

# When the dragon takes the horse's place: a post-colonial character in Xul Solar's *criollo* piece

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## RESUMO

A figura de São Jorge na luta contra o dragão, que tanto aparece nas pinturas de Kandinsky, funcionava como um xamã guerreiro e curador dos males da sociedade moderna. Xul Solar, representante da vanguarda *criolla* argentina, na crença de que a América, com seus sistemas de mitos e crenças, revelava um espaço espiritual, no qual se desenvolveria a nova humanidade, toma o dragão para subverter os fluxos da colonização. Na aquarela *Drago*, de 1927, tida como a melhor representação de sua utopia de unidade latino-americana, um dragão engalanado pelas bandeiras da América Latina desliza por sobre o mar em direção à Europa, saudado pelas bandeiras das Metrôpoles. O homem montado no dragão segura um bastão encimado por um triângulo (que para Kandinsky era o símbolo da vida espiritual), para levar ao Velho Mundo a mensagem do Mundo Novo. Palavras-chave: mito da serpente; deus e códices; pós-colonialismo.

## ABSTRACT

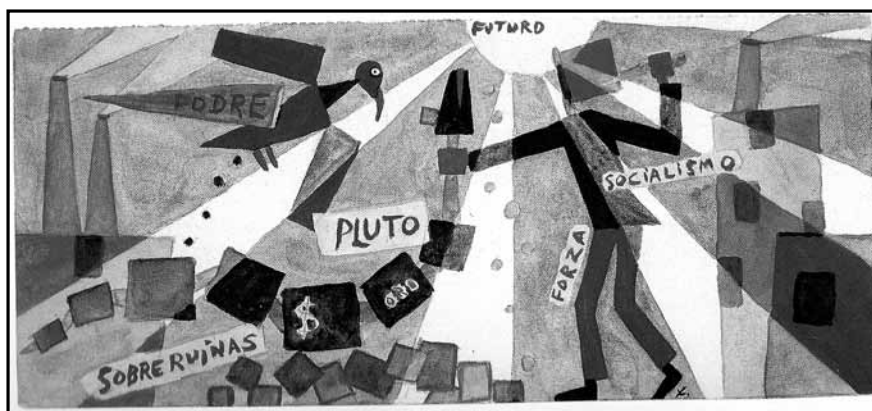
The figure of St. George fighting the dragon, which appears so often in the paintings of Kandinsky, functioned as a warrior shaman and healer of the ills of modern society. Xul Solar, a representative of the Argentinean *criolla* vanguard and the belief that America, with its myths and belief systems, revealed a spiritual space in which a new humanity would develop, uses the dragon's role to subvert the flow of colonization. In the 1927 watercolor *Drago*, regarded as the best representation of his utopia of Latin American unity, a dragon adorned by the flags of Latin America glides over the sea towards Europe, greeted by the flags of the metropolitan countries. The man riding the dragon holds a staff topped by a triangle (which for Kandinsky was the symbol of spiritual life) to carry the message of the New World to the Old World.

Keywords: serpent myth; gods and codices; post-colonialism.

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The mounted figure who appears so often in Kandinsky's paintings, functioned as a warrior shaman and a healer in the fight against the materialism of modern society.<sup>1</sup> In the position of Saint George the knight performs the role of the liberator of society personified by the virgin. This theme in which Saint George attacks the dragon is frequent in Russian painting and in Bavarian *ex-votos*. Kandinsky painted the holy warrior in numerous variations, even in his most abstract phase (for example *Picture with White Border*, from 1913).<sup>2</sup> The figure of Saint George fighting the dragon illustrates the cover of the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, edited by Kandinsky and Franz Marc in 1911 as a manifesto of the Munich primitivist group. Although he shared with other artists the taste for archaic culture and developed abstract art, Kandinsky's abstract primitivism differed due to the advocacy of spirituality. He saw the visual references of old Russia as a means of evoking spiritual ties and an authentic culture. The figure of the knight in his pictures incarnated the idea of this search, the symbol of the struggle of the spirit against materialism and the victory of the vanguard over tradition.



*Podré*, 1919. Watercolor on paper.

The Argentinean artist Xul Solar (1887-1963) was also concerned with the theme of the death of the dragon, as can be seen in his 1919 watercolor *Podré*. The word *podré*, which in *Neocriollo*, an artificial language invented by Xul, means *power*, appears alongside a bird which everything indicates is announcing the new epoch. Starting in the upper part of the painting, a large sun, inside of which can be read the word 'future' throws its rays across the picture, dividing it into two spaces: on the left are the symbols which report to us the representations of capitalism; and on the right, those of socialism. In the foreground

over this structure, positioned on the right is a man whose head formed by a red flag reminds us of the symbol of the Russian Revolution and leftwing movements, at least from the Paris Commune onwards. Over the man are the words *strength* and *socialism*. The man is hitting the head of a serpent, whose body is formed of small green square figures which can be adduced to be paper currency, which was crawling on the opposite side of the picture over a pile of ruins, with the mark of the dollar on its back, as well as the words *oro* (gold) and *pluto* (in ancient Greek this meant rich, one further metaphor to symbolize the serpent as a representative of capitalism). In this way the artist composes in a painting a literal narrative of the opposition between socialism and capitalism and the belief that the latter is about to crumble.

The death of the dragon is portrayed by Xul Solar in two other watercolours. In the 1922 *Hombre y dragón* a large serpent horizontally occupies the length of the picture in a background illuminated by sunrays. A little to the right in a vertical position a man is holding a weapon in the form of a lightning bolt, with which he is ready to hit the head of the dragon. In addition to the sun rays, the scene is lit by candlesticks, giving it a ritualistic aspect.

In the 1923 *Drago San Jorge* the scene of the dragon's death appears once again. Here the man, positioned on the right of the picture, is identified as St. George by the words which Xul inserts over him. The man is mounted on a circle, which suggests to us the formal representation that Kandinsky chose to represent the knight in his abstract paintings. In his left hand the man is holding a standard with St. George's cross. In his right hand he holds a sword pointed in the direction of the sectioned body of the dragon, which crossed the picture horizontally from the left to the right. The pictorial work once again induces mystic aspects, part of Xul Solar's thinking. In the upper part there is a red sun and in the lower, a path of light where St. George passes, flanked by skulls, cactuses, and strokes which could suggest thorns or crosses.

In these three works – *Podré*, *Hombre y dragón* and *Drago San Jorge* –, we can clearly find the configuration of the theme of the struggle of St. George against the dragon as a sign of a spiritual conflict against materialism, worked by Kandinsky in his abstract formulations. Xul Solar's entire production was marked by this faith in the possibility of art to permit access to a spiritual world and in the role of the artist gifted with spirituality, who had eyes to see what science could not explain.

A short while after his arrival in Europe, Xul acquired the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*. Enthusiastic, he wrote a postcard to his father, showing himself to be confident and full of high spirits, after discovering that he had been work-

ing alone on a trend that would be the most important of the future.<sup>3</sup> Xul Solar remained in Europe for 12 years (1912-1924), spending time in London, Paris, Florence, Milan, Turin and Munich, in the middle of a spiritual revival which allowed him contacts with the theosophy inspired aesthetics in the writings of Mondrian, and with the messianic and religious mysticism found in the picturesque practice and theory of Malevich.

In Kandinsky's *Do espiritual na arte* Xul had found a concrete reference to what had helped him confirm the intentionality of his art, ideally linked to anti-materialism, without however actually developing his own visual language. Xul excelled at a form of expression which communicated his spiritual messages, making recurrent use of symbols, and the peculiar repertoire of his atemporal universal and spiritual world: numbers, signs, arrows, serpents, dragons, birds, angels, the sun, the moon, stars, eggs, flags, hills, stairs, masks, pre-Colombian gods, Egyptian figures, stylized human figures, ruins, trees, symbols he designed himself and others from philosophical and religious traditions (pre-Columbian, Chinese, Indian, cabalistic, tarot, alchemy, zodiac, the Buddhist swastika, the star of David and other Christian symbols). The elements are recurrent; the compositions and the formal conceptions of his watercolors and temperas vary. Xul based his visual solutions on the juxtaposition of symbols in imaginary spaces, essentially formed of colors, transparencies and structural. Visually, he is close to Paul Klee. However, while in the works of Klee some graphic elements are repeated, including arrows, numbers and words, in Xul the symbols are even more diverse and more constant, and also assume the hermetic content of his occultist references.

## MEXICANIDAD

Xul Solar would find in Europe an environment suitable to a young artist, musician and painter, who had declared himself shortly before leaving to be, "very studious of the bases of culture, especially symbolism and religion, helped by his philosophic understanding of astrology."<sup>4</sup> Arriving in London in 1912, he remained there for a few days before going to Paris. Among his walks through the city he went to the British Museum, where there was a strong presence of objects from indigenous American antiquity. The 1889 Exhibition had been held there, from which Gauguin had copied Aztec sculptures.<sup>5</sup>

During a second period in London on other business – between November 1919 and May 1920 –, Xul studied African, pre-Colombian and Oriental symbols,<sup>6</sup> in the vogue of primitivism which permeated European art. The

*Mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) constructed in Mexico by the *muralistas*, which made indigenous culture visible and celebrated, was incorporated by European artistic primitivism. Between 1908 and 1910, Rivera had travelled through various countries, including France, England, Belgium and Holland before settling in Paris in 1911, where he was especially influenced by cubism, but also reinforced the Mexican imaginary ideal among artists.<sup>7</sup> Another example is that of the painter Jean Charlot (1889-1979), who had emigrated to Mexico in 1921, participated in muralism and produced more than four dozen small easel paintings in oil on canvas on Mexican subjects.<sup>8</sup> In 1911 Franz Marc, affected by his studies of African and Peruvian sculpture, wrote: "We have to be courageous and turn our backs on almost everything that until now we have considered precious and indispensable to our thinking, if we want to escape from the sewers and our bad European taste" (Goldwater, 1967, p.127).

In short the aestheticization of pre-Colombian objects had a significant impact of primitivist art, as shown in the exhibition of *Objects of Indigenous American Art* in the Burlington Fine Art Club in 1920 in London and the exhibition *Les arts anciens de l'Amérique* in the Louvre Musée des Arts Decoratifs in 1928.<sup>9</sup> When he was in London Xul did not go to the Burlington exhibition,<sup>10</sup> but its immediate context led to the publication of a book by Roger Fry, a renowned art critic, *Vision and Design* (1918). In the chapter American Archeology, he laments how much humanity had lost by not knowing the pre-Colombian civilizations in the same way it knew those of Greece and Rome. In this article Fry looks at the collections of Aztec, Mayan and Inca antiquities in the British Museum; cites the series of articles by Thomas A. Joyce, discussing archeological remains and publishing original documents and reports from Spanish conquistadors about the ancient culture of Mexico and Peru; equally he mentions the nine volume work on old Mexico by Lord Kingsborough.<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting that in the 1920s D. H. Lawrence's novel *The Plumed Serpent* was published.

Between the end of 1921 and the end of 1923, Xul was based in Germany, where Humboldt's Mexican travel diary, written at the beginning of the nineteenth century, made many aspects of the Mexico city and Aztec divinity and cosmology known, leading to as large gravitation of modernists to Pre-Colombian motifs. Xul came into contact with ethnographic collections, studies, publications and works by various artists. During these two years Xul Solar acquired 229 books.<sup>12</sup> These included four referring to Mexican culture, including one written by Theodor Wilhelm Danzel on Mexican codices.<sup>13</sup> Although Xul did not know of the 1923 Aby Warburg lecture on serpent ritu-

als in New Mexico, as it was not published at the time, it is worth mentioning it here to highlight the increase at that time in Mesoamerican culture.

In this conference, Warburg made a description of serpent dances with the title "Serpent Dance, Cultural History, Cult and Memory," listing various rituals ranging from the *pueblos* of New Mexico to those of archaic Greece, as well as the symbolic pagan inheritance from Christian western culture, stating that the memory of the serpent culture is repeated because it is a symbolic response to the question of destruction, death and the essential suffering of the world. According to Warburg, what interested him as a historian of culture was that, in the middle of a country which had made technological civilization a precision weapon in the hand of an intellectual, was stuck a primitive humanity which had been fighting with great pragmatism in order to survive. This pagan humanity had a religious veneration for natural phenomenon, for animals and plants, to which the Indians attributed active souls which they believed they could influence with their dances. This coexistence of fantastic magic and pragmatic activism which could appear to Europeans to be the symptom of an internal contradiction, for Indians, Warburg said, was not at all schizophrenic, to the contrary it was an experience which liberated infinite possibilities of relationship between man and the world around him.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the codices, or *Codex* in Latin, manuscript and pictographic books, with registers of a wide range of themes from the great civilizations of Mesoamerica, dating from remote epochs before the Conquest, with some going as far as the eighteenth century, began to appear in Europe from the nineteenth century onwards in facsimile editions. Although the Franciscan bishop of Yucatán, in Maní, Diego de Landa, had ordered 27 of them to be burned in 1562, 21 codices are preserved today (Armando; Fantoni, 1997, p.32), some dating from shortly after the Conquest. For example the Florentino Codex was written by the Franciscan Frey Bernardino de Sahagún, who arrived in Mexico after Cortés with the mission of Christianizing the Indians. He learned the Nahuatl language and with the help of informers created a historical encyclopedia of the Aztecs, narrating their customs, gods, dances and ceremonies, under the title *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*.<sup>15</sup>

Scholar of the codices have alerted that although they were produced after the Conquest and contain information and interpretations linked to the interests of Christianization, it is thanks to these codices that we have knowledge of various cultural and scientific themes of Mesoamerica, religious beliefs, rituals, history, genealogy, alliances of lords, geographic notions, economic systems, etc. The most recent also illustrate aspects of Christianization, the

hybridization of culture and economic and social problems which emerged with the presence of the Spanish.<sup>16</sup>

### XUL SOLAR'S *CRIOLLISMO*

Before embarking on his return to Argentina in 1924, Xul participated in the *Exposition d'Art américain-latin* in Musée Galerie, Paris,<sup>17</sup> presenting three watercolors with indigenous inspiration: *Cabeza*, *Composición* and *Mujer y serpiente*, works which are part of the final cycle of paintings which extends from 1918 to 1927, conventionally designated as the 'Pre-Colombian' period. During this period the serpent, together with the references to the Mesoamerican universe, formed the principal theme of his watercolors. It is here that the aim of this article is inserted: by laying claim in his 1920s paintings to one of the strongest symbols in Mesoamerica, Xul Solar proposed to rehabilitate the serpent not as a representation of modern materialism, rather to the contrary, as the evocation of spiritual forces for his pictorial program of the creation of a new world.

While Kandinsky saw the archaic culture of Russia as an 'authentic culture,' Xul believed that America would reveal with its systems of myths and beliefs a spiritual space in which a new humanity could develop, in light of a Europe shattered by wars. It was no longer enough to dress as a *criollo* – there are statements from companions, as reported by Mário Gradowczyk, who spoke of Xul in Montparnasse cafés always dressed in a poncho with blue and white stripes. Together with his contemporary, the cubist Emilio Pettoruti, his plan was to return to make an impact on the *Porteño* (from Buenos Aires) artistic scene.

We can say that the Argentinean painter *Pettoruti*, one of the Criolla vanguard for the future ... We are and we feel new ... The old Cuzcos and Palenques and Tenochtitlanes have been torn down (and nor are we more than the same red race). We can clearly see the urgency in breaking the invisible chain (as the strongest are) which in so many fields still sees as a *Colony* the great *Iberian America* with 90 million inhabitants.<sup>18</sup>

Returning to Argentina, Xul entered the *Criollista* movement of the *Martín Fierro* journal (1924-1927), which brought together young poets from the Argentinean vanguard: Oliverio Girondo, Raúl González Tuñón, Jorge Luis Borges, Macedonio Fernández, Eduardo González Lanuza. In Borges' *crio-*

*llismo* Xul found not only interlocution, but a means of expressing himself: he illustrated *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928) with his vignettes and designed the cover of the journal *Proa* (1925), the subtitle of which was Latin-American Union and had the aim of spreading ideas of aesthetic renewal. In this image the crew of a boat head east, wielding machetes and accompanied by vivacious serpents which seemed to vibrate and applaud. Borges and Xul were not searching for a lost essence, but rather both, having spent a long time in Europe, wanted to transcend time and place in Latin America, connect the national and the universal, identity and otherness.

The hypothesis is that Xul, fed by the aesthetic principles of Kandinsky, by claiming in his painting one of the greatest symbols of Mesoamerica, proposed to take the serpent to visually compose the message of the New World, inverting the spaces of colonization, not to dominate Europe, but to combat its state of decadence with spiritual weapons, provided by the cosmology of interaction between human and divine which the artist conceived in *Criolla America*.

## THE SERPENT AND THE NEW WORLD

In the years following the end of the First World War, Xul established himself in Italy and saw himself ever more affected by European decadence and touched by the spiritualist utopias of the continent. The architectures called *Bau* or *Estilos* are from this period, with expressionistic characteristics, mixed with typical elements such as filigree arches in the façades with Neo-Gothic references, which seem to visualize the artist's intention to materialize *Volksbauen* (buildings for the people), where the masses could congregate to raise a new world. Or to implement Adolf Behne's precepts, for whom the mission of architecture was to unite all the arts into order to create a final unity: of man with man, or man with nature, of man with the cosmos.<sup>19</sup> It was at this moment that his watercolor *Nuevo Mundo* (1919) appeared.

In this dream, iconographically expressed, the serpent becomes the 'loyal' companion or helper. It made its first appearance in the watercolor *Otro mundo* (1918), a title which in itself brings us to visualize a different world. In the foreground are two human figures encircled by blue auras behind two hills. One of the figures is looking on and the other seems to be giving a speech to four snakes who are emerging out of the ground, as if to listen to the speaker. In 1919 Xul painted a small watercolor in which two snakes dragged them-



selves over an abstract background, formed of various colors among which a reddish color stands out. Interspersed among the snakes words form the phrase: "The wise snake is in the house of his serpent father."

Few creatures seem to have been given such a wealth of iconographic symbolism as the snake. It has been used as a symbol of fertility, mortality, wisdom and prosperity. Due to its underground lairs and its powerful venom, it has been associated with death and hell, or the underworld, guardian of ancestral souls. Since man saw the snake emerging from dark hideaways and rocky niches, he imagined it as guardian of the land, protector of everything placed on the ground. As a sexual symbol, due to the analogy with the virile member, the snake became connected with prosperity and life. With the ability to change its skin, it appeared to have the power of renewal, youth, strength, immortality, and wisdom. Symbolically it is respected and feared.

In Mesoamerica, although various powerful animals – jaguars and eagles, for example – were also important in iconography, serpents assumed the broadest and most varied role as a religious symbol: in a state of ecstasy gods dance the serpent dance; large rattlesnakes adorn support columns from Chichen Itzá to Tenochtitlan; gods such as Mixcoatl, Quetzalcoatl and Coatlicue iconographically represented by the figure of the serpent. Two characteristics of the behavior of the serpent were probably the reason for its use by Mesoamericans: first, snakes swallow their prey whole, leaving them to decompose within their bodies, (imagetically the large supernatural serpents belched creatures from their mouths – a warrior, a human, a god, or a skeleton); second, snakes change their skin. Their skin split along their back, allowing the snake to slide out, leaving the old skin behind and in the case of rattlesnakes even their rattles. This characteristic associated snakes with the idea of being vehicles of rebirth and transformation. Three fundamental notions accompanied the Mesoamerican serpent: one, the serpent is water and thus a conductor of water; two, from his mouth a cavern opens; three, the serpent is heaven. This last concept survives in Mayan linguistics: the words snake and heaven are homophones, *coatl* and *caan* or *chan*, depending on the language.<sup>20</sup>

The serpent dance, rich in symbolism, – in performances, choreography, the use of adornments and clothing –, accompanied the ceremonies of various gods, calendar celebrations, festivities and rituals dedicated to the evocation of mythological forces or nature, associated with rituals of fecundity and fertility.<sup>21</sup>



*Sandanza I*, 1925. Watercolor on paper, 23 x 31 cm.

Warburg, in his famous lecture mentioned above, described the ritual of the serpent dance in New Mexico which aimed to ask the serpents to provoke the rain. In 1925 Xul Solar produced the series *Sandanza*, in which there appear approximations with the Mexican codices in relation to narratives, integrating images and texts about serpent dances, choreographies which imitated serpentine movements, or groups of dancers who used clothing and adornments with inferences to serpents and performances with ritual aims.

In addition to the inspiration in the theme of the dragon taken from the mystical and visual thought of Kandinsky, as well as the use of Mesoamerican iconography for his purposes, it can be supposed that in his time in Italy when the figure of the serpent began to enter his pictographic 'fauna,' Xul had entered into contact with other sources. He was studious and rather than just working as a painter, he wanted to be recognized as an artist, as his friend Emílio Pettoruti reported,<sup>22</sup> 'prying' in museums, libraries and archives. In his searches he may have come into contact with the literature on the myths and symbols of archaic culture. Among the ancient Etruscans, who had lived in the Italian peninsula before the Indo-European migration and the arrival of the Latins around 1000 B.C., the symbolic presence of the serpent was strong: "The Etruscans who coexisted with these notable creatures, very probably knew their attributes."<sup>23</sup>

Another source with which Xul may have been in contact with in Italy is

the book of Filippo Picinelli, an Italian abbot who in the sixteenth century made a compilation, a type of large encyclopedia, of the iconography of the serpent and other animals.<sup>24</sup> In its various editions this book was much used by artists from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The serpent appeared in a polyvalence of symbols and meanings. Between the 'mystic serpent,' who represents the image of Jesus the healer and the 'serpent of sin,' cause of the downfall of Adam and Eve, there were a wide range of 'moral physiologies' from the political dominion exercised by Christian monarchs, to the secrets of Neoplatonic metaphysics. Through antonomasia, it represents various dimensions of life: damned since Genesis for engendering Pride (the worst of all sins), it is also exalted and assimilated by Christianity as the best image of the divine concept of Eternity, the Incarnation of the Word, the resurrection of Christ and the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Visually it appeared in distinct symbolic traditions: in classical mythology, in heraldry, medals, hieroglyphics, and emblems. According to Filippo Picinelli: three great teachings are revealed by serpents: the periodic change of skin with the help of cracks between the stones; the union of its face with the glue; the hiding of the head under the coiled body as a means of prevention. There is no emblemist, it can be concluded from the reading of the book, who is not caught by some of their renowned qualities: renewal and sagacity (skin), immortality and universe (circle), prudence and cunning (spiral).

## GODS AND CODICES

Serpents began to appear in Xul's watercolors, as he himself stated, when he was in Italy after the First World War, at the most acute moment of the feeling that European civilization was in ruins. They emerge from their lairs, or drag themselves through leaves, as in *Troncos* (1919) or *Una Drola* (1923). They climb into the heights, as in *Reptil que sube* (1920). *Serpientes* (1919) presents a strange figure, a hybrid of man, bird and serpent. In other works the serpent plays the leading role in the scene with esoteric type human figures, as in *Figura i sierpe* and *Dama, pájaro y drago* (1921), *Tú y Yo* (1923) and *Tres* (1924). In *Composição Surrealista* (1923), a serpent stands up and faces a figure with large blue eyes. The eyes of the serpent and of the man meet and challenge each other. In *Tres y sierpe* (1921), three women's faces contemplate with spectral eyes. They are restless faces which suggest expressions of astonishment, surprise, expectation, fear. The serpent drawn as a flat strip with its golden aura appears to bring the spectator to the terrestrial, uniting the ethereal fem-

inine figures in the cosmic plane. This is what also can be observed in *Drago T* and *Dos dragos* from 1920, *Hado* and *Rei Rojo* from 1922, and *Ña Diáfana*, from 1923. In various of these the human figures are composed of cylinders, the hands have long figures, and the eyes are large and pronounced. In others, they are transparent bodies with visible organs, diluting the frontiers between inside and outside. While in others again there are juxtapositions of various characters, diluting the individual identities, or superimpositions of themes in the same picture. In this case this involves the condensation of connected, but different, aspects which through abstract and formal syntheses, allusively refer to the gods and the successions of ages, to cosmological myths, the celebration of ritual, emblems with divine powers and magical practices.

1923 is a year of great chromatic wealth, full of references to pre-Colombian gods with approximations to the codices, such as *Juzgue*, *Cuatro Cholas*, *Homme das serpents*, *Por Su Cruz Jura*, *Jefe de Dragones*, *Hombre y dragón*, and *Dios estaki*. In *Homme das serpents*, a central figure appears flanked by three serpents which stand themselves up – one of them appears to want to lick the face of a man or speak into his ear. Symmetrically, a large arrow like a flame or phallus, stands itself up. The inclusion of the word ‘doma’, in light of other works such as *Jefe de dragones*, in which the characters appear exercising a supernatural power over the serpents, situated these paintings in the sphere of the magi who, according to Sahagún’s report, capture live snakes to cure with them. In *Por Su Cruz Jura* the fight between man and serpent appears once again: here the two figures are back to back, each one moving in such a way that leads us to think that they are moving apart.

In the watercolors in which Xul Solar expresses his intention of returning to Argentina, and wants together with his contemporary, “criollo, as criollo” as an Indian,<sup>25</sup> the cubist Emílio Pettoruti, to have an impact on the *Porteño* artistic scene, the serpent transforms itself into a boat to make the Atlantic crossing, as in *Fluctua nave sierpe por la extensión y su cornake*, *Añoro Patria*, and *Chaco*, dating from 1922. In 1923 there is another series: another *Chaco*, *América*, and *Drago y dama fluctúa*. When the serpent does not assume the figure of the boat, it is a travelling companion following the boat, a protector of the crossing, as in yet another *Chaco* from 1923. In *Despedida* (1923) the traveler occupies a stylized boat and two serpents welcome their passage. In *Mansilla 2936* (1920) the desire for return appears clearly. The title indicates the name of the street and the number of the house where his father lives in Buenos Aires, according to the interpretation of Mário Gradowczyk, mentioned above. The image is suggestive: at the center is a man whose body is

composed of the architectural plans of his father's house; the profiled face is schematized by a geometric form and open arms; two large rectangles compose the figure, in a mixture between the plans of a building and a drawing of a human figure. The character stands over a serpent which acts as a platform for the man-house, while two birds fly overhead. In the center of a the image appears in a green rectangle the word *patio*, and around the house or man-house the words *B. Aires, plano, mansilla, puerta* and *la casa*, and number 2936.



*Tlaloc, dios de la lluvia*, 1923.  
Watercolor on paper, 26 x 32 cm.



*Nana-Watzin*, 1923.  
Watercolor on paper, 25,5 x 31,5 cm.

1923 is singular. Together with the extreme creativity in the use of colors, lines and simple planes which suggest spaces with perspectives and depths, the presence of certain signs is significant in his visual language: flags, especially of Argentina, some only suggested by color, letters and numbers with enigmatic symbols, words in *neocriollo*, representations of pre-Colombian gods. It can be seen that at this moment the artist was increasingly linked to the iconology of Mesoamerica and increasingly determined to return to a project of aesthetic renewal. In this way the references to pre-Colombian elements in his watercolors acquires full expression.

*Tlaloc* and *Nana Watzin*, taken in sequence, suggest to us the narrative of the birth of Quinto Sol (the fifth sun) and the Moon, with approximations to what appears in the Florentine codex, which demonstrates the central importance of the sun and the ritual of sacrifice for its birth.<sup>26</sup>

In the first picture, *Tlaloc*, the god of rain, stands erect integrating the planes of heaven and earth, unifying the two opposites which constitute the dual aspect of this divinity, whose dual relations appear linked to water and to fire. The serpents, the words *agua* (water), *Tlaloc* and *alt*, which means water in Náhuatl, and also the rays which descend from heaven announcing the

rain, complete the formal unity of the work. According to the narrative the rains which Tlaloc sends to his children, the Tlaloques, fertilizes the field occupied by the gods Xipe, Cintéotl and Xochipilli. In the mythological narrative the third age of the succession of ages of the world, the sun of water, placed under his protection, ends in a spectacular catastrophe (which appears in the upper part of the picture, in a shower of fire in the form of thunder and lightning): heaven fell down, all the waters on earth overflowed and men were converted into fish, who appear in the lower part of the picture coming out of water. After this sequence in which the fourth age is represented by the presence of fish (who appear in the lower part of the picture leaving the water), the fifth age occurs, the age of the Sun, which is associated with the goddess Nanahuatzin.

In this cyclical concept of time, the age of the Sun begins in Teotihuacán when the gods are gathered around a large fire, which can be seen in the second picture, *Nana Watzin*. Here Nanahuatzin is over the flames and another person is kneeling beside him as if they were praying. It is possible that this is Tecuciztécall waiting for the moment of sacrifice to convert himself into the moon. Over an altar, *Mama Terra* (mother earth), *Tlazolteotl*, *leña* (firewood) and *passión* (passion) – all indicated by geometric forms and by inscribed words – feed the fire (a feeling reinforced by the word *s'exalta* – exalted), whose flames like arrows rise up to the sun and moon, suspended in the upper part of the scene. In the terrestrial plane, over pointed firs, the inscription *Xolotl*, a god associated with the underworld, contrasts with a bird in the heavens with its wings opened. A strong luminosity achieved with yellow and orange bands, covers the space in all directions. Clear and dark geometrical shapes form the background over which the words *Renovación por fogo santo* (renewed through holy fire), on one side and *Germina ora adora da-se* (germinate, pray, worship, devote yourself) are written.

The two scenes in the pictures induce an approximation with the cosmogonic narratives of the Nahua universe, which include a cyclical concept of time. According to the version transmitted by Sahagún's informants, the Fifth Sun, the sun in movement, was created in Teotihuacan when the gods met around a brazier. One of these was supposed to throw himself into the flames to transform himself through his sacrificial death into a new sun. Nanahuatzin threw himself, transforming into the sun. Tecuciztécall repeated the gesture and transformed into the moon. However, the sun and moon remained immobile. For them to follow their paths, the other gods decided to die.

In the Albin codex Tlaloc appears intimately linked to the foundation of

Mexico and the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan. Tláloc called a priest and told him that the city of Tenochtitlan would be the home of his son Huitzilopochtli.<sup>27</sup> In the Vatican codex Tlaloc has various functions, including being the regent of the sun, rain, and fire, companion of the four winds and the four times of the year. His actions could be beneficial or malevolent. Particular powers were granted to the rain gods, of whom one was Tlaloc, in antiquity. “They are the ones who give courage and leadership, they are the guardians of tradition and in their domain reside what the ancestors called ‘giants.’”<sup>28</sup>



*Drago*, 1927. Watercolor on paper, 25,5 x 32 cm.

## THE NEW WORLD – AMERICA OR EPILOGUE

Given what has been discussed in this article, the watercolor *Drago* (1927) can be considered Xul Solar's best representation of *criollismo*. In the foreground there is a large person standing, defiant, transported by a dragon dressed up in the flags of Latin America and flanked, perhaps greeted, by the flags of the metropolises, – Italy, France, Yugoslavia, the United States and Portugal – slides over the sea, leaving the Americas in the direction of Europe, inverting the flux of colonization. The scene gives the work a feeling of dynamism and velocity, a determination and the certainty of a mission to be fulfilled. The sun, the moon, the stars and a comet which crosses the heavens

confer a mystical aura on the scene, which references pre-Colombian divinities. It can be hypothesized that Xul Solar subverted the place of the dragon. While, in Kandinsky, the horse ridden by St. George attacks the dragon (as a symbol of modern materialism), Xul, believing that the struggle against modern materialism comes from the Americas, takes the serpent (it should be borne in mind that Cortés defeated the Aztecs riding a horse) to transport the 'good news.' In place of St. George's sword the emissary carries a staff topped by a triangle, which for Kandinsky was the symbol of spiritual life; on the dragon's head are the symbols of three large religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islamism, which for Xul were sources of wisdom. In addition to the 1927 *Drago*, Xul also painted with the theme of a dragon turned into a boat leaving the Americas for Europe *Outro Drago*, 1926; *Mundo*, 1925; *País*, 1925, and *Horóscopo*, 1927.

Thanks to the narratives of Friar Sahagún we know of the myth of *Quetzalcóatl*, also called the *Plumed Serpent* – a mixture of a serpent and a bird –, supreme god, lord of corn, the art of weaving, the mosaic, dance and music, the science of curing illnesses, craftwork, trade, time, the stars in heaven, the calendar, orations and sacrifice. The *Plumed Serpent* was the performance of the miracle, magic, sorcerer and guardian of all the secrets of enchantment. However, in its mythology the *Plumed Serpent* confronted his evil twin, Tezcatlipoca. According to the Aztec belief, Tezcatlipoca infiltrated one of his servants who intoxicated the *Plumed Serpent* and his sister, making the two of them sleep together, breaking their vows of chastity. The *Plumed Serpent*, feeling guilty and in agony, abandoned his possessions on earth and began an epic flight: a pilgrimage to purify himself, which resulted in the proliferation of his image and his name through ancient Mexico, always heading east. He promised he would return in *Ce Ácatl* of the Aztec calendar, which occurs every 52 years. Dressed in a turquoise mask and a mantle of feathers, he had a raft made of serpents and sat in it as if it were a canoe and departed, sailing over the sea. After this the *Plumed Serpent* exploded in flames. The ashes of his heart rose and like a phoenix were transformed into the planet Venus.

Ironically, 1519 when the Spanish boats were seen off the coast of Veracruz, coincided with *Ce Ácatl*. It is assumed that this was understood by the Aztecs as the return of the *Plumed Serpent*: many of the interpretations of the Conquest believe that Cortés' good reception occurred because the Aztecs believed that he was Quetzalcóatl (Baldwin, 1998, p.9).

The works of Homi Bhabha, Said, Barbero, Canclini and Stuart Hall, amongst others, deal with the question of post-colonialism, looking at the



cultural potency of the colonized areas. Serge Gruzinski highlights co-invention in the creation of American culture, the exchanges and intermixing which is produced between metropolises and indigenous knowledge. The colonized digest the culture of the colonizer to better fuse it with native culture rather than simple assimilation or imitation. The colonizers were not passive. The *Cantares* are neither Amerindian works nor European: they are intermixed. Gruzinski takes Mário de Andrade's lines "*Sou um tupi tangendo um alaúde*" (I am Tupi, strumming a lute) to mean that "it is possible to be Tupi – in other words an Indian from Brazil – and to play such an European instrument as ancient and refined as a lute."<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps, in defense of inversion, or the path back, we can cite Oswald de Andrade's poem *Erro de Português* (Portuguese Mistake) which sees things in a more dialectic manner: "Quando o português chegou / debaixo de uma bruta chuva / Vestiu o índio / Que pena! Fosse uma manhã de sol / O índio tinha despido / O português" (When the Portuguese arrived / under a brutal rain / They dressed the Indian / What a pity! / It was a sunny day / The Indian had undressed / The Portuguese). For Oswald Europe did not emerge immune from contact with the new world. It was the discovery of American man which inspired Europeans to create the utopian literary genre, since, after all, we were born as 'new men': "Utopias are a consequence of the discovery of the New World and, above all, the discovery of new man, a different man found on the lands of America."<sup>30</sup> According to the poet the geography of utopias is based in the Americas. It was a Portuguese sailor who described for Thomas More the peoples and customs of a land not located in Europe. Campanella in *Cidade do Sol* reported to a Genoese amateur who reminds us of Christopher Columbus. Bacon wrote *New Atlantis* based on an expedition to Peru.

In the essay *O achado de Vesúcio* (Vespucci's Discovery), Oswald comments on the letter entitled *Mundus Novus*, which the sailor sent to Pedro Lourenço de Médici in 1503: "It was Vespucci who offered late Ptolemaic Europe a different panorama of the human species" (ibidem, p.210). The letter, according to Oswald, was successfully publicized at the time in various languages, and the images of the new world it contained unchained an intellectual movement of grandeur. All of this opened "a horizon for European man, confined on a flat and immovable earth between heaven and hell." The images of America were the midwives of European utopias, since Europe had discovered that on the other side of the world the lands were inhabited by different people. To corroborate his thesis Oswald drew on Afonso Arinos' book entitled *O índio brasileiro e a Revolução Francesa* (The Brazilian Indian

and the French Revolution), in which the ambassador argued that the way of life of Brazilian Indians influenced the thought of humanists such as Thomas Moore, Erasmus, Montaigne, John Locke, and Rousseau's concept of the natural goodness of the savage, fundamental in the 1789 French revolution.

The conclusion is that Europeans did not emerge immune from contact with the New World. As we have seen Mexican culture became an argument of Europeans to criticize their own world, although in the space of art and not science. Pre-Colombian iconography became part of the visibility of European modernists. Nor was it only from the discourse or interpretation of Europeans, for whom the world was divided into Europeans and non-Europeans. *Mexicanidad* was built within Mexico by the muralists. Brought to Europe by Diego de Rivera, it influenced European artists. In *Orientalism* Said says that Orientalist thought domesticated a scientific knowledge capable of legitimating the authority of the West over the Orient: the latter, Said says, is an invention of the West. More subtly and subjectively, he adds, is what can be perceived in the literary works of poets and novelists who never travelled abroad: the fascination with the Orient which gave their works an imagination and aesthetic marked by the effects of orientalism.

Xul Solar, as we have seen, believed that America, with its systems of myths and beliefs, was giving "the shaking world a great example of co-existence, fraternity, mutual respect, about all the countries with a Latin origin."<sup>31</sup> His *criollista* desire was to bring to "the tired world, to contribute a new meaning, a more multiple and higher life..."<sup>32</sup> His patriotism was to find "the highest possible ideal of humanity – achieve it and extend it to the world" (ibidem, p.99).

## NOTES

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