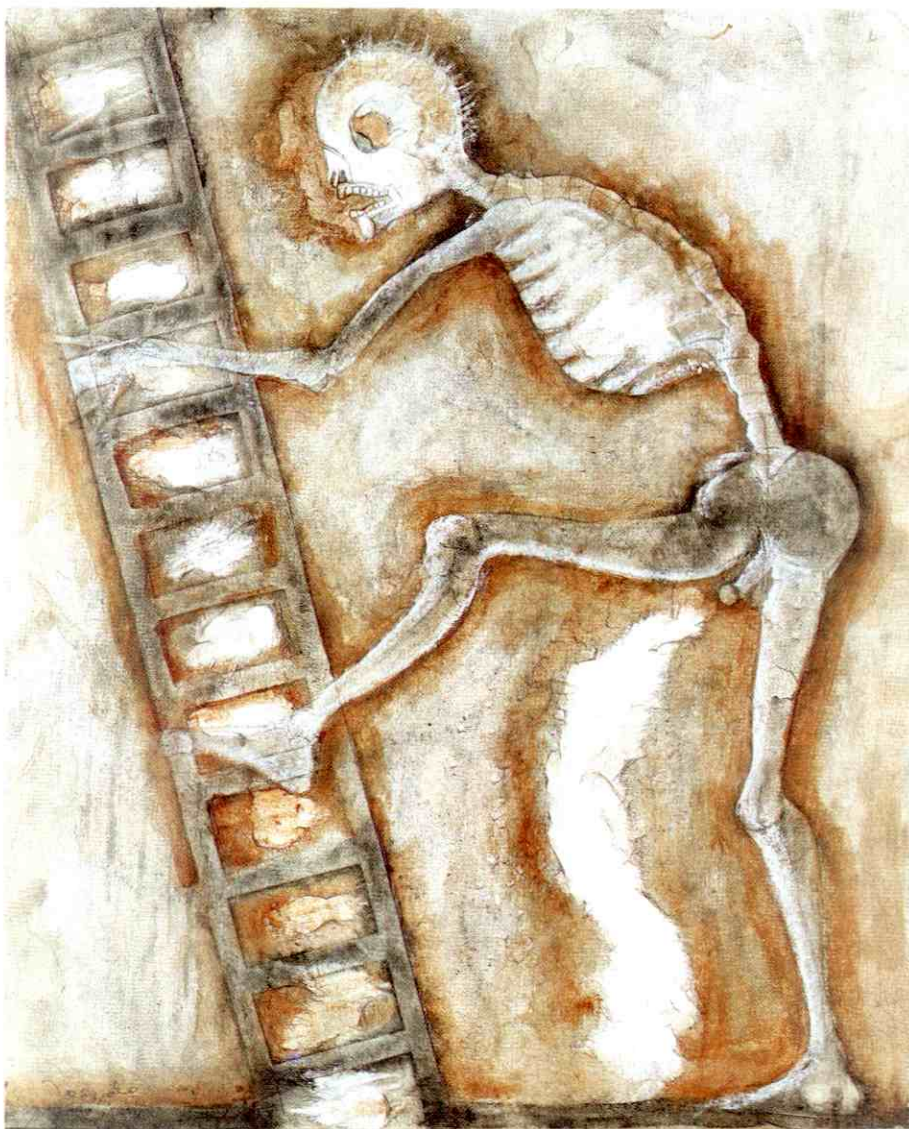




Francisco Toledo  
Between Myth and Fable<sup>1</sup>



Photos by Gilberto Chen. Reprinted courtesy of Galeria Juan Martin

*Death Ascending a Stair*, 1990 (gouache/paper).

Mexican [artist Francisco] Toledo completes the trio of painters whom André Pieyre de Mandiargues calls “exceptional,” and with whom, it seems to me, some major form of essential mediation is consummated. Clearly, the mediation of Francisco Toledo, in 1964 introduced as “a young Zapotec Indian whose art is a sort of transfiguration and exaltation of the daily myths of the peoples of the Isthmus,” is linked, in the first place, with the antagonism that

\* French art critic.

**Previous page:** *Death and Toad*, 50 x 40 cm, 1989 (gouache/paper).

continues even today between Mexico's indigenous civilizations and the Western civilizations ("civilizations," plural, to distinguish perhaps between the cultural oppression of Hispanic origin and that of Anglo Saxon America). From this point of view, Toledo's situation may recall that of Wifredo Lam or, in his own country, Rufino Tamayo, also a Zapotec Indian. This double comparison is sufficient to show up the differences: in effect, it seems to me that Lam dedicated himself to revealing the symbolic forms of primitive creative vitality (he later lavished the attention that he had first given to voodoo and its Cuban variation, *santismo*, on the peoples of the Third World). Tamayo, on the other hand, limited himself to imbuing his profound Indian-ness on the aesthetic inherited from the West, among other reasons because he had one of the most exuberant and individual brushes of this century. Neither one nor the other seemed to have become a tributary of that curse of modern art that condemns the artist to paying for his right to find his own way with relative loneliness: far from his own, like someone condemned to their distrust and incomprehension.

It seems to me that, for himself, Toledo wanted to avoid this curse and that, in any case, he felt better equipped than his predecessors for confronting it. "Toledo is not a solitary artist," writes

Carlos Monsiváis. "He belongs to a people, an aesthetic...and a history." I would add that more than Lam and Tamayo, he reminds me of Chagall. Just as this great forerunner of his remained decidedly linked to the world of his childhood memories and the atmosphere of the ghetto of Vitebsk that bewitched both him and his work all his life, Toledo remained absolutely faithful to Juchitán, his native region; to his father, the shoemaker, and his grandmother, the pig butcher; to his aunt, the robust Felicitas, who every day swam across the Perros River looking for skins for her brother the shoemaker, skins that she carried back on her head without getting them wet. These memories, more or less transfigured by the imagination, are his first source of inspiration. But, in contrast with Chagall, he did not remain there, since, as Mandiargues writes

I know no modern artist who preserves so much and as naturally as he a sacred conception of the universe and a sacred meaning of life: none who delves so seriously and simply into myth and magic; none so purely inspired by rites and fable....Without there being, strictly speaking, a narrative subject, all of Toledo's production, down to the least of his work, is the development and consummation of the fantastic....Many are the details clearly related to the world of magic, but we would probably be wrong if we wanted to interpret Toledo's art



Toad, 24 x 32 cm, 1989 (encaustic/paper).



My Mother Spoils Me, 56 x 76 cm, 1996 (watercolor/paper).

as an attempt to acquire power over hidden or supernatural forces. In any case, it is a mystical attempt, of the order of profound clairvoyance.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the Mexican painter has shown himself to be the possessor of exceptional artistic means that he plays with sometimes with impetuous inspiration:

He is one of those mystics who do not deprive themselves of taking their quest as a game and are able to laugh out loud in the most beautiful moments of their exaltation.<sup>3</sup>

Mandiargues also points out that there is more than one point in common with [Paul] Klee, beginning with that playful dimension and going on to the graphic invention and transparency of certain hues. Apparently, chance gave him the gift of bewitching the universe:

Everything that his fingers touch is baptized and authentically renewed: even old newspaper clippings that become unexpected creatures, the old walls of the

neighborhoods he frequents, covered with such original graffiti that it entralls the art lover and the street itself enter the gallery and even the museum.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to a career guided by those two imperatives, "fable and form," Toledo's work seems particularly able to play a first-class mediating role since it

is natural and simple as life and death are (or should be). Violence and charm animate it indissolubly.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

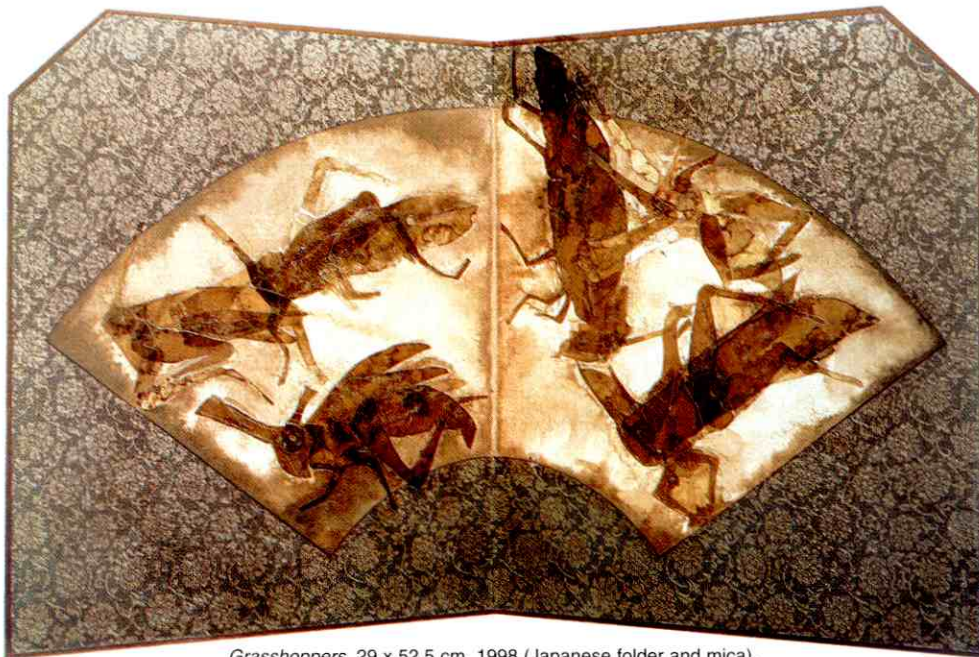
<sup>1</sup> This article is an extract of José Pierre's book *Le Belvédère Mandiargues. André Pieyre de Mandiargues et l'art du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Artcurial-Éditions d'Adam Biro, 1990), pp. 177-179.

<sup>2</sup> André Pieyre de Mandiargues, "Toledo hors de pair," *Troisième belvédère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

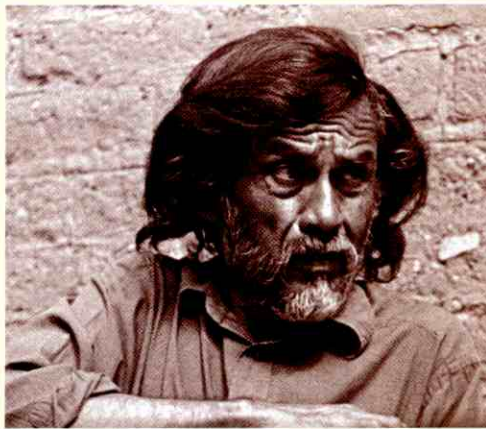
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Toledo, *Critiquettes* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



*Grasshoppers*, 29 x 52.5 cm, 1998 (Japanese folder and mica).



Cecilia Salcedo

## Francisco Toledo

### Brief Biography

**F**rancisco Toledo was born in Juchitán, Oaxaca. In 1940, after spending his early childhood in southern Veracruz, at the age of 12 he moved to Oaxaca where he began his artistic studies in Arturo García Bustos' engraving workshop. While still a young man, he moved yet again, this time to Mexico City, where he attended the Citadel School of Design and Crafts' engraving workshop.

In 1959, he had his first show at the Fort Worth Center in Texas and Mexico City's Antonio Souza Gallery. That same year he traveled to Europe, settling in Paris where he briefly joined William Hayter's atelier to study engraving. After withdrawing from formal studies, he spent his time looking at paintings in the museums of Europe, where he got his real education. After a 1963 showing at Karl Flinker's gallery, he decided to return to Mexico in 1965.

He works in different mediums including painting, water colors, sketching, sculpture and the tapestry design he does together with the weavers of Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca, as well as continuing his

work in graphics. He made several trips to New York, settling there in 1979, where he began to work in ceramics. When he returned to Mexico in 1980, he had a showing in Mexico City's Modern Art Museum, exemplifying the different techniques he has used. In 1984, he began a four year stay in Barcelona and Paris, where besides painting, he did a series of engravings for the Barcelona polygraph. In 1988, he went back to Oaxaca to live.

In recent years, this Zapotec artist has spent his time promoting and disseminating the arts and culture of his native state. He founded Ediciones Toledo, a publishing house, and created the Oaxaca Graphic Arts Institute, the Oaxaca Contemporary Art Museum, the Alvarez Bravo Center for Photography, the El Pochote Cinema Club and the Oaxaca Paper Art Workshop. He has also given his support to the protection and conservation of Oaxaca's historical and cultural patrimony through the Pro-Oax Foundation, as well as to ecological projects to protect Monte Albán and the Papaloapan River. ■■■