

# ¿QUÉ ME VES? HÉCTOR GARCÍA CRONISTA DE LA LENTE



## What Are You Looking at?

Héctor García, photographic chronicler

### What do we see when we see Héctor García's photographs?

Héctor García Cobo is one of Mexico's most essential photographers.

Born in Mexico City in 1923 during Mexico's post-revolutionary reconstruction period, he spent his childhood in an impoverished *vecindad* in La Candelaria de los Patos, a deprived neighborhood in the center of the capital. Living a life of poverty, neglect, child labor, and adventure, García was wayward in his youth: he appeared before the juvenile courts and was detained in a correctional facility. He also worked as a laborer in the United States, washing dishes, waiting tables, sweeping streets...

Upon his return to Mexico in 1946, he was hired as an office boy at *Celuloide* magazine. The publication's director, Edmundo Valadés, recognized his talent as a photographer and sent him to study at the Mexican Cinematographic Institute, where Manuel Álvarez Bravo was a teacher. There, Héctor García learned how to use a camera and became a professional photojournalist and artist.

His photographic career flourished during the post-war years (1945–1980), a period in which the

welfare state became established. Mexico enjoyed solid economic and industrial growth and daily life changed dramatically for Mexicans, particularly in Mexico City. However, this progress was uneven and full of contradictions—the subject of many films, songs, press articles, and deep philosophical debates.

A number of writers and visual artists documented this era in Mexico, notably Salvador Novo, Elena Poniatowska, and Carlos Monsiváis (texts), Héctor García, Nacho López, and Rodrigo Moya (photography), Alberto Beltrán and Abel Quezada (cartoons), Salvador *Chava* Flores (lyrics), Gilberto Martínez Solares and "El Indio" Fernández (film), and Gabriel Vargas and Eduardo del Río "Rius" (comics).

Written chronicles often needed visual support, and some of the great authors worked closely with photographers and artists: Novo published and illustrated his book *México* with photographs by Rodrigo Moya, Poniatowska collaborated with Alberto Beltrán in *Todo empezó en Domingo*, and Héctor García's talent as a photographer helped Carlos Monsiváis in several projects.

Héctor García was a born visual chronicler. An effective photojournalist; a creator of icons. The curator of the photography at New York's MOMA, Susan Kismaric, wrote that "Héctor García's photographs have told the story of his country."<sup>1</sup> Kismaric is right. It is impossible to understand mid-1950s Mexico City without the benefit of Héctor García's gaze. Some of his images tell part of the visual history of 20th-century Mexico. Among his most famous images are *Señora Sociedad*, *Niño en el vientre de concreto*, *Siqueiros*, *El Coronelazo en Lecumberri*, *Sus caracolitos*, *Entre el progreso y el desarrollo*, and *Ojo insólito*.

If Susan Sontag is right and that "to collect photographs is to collect the world,"<sup>2</sup> then to collect Héctor García's photographs is to collect Mexico (and Mexico City in particular). To see Héctor García's work is to see Mexico.

Rafael Barajas "El Fisgón"

<sup>1</sup> Susan Kismaric. *Héctor García*. In *Héctor García*, Turner/DGE/ Equilibrista/ Conaculta, Mexico City, 2004, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 1977.

# Héctor García's Childhood

Héctor García's life seems to confirm the idea that "your destiny is determined in childhood."

The photographer often recounted how his mother had to leave for work before dawn and left him alone in a dirty room in total darkness:

You see, in the room where we lived in a courtyard of the *vecindad* on Calle Juan de la Granja, in this neighborhood called La Candelaria de los Patos, my mother left me tied up to one of the legs of the cot so that I wouldn't go out onto the street. It was windowless, and in the darkness I was completely alone, crying and crying until I heard the first voices of the morning from outside, and between the bars and holes in the door the light began to penetrate the shadows, which in turn increased the clarity that offered an endless parade of enlarged figures as if seen through a magnifying glass, calming me down and leaving me entranced. I could see my neighbor Pancho and the other kids walking freely down the *vecindad* passageway, or the porter passing by with bags on his back, the honey seller. So I had all the *vecindad* projected onto the wall: street vendors, water carriers, heated arguments...<sup>3</sup>

From a very young age, alone and locked up in a room, the future photographer became fascinated by the phenomenon of the camera obscura, described by Johannes Kepler in 1604, which he used to develop the telescope and photography.

This scene explains Héctor García's fascination for photography, street life, and travel. It also explains the artist's lifelong curiosity and empathy for children, especially the poor and the abandoned. Héctor García's images of children are always emotionally powerful. These works create a very intimate visual whole. In his portraits of the young, Héctor seemed to transport them back to the world of light and shadow where he found solace as a young boy.



<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Juan de la Cabada. *Héctor García: Pueblo y fotógrafo*. Reproduced in: *Héctor García, Turner/DGE/ Equilibrista/ Conaculta*, Mexico City, 2004, pp. 181-182.

## Héctor García and Mexico City

As a child, Héctor García had explored the streets of Mexico City as an itinerant worker and vagrant. You might say that his work as a photojournalist was a natural extension of this period of wandering the capital's streets.

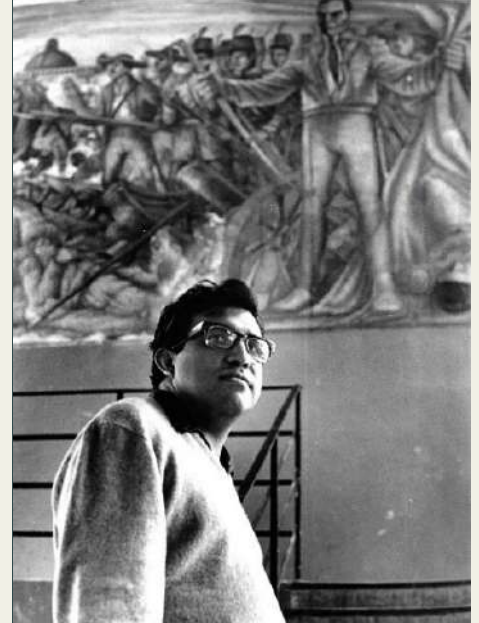
As a press photographer, he captured the joys and troubles of Mexico's hardscrabble neighborhoods as well as its high-society scenes. His eyes were always open to social injustices and he never stopped taking portraits of his city's *vecindades*, slums, and garbage dumps.

In his work as a photojournalist, he captured moments, events, incidents, and great tragedies such as the earthquake of 1957, the railway workers' movement of 1958, and the student protests of 1968.



## Carlos Monsiváis and Héctor García

Carlos Monsiváis had a long personal and professional relationship with Héctor García.



Both grew up in poor, popular neighborhoods, and began their careers in journalism. Both witnessed Mexico's transformation and understood modernity and injustice, low and high culture. They complemented each other's work; Monsiváis's journalism (and other projects) often required photographic illustration. Héctor García's images illustrate several of the author's books (as well as

the album by Los Tepetatles rock group and Fiesta Hip comic strip).

The writer and the photographer were also close friends and lived relatively close to each other. Carlos would often call his neighbor Héctor to help him take "urgent" photographs. As a result, we can now enjoy pictures of Monsiváis dressed up as a priest, a soccer player, and a Don Juan.





## Photojournalism

After the fall of the Spanish Republic in 1939, some remarkable European photographers settled in Mexico: the German Walter Reuter, the Spanish Mayo brothers and the Hungarian Kati Horna.

In the post-war years there was a boom of experimentation in the world of photojournalism and documentary photography. This was the time of Henri-Cartier Bresson, Robert Doisneau, Gyula Brassai, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, Endre Ernő Friedmann (Robert Capa), and many other leading photojournalists. In 1947, Capa, Cartier Bresson, and other colleagues founded Magnum, the world's first agency of independent photographers. In the 1950s, new industrial processes made it possible

to increase shutter speeds and to perfect color photography.

Héctor García was part of the growth of press photography in Mexico and benefited from all these innovations (Héctor's colleagues even nicknamed him *El Ciclotrón*). Indeed, he founded his first agency in 1950: Foto Press.

The Mexican press gave greater importance to photography in the post-war years, and the newspapers were filled with photographic reports. Héctor García was one of the leading photojournalists of his time. He was a star photographer.