

# Oaxaca Times

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## Francisco Toledo

Things were stirring in the art world when Toledo began his studies at the Taller Libre de Grabado in 1957, the age of seventeen. Although tourists still came to Mexico City to see the spectacular murals of the Big Three, although Siqueiros was still around, lustily inciting controversies, many younger artists had turned away from the revolutionary past. They were more attuned to the one artist of the generation who had long before abandoned social and political problems in his art: Rufino Tamayo. He spent many years in the United States and had returned to Mexico in 1950 determined to assert his hard-core cosmopolitan views. He never tired of reminding the new generation that "painting is a world of plastic relations - all the rest is photography, formalism, literature or something else, for example, demagoguery." A Zapotec in origin whose tenacious roots were never obscured by his "world of plastic relations", Tamayo was quick to see the extraordinary character of the young Toledo who, like him, had moved into the great world from small Zapotec villages. The two Zapotecs understood each other.

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"Self-portrait" Francisco Toledo.

From his earliest youth, Toledo had shown a rare independence. Perhaps Tamayo's example had helped to push him beyond local boundaries. For a young art student there were very few models. The Western art world had shown little interest in Latin America, and apart from Tamayo, only Wilfredo Lam and Matta had succeeded in piercing its sublime indifference to anything but the classic muralists. Toledo's ambitions were soon bestirred. By the time he was twenty, he had taken himself

to Paris where he would remain for five years. Unlike many artists from the Western hemisphere, however, he did not frequent the more visible haunts of the international avant-garde, but set himself to work in the shop of Stanley William Hayter, an eccentric British artist determined to revive the languishing arts of etching and en-

graving. Hayter not only initiated many technical experiments in the print medium, but he inspired his students with a great respect for the engraver's tradition. Toledo, who already in Mexico had sensed the extraordinary range available in the print arts in which, for instance, hundreds of different textures and grains

“ Unlike many artists, he did not frequent the more visible haunts of the international avant-garde, but set himself to work in the shop of an eccentric British artist. ”

in paper could be exploited, or in which the hand's most subtle pressure could be miraculously transmitted through the various pressures of the press,

and in which the necessarily abstract - that is, economical - character of line reigned supreme, evolved swiftly. Within months he had extrapolated effects he had discovered through working his etchings into paintings. By the time he returned to Mexico in 1965, he had been recog-

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# Francisco Toledo

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... as a singular artist in Paris, celebrated for his "development of mythic" and his "sacred sense of nature," as Andre Pieyre de Mandiargues wrote in 1964.

From then on, Toledo's interests seemed unable to avoid recourse to myth in speaking about his work. This is unfortunate. Although there is certainly a mythic dimension to Toledo, exclusive attention to it diminishes his presence as a 20th-century artist. Toledo is not an archaist despite his frequent allusions to local motifs. Nor is he a folklorist. He is a modern artist who, like others such as Paul Klee, Marc Chagall and Miro, has learned the value of the sweeping glance into the minutest corners of nature. The great tradition of what Baudelaire called "the fantastic real" lives on in him. Baudelaire had pointed out in the mid-19th century that for most of us, above all for business people for whom nature exists only insofar as it is useful in their business, "the fantastic real in life is singularly muffled." That "real", which resides in nature, takes on a fantastic visage only when the artist raises it to the highest degree. The modern artist, profoundly aware of his relationship to nature, discloses his discoveries in subtle ways. The two distinctly modern aspects of Toledo's oeuvre that must be acknowledged are his innate, his natural feeling for diverse materials, through and in which he expresses complex ideas; and his graphic imagination that moves far beyond the

illustration of stories (whether they are origin myths from pre-Columbian cultures or fables recounted in the Juchitán of his childhood.) Toledo is a shaper of visual thoughts, not a teller of tales, and those thoughts are evident in the work of his hand as it carves, models, incises, washes, floats or flecks. They are apparent in the essences of the materials themselves that are as important to him as the caprices that rise in his imagination as he works. In the most vital way Toledo is a modern artist: one who works with the principle of free association, and in whom the imagery of countless places and epochs resides. His works, as Salvador Elizondo has written, are the record of things and beings at a given moment, outside the laws of nature, and more like "instant dreams" than myths.

It is, then, in Toledo's ability to make rare conjunctions that his genius lies; his ability to persuade us that there is, indeed, a fantastic reality that enjoys a long artistic history, embracing not only the arts of so-called primitive cultures, but also those of ancient Catalonia, Ottonian Germany, Tsarist Russia, Parisian Surrealists, and much, much more. Toledo is no stranger to art history, or to the history of poetry. William Blake was one of his childhood discoveries. To confine him to the precincts of Zapotec culture is to do him an injustice, since he has proved, in his work, that he has ingested and understood many other cultures which he

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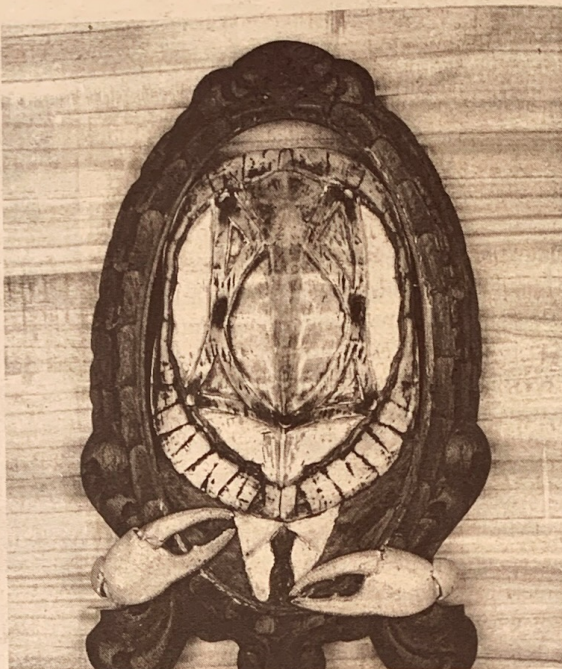
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# Francisco Toledo

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assimilates and charges with his own vision. If he has found sustenance in various aspects of Mexican art history - not only that of pre-Columbian provenance, but everything else from indigenous Spanish baroque to artisan forms still practiced in Mexican provinces - it must be seen as yet another intense glance at the fantastic real through his own prism. All of the memory traces of other cultures, and even his own, are not, still, what makes Toledo's work arresting. Rather, it is his way of making them answer to the demands of nature. What-



"Self-portrait with tie" Francisco Toledo.

ever else we may say about him, Toledo is intent on creating a natural history, or perhaps, an unnatural natural history, that will alert his viewers to both the breaches and continuities in the human imagination which, nonetheless, is eternally a dependent of nature. To the old game of animal, vegetable and mineral, he adds the unaccountably human.

Nothing human is foreign to him as he often underlines in his work where he brings a wry humor to bear. Toledo's humor is not the humor of the illustrator so much as that of the poet who looks upon the world and notices strange analogies. Not only analogies of actions, but of shapes and textures. He looks, for instance, at an iguana and sees in the conformation of his skin markings an analogy with the weave of a basket. He looks at a leaf and sees in its rhythmic shapes analogies to the shapes of grasshoppers. His homomorphism is very nearly ecstatic as he keeps finding more and more similarities between animal and man, vegetable and animal, mineral and flesh. Sometimes his fierce erotic allusions are at once disquieting and amusing, as in his frequent rhyming of fish and penises, and of course, his ribald use of rabbits and snakes. It is a persistent

the fascination with metamorphosis. In Toledo's universe, things often metamorphose into their opposites, or something that could be called their opposite, and this too has a long history. When Dante really wanted to horrify his readers, he described denizens of inferno who had metamorphosed into monsters with heads on backward.

Like all good connoisseurs of the fantastic real, Toledo knows that each experience with his materials must spring from the plain and downright real. Marta Traba had it right when she said that Toledo

Toledo impulse to anthropomorphize, as in the recent paintings of Manta rays, each with its human and terrifyingly uncanny resemblance. This impulse to anthropomorphize is as old as mankind, as is

"works from real premises: Oaxaca's Zapotec situation, its isolation and marginal life in relation to urban civilization: and that from these real sources, he "constructs for himself

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# Francisco Toledo

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"The persistent turtle" Francisco Toledo.

...mic universe where the relations  
...man, animal and nature are strictly  
...verned." But it is the true artist in  
... that moves out from the soil of  
... origin. Oaxaca may be always  
... ere, beneath the marvelously  
... cked surfaces of his images, but so  
... many other things.

A few examples: In one  
his many works on the  
me of Juarez - the most  
mic works he has ever pro-  
ced - there is a fish  
... ssil riding a broom-  
... ck and other strange  
... atures that certainly  
... ude to the hell of  
... eronymous Bosch. In the  
... 73 "Wedding oxen", the  
... ground, the blue nude, the  
... id decorative evocation of  
... ox's muzzle, call up min-  
... ure paintings from the markets of  
... thern India. In one of the most  
... ent variations of the traditional  
... vera for the Day of the Dead in  
... ico, Toledo paints a masked skel-  
... laden with a huge toad, as a

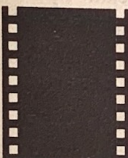
peasant would be with his burden of  
firewood. Yet, something in the draw-  
ing reminds us that the skeleton motif  
is one of the most hallowed in  
Northern European prints and that  
Altdorfer, Dürer and others reside in  
Toledo's memory as much as the

19th-century hojas volantes,  
the broadsides issuing from  
the printshops of Mexico  
City.

To notice his artistic uni-  
versality is not to ne-  
gate his extensive use  
of local sources. With-  
out insisting on  
Mexicanidad, Toledo none-  
theless frequently takes ad-  
vantage of the rich visual history  
of his country. obvious  
allusions, such as the painted  
faces with their tongues stick-  
ing out, or the uncomfortable smile  
of Vera Cruz figurines, or to the all-  
too-famous plumed serpent, with its  
sexual connotations as underlined by  
D.H. Lawrence, or to coyotes, jag-

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# Francisco Toledo

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uars and conch shells characterized in Teotihuacan, or the mazes and interlaces found carved in relief on so many ancient monuments, make Toledo's own place unmistakable.

It is clear that he is scholarly in his probing of his own Zapotec sources, where already strange metamorphoses had taken place around Monte Alban, and images with the body of jaguars and the face of iguanas abound. (It is apparent, also, that he has relished the transformations of ancient symbols when, in the 16th century, the fanciful códices were indited.) Yet all this does not prevent him from casting an eye to Europe and painting with a Dubuffet line the portrait of a cow. or combining a European allusion (to Goya) in "Woman with Chairs" with the mask of ancient Mexico, its tongue sticking out.

In several of these self-portraits, as well as in other works, the device of the net pulls things together, but the net is sometimes more like the spider-web which, in its natural beauty, is nonetheless capable of entrapping living creatures. In such works as "The Angry ones", one of his most abstract and mysterious recent paintings, and "The Flame", the darker side of Toledo's musings emerges, reminding us that the work of the Surrealists is never done. Despite what critics call his animistic tendencies, Toledo, who insists through his immensely varied materials, and the way he unveils shapes



"The wanderer, death with toad" Francisco Toledo.

and textures, that we sense the embodiment of matter, does not tell us that all objects have a soul, but rather, urgently reminds us that they exist. He has painted Flit cans and sewing machines, and shoes and masks as well as sinister invented creatures that also exist, at least in the dreaming imagination. Always juxtaposing the beautiful (how lovely the grain of the paper beneath washes of watercolor, or how deep the chroma illuminating his small gouaches, or how rich and suggestive the textures pulled up from shaped paper, or carved into the paper itself) with the disturbing, Toledo is a true heir to a visionary tradition that never flinched from the bizarre. What Octavio Paz said of the late Rufino Tamayo can be valid for Toledo also: "The world does not offer itself to him as an intellectual scheme, but as a live organism of correspondences and enmities."

Written by Dore Ashton. **LATIN AMERICAN MASTERS**

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