

***PORFIRIO AGUIRRE DIRCIO  
and the Malinaltepec Mask***



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The first meeting I had with Mr. Porfirio Aguirre happened when I met his vast library. When I saw his books stacked on a shelf two ideas came to my mind; on the one hand, I wanted to know what titles he had read and on the other hand I was intrigued by a grayish sticky material on the covers of many of them. I could see that the topics were varied, ranging from biology, geology, to art and linguistics. And I realized that the sticky stuff was melted wax, which time had filled with dust. I was deeply struck by the fact that electricity, something we take for granted in our modernity, was not available to everyone at the beginning of the 20th century and that for Mr. Porfirio Aguirre the use of candles was always customary during his long hours of study; at least, his books are faithful proof of that. Below I will share some of the most outstanding facts of this important archaeologist, anthropologist, philologist, translator and also proud Copeño.

Porfirio Aguirre was born in the beautiful town of Copanatoyac on February 25, 1889 to Jesus Aguirre Moctezuma and Lorenza Dircio; he spent his first years surrounded by the beautiful mountains that surround Copanatoyac and throughout his professional work as an archaeologist and anthropologist, this would lead him to trace new routes to unravel the glorious past of the area of the Mountain of the region. He defined himself as a Nahuatl from the Sierra de Guerrero because he learned and practiced the native language, Nahuatl, all his life, even though a large part of this language was developed in Mexico City. Being fluent in Nahuatl allowed him to perform translation work that was key to understanding our pre-Hispanic

past. Later, I will detail some of these texts and the scope of these works.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Nahuatl, he also spoke Mixtec and Tlapanec.<sup>2</sup>

At an early age he had the opportunity to go to Mexico City to study. At fourteen, he joined the Academy of San Carlos, where he advanced with his charcoal drawings and participated in various drawing competitions. From an early age, he showed the ability to express himself with charcoal and managed to master the standards of the painting academy, representative of the early twentieth century. In 1904, his classmates from the nude drawing class were Gabriel Gutiérrez, Sóstenes Ortega, Melquiades Huerto and Diego Rivera. With Diego, he established a friendship that lasted his entire life, both nurtured each other in different ways and their names appear on several occasions recorded in the catalog of the documentary archives of the San Carlos Academy from 1900 to 1929, where in a night drawing competition of silhouettes taken from print, when both were in

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<sup>1</sup> In private communication in 2006 with Dr. Miguel León Portilla, as part of the Second Congress of Historians held in Mérida, Yucatán, who is an expert Nahuatl and a scholar in the subject, I asked him about the contributions of Mr. Porfirio Aguirre to the understanding and knowledge of the Nahuatl language and the colonial manuscripts written in that language. Dr. Leon Portilla told me that these contributions were crucial, since Mr. Aguirre, in addition to mastering the language, had an anthropological background that allowed him to provide a deeper and more detailed context to the work studied.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to these three indigenous languages, he mastered other such as German, English, French, Russian and Japanese. He was a great polyglot. He learned all these languages in a self-taught manner; this I could personally verify when browsing his personal library, where I could determine that he was an avid reader and a diligent student, took detailed notes and made diagrams and drawings with great mastery. The German language, in particular, allowed him to progress in his and professional field. He guided groups of German scholars who visited Mexico, the entire visit offered in this language. On one occasion, while in Monte Albán, a young German woman named Erika Kaiser was delighted with her explanations. Months later they married and had two children, Guillermo who died at the tender age of two, and Jorge Porfirio Aguirre Kaiser who traveled many times to Copanatoyac and was always interested in recovering as many photographic records and personal testimonies to reconstruct the life of his father, Mr. Porfirio Aguirre.

the second grade, Diego Rivera won the first place and Porfirio Aguirre was second. With this reference, we can realize his drawing abilities, as well as the great mastery he managed to develop from a very young age. Just to think that his partner, Diego Rivera, who won the first place would become one of the most important exponents of the mural movement, we would be curious to know about the fate of Porfirio Aguirre, who was a bright young man and an avid reader read of critical texts who moved in the most exclusive intellectual circles in Mexico of the early twentieth century.

The main area where Porfirio Aguirre would shine was in anthropology and his area of specialization was archeology. That is, he had a double profile that allowed him to move easily from an anthropological point of view, to have a more technical mastery of the materials found in various excavations, from an archaeological perspective. He belonged to the first generation of archaeologists in the country. By 1914 at the International School of American Ethnology and Archeology, the idea was being organized to adopt and adapt some of the ideas of the most dedicated and outstanding American anthropologists of that time, such as Franz Boas, to the daily work of anthropology in Mexico. In this first group, the first nine students had enrolled: Isabel Ramírez, Elías Amador, Manuel Gamio, Agustín Agüeros, Germán Baltazar Rivera, Armando Gil, Miguel Othón de Mendizábal, Enrique Juan Palacios and Porfirio Aguirre, who would forge the foundations of the future works in various areas such as: anthropology, archeology, linguistics, indigenism and

more. For Porfirio Aguirre, this opportunity was crucial, since it allowed him to have a professional training and develop professional relationships, which would eventually lead him to a successful career, although at certain times he suffered setbacks in his professional work, which will be detailed later.

By 1913, for example, various areas of study were being reorganized by the National Museum and four inspectors were appointed who would have to make decisions on four specific geographical areas; Archaeologist Porfirio Aguirre would be responsible for Michoacán, Colima, Jalisco, Sonora, Sinaloa, Durango, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosi, Queretaro, Guanajuato and the territory of Tepic. These tasks allowed him to get to know Mexico better and he had the opportunity to collect archaeological and anthropological information of diverse nature. However, his favorite area, which he knew thanks to his friends and the contacts he had in each of the small neighboring towns, was the Mountain in Guerrero. The ease he had to transport himself along sidewalks and small roads led him to Malinaltepec, Guerrero where he made an incredible discovery, which on the one hand, allowed him to unravel the beauty of a unique prehispanic past but on the other, meant a bitter moment because the authorities in turn doubted the veracity of his discovery. I am referring to the beautiful and newly authenticated MALINALTEPEC MASK.

Today this mask is in the National Museum of Anthropology and History, but if we want to delve more into the history behind this symbol, which not only represents and identifies the Museum itself in many other spaces, but is a symbol of Prehispanic grandeur woven into one of the most fascinating but also cruelest histories of Mesoamerican archeology. By far, this mask represents an icon, and a reference for the Museum and also for our country; however, its discoverer, Mr. Porfirio Aguirre, did not enjoy the fruits of this success, on the contrary, he was accused of plagiarism, theft and many other things. Can you imagine what all these accusations could have meant to him, after he had made a precise record of the excavation area, as well as the characteristics of the piece? Well, all he received was criticism, disqualification and contempt by the society of the time and the politicians who administered the cultural institutions. The only argument against him was that he doubted the archaeological record and the vagueness about the data of the archaeological context.

However, all this information was delivered in time and form and attested by the expert opinions published in 1922 and with the title of Mask with Turquoise Mosaic issued by the National Museum of Archeology, History and Ethnography , Herman Breyer,<sup>3</sup> concludes: "Mr. Porfirio Aguirre, who had the good luck to find this precious object in a trip made to Guerrero,

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<sup>3</sup> Beyer, Hermann, "A Pre-Hispanic Mask with Turquoise Mosaic", in *Mask with Turquoise Mosaic: Expert Opinions*, 1922, Mexico, Printing of the National Museum of Archeology, History and Ethnography.

is to be congratulated for such an important finding".<sup>4</sup> However, it seems that these opinions were not enough to prove the authenticity of the piece and public derision played havoc with the spirit and professional future of Mr. Porfirio Aguirre. The discovery was made in 1922, the photograph of the turquoise mask was widely disseminated, even publications in Germany and France showed on their covers the beauty of the piece. However, 88 years had to pass, as it was until 2010 when, through a multidisciplinary investigation that the piece was authenticated and the arguments that the piece was unreliable were dropped.

However, Mr. Porfirio did not live to have his name cleared. In of 2010 a book was published: *The Mask of Malinaltepec*, coordinated by Restorer Sofía Martínez del Campo Lanz, and yet still in this book in the section written by Sue Scott,<sup>5</sup> a gray and incriminating tone is shown in various ways. It does not allow to see an exhaustive or complete investigation about the archaeological work of Mr. Porfirio Aguirre or about his achievements in other areas such as: linguistics, anthropology and the translation of historical documents.

The name of Mr. Porfirio Aguirre needs to be cleared, a so important Copeño not only for archeology, as he discovered one of the most representative icons of our National Museum, the Mask of Turquoises of Malinaltepec Guerrero, but for a series of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 3. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, Sue; "The mask of Malinaltepec and its companions" in *The Mask of Malinaltepec*, National Institute of Anthropology and History, 2010 p. 106

contributions, which we will point out later. For example, in archaeological terms, he is the one who led the first explorations at the site of Ayotzinapa; today we know this name due to the great tragedy that took place in 2014 with the disappearance of 43 students of the Normal Rural School with the same name. However, Ayotzinapa is also a reference in terms of the archaeological record of our country, because in the Technical Archive of the National Coordination of Archeology, where all the reports on archaeological sites in Mexico are located, the oldest record about the state of Guerrero dates from 1916 and was written by Archaeologist Porfirio Aguirre and provides an account for the sites of Oztocingo and Ayotzinapa.

Mr. Porfirio Aguirre was also very interested in living peoples such as the Huichols and their religious festivals, as well as the Huichol myths and songs. Added to this interest, he had a way with languages, as we already mentioned he was a polyglot, philologist and translator. One of the most cited books he translated is written by Walter Krickeberg: *The Totonacs, contribution to the historical ethnography of Central America*, published in 1933.<sup>6</sup> An article published in one of the newspapers with the largest circulation in Canada, announces the progress of Mr. Porfirio Aguirre's research on the understanding of the symbolic world and the Huichols. Another reference on the subject occurs in the various gatherings that

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Krickeberg, "Die Totonaken", en *Bässler-Archiv*, t. IX, 1925. [Translation from German to Spanish by Porfirio Aguirre: *The Totonacs, contribution to the historical ethnography of Central America*, by Dr. Walter Krickeberg, Graphic Workshops of the National Museum of Archeology, History and Ethnography, Secretariat of Public Education, Mexico, 1933.]



took place in different cultural spaces, for example, as reported by Elena Poniatowska in her book *Tinísima*, where she alludes to the group of friends who lived together in Tina Modotti's house, and they comment on the Huichols and on the sacred plant: the peyote. In this meeting they discussed plants with powers and their symbolism in the indigenous peoples of prehispanic Mexico. In these and other references, we can see that Mr. Porfirio Aguirre frequented high intellectual circles and forged close friendships with personalities such as Jean Charlot, a French painter settled in Mexico, Walter Pach, an American writer, Tina Modotti, an Italian photographer and as we discussed with Muralist Diego Rivera whom he met when they were both 14 years old.

Another of Mr. Porfirio's areas of great interest was the transcription and interpretation of the pre-Hispanic codices for which he spent more than ten years of his life in foreign libraries and universities that are depositories of pre-Hispanic manuscript codices. The faithful copy he made of the Laud Codex stands out, a piece held at the Bodleina Library in Oxford, England; I had the opportunity to know the xylographic copies that Mr. Porfirio Aguirre made, and their graphic and aesthetic value is unique. His tracing is impeccable and the harmony in its colors strictly follows the pre-Columbian tradition. Besides dedicating himself to faithfully copying this codex, he also produced the facsimile reproduction of the Azteca Pilgrimage Strip, the Troano Codex, and the Ixtlixóchitl Codex. The delicacy of his traces shows Mr. Porfirio's great ability for drawing, and the sagacity to achieve a

work of singular beauty. In a comparative analysis between the deities that were reproduced in these codices, the figure of Tlazolteótl stands out, which in turn, is the central figure of the mural made by Diego Rivera at the Hospital de la Raza with the theme "The People Demanding Health". This is one of the clear examples of how the lives of both were nourished in different ways. For Diego Rivera, the prehispanic symbolism reflected in the codices and their access would not have been possible without the friendship of Mr. Porfirio Aguirre who studied pre-Columbian cultures and learned in drawing, and who made the copies of more than 10 codices. We could also keep track of some of the reconstructions Diego Rivera made about the pre-Hispanic past that were widely reflected in the murals of the National Palace. For example, the images related to the codices and their dyes, to the variants that were used to make the pigments and all the information related to the glyphic writing, to the iconography and to the prehispanic pictography since Mr. Porfirio Aguirre served as a bridge between the world of archeology and painting.

Another example of the above is in the book entitled "The Monster in his Labyrinth" written by Alfredo Cardona Peña, where in the form of an interview, he writes this document to give an account of the life and work of Diego Rivera and recounts throughout the text on several occasions about the friendship he forged with the Archaeologist, the Nahuatlato Porfirio Aguirre and refers to the copy that Mr. Aguirre made of a piece of wall where a mural painting of Teotihuacán was discovered

containing images and admirable figures and where Diego Rivera asked Mr. Aguirre to make a copy of the original. He also tells that this copy was seen by Lawyer Alfonso Caso, and he had taken it as a trickery and it was said that the fresco was a fake, so no one from the "official world" went to see the original. The piece left Mexico and the exceptional work done by Porfirio Aguirre was never valued, even with the pleas of Diego Rivera to preserve the piece *in situ*, nothing was achieved. This was another one of many disappointments in the bittersweet path of Mr. Porfirio Aguirre.

Perhaps, the last part that corresponds to mention about the life of Mr. Porfirio Aguirre is his prolific pen. About this issue, there are two very important contributions. One refers to the research he did in archaeological and anthropological terms, and we highlight the discovery of the mask of Malinaltepec and the excavations in the archaeological site of Ayotzinapa. Also, his excavations in Chupícuaro, Guanajuato stand out as well as the notes that he made on the baths of Netzahuálcoyotl. On the other hand, we have his contributions on Nahuatl culture, as the translations he made on the First Memorials of Tepeapulco. Anonymous indigenous<sup>7</sup>, in addition to a score of other texts, such as: *Cualli Amatl. Chicome Calli*,<sup>8</sup> this book is about another anonymous Nahuatl and which, also translated by Mr. Porfirio

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<sup>7</sup> FIRST Memorials of Tepeapulco. Anonymous indigenous people compiled by. Translation of Nahuatl by Porfirio Aguirre. Mexico Vargas Rea. 3 parts Col. Amatlacuilatl.

<sup>8</sup> *Cualli Amatl. Chicome Calli. Conquest of Tlatilolco*. Anonymous Nahuatl translated into Spanish by Porfirio Aguirre, Mexico, Vargas Rea, 1950, 42 p. (Amatlacuilatl Collection).

Aguirre, a historical document that narrates the conquest of Tlatelolco and the implantation of Christianity. Within the bibliography recommended for the study of the Nahuatl culture, there are many of its translations, among which we can highlight those already mentioned.

Mr. Porfirio Aguirre walked the intricate roads of the Sierra de Guerrero again and again, walked them on foot and by mule, sometimes accompanied by a villager and others by his son Jorge Aguirre while spotting blue birds and remembering with nostalgia those years in Copanatoyac, where both found in the mamey trees and in the peaceful evenings, inexhaustible hours for enjoying the past and archeology, and the present and painting, where the charcoal sketches and photographs are the faithful witness of a relationship with your land, with Copanatoyac, a place that marked the life of a man who searched and searched until he found pieces of unparalleled beauty, but who also found uneasiness, frustration and forgetfulness.

Copanatoyac, is undoubtedly a source of inspiration, longed for land and indisputable reference, which is linked to the history of a country immensely beautiful, but also terribly abandoned and sometimes forgotten. Hopefully this effort to recover, not only the oral tradition of Copanatoyac will lead to value the illustrious men and women who have honored its name and who have proudly held its language and history and woven the modern history of our country .



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