

Promotor of the Study And Conservation of Pre-Hispanic Murals

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Beatriz de la Fuente dedicated a great part of her life to the study of pre-Hispanic art. During her academic career as a researcher at the UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research, she delved into different aspects of Mesoamerican art and, amazed by the forms and volumes of the sculpture, spent several years analyzing it basing herself on art history methodology.

Her respect for and interest in Mexico's ancient art made her start by demonstrating and insisting that this pre-Columbian production was, indeed, art. For her, art is the way in which human beings are able to create and recreate the world around them. In her insistent, careful research, which produced many articles, books and lectures, we can perceive the way in which Beatriz de la Fuente analyzed artistic expressions and transmitted her hypotheses, always with solid, rigorous foundations.

Immersed in that far-off world, attempting to decipher the codes of artistic expression, she was attracted by mural painting. She thought that the fundamental quality of images represented on a two-dimensional architectural surface was that they were means of communication with



Ernesto Penaloza/UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research Photo Archives

their own characteristics, and whose resources and forms offered innumerable meanings. She was also concerned about the fragility of the paintings, permanently at risk of disappearing because scholars of this stage of Mexico's history paid no attention.

To achieve her aims of registering, protecting and studying these works of art, she designed a project called "Pre-Hispanic Mural Painting in Mexico" and, in 1990, invited five researchers to begin its long road with her. She decided to struc-

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ture the project in the five cultural areas where painted walls are still preserved: Teotihuacán, the Maya area, Oaxaca, the Gulf Coast and Mexico's Central Highlands. I was responsible for coordinating the research into the Mayan murals.

Analyzing the paintings of the different Mesoamerican cultures allowed us to discover the variety of styles and the wealth of historical content found in the topics represented, giving us an insight into more about those cultures.

The aims were clear: creating a systematic catalogue in which, with photographs, sketches and maps, we could register the pictorial evidence and thus make sure it was not lost, keeping this patrimony available for evaluation, study and dissemination. Given the complexity of the universe of mural painting, a global approach to the murals and their context was necessary. That is why Dr. De la Fuente thought it fundamental to bring together different disciplines and why she invited students of the humanities and the exact sciences from different UNAM institutions and the National Institute of Anthropology and History to participate in this project. This is how multi-disciplinary studies have been carried out under the direction of archaeologists, historians, art historians, biologists, architects, astronomers, epigraphers, chemists, restorers and graphic artists.

For the last 15 years, every Thursday we 24 people who are now members of the project have met in a seminar to study and analyze mural painting and discuss new proposals about iconography, composition, style and techniques. Under the precise, well-guided leadership and coordination of Dr. De la Fuente, we all learned how to approach the murals, how to recognize their formal and iconographic qualities and how to deepen our analysis of them, submerging ourselves in that

language of lines, colors and textures that are the expressive media of painting. In that same fashion, she fostered discussions and participated with the intention of learning, always open to other opinions. In the seminar, then, there was a coming together of languages: ours deciphering the pictorial, which in turn acted as the medium for conveying ideas, customs, rituals and beliefs of the Mesoamerican peoples.

Dr. De la Fuente's efforts in this important, sweeping project have resulted in the publication of six volumes: two about Teotihuacán, two about Bonampak and two about the Maya area. Two more about Oaxaca are now being prepared for publication, while the catalogue about the Maya area is being finished and the catalogues about the Gulf Coast and Mexico's Central Highland are being drafted.

The catalogues include not only the well-known murals, but all the evidence found, from large scenes to small fragments, since we think that any pictorial remnant is of value in itself. This means that the material is very rich in information. The body of this pre-Hispanic artistic tradition is unequalled internationally. And the interest in disseminating it can also be seen in other activities: courses, lectures, national and international exhibitions, an Internet website, the *Boletín Informativo* (Informational Bulletin) the project puts out every six months and other publications.

For the 15 years in which I worked closely with Doctor Beatriz de la Fuente as her collaborator, disciple and friend, she showed untiring commitment to the project, pre-Hispanic cultures and her colleagues.

This undoubtedly makes her an example of discipline, patience and humanity reflected daily in her positive vision of life. ■■■

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