

# Angel Zárraga: Mexican painting from Paris

**T**he work of Angel Zárraga did not receive the same recognition as that of other painters of his generation. This may be due to the fact that he lived in Paris for more than 35 years, or because he did not

deal with the revolutionary themes that absorbed his contemporaries in Mexico. Yet Angel Zárraga obtained great fame in Europe, where he was trained as an artist and defined himself as a Classical painter, after having

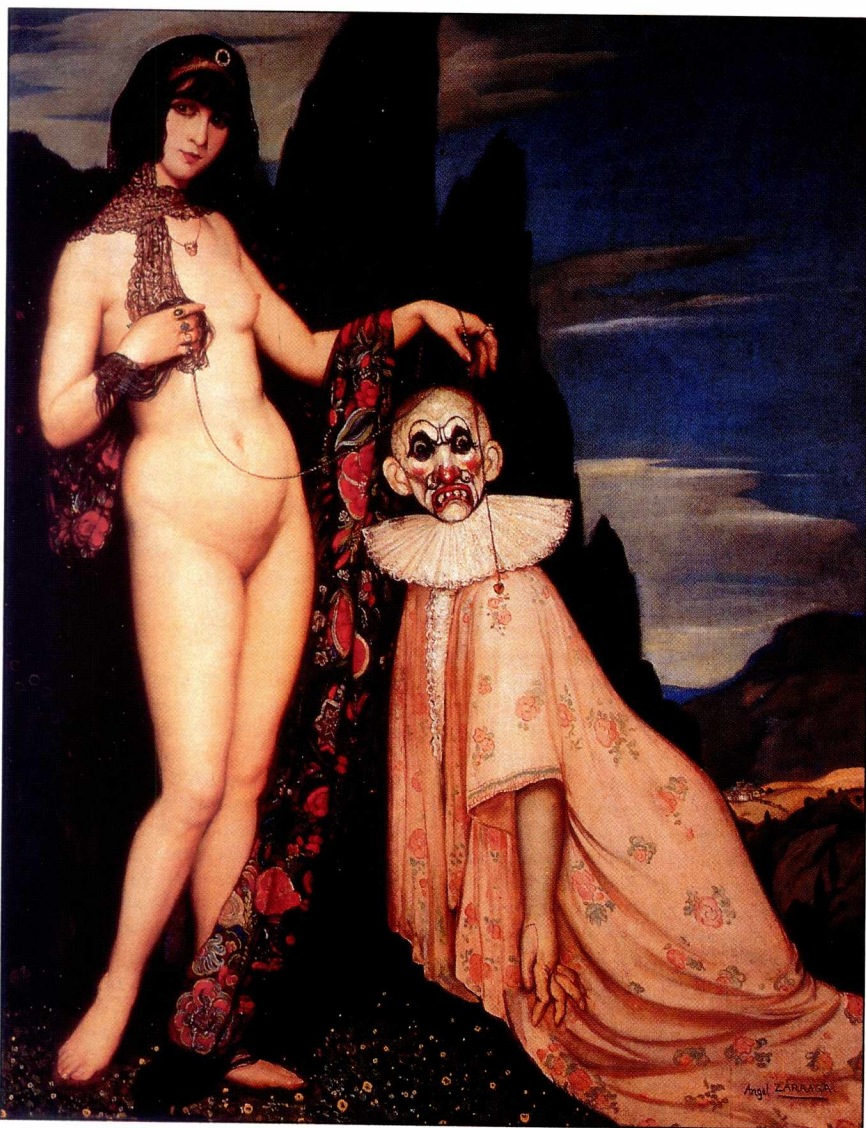
experimented with such vanguard currents as Cubism and Modernism.

The painter's life and work were taken up in a book by Antonio Luna Arroyo. "Angel Zárraga is a little known artist in our country. Of pacifistic temperament, he is well known in other countries, above all France. Other painters of his epoch criticized him due to aesthetic disagreements and because of the relations he established with the 'well-to-do' class in times when wealth and aristocracy were in conflict with the idea of a revolutionary Mexico."

The importance of religion to Zárraga, as a man and as a painter, is shown in the work he did in chapels in France as well as in the Mexican city of Monterrey.

## The influence of great Mexican thinkers

Zárraga was born in the city of Durango on August 16, 1886. At the age of seven he moved to Mexico City with his family, enrolling in the San Ildefonso National Preparatory School in 1899. His teachers were José María Vigil, Justo Sierra, Ezequiel A. Chávez, Rafael Angel de la Peña, Amado Nervo and Manuel de la Parra, all of them thinkers and artists representative of that time. His first works include drawings and portraits. It is likely that his closest friends, Diego Rivera and Saturnino Herrán, influenced his orientation to innovative ideas.



Le Pantin, 1909.



His artistic participation included the literary camp. During this early period he was sporadically published in the magazine *Savia Moderna* (Modern Sap), for which he continued to write from Europe. Years later, after returning to Mexico, he published *Poemas* (1917-1939).

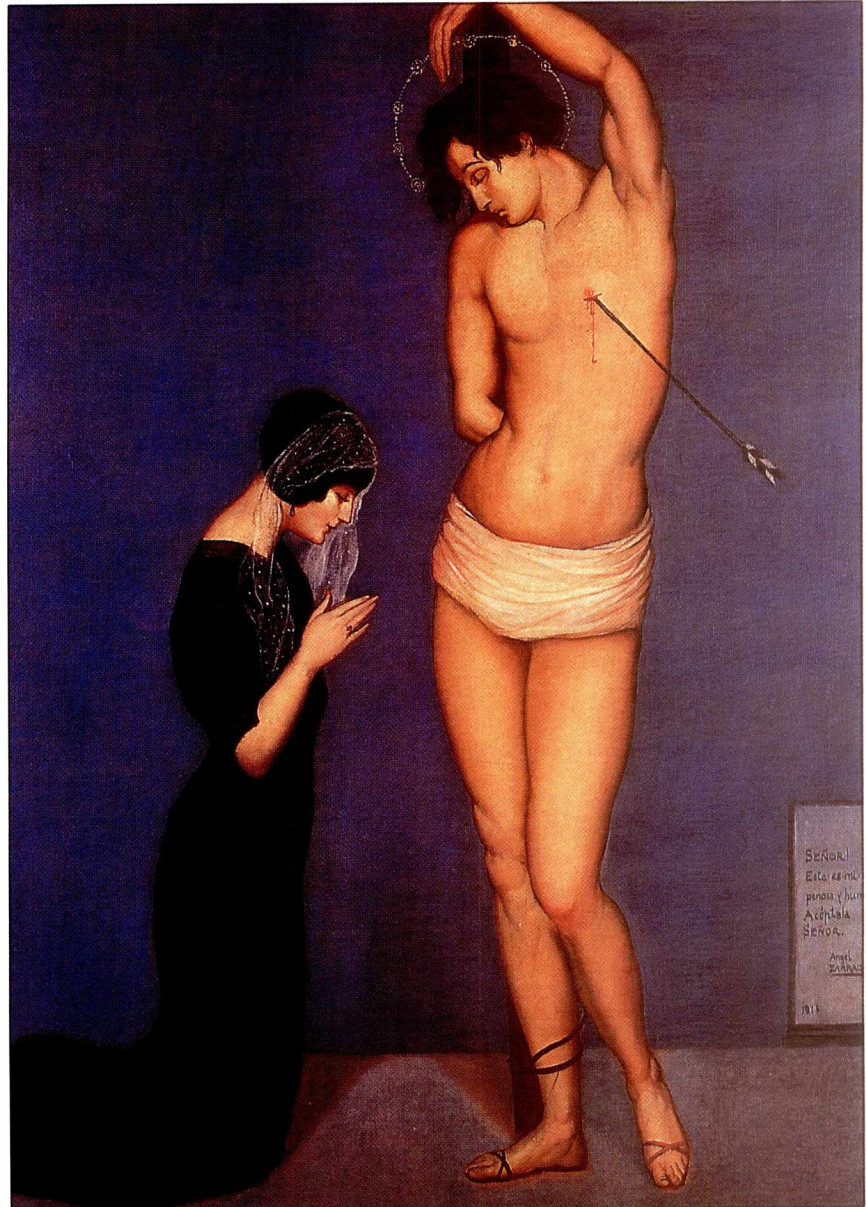
### The vanguard in Europe

At the end of 1904 he moved to Europe, where he studied at the most important schools of the day. After arriving in Paris he moved to Brussels. He enrolled in the Royal Academy and became interested in the Symbolist movement represented by Fernand Khnopff and James Ensor. Reviewing an exhibition of the *Libre Esthétique* that introduced the Impressionist movement, he wrote: "I confess that I was greatly disconcerted and that when I saw the most diverse things brought together under the label of Impressionism I asked myself why some gentlemen are possessed by a mania for classifications."

In Spain he was part of an outstanding literary group that included Ramón del Valle Inclán, and participated in a collective showing in the Prado Museum called the "Exposición Internacional de Madrid." His paintings *Autumn Sonatas* and *Brown Earth* were awarded prizes.

This is a synthesis of what he wrote from Spain about color in *Savia Moderna*:

*"I believe it is not difficult to convince anyone of the expressive power of color. A color certainly has less expressive and emotional power by itself than when it is contrasted or harmonized with another. However, between white, which gathers all the rays of the sun, and black, which absorbs them, each color has its own accent, with happiness and tranquility as you move closer to*



*Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, 1911.*

*white, and melancholy or sadness upon reaching extreme darkness. "Yellow is the color which emanates most directly from light; colorist peoples, like the Chinese, see it as the most beautiful hue. Stained by black are the hides of terrible animals—such as tigers—and this contrast of gold and black is very common and well-loved among the violent peoples. Divine Spanish ladies wrap their bodies in*

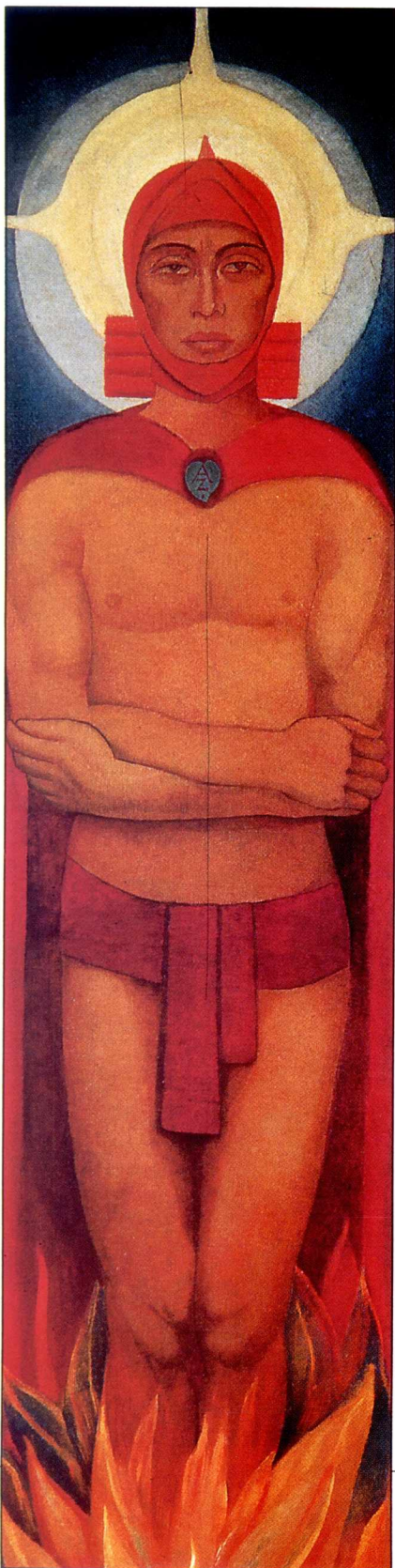
*prestigious gold-black cloth from Manila.*

*"Red is situated between clear hues of happiness and the tranquility of the shadowed tones. It has an expression of dignity and pomp.*

*"Blue is the color which rises and falls the most in the tonal range; it reaches an almost imperceptible white and deepens towards the boundaries of black. It pleases the poets, because it is*



immaterial and heavenly. Thus, in succession, one may speak of the expressive characteristics of a color in itself, and similarly we



find that *chiaroscuro* has its own special expression.”

A characteristic work from his Spanish period is the 1906 painting *The Old Man in the Sanctuary*. It shows the clear influence of his Spanish teachers, especially Zuloaga and Sorolla. The dark tones are typical colors mixed with black, the traditional atmosphere of the home with white ceramic pitchers, combined with old Castilian types.<sup>1</sup>

His travels in Europe extended to Italy. In 1910, along with Zuloaga, Valentín Zubiaurre and De Chirico, he was invited to participate in a collective exhibition in Venice, where he displayed *Autumn Allegory*.

### Cubism, a transitional stage

Zárraga was a late-comer to Cubism. While this experience strengthened his knowledge of composition, it did not provide him with an acceptable outlet. This may be because its figurative demands made him uneasy or his exercises never gave him a full understanding of the movement's impulses and ideas.

Zárraga admitted that he joined the Cubist movement as a sort of discipline, forgetting that for the theorists of that time Cubism was a way to conceptualize the world, an end in itself.<sup>2</sup> He came to regard Cubism as dehumanized art. In his struggle to be part of the changes then occurring, he went through a period of general disenchantment which led him to return to original sources, to the study of man, and to follow Cézanne's conceptions of synthesis. "In nature everything is designed according to three basic units: the sphere, the cone and the cylinder." In other words, he

<sup>1</sup> Elisa García Barragán, *Ángel Zárraga, entre la alegoría y el nacionalismo* (Ángel Zárraga, Between Allegory and Nationalism). Mexico City, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1992, pp. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.



*Blonde Soccer Player.*  
◀ *Cuahtémoc*, 1927.

decided to return to structured painting and compositional sense.

From Cézanne he also derived the desire to work on pieces which "demonstrate a new spirituality and freedom, which contain an aura; in synthesis, which bring back Classicism."

### Sports

The search for a more human way of painting, together with his great attraction to sports, led Zárraga to paint the human figure from a Classic point of view. In *The Soccer Players* he masculinizes the feminine figure. His portraits and athletic personages of harmonious proportions also date from this period.

In Paris, during the war, he fell ill with pneumonia, from which he recovered thanks to the care given him by a Russian friend, Jeanette Ivanof, a soccer player who initiated him into the sport and to whom he became engaged in 1919. In that same year he



made his first incursion into mural painting, as well as decorating the Vender Henst house.<sup>3</sup>

### Religious themes

Between 1922 and 1925, he decorated the Vert Coeur castle, near Versailles, and in 1924 he painted the crypt of "Our Lady of Salette" in Suresnes, Paris—judged by critics to be his most beautiful work of religious painting. Zárraga's fame reached as far as Mexico. His fellow student and friend José Vasconcelos invited the artist to participate in his messianic cultural crusade to paint murals on the walls of Mexico City's most important public buildings. Zárraga declined the invitation, since he had not yet completed his work at Vert Coeur castle. He was nevertheless able to take part in the decoration of the new Mexican Legation in Paris. This work implied a separation from the religious

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Luna Arroyo, *Rescate de Angel Zárraga* (Rescuing Angel Zárraga), Mexico City, Cuadernos Populares de Pintura Moderna, 1979, p. 51.



Dolores del Río, 1927.

themes which he had been working on over the previous months.

Angel Zárraga did not have a clear idea of the fundamentals of the Mexican School, principally represented by Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. This lack of information was due to his scanty knowledge of post-Revolution Mexico. His memories were those of the "Frenchification" and Europeanism of the Porfirio Díaz epoch. Thus, in the Mexican Legation in Paris, he presented the lyrical vision of a Mexico that would be acceptable and accepted in the world concert of nations.

In 1927 he began the decoration of the Legation with oil paintings of various sizes. The first canvas in his imaginative historical survey is *Cuauhtémoc In the Storm*, in which "the falling eagle"<sup>4</sup> relates the encounter between two cultures.

The artist's pictorial experiences and emotions flourished in these paintings, the intention of which is muralistic and which can be considered his most definitive experience within the Art Deco movement. In 1926, José Vasconcelos' wife Irene wrote a review of the painter's work for the *Diario de Lisboa*, noting: "Zárraga is the most Classical of painters, because—perhaps unlike any of his contemporaries—he achieves a balance between reason and sensibility. Neither the one nor the other is dominant. Heart and mind are in agreement."

The Chapel of the Redeemer was the most complete work he had done until then. The architects gave him complete freedom to paint the frescos *Annunciation*, *The Redeemer*, *Eternal*

<sup>4</sup> Cuauhtémoc was the last Aztec ruler; his name means "falling eagle." (Editor's note.)



Tehuana Girl, 1927.



*Bliss* and *The Via Crucis*. “The al fresco paintings fit the spaces in an exact, proportioned way, clearly delimiting two domains: the spiritual and the terrestrial.”

In 1934 he married again, this time to María Luisa Gysi, who was Swiss. He continued painting portraits and some landscapes. He also painted the frescos in the University City chapel in Paris and—in the midst of the German invasion of France during WWII—the murals of the “Maison du Café.” Zárraga directed a series of programs on Radio-Paris designed to awaken anti-Nazi consciousness in Latin America. This put his life at risk and ended his stay in Europe.

#### Return to Mexico

Until then Zárraga had occupied the post of honorary diplomatic attaché (1933-1938). With the help of friends he returned to Mexico, where many opportunities awaited him. He entered the Seminary of Mexican Culture, of which he later became vice president. At the same time he published *Poemas (1917-1939)*, with a prologue by Alfonso Reyes. He decorated several locations, among them the bar of the Bankers Club, where he painted *Poverty, Wealth, Abundance* and *Pleasure*.

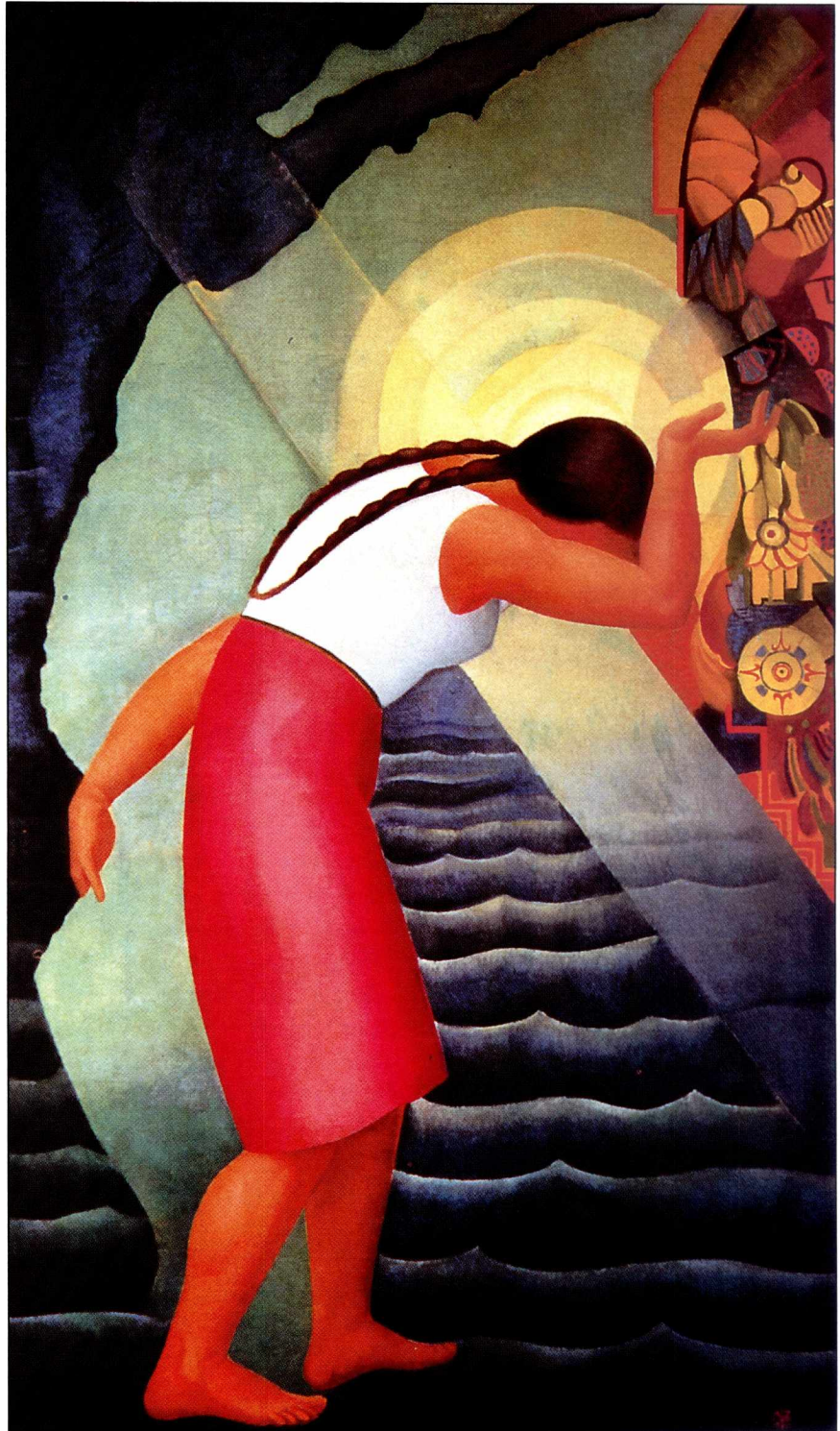
Zárraga’s work is hard to classify. He can be described as one of the most important mid-century painters of religious themes, as a portraitist who achieved a deep psychological penetration of individual characters or as many painters brought together as one. His Impressionist and Cubist-style landscapes testify to this versatility.

Through more than fifty continuous years of work Zárraga expressed a kind of solitary rebellion. This came through in whatever style he used, from the

most severe Castilian forms to purely decorative elegance, and it compelled him to modernize the techniques of masters from other

times, in contrast with the tendencies of his contemporaries ✕

Mónica Ching  
Assistant Editor.



*The Horn of Abundance*, 1927.