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Villa: The Revolutionary

Villa: The Revolutionary magician on the surrealist deck of cards

*Red earth, virgin earth,
earth impregnated by the
most generous blood,
land where the life of a
man has no price . . . At
least there is one country
in the world where the
winds of liberation have
not fallen off.*

-André Breton, "Mexican Memory"

This red earth, this turbulent country to which André Breton refers in his text "Mexican Memory" (published in the magazine *Minotaure* in 1939, and yet to be translated into Spanish in its entirety), had been occupying a privileged site in the surrealist imagination for years, materializing some of the movements dearest values. Mexico, "black humor's chosen place," was the country of Jose Guadalupe Posada (of whom Breton reproduced certain prints in *Illinotaurein* 1937). Mexico "tends to be the surrealist place *par excellence*" in which the encounter between Breton and Trotsky took place in the spring of 1938, and where the surrealist poet and the Russian exile edited the manifesto "For an Independent Revolutionary Art," later signed by Diego Rivera in the name of Trotsky. This country, home of the first 20th-century revolution, seemed surrealist to Breton "in its highest aspirations,"



among them "that of ending man's exploitation by man." He also admired "its living mythic past."

If, as Evelyne Laroche states in her excellent unpublished thesis, *Mexico's Surrealist Adventure*, the surrealists thought of Mexico in images, one of the most attractive is, without a doubt, Pancho Villa as the Magician of the Revolution in the surrealist Game of Marseilles.

Created between 1940 and 1941 by certain members of the group (Victor Brauner, André Breton, Oscar

Domínguez, Max Ernst, Jacques Hérold, Wilfredo Lam, Jacqueline Lamba, and André Masson), who were refugees in Marseille at the time. This deck of cards substitutes the traditional four suits—hearts, clubs, diamonds and spades—with the four ideal concepts of surrealism: Love, Dreams, Understanding and Revolution.

Likewise, the monarchical cards are substituted by more democratic characters, closer to the oneiric orientation of surrealism: the Genius, the Mermaid and the Magician, in each of the suits. Among them include: Freud as the Magician of Dreams; Baudelaire as the Genius of Love; Hegel as the Genius of Understanding; Lewis Carroll's Alice as the Mermaid of Dreams, and others that are equally suggestive. In place of the joker appears the figure of Ubu, the bizarre monarch created by Jarry.

The image which represents the Magician of the Revolution is not only of interest, it is also very significant, as it represents certain important aspects of what Mexico symbolized for the surrealists. At first, it is curious to observe the fact that a semi-legendary person, such as

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Villa: The Revolutionary

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Pancho Villa, was chosen, corresponding perfectly with the image of the "adventurer, brother to the poet". That plows the landscape of Anahuac evoked by Breton in his Mexican texts. The antisocial hero, dynamic, involved in a "mission" to redeem the oppressed, constitutes a para digmatic being in the surrealist imagination.

Nevertheless, it is not only the identity of the rebel general that is attractive in this card. The peculiar characteristics of the artistic representation are also revealing. By carrying out this work collectively, the intention of the surrealists had been to maintain the author's anonymity in each of the card's images. In some cases, it is possible to identify the hand of a specific painter, but in the case of Villa's plate there is no feature that allows for the identification of the artist.

The effigy of the Mexican revolutionary appears, in the traditional manner, as a double image split in the center: the same form seen whether right side up or upside down. The hero is represented

in the form of a hybrid creature, with a bird's head and human extremities (his right hand is distinguishable). Villa's chest is composed of two sinuous forms that accentuate his dynamic character. The figure, shown in profile, is touching his hat, identifiable as that of a Mexican *campesino*. Between his two hands a snake undulates, with both extremities ending in a head that is held between the "magician's" fingers.

As in the other plates, primary colors are utilized here: red for the snake, yellow for the hat, and blue for the hand and the head of Pancho Villa. The suggestive force of this image resides not only in its references to the actions of the rebel leader—the person who channels the primitive forces symbolized by the snake (a reference to the earth) and transforms them into a spiritual type of energy (represented by the bird and by the color blue), which ends in the hat, the yellow color of which alludes to illumination. It also refers to revolutionary activity as a blind force that marches toward the estab-

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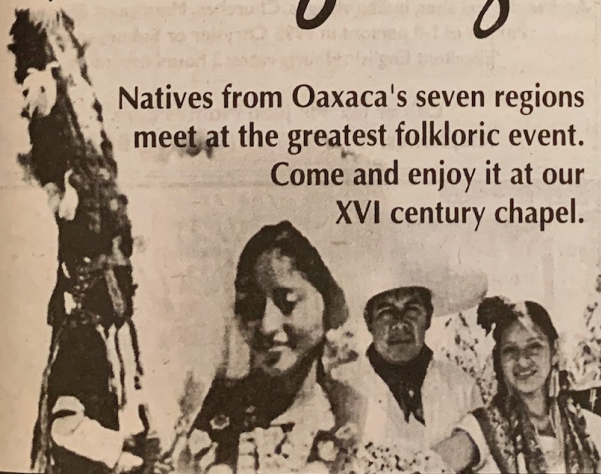
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ishment of a just order—but, even more so, by using the image of the bird and the snake as antagonistic forces, it makes reference to the “power of conciliation between life and death that is one of the greatest attractions of Mexico”.

This figure also evokes the ancient myth with regard to the founding of Tenochtitlan by the Aztecs as an existential dimension whose prophylactic violence and regenerative energy the surrealists oppose to the

exhausted formulas and conventions of the old European bourgeoisie. Surrealism, then, in an attempt to create “the natural collective of our epoch,” privileged Mexican artists inserted it within an activity to which these poets and artists gave great importance: the game of chance.

*-Written by Lourdes Andrade
 Translated by Kurt Hollander.
 Taken from “Artes de Mexico”
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