



© Estate of Leonora Carrington

The relationship among the diminutive humans and between them and the cosmos is “personal” and concrete, not abstract and impersonal like ours.

It should come as no surprise that multifaceted Leonora Carrington included among her many talents that of painting fresco murals of noteworthy quality. In this article, I will touch on two works in particular, whose originality is evident both in the history of art and in the artist’s poetics. I am referring to *The Magical World of the Maya* (1963), in Mexico City’s National Museum of Anthropology and History, and *Dog Woman* (mid-1960s), to be found in the Xilitla Castle in the San Luis Potosí Huasteca region.

The former fulfills a specific function: it is situated in the museum’s ethnological section, where it was intended for when the government commissioned it. It centers on a pre-established theme, which provided Leonora affinity and sympathy from the public. The portable mural, of medium-sized format, is an artistic interpretation of the Mayan culture of the 1960s —always so effusively historical— in which the painter’s imagination unfolds based on her profound, conscientious study of the topic. She relies on historical sources (mainly Mayan codices and the *Popol vuh*), on a detailed examination of Mayan society *in situ* (using sketches, not a camera, given the local people’s belief that they would lose their souls if photographed), and on a permanent exchange of information with



* Researcher at the National Fine Arts Institute National Documentation and Research Center for the Visual Arts (Cenidiap).

We would like to thank Xavier Guzmán Urbiola for his help in gathering materials for this article.

Leonora Carrington

Muralist

Luis Rius Caso*



The Magical World of the Maya, 213 x 457 cm, 1963 (caseine on wood).

© Estate of Leonora Carrington. Photo by Lourdes Almeida / Conaculta-INAH-MEX

specialists close to Leonora, like Laurette Séjourné and Gertrude Blom, the Swiss anthropologist who introduced the artist to two traditional healers who allowed her to be present at their ceremonies.

There is insufficient space here to delve deeply into this interesting relationship between the artist and the anthropologists, in many ways reminiscent, for example, of that between visual artist Miguel Covarrubias and archaeologist Alfonso Caso, or between artist Adolfo Best Maugard and anthropologist Franz Boas. Suffice it to point out this relationship to anyone interested in studying its impact on our artistic process, and in this particular case, following the trail of a friendship that led to archaeologist Ignacio Bernal inviting Leonora to paint this mural.

This work, then, is solidly based in knowledge acquired from different places, among which must be included Leonora's travels to the Lacandón region in 1963, which turned out to be a veritable initiation. Human beings and gods appear before us thanks to the artist's magic, which restores them to the unity existent in a mythical, original moment, where the tension of opposites or extreme associations, like the sacred and the profane, disappears, where opposites stop being perceived as contradictory. In the mythical time recovered, the cosmos acquires an original, virginal dynamic. Beings and things move and synchronize with each other; parts correspond to the whole and the whole is verified

The artist's magic restores human beings and gods to the unity of a mythical, original moment, where opposites stop being perceived as contradictory.



in each of its parts; sympathy and animism play together, the constituent parts of magic. A hidden will emits a rainbow that covers the scene and, when it touches the earth, animates it. A face emerges from the ground, from within which bursts forth the nude image of Ix Chel, or the lady of the rainbow, goddess of weaving, medicine, of birth, and of the moon, according to the sacred book, *Popol vuh*.

Ruled by an ordering movement of their own, the three levels of the cosmos intimately and inexorably meld: at the right side of the mural, the underworld pushes to the surface a *ceiba* or silk cotton tree, the Mayas' sacred tree, which attracts a flock of owls, emerging from the eye of a being apparently inspired in a representation on the codex of the god Chac. From the depths of this figure, from his stony quiet, breaks away the antithesis of his being, in an extension of wings and feathers —reminiscent of extreme associations. The underworld is presided over by the jaguar god, in the bottom left, and there live the inhabitants destined to that place by Quiché mythology, like the twin monkeys (left side), who became monkeys after being human, when they were defeated by the heroic twins that would later become the sun and the moon. On the surface live the human beings, tiny in scale, living with the beings and things of their day-to-day existence, but also with the gods and mythological beings who populate their wakeful vigils and dreams, their life and their death.

Times as well as beliefs cross each other in an emphatic syncretism underlined by the representation of a church like the Santo Domingo Church in San Cristóbal de las Casas, right in the center of the work, and by the points where the rainbow meets the ground: a Chamula Catholic church, with a large white sacred sheep on the extreme left,

and an indigenous shack inside of which a traditional healer carries out a ritual, on the other side. Other divine and cosmic representations accentuate this syncretism even more: we can see above the rainbow in the foreground and in the middle, a disquieting figure that seems to be the beneficent personification of Chac, the god of rain, followed by a motif probably associated with Kukulcán, and the beautiful composition of what for the art historian and Carrington scholar Whitney Chadwick is a multicolored bird that is the forerunner of the hummingbird, which represents the moon and the sun.

The relationship among the diminutive humans and between them and the cosmos is “personal” and concrete, not abstract and impersonal like ours. Magic reigns among them (the science of the concrete, in the mode of anthropologist Claude Lévy Strauss), and for that reason, in the dynamic system of the cosmos, any activity undertaken makes sense —whether religious, like the procession headed to the church, or the ceremony carried out by the traditional healer, or the most prosaic, like singing, planting, herding, or conversing. And perhaps it is these daily episodes that are the most eloquent references to a reality nourished in all its spheres: from the most trivial to that involving the most complex metaphysics. So, thanks to the invocation starting from an ordinary act, a reality is unveiled that is much more elaborate in its composition due to its cosmic significance, the totality it acquires.

In this work, as we have seen, Leonora’s iconography is notably based in research; but not because of that must we limit our view of it to the search for ethnic, historic, or mythological motifs. The artist’s symbols take on the quality and/or singularity of the objects represented, but above all, come from a particular, more pre-

Magic reigns among the humans and for that reason, any activity undertaken makes sense —whether religious, or the most prosaic, like singing, planting, herding, or conversing.

cise system of signification: the poetics of the artist herself. The animals represented (tapirs, wild boars, deer, spider monkeys, leopards, the quetzal that crowns the church of San Cristóbal, etc.), for example, came out of meticulous studies in the Tuxtla Gutiérrez zoo, but also from a poetics that in each work is concretized and to which each work refers.

The second mural, also a fresco, contains a single figure, that of a dog-woman, or the dog goddess. It is 90 centimeters wide and 2.55 meters high; the figure is sepia color and is standing next to a column in the arcade leading to the house, on which the dog-woman rests her left arm. Conceived to be integrated into the architectural discourse, the image seems to be watching over the place. One of Leonora’s typical figures, it surprises with its mystery and visual force. It was rediscovered a few years ago and published in a beautiful

little book by historian Xavier Guzmán Urbiola and written by Gabriel Weisz,

Leonora’s son, that documents the process and meaning of the work based on an inspired exercise of memory supported by fiction. Weisz writes, “My mother came to Xilitla with her paints and brushes. As soon as she finishes breakfast, she goes over to one of the thick columns holding up the house. Slowly, the faint outlines of a new inhabitant of the column reveal themselves.”¹

And also,





Dog Woman, 1964-1967.

© Estate of Leonora Carrington
Photo by Lourdes Almeida.



Plutarco Gastélum Esquer

“My mother goes over to one of the thick columns holding up the house. Slowly, the faint outlines of a new inhabitant of the column reveal themselves.”
Gabriel Weisz.



Plutarco Gastélum Esquer

Edward James, creator of the Xilitla artistic space.

The goddess guards an access that either invites you in or impedes your entry. Her history could be traced to the burned crimson tracks found in pre-historic cave paintings. The painter brought her from that unformed vacuum to this white, even surface. She is no longer the shadow of an idea living in limbo, since she has become the soul of the house; soulless homes are always overwhelming. She will always be there to guide nocturnal creatures, who must not lose themselves among the rows of majestic columns.²

With her body facing front and her head in profile, the solitary, elegant figure seems to personify ancient Egyptian genealogies. The aforementioned book describes her process of creation, with photographs from the period. The dog goddess has inspired admirable writing, precisely as it did Weisz's.

Different in theme and intention, though coinciding in time, both frescoes testify to the inescapable and extremely original presence of this brilliant painter and writer in the singular history of Mexican muralism. ■■

NOTES

¹ Gabriel Weisz, *Leonora Carrington. Un mural en la selva* (Mexico City: Xul Servicios Editoriales, 2008), p. 26. See the on-line review at <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/02/27/cultura/a05n1cul>.

² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

We would like to especially thank Plutarco Gastélum Yamarez for permission to publish his father's photographs of Xilitla.