The Art of Fernando Llort

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Fernando Llort, *Fragmento de Mi País*, silk-screen print, dimensions unknown, 2000

Permission has been granted by the Fundación Fernando Llort for the use of artwork throughout this journal and photography contained within this article.
Fernando Llort Choussy was born in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, in 1949. As a child he spent much time drawing and making crafts. In 1966, he decided to travel to Medellín, Colombia, to study religion at the Seminariola Ceja, then decided to travel abroad. He spent three years studying philosophy at the Universidad de Toulouse in France, and then at the prestigious Leuven University in Belgium where he earned a degree in philosophy and theology. During those years he also painted, and held his first exhibition in France. Not long after his European experience, he headed to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where he studied architecture and art, but was uncomfortable with the racist attitudes of some of his acquaintances.

Llort returned to El Salvador in 1971, and at this time became lead singer and guitar player in a band, and also wrote poetry and essays. Tensions were escalating in El Salvador between the military government (supported by the upper classes), and the peasants or lower strata of society. The Catholic Church tended to remain aloof from these conflicts, and generally supported the elite autocracy. Things began to change after Oscar Romero was named Archbishop in 1977. Many in the church hierarchy were not pleased when he began criticizing the violent actions of the military against the peasants.

In 1972 Llort decided to move to the remote village of La Palma, where his family owned property. La Palma was suffering low employment and a high crime rate, therefore Llort’s friends asked, jokingly, whether his father had exiled him there. But for Llort, La Palma became the place where he found his calling in art and spirituality. For him, the artistic vocation provided a connection to the local people. He began teaching workshops in woodworking, and in painting, for those with little or no training. Over the next decade his workshops multiplied, making La Palma one of El Salvador’s best-known producers of folk art (currently there are about 120 workshops), a place to find beautiful products for sale. As a result, crime and poverty had been reduced. His art during his years in La Palma, and the pieces created in his workshops, were inspired by village life and the natural environment. Llort also started his own family. He married Estela Chacón, and his children were born: Juan Pablo, now a chemical engineer; Angel Fernando, a musician; and María José, who manages much of his business.

Meanwhile, El Salvador’s military repression had hardened, especially following the assassination of Archbishop Romero in 1980. Soldiers often shot innocent peasants on the road, and at times assassinated entire villages. While projections vary, some estimates as high as 70,000, at least 25,000 civilians died from the violence during that decade. Llort’s art during this period, however, does not portray or directly critique social oppression or war. Instead, his images are bright, multi-colored and joyous, strengthening the identity of the masses at the deepest level, and celebrating healthy life as the potential of all people, in contrast to the anguish, tragedy and devastation surrounding them. Llort’s goal was “to reconnect with my roots as a Latin American, and help define our people in their human and spiritual dimensions.” He retrieved Mayan and other pre-Columbian designs and motifs, and stylized the flowers, fields, plants, birds and other animals familiar to all El Salvadorians in his own striking fashion. Ordinary people doing ordinary things appear often in his work, frequently against a background of grouped hills and/or modest houses. Religious symbols often appear: open and upraised hands express worship, supplication or thanksgiving; images of people praying, with biblical phrases as titles; Jesus and Mary; birds symbolizing creation and the sun God’s creative power. His paintings are saturated with designs and bright colors that celebrate the harmony of the universe and unity of humankind. For these reasons he named his workshop in La Palma, “La Semilla de Dios” (The seed of God), and his current gallery in San Salvador, “El Arbol de Dios” (The Tree of God).

Llort’s media include paintings, prints, engravings, silk screens, lithograph and handcrafted items. Some of his work is produced on ordinary materials like wood and fabric, occasionally joined in collages. Both he and those in his art workshops have produced cups, plates, potholders, boxes, crosses and many other objects for
daily use, sold at affordable prices, in evidence of his continuing connection to ordinary folks.

Opened in 1981, Llort’s gallery in San Salvador (El Arbol de Dios) also serves as a cultural and art training center. When John Paul II became the first Pope to visit El Salvador, in 1983, Llort designed the provisional church and the altar that were used for the papal mass. He also designed the Pope’s stole and sang at the mass. These garnered such attention that the Pope asked him to paint a depiction of the Lord’s Supper for the Vatican Embassy in El Salvador. Also in 1983, Llort created a mural of 36 square meters, “Tribute to the Sun,” for the façade of El Arbol de Dios.

In 1985 a chapel built in honor of Archbishop Romero was erected at the University of Central America in San Salvador, and commissioned Llort’s paintings around the altar. It was near this chapel that in 1989 six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, were slain by government forces. Afterward, other artist works commemorating these martyrs were added to this chapel. That year he established the “Fernando Llort Foundation for the Advancement of Art and Culture,” which offers a range of workshops like those in La Palma, to provide training for local people in the arts. The Foundation’s mission is to advance the welfare and development of the human being.

In commemoration of the 1992 Peace Accords to end El Salvador’s Civil War, Llort was asked to design and create a mural along the arch of the large front door of the national Cathedral in central San Salvador, which he refers to as “definitely the greatest honor that has ever been bestowed upon me.” The mural was completed in 1997. Among other themes, its panels depict allegorical new man and new woman, their work tools, guardian angels, a peace dove, and the Last Supper. But in late 2011, without informing Llort, the mural was torn down, its panels smashed. His son Juan Pablo gathered some fragments and took them to Fernando’s gallery. In ironic twist, it was the government that decreed this act ordered by high church officials. There are two kinds of services conducted in the Cathedral, traditional masses in the main sanctuary, and in the basement, which contains Romero’s crypt, less formal Masses are attended by a group that reveres him and carries on his message. I attended the services in the basement, and often heard parishioners criticize the mural’s destruction. This unexpected destruction of Llort’s art indicates that his celebration of the common people is not necessarily appreciated by those in power. Over the years, their opposition has kept him from being as widely known as he should be.

Llort’s production expresses Faith, which has guided his work, and Art, which has been a strong force for Justice. He does not promote political involvement or public demonstrations, instead, he seeks to strengthen the Identity of the El Salvador people by depicting their indigenous symbols, daily activities and familiar landscapes, examples and models for their own creative work.

His art is known by common dispersal, through visitors from outside El Salvador (this author met him in June 2012 at El Arbol de Dios), and his own occasional trips. Llort has exhibited in the U.S., Japan, Canada, Germany, France, Spain, Mexico, Ecuador and elsewhere in Central and South America. He will be in Chicago between August 3–11, 2013, to speak and display his art. For information on this visit, please consult: <http://www.facebook.com/FernandoLlort2013>.

ENDNOTES


2. Molina wrote: “le fue encargado a Llort la decoración del templete para la misa pontifica. Así como el diseño de la estola Papal para la ceremonia.” This is how his daughter María José Llort explained it: “they called a ‘template’ the provisional church and altar that was built… my father was in charge of the decoration of the altar and stola of the Pope. He also sang at the Mass that was offered.

3. See Fernando Llort, “Biografía” at <http://lagavia.8m.net/gallery_pinturas.html>.