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Costa, Olga. *Vendedora de frutas*. 1951. Oil on canvas. The Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City.

## Mexico Through the Russian Gaze: Olga Costa in Guanajuato

Yulia Stakhnevich

In 2003, I went to the Mexican town of Guanajuato to work on my Spanish. What made this trip memorable though was not the learning of Spanish, but a serendipitous encounter with the legacy of Olga Costa, a Mexican artist of Russian descent.

I arrived in Guanajuato in early May at the end of the dry season. Everything was covered with a thin layer of dust. Vegetation had turned grey, and temperatures never went below 90 degrees. When I was leaving in late July, the rainy season was in full swing: torrential rains came in the afternoons washing down the streets and making the trees and the bushes green and lush again. Regardless of the season, for someone like myself who was born and raised in the urban jungle of Moscow, Guanajuato felt magical. It struck me as a place where time stood still, where people moved at a leisurely pace, and leaving your guidebook behind was the right thing

to do. I practiced my Spanish, learned how to dance salsa, took classes in cooking, and made new friends, both Mexican and expatriate.

I have to admit that initially I didn't pay too much attention to accounts of the sightings of rare and exotic Russians in the middle of Mexico: after all, when you travel, you want to learn something new, experience things that take you out of your routine. But as time went by, I couldn't stop thinking about the strange Russian woman my hosts mentioned in conversations. What intrigued me about her was that she was not a transient visitor; she came to Guanajuato and stayed. How and why did that happen? And

did she ever experience Russian *toska*? Although somewhat ambiguous in meaning, *rocka* [toska] permeates Russian worldview on many levels and is often connected to the feelings of displacement and loss.

Vladimir Nabokov best described it in his *Commentary to Pushkin's Eugene Onegin*:

“No single word in English renders all the shades of *toska*. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels, it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases, it maybe the desire for somebody or something specific, nostalgia, lovesickness. At the lowest level, it grades into ennui, boredom.”

Being Russian myself, I am not inoculated against the occasional bouts of *toska*, and towards the middle of my stay in Guanajuato, I realized that I might have been suffering from it also. The desire to establish a personal connection to a new country while renewing my links to my first language and culture led me serendipitously to a further exploration of Olga Costa's life.

Born in 1913 to Jacob Kostakowsky and Ana Fabricant, émigrés from Odessa, then tsarist Russia, her journey exemplifies the complexity of connections between creativity and one's first language and culture, a topic that has a deeply personal meaning to me as an immigrant. Issues of identity and creativity, of course, transcend the personal; they have a broader political appeal. For instance, recently Russia has been attempting to reclaim the cultural legacy of Russian artists displaced by twentieth century politics and war. Russians have long had a deeply rooted belief that although creativity is individual, it must be fed by the artist's native

milieu and that maintaining a strong connection to Russian culture and language is necessary for the expression of Russian creativity.

This view, no matter how naïve, is so prevalent in the Russian psyche that it has always played a role in how the Russian public viewed artists in self-imposed or government-sponsored exiles: with pity, sorrow, or disdain. Although some might question Olga's Russianness by pointing out that she was born in Germany, soon after her birth the family moved from Leipzig to Berlin, which at that time became the cultural capital of the Russian expatriate community.

Olga's father, a professional musician, actively participated in the Bavarian Socialist Revolution in 1919 and, after its defeat, was incarcerated but escaped the fate of hundreds who were executed. According to Lya Cardoza (Olga's younger sister), as a reminder of his time in prison, he always carried a pocket watch on which he had scratched the names of his (then only daughter), Olga,

and wife in Russian. The choice of the language is a powerful tribute to the significance that the Russian language had for Olga's parents: it was the language of intimacy, of remembrance.

After the amnesty, the family reunited in Berlin where Russianness was in the air: it was in the food stores, bookstalls, coffee shops, and in the music halls where her father worked. But by 1925, the German economy was improving, making life more expensive for Russian émigrés. The result was devastating to the Russian community with many choosing to leave Berlin for Paris, New York, or elsewhere. For the Kostakowsky family that elsewhere was Mexico, the country that Lya Cardoza later described as "*país revolucionario y lleno de nuevos horizontes*" ("a revolutionary country full of new horizons"). The family began their transatlantic voyage in the French port of Saint-Nazaire where they boarded the vessel "*Espagne*," arriving in the Mexican port of Veracruz on the seventh of September in 1925. They carried Nansen passports, which were issued by

the League of Nations after World War I to stateless persons.

The transition to their new country was not smooth. Their luggage, consisting of books, musical notations, Jacob's finished and unfinished compositions, and his cherished violin, all mysteriously disappeared at customs, leaving the family stranded in the port city with limited financial resources and no Spanish language skills.

In their first days in Mexico, the Kostakowsky family experienced different aspects of their new surroundings. The parents had to garner assistance from the German Consulate to ensure family subsistence and were engaged in frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful communications with customs officials about their lost or stolen luggage. They also fretted about train bandits and sent telegrams imploring relatives to wire money to help pay the family's fare to Mexico City. Meanwhile, Olga and her sister marveled at the strange new vibrant colors of Mexico. In contrast to monochromatic Berlin, Veracruz instantly overwhelmed them with its array of tropical flowers, dark-skinned people, soft, lush breezes of the ocean carrying new scents, brightly robed *vendedores* selling strange and exotic fruits, and the rolling sounds of Spanish that they heard from street vendors and the maids at the hotel.

In his monograph on Olga Costa, Sergio Pitol quotes (in translation) Olga's recollections of that first month in Veracruz.

"We arrived in Veracruz during the strike of tenant farmers. The city was covered with red and black flags. For me everything stood out: houses with wooden windows painted in green, the appearance of the people, the movement of air at dusk, the sky that sometimes became all black with vultures, the insects, the bread. The first time



Costa, Olga. Untitled. 1936. Oil on board. Author's collection.

that I entered the bathroom I discovered in the bathtub a huge black tarantula. Also I remember a maid at the hotel; she was tall and skinny and always wore a dress of yellow stiff muslin; in the mouth sparkled a gold tooth. With a cigarette in one hand and chamber pots from the rooms in the other, she walked in the hallway like a queen.”

Although the Kostakowskys’ impressions of Mexico were personal, it stands to reason that they were also influenced by the popular writings of Konstantin Balmont, a famous Russian symbolist poet who visited Mexico in 1905. He was one of the first Russian authors to visit Mexico and published his travel journal *Путевые письма* (*Letters from the Road*), several essays and poems, and translations of Mexican myths, all of which were widely popular among Russian armchair travelers.

With Olga’s parents being highly educated, it is likely that they read Balmont’s works and might have shared them with the children, pointing out the amazing things they all were about to encounter in the new land:

“The country of red flowers, discovered in a mind intoxicated by the Sun and enamored of the Moon, and the Evening Star, the Morning Star. A country of multi-colored flowers and of birds with bright feathers, azure, green, the shade of all precious stones. A country of bloody spectacles and of refined reverence, of legends truthful and of reality improbable, of colorful hieroglyphs and pyramid-shaped cathedrals, of slow words and the quick knife, of eternal Spring—eternal Autumn. A country whose history is a tale, whose fate is a sad poem, sadder than a poem by Edgar Allen Poe. A country deceptive, betrayed, sold-out, conquered by prophecy, by a genius, by a woman, by a horse, mutilated irretrievably by a pale-faced centaur, carrying destruction, devastation, and a hypocritical religion, along with deadly contagious diseases, everywhere he penetrates – to India, to Oceania, to the Peruvian idyll, and to this downtrodden Country of Red Flowers.”

In her later paintings Olga drew both from her initial impressions of Mexico and made artistic references to the imagery conjured up by Balmont: “the country of red flowers” lived on in many of her paintings, especially in landscapes and still lifes. In her interviews, she indicated that the impressions of seeing the unspoiled beauty of Mexico stayed with her throughout her life and influenced her work. For example, Olga’s most famous painting, *Vendedora de frutas* (Female Fruit Seller) from 1951 celebrates a traditional market scene, using bright colors and featuring a cornucopia of fruit. The depiction of the seller herself is reminiscent of the maid at the hotel that Olga admired in Veracruz. The artist recognizes the same strength of spirit and dignity beyond the subject’s humble station in life and paints her not as a subservient being, but as someone with queen like qualities.

Olga herself was not as bold. While her parents encouraged her to take courses in piano and voice to follow her father’s profession, she chose to pursue her natural predilection for painting: “*Me daba miedo tocar o cantar en público. La pintura por el contrario es un trabajo solitario*” (I was scared to play or sing in public. Painting, on the other hand, is a solitary profession.) And when Olga saw Diego Rivera’s murals for the first time, she was so transfixed by the colors that, as she put it, the music ceased to exist.

Olga entered the famous *Academia de San Carlos*. There her teacher was Carlos Mérida, a famous Guatemalan artist, who referred to her as “*el ángel blanco de la pintura mexicana*” (“white angel of Mexican painting”). A favorable comment on the surface, this definition stuck, identifying her as a Mexican by inclination, yet the “other” by birth. This duality, though subtle, separated her from native-born artists; however, Olga never discussed it in any of her interviews.



Costa, Olga. Untitled. 1971. Oil on board. Author’s collection.

In the Academy, Olga took a lithography class, in which she met her future husband, José Chávez Morado. A promising student, she had to drop out because of financial difficulties. In 1935 she got married, a happy union that lasted 58 years. Her husband came from a well-to-do and respected Mexican family, and by the time of their marriage his career as an artist (particularly as a muralist) was flourishing. On the marriage license, Olga still used her maiden name, but soon afterwards she chose to Mexicanize it to a more conventional Spanish name, Costa. Surrounded by many artisans, Olga returned to painting. She referred to her first attempts as “*pininos*”, a word with no English equivalent, but which may be translated in this context as ‘dabbling’ in painting. This initially idle pastime became a professional career that lasted a lifetime. Olga preferred to stay away from the rough and tumble street politics, but her art reflected the on-going debate about the definition of *mexicanidad*, or what constituted an authentic Mexican identity. Many of her paintings are done in the *costumbrista* style that celebrates both the indigenous and mestizo elements in Mexican culture.

After living in Mexico City for many years, in 1955 Olga and José chose to move to the town of Guanajuato where they established a permanent residence. They purchased a house in the *Pastita* neighborhood with vistas of surrounding mountains. The house was a part of the seventeenth century *Hacienda de Guadalupe*, and the couple bought it with an idea to restore and to use it both as their home and studio space.

This became the place where Olga painted many of her later pieces. In her spare time, she established a lovely garden, and that’s where, in 1993 her husband had her ashes interred. The house became the *Museo-Casa Olga Costa-José Chávez Morado*, a museum that opened its doors after Olga’s death.



*Olga Costa at the patio of her house in Guanajuato, Mexico. Photograph taken by Flor Garduño.*

It contains the couple’s furniture, objects of art, mostly within Mexican indigenous and folk art traditions as well as works by both artists. The couple made significant contributions to several museums in Guanajuato and were well-known and respected in the city.

After returning from Guanajuato, I had not thought about Olga Costa for some time, until I had an opportunity to visit the Russian State Library in Moscow. The Library established a special collection about artists who worked abroad. The collection is known as *Русское зарубежье* [Russian foreign lands]. The foundation of such a collection was a major step in accepting the complex nature of creativity across national borders. Nonetheless, even the title of the collection indicates certain proprietary rights that the state-owned library claims to have on the individuals’ creative work if their contributions were to be included in the collection.

I was curious to find out if anything at all was known about Olga’s life and artistic legacy in her ancestral country. After several days of going through old-fashioned card catalogues and speaking with several librarians, it became clear that the existence of the whole Kostakowsky family with their artistic contributions remained unknown in Russia. Olga was not admitted into

the pantheon of foreign artists whom Russia recognized as her own.

Conversely, in Guanajuato she was recognized as a respected Mexican painter and a patroness of Mexican art, a person born outside of Mexico, but who loved and cared for the people of her adoptive homeland. In Olga’s case, a key to her Mexicanness might have been a combination of her talent, genuine interest in her new country, and courage to claim her desired identity by establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships with those whose cultural ties to Mexico were never disputed.

Matters of nationality and ethnicity are often painfully private, and we might never know if Olga was susceptible to the bouts of infamous Russian ‘*toska*’. What we do know is that although her Russian roots were buried, under close examination they can still be traced in her art. Does that make her Russian? Only Olga would have been able to answer this question. What we can say with certainty though is that she was successful at overcoming feelings of displacement and loss inherent in the experience of immigration by actively and genuinely engaging with her adoptive land. For those of us, including myself, who move beyond the borders of the familiar and have to constantly reinvent ourselves, Olga’s life will remain an inspiration, an example of achieving equilibrium, of finding a new home and yet remaining true to oneself.

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