

A MEXICAN "MÁSCARA" OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

THERE was no lack of amusements, both public and private, in the Mexico of the Viceroy. The temperament of the Spanish overlords as well as that of their Indian wards was not well adapted to the fostering of a stern and ascetic atmosphere such as prevailed in the contemporary colonies of the English in New England and on the Atlantic Coast. The natural gaiety and love of display which characterized both the conquerors and the conquered in New Spain made it inevitable that they should find expression in numerous diversions, particularly those of a public nature. Hence it was that various entertainments enjoyed by all classes in the realm were developed and became a familiar feature of the daily life of the community. The Church, whose influence permeated nearly every phase of the life of the times, was not slow in recognizing this universal love of ostentation and pageantry nor in turning these tendencies to its own advantage. It endeavored to satisfy the popular desire with processions of elaborately clothed images and ornate symbols; these, with all the pomp and splendor which so rich an institution could command, were brought forth to dazzle the eyes of the populace and to convey to their simple minds the great Glory of God and His Church. On other and less spectacular occasions groups of members of the various Orders paraded solemnly about the streets and public squares to voice their thanks to the Virgin for her favors and to solicit her protection in times of stress. And, more rarely perhaps, there was the awe-inspiring presentation of an "auto-de-fe."

But such grave and dignified affairs could not wholly appease the multitude and the Church wisely gave its sanction to other and more secular diversions. Sometimes it doubtlessly felt compelled to overlook certain activities

that it could not wholly approve. The inherent nature of the people demanded opportunities on which other than their religious emotions might be stirred and when all might indulge their love of conflict as well as make manifest their innate joyousness. In part at least, their primitive lust of battle was satisfied vicariously by the sanguinary spectacles of the bull-ring and the cock-pit; their instinctive *gaieté de coeur* displayed itself in other and more harmless pastimes such as in the theater and in the "máscara." It is with this last form of entertainment that we are here chiefly concerned and which will be discussed briefly.

The "máscaras," or "mascaradas" as they are also called, were composed of groups of persons who, wearing varied and peculiar costumes and masks, came forth mounted upon horses and other animals or on foot and paraded about the streets of the city either by day or by night. In the latter case torches were usually carried. The disguises might represent historical, mythological, and Biblical personages, the gods of primitive religions, and planets, or they might symbolize the Virtues, the Vices, and other abstractions. A máscara taking place in Mexico City on Jan. 24, 1621 represented all the knight-errants of history and fiction, the authors of famous novels of chivalry, Don Belianis de Grecia, Palmerín de Oliva, el Caballero de Febo, and at the end as the last and most modern of these heroes came Don Quijote de la Mancha. These were followed by Melia, la Encantadora, and Urganda, la Desconocida, both mounted upon camels. Following these clumsy dromedaries came two ostriches surmounted by the enchanted eunuchs, Ardian and Bucendo; last of all came Sancho Panza and Doña Dulcinea del Toboso.¹ As González Obregón points out² this is an interesting bit of evidence of the popularity that the immortal work of Cervantes had already attained in Mexico City at this early date.

The garbs of the different nations of the world were commonly imitated in these festivals especially those of the

¹ L. González Obregón, *México Viejo*, 254.

² *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

Turks and the Indians; it was also usual to simulate the forms of birds and animals. Another familiar device was to represent the figures upside down with the feet in the air and the head upon the ground. Often "carros" or floats of an allegorical nature accompanied these parades of masqueraders.

From what has been indicated it is apparent that the máscaras were not merely of a serious and dignified sort. It is likely that the majority of them were composed of ridiculous and grotesque figures which excited the merriment of the on-lookers. There were, in fact, two distinct species often organized in pairs. The serious one was termed a "máscara a lo serio" and the ridiculous type was designated as a "máscara a lo faceto." It is not difficult to believe that the latter class was more popular both with the spectators who lined the streets and with the actors who participated in them. Nor will the investigator be startled to note in the chronicles of the time that the students of the Royal University and the thriving Colegio de San Pablo y San Pedro were not averse to relieving their ebullient spirits by taking active parts in such comic spectacles. And occasionally the "máscara a lo faceto" was utilized to satirize or burlesque certain living and prominent persons. We read in one place:³

"Se hizo en ella (Puebla) una mascara indecentisima en que sacaron en estatuas al conde virey y a la condesa su mujer, en forma de que se hacía justicia de ambos, con pregón de muchas y grandisimas injurias haciendo paseo por las calles, siendo actualmente virey, y consiguiente ofendiendose a S. M. cuya imagen representaba con tan atroz delito siendo tan público."

This diversion was not the special privilege of any class; it was essentially democratic and frequently all ranks of society paraded in the same máscara. Noble gentlemen were much given to this pastime, students took part in it as intimated above, and city merchants and storekeepers also played their parts as did the numerous guilds of work-

³ Antonio de Robles, "Diario de Sucesos Notables," *Documentos para la Historia de México*, First Series, II, 31.

men of the cities and towns. Concerning the participation of the latter we read⁴ that during the festivities attending the announcement of the second nuptials of Charles II the silversmiths, the bakers, etc., on successive days rivaled each other in the gala of their display. As was the custom prizes were offered for the most impressive floats and costumes and these stimulated the spirit of competition between the craftsmen of the various trades.

The many races and mixtures which composed the heterogeneous population of New Spain commonly took part in máscaras in which only those of their own kind shared. Not infrequently do we read in the records of the time of masquerades in which negroes, or mulattos, or Indians were the sole participants.⁵ The description which follows is that of one of these public entertainments given by the indigenous inhabitants of the city of Querétaro. Children occasionally paraded in a similar manner.⁶ In one of these festive processions we learn that women also cooperated. In November, 1700, there was an important máscara in which women appeared dressed as men and men in the apparel of women.⁷

The number of those who officiated in these functions was usually large. In February, 1672, for example, more than four hundred people, together with elaborate floats, passed through the streets of the capital in gala array at the celebration of the Fiesta de San Francisco de Borja.⁸ While this is somewhat larger than that of the majority of máscaras recorded it was probably exceeded on some occasions.

Considering the temperament of the subjects of the Spanish sovereigns in New Spain it is not difficult to believe

⁴ Robles, *op. cit.*, III, 60-61; Letter of Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora to Admiral Pez entitled "Alboroto y Motín de los Indios de México," Aug. 30, 1692, Ms., 12. (In possession of the Bancroft Library of the University of California.)

⁵ Gregorio Martín de Guijo, "Diario de Sucesos Notables," *Documentos para la Historia de México*, First Series, I, 224.

⁶ "El día siguiente (Nov. 7, 1700) salió otra máscara de los niños de San Juan de Letrán, vestido a lo romano." Robles, *op. cit.*, III, 290.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 289.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 123.

that they willingly lent their cooperation to such carnival-like activities. As the costumes, however, became more elaborate and bizarre, the expense became greater and entailed a heavier outlay on the part of each individual who participated. The viceroys and other public officials frequently commanded the organization of a máscara as part of the celebration of some significant event but they seem to have been chronically disinclined to defray the costs from the public or their own treasury. This, of course, obliged each member to supply his own equipment and thus gave rise to an occasional indisposition to contribute to the universal rejoicing in this particular manner. When the news reached New Spain in April, 1658, that the Queen had given birth to a Prince, the Viceroy immediately summoned some one hundred and fifty men representing all classes, the high and the low, and including the merchants.⁹ No doubt the services of the latter were enlisted very deliberately on the part of the Viceroy; he well knew that they were the members of the community most likely to be possessed of liquid assets in the form of money or goods and thus more easily might be laid under contribution for the successful accomplishment of the enterprise. Sometimes these business men, as in the case under consideration, sought to evade their obligations by offering the rather transparent pleas of poor health or inability to ride a horse through the city streets. But their exemption was only procured by the payment of fines of varying amounts and in this way the máscara was financed.

In many respects these diversions resembled the festivities attending a carnival but there was one difference which should be noted. The carnivals fell at stated intervals and were usually annual affairs; the máscaras, on the other hand, might take place at any season or time of the year. They were utilized for the celebration of some happy event more or less unexpected. A birth, a marriage, a coronation, or a similar incident in the life of the royal family called for rejoicing; likewise the entry of a Viceroy upon his new

⁹ Martín de Guíjo, *op. cit.*, I, 395-396.

duties, his birthday, and other such occasions were fittingly observed by máscaras and other public entertainments.

It should not be thought, however, that festivities of this sort arose out of occurrences of a purely secular nature; ecclesiastical holidays were also recognized as opportunities for the presentation of máscaras. The more important Saint's days and especially the solemnization of the Purísima Concepción de Nuestra Señora, that doctrine of such fundamental importance, were thus honored. And the fun-loving Spaniards and Creoles saw no impropriety in including the ridiculous máscaras as well as the more serious in the elaborate ceremonies associated with so grave an event. In this, perhaps, they showed more wisdom than did their dour contemporaries in the English colonies to whom the possible hilarity of such a celebration must surely have seemed a sacrilege. On the whole, the máscaras, whether "a lo faceto" or "a lo serio," were a wholesome and innocent diversion. Occasionally they were attended with some disorders but these seem to have been infrequent in the latter part of the seventeenth century at least. Only once, indeed, do we read of a fatality growing out of this pastime during this period. The diary of Robles¹⁰ reports with all solemnity that:

"A man died in Santa Cruz of a kick which he received from one of the horses of the máscara."

The history of this interesting custom goes back to the earliest times of the Spanish domination. As early as 1539 the máscaras were so common that it was found necessary to forbid them without a special licence presumably because of the popular disturbances that became associated with them.¹¹ Notwithstanding this fact, however, they flourished and were repeated at frequent intervals. In 1565 the son of Cortés took part in one in which the famous entry of his father into the Aztec capital was represented with great fidelity of detail.¹²

During the seventeenth century the vogue steadily in-

¹⁰ Robles, *op. cit.*, II, 224.

¹¹ González Obregón, *op. cit.*, 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

creased and during the latter part may possibly have attained its greatest popularity. Several chronicles of the daily life of this period make frequent allusions to this public diversion and now and then afford us brief descriptions of them.¹³ Perhaps the most complete account of a máscara made during the closing decades of the seventeenth century was that of the great Creole humanist, Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora,¹⁴ in his little book entitled the *Glories of Querétaro*.¹⁵

Of the author of this short work it is not necessary to say much here. A professor of mathematics in the Royal University, the diversity of his interests and his prolific literary activity soon marked him as one of the greatest scholars of his century in the New World and one whose worth was recognized by Louis XIV of France. Don Carlos was close in the councils of various viceroys who came to administer the affairs of New Spain and this intimacy made him familiar with public matters pertaining to the realm. He is particularly renowned for his activities as a mathematician and for his historical studies especially those related to the aborigines of his native land. He was a shrewd observer and delighted in minute details. It is because of these traits that we have one of the most complete descriptions of a máscara of the latter half of the seventeenth century.

The *Glories of Querétaro* was one of his earlier works and records the founding in the city of that name of a

¹³ A compilation of the more important notices referring to the máscaras and taken from the diaries of Robles and Martín de Guíjo is given in the vast work of Vicente Riva Palacio, *México através de los Siglos*, II, 722-723.

¹⁴ The most recent account of this famous Mexican savant is that of Francisco Pérez Salazar, *Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, Obras, con una Biografía*, México, 1928 (Sociedad de Bibliófilos Mexicanos); and that of Irving A. Leonard, *Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, A Mexican Savant of the Seventeenth Century*, Berkeley, 1929, (University of California Press).

¹⁵ "Glorias de Querétaro en la Nueva Congregación Eclesiástica de María Santísima de Guadalupe, con que se ilustra: Y En el Sumpuoso Templo, Que cedió a su obsequio D. Juan Cavallero, Y Ocio Presbytero, Comissario de Corte del Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición. Escrivelas D. Carlos de Sigüenza, y Góngora Natural de Mexico, Cathedrático propietario de Mathematicas en la Real Universidad de esta Corte. (Pegasus) En Mexico: Por la Viuda de Bernardo Calderon: IXIDCLXXX."

church devoted to the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Beginning with a eulogy of the natural beauties and resources of the vicinity of Querétaro and praising the piety of this community and its devotion to the Most Holy Virgin, he relates the measures taken to establish a church there in her name. When the structure was finished in 1680 it was consecrated the same year with suitable ceremonies. An inevitable feature of the program was an elaborate máscara which Don Carlos described with characteristic meticulousness. This sketch is given below reproducing textually the description as it appears in the author's work.

As a preliminary the great Mexican savant tells us that the chief Justice of Querétaro felt moved to commemorate so glorious an occasion in some appropriate fashion. He therefore enlisted the services of the administrator of the Indian community of the city to arrange a native máscara. Stating "si yo supiera proponerla a los oydos como la gozaron los ojos, consiguiera sin duda con mis palabras lo que entonces obtuvieron los Indios con sus adornos; haré con todo lo que mis fuerzas pudieren, aunque no dudo que me expongo a que la incredulidad me censure"¹⁶ Don Carlos begins:

A las tres de la tarde començo (la máscara) à manifestarse por la publicidad de las calles dividida en quatro trocos, de los quales el primero, no tuvo cosa especial, que mereciese alabanza, por haver sido vna desordenada confusion de montaraces Chichimecos, que sin otra ropa que la que permitiò la decencia, y sin mas adorno, que los colores terriços con que se embijan los cuerpos, afeadas las desgreadadas cabeças con descompuestas soheces plumas, y casi remedo de Satyros fingidos, ò de los soñados Vestiglos, horrorizavan à todos con algazaras, y estruendos, mientras jugando de los arcos, y las macanas, davan motivo de espanto con el barbaro especimen de sus irregulares, y temerosas pelcas. Mas aplausos oõsiguiò vna compañia de Infanteria, con que se principiava la Mascara; componiase de ciento y ocho mancebos, à seis por fila, no aviendo entre todos quiẽ no adornase su persona con exquisitas galas à la Española,

¹⁶ Sigüenza y Góngora, *Glorias de Querétaro*, 47. The following description is copied from *Ibid.*, pages 47-51.

siendo matizado entretenimiento del ayre las vandas volantes, que de los ombros pendian, y las garzotas, y plumas con que los sombreros se adornaron, y ennoblecieron. Pero nada de esto me confundió como el ver, que sin mas practica que el cuydo en que tal vez atendieron las Españolas marchas, ò en conductas de gente, ò en regocijos, y fiestas, dispusieron la suya con orden tan admirable, que ni en el compas de los movimientos, ni en la igualdad de las filas, ni en la gala del disparar, ni en la presteza de las cargas, ni en el concierto de esquadronarse, y salir, les hizieran muy conocida ventaja los Veteranos; de donde puede inferirse, no ser incapaces de disciplina, si à caso fuera necessario introducirlos en los Marciales estudios. Causò asombro la ligereza con que jugaba una pica el que capitaneava esta segunda tropa.

Seguianse quatro clarines, en quatro bien arrendados cavallos engualdrapados de encarnada frisa, ribeteada con guarniciones de plata, cuyas dulces cadencias, y trinados redobles fueron plausible prologo del tercero, y mas principal trozo de la lucida Mascara, que se compuso de grandeza, que aunque gentilica, y barbara mereció las aclamaciones de Augusta, à beneficios del Cetro que rigió el dilatado Septentrional Imperio del occidente. Y claro està, que fuera monstruosidad censurable, el que para manifestar su regocijo los Indios, se valiesen de estrañas ideas, quando en la de sus Emperadores, y Reyes, les sobró assumpto para el lucimiento, y la gala; la que todos vestian era la antigua, que en las pinturas se manifiesta, y que en la memoria se perpetúa, siendo en todos tan vniforme el traje, como rica, y galante la contextura de sus extraordinarios adornos. Capitaneava la tropa el que ideava al gran D. Diego de Tapia. . . . Seguiase el anciano Xolotl, primer Emperador de los Chichimecas, en la vltima poblacion destas Provincias, despues de la memorable ruyna de los Toltecas, y à este Nopalton, Tlotzintecuilti, Quinatzin por otro nombre Tlaltecatzin, Techotlala: y Ixtlilxuchitl, todos seis del linage Chichimeco, y à quienes sucedieron los dos Tepanecas Teçoçomoc, y Maxtla, que aunque tiranos gozaron la universalidad del dominio, en que por muerte, y rota de los exercitos de este, entrò el quarto Rey de los Mexicanos Aztecas Itzoatl, y consiguientemente Motecuhçuma Ilhuicamina, Axayacatzin, Tiçoçic Chalchiuhtonac, Ahuitzotl, Motecuhçuma, Xocoyotzin, Cuilahuatzin, y el infeliz, y desgraciadissimo Quauhquemoc. No dexaron de acompañar à estos los tres primeros Reyes Mexicanos Acamapich, Huitzilhuítl, y Chimalpopoca, aunque no gozaron de esta grandeza, como ni los seis vltimos de Tetzoco, que que (sic) jamás tornaron despues de la muerte de Ixtlilxuchitl à la posesion del Imperio, y fueron Nezahualcoyot-

zin, Nezahualpilli, Cacamatzin, Cuicuitzcatl, Coanacotzin, y Ixtlilxuchitl segundo.¹⁷

Adornabanse las cabeças de todos con el Xiuhetzolli, que era divisa propria del Señorío, siendo cada vna de ellas noble deposito de quantas riquissimas piedras desde el Oriente à que devieron sus brillos passaron à estas Provincias del Ocaso à manifestar sus quilates, no faltandoles la estimable trenzadera del Quetzaltlallpilloni, ni los vistosos plumeros, en que se primorizava su gala, como son el Malacaquetzalli, Tlauquecholontec, y Aztatzontli, todos vniformes en la preciosidad de las plumas, y singulares todos en lo exquisito de su disposicion admirable: lucieron en pies, y manos, el Ixitecucuextli, Ixipepetlachtli, y Matzopetzli, y sobresalieron las extraordinarias costosissimas mantas, que solo servian à la Magestad en el trono, que llamavan Xiuhlalpillimantli, y Netlaquechilloni;¹⁸ pero para que me canso en particularizar sus aliños, quando por referirlos en la propiedad de la elegante lengua, puede ser que fastidie à quien ignora el Mexicano idioma?

Terminavase esta lucidissima tropa con la persona augusta del invictissimo Emperador Carlos V. en quien recayò la occidental Monarquia con que estendiò su dominio desde la Boreal Alemania, hasta el Americano occidente, adornavase su persona con todas armas, gravadas de oro, y pavonadas de negro, montando como tambien sus predecesores, no se si diga que en los hijos del Zephiro, ò en los cavallos del Sol, porque reconocidos à la magestad que los governava, proporcionavan sus movimientos ayrosos con la igualdad compaçada con que se pasea por la

¹⁷ In passing it may be stated that the author, Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, was the foremost authority of his time on the antiquities of the native peoples of New Spain and this fact may account for his prolixity of historical detail in the present instance.

¹⁸ To Señor Don Ramón Mena, Professor of Archeology in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía, I am indebted for an interpretation of some of the Nahuatl words used in this description by Sigüenza. These are:

"Xiuhetzolli, es la corona (copilli) de turquesas que llevaban los Señores.
Quetzaltlallpilloni, es una cinta terminada en borlas y en pluma de Quetzal para atar el cabello en la coronilla.

Malacaquetzalli, es un ornato de plumas de Quetzal en forma de malacate.
Tlauquecholontec, adorno pequeño de pluma roja del pájaro Tlauquechol.
Aztatzontli, adorno de plumas de garza para la cabeza.
Ixipepetlachtli, especie de banda ancha para el pie en el juego de pelota.
Ixitecucuextli, (not indicated by Professor Mena but probably another ornament of the foot or leg.)

Matzopetzli, brazaletes.
Xiuhlalpillimantli, es una tilma o manta con dibujos azules en forma del geróglifo tlalli, tierra.

Netlaquechilloni, es un adorno para el cuello, especie de gola.

ecliptica el Apolineo tiro, de viendoles las plumas, que los mintieron Pegasos, al ayre de sus bornèos quantos aplausos se conciliaron sus apacibles visos; correspondiò en fin la vizarria de los jaezes costosos à lo augusto de los que con esta, recomendaron su gala.

Seguiase vn triunfal carro, muchas vezes mas dichoso, que el que en las elevaciones del firmamento se forma de luces, y se tachona de estrellas. El tendido que sustentavan las ruedas, midiò seis varas de longitud, que fue dupla del ancho, y subsecualtera de la altura monteandose en este desahogadò distrito sobre fingidas ondas de velillo de plata blanco, y azul, vn barqueton cuyos costados fueron desvelo del ensablage, que con rolèos, caulicalos, y targetas lo ennobleciò a todo resto, y lo hermosè con pulidissimo ayre; salian de vn mascarón, que terminava la proa, diversas vandas de tafetan encarnado, que embevidas en los tirantes parecia que ellas lo eran para que se condugese esta maquina. Elevabanse por la popa dos elegantissimos arbotantes de que se formò vn trono en cuyo medio debaxo de vna volada concha, que por la parte anterior sustentavan dos Bichas Persicas, iba colocada la Imagen de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, desde cuyo solio corrian à lo infimo algunas gradas, que se encubertaron con tapetillos de seda, como tambien se hermosè el todo con diversos gallardetes de tafetan de colores, que juntos con innumerables ramilleteros de maticadas flores parecian errante primavera, que mucho mejor que los Pensiles de Babilonia à la mortal Semiramis se dedicava à la Reyna immortal del Parayso celeste. En lugares acomodados se distribuyeron seis agraciados Angeles, que se ocuparon con algunos atributos de la Santissima Virgen, y arrodillada en lo infimo de las gradas, vna hermosissima niña adornada con los atavíos Indianos, en que se ideava no tanto la America en lo comun, quanto con especialidad estas Provincias Septentrionales, que llamò la gentilidad: Anahauc. Ocupava las manos con vn coraçon, que era el de todos, y con vn perfumador que exalava fragancias, y suavidades.

En torno del triunfal carro iva vna dança del celebre Toncontin Mexicano; y si para remedar en ella la magestad con que los Reyes antiguos la practicavan se visten ordinariamente con todo esmero, que seria ahora en ocasion tan plausible? Era esta la quarta porcion, que terminava la Mascara, anidiendosele por grandeza algunos venerables ancianos, que al son del Tlalpanhueuetl, y Teponaztli, à que acompañaron el Omichicahuaztli, Ayacaztli, Cuauhtlapitzalli,¹⁹ y otros semejantes instrumentos

¹⁹ Professor Mena has also interpreted these Nahautl words as follows:

"*Tlalpan-Huehuetl*, es un tambor vertical de madera con parche de piel y se suena con las manos, estos tamborcitos llevaban al pecho los señores en la guerra.

propios de su nacion, referian las alabças de la Santissima Virgen, en cultos canticos de elegantissimo estilo.

Con esta grandeza discurriò algunas horas por los Conventos, y principales calles de la Ciudad, recitandose en aquellos algunas Loas, en que manifestando el regocijo comun, se decifrava el motivo de tanta fiesta.

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Teponaztli, es tambor horizontal con lengüetas de madera, hueco, y se suena con bolillos terminados en esferas de hule crudo.

Omichicahuaztli, es un instrumento musical consistente en un hueco largo con estrias y un pivote para raspar sobre ellas.

Ayacaztli, nombre de la sonaja.

Cuauhtlapitzalli, que es un pífano de madera."