

# Phantoms and Embodiments: El Quixote a time traveler.

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In a world in which the autonomy of art is undeniable, few topics surrender the visual arts: El Quixote is one of them. In 2005, the exhibit "The three dimensions of Don Quixote" at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, Spain, brought a fresh air to the celebration of the 400 anniversary of the first edition of *El Quixote*.<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, El Quixote Festival in Durham, North Carolina, brings another inception in which migrant and local visual artists in the United States look at the legendary character 400 years after the publication of the two novels and the passing of Miguel de Cervantes.



What an exceptional set of circumstances. The two cultural pillars of the Anglo and Spanish culture, William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes share the same year, almost, the same day of death, April 23, 1616. Both, lived fully, as we do today, as tumultuous and tempestuous as it was their time and shared it in the tragedies and comedies coming out of their imagination. We do share that history, we are part of that legacy of imperial nightmares and a global Eurocentric culture that transformed the globe during modernity, they foresaw such forces that unleashed our own wild and turbulent time.<sup>2</sup>



It was Francisco de Goya, considered the first "modern artist:" who demystified topics, techniques, and genres in the visual arts. He depicted royalty and nobility as they were, warts and all. In the Age of Enlightenment (as the 18<sup>th</sup> century is called), Goya plunges into our inner being, our unconscious, and exposes an irrational and bestial world, as the one of Cervantes' Quixote. One of his best known prints from *Los Caprichos* bears the words "*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*" (The Sleep of Reason Produces Monster"). Beneath the print, a caption clarifies: "*La fantasía abandonada de la razón, produce*

<sup>1</sup> The exhibit showed twenty pieces commissioned for the event to the most representative of the Spanish contemporary artists of the time: Andreu Alfaro, Eduardo Arroyo, Rafael Canogar, Martín Chirino, Alberto Corazón, Susy Gómez, Cristina Iglesias, Carmen Laffón, Francisco Leiro, Eva Lootz, Julio López Hernández, Blanca Muñoz, Juan Navarro Baldeweg, Miquel Navarro, Carlos Pazos, Javier Pérez, Jaume Plensa, José María Sicilia, Susana Solano y Darío Villalba. These artist made personal interpretations highly experimental and some how distant from the historical illustrative vignets of the past. <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/exposiciones/tres-dimensiones-quijote-quijote-arte-espanol-contemporaneo>

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the legacy of El Quixote in Graphic arts, see: Johannes Hartau, "Algunas representaciones iconográficas de Don Quijote en Francia", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, 37-2. 2007 (see the online version at: <http://mcv.revues.org/1692?lang=en>)

*monstrous imposibles: unida con ella, es madre de las artes y origen de sus maravillas*" (Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders), what else was Goya thinking about but to echo El Quixote? Goya broke with the conventions and rules of neoclassicism, and anticipated romanticism, expressionism, symbolism, and surrealism, by his use of an expanded visual vocabulary and literary undertones. Although he advocates reason, he paints with raw feelings.

By the mid nineteenth century, in the wake of the Romantic movement, when the graphic illustration was central in art, it was possible to paint by alluding to the great novel by Cervantes. That was the case, for example, of the great versions of *El Quixote* by Eugène Delacroix and Honoré Daumier and later by Paul Cézanne, for example in his "*Don Quichotte sur les rives de Barbarie*," (1870) Cézanne depicts abductions and legendary feasts making an exotic view of the novel bringing it close to our times.

By 1900, as the claim to autonomy of painting (which would soon lead to the invention of abstract art) grew, the literary inspiration was pushed aside of the territory of the visual arts. However, in the succession of the vanguards of the twentieth century, there was a movement that restored the old idea of art as illustration: surrealism. The surreal visual arts led many myths and old stories, and Don Quixote, with his delusional misunderstanding between literature and life, between fantasy and reality, had to be among them. Maybe that's why the best visual interpretations of Cervantes' novel in the twentieth century, the few who are saved come mostly from surrealism. André Masson, "*Don Quixote y las Cortes de la Muerte*," 1935 (Cleveland Museum of Art), has been said that could also be an allegory of resistance against the threat of fascism by part of Masson while living in Franco's Spain. This topic would surface again in Masson's sets and costumes for the version of the play *Numancia* of Cervantes directed by Jean-Louis Barrault in 1937.<sup>3</sup>

That same political context comes to the fore in the famous comic antifascist of Picasso's etchings and aquatints, in: *Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937). Franco demolishing the statue of the Republic, Franco kneeling before a coin of a "duro", riding on a pig, Franco's ass in the air . . . ; in all these surreal adventures is not much of perverted quixotism? Franco was the anti-Quixote, the madman champion, not supported by beautiful ideals, but its reverse. In 1955, Picasso produced, maybe, the most reproduced image of El

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<sup>3</sup> *The Siege of Numancia*, written by Cervantes (1586) is his most revered tragedy, it was popular from the 1930s to the 1950s with several versions and adaptations made in Spain, France, and South America. See: Begonia Lolo (ed.), *Cervantes y el Quijote en la música: estudios sobre la recepción de un mito* (pag. 420-21). 2007

Quixote today. It was featured on the August 18- 24 issue of the French weekly journal *Les Lettres Françaises* in celebration of the 350th anniversary of the first part of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

Another surrealist who is maybe the best known for his depictions of El Quixote is Salvador Dalí. In his dual Spanish and militant style of surrealism he was destined to be the most famous of all illustrators of El Quixote after Doré and Goya. In his drawings and watercolors, made in 1945 for an English version of the *cervatina* novel to be published in New York, Dalí combines stereotyped reasons of his painting: his ghostly figures move in a landscape of endless plains and large scenes before decorated skies visions. A decade later, in 1957, Joseph Forêt commissioned him a series of lithographs for another illustrated edition of Don Quixote, and the artist then decides to deploy a repertoire of experimental techniques to achieve the task. Around the same time, another Spanish artist, the sculptor Alberto Sanchez, created, during his Soviet exile, a series of drawings of Don Quixote, for the super production *Don Quixote* by Grigori Kosintsev in 1957, considered the best movie ever filmed on the novel by Cervantes.

Don Quixote as pictorial subject traveled to the United States in the 1868 edition of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* with illustrations by Gustave Doré (made initially for the 1863 French editon), this edition of the masterpiece was supposed to have 60 illustrations; however, the novel captured Doré's imagination and he produced 200 of them. It is well known that "in every English-speaking home where they can spell the word 'art,' you will find Doré editions."<sup>4</sup> His renderings were so influential they determined the look of Quixote and Sancho Panza in many subsequent illustrated versions, stage and film productions, and readers' imaginations. El Quixote returns later in the luggage of surrealism. In the mid 1940s, Jackson Pollock himself painted a picture entitled *Don Quixote: A semi-abstract painting, not so lucky*, where you can glimpse a figure on horseback formed by flat runs. American sculptor David Smith, produced in 1952 a series of seven lithographs devoted to the same subject, expressionist prints some with colored gouache. In the 1970s, the Chilean Roberto Matta during his transition from French surrealism to American abstract expressionism, explored Cervantes topic in some paintings with bright colors and ethereal atmosphere.

Such fascination revamped recently, maybe because of the "anti-hero" logic that encapsulates the contemporary narrative of a madman going epic. El Quixote that by starting a journey, with his sidekick (Sancho), would informed the contemporary narratives

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<sup>4</sup> See the illustrations in: Project Gutenberg has an [English full text Quixote](#) with the illustrations scanned in, and the University of Buffalo has an [extensive searchable digital collection](#) of Doré illustrations.

from road-movies, comics and heroes, to epic productions from East and West. In the visual arts we count with dramatic versions, such as that of the sculptor Germaine Richier, *Don Quichotte de la Forêt* (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis) presented in the Venice Biennale of 1952. Halfway between surrealism and existentialist sensitivity of the war, this bronze figure more than two meters tall, so thin and rough (as Giacometti's), holds a spear in one hand, and his other hand is raised in a prophetic gesture. Richier's Quixote has much of an insect, Kafkaesque bug and absurdity, but also radiates an imposing dignity, the glow of a true hero defeated. More recently, another artist trained in surrealism, Antonio Saura, made a series of 133 drawings in ink, gouache, acrylic and pencil, for an edition of Don Quixote and was awarded by the Booksellers Guild and the Municipal Council of Leipzig in Germany, 1988.

Don Quixote resides also in the popular domain, he has been also subject of multiple representations by professional and non professional artists, artisans, amateurs, etc., the most important collection of this phenomenon is located at the Quixote Iconographic Museum in Guanajuato, Mexico.<sup>5</sup> There, countless skinny wild-eye Quixotes exists, Quixotes fighting the windmills, melancholic quixotic hotheads, expressionist and surrealist Quixotes, pop and even abstract Quixotes and Quixotes, Quixotes, and Quixotes. An eclectic, even bizarre landscape almost as a real nightmare unfolds in front of the eyes of the visitor. From famous artists and illustrators to amateurs and sentimental painters, painters of sad clowns and modern Gioconda's, the figure of Don Quixote (and Sancho) as it relates to the art world, seems doomed to the domains of the popular and the kitsch. That is the power of imagination over the subjugation of the elitist art and literary world. There is where El Quixote resides and where Cervantes wanted him to be, a man of the people going mad for the forcers of reason and the asymmetries of historical times.

Four hundred years passed, and we still reflect on the narratives, experiences, and work of Shakespeare and Cervantes. We measure classic, modern, and contemporary narratives with their now canonic work. They rule language and culture, and we have created a visual imaginary with their characters, stories, and landscapes of their imagination. We all have faced Mercutio, or loved as Romeo, dream as Quixote, or being compassionate as Sancho. Today, we have the opportunity to look through the eyes of the beholder, visual artists, poets, writers, dreamers, to such legacy.

This exhibit brings multiple versions that oscillate from canonical illustrations to imaginative renders of the famous subject. Leticia Alvarez, Ernesto Hernández, James Bamhill, Alicia Ortiz, Eliza Lopez Trejo, Dennis Wells, and Ingrid Zavala's work derive from the

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<sup>5</sup> The museum is located in downtown Guanajuato, the capital of the Cervantino Festival and one of the most important centers for research of Cervantes work outside Spain. <http://www.guanajuato.gob.mx/museo/>

illustrative with individual takes on the subject. While Kayla Rose Marie García and Betsy Birkner use the dramatic almost theatrical absence of the “Caballero de la triste figura” in their armors for a new age. The physicality comes in the work of Socorro Hernández-Hinek and Francisco González in which collage and palimpsest function as a metaphor of a journey; Mariana Rodríguez-Pardy’s ceramic presents a perspective from the character (that goes to the dark forest); Negret’s pseudo abstract expressionist piece succumbs to the power of the image building and atmosphere for a phantom scene; Zaire Kaczmarek’s photo-image collapses movement, capturing a raising and a falling body in the same frame; deconstruction and decay is present in the poetic three-dimensional pieces of Paris Alexander; and Monica Weber elaborate on the evolution of the image by using form and materials. Strength, gesture, and cannon is used in the work of Nico Amortegui, José M. Cruz, Noé Katz, Gustavo León, Luis Ardila, Julio González, David Rubin, and Jorge Zuluaga where a careful study of art history grounds their work creating dense a powerful renders that oscillate between urban/rural - human/animal, real/abstract depictions with clear references to the work of modern and contemporary masters such as Klee, Picasso, Dali, Miró, Basquiat, and Motherwell. Symbolism and brutalism comes in the work of Mary Ann Anderson and Angela Viera, on one hand, Gustavo de los Rios and Cornelio Campos, on the other, whom by using Eastern and Latin American sources mix mandalas and incaic/aztec sources that establish narratives with psychological undertones. Finally, Jean-Christian Rostagni’s images create free associations by a smart use of “nature” as a subject, which establishes a potentiality of relations between form and content, creating windows and bridges of sense that put together states of mind and states of being at the same time.

Again visions come to us in form of images, as phantoms of reason that remind us of the power of imagination in a time of digital emancipation.

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