
I : MEXICO

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The Face of Creation

To see Mexico from the air is to look upon the face of creation. Our everyday, earthbound vision takes flight and is transformed into a vision of the elements. Mexico is a creation of water and fire, of wind and earthquake, of the moon and the sun.

Not just one sun but the five suns of ancient Mexican cosmogony. First comes the Sun of Water, which presides over the creation of the world and ends in the storms and floods that foretell the coming eras—Sun of Earth, Sun of Wind, and Sun of Fire—each ending in catastrophe until we arrive at the fifth sun, our own, which awaits the final cataclysm.

Sun of Water

Coursing through Mexico are serpentine rivers, mere threads of fertility in the midst of deserts, opulent tropical undulations pouring slow and wide into the sea. Over the flowing waters of the Papaloapán, river of butterflies, over the still waters of Lake Pátzcuaro, furrowed by dragonflies, flutters the goddess Itzpapalotl, a star in the Aztec pantheon. Her very name, Obsidian Butterfly, resounds with the ambiguity of all the elements, her fragile multi-colored wing at once a fearful sacrificial knife.

She is the first sign of creation, proclaimed by the fleeting liquid element. It is not the nature of water to be always placid, and when it lies as calm as a mirror locked in the crater of a volcano, its image is ominous indeed, for its supernatural tranquillity promises an imminent commotion. What are our years when seen against the mountains' millennia of stone? Who can really believe that these rock-encircled lakes in the craters of Toluca and Puebla always wore, and always will, this same metallic, motionless sheen?

Now everything moves again. The Usumacinta River flows on, inseparable from the forest it waters, equally inseparable from the clouds that gather over both jungle and river, as if they, too, were drawn along by the current. We know that all three—sky, river, and jungle—hide and protect the civilizations that slumber beneath them, pretending to be dead, giving signs of life only in the mystery of the figures drawn on the rocks beside the Planchón River and in the ghostly processions of the frescoes at Bonampak.

The stillness of the waters is illusory. Majestic waterfalls cascade, washing away the land and its history. Mountains collapse into the sea. Sandbars break the very waters of the sea. And the surf on the coast of Jalisco shows the earth as a dark-clawed monster, besieged and battered by the fury of the sea.

The land is a portrait drawn by the sea. But we have only to turn the picture around to imagine the contrary. Is this not rather the portrait of the sea as it is attacked by a hungry, ferocious land, an ambitious, aggressive, imprisoned land that challenges the sea, ruler of the greater part of the planet's surface, for its dominion?

Unquiet, tremulous, and insatiable, fearful and defensive, land of teeth and nails, jaws and talons—for a moment the land of Mexico shakes. The earth is about to speak. Earth will come to dominate water. The second sun comes to life amid awe and terror.

Sun of Earth

From the heights, the dead volcanoes—Popocatépetl, Iztaccíhuatl, the Nevado de Toluca—signal that their silence is no insurance against catastrophe, but rather a portent of the next tremor. Parícutín, the youngest volcano, smiles like a mischievous child, warning us that one day a curl of smoke may appear in a Michoacán farmer's field, spiraling up from the bowels of the furrowed earth that shakes its shoulders, vomiting flame and ash until, in a matter of hours, it reaches the sky.

And there is more: Chichón, that dark, active giant, proclaims that its quaking and smoking will cease only in foreboding of the next great commotion of this restless land, where creation has not yet ended its labors. Each volcano ends only to pass the flaming baton to the next.

Sun of Water, Sun of Earth. From the air, we can see the origins

of the land and all that flows over its surface. We can take a picture of the very point where the Sierra Madre Oriental begins, proudly abandoning plains and deserts as it starts its climb, then shoots toward its vibrant coupling with the western chain in the Nudo Mixteco. Linked forever, the two chains then run on together to their ultimate extinction at the southern extreme of the continent in Chile and Argentina, where the Andes bud off from the chain like frigid grapes. We can also take a picture of the source of the Conchos River and see the birth of its waters from the womb of the land.

As we see all of this, we are present at the creation of nature. Not as something that happened *illo tempore*, in the age of the gods, but as something that is happening to us now, in our own time and before our very eyes.

The Nevado de Colima shows itself a mature gentleman, a bit gray around the temples, reminding us of the ambiguity of nature in Mexico. But neither he nor any of the great slumbering patriarchs watching over the earth can deny us our own time in this land.

For it is we—you and I—who see and touch and smell and taste and feel today, even as we witness the perpetual rebirth of the land here and now. We are the witnesses to creation, because of the mountains that watch us and in spite of their warning: “We will endure; you will not.” Our response to this warning can be as sinful as pride, but also as virtuous as charity. We take the earth in our hands and re-create it in our own image.

Geometry, Einstein said, is not inherent in nature. Our mind imposes it on reality. Man’s geometric imagination can be marvelously observed, from the air, in the incomparable clash of jungle and architecture in Palenque and Yaxchilán. It is at these sites that the primeval struggle between nature and civilization seems to have taken place; indeed it is still going on. Nature embraces architecture, but the human creation suffers because, while desiring to give itself up to nature’s almost maternal tenderness, it also fears being suffocated by it. And as human beings, we also fear that we will be expelled from that great, moist womb that nurtures and protects us, cast out into the shelterless world.

The great art of ancient Mexico is born from this tension between nature and civilization, between fear of enclosure and fear

of exposure. The splendors of the great acropolis at Monte Albán and the sacred spaces of Teotihuacán are the triumphs of but an instant of human domination over nature, yet also of human equilibrium with it. In these places, man has met time and made the shapes of time his own.

Nevertheless, man looks around him and sees the seductive threat of the sierras' deep gorges, the devouring tangle of the jungle, and the latent tremor of the mountains. He responds by gently caressing the slopes of the mountains, festooning them with terraced gardens; by stroking the plains and planting them with wheat and maize; and by building cities, shelters of his own making to substitute for the protection of trees, caves, and craters.

Mexico is a land of walls. Like all other peoples, we built them first to defend ourselves against inclement weather, marauding animals, and enemy attacks. Soon, however, architecture found other motives. First was the need to distinguish the sacred from the profane. Then came the need to segregate the conqueror from his subjects. And finally it becomes necessary to distance the rich from the poor.

In spite of these divisions, our cities transcend their limits and, with the very walls that divide and separate, create movement, a circulation that reunites us in the public square—the common place, the central site—and later in atriums and naves, chapels and portals, patios and gardens, until a network of communications is established that defies, and sometimes even defeats, the walls of isolation.

This is so because the human creation of the city acquires, in the Iberian New World, a sense of paradox. Civilization means living in the city, in the *civitas*. But in Ibero-America the paradox is that the city is simultaneously a creation of the will and a product of chance. Perhaps this is true of all cities, simply because the *civitas*—the place of civilization, the space where we coexist—is also the *polis*, the place of politics, the space where we debate. And both civilization and politics, much as they may imagine themselves to be projections of the will, are also the result of necessity and chance.

The cities of Mexico, I hasten to add, temper these characteristics with powerful admixtures of tradition and novelty. First tradition: the energetic plan of the new Spanish city replaces its Indian coun-

terpart, supplants the traditional ceremonial, political, and religious functions, only to find itself obliged to take them on anew. And then novelty: the Spanish-American city offers the opportunity to create new, regular, chessboard cities, as rectangular as the grid on which Saint Lawrence burned.

During the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti dreamt of making the ideal Platonic city real. The novelty of America permitted such a thing. Here one can leave the walled agglomeration of the medieval city behind. But the past does not allow itself to be buried so easily. On the one hand, the previous tradition—the Indian center—struggles to reassert itself from under the very foundations of the new city, as recently happened in Mexico City when the Aztecs' Templo Mayor was uncovered in the central square, at the heart of the modern metropolis. On the other hand, racial novelty transforms both the Indian and the European city into a mestizo city, a city of mixed bloods. And economic demands—mining, the haphazard topography of gold and silver—also cause the Renaissance city to revert to the medieval hive of narrow alleys, tunnels, stairways, and pits.

From the air, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Morelia display their checked innovations as well as their mestizo ambiguity, while Taxco, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato yield to the serpentine cityscapes called for in the mining districts. Like the gold seekers themselves, these cities scramble up mountainsides, tumble down slopes, and sniff out the precious metals there. When they find them, they adorn their altars with them, pave the streets with silver when their daughters get married, or lose their gold forever on a bet, on a whim, at a fiesta.

There is a splendid photograph by Michael Calderwood, the distinguished British artist, of the Barranca del Cobre, the Copper Gorge, in Chihuahua. Like the other canyons of the Americas, especially the most glorious of them all, the Grand Canyon, this great Mexican abyss bears witness to the two extremes of creation, birth and death. If this is a picture of the first day of creation, it is also a portrait of the last. Nevertheless, the drama of these places does not end in an affirmation of the beginning and end of the earth: their greatest effect lies in how they define our frame of reference step by step as our vision moves through space. In Arizona or Chihuahua, the reality of these natural wonders is actually deter-

mined by our movements. A step to the right or left and the great stone abyss that we see changes so fundamentally that we never look on the same gorge twice. The movements of our body, our change in point of view, transform what on the surface seemed an unalterable monument of nature.

Am I not defining the Baroque and searching for its specific American form? The Baroque is always an art of displacement, requiring the movement of the spectator if the work of art is to be seen at all—and, perhaps even more important, if it is to see itself. For the Baroque is a circular, not a frontal, art. The Byzantine icon must be seen from the front. Bernini and Michelangelo, on the other hand, invite the spectator to see the icon in the round. And when, in *Las Meninas*, Velázquez liberates painting from sculpture—to use Ortega y Gasset's phrase—his instrument of liberation is that circular gaze which enters the painting and observes the painter at work, as it were, from behind his back. In this way, the Baroque painting paints itself a second time.

In Mexico, as throughout Spanish and Portuguese America, the Baroque goes well beyond the sensual intellectual reason of the Europeans. For among us, the Baroque is a necessity, a vital, resounding affirmation—or, better yet, the affirmation of a necessity. A devastated, conquered land, a land of hunger and of dreams, finds in the Baroque the art of those who, having nothing at all, want everything. The Ibero-American Baroque is born of the abundance of need; it is an art desiring what is not there, a triple somersault over the abyss of desire with the hope of landing on one's feet on the other side and touching at last the object of desire: the fraternal hand, the body of love. The harsh, abysmal landscape of Mexico is, in its savage solitude, the picture of the Baroque hunger for its opposite, abundance and sharing.

The Sun of Earth, seemingly the most solid, the most long-lasting, thus shows that it, too, is a passing phenomenon. Its true image is that of a cloud in the artificial heaven of a Baroque altar. But the real heaven of Mexico offers more clouds than any altar does. Clouds are the crowns of Mexico's second geography.

Sun of Wind

Mexico is a country of prolonged, tranquil, luminous clouds. And clouds are the favorite daughters of the next sun, the Sun of Wind, which erodes coastlines and mountain peaks, that sculpts the stones and reshapes the tilled land.

At times, Mexico's opulent clouds are like a shroud tenderly shielding our eyes from a stiff or moribund body. Clouds hide from us the agony of the Lacandón rain forest and its people. Both are destined to extinction. At times, though, clouds are but the veil of civilizations unwilling to be disturbed. Most subtle of shields, the Sun of Wind protects all things in our country that await another time, a better time, to become manifest. In the meantime, clouds disguise the persistence of a sacred, magical world that the active, Faustian will of the West strives to annihilate.

Yet the clouds of Mexico carry out another, more disinterested task: they constantly soften the harder contours of the elements. Sea and land, volcano and air, ancient ruin and jungle, river and desert all clash head-on in Mexico. Here the elements war among themselves for their moment in the sun, and whole eras are named after each—water, fire, earth, and wind.

Everything in Mexico vibrates simultaneously, perhaps because the clouds constantly soften the harshness of the imperious Mexican elements, so none truly triumphs over the others. Wind pushes the clouds, the airy spray dissolves the roughest peaks, clouds intertwine surf and shore and commingle waterfalls with cascades of flowers—hibiscus, bougainvillea, yellow marigolds for the dead. The cloud is an all-embracing mist, a smoke dissolving all things and rendering all distances deceptive.

An encounter and a coupling, at times a confusion, a triumph of light, a blurring of the slashing strokes so often present in Mexican art. The hardest lines of Rivera or Siqueiros are as fearsome as the brutal natural encounters we see in the Mexican landscape. The Isla Tiburón with its point—appropriately named Chueca, Crooked—is like a shadowy wing menaced by a dagger-colored sea. It is as if the island wanted to fly away and the sea were holding it down, reminding the island that its destiny is to live between land and sea in perpetual confrontation.

The Sun of Wind then intervenes to dissolve all borders, to still

every quarrel, to silence all shouts. The Sun of Wind ruffles the sand, softly caresses the face of the water, reveals the texture of the undersea depths, and pulverizes the many varieties of stone: porous, basalt, chalk, and sand. In Mexico this region of the air belongs to the painter Ricardo Martínez, in Europe to J. M. W. Turner. The Sun of Wind has been photographed by Gabriel Figueroa here, by Michael Calderwood there.

In this way, the Sun of Wind reveals a third Mexico within the very element from which we see the country: the air. The wind that blows through the mouths of two twin gods, one Mediterranean and the other Mexican, Aeolus and Ehécatl, dissolves the rigidity of the earth and the immobility of the sea as they confront each other. The wind is a gift, a godly one. But like all other divine offerings, it is ambiguous. And it has three names. The first is metamorphosis. The second is harmony. And the third is death.

The Sun of Wind transforms the unmoving landscape into a movable passageway. Things that seemed eternal prove to be changeable. Forms come together and pull apart to create new forms. The Pinacate crater in Sonora becomes a delectable woman's nipple. A river in Baja California acquires a surprising shape: a pink scorpion nestling in a bed of black earth. Are those real cows crossing the lagoon at Mexcaltitán or merely a mirage? Aren't those fishing boats anchored around a buoy at Puerto Peñasco really a butterfly freshly emerged from the chrysalis of the sea? Are the cupolas of Cholula mushrooms? Are the tiger cages in Chapultepec Park made only of air?

Sun of Wind, my sun. On the cover of the geography book I used in school as a boy was a picture of Mexico as a horn of plenty, out of which flowed an overwhelming wealth of fruit as well as a long stalk of wheat that turned into the Baja California peninsula. That cornucopia appeared to be floating in midair. No hand, no land held Mexico up in the sky. It was like a free-floating planet of infinite riches.

I had to believe in the powers of the god of wind, Ehécatl, in order to hold in my imagination that Mexican cornucopia floating in the sky, scattering its fruits and fertilizing the fields with wind-borne seeds.

To penetrate the wealth of Mexico is to discover at one and the same time its permanence and its transience. For one moment,

nothing changes and all the elements unite harmoniously. White birds resting in the waters of a power dam rob it of its engineered coldness. Cattle and wheat fields, derricks, hotels, haciendas, modern cities, and beach resorts—these are all names for abundance. But do they express harmony as well? Perhaps real serenity is far more modest and intimate. I find it in an aerial view of Tlacotalpán, with its peculiar knack for harmonizing gaiety and reserve. Here is a livable sensuality, the very definition of life in Veracruz.

Abundance also means the flight of the flamingos coming to feed, the pink blur of the birds on an orange sea, the silhouette of the jungle's green shadows. The shock of Mexican colors and the mutable hues of nature come together in a recently repainted village church or in the haven of a Oaxaca hamlet. This is perfection, the harmony we long for, the peace of the elements.

Sun of Fire

Peace does not last. The fourth sun, Fire, is ready to scorch the earth, to make it resemble those craters that—only because whimsy is more necessary than need itself—allow themselves the luxury of surrounding a cornfield near the sky. From the air we can see a soccer field, its outlines burned into the asphalt of the city like the burning graphics of that portrait of the sky on the earth at Nazca, in Peru, which can only be seen from the air.

There is a stony place in Chihuahua called Rocas de Lumbre, Rocks of Fire. Only, the fire is not necessarily a visible flame but rather, at times, the paradox of burning water—the *atl tlachinolli* of the Nahuas—the inner conflagration that we know, that knows itself, as death. As in the prose of the Mexican novelist Juan Rulfo, the lowest-lying field and the highest mountain have a hole in them through which escapes the heat of sexuality and death. Eros and Thanatos are both entryways into the invisible underworld, the Mictlán of the ancient Mexicans, where we enter wearing masks. We need another face for death, a mask that makes us acceptable for the other life—a better face perhaps than the one we had when we lived on earth, when we were bathed by water and animated by wind.

To see the Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque from the air is to look upon death. This pyramid was erected by Lord Pacal, first to

anticipate and then to commemorate forever his own death. From above, the extensive fields of *zempazuchil*, the yellow flower of the Day of the Dead, are a sign of the service nature always provides for death. Flowers the color of fire associate death with an invisible fire disguised as life: the Sun of Fire that proclaims death does not exhaust itself in death, even though it brings it, as it were, to life. For life in Mexico foresees death; it knows that death is the origin of all things. The past, the ancestors, are the source of the present. Now the craters are lakes, are cornfields; once they were boilers filled with fire. Could they be that again? Of course—just as life will come back again, because death precedes it.

The Sun of Fire is not, then, an omen of inexorable destruction and catastrophe but a link in a circle where fire consumes air only to become its opposite, and then earth and then air again, before it burns and starts the cycle over.

Again, the Sun of Water

From on high, the four suns are consecutive but also simultaneous. As our gaze descends to the earth, it assigns precise names and places to each of the suns of creation. The name of Water may be Acapulco or Careyes, Puerto Escondido or Mazatlán, Veracruz or Cancún. Three seas—the Pacific, the Caribbean, and the Gulf of Mexico—surround our land with more than six thousand miles of coastline. And these seas, although they are ours, bring news from the outside world on every wave.

From the gulf coast the god Quetzalcoatl journeyed to the Dawn, promising to return to see if the people had put his principles of peace and brotherhood into practice. To that same coast came the Spanish conquistadors on the day prophesied for Quetzalcóatl's return, thus appropriating to themselves an omen that was theirs only by chance: the gods have returned to settle accounts with us. . . .

The Gulf of Mexico became from that day on the last cultural port of call of the Mediterranean in the Americas. Soldiers and monks, scribes and merchants, pirates and poets, invaders and exiles brought with them and carried through Veracruz the news of two worlds: America and Europe, Gulf and Mediterranean. Final resting place of the waves of the Bosphorus, the Cyclades, Sicily,

and Andalusia, the Mare Nostrum of European antiquity comes to an end in Tampico, Villahermosa, and Campeche.

But the waters of Mexico also send back their waves through the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, and their message is the news that the New World so desired by Europe is yet to be discovered, is yet to be imagined. It harbors mankind's oldest myths, its most secret truths, its dreams of the creation of the world and of man amid violence, pain, hope, and joy.

"Let the day break!" exclaims the Popol Vuh. "Let the dawn appear in the sky and on the earth. There will be neither glory nor grandeur until the human creature exists."

In Mexico's second sea, the Caribbean, an invisible sentinel stands guard at Tulúm, waiting for the impossible return of the god. Sun and sea meet here. The watch is sleepless and eternal. But no god will return, because the earth is demanding that its children rebuild it, that they themselves be the creators now.

Finally, on the Pacific coast, the waves tell of a world even more distant than Europe—Cathay, the Kingdom of the Middle Earth, Cipango, the Land of the Rising Sun, and our vaporous sisters in the shadows, the Philippines. Each of these islands and kingdoms sends us its wealth—"Japan its silks, the South Sea its treasure of rich pearls, China its mother-of-pearl," as the colonial poet Bernardo de Balbuena says in his *Grandeur of Mexico* (1602).

*In you are their grandeurs condensed,
For you supply them with gold and fine silver,
While they give you things more precious still.*

The Sun of Water does not enclose us. It opens us, puts us in communication, breaks down the barriers of isolation; it makes us circulate within and without. We receive, we give, exchange, prepare the passage of water to land, of land to air, of air to fire, of fire to water again.

Mexico is a portrait of the cycles of creation, a portrait of the skies and a succession of suns and elements that give no quarter. The portrait of the Mexicans is the portrait of creation.

That is why human victories are greater in Mexico. No matter how harsh our reality may be, we do not deny any facet of creation, we do not deny any reality. We try, instead, to integrate all

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aspects of the cosmos into our art, our way of seeing, our sense of taste, our dreams, our music, our language.

From the roof of Mexico, one can better appreciate this way of being. We are like Calderwood's picture of Rivera's sculpture of a god that can be truly seen only at a distance, from on high.

This is a portrait of a creation that never rests, because its work is not yet complete.