Contributor: Deborah Caplow

**Herrán, Saturnino**

(Born Saturnino Herrán Guinchard: 1887—Aguascalientes; Died: 1918—Aguascalientes)

Mexican painter Saturnino Herrán is considered a precursor of the **Mexican Mural Movement** of the 1920s, although he died before this movement took shape. As a child he attended painting and drawing classes at the Aguascalientes Academy of Science, and later moved with his family to Mexico City where he began to study painting and drawing at the Academy of San Carlos in 1904. His teachers were artists Germán Gedovius, Leandro Izaguirre and Antonio Fabrés; fellow students at the Academy at this time included **Diego Rivera** and Roberto Montenegro. In 1910 Herrán became a drawing teacher at the Academy himself. He painted Mexican subjects in a **Symbolist**, **Post-Impressionist** style, influenced by Catalan modernism, as well as Spanish Baroque painters Diego Velazquez and José Ribera. He was also impressed by the murals of British artist Frank Brangwyn. He became interested in the idea of mural painting, and started a monumental work, *Nuestros* *dioses* (Our Gods), in 1914. This was to have expressed the syncretism of the history of Mexico embodied in the spiritual practices of the Aztecs and the Spanish during the Conquest of Mexico. However, Herrán died before he could complete the mural.

Herrán’s images show a mastery of the Classical tradition taught at the Academy, the rich, saturated colors of Post-Impressionism, and the elegance of **Art Nouveau**. His early Symbolist works demonstrate the influence of fin-de-siecle decadence in their subject matter, their languid passivity and sinuous lines. In *El beso de la muerte* (The Kiss of Death, 1903), the artist drew a bat-winged skeleton embracing a naked man, a willing victim who seems to welcome death. A self-portrait from the same time portrays Herrán with a skull attached to his head. The artist also created idealised images of rural and urban Mexicanworkers. Paintings such as *Labor* of 1908 and *Molino de vidrio* (The Glass Mill) (1909) demonstrate his sympathy for the plight of oppressed workers by showing the physical strain of their toil. In 1910 he received a commission to paint a diptych for the School of Arts and Crafts of the Ministry of Public Instruction. The two parts were called *La alegoría de construción* (The Allegory of Construction) and *La alegor*í*a de labor* (The Allegory of Work); they portray massive figures of men at work in building sites, one of the first portrayals of urban workers in twentieth-century Mexico.

Herrán’s works from the teens focus on indigenous themes, as in paintings such as *La ofrenda* (The Offering, 1913), a colorful oil painting of indigenous flower vendors transporting marigolds for the Day of the Dead. Painted in rich, saturated colors, this image presents a romantic view of Mexican indigenous culture, and like other works by Herrán, the image presages the *indigenismo* (Indigenism) of the 1920s and ’30s in the paintings of Rivera and others.



*La* *ofrenda* (The Offering), 1913, oil on canvas, 182 X 210 cm.

Localización: Museo Nacional de Arte. INBA. México DF

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saturnino_Herr%C3%A1n_-_The_offering_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg>

*La Tehuana* (Woman from Tehuantepec, 1914), modeled by his wife, Rosario Arellano depicts a woman wearing the typical clothing of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a region later popularized by **Diego Rivera** and **Frida Kahlo**, among others. However, other than the dress and head covering there are no specific references to the culture of Tehuantepec in Herrán’s image, and the work emphasizes the subject’s attractiveness and desirability. The artist was one of the few Mexican artists to paint nudes at this time. His 1910 triptych *La leyenda de los volcanes* (The Legend of the Volcanoes) is a depiction of the myth of Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl, the two massive volcanoes visible from Mexico City; following the fable, Herrán depicted Popocatépetl as a handsome youth and Iztaccíhuatl as a beautiful young woman, in erotic, late Neoclassical poses. Herrán exhibited this work in 1910 in an exhibit of Mexican painting organized by artist Dr. Atl during the Centennial of Mexico’s independence from Spain. This exhibition was created in opposition to the government-sponsored show of Spanish art. In addition to his fine arts work, Herrán worked as a book illustrator for Editorial Cultura and as an illustrator for the Museo Nacional de Historia between 1905 and 1910.

In his final work, *Nuestros dioses* (Our Gods), Herránintended to express the syncretism of the Aztec and Catholic religions, and by extension, the idea of mestizaje. He began this work in 1914 as a triptych for the National Theater (now in the Palacio de Bellas Artes) in Mexico City. He left numerous studies for the mural, the most developed of which is a large oil sketch for the left side that portrays Aztec worshippers facing a central deity, which sold at auction in 2013. Sketches for the right side portray Spanish Conquistadores and priests kneeling in devotion. The center section combines a figure of the terrifying Aztec goddess Coatlicue, draped with skulls, hands and hearts, with the crucified Christ, superimposed on her massive body. The dualism of the Aztec goddess, half serpent and half jaguar, is compounded in the suffering Christ. The expressive power of this unfinished work attests to the Herrán’s unique vision; had he lived, he would undoubtedly been involved with the Mexican Mural Movement. However, he died of an intestinal ailment in 1918, before he had a chance to complete *Nuestros dioses*.

**Further Reading**

Castañeda, J. *Saturnino Herrán 1887-1918* (1987). Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Arte; Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas; Aguascalientes, Mexico: Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Gutierrez, H. and Victor Muñoz, *Saturnino Herrán: instante subjetivo* (2010).

Mexico City: Insituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes.

Muñoz, Victor, *Herran: La pasión y el principio* (1994). Mexico City: Bital Grupo Financiero.

Ramírez, F. (1976) *Saturnino Herrán 1887-1918*, Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

*Saturnino Herrán 1887-1918* (1987) Museo Nacional de Arte (Mexico); Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas; Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes; Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (Mexico).

**List of Works:**

*La alegoría de construcción* (The Allegory of Construction) and *La alegor*í*a de labor* (The Allegory of Work), 1910, murals.

*El beso de la muerte* (The Kiss of Death), 1903, ink drawing?

*Labor* or *El trabajo* (Labor or Work)*,* 1908, oil on canvas .

*La leyenda de los volcanes* (The Legend of the Volcanoes), 1910, oil on canvas.

*Molino de vidrio* (The Glass Mill), 1909, oil on canvas.

*Nuestros dioses,* 1914, various media.

*La* *ofrenda* (The Offering), 1913, oil on canvas.

*La Tehuana* (Woman from Tehuantepec, 1914, oil on canvas.