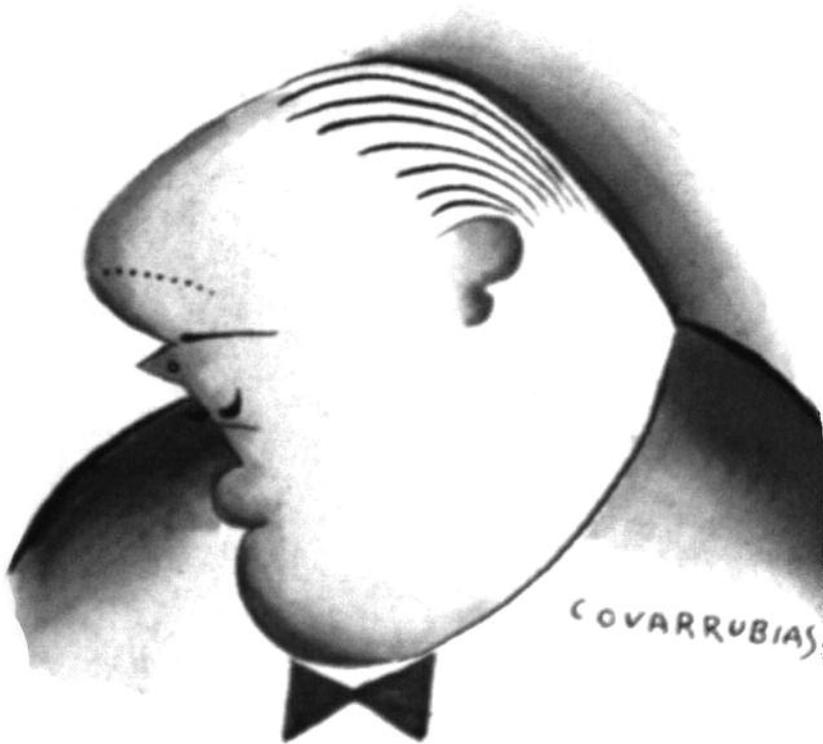


# *Miguel Covarrubias* A Genius of Two Cultural Traditions

Alejandro Negrín\*





▲ *Paul Whiteman*  
(Ink on paper). University of the Americas, Puebla,  
Foundation Collection. Courtesy of the Miguel  
Covarrubias Estate.

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*Senator Smith W. Brookhart  
vs. Marlene Dietrich*  
Impossible Interview Series  
No. 10. Original illustration published in *Vanity  
Fair*, September 1932 (gouache and ink on  
board). The Nickolas Muray Collection of Mexican  
Art, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center,  
The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the  
Miguel Covarrubias Estate.

Between May and July 2006, the Cultural Institute of Mexico in Washington, D.C. housed the work of the multi-faceted Miguel Covarrubias, perhaps our country's only artist who was simultaneously an important part of both Mexican and U.S. cultural traditions. This exhibition, "Miguel Covarrubias: Mexican Genius in the United States," showed that the painter, cartoonist, illustrator and collector—to mention only some of his many talents—captures viewers from both sides of the border with the same intensity.<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, Miguel Covarrubias is pure living history. The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the University of Texas Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. house three of his most significant collections. His name is familiar in any

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used book store or flea market in New York or Washington, D.C. Originals of the many magazines that published his cartoons are auctioned off on the Internet, as are many of his works and the books he illustrated in the United States.

Another trait that makes him exceptional is that, even though he was 18 years younger than Rivera and 21 years younger than Orozco, he was a pioneer in establishing extraordinarily well-executed Mexican art in the United States, a process the muralists would later consolidate.

Born in 1904 in Mexico City, he would die prematurely in 1957. Covarrubias is considered one of the most important protagonists of Mexico's "cultural Renaissance" after the revolution. Biographer Adriana Williams calls him a Renaissance man because of his vitality, the diversity and complexity of his interests and his achievements in all the disciplines he went into. Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis, a collector of his work, remembers, "Miguel Covarrubias's multiple occupations: cartoonist, painter both of easel paintings and murals, self-educated—but not amateur—ethnographer and archaeologist, first class exhibit organizer, cartographer, scenery designer, occasional engraver, promoter of modern dance, student of and disseminator of great Mexican, Central American and Balinese indigenous art. In each of these disciplines or passions and vocations, Covarrubias is truly exceptional."<sup>2</sup>

A self-taught sketch artist and cartoonist, a follower of the schools of engraver José Guadalupe Posada and muralist José Clemente Orozco, he arrived in New York in 1923 at the age of 19, thanks to help from poet José Juan Tablada. The resume of "El Chamaco" or "The Kid," as he was known, included having already published in the Mexico City newspapers with the widest cir-

cultation. The magazine *Vanity Fair*, then the trend-setter for the canons of U.S. taste and culture, hired him immediately.

It was no time at all, suggests writer Elena Poniatowska, until Covarrubias had conquered the Big Apple. He was not only a friend of Tablada, of Carlos Chávez, of Adolfo de Best Maugard and of painter Rufino Tamayo, all Mexicans who lived in New York at the time, but he was also part of a wide circle of artists and intellectuals that included Edward

Weston, Tina Modotti, Nickolas Muray, Man Ray, Constantino Brancusi and Paul Bowles, just to mention a few. Covarrubias, adds Poniatowska, “was the darling of the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts,” the *crème de la crème* of New York society.<sup>3</sup>

In 1925 he published his first book, *The Prince of Wales and Other Famous Americans*, with 65 caricatures of politicians, writers, artists, musicians and athletes of the time. *Life* magazine would say that this work “set America laughing and lifted Covarrubias to the pinnacle of United States cartoonists.”<sup>4</sup>

From then on, Covarrubias maintained a permanent presence in the United States. He was the cartoonist and illustrator of *Vanity Fair* (1924-1936), *Vogue* (1936-1949), *The New Yorker* (1925-1950), *Fortune* (1932-1942), *Life* and *Time*, as well as the illustrator of at least 20 books by authors like Herman Melville, John Ridell, Nora Zeale Hurston, Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Huston.

Alan Fern, who organized the first great retrospective of Covarrubias’s work at the prestigious National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. in 1984, highlights an essential aspect, saying, “The art of Miguel Covarrubias is full of paradoxes. Always regarded as a Mexican by his New York friends and colleagues, he seems to us the quintessential commentator on American life in the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>5</sup>

Between 1923 and 1939, New York was the center of his activities; from there he made many trips before returning to Mexico for good in 1940. His 17 years in the United States, says critic Sylvia Navarrete, were a period of feverish activity: “two albums of caricatures and a travel book; illustrations for more than 10 works of literature; mural maps; exhibitions of his own and others; adver-

▼ *Clark Gable vs. Edward, Prince of Wales*  
Impossible Interview Series No. 12  
Original illustration published in *Vanity Fair*, November 1932 (gouache and ink on paper). The Nickolas Muray Collection of Mexican Art, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the Miguel Covarrubias Estate.



tising; designs for theatrical productions...plus a marriage and two trips around the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Covarrubias would live for 17 years in Mexico until his death in 1957. Here, he entered equally successfully into new disciplines. Appointed by the National Institute of Anthropology and History co-director of the excavations of Tlatilco from 1942 to 1943, he collaborated with prestigious archaeologists like Alfonso Caso, one of the pioneers of the discovery of the Olmec culture, Mexico’s oldest. Caso himself would remember that, “Covarrubias gave archaeology something it lacked and that we could not give it: an aesthetic perception of form.”<sup>7</sup>

When he took over the Dance Department of the National Fine Arts Institute from 1950 to 1952, Miguel Covarrubias fostered the Golden Age of Mexican dance. Not only did he revitalize modern practices of dance in Mexico, remembers Sylvia Navarrete, but he also brought together extraordinary musicians (José Pablo Moncayo, Blas Galindo, Carlos Chávez), writers (Juan Rulfo, Juan José Arreola, José Revueltas), photographers (Nacho López, Walter Reuter) and painters (José Chávez Morado, Reyes Meza) to work on the 34 ballets created by Mexican and foreign companies during his administration. The New York company of Sinaloa-born José Limón and the Merce Cunningham and Lucas Hoving companies created choreographies and gave courses in Mexico during this period.<sup>8</sup>

Covarrubias was a unique creator, whose talent fed on two different and even opposed cultures. Practically his whole life, his work maintained a counterpoint between Mexico and the United States. He painted both his famous maps of Florida and the *Pageant of the Pacific* for San Francisco’s Golden Gate



▲ *Helen Wills*  
Original illustration published on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, August 1932 (gouache and ink on paper). The Nickolas Muray Collection of Mexican Art, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the Miguel Covarrubias Estate.

International Exposition (1938-1939) in the United States, and the renowned *A Sunday Afternoon in Xochimilco* (1947) and his memorable *Map of Folk Arts* (1951) in Mexico. His most important anthropological and ethnographic works, *Island of Bali* (1937) and *Mexico South: the Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (1945), best sellers of their time and true classics today, were originally written in English with support from Guggenheim fellowships. We should also not forget his noteworthy contribution to the dissemination of the extraordinary Afro-American culture.

Covarrubias’s parallel roads in Mexico and the United States finally met in

other pioneer projects. He promoted the exhibit “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” at New York’s Modern Art Museum (MAM) (1940), curating one of its sections. Together with MAM Director René D’Harnoncourt, he also promoted and organized the exhibit “The Indigenous Art of North America” (1945) at Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology and History.

Miguel Covarrubias’s contributions are enormous. Perhaps one of the most important and definitive was his role in establishing deeper cultural relations between Mexico and the United States. **MM**



*Al Capone vs. Chief Justice Charles Evan Hughes* ▶ Impossible Interview Series No. 11. Original illustration published in *Vanity Fair*, October 1932 (gouache). The Nickolas Muray Collection of Mexican Art, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the Miguel Covarrubias Estate.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The collection was made up of 47 sketches from the University of the Americas Miguel Covarrubias Archive; 65 facsimiles owned by the University of Texas Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center; six documentaries directed by José Benítez Muro and produced by Mexico’s Channel 22 television station; as well as original books and magazines loaned by friends from Mexico and the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, “El renacentista como caricaturista,” *Homenaje Nacional/National Homage, Miguel Covarrubias, Cuatro miradas/Four Visions* (Madrid: Museo Mural Diego Rivera/Museo Casa Estudio Diego y Frida Kahlo/Museo Soumaya/Editorial RM/Conaculta, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *Miguel Covarrubias: vida y mundos* (Mexico City: ERA, 2004), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Adriana Williams, *Covarrubias* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Fern, “Foreword,” Beverly J. Cox and Denna Jones Anderson, *Miguel Covarrubias Caricatures* (catalogue) (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985) p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Navarrete, “Un boy wonder en los Estados Unidos/A Boy Wonder in the United States,” *Miguel Covarrubias: genio de México en los Estados Unidos/Mexican Genius in the United States* (catalogue) (Puebla: Universidad de las Américas, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Poniatowska, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> Sylvia Navarrete, writer, and Alberto Tosalín Ahumada, ed., *Miguel Covarrubias: retorno a los orígenes/Return to the Origins* (Mexico City: Consejo Cultural Universidad de las Américas/Conaculta/INAH, 2004), pp. 122-130.