



MIGUEL COVARRUBIAS — 1905-1957

The untimely death on February 4, 1957, of Miguel Covarrubias, one of Mexico's outstanding personalities in Mexican art and anthropology, is a great loss to the country and to science, particularly in the field of museology.

It is not known what incentives attracted Covarrubias' attention, interest, and devotion to primitive and folk art. His training for it was unusual, and unorthodox: his teachers were craftsmen and artists from many countries; his experience was gained in museums, workshops, market places, village roads, or in collectors' houses.

His great talent as a caricaturist won him early recognition and merited fame. His extremely popular drawings in this difficult field were published in many Amer-

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ican magazines, including *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*. However, he never neglected his own personal interest in art, and thus he wandered into anthropology and archaeology in search of knowledge. He had an amazing store of information on the life, culture, and arts of many peoples of Asia, Africa, America, and many other parts of the world, and an insatiable desire to know the cultures and arts of ancient Mexico.

He attacked problems which perplexed him with his own devices and research methods. It was in this manner that he became involved in the Olmec problem. His enthusiasm for the classic art of the "Olmecs" was so overflowing that he induced his friends to investigate and discuss the cultural enigma of the "Olmecs," which has so puzzled Mesoamerican archaeology.

In 1938 Covarrubias designed and painted the Pacific World mural maps — flora, fauna, people, houses, art forms, transportation, and economy — for the Golden Gate International Exposition, which were later exhibited in New York at the American Museum. In the course of this work he came in contact with many anthropologists working on Asiatic problems. This association renewed his old ideas of Transpacific contacts, which in late years he so often mentioned, and which he wrote about in his book, the first of a trilogy, *The Eagle, the Jaguar and the Serpent*.

There were times when he gave his best to museology, and applied anthropology. He contributed to many different projects or enterprises dealing with native arts: the work of the U.S. Indian Arts and Crafts Board; the exhibitions "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art" and "Art of North American Indians," presented in the United States at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and later in Mexico at the National Museum.

It was during this period that Covarrubias came closer to anthropology and anthropologists. The Escuela Nacional de Antropología invited him to give courses on primitive and pre-Columbian art. Considerable patience and persuasion were needed to help him overcome his stage fright. In latter years I often wondered how he could have been so timid. In 1942 the School initiated a training program on Museum Science and Administration. Covarrubias contributed generously with ideas and experience, and thus, was awarded the first

appointment in Mexico to teach museology.

In 1946 and 1947 he was asked to cooperate in the reorganization of the National Museum of Mexico. This included a radical change from its previous organization. It also involved planning for a new museum building, which was finished in 1948.

Covarrubias was instrumental in a re-examination of the status of Archaic cultural horizons in the Valley of Mexico. The National Museum initiated an archaeological project in 1947 with explorations in Tlatilco, El Tepalcate, and other sites in the Anahuac Valley, which brought to light a close and intimate association of Archaic material with Olmec types. There were times when he was tempted to force reality, but in the end he always came back to the truth.

His knowledge of the arts of Asia and the South Seas inclined him to a belief in a cultural intercourse and Transpacific contacts between America and Asia. He may not have been able to present sufficient proof, but his insistence drew attention to similarities and parallels in the art of the 2 continents, which, when better understood, may have more significance. His attitude towards these and other problems stimulated the interest and intellectual curiosity of many young anthropologists. The worst that could be said of him as a believer in Transpacific contacts is that he talked too much, knew too much, and felt too deeply.

Miguel Covarrubias became famous and popular while still a very young man. In addition to his reputation as an artist, Covarrubias was equally known as a writer; his first published volume, *The Prince of Wales and Other Famous Americans*, appeared in 1925, and was followed by other books, the best known of which are *Island of Bali* (1937) and *Mexico South* (1946). His last major work, *The Eagle, The Jaguar and the Serpent* was published in 1954.

His success could not mar his deep feeling and support for noble human causes. He rebelled against social injustices; he was loyal to his ideals and to his social and political convictions, which he expressed freely. He fought with all the power of his individuality for any cause he considered just. Obviously, certain things may not have been as he believed them to be, but the fact remains that he was sincere and loyal to his own convictions.

During the last year of his life, Covarrubias' contributions to anthropology and art were invaluable. He was a member of the Arts and Craft Board of the National Museum of Popular Arts of Mexico and helped in its organization. For a few years he was the Director of the Department of Ballet of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. His influence in this field of Mexican art was productive of many new ideas, and wider concepts of this field of artistic endeavor.

Before he died, Covarrubias bequeathed his priceless collection of pre-Columbian art to Mexico. In this manner the nation inherits the most valuable Olmeca collection in existence, and will thus preserve the spirit of pursuit of knowledge and affection which Covarrubias felt for the Olmecas, and, in general, for all Indian art.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The photograph of Covarrubias is reproduced through the kindness of Alfred A. Knopf, and the self-portrait through the kindness of Wm. Duncan Strong.