

THE TRUE MEANING OF THE WORK OF SATURNINO HERRÁN

THE FALSE CRITICS*

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People have claimed that Saturnino Herrán's work possesses a nationalist character, but this claim proves absolutely false if we study the characteristics of this painter. It is the literati who have mistaken the true meaning of Herrán's labor. Nothing is more dangerous to painters and sculptors than the criticism of the literati. They typically write about the personal impression that is suggested to them by some trivial aspect of a picture or statue, and they set themselves to the task of seeing this, that, and the other in a form that is naturally literary. This leads them to attribute to the painter symbols and ideologies that were quite far from his imagination, without keeping in mind, almost ever, the essential character of a picture, its true plastic value, its material quality, the harmony of its tones, its drawing, its tendency, etc., all of which are qualities that must be taken into account before any others. It is painting or sculpture that is at stake, not literature. This form of criticism greatly harms artists and is the result of the fact that the literati possess little or no culture regarding this matter; hence, they completely distort the meanings of works.

I have had the opportunity to read a page of the extinct newspaper

* "La verdadera significación de la obra de Saturnino Herrán: Los falsos críticos," *El Universal Ilustrado* 4, no. 169 (July 29, 1920): 14 and 26.

El Pueblo, which was dedicated to Herrán and given this weighty title: “Saturnino Herrán: The Most Mexican of Painters and the Greatest Painter of Mexico.”¹ This text has been discussed by many literati, many of them illustrious and none of them art critics in the full meaning of the term. From Mr. Mariscal, with his soporific erudition, to the admirable López Velarde, they have written without saying a word of truth about Herrán’s work. (This is said with apologies to my “cultísimo”² friend Jesús B. González.³)

In Mexico one finds erroneous criteria for what nationalist painting should be. It is believed that artists make nationalist works when they paint either a *charro*, a *rebozo*, or a *china poblana* or a more or less starched *Tehuana*, or even a servile copy of the Aztec Calendar or Sacrificial Stone. Indigenous art should be nothing more than a point of departure, and it should provide nothing more than guidance; but it is necessary to make it evolve. For we must keep in mind that we are no longer in that epoch, nor is our spirit the same as that of the Indians, nor are the elements of our work the same. To make nationalist art, we must fuse the essential part of our autochthonous art with our current countenance and our current feeling, but not in an external, that is to say theatrical, form but instead in an essential, spiritual form. The spectacle of our nature alone offers us a wide field for making nationalist painting, but by fusing that spectacle with the soul of that nature rather than expressing it in its more or less exterior form. Until today, with the exception of Roberto Montenegro, no one, using those elements, has produced a nationalist note. It takes little to satisfy the public, hence the success of the many Tehuanas in the musical review *Peluquería Nacional*,⁴ which, despite the efforts of María Conesa,⁵ have been nothing more than mockeries of the character

1 Federico E. Mariscal, “Saturnino Herrán: El más mexicano de los pintores y el más pintor de los mexicanos,” *El Pueblo*, December 29, 1918.

2 Translator’s note: “Cultísimo” translates as “highly cultured.” “Culto,” which means “cultured,” is a word that when it appeared in art criticism in Mexico City during the 1920s possessed derisive connotations of a class of urbanite intellectuals and amateur art enthusiasts who saw themselves as sophisticated enough to appreciate international avant-gardism.

3 Translator’s note: Jesús B. González was a poet and prominent figure in Mexico City literary circles who had written about Herrán’s work in the magazine *Revista de Revistas*.

4 Translator’s note: A musical review featuring women in indigenous costume that became popular during the early 1920s.

5 Translator’s note: Although Conesa was a widely celebrated actress, the meaning of this statement is that even despite her efforts, her Tehuana was nonetheless inauthentic.

of true Tehuanas. This is the same cause for the success of the commercial shows of Mr. Best [Maugard], of Mr. Garcia Núñez, and of Mr. Fernández.

To my mind, Herrán's work does not possess any Mexican qualities except for the types that he used as motifs. Everything in his work is anecdotal, without merit beyond its superb drawing. His work suffers from a very marked Spanish influence and has likewise many points of contact with the English Branwyng:⁶ his painting is essentially Spanish and this is thus how he approached painting his pictures of Mexican types, as though they could have been made in Ávila or Segovia. His palette has no personality, no special character that distinguishes it as Herrán's. There is a very similar case to Herrán in Argentina: that of Jorge Bermúdez. This painter, the American whose work is closest to that of Zuloaga, paints Argentinean types with a type of painting that is genuinely Spanish; I recall his *Santera*, which had many points of contact with the *Cofrade de San Miguel* by Herrán. I am the first to understand that one must cherish Herrán, but it must be for his precise value and without distorting the true character of his work. Herrán should be celebrated as a superb draftsman; his paintings are drawings with color. If the ill-fated artist had lived longer perhaps he would have produced work that was more modern, more of our time. Since he was an exceptional artist, we must be content with the museum-worthy treasures that he has left.

TRANSLATED BY HARPER MONTGOMERY

6 Translator's note: Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956) was a prolific English painter, printmaker, and muralist whose works were widely known in Europe and the United States. After studying with William Morris, he developed an illustrative, decorative style, and in 1930 was, along with Diego Rivera, commissioned to paint a series of murals for the Rockefeller Center.