

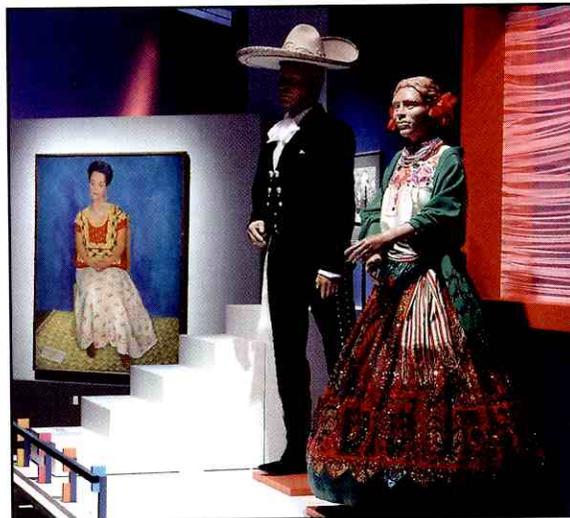


Jacques Lesnard

Claudia Fernández, *Nourishment*, 1996 (mixed media).

# Mexican Imagination in Quebec

Dianne Pearce\*



Jacques Lesnard

Charro and China Poblana costumes, Serfín Museum of Costume.

This year has five seasons in the province of Quebec: the fifth is the Season of Mexico. The Museum of Civilization in Quebec City, in collaboration with the Hamel-Bruneau House and the Charlevoix Museum, has produced a diverse program of exhibitions on Mexico. "Mexican Imagination" (May 20-February 14, 1999) at the Museum of Civilization is by far the largest and is accompanied by a mural installation by Rene Deruin entitled *Paradise. The Duality of the Baroque*. The Hamel-Bruneau House in Ste-Foy, mounted "*Talavera: Avant-Garde Tradition*" (May-August 1998), an exhibition of ceramics produced by 20 contemporary artists during their two-year residency at Talavera de la Reyna, a traditional ceramics studio in Cholula, Mexico. Also, the Charlevoix Museum is presenting two shows, "Mexican Toys and Miniatures" and "In the Earth as Well as the Water" (May 16 to November 1, 1998). The latter offers more than 20 large-scale paintings by Jorge Alfonso, a Oaxacan painter.

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Finally, an important retrospective of the work of Mexican film-maker Arturo Ripstein will be presented at the Museum of Civilization in Quebec and the National Film Board in Montreal.

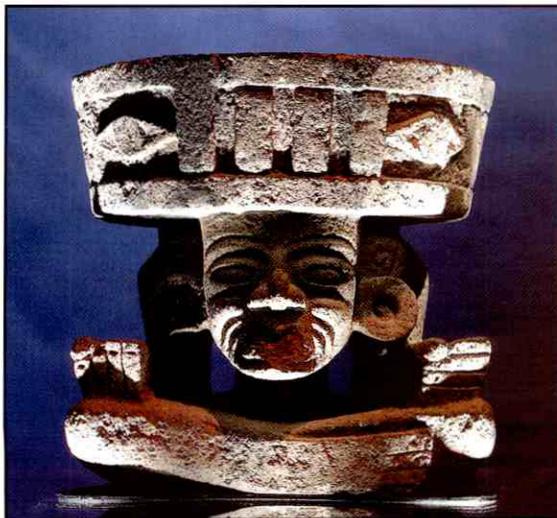
All of these three museums have organized an array of related events to highlight Mexican culture and educate the public about this geographically diverse country and its culturally varied people. The exhibition "Mexican Imagination" was launched amidst the musical works of Salvador Torre, a celebrated Mexican composer who was present at the opening. Also, ongoing educational workshops called "Dinner is served" are being offered to the public and, in September, to school children. Through observing, preparing and, most importantly, tasting, patrons both old and young can discover the importance and use of two traditional Mexican foods, corn and chocolate. Participants discover the myths surrounding the origin of these two foods, how to grow them and how to prepare them for present-day consumption. Concerts and a performance by the Folk

Ballet educate the public about Mexico, as do various lectures on the history of Mexico and its geography.

#### A BAROQUE PARADISE

Upon entering the museum, the mural by Rene Deruin is supposed to greet you, but you have to search for it. The piece, made up of painting, sculpture and print-making, loomed magnificently large and powerful, but too far away to see properly. High above my head and some 50 feet away, it merged with the architectural structure of the museum.

This obstacle was, I think, obvious to museum and artist alike: they had provided below a book on a podium containing large colour photographs of the mural. Indeed the mural warrants a closer look: sections of dark brown ceramic relief alternate with panels of warm-coloured paint and engraving. The panels of perhaps 10 feet by 10 feet, are laden with richly detailed bits of ceramic, formed and applied, to create a textured surface of light and dark



Jacques Lessard

Hehuetéotl, God of Fire, A.D. 1000 (stone).

reminiscent of the Mexican baroque churches of the eighteenth century. The baroque appears frequently in folk art and is often viewed as marginal, but it frees Deruin from the power of order: the abundance of motifs liberates him from conventions and norms.

Deruin's relationship with Mexico started about 40 years ago. He spends a good part of each year there and has exhibited widely, including his famed *Migrations* at the Modern Art Museum in Mexico City in 1993.

#### HYBRID IMAGINATIONS

The conceivers of "Mexican Imagination" (a collaboration between the Museum of Civilization and the National Folk Cultures Museum) hand us "an invitation to discover the other Mexico"—an invitation that does not prove disappointing. The exhibition breaks from the historical curatorial traditions and offers viewers a vision that tourists do not often "see": a diversified and complex culture

constantly in the process of merging thousands of years of tradition with the speedy changes of contemporary society. The curatorial thesis states that certain traditions and customs remain in the Mexican collective identity and perpetuate the ancient heritage while, at the very same time, present day norms influence them, sometimes even clashing with them. The result is a hybrid culture that remains elusive to Canadians. And is it not precisely this intangible quality that attracts us to Mexico? To convey the many dimensions of contemporary Mexican society laden with traditional references, the curators divide the exhibition into thematic rooms, including Architecture, Living, Food, Celebration, Religion, Baroque Style, Death, Mexico City, A Plural Nation and Contemporary Artists.

As you enter the introductory room, you are warmly welcomed by Huehue-téotl, god of fire. This rather foreboding stone bust dating from A.D. 1000 sits upon a structure reminiscent of a pyramid. As with all pre-Hispanic artwork, he is the product of the collective imagination, not

the result of a creative endeavour on the part of a particular artist. He is a symbol that represents the sun and, hence, life. He is the all-knowing, wise god whose deeply carved wrinkles have been intentionally carved so carefully upon his face.

But this is where the anthropology ends, for, mounted on the wall next to this god, is a series of black and white photographs called *Tarot Chilango* (1995-96) by contemporary photographer Raúl José Pérez. With a satirical stab, Pérez taps into the Mexican ability to laugh at oneself: he has re-interpreted a deck of tarot cards by replacing the traditional wizardly and wise characters with everyday *chilangos* (a term used for Mexicans born and raised in Mexico City) in staged settings. The Justice card shows a middle-aged upper class woman sitting cross-legged at her desk in a dark library. She looks up from her busy activity weighing two crumpled sheets of paper and motions to us in that familiar Mexican gesture formed by the thumb and index finger, "Just a moment!" On the Automobile card, a young working class hoodlum



Louise Leblanc

Bill Vincent, *Macabre Dance with a Deconstructed Vase*, 18 pieces, 8" x 12" each, 1998.

stands on a dirt road in front of his VW beetle whose headlights shine at us. He scowls while waving a long chain and grabbing his genitals to declare his contempt for us.

From here, visitors move into the first thematic room, Architecture, where they see photographs and a maquette of Chihuahua's Museum of Cultures of the North designed by architects Garduño and Maldonado. Indicative of the Mexican tendency to harmonise architecture with its natural surroundings, the sprawling museum remains low as if growing out of the flowing dry hills of the region. Next to these photographs is, paradoxically, an authentic and life-size coastal hut built inside the museum using traditional materials such as bamboo, adobe, straw and palm leaves.

The large circular area devoted to Celebration introduces us to Mexico's perplexing traditions. The area is divided into various sections each presenting a religious or secular tradition still celebrated today, for example the Dance of the *Chinelos*, the Tecuane Dance of the Jaguar, the Day of the Dead, Holy Week, and the Nine Days Before Christmas. Costumes and objects accompany each section, and a video tape at each station illustrates the ceremony in action. And what is Mexico without its three popular games which have risen to near-sacred veneration: soccer, the pre-Hispanic ball game and *las luchas* or the Worldwide Wrestling Federation? Wrestling, surprising as it may be, has actually been popular since the 1960s when René Cardona directed a series of cult movies about El Santo, the masked wrestler, scientist and superhero detective (*Santo and the Treasure of Dracula*, 1968, played very recently at

a midnight show, in the Fant-Asia Film Festival in Montreal.)

This exhibition would not be complete without the image of the dark-skinned Our Lady of Guadalupe watching over us. The legend of Guadalupe recounts how she miraculously appeared to the indigenous boy Juan Diego in 1592. Many fervently believe in this divine miracle while others think the Spaniards fabricated it in an attempt to convert the Aztec-Mexicas to Christianity. Nevertheless, the all-powerful female deity Tonantzin, whom the Aztecs had worshipped, was usurped by Guadalupe, and her temple subsequently razed to clear the area for the Guadalupe Basilica.

Death, too, is a phenomenon in Mexico that eludes non-Mexicans. The Day of the Dead, celebrated November 1-2, requires elaborate and colourful altars filled with fruit and tequila, incense and candles, cigarettes and candy skulls, and mounds of flowers to welcome back the spirits of loved ones who have passed away. Pre-Columbian civilizations did not fear death; rather, because their reli-

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gion taught that both life and death were part of the "movement" necessary to continue the world, they welcomed death as natural.

The room called A Plural Nation offers a particular blend of tradition and modernity in which ancient accessories and traditional costumes clash and combine with modern clothing. The Serfin Museum of Costume has loaned outfits, headdresses, shawls and traditional dance apparel to present a spectacular, albeit incomplete, overview of the colourful and manifold costumes of Mexico, which would warrant an exhibition unto themselves. Next to this, ironically, is a glass cabinet containing various accessories (leather necklaces with beads, thick belts, wallets with chains, leather wrist bracelets, police boots, black T-shirts hailing favourite bands) worn today by young Mexicans whose underground style is influenced by local rock groups such as Café Tacuba.

The last theme, in what is probably one of the smallest rooms, is Contemporary Art. The artists in this section were invariably chosen due to the hybrid nature of their work to emphasise the theme of "Mexican Imagination." They are Franco Aceves, Ricardo Arguía, Cisco Jiménez, Jaime Goded, Claudia Fernández, Francis Alys, Betsabée Romero and Diego Toledo. Claudia Fernández's installation, *Nourishment* (1996) consists of a series of household objects painted blue with white dots splashed on them to imitate those blue-and-white enamelled metal cups and plates used for camping. These coated ordinary objects sit on the floor while a huge colour photo looms above them of a life-sized enamel spoon next to Fernández herself, her dark hair spread out and sporting a provocative miniskirt, vest and high heels in the same

blue and white spattered print. By likening herself to a metal camping spoon, she declares herself a mere object, nourishment for hungry eyes. Another piece worth mention is *Patriotic Stories* by Francis Alys, a Belgian artist who lives in Mexico, himself somewhat of a hybrid. *Patriotic Stories* is a video loop of a large plaza with a circle painted in it. A shepherd enters the picture frame followed by one lamb that he leads around the large circle. A second lamb enters the frame and follows behind the first. This process continues until the shepherd is followed by some 30 sheep all walking around the large circle. Finally, the shepherd leads them out of the picture frame. At first you laugh at the futility of the ritual. But it has an underlying tension as if on this windless day a magnetic force pulls each lamb methodically from its pasture to perform the pointless circular walk over pavement. Could this not be a metaphor for us, gullible human beings blindly following society's delusive paths?

#### THE QUEEN'S FAIENCE

The theme of the contemporary merging with the traditional is evident in the title and content of the show at the Hamel-Bruneau House, "*Talavera: Avant-Garde Tradition*," curated by Jaime Contreras Castro and previously exhibited at the Amparo Museum in Puebla. With the aid of the University of the Americas in Puebla, 20 artists from Mexico and elsewhere took up a two-year residence at the ceramic studio Talavera de la Reyna in Cholula, Puebla. There, the artists united with master potters to complete a project. By joining visions and sharing knowledge, the craftspeople provided technical know-how never

before practised by the artists, while the artists exposed the craftspeople to their varied aesthetic solutions. The process, difficult as it might be when old meets new, resulted in traditional ceramics invigorated by the dynamism of contemporary proposals. In the sixteenth century, a group of potters from Toledo, Spain, established themselves in Puebla, introducing their use of lead and tin enamel. You will recognise these ceramics by their blue color (made using copper oxides) on a white background. The exchange between the artists and craftspeople at Talavera de la Reyna has reinvigorated the expressive possibilities of the material. The Hamel-Bruneau House provides a video of the techniques used there. It should be noted that at this studio, they use white faience called *talavera*, so named because of its resemblance to that produced in the village of Talavera de la Reyna in Spain (called *de la Reyna* or "of the Queen" because this highly valuable product was protected at that time by Queen Isabel the Catholic).

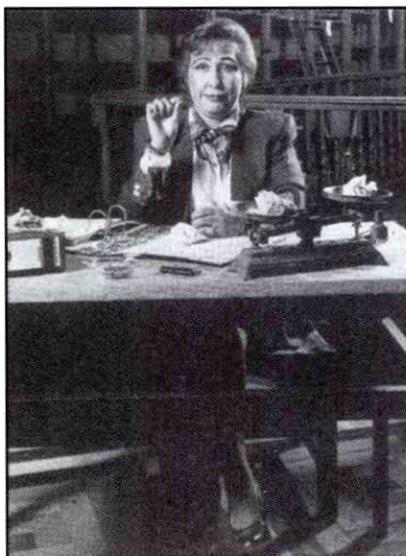
Probably one of the most successful pieces in the show is *Macabre Dance on a*

*Deconstructed Vase* by the Canadian printmaker Bill Vincent. Vincent broke a vase into 18 pieces and used each as a "canvas," or surface upon which to paint using ceramic glazes.

Each of the 18 pieces of the broken vase was mounted on an 8" x 12" rectangle of charred wood and then hung on the wall in three rows of six. At first glance, it is not obvious that these random pieces are from a broken vase; rather, each appears to have been sculpted independently before being painted. The blackened wood supports, for me, recall the vast amount of firewood required to stoke a kiln.

Another piece in this show is a sculpture by Luca Bray, *The Enchanted Forest* (1996). These two large, totem-like structures rose to six and a half feet and appeared to grow out of a ground of broken rocks. Bray achieves the meeting of art and craft. A closer look reveals that the sculptures are not reductive, but rather additive: they have been built up by affixing commercially-produced cups, bowls and saucers to ceramic cylinders. The placement of these objects follows no particular pattern, but is guided more by Bray's sense of aesthetics. Also, he has embellished the surface of the "trees" very much in a sculptural and painterly way: they have first been carved in relief and then painted with glazes.

Quebec's Season of Mexico depicts the "other" Mexico and succeeds in revealing the "cosmic race" (Beaucage) as it is today, as one of hybridization and trans-identity. These exhibitions offer museum-goers insight into the real Mexico, the one in which old and new meet to form a postmodern country of harmonious contradiction. ■■■



Raúl José Pérez, *Tarot Chilango: Justice*, 1995-96.

L. Pérez Falconi/O. Necoches