

Las Golondrinas

As a student of Mexican history - especially its ancient, pre-Colombian past - I have always felt a powerful spiritual connection to the country. I cannot walk down a rural road or a city one either without witnessing many often unconscious connections that the Mexico of today shares still with its past.

In a dry, dusty field just off a country road about twenty minutes by car from San Miguel Allende where I annually vacation at Martha Hyder's magnificent "Casa Quebrada" there stands a small abandoned chapel. The locals tell me that it was built in the 1570's when the early Spanish friars were busy converting the indians. Infact this petit and charmingly primitive building was built entirely with indigenous labor just twenty years after Cortes seized power from the Aztecs.

Although the church did at times exploit the native peoples and committed other excesses, in the early years following the Conquest the first wandering mendicant friars attempted to spread their utopian vision of a universal church, a heaven on earth among the conquered peoples, and often alone stood between the indians and the brutal treatment by the greedy Conquistadors and great land owners.

This simple building with only a hint of ornamentation manifests that innocent faith that sustained Saint Francis and his followers whose daily examples of simplicity, kindness and poverty greatly impressed the indians and reminded them of the hard and selfless lives of their own priests. In a few more decades the stone and stucco of the chapel will return to the earth from which it was made, reclaimed by nature. It will be just one more metamorphosis in a long history of changes the church in a larger sense has undergone in Mexico over the centuries. Some of these changes have involved the incorporation of ancient beliefs into the canons of the Catholic Church itself.

As I painted the study from which this watercolor was done I was struck by the comings and goings of several pairs of barn swallows nesting in the sooty chamber of the chapel. For centuries the swallow was thought to bury itself in mud during the cold months, only to reemerge when the weather warmed again. In a symbolic sense the swallows literally "died" and were reborn in the spring. Thus in many of the world's cultures the swallow was synonymous with the endless cycles of birth, death and resurrection, and this is what I saw as I painted this picture.

Though the mexican church has gone through so many traumatic changes over the centuries as the surviving native peoples have witnessed, yet the cycles of nature from which their ancient gods were derived have remained remarkably the same and have given the people a sense of rhythm and continuity not found in western culture. In the wind, the rain, the boundless earth and the light of the sun the people had always beheld the power of their gods. And the old deities did not completely vanish in the new, more abstract and law-centered faith which seemed to worshipp an impossibly distant god.

And so what I saw that day in that field near San Miguel was not just an ancient and abandoned church building battered by time and circumstance but still standing. Rather what I beheld was a house of faith abandoned by people whose descendants no doubt have carried the seeds of that faith to another place to give it a new birth. Now left to the nesting swallows, the crumbling chapel still offers a place of renewal to those very birds whose own ancient symbolism was all about life, death and renewal. I think Saint Francis would have approved.

(STUART)

Explanation of Painting's Meaning
Jos. Galondrinas "The Swallows"