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Jean Charlot

PRE-HISPANIC QUOTA IN MEXICAN MURALS

IN times of unrest the Indian quota shoots upwards, more for a symbolical pennant than as a true racial claim. For Mexicans bloods are so thoroughly churned that Hidalgo, a Spaniard, upholds in history Indian rights, while Diaz, a Mixtec, personifies the oppression.

But cowed, triumphant or just uninterested, the Indian remains a potent stylistic factor. The Roman Church soon acquires in Mexico a native tang, paper rosettes, sacred dances; and self-tortures creep as vines over the rock-old dogma. Heaven nods approval. Not only does the Guadalupe appear on a strictly Indian straw *tilma*, but averted face and joined hands, dark against the ashes of roses of the robe and the ash-blue of the mantle are unmistakably Indian flesh — cinnamon hues waning to olive.

In 1810 Hidalgo pitted the humbly dressed Indian Virgin against the Spanish One, doll-like, dolled up in a stiff cone of gold-heavy brocade. Minus its common denominator — Our Lady — the clean statement that remains already contrasts Mexican aesthetics with those of Europe.

Again Indianism rises in the 1860's as Republic crushes Empire, with a correct cast this time, the blond Hapsburg versus the

jade-dark Juarez. Lithographs popularize the Aztec calendar stone become a national pride. But soon after Diaz bleaches his face and hands, and Mexican esteem of things Mexican sinks.

The retrograde progress of the Diaz regime is told by successive contributions to Paris world fairs:

In 1889, the national pavilion was "a restoration of an Aztec temple, the high slate-colored walls rising in impossibly steep steps, and surmounted by strange and forbidding statues of kings and divinities."

In 1900, "Today, as befits a modern and civilized nation, the representative building suggests a modern palace in the neo-Greek style so prevalent in the Mexican capital (!), the principal facade on the Seine . . . preceded by a perron flanked by sphinxes."

Again Indianism is the traditional leaven of the 20th Century revolution. This time both leads are miscast. Indian Diaz is the villain ousted by the Indians' savior, pink, bearded Madero. Indianism matches the political rise of a people come to the capital from crags like Tepoztlan, where the beat of *teponaztle* is still heard, where sonorous *nahuatl* discourses are publicly flung to the night sky. Walnut-skin Guadalupes dangle from the giant brims of Zapatista sombreros. The Indian Obregon rides over the map roughshod, with his Yaqui warriors.

The Indian shows less tolerance of his racial saga than does the white man. At the revolutionary convention of Aguascalientes lawyer Soto y Gama, paradoxical mouthpiece for Zapata, with pince-nez and waxed moustache, orates: "We have shared the Indian's life and felt his anguishes."

Obregon's retort, "What anguishes of the Indian has he felt — pure blah! Señor Soto y Gama should know that he is speaking to a pure Mayan Indian who can discourse in his tribal dialect. . . . Señor Soto y Gama should know that after eleven years of sacrifices and labors I rose to the status of worker . . . yet I do not feel the anguishes of the Indian. That is cheap vaudeville, all that is nothing more than cheap vaudeville!"

Born of the revolution, the mural renaissance reflects Indianism. But whereas the term could be questioned in its social usage, debunked even as a political myth, its meaning remains impeccable on the aesthetic plane.

The Indian artist has to his credit splendid achievements. To praise them we had what the Indianist of Mid-19th Century lacked, a key to their plastic significance. From Cézanne on, the cone, the sphere, the cylinder acquire passionate meanings. Picasso throws in the cube. Severini, Metzinger, Rivera brew an alchemy of the fourth dimension, sliding, rotating wires and cardboards in an intoxication of discovery. Their none too metaphysical painters' brains throbbed at the limits of the visible. Past that, physical painting could not breathe. Severini quotes Rivera in 1917, "A being living in a world with varied refringences instead of homogeneous refringences would be bound to conceive a fourth dimension." Adds Severini, "This milieu with distinct refringences is realized in a picture if a multiplicity of pyramids replaces the single cone of Italian perspective."

These hard won glimpses into an art possible perchance on another planet became amazed vistas of reality for the plastic pilgrim from Paris, at the National Museum of Mexico City. But the Aztec pyramids, spheres, cubes and cones, far from retaining, as did the cubist ones, a whiff of the dampness of the classroom, were cogs, pistons, ball-bearings one suspected of cosmic functions. They sublimated this other fetish of ours, the Machine. Aztec theogonical sculptures, Coatlicues, great serpent heads, blood basins, sacrificial and calendar stones, are classical pre-forms of the fiercely rational trend that had just swept from painting all the boot-blacks shooting craps, the cardinals eating lobsters, the naked women that passed for art a generation before.

On the technical side, Aztec sculpture illustrates more than any the loving intercourse that should exist between the sculptor and the material he chooses. The Aztec standard for good sculpture is identical with that of Michel Angelo: To be proclaimed beautiful

the statue should roll intact from the top of a mountain to the valley below.

Aztec sculpture is self-sufficient, not intended to convince or to please. It acquires the texture of boulders long under water, as if the metaphysical stream that shaped it used a working logic akin to hydraulic forces. To handle it with eyes closed is to gain a knowledge keener than that acquired through the eye. It seems that, overlooked in a jungle, it would yet 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 implications of Aztec carvings remained indirect for the muralist, being lessons from another medium. The respect shown by the Indian artist for the matrix boulder paralleled our love for the lime and sand that is the stuff of fresco. His mathematically contrived rhythms and close to organic geometry acted as reminder that architecture bosses whatever is painted on the wall.

But of all the ancient remains, the painters felt closer to painting. Previous generations appreciated Indian paintings as a picture-writing that spelled a dead history. As art, if they were touchingly naive for a few men of good will, they remained for most comically uncouth. José Bernardo Couto observes in 1860, "One should not look in them for correct drawing, or for a knowledge of chiaroscuro or of perspective, or a taste for beauty and graceThey fail to express moral qualities and the moods of the soul . . . owing to a certain propensity to observe and copy the less genteel aspects of Nature, such as animals of disagreeable aspect."

But in the 1920's, the Parisian vanguard of artists that hacked its way through uncharted aesthetic jungles, proudly brought back trophies not unlike the squatty, gesticulating, knob-kneed pygmies eternized on lime-coated paper of maguey fiber before Columbus was born. There were affinities: that vanguard itself was called comical and uncouth, and in truth was naive enough to have faith in its own efforts.

Though I was born and bred in Paris, my horn-books were the

Mexican manuscripts that Uncle Goupil deeded to the Bibliothèque Nationale, deemed at that time textbooks for the education of Aztec princelings. They were also my A.B.C. of modern art.

Aztec painting may be only a writing, but letters too have a style. To know *calli*, the square of adobe invaded by a square of space that signifies "house," watered the cubed cityscapes of Braque and Derain into a mild heresy of impressionism. The flat backgrounds of the codices, split or quartered in heraldic colors, seemed the goal towards which the Matisse of "Music" and "Dance" took first hesitant steps. The anatomies that Leger put together with ruler and compass were no doubt a step away from Bouguereau, but had still far to go on their semi-mechanical legs to reach the style of a Tlaloc or Tzontemoc.

Ages before Moctezuma, councils of ancients had wed each color to a knot of subject-matters, terreverte for vegetation and death, blue for water and jewels, red for blood and stars, puz-zole for earth and male flesh, yellow for felines, priests and female flesh, black for Hell. Besides which the lawyer-like arguments of purist Ozenfant, assigning to each of the four elements a color, were furtive catacomb rites *en lieu* of a pontifical Mass.

A few were spared. Picasso's evisceration of objects retained some of the fierceness of a ritual knifing.

In the Mexico of the 1920's, even more than to the codices, the muralists looked for murals. When in a pagan world the temples drew the faithful, polychromy spread its tapestries on indoor and out of door architectures, paint dribbled down temple steps together with the blood and the broken reed flutes shed by the divine victim. But now only fragments of Aztec murals lived, not enough to understand their role in an architecture, just enough to feel the beat, blunt as a flag, of red laid against blue on dazzling white.

Toltec murals were even rarer. When we started painting, Teotihuacan had not yielded the fresco of yellow dwarfs heaped on a sang-de-boeuf background, busy as maggots on a chunk of steak.

The faded fragments found in 1883 could only be divined through the Peñafiel copy, that pleaded childishness.

But in faraway Yucatan, Mayan murals still stood in their architectural setting. To the muralists who saw them before starting to work they were an inspiration, a comprobation to those who saw them after.

The simple myth of Spaniard versus Indian is hard to hold in the case of the Mayan. There is more in common between Spaniard and Aztec than between Aztec and Mayan. The Mayan was long, the Aztec squatty, of green gold contrasting with Aztec dark copper, metaphysically inclined whereas the Aztec was a fighter. The Mayan had a beak nose, bulging eyes and a brain that shot its skull backwards, against the snubnosed, sliteyed, round-topped Aztec. The Aztecs conquered the Mayans: the latter fought as far as hand propelled javelins could reach, but the former sprang on them mechanized warfare with the bow and arrow.

Their arts were antithetic: Mayan parallels of "Washington Crossing the Delaware" show the redcoats, the Aztecs, as naked funny dwarfs with a few hairs hanging Chinese-wise from lip and chin; whereas an Aztec warrior billeted in one of Chichen Itza's desecrated temples, vented his disgust for the lean androgynes frescoed on processional friezes by scratching deep into them a brutal graffito of Aztec manhood.

The Temple of the Tigers is a small lookout that dominates the ball court of Chichen Itza. The templet served a similar purpose to that of the chapel annexed to the arena, in Spain, where bullfighters kneel before they kill. There, players prayed for victory, judges sat in judgment, and there the winning team received its prize. Because of its many wall pictures Stephens called it in 1840 the Sistine Chapel of America.

The best preserved of its murals represents a battle fought on a field spread between the thatch-roofed houses of a tribe and the raised tents of its besiegers. The warriors, over a hundred of them, use round shields and long javelins. One of them is

eaglespread on the green, a spear through the thigh. While men give and receive death, their women shuttle from home to front lines with provisions. In the village a few crones and oldsters squat on roofs, unmoved by the unfolding epic.

The artist has engineered a masterly game of geometry, playing the circle that is the shield against the straight line that is the spear. Diagonals surge upwards from the outside towards the center. Each individual drama adds its sloping segment to sum up the hidden pyramid that is the compositional goal of the painter.

In the lower part of the panel, its intended foreground, plumed chieftains negotiate, seated on low stools beside dome-shaped tents. Boldly rising over the frieze-like scene, two standards are topped by an apparition of the senior god, enthroned in the solar disk fringed with light rays. Spiritual climax of the picture, this vision is also its plastic climax. The vertical pennant and concentric sun motives echo amplified the two contrasting geometrical units that scaffold the picture.

This battlepiece plays a role in the formative period of our movement. Rivera was deeply impressed when, fresh from Europe, he saw it as he toured Yucatan in December 1921.

Even if one is part of the same stream of culture as the artist, knows him and is privileged to ask questions concerning the meaning of his art, even if one is himself the artist, problems of aesthetic are hard to clarify. The difficulty is increased tenfold when one attempts to evaluate the contemporary output of men of other roots or *mores*, for example folk artists. It increases a thousandfold in the case of dead cultures.

Sifting the vast store of pre-hispanic objects, we know that a strong quota of art must have gone into the make-up of those whose purpose is more than pragmatic, whose craft transcends function. Successive generations of searchers have sought to isolate this *x* in a pure state. A rational approach is of little use where such investigations are concerned. It is emotion that picks beauty, and the stream of feeling carts also the rotting flotsam of past

artistic experiences, partisan and ill-remembered. The method may be weak but knows no alternate.

Most common yardsticks up to the 1920's were Greco-Roman classicism, the Italian Renaissance, and photographic realism. Because of the few contacts with pre-hispanic forms, each proved a stumbling block rather than a help in the search.

A classicism sprung from the classroom remains a widespread motor in picking certain archeological specimens as artistic and in damning others. The Mexican sociologist Manuel Gamio illustrates the point in 1916, in his exposure of the subconscious reasons that dictate the popularity of the sculptured "Head of an Eagle Knight" in the National Museum. He confronts it with an old textbook chestnut, a Greek coin representing "Alexander garbed as Hercules." Strikingly similar, they both show aquiline profiles framed by wide open maws, the Indian's inside an eagle helmet, the Greek's inside a lion's pelt. Gamio's verdict: "The emotion aroused (by the Aztec head) is a psychological fraud, a hybrid that confuses the observation of American forms with the evocation of European ideas."

The second aesthetic paragon is the Italian Renaissance, or rather its residue in the innermost gray matter of gentlemen's pates—a composite Madonna, the flesh of Raphael, the smile by Da Vinci. While digging out in 1925 the main altar of the Temple of the Warriors, seventeen columnar figures were unearthed. The subject matter was the same in every one, a male caryatid with arms raised to support the altar slab. Of same style and size, probably the work of the same hand, they were as much of a match as are the four legs of a chair. As against sixteen judged coarse, one was deemed artistic, baptized by the staff "The Mona Lisa of Chichen Itza," photographed, reproduced, made famous. Whence then the difference? The mouth of sixteen figures turned down at the corners; that of the favorite turned up. Chiaroscuro shades of Leonardo!

Photographic realism pertains to an era that idolized Meis-

sonier, Gérôme, and many a painter of tearful chimneysweeps and merry monks. Then, the evolution of Greek art was presented as a progress towards some such goal, soaring from the limbo of archaic deformities to the heaven of hellenistic genre. Naturally, informed archeologists looked for a parallel sequence in the development of Indian aesthetics, and found what they were after. Doctor Spinden does just that in his 1908 analysis of a sequence of Mayan stelae, each representing a standing chieftain or priest. He proves by measurements that the feet tend to a more natural angle with the legs as craft and culture become more complex.

As long as such standards reigned, the painters who favored Mexican plots told them in the manner of their European teachers. Indianism meant a choice of subject matter to grate on the routine thinking of the Spanish directors of the Academy: In these pictures Aztec gentlemen invariably shamed the savage conquerors with their better manners. In the 1870's, Ingrist Felix Parra, praised by Rivera as "upholder of the cult of ancient American art," presents Cortez as a ruffian, spurred boot on the carcass of a dead Indian whose wife and child look with horror at the armored cad. In his desire to win the spectator to the underdog the artist transforms the female into one of the Roman peasant models, kerchief and all, popular in European academies. In the 1880's Izaquirre, future teacher of Orozco, paints in "The Torture of Cuauhtemoc" the partial roasting of the last Aztec emperor.

The transition period in the appreciation of pre-hispanic forms was marked by what Siqueiros called in 1921 "lamentable archeological reconstructions, Indianism, Primitivism, Americanism, so fashionable among us." Already in 1916 Orozco knew of "a small group bent on exhuming from the Museum of Archeology the decorative motives of our native past, attempting to put them to sundry uses and applications."

Gamio's pregnant negative of that same year is matched by the positive pioneering of an American, Franz Boas, in fields of art called primitive for want of a wiser word. Boas sired to his

method the Mexican Best Maugard who culled and copied innumerable crockeries and potsherds before deciding on the seven primary elements of an aesthetic that eased out at last the three art standards so ill-fitted to things Mexican.

To bear stylistic fruits, the lessons incipient in Indian art had to wait for a post-cubist age, when artists and critics alike would slight the implications of subject matter, stop reminiscing about other brands of masterpieces, and emphasize the appreciation of pure form.

That the new standards fitted so much better than the old ones was proof that we were on the right track. Cocksure, we pitied what had gone on before us in the field of amerindian aesthetic, never understanding that the luck we experienced now was not of our doing, but potluck. The method was the same it had always been; we approached our subject as all others had, armed with a medley of plastic prejudices as invalid on rational grounds as any before, and as European. But the wind had changed, international art currents now eddied close to the prehispanic shores.

While correct anatomical proportions fitted one in a thousand specimens, our own brand of distortion enjoyed a heyday at the National Museum. Bereft of classical beauty and of Renaissance sensuousness as well, idols showed a strong family air with Picassos of the "negro" period. They combined also the weight of Leger with the mathematical innuendoes of Juan Gris. Wood teponastles had the same color and moroseness as a 1920 Derain.

Into this mold of a pre-hispanic art understood in terms of a plastic present were poured whatever human meanings were dominant at the social moment. Which meant that political Indianism was the breath that gave life to plastic Indianism.

In 1921, in the opening manifesto of the movement, Siqueiros states, "We must come closer to the works of the ancient settlers of our vales, Indian painters and sculptors, Mayan, Aztec, Inca, etc. . . . Our climatological identification with them will help us assimilate the constructive vigor of their work. Their clear ele-

mental knowledge of nature can be our starting point."

Rivera in his first Mexican interview, July 28, 1921, said, "The search that the European artist furthers with such intensity ends here in Mexico, in the abundant realization of our national art. I could tell you much concerning the progress to be made by a painter, a sculptor, an artist, if he observes, analyzes, studies Mayan, Aztec or Toltec art, none of which falls short of any other art in my opinion."

Critics concur. José Juan Tablada in January 1923, "After a long academic sleep, the old Aztec art has inspired a national renaissance."

That same month Charles Michel writes, "However remote, one feels a moving reminiscence, the twinkle of a star gradually unfurling to splendor, that is the belated opening of the recondite soul of the ancient race of Anahuac!"

Renato Molina in May of that year, "Diego Rivera . . . is revitalizing fresco painting just as it was practiced by the ancient Mexicans."

Atl in July, "It appears that today the strength of the pre-cortesian races is surging again, especially where painting is concerned."

Even the technique is deemed pre-hispanic. *El Universal*, June 19, 1923, "The artist-painter Diego Rivera has rediscovered the process used by ancient Mexicans to produce their splendid frescoes, such as those we admire today in the monuments of San Juan Teotihuacan."

Conservatives use that very same point to ridicule the mural movement. An editorial in *El Demócrata* pokes fun at "equivocal pigments à la mode Teotihuacana." Rivera having said that murals should tell a story, is reproved by the same paper, "A painter likens painting to writing. If this definition should hold, we would regress further than the Italian primitives, as far back as the primitive Aztecs who told their history in hieroglyphs."

At least one painter, Orozco, turns a cold shoulder on Indian-

ism, both political and artistic. A newspaperman suggests in 1926 that "Diego is deemed the painter of our race." Orozco objects, "What he does by putting a profusion of Indians in his pictures is to make hay while the Indian smallpox rages, a disease that is itching our politicians As art for export it is understandable, but there is no excuse for painting it in Mexico I follow the tendencies of Diego Rivera? I would rather do it first hand, contact the original sources in the National Museum, the codices and other remains of aboriginal art that Rivera reproduces in his works"

How far do the works themselves uphold the contentions of the painters and the opinions held by friends and foes alike?

In our early murals the pre-hispanic factor is not as decisive as contemporary opinion implies, though our good will did result in transporting some archeological data from museum to wall. Rivera installs in 1924 Yolochochitl, god of flowers, in a jungle where he seems as little at home as Yagdiva and her sofa in Rousseau's.

Of more import are a few forms where pre-hispanic and post-cubist aesthetics fuse organically. First in date, even though they are not murals, are the pictures that Carlos Merida painted ca. 1919. They put to new creative uses the heraldic colors and unbroken outline found in codices.

Rabid in its pro-Indian subject matter, my 1922 fresco contains creative passages that parallel the forms and moods of diorite masks. Diego shows great understanding in those 1923 kneeling figures, often women seen from the back, where legs and arms press close to the ovaloid of the torso, with an economy of shape that suggests a carving out of a glacier-smoothed matrix.

Of the giants that Siqueiros left unfinished in the small staircase of the Preparatoria, Rivera justly wrote in 1924, that they were "the most successful synthesis of the race arrived at since pre-hispanic times."

Paradoxically, Orozco realizes another masterly fusion of an-

cient and present plastics and emotions, in the Indian squatting before a blood soaked teocalli, frescoed in 1926, in the main staircase of the Preparatoria, in the same year and in the same place where he spoke the blast at Indianism quoted before.

The idea of a resurrection of an Indian culture became popular, probably because of its romantic implications. To the dismay of his Mexican tutors, D. H. Lawrence in *The Plumed Serpent* interpreted the revolution as a rebirth of paganism, picturing processions of faithful along the ledge of Lake Chapala, who carried idols of Tlaloc and Huitzli-pochtli instead of statues of Catholic saints.

Artistic Indianism bred also quid-pro-quos. José Vasconcelos had sponsored the mural work. A knight of hispanism, he found himself hailed outside Mexico as an Indian at heart. Of his lecture tour in Santo Domingo a reporter writes, "What he said was little besides what he could have said. He could have said: I have redeemed Mexico in the eyes of the world . . . I snatched Montenegro and others from the octopus embrace of Paris when I foisted the resurrection of the artistic modes of the Aztecs."

The field that critics allotted me was the Mayan. I visited an artist friend in Los Angeles, who tempted me with a blank lithographic stone. My host and his wife watched in silence while I improvised with crayon. The plate finished to everyone's satisfaction, she murmured, "Well, he didn't, did he?" It was admitted that I had not. My raised eyebrow elucidated the fact that I was suspected of carrying Mayan motives by the pocketful to buck up waning memories.