Portrait of a Young Painter

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Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zuniga and Mexico City's Rebel Generation.

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In late 1964, in the waning days of the Adolfo López Mateos regime, the Mexican government opened seven new museums, the most spectacular of which was the Museo Nacional de Antropología. With this project, the government moved to solidify a cohesive nationalism at a fragile moment. In the first months of his administration in 1959, railroad workers launched strikes that provoked military intervention and the unprecedented jailing of 10,000 workers. In 1960 and 1961 sugar and textile workers and white-collar employees—telegraph operators and telephone workers, pilots and stewardesses—walked off their jobs. In 1960 the conservative press, political parties, and civic associations in major cities launched protests against the introduction of a free, obligatory, and singular series of primary-school textbooks. From the 1960s, university students launched left-oriented protests in Puebla, Hermosillo, Morelia, and Mexico City. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 deepened the fault lines in Mexican politics. This fresh, untested promise of social redemption and liberation challenged the Mexican regime’s pretension to fulfilling the promises of the 1910 revolution. In 1964, Pablo González Casanova published his scathing critique of the revolution’s social and political consequences. While the economy continued to grow, what was known as the Mexican Miracle began to dim as problems surged with population explosion, mounting unemployment, urban traffic and housing congestion, and increasingly impoverished campesinos, to whom the revolution had promised land and dignity through agrarian reform.
The United States responded to the Cuban Revolution with interventionist aggression and placed heavy demands on the Mexican government to denounce Cuba, a position untenable to the PRI’s progressive wing, the small left opposition parties, intellectuals, and artists, and a growing sector of the public, swelled by legions of students. Many of these adhered to a new opposition movement, the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, led by Lázaro Cárdenas, informal chief of the PRI’s progressive sector. Offsetting the MLN were the organized forces of the party’s right wing, identified as Alamanistas for their association with ex-president Miguel Alemán (1946–1952). President López Mateos used economic prosperity and his considerable negotiating skills to prevent open ruptures. Among his many moves, he allowed greater freedom of the press, endorsing Política as a more radical complement to Siempre!, the officially tolerated magazine of critical opinion. At the same time, the state reinvigorated its already strong cultural apparatus, in part to embrace and channel the energies of youth.

In a bold, sweeping gesture in 1964, the regime created seven new museums not only to pull the nation together but to enhance international prestige at a moment of heightened cultural diplomacy and increasing tourism. These included the museum built at the pyramids of Teotihuacán, amid a spectacular refurbishing of the ancient site; the colonial museum at the convent of Tepozotlán, outside the city on the expanded highway to Teotihuacán; the Museo de la Ciudad, housed in the old Casa de los Condes de Santiago y Calimaya in downtown Mexico City; the Anahuacalli, which housed Diego Rivera’s collection of Mesoamerican art; a museum of natural history in Chapultepec Park, which replaced the old museum of hygiene; and the Museo de Arte Moderno, also in Chapultepec Park, which would display paintings of the Mexican school while broadening and diversifying the representation of Mexican artists.

Across the street from the Museo de Arte Moderno was the crown jewel of the state’s cultural project, the Museo de Antropología, conceived as Mexico’s singular and distinctive contribution to humanity and universal culture, a concept promoted by UNESCO in the aftermath of World War II. At the museum’s entrance, water cascades from a vast canopy. Its stem is a bronze column, sculpted from bottom to top by José and Tomás Chávez Morado, with symbols of the indigenous origins of their country and the historical struggle of a mestizo nation to reach the present moment of clarity, integration, and peace represented in the figure of a dove and a man wrapped in olive branches. In their design, architects Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, Jorge Campuzano, and Rafael Mijares reached the pin-
nacle of high modernism. Functionalist in its embrace of the spectator, the museum’s structure, its integration with its natural surroundings, the materials used in its construction, and the symbolism in its design all emanated from Mesoamerican roots. Like the new buildings of the Torcuato di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires, opened in 1963, the Museo de Antropología was a modernist masterpiece constructed at a moment of rising prosperity and optimism against a backdrop of social turmoil and mounting contention.5

The Museo de Antropología was more than state of the art: it was spectacular and path setting in its museography, designed to display and interpret in didactic simplicity and luminous spectacle the history, art, and material life of ancient and contemporary Mesoamerican cultures and to create archives, libraries, workshops, labs, conference rooms, and auditoriums for study, discussion, and diffusion, all within a monumental space of rare, quiet beauty. This massive undertaking brought together every level and talent in the Mexican labor force—experts in archaeology and anthropology, bricklayers, glassworkers, carpenters, solders, metal and electrical workers, and engineers of every type. Joining them were teams of artists led by prominent painters of diverse affiliation—Mexican school stalwarts such as Pablo O’Higgins, José Chávez Morado, Jorge González Camarena, Raúl Anguiano, and Frida Kahlo’s students Rina Lazo and Arturo García Bustos, as well as those independent of the school (e.g., surrealist Leonora Carrington), and those opposed (e.g., Rufino Tamayo, Manuel Felguérez, Mathias Goeritz, Gilberto Aceves Navarro, and Rafael Coronel).6 Esmeralda painters and sculptors Luis García Robledo, Fermín Rojas, and Gloria Pimentel created replicas of the bas-reliefs, sculptures, and murals that could not be moved from their tombs at Monte Albán. Esmeralda sculptor Rafael Guerrero made the human figures, animals, and wares that filled the stunning reproduction of the grand market at Tlatelolco.

Mexico’s indigenous peoples so readily marginalized by the country’s modernizing craze served as advisors and creators. They worked with the teams of anthropologists who claimed to have visited every living original culture in Mexico and gathered information not only about the past but contemporary practices, beliefs, and material life. Not relegated to a position of simple informants in the creation of themselves as objects of display, Mayans, Zapotecs, and Nahua speakers came to the city to work in the museum, where they advised and built their own exhibits. Men, women, and children filled the central patio with work tools, hunting arms, clay, wood, cotton, and straw. From these they built replicas of their
homes and work sites and made their ceramic utensils, clothing, and toys. Out of cane, workers from Morelos built a typical Nahua granary. Outside the Maya gallery, Yucatecans reconstructed the temple of Ochob using original techniques and stones they had brought from the peninsula.7

From February 1963 to the opening on September 17, 1964, people worked three turns around the clock. The process was not without creative contradictions. Head architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and a team of engineers and archaeologists proposed to rescue Tlaloc, the ancient god of rain, for the nation and the world. Tlaloc had been sleeping for centuries in a riverbed in the town of Coatlinchán, twenty-four miles outside Mexico City. To lift the god, who was 8 meters tall and weighed 168 tons, they worked over a year building an immense truck with several steel flatbeds, many Goodrich Euzkadi giant tires, and a cable apparatus for lifting the deity. To transport him to Mexico City, bridges and highways had to be reinforced. The people of Coatlinchán were not pleased. They sabotaged the truck and the road built for its exit. When they cut the cables suspending the god and sent him crashing to the ground, the government sent in the army. Pedro Vázquez Ramírez went to the town to try to convince the residents of the extraordinary significance of the sculpture to the national patrimony and to Mexican history. He told them how important it would be for the greatest number of Mexicans to be able to see Tlaloc in the museum. The villagers would not budge. Then the old schoolteacher got up and told them that the stone was like the grass, the lake, and the shore and that the god himself would always protect them. To the architect’s surprise, the people turned to him and said: “You can take him.”8 In fact, as Sandra Rozental has recently shown through extensive interviews with the people of Coatlinchán, Vázquez Ramírez’s tale of a community superstitiously attached to an ancient god obscured the real story. The rock was not an object of religious veneration or the source of rain but part of village space, a place of recreation, and passage to the mountain where residents pastured animals and gathered firewood. To part with it, village officials had negotiated with the government for a new school, a health clinic, irrigation works, and a paved road. The riot occurred because many, sensitive to the arrogance of federal authorities and engineers, felt they would be betrayed and would not receive these benefits. However, the notion of their primitive religiosity made for an urban legend in Mexico City. The dramatic entry of the now celebrated deity, gigantic and prostrate on his flatbed hauled by two enormous trucks, was televised. The national cathedral on the Zócalo lit up the night to welcome him. As he moved slowly down the boulevard of La Reforma,
people were awestruck, for the skies opened and huge torrents of rain fell upon the city in the normally dry month of April. It was, of course, the work of Tlaloc. While the people of Coatlinchán got their instruments of modernity—school, road, clinic, and wells—the rumor ran among the citizens of the capital and the press that the subsequent drought had to be blamed on the authorities for having left the humiliated god prostrate for weeks on his giant flatbed. Not until the authorities turned him upright on his feet did it rain. This would suggest the museum offered to the proud moderns of the capital an alternative subjectivity, if only imagined (sometimes in jest), and a possibility for reinterpreting the nation’s history and cultural legacy.

Pepe Zúñiga and his Esmeralda friends, Pepe Méndez, Octavio Ocampo, Armando Villagrán, and Aurelio Pescina, were all invited to paint. Joining the Esmeralda contingent was their friend Guillermo Zapfe, who took evening courses there. A graduate of the prestigious Colegio Alemán and of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional, Zapfe was, in Pepe’s opinion, the most intellectual of his friends: the only one who really understood Kandinsky’s theory of color. Zapfe directed the workshop for drawings that would decorate the glass in the gallery introducing the history of the American peoples as uncovered by archaeologists and anthropologists. Ocampo joined him there. Villagrán worked with Luis Covarrubias painting transportable murals. Pescina joined Raul Anguiano’s team in the Sala Maya. Pepe first worked with Luis García Robledo’s group in the Sala Oaxaca.

For Pepe and his friends, creating the museum’s murals and its ethnographic maps became an experience of reverence, irreverent exuberance, and exhilarating learning about their country and its past, about art, and about themselves as aspiring youth. What an opportunity for these young men! Pepe remembers: “The government decided to spend everything possible to make it one of the greatest museums in the world. So many artists were there! Medio mundo! They paid us by the hour, very well and they gave us the finest materials. We worked with much passion. We were given the liberty to work in our own languages, our own styles. I was leaving the Esmeralda, and I had a good foundation to search for a style. In the museum, we were a very big family of artists enriched by our communication.” Established artists recruited young talent from a diversity of backgrounds. Rogelio Naranjo came fresh from Morelia and the leftist student environment of the Colegio de San Nicolás and Michoacán’s university. In the RCA Victor warehouses in the Calle Egipto, where many of them worked, Naranjo was timid and quiet, but he would
shortly gain fame when Carlos Monsiváis invited him to illustrate for *La cultura en México*, the celebrated cultural supplement of *Siempre*! He would become a major caricaturist for progressive magazines and, as the press opened up after 1970, for mainstream newspapers. Byron Gálvez came from Hidalgo, where his campesino father played in a jazz band. He had recently graduated from San Carlos and was enjoying his first solo exhibit. He painted in the Sala Oaxaca. Pedro Banda, who had come from humble rural roots in Tamaulipas to La Esmeralda in 1949 and never abandoned his thematic focus on campesinos, took a leave of absence from the Secretaría de Educación Pública, where he was working on textbook illustrations, to join the team of Regina Raull. “The pay was immensely better,” he recalled. Aurelio Pescina, the Esmeralda student from San Luis Potosí who hauled meat in the Merced market, was sought after by many team leaders for his extraordinary drawing capacity. Javier Arévalo came from Guadalajara to work with fellow Jaliscense González Camarena. Eugenio Brito came from Chile; he was at the time a visiting artist with the government’s Organismo para la Promoción Internacional de la Cultura (opic).

Pepe Zúñiga forged a close friendship with Brito and with Guillermo Ceniceros. Ceniceros came from Monterrey. The son of a carpenter, he had worked as a boy in manual labor, then industrial design, at the giant machine manufacturer FAMA. The company paid for his schooling and would have provided him with a scholarship to the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey had he not gravitated to the fledgling Escuela de Artes Plásticas at the state university and a small circle of young painters eager to break into a more cosmopolitan world. There he met Esther González, a teacher who had turned to art. They came to Mexico City in 1963. Between teaching art at a private school and caring for two young children, she focused on engraving while Guillermo went to the museum. Soon after, he would join the workshop of David Alfaro Siqueiros. For Guillermo, to paint with Siqueiros was a dream come true, as he had long worked with industrial materials, the master muralist’s forte. In 1964 at the museum, Guillermo was learning about his own country. He worked on the exhibits of the Mixteca, western Mexico, and Veracruz. With the aid of photographs taken by the North American anthropologist Barbara Dahlgren, he painted the Seris, Purépechas, Triquis, and Totonacos in their festive dress for Luis Covarrubias’s ethnic maps.

For Pepe too the museum was an unprecedented opportunity to learn about the history of his country while at the same time creating it. Shortly after entering the project, he transferred from the Sala Oaxaca to the team
of Raúl Anguiano, who offered him more money and a better painting opportunity in the Sala Maya. Anguiano assigned Pepe a mural with the theme “gods of Mesoamerica.” Advising him were the Campeche-born archaeologist Román Piña Chan, who had recently published Culturas y ciudades de los mayas (1959) and Bonampak (1961), and Alberto Ruz, who had excavated much of Palenque and uncovered the tomb of the Mayan ruler K’inich Jánaab’ Pakal in 1948. Anguiano had accompanied Ruz and illustrated the trip. Pepe began to read voraciously: Paul Westheim’s Las ideas fundamentales del arte prehispánico (1957), Alfonso Caso’s Pueblo del sol (1953), the Codices Borgia and Mendoza and other materials in the old museum’s library. His trip to Palenque with Santos Balmori helped his understanding. He took time out to visit the Museo de Antropología in Jalapa, Veracruz, to see the recently uncovered frescoes, graves, and huge terra-cottas dedicated to women who died in childbirth. Putting theory into practice, he experimented with color and composition. On the eighteen-square-meter canvas, he started with the golden ratio, creating a harmonious hierarchy of spaces occupied by twenty-three gods and goddesses of death, water, air, and fire—Tlaloc, Ehecatl, Mitlantecutli, Chalchicuitle—framed by the magic of the Maya sacred tree, cenotes, jungle, and sky in brilliant tones of red and blue (see figure 8.1). “The content and the colors were completely Mexican,” he recalled. “All these treasures of magical thought.”

In the RCA Victor warehouse, the young painters and sculptors worked up to twenty hours, from early morning until late into the night, high on caffeine and the excitement of the collective experience. They painted to the light symphonic music of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Pedro Banda recalled that from time to time, Pepe played Bach over the radio he brought with him.14 Rogelio Naranjo remembers that Raúl Anguiano
played Ravel’s *Bolero* over and over. They listened as well to the new folkloric music from Chile, Colombia, and the Argentine pampas. They heard the Mexican urban balladeers José Alfredo Jiménez and Chavela Vargas, soulmates in songs of desire and loss they sang in long nights at the Bar Tenampa in the Plaza Garibaldi. “Chavela Vargas!” recalled Pepe. “How daring! With her strong, impassioned voice, this women sang ‘desde las tripas,’ her desire for another woman.”

It was an ambience of creative, energy-charged *relajo*. Raul Angui-ano, who loved attention, had his model Juan pose nude on the scaffolds. Painters and carpenters responded with whistles. Juan relished the applause. When Pepe’s girlfriend Emma showed up in the afternoon to have lunch with Pepe, Villgrán would call out, “¡Negrura! Aquí viene tu blancura!” The racial epithet bothered him less now: it was uttered affectionately among friends in a moment of solidarity and rupture. Emma’s tight white dresses showed off her sexy body. She had a long wavy mane of chestnut-colored hair that reminded Pepe of the Chicana singer Vikki Carr. When Emma came around, Villagrán whistled and Pepe Méndez called her beautiful. Pepe enjoyed showing her off.

In the evenings after payday, the young painters would go to the Fondo del Recuerdo restaurant in Bahia de Las Palmas Street, where they drank *toritos* of *aguardiente* with guanaba or pineapple and listened to Vera-cruz music. For Guillermo Ceniceros, just getting to know the music and the food was a learning experience about Mexico. They talked about painting, anthropology, how the murals were going. They discussed the different artistic styles and histories of their team leaders and the errors they thought some were making on the job. They talked about new exhibits and experiments—among them, Jodorowsky’s now famous and oft-repeated “*pánicos*.” Pepe remembers that although they talked a little about politics, they noted how lavishly the government was willing to spend on the museum to impress the entire world. They commented on how the press never reported the number of workers killed and injured in the construction, particularly in the building of the spectacular waterfall at the museum’s entrance.

The young men continued their conversations elsewhere. In Villa-grán’s house in the Calle Melchor Ocampo, they drank rum. Some smoked pot. Pepe did not because it reminded him of his Tío Manuel. They went to the movies to see the Beatles’ *A Hard Day’s Night*. “What a daring film and John Lennon!” remembers Pepe. “That’s when I began to love the Beatles.” On Bajío Street in Zapfe’s studio, which he named Vaticueva after the *Batman* comics, they drank and listened to music. Pepe
heard Joan Baez sing for the first time. “Wow, how well she sings in Spanish!” Pepe noted. “Claro, pinche negro,” replied Zapfe, “didn’t you know her father was Mexican?” Then Zapfe played the newly recorded Misa Criolla (creole mass) composed by Argentine folklorist Ariel Ramírez. The music was part of Pope John XXIII’s reform movement within the Catholic Church, which would be marked in Latin America by the theology of liberation, its option for the poor, and the introduction of folk music and guitars at mass.

The friends also got together at the home of Esmeralda instructor García Robledo on Bolivar Street, near the Viaducto in the south of the city. He would play African music from his native Cuba, not the commercialized Sonora Mantancera they heard over the radio and at the clubs but a more primitive, rougher music—“authentic,” as it was called in that day when “authentic” became a keyword. Also a connoisseur of baroque music, García Robledo put on his recordings of Bach, Vivaldi, and Frescobaldi. The music of the Ave Marias reduced the young men to tears.

Similar feelings Pepe experienced when he saw Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Gospel according to St. Matthew, released in 1964. So different from the sentimentality of Hollywood religious spectacles or Mexican Catholic iconography, Pasolini’s Christ was, in Pepe’s words, “very human”—an ordinary young man speaking with contained but uncompromising anger against the materialism of society and the abuse of the powerful. He preached to poor and simple people, the real residents of Basilicata, Italy, in their own arid, poverty-stricken habitat, made more austere by the black-and-white photography of the land and close-ups of the human face. The fiercely radical interpretation of the Catholic Marxist and homosexual director was rendered more moving and profound by music from Bach’s B Minor Mass and St. Matthew Passion and by the Missa Luba, the new African mass performed with Congolese instruments. Odetta sang the spiritual “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child” as the three kings came to visit the Christ child along with the children and mothers of Jerusalem. “The music was unforgettable!” remembers Pepe, “Pasolini’s films are completely unique!”

A deepening intensity of human feeling went hand in hand with expanding sensual experience. The moment could be ribald and wild—like the time Pepe, García Robledo, Pepe Méndez, and Fermín Rojas went to Acapulco on a lark. They drove in the Datsun Pepe had bought from García Robledo with the good money he was earning. He had taught himself to drive on a Mexico City street, and as green as he was at the wheel, they made it to Acapulco. Thoroughly drunk around 11 PM one evening,
they headed to the Playa Pie de la Cuesta to see who was more macho. Illuminated by the car headlights, they dove nude into the shark-infested open sea. Or the experience could be one of sexual excitement. He loved to go with Emma to a dark intimate bar where they danced danzón. They meshed beautifully together. Or the experience could be one of solitude touched by the powerful trumpet of Miles Davis interpreting the Concierto de Aranjuez of Joaquín Rodrigo as if alone and mourning in the silence of a great Moorish plain or the same masterwork interpreted in close, interior intimacy by the Modern Jazz Quartet with John Lewis at the piano and Milt Jackson on the vibraphone. Pepe heard them over Radio Universidad’s Jazz en la Cultura. A Cuban friend had given him the recording of Davis’s Sketches of Spain when it came out in 1960. He bought the MJQ record when it became available in 1964.

In the summer of 1964, trucks transported the murals and maps done in the RCA Victor warehouse to the Museo de Antropología. The artists headed there to hang and complete them. “It was just splendid,” recalled Pepe, “to see all those people working. It was like a huge, teeming city inside the building, with hammers pounding, machines polishing, a dissonant chorus of voices without music.” Pepe’s mural went with him and Anguiano’s team to the Sala Maya, where they watched a construction worker crash into the cross of Palenque with his wheelbarrow, breaking it into pieces. It was soon restored and they kept on working, each assigned to a particular detail in the murals—the sky, the trees. Six painters contributed to the mural Pepe had designed. Then Anguiano came, gave it three brushstrokes, and signed his name to it. It was disappointing not to be recognized, but the experience of the teamwork, of exploring indigenous culture, of painting, most of all of being in the museum made it all worth it.

“You would enter the museum,” he said, “and just breathe the spirit of the indigenous, this love to recover something—art, legends, poetry. It was so inspiring!” He remembered the eerie sound of the conch shell that would echo the length of the museum, from the Sala Mexica over the long reflecting pool to the waterfall at the entrance. Once in the Sala Mexica he stood in front of the ferocious goddess Coatlicue as the electricians were putting in lights to illuminate her. In a moment, the lights went out and he stood face to face with the sacred goddess to whom thousands of sacrifices had been made—she with her skirt of writhing snakes, her necklace of human hands and hearts. Literally terrified and deeply humbled, he stepped back slowly.

Otherwise there was little time to contemplate. The painters worked
day and night, sometimes sleeping on the floor “because the commitment was so strong to complete this museum.” The day before the opening, Octavio Ocampo remembers commenting to Pepe Méndez, “This is going to be a catastrophe!” as they scanned the “total disorder of scaffolds, tools, wires, paint buckets, rubbish and garbage and people running every which way shouting, everyone trying desperately to finish their work.” Security threw them out at dawn the day before the opening so another crew could clean up and install plants, flowers, and patriotic paraphernalia inside and outside the building.

The young artists were not invited to the opening on September 17, 1964. They watched it on television, with all the dignitaries (foreign diplomats, ministers of education and culture, representatives of the United Nations and other international organizations, museum directors, anthropologists and archaeologists, historians) and the music of Mexican composers Moncayo, Castro, and others.20 “We cried,” remembered Pepe, “We could not believe that all the disorder of a day disappeared as if the flowers had bloomed there in the entrance forever.” “Everything was perfect!” recalled Octavio Ocampo, “The gardens with their flowers, trees, and newly trimmed lawns; the floors cleaned and polished, all the rooms in marvelous order. Once more the Mexican Miracle!”21