a kind of social accomplishment.

THE SECTION RESERVED to folk arts is especially complete. In its quaintness and color it is also the one that needs less training to approach. It may be viewed as decorative art if one forgets the soulless, fashionable connotations of the word. Out of humble materials, clay, straw, gourds, thousands of objects are made, exquisite alike in their shapes and colors. Such objects are rather bartered than sold and



ON FACING PAGE; ABOVE: Guadalupe Posada: *The Crimes of the Bejarano*. Woodcut, ca. 1890. In the author's collection. ON FACING PAGE; BELOW: Jose Clemente Orozco: *Dome of the Assembly Hall, Guadalajara*. An enlarged photograph is included in the Mexican show at the Museum of Modern Art

RIGHT: Pablo O'Higgins: *Fresco in Market, Abelardo Rodriguez*. Detail. Courtesy Bonestell Gallery, New York



David Alfaro Siqueiros: *Ethnography*. Oil, 1939. Lent by the Pierre Matisse Gallery to the Mexican exhibition at the Modern Museum

in any case will bring only a few centavos. The ingenuity in planning and pleasure in executing them is matched only by the indifference of the artist to the problems of distribution and of gain; they belie the theory that man works spurred only by the profit motive. Rather do those Mexican crafts illustrate Verlaine's opinion that the last vestige of divine freedom left to man, chased from Paradise, exists in his creative capacity for work.

To know what folk art really means to the folk who make it needs as much objective research as to scan the puzzle of Aztec relics. Those bright masks with comical beards and horns which connote for us a gay mardi-gras are to the man who wears them more akin to a priest's surplice. The impetus of muscular exertion that seizes the faithful on the day of the feast of Guadalupe, uses the peacock's splendor of the bouquet of feathers implanted in a grinning mask as if it were an optical prayer. The rattles held and shaken rhythmically through the dance acquire a propitiatory meaning, as does a Tibetan prayer-mill. The "Arab" masqueraders, topped with huge horns should be seen in action when the danced pilgrimage of Chalma proceeds—hundreds of devils spring in ordered bedlam in front of the main altar, as if exorcized into sight by the powers of its life-size crucifix.

Even the pottery, to us charming or quizzical, may be heavy with feeling for its Indian owner. A little girl was passing through the streets of Acapanzingo holding a jug of water, a plain jug, egg-shaped with the gullet sideways. Suggested a tourist, "It looks like a duck." She answered indignantly, "It is a duck," hugged it tighter and ran. They have no dolls to love in Acapanzingo.

Folk painting is painting done by people that some well-to-do critics would not enjoy meeting socially. Out of this anonymous limbo of folk art have emerged already such artists as Posada, Manila, and Estrada, that will rank as old masters in the eyes of the twenty-first century. Thus the distinction made in this show between both species of painting—the popular and the professional—should be taken with some grains of salt. There is a lovely portrait in white, done by one of the folk, that the artists in the next rooms have good grounds to study and envy. There are among the *milagros* or ex-votos, pictures of consummate art and great depth.

Among us, people give thanks for graces received: health, money, ambitions satiated. But the Mexican devout pray for less obvious gifts. There exists a *milagro* representing a lonely room and a bed, and in it a woman very dead and green, dedicated as follows: "Mrs. * * * having left her village and come to town wished to die. Her family erects this picture to give thanks in her name that her wish has been happily granted."

. . .

AFTER MURGER WROTE his *Bohème* and it had become a best seller, a number of elderly bums, once his friends, nourished a lively controversy as to which one of them was the original bohemian he had been writing about, and made a few pennies lecturing on how picturesquely they had once sowed their wild oats. Whenever I talk or write about Mexican modern art I am reminded of this incident. What was once alive, strong, and seething has now faded into club talk. What we created that was without precedent has established, only too well, its precedent.

There was a heroic scope to the gesture of those men who turning their backs on both art dealers and patrons, and their minds away from the Parisian novelty shop, planted their works indelibly on the walls of Mexico's buildings, with no incentive to do so but that of an inner urge synchronized with the social unrest, with no assurance that they would ever be noticed by the "cultured," but with the positive belief that they had ceased being artistic and were now artisans, companions to the carpenters and plasterers who were collaborating in the work. At this stage, Rivera would smash the camera of a press photographer that had sneaked up on him, with orders to expose the spending of government money for things people considered ugly. Siqueiros, receiving the news that a friend had just been assassinated, did paint in tribute his "burial of a worker," secreting in the wall behind the painted coffin a bottle with a message of adieu. Orozco, his works stoned and maimed, would with superb indifference ask his mason not only to patch, but also to repaint the work. Such intensity of collective creation could not last long; as an attempt at erecting a painted monu-

(Continued on page 440)



Unknown Artist: Portrait of Maria Tomasa Garcia Aguirre. Ca. 1820. Lent by the Museum of Popular Art, Mexico City, to the Museum of Modern Art

TWENTY CENTURIES OF MEXICAN ART

(Continued from page 404)

ment in the anonymous mood with which the ancients had built cathedrals, the Mexican experiment comes to a close before the end of the 'twenties.

Another group was in the meantime indulging in a more restrained painting, with the accent on pure plastic values. Let us say that while the full orchestra of Mexican muralists was blaring, for those who had keen ears some chamber music was still to be heard. The best of those easel painters have been able to ply to their ends the influx of modernisms, and yet retain genuine style and scope. The impetus they gave gathers force with the 'thirties, spreads the reac-

(Continued from page 440)

tion against monumentality. A new emphasis is laid upon the qualities that mural work lacked perforce: the full rainbow range of chemical pigments, a variety of textures, a lighter mood. Steady eyes and hands perform on a miniature scale pictures as astonishing as the *Our Father* inscribed on a grain of wheat.

The discreet portion of the Museum of Modern Art allotted to the modern art of Mexico does not tell this story in full: for unexplained reasons, the decade 1930-40 is featured, thus glossing over the important period before. Even though murals cannot be transported for exhibition purposes, there exists a body of works closely related to them: geometric diagrams, studies of details from nature, full-scale tracings used on the wall. Much of this material is now lost, thrown from a scaffold and trampled at the end of a work day; much that remains could have been reassembled and shown. Even the painters that opposed in style the school of muralists, would have increased in significance against this historic background. The oversight of a bare five years (1921-26) punches a gigantic hole into the close-knit trend of those two thousand years of Mexican art.

Releases given by the Museum to the press suggest that the arts of Mexico are characterized by "gentleness and a love of fun and play." The emphasis put by the display on the tender innocence of Mexican toys, the colorfulness of peasant costumes, the amused exercises of sophisticated artists, comes dangerously close to proving this point. It is as if the vast Mexican panorama had been surveyed through a rose lorgnette. Considering the world today, so cruelly different from the optimistic world of yesteryear, the art of Mexico at its most severe scores a prophetic point; it would have been a more responsible performance if the present show had had courage enough to underscore it.