

MEXICAN FOLK-ART EXPRESSED IN THE
CUT-OUT DESIGNS OF LOLA V. CUETO,
EXHIBITED AT THE SOUTHWEST
MUSEUM DURING MAY, 1946

INTRODUCTION BY JEAN CHARLOT

SINCE Lao-Tse stated that the most active part of the wheel is its hub, made to receive the axle, a philosophy of the vacuum has underlined the fact that it is not only by addition that things and people are bettered, but often by subtraction. What extra matter is flung from the matrix block transforms the raw stone into a statue; Diogenes is enriched the moment he throws away his wooden drinking bowl. This notion fits well the *mores* of the Mexican artist, in a land where the uses of art are as widespread as those of bread, where art-making is not the privilege of the few, but the birthright of all.

While only a few may afford expensive materials, the many know that art value does not depend on the rarity of the original material. What humbler material than paper, and to subtract from it should make it still humbler, and yet what splendid results!

For the true artist, the pleasure of art resides in its making. Its permanency, its appreciation for generations, its enshrining in a museum, all are very good, but have nothing to do with creativeness, with the one luxury that the artist knows, art-making, that is both a collaboration with and a mastering of his material. The brittleness of paper is not easier to master than the hardness of marble. It may be the Asiatic quota latent in the Indian race that made the native artist try his hand on paper, as the Persian warrior essayed his scimitar on a floating feather. Also Oriental and Amerindian is the resigned understanding that time being short of eternity, a work of art made to last a day is not much more ephemeral than one created to last for centuries.

Codices have preserved the features of pre-Hispanic arts that were not made to last. To play its role in lay and religious feasts, a paper made of agave fiber was dyed and cut into

fringes and rosettes, as splendid for a day as de luxe head-dresses and standards; its garlands beautified temple and palace.

Come Colonial days, paper vies with lace to ornament churches. Impoverished by the Conquest, Indian master hands turn forever from the shaping of gold, and of quetzal feathers, to that of the humble paper, with as great a creativeness.

Today, paper has an important place in folk art. There are pre-Hispanic survivals. In villages, paper is still made from the fibers of traditional local plants, its use limited now to sorcery and agrarian incantations. Cut-out silhouettes of gods are buried in the soil to insure its fertility. Other cut papers, openly displayed, add beauty to the opening of a *pulquería*, or, made into fringes and flowers, will be stretched from house to house, often filling the air over a whole village, to celebrate the visit of a famed religious statue to that of the local shrine, or even the homecoming of a politician.

The cut-outs of Lola Cueto are a valid quintessence of what ancient art traditions have merged into folk-forms. Paradoxically, the mosaic of colored papers is made into the solid expression of Mexican modes. The grave religious images, the kneeling devout at the feet of a scourged Christ, remind also one of the Mayan reliefs, where pagan faithfuls perform blood rites. The hieratic Virgins, stiff in their brocaded robes, eased long ago the religious transition by mimicking the shapes of ancient *teocalis*.

Lola Cueto preserves a deep understanding of what constitutes the essence of each medium when she transfers to cut papers the stylized birds that nestle in the leaves of Michoacan lacquers, or the popular engravings of Posada, that range in mood from comical tourist whose umbrella is no defense against a Mexican bull, to sensational dramas that bare teeth, hearts, and *machetes*.

The last show of Lola Cueto was that of her needlework, tapestries of rich and heavy material that competed in splendor with stained glass windows. The versatile artist turns to the humbler paper cut-out as one relishes a glass of water after too rich a fare. Her pictures, as light in weight as they are heavy with tradition, preserve for a while childish enchantments, all the more exquisite for eschewing the permanency that marbles and bronzes rarely deserve.