

# The Teacher

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On February 6, 2002, we students close to Beatriz de la Fuente, headed up by Tere Uriarte, the director of the Institute for Aesthetic Research, organized a colloquium to honor our teacher's academic career. Then, in a moment of clarity, I thought that the combination of the words "Come Closer and Look," the title they accepted for the colloquium and the publication that came out of it, summarized what Beatriz de la Fuente had taught me in her examination of Mesoamerican art.

Beatriz de la Fuente had the pioneering passion to approach the world of what was then considered archaeological pieces

and to look at what was unique and un-repeatable in each work. "The doctor" as all her students traditionally, respectfully and affectionately called her, always tried to teach us to search for the creative, sensitive and intelligent human being behind the materials and the forms. In this way, both her reflections as a teacher and in her written work displayed the humanist tradition of art history, unveiling the creative process and the dynamics of signification and expression intrinsic to each work, in contrast to archaeology's way of proceeding which inserts objects and monuments into explanatory patterns of social organization and ideology.

Beatriz de la Fuente's vision was decisive in the task of calling attention to the expressive and signifying power of

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Mesoamerican art. She used to say that art was one of the most sublime and complex forms of communication because it translated humanity's fundamental concerns into the language of forms charged with meaning.<sup>1</sup> But her approximation is not reduced to suggesting and translating the worlds underlying the images; she also recognizes in them value and respects them for themselves, since her methodology outstandingly includes her capacity as a promotor and the vision of a cataloguer. That is to say, Beatriz de la Fuente came closer, looked, described, examined and interpreted, but she also shared what she had seen and left it as a legacy to future researchers in the form of exhaustive catalogues that are today valuable veritable mines for future work and an important point of reference for the conservation of Mexico's ancient art. In her approximation to the works and the people who created them, the doctor was also committed to educating the sensibilities of her public because, as she once said, "Knowing and understanding, knowing and respecting go hand in hand."

Another important idea that runs through her work —about which I had the pleasure to talk and exchange ideas with her on different occasions— is the question about the diversity and unity of the cultures of ancient Mexico, apparently contradictory characteristics of what we today call Mesoamerica. I often heard her reflect that the particularities of Mesoamerica's artistic expressions were very significant and little understood. The art works, she said, as products of human beings, change with time and in space. The study of styles, as a way of defining the characteristics that identify a creative people and the different moments of its expression, indicate to us that there were profound differences in ways of thinking, translating and expressing questions and

concerns in Mesoamerican art. These differences need to be more closely analyzed in the context of Mesoamerican unity and not be passed over or brandished as an argument for the non-existence of a whole. Our teacher's questions arose from her true proximity to the works: she was very familiar with all the archaeological sites; she was always up to date about new finds; and her eagerness to understand the human creators behind them was proverbial. I remember affectionately and with surprise the first time I saw her, when she was working on the restoration of the mural painting in the Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala Red Temple in summer 1990. Beatriz de la Fuente asked for permission to look at the painting closer up. This meant she had to climb down an improvised, rather unsafe wooden ladder that descended six meters into the painted room we were restoring. When we granted her request, the doctor's eyes shone: they looked like two enormous jade windows opening up to another time. She went down, sure of herself; she got close up and looked, opening up with her gaze my future as a restorer who would analyze the techniques and materials used by many schools of artists of Mesoamerica, for the project she dedicated 15 years of her academic life to and that I had the pleasure of sharing: Pre-Hispanic Mural Painting in Mexico.

How many times her eyes opened up ways forward to others who, like me, do what we do in her company. **MM**

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Beatriz de la Fuente, "¿Puede un estilo definir una cultura?" (paper read at the round table discussion "Olmeca: Balance Sheet and Perspectives" in Mexico City, March 2005).