



ENGLISH
VERSION

EL JUEGO y EL ARTE DE
LA MINIATURA
En el Museo del Estanquillo

The game and the art and of miniature at the Museo del Estanquillo

“The detective of the miniature”, that is what journalist Ángeles Vázquez called Carlos Monsiváis in 1993, because of the revalorization he spearheaded of artists such as Roberto Ruiz, Teresa Nava and the couple Teodoro Torres and Susana Navarro. Names that will sound familiar to people who visit the Museo del Estanquillo frequently, and whose work can be seen exhibited along with other creators the writer admired. It is important to note that 250 works that make up this exhibition are shown publicly for the first time.

Due to the huge fascination the chronicler felt for miniatures, the renowned collector Ricardo Pérez Escamilla said: “Carlos Monsiváis has his cats, and his miniatures. It is clear by now, ¿isn’t it?”. The phrase seems over the top if one takes into account all the works that the writer collected and which has been explored through different exhibitions in the museum. If we go by the numbers, photographs, graphic arts and caricatures are the largest collections. However, what Escamilla wanted to highlight was the relationship the author established with miniatures, one that could be called affectionate and playful (it has been dearly documented by the photographer Graciela Iturbide). Such an attitude was very much in mind when curating this show, so as to include in it objects that share that playful nature, like string puppets (some of them from the renowned Compañía Rosete Aranda), Saturnino Calleja’s small sized books, and the movable scenes created by Jalisco born Luis Ascanio Zenteno, a relatively obscure artist whom Monsiváis considered a “creator of the first degree”.

As we can see, miniatures make up an important part of Carlos Monsiváis’ collection. Adding up the pieces of the artists mentioned they amount to more than a thousand, and we are not even counting Alfredo Velázquez Lona, Guillermo Romero Amador y Gratierr, Eduardo Oliva Arias, Hipólito Sánchez and Arturo Carrillo Campos’ pieces. This exhibition emphasizes the particularities of each of these creators, which were greatly appreciated by the writer.

The show is divided in the following themes: the exploration of death in Mexican tradition; Don Juan Tenorio and string puppets; children’s stories and literary characters; scenes and characters of Mexican history and daily life, all of them themes that reappear in the chronicler’s work and are present in his collection.

Ana Catalina Valenzuela



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"Miniature in Mexico is protected and highlighted by an extraordinary tradition, especially after the 19th Century, which has allowed popular artists (here, the emphasis is on the word artists) to express their refinement, their precision, their irony, their sense of ensemble. The universe that fits in the palm of his hand is also the object that expands in our imagination until it becomes fond and obsessive, treasured by memory which manages to put it always first"

Carlos Monsiváis, *El vasto mundo de Alfredo Velázquez Lona*

"The Mexican toy: elemental, coy in its simplicity, beautiful in its own way, reveals the collective imagination made up of limits that transform in joyful limitations that become a tribute to unlimited fantasy"

Carlos Monsiváis, *Arte popular: lo invisible, lo siempre redescubierto, lo perdurable.*
Una revisión histórica

"...a modern poet [said] that every man has an image he will abandon the world for; how many will look for it in an old box of toys?"

Walter Benjamin, *in El mundo literario, June 1928*

"Playing is one of the ways of ascertaining our presence and it is still proof that living might be worth it"

David Huerta, *El juego y sus emblemas*

"Collectors are the world of objects' face readers. It is enough to watch them while they manipulate their things in the display case. As soon as they have them in their hands, they seem inspired, like a magician that can see the great beyond through them"

Walter Benjamin, *in El mundo literario, January 1930*

"...one might say, in a schopenhauerian way: 'the world is my imagination'. I possess the world depending on my ability to miniaturize it. But one also has to understand that in the miniature, values are condensed and enriched [...] One has to go beyond logic to live the greatness that exists within the small"*

Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of space*

*From philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (Poland 1788-Germany 1860)

"I am more comfortable in the world of miniature. For me, they are dominated worlds. Seeing them I feel worldifying waves flow from my being. The enormity of the world is nothing but a nebulous of worldly waves. The miniature, honestly lived, isolates me from the surrounding world, helps me resist the dissolution of the environment. Miniature is an exercise in metaphysical freshness; it allows us to create a world without to much risk. How relaxing, this exercise of a dominated world! The miniature rests without ever going numb. There, the imagination is ever vigilant and happy."

Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of space*



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"If the extraordinary case of Roberto Ruiz proves something is the futility of upholding the barrier between artisan and artist. He, undoubtedly, is an artisan; this is how he's been brought up, such is his humble and loving approach to miniature. Also, unequivocally, he is an artist, because of his imagination, that allows him to restate without repeating himself, because of the variety of forms and solutions, because of the concentrated elegance and gentleness."

Carlos Monsiváis, Roberto Ruiz: El baile de los esqueletos en parejas

"Doña Teresa's fantasy, like everyone who was a child before 1960, was sprung open by the puppets made by Rosete Aranda. That is why in her miniature remembrance she chose her masterpiece Don Juan Tenorio, as a tribute to the Rosete Aranda's work, arguably the most staged work in the history of Mexican theater, which gave her the opportunity to unite poetry, the Day of the Death, seduction classes and the pleasure of repeating each year every year what will continue to fascinate us every twelve months."

Carlos Monsiváis, Teresa Nava: Memoria y creación

"... the great law that governs all the rules and rhythms of the world of games: the law of repetition. We know that for the child, the soul of the game is there, that nothing makes him happier than the shout "again!" [...] Indeed, all profound lived experience looks, tirelessly, until the end, for repetition and return; seeks the replenishment of the primitive situation from which it came from. [...] That is not only the way of dominating experiences that appear primitively terrifying through the weakening, the cheeky provocation, through parody, but also through the repeated enjoyment of triumphs and victories, and each time more intensely so."

Walter Benjamin, in El mundo literario, June 1928

"For example, the dynamism of the miniature is frequently revealed through the stories where Tom Thimble is installed inside the horse's ear and dominates the forces that pull the plow."

Gaston Bachelard, Poetics of Space

"Each of the works of Don Alfredo is the result of the synthesis of what is evoked and what is dreamt, between miniaturized reality and the new perspective of the spectators who supply different dimensions to the popular work of art. Thanks to the magic, to the great technical ability, to the intelligence that distributes ensembles and figures in the smallest space, to the spectators of the work –I speak for everyone to speak for myself– who are dominated by the paradox of the origins: we grow in order to fit into the miniature, we shrink to adjust to the requirements of the universe."

Carlos Monsiváis, El vasto mundo de Alfredo Velázquez Lona



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The portentous life of death

“And to rid it of its main advantage, we must follow the road opposite to the ordinary; let us strip it of its strangeness, let us be familiar, used to it. Let us not think of anything more frequently than death”.

Michel de Montaigne, Essays

Carlos Monsiváis mentioned regarding death in popular art that: “...in this symbolic journey, nothing compares to the strength of myths regarding the relationship of Mexicans with death [...] The production is ample, and informs both catholic rites and ‘pagan’ festivities, of manifestations of love for the dead and delight in being alive, memory and renovation”. And he clarifies: “Mexicans, as any other person from every other country, certainly does not love death”. The traditions he describes can be seen represented with meticulous effort in the two altars to the dead created by Eduardo Oliva Arias that might have been inspired by any Mexican household.

A title that might be suitable for the works in this section, created by Roberto Ruiz and Alfredo Velázquez Lona, might be Fray Joaquin de Bolaños 1792 work, La portentosa vida de la muerte emperatriz de los sepulcros, vengadora de los agravios del Altísimo (The portentous life of empress death of the tombs, avenger of offences against the Highest) where the author states in its prologue: “Death is insipid, but to make its memory less bitter, I present it here in gold, or dressed up as a joke, as novelty, as wit. Here it is, as story, because I want to amuse”.

In these pieces we see happy skeletons doing what live people do: playing musical instruments, write books, go to the dentist, weave in a loom, take pictures, etcetera. But these same artists also showcase Death alongside the devil or together in covens without foregoing their playful character; in these creations Death does not induce fear, it provokes laughter or even tenderness. The imaginary cemetery created by Guillermo Romero y Gratierr gives us a sense of loneliness and we might not want to be there at night. However, the fact that these work are miniatures gives both the spectators as well as the artist the opportunity of imagining death and the whole world as being under our dominion because they can fit in the palm of our hand.



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Life is a dream and theater, play

“Ever since I was a child, I’ve enjoyed miniatures terribly and have found in them the ancient medieval fascination for the Homunculus”*

Carlos Monsiváis

**Homunculus: tiny man thought to be created by alchemists in their laboratory*

In theater, imagination and repetition go hand in hand with play. The playwright proposes a team made up of stage designers, gaffers, actors and actresses, etc.; an imaginary world that is presented again and again. Theater imitates reality. Actors and actresses pretend to be other people, or in the case of puppets and marionettes, a puppet master impresses upon the puppet a dose of reality that corresponds to its part in the play. Actors do not complain about having to personify a character night after night, because the scenes are played as if they were being represented for the first time.

Twenty-four of the theaters in exhibition –three of them belonging to the famous Compañía Rosete Aranda– were part of the cast of a Don Juan Tenorio play, a theater work that, both with live actors or puppets, as Carlos Monsiváis said, is one of the most staged in the history of Mexican theater. Its author, Spain’s José Zorrilla, created a script in which the protagonist, the one that gives the play its name, goes through different adventures propelled by its outlandish inclination to seduction. His adventures tend to be comical, even when he is faced with beings from the underworld.

This exhibition includes, besides the aforementioned puppets and other seven from the Compañía Rosete Aranda, two marionettes by Lola Cueto; the homage in miniature to Don Juan Tenorio created by Teresa Nava; the history of Greek and Classical theater by the Torres Navarro couple as well as four copies of the Galería del Teatro Infantil. Colección de comedias para niños o títeres, created by the famous engraver José Guadalupe Posada.





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Should I tell it to you again?

"[...] I'm sure that the process that gives childhood an extraordinary privilege: being the formative time and space where every person has access to their own fantasy, of being as free as their ability to extract lessons from, for example, authors like Perrault, Andersen, Jules Verne, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Michael Ende, or for example from the universe of toys that we no longer regard disdainfully thanks to Blade Runner, Ridley Scott's classic film, where the toy maker ages years every hoer, and were the toys are the liveliest in a sphere of disintegration, decadence and chronic repetition".

Carlos Monsiváis, La infancia, universalidad de la imaginación.

Johan Huizinga, historian of culture, affirmed in Homo Ludens: "As with poetry, myths emerges from the sphere of play". In this exhibition the concept of miniature is included along with all the other concepts. Here, some of the most important characters of the history of literature, such as Beatrix and Virgil from the Divine Comedy, reinterpreted by Alfredo Velázquez Lona, which must be seen through a magnifying glass, as well as a dozen characters from Greek mythology, including the daring Prometheus who stole fire (knowledge) from the gods; Venus and Neptune, gods of beauty and the sea, who the Torres Navarro couple scaled into the dimensions of what can be handled. The exhibit also includes famous Mexican authors Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Carlos Monsiváis.

The scale does not reflect the value of the characters or the scenes; quite the opposite, as Gaston Bachelard writes in Poetics of space: "The miniature adopts the universe's dimensions. The great, once again, is contained within the small. To use a magnifying glass is to pay attention, but isn't paying attention a way of using a magnifying glass? Attention by itself is a magnifying glass". In this section, magnifying glasses are in order to appreciate three works by Roberto Ruiz: a unicorn and two scenes from Don Quijote de la Mancha. Luis Ascanio Zenteno chose to animate Cervantes' work through a wood stage with a cardboard and string mechanism. He presents four animated episodes: one of Greek origin (a faun spying on some muses), and a Celtic one (a knight rescuing a damsel kidnapped by a dragon), a medieval troubadour's serenade and a fun party thrown by animals in a kitchen that could very well have been inspired by the tales published by Spanish editor Saturnino Calleja, who has a selection of his small books for children in which the sizes of people and things determines their world view. That is why Tom Thumb can us a fat needle as a sword, or a child can ride a small chicken.



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The earnestness of play in History

“What [Huizinga] calls his “first contact with history” happened when he was a six year old. A parade that represented the entrance of count Edward into Groningen, in 1506, impressed him and stuck in his mind as the most beautiful sight he had seen, with the count’s shining armor and the flags waving. It was history in a parade, and as a parade, it was also a game of illusions.”

Ernst Gombrich, La gran seriedad del juego. Reflexiones sobre “Homo ludens” de Johan Huizinga (1872-1945)

War and the law are among the themes studied by Johan Huizinga in Homo Ludens. Even in these topics the German historian found a playful component by associating the warring and judicial principle to the competitive inclination and the creation of rules in children’s games. According to Huizinga both characteristics infuse seriousness into our games. How can it be otherwise if both war and laws greatly determine the make up of our world and its history?

The minor characters created by Teodoro Torres and Susana Navarro remind us of toy soldiers children play with. Even though the couple did not intend to create toys, the scale of their tiny works undoubtedly lead us to the appreciation of the most solemn events through a lens of tenderness. The same thing happens, for example, with the Cuadro histórico de Benito Juárez, created by Alfredo Velázquez Lona, which includes scenes of the Juárez administration proclaiming the Reforma laws, or the execution of Emperor Maximilian. In Hipólito Vázquez Sánchez’s woodcarvings depicting battles between Aztecs and Spanish, one does not think of the bloody combat that took place in real life, but in scenes from a kids’ fight.

However, this approach to history should not be disregarded because of its playful nature. In fact, the particular observation of these themes in miniature form can also be seen as an effective didactic tool for understanding the past without losing sight that one is appreciating works of art.

In the Torres Navarro couple’s case, Monsiváis familiarized them with 19th century chronicles thanks to the lithographs he showed them. It is possible to appreciate this, for example, in the case of the José María Morelos monument, erected in the Plaza de la Guardiola, and located today in the Tepito barrio. The piece presented here allows us to see how the Torres Navarro translated the three-dimensional vistas of the monument drawn in 1865 by Hesiquio Iriarte, an engraver from the San Carlos Academy, and later, satirically, represented by Constantino Escalante for La Orquesta newspaper.



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The tales of the unrecognized

“If a collector does not proceed in a child-like spirit, he is lost. It would be unforgivable if he went along in a childish spirit, but being child like in this sense is something to value, since it embodies the joy of first discovery [...] [A collector is propelled] by the desire to rescue something from the insult of disappearance, and the noble and sincere desire that other people might see it... some day”.

Carlos Monsiváis

As a collector, Carlos Monsiváis recognized the value of works few others had noticed or that were disdained within the art market, as happened with caricature and with the works included in this exhibition. The writer considered them authentic expressions, even though they were not affiliated to academic circuits or signed by renowned authors. Monsiváis included these artists into Mexican art history.

In the “The tales of the unrecognized” section of his book The Practice of Everyday Life, French historian Michel de Certeau talks about production processes and how they relate to politics or power behind certain classificatory practices that frame objects as being “popular”, and thus leading to their contemptuous appreciation. Monsiváis follows De Certeau when he states that “(the term popular is of the people) and devolves into a sentence: if their distinctive trait is their anonymous character then generations of artists, regarded as artisans, will be the “spokespersons” of instinct, and with this comes the inevitable salary gap, and the miserable prices, then as now, deteriorate the process”. This exhibition aims to echo Monsiváis’ considerations and to bring the Estanquillo’s public closer to the production of authors featured here. We do not know some of their names or their careers. Nevertheless, the artistic quality and their genuine character are evident for all to appreciate.

Also, this exhibition seeks to recognize daily life as being a part of History, much in the same way the chronicler Monsiváis did: to go beyond the study of politicians, military men and lawyers’ acts and to focus on the people in the street, the people whose name is unknown but how undoubtedly are part of History. However, we have to point out that these pieces are not intended as precise portraits of society but as expressions of jocular, joy and beauty present in our everyday activities and in the people who do them everyday. Undoubtedly the artists modeled themselves after the Romantic costumbrist movement of the 19th century, because one of its intended aims was the construction of a national identity: Mexican national identity.

* Carlos Monsiváis, “Las artes populares: hacia una historia del canon”, in Arte popular, Cinco siglos, p. 19.



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Tradition and beliefs

“By the end of the 20th Century, Mexican popular art, market crashes and personal penury notwithstanding, regardless of erratic government behavior and lack of promotion, continues to dazzle us with its power of representation, fantasy and formal enjoyment”.

*Carlos Monsiváis, Arte popular: lo invisible, lo siempre redescubierto, lo perdurable.
Una revisión histórica.*

Eventhough they are linked to spirituality, both Huzinga and De Certeau consider tradition and beliefs both contain a playful or festive character. Carnivals, for example, are festivities that came into being in ancient civilizations in order to reconcile everything on the face of the Earth: moral judgements, good and evil; predators and preys make a truce to celebrate life, and in this exhibition this is represented by Alfredo Velázquez Lona in a sort of party within a colorful building.

With its Prehispanic origin, the voladores ceremony is today mainly associated with Papantla, the city in Veracruz, but it developed in the mesoamerican peoples of the central and western regions of the country. The dangerous dance five men perform atop of a pole around twenty meters high is related to the creation of the universe and the five Cardinal points (East, West, North, South and Center). Here, Luis Ascanio Zenteno's version is exhibited, along with a Graciela Iturbide photograph where we can see Carlos Monsiváis clearly enjoying activating the work created by the Jalisco artist.

In Catholic religion –spoused by most Mexicans– there are family or community rituals practiced with fervor. That is the case of the arrangement of the Nativity scene, in this case interpreted in a miniature by Luis Ascanio Zenteno and Roberto Ruiz. The posadas are undoubtedly part of Mexican tradition and they represent the Virgin Mary's search for a place where she could deliver his son Jesus. Alfredo Velázquez Lona creates a detailed and multicolored representation. Regarding communal rituals, processions come to mind. Here we present one that comes from the Chamula people in Chiapas, created by the Torres Navarro couple. In that sense, patron saints' festivities are an essential part of Catholic religion, because for many Mexican families the calendar of saints' days is decisive in choosing their children's names. These celebrations are represented by Teresa Nava –one of Carlos Monsiváis' favorite artists and from whom he collected 140 miniatures–, and by Eduardo Oliva Arias, who creates a mixture of symbolic elements such as clocks or skeletons and sculpted, painted and barnished chalk mounted on buttons. The result reminds us of Canadian totems.

Scenes dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe created by Nava and Oliva Arias are included in this exhibition, whose worship has undoubtedly impacted Mexican history and society.