

Olga Costa and José Chávez Morado



Olga Costa, *The Bride*, 70 x 55 cm (oil on canvas). Private collection.



José Chávez Morado, *Bird Seller*, 36.5 x 33.5 cm (crayon sketch). Echeverría Zuno Family collection.

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Olga Costa and José Chávez Morado not only shared a long married and productive artistic life together, they also loved Guanajuato and its people to whom they donated their house and several art collections. Here we pay homage to their artistic achievements and their generosity and interest in the promotion of art and culture.

José Chávez Morado



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A Portrait of the Nation, 70 x 90 cm, 1961 (oil on canvas). Artist's collection.



Cart of Crazies, 70 x 91 cm, 1950 (oil on canvas). Artist's collection.

A Man of Another Age¹

Talking about José Chávez Morado is one of the greatest difficulties a modern Mexican art lover or critic could have. Part of this is his diverse, prolific, eclectic and paradoxically unified body of visual work: in addition to being a painter, sculptor, engraver and designer, he was also an outstanding political and union activist, educator, cultural promoter, museographer and essayist. He is a man of another age, an age in which man's efficiency was not measured in quarter-hours or bits of knowledge.

His professional training did not take place mainly in schools. He did study at Chouinard School of Art in Los Angeles and at Mexico City's National Fine Arts School, but José Chávez Morado can be characterized as the prototype of permeability and eclecticism in formal matters. Although he has remained faithful to his creed and political practice—he is a leftist—he has also participated in government activities to promote art.

José Chávez Morado was born in Silao, Guanajuato, January 4, 1909, into a family with republican traditions, from which part of his political beliefs stem. His paternal grandfather, Isidro Chávez, was a militant of the Benito Juárez movement despite the tenacious opposition of the opulent mine- and landowner society in the region. José's parents were José Ignacio Chávez, merchant, and Luz Morado, housewife.

His initial education was basically what modestly-positioned families "of good principles" try to give their children. José's paternal grandfather had a sizeable library where he broadened out his interests and filled his mind with fantasies. There, he soaked up history, poetry, science and fiction; some of these books were illustrated and fanned his desires to sketch. His family atmosphere concentrated the pure roots



The Kite, 161 x 76 cm, 1970 (oil on canvas). Agustín Salvat collection.

of Spanish Catholicism—a motley mix of popular religiosity, superstitions, artfulness and profound humanistic spirituality—and certain local elements that, despite modification—or precisely because of them—flower with surprising brilliance in domestic customs, popular fiestas and particularly in the folk art of the region.

At the age of 16, probably feeling oppressed by the closed-in, small-town atmosphere of his home, he took an adventurous trip to the United States, where he worked as a laborer on fruit farms in California. Apparently, it was in this

got off to an auspicious start in set design, a field in which several visual artists were particularly interested.

Chávez Morado's first mural was on the central staircase of the Veracruz Normal School in Xalapa and was entitled *The Antiimperialist Struggle in Veracruz*. It was commissioned after a recommendation from the Revolutionary League of Writers and Artists (LEAR) to the Minister of Public Education, Gonzalo Vázquez Vela. Chávez Morado, a LEAR member, published communist-leaning engravings in the organization's maga-

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period that he decided on his vocation as an artist; he increased his habit of sketching by making diagrams and notes on the human figure. It was at this time that he first came into contact with Mexican muralism when he watched José Clemente Orozco work on frescos at Pomona College in Claremont, California.

In 1931, once back in Mexico, he enrolled at Mexico City's National Fine Arts School, where he studied engraving with Francisco Díaz de León, painting with Bulmaro Guzmán and lithography with Emilio Amero. The germ of Chávez Morado's vocation as a monumental artist can be seen in his education, since the inclusion of geometrical and lyrical elements and critical concepts formulated in the composition of his graphic message reflect the overall situation of visual integration and urban art. In 1933, he first manifested what would be one of his constant concerns, artistic education, that he dealt with as a teacher, as an organizer of schools and study plans and as a promotor of museology.

In 1935 he began his career as a muralist, an employee of the Ministry of Education and a married man, having married a student at the Fine Arts Central School, Olga Costa. He also

participated in the LEAR Mexican delegation to the International Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals congress in Valencia, Spain, where he was in charge of setting up the exhibit, "One Hundred Years of Revolutionary Mexican Art." He was also a journalist; in 1942 he published four issues of a mural-magazine or poster-newspaper called *El Eje-Le*. A few years later, under the pseudonyms Juan Brochas and Chon, he contributed to the Mexican Communist Party newspaper *La voz de México* (The Voice of Mexico) in which in 1944 he polemicized against David Alfaro Siqueiros' idea of creating a Center of Realist Art. Salvador Toscano, then director of the National School of Visual Arts, Guillermo Ruiz, director of La Esmeralda art school, Diego Rivera, María Izquierdo, José Clemente Orozco and Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, among others, also participated in that discussion.

In 1938, Chávez Morado joined the Popular Graphics Workshop, a response to Mexican progressives' enormous need for visual communication. He remained there until 1941, doing a considerable part of his work in graphics, mainly in linoleum and lithographs. His easel paintings of those years had recurring themes and are

testimony to his loving identification with urban scenes and an imitation of the discourse of the popular customs that marked the production and the impetuous course of his life.

One of the most notable aspects of Chávez Morado's work as an educator has been his promotion of museums. Together with Olga Costa he promoted the Spiral Gallery, an experiment that aimed to disseminate the work of artists of different ages and currents. Out of those efforts came the Modern Art Society. In 1944, he organized his first individual showing in the Mexican

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Art Gallery, and in 1945, he won the engraving competition organized by the Mexico City government to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Mexican Revolution.

The concept of visual integration became a constant concern of Mexican art from the time the idea of incorporating public monumental art into general programs of cultural development became current. Chávez Morado's position would merge all aspects of the visual arts, whether monumental or not, in the urban setting. He was in favor of pluralism and considered both private and government initiatives positive.

Thirty-two murals were painted in Mexico by artists like Juan O'Gorman, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1952, most of them in University City, then under construction. Chávez Morado did three of them: *The Return of Quetzalcóatl* and *The Conquest of Energy*, both mosaics, and *Labor, in vinelita*. In 1955, educational authorities and the Guanajuato state government commissioned him to decorate the stairwell of the Alhóndiga de Granaditas granary building with the mural *The Abolition of Slavery by Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla*. Ten years later, on the second staircase, he painted *Song to Guanajuato*.



Little Stairways, 100 x 120 cm, 1973 (oil on canvas). Echeverría Zuno Family collection.



Cross on the Scaffold, 100 x 75 cm, 1943 (oil on canvas). Jorge Espinoza Ulloa collection.



The Oath, 24 x 29 cm, 1947 (ink and distemper). Juan Evenchutz collection.

In 1956, at the Mexican Visual Arts Winter Salon, Chévez Morado won first prize for his oil painting *Miners* and worked intensely on the organization of the National Visual Arts Front exhibits.

In 1966, retired from his post as director of the School of Design and Crafts, he and his wife Olga went to live in Guanajuato at the former mining hacienda Torre del Arco, which was to be both their house and studio. An untiring cultural promotor, he soon became involved in adapting the Alhóndiga's museography. In 1967, he took charge of new projects for the museum, which he directed for a decade.

In 1974, Chévez Morado received the National Prize for the Arts, and in 1975, he began the paperwork necessary for the state government to acquire a colonial monument, the family home of the Marquis de Rayas, to house the People's Mu-

seum of Guanajuato, to which he and his wife donated their art collection and which he directed until 1982. In what had been the building's chapel, Chévez Morado painted *The Fractured Pilaster*, *The Real de Minas de Guanajuato* and *Guanajuato Society in the Nineteenth Century*.

The most common theme in Chévez Morado's work is urban and rural landscapes, mainly those of the highlands and the area around Guanajuato. Some examples are *The Awnings* (1941), *Symptoms of Decadence* (1945), *Prickly Pear Tree* (1952), among others. Popular fiestas and customs, usually related to profoundly significant religious allegories allusive to national political and economic situations can be seen, for example, in *Black Mexico* (1942) and *Scene at a Fair* (1950). He ponders the process of the mixing of the races as the bulwark of cultural and ethnic integration of modern Mexicans in *Self-Portrait*



The Witches' Sabbath, 30 x 55 cm, 1944 (gouache). Mr. and Mrs. Jorge Espinoza Ulloa collection.

with *My Nana* (1948), *A Portrait of the Nation* (1961) and *Toltec* (1961), among others.

Women, particularly indigenous women, are an important presence in his work. A few examples: *Tlacotalpeñas* (1936), *Tehuanas* (1949), *The Great Tehuana* (1936), *The Girl of the Cage* (1974). His work also includes fantastic fancies, usually satirizing backward attitudes in society, for example, *The Witches' Sabbath* (1944), *Cart of Crazyes* (1950), *State of Grace* (1969). Paintings like *Nocturnal Construction* (1959), *Requiem* (1950) and *Tzompantli* (1961) present both the spectacle of advanced technology and the dispossession of the laborers who work with it. His body of work is rounded out with a small number of still lifes and the self-portraits painted from 1973 to 1980.

From the formal point of view, Chávez Morado's work can be considered prototypical of

the realism that sprang up parallel to post-revolutionary muralism, with many folk art influences. International influences like surrealism (*The Witches' Sabbath*, *Nameless Fable*), cubism (*Pair of Arches No. 1*) or action painting (*The Tangle*) can also be detected, however. This shows his eclectic receptiveness and a critical historical view.

Today, José Chávez Morado, whose rich and diverse body of work is part of a trend in which social conditions have an impact on artistic production, continues to paint in Guanajuato. **NM**

NOTES

¹ Summarized version of José de Santiago Silva, *José Chávez Morado. Vida, obra y circunstancias* (Guanajuato: Ediciones La Rana, 2001).