

Robert Wilson, art historian, art collector, and retired professor of art history at the University of Washington, was writing an article about his favorite artist, Alfredo Arreguín, when I met him, in the fall of 2007. His apartment was like a little museum. An Arreguín painting of a jaguar welcomed us in the entryway, a large Rufino Tamayo hung above the couch, from where we could see a Diego Rivera, a Picasso drawing, and works by other world class artists. Large Arreguín paintings graced almost every wall of every room of the apartment.

Robert was fighting cancer and feared that he would not be able to complete the article before his death, so I offered to help him by placing everything that he had written in long-hand on the computer. He was hoping to submit it to art history journals for possible publication.

I was able to go to his apartment three times. Robert would read to me while I tried to keep up. Although we were able to finish the first part of his article during these visits, he had not yet given me his sources. Robert had done meticulous research, including several references on each page, but his health worsened enough that he never was able to meet with me again. His family gave away his books, and his notes were lost, so there is no bibliography for this article. I have placed each sentence that was to be footnoted in italics and, as a tribute to both the historian, Robert Wilson, and to the artist, Alfredo Arreguín, I am placing it on this website for others to appreciate. I ask for understanding from all authors who have been quoted without names, publications, dates, or page numbers.

–Alison Miller, 2-28-2011

Myth in the Life and Art of Alfredo Arreguín: The Trail of the Jaguar

by Robert D. Wilson

A Leitmotif of Mexican literature—one finds it particularly in the novels of Charlos Fuentes—is the idea that the bourgeois world of our time is closed and sterile because it can no longer create myths. In this view, myths are the indispensable means to spiritual regeneration... Above all, man is urged by [such] writers to create myths or, indeed to re-create and re-live them. —James B. Lynch Jr.; “Tamayo Revisited.” Introduction to Rufino Tamayo: Fifty Years of His Painting, 1978.

One day in 2001, Alfredo Arreguín picked up a book about the art of his native Mexico and read a passage concerning “the origin of the two warrior orders, eagles and jaguars”. They were not exclusive to the Nahua world but belonged to all Mesoamerican peoples. The two orders represent the two aspects of reality, the night-day dichotomy.

The order of celestial war, that animates the universe, is symbolized by these two-faced animals. If the eagle is the sun, the jaguar is “the sun of the night”. This vision of the jaguar as a flaming sun, in the dark, nocturnal jungle would have delighted William Blake who believed in the universality of the poetic imagination: “*Tyger, Tyger burning bright / In the forest of the night...*”

Roughly three weeks after reading these words, Arreguín took his brushes in hand and painted a work so complex, iconic and challenging of one senses, that it must have resulted from a long process of development: the *Self-Portrait as a Jaguar Knight*. The element of challenge is perhaps most immediate in the areas of light and color. For Arreguín, the “Tyger burning bright” —that is, the jaguar presence in the painting— has not just inhabited its dark forest realm: it has illuminated the landscape to the point of converting it into a day scene, and a vivid one at that. In particular, the raking brilliance of the reds and yellows confronts, even as it attracts. Yet the artist did not wish to lose the nocturnal association and almost titled the picture with a play on words: *Jaguar Knight-Jaguar Night*.

Even without this title, associations of such a kind should spring readily to the mind of anyone versed in the mythology of Mesoamerica. *The Aztecs worshipped the jaguar as a god and called it Tepoyollotl, —heart of the mountain— in recognition of its fondness for seeking refuge in the darkness of caves. According to a belief seemingly widespread at the time, the spots on the great cats’ pelt were thought to symbolize stars, while the skin itself supposedly represented the night sky. But above all, in both Nahua and Maya cosmology, the jaguar was the sun of the underworld. In Aztec thought, as soon as it dropped below the western horizon, it began its journey, in feline guise, through that darkest of realms, the subterranean passage which led at last to Mictlan, the abode of the death god. During this ordeal, the creature was tormented by terrible demons, with only the grim ranks of the deceased for consolation. It endured nonetheless, and, at length, was reborn as the bright eagle sun of the morning, speeding towards the zenith, attended by only the bravest souls—those of warriors killed in battle or on the sacrificial stone.*

The jaguar knights are said to have been the direct earthly personification of the underworld sun. If the jaguar faced many more dangers than the eagle, it did not yield to them, and assuredly, the jaguar knights yielded not an inch in courage to their counterparts, the eagles. Brundage is doubtlessly right when he states that *“the nocturnal sun in Aztec myth was a magisterial figure, noble, tragic, and mysterious, in every way a warrior’s beau ideal.”* It might even be argued that, of the two, the jaguar was the more admirable because it confronted and survived the terrors of the night.

Yet, in a possible example *of the dualism often present in Mesoamerican myth*—and perhaps of special interest in regard to Arreguín’s picture—there are tantalizing hints that sometimes, at least, the jaguar sun could have diurnal traits. *An early pictorial manuscript shows a jaguar warrior with the facial likeness of Huitzilopochtli, an Aztec solar deity who allegedly slew most of his half brothers, the stellar demons of the milkyway, with his awesome weapon, the fire serpent, because they had conspired in the murder of his mother just moments before his birth. This story has almost always been taken as an allegory of the rising sun “slaying” the stars with its rays of light. A later source, but one with clear pre-conquest roots, describes both eagle and jaguar leaping into the air; the bird of prey, like the morning sun, flies steadfastly upward while the jaguar soon sinks back to earth like the afternoon sun setting in the west.* The bright tonality of Arreguín’s painting accords rather well with the idea of the jaguar as a putative sun of the day.

None of this is meant to suggest that the artist engaged in a systematic study of myth before immigrating to the United States at the age of twenty-one—or later, for that matter. He never aspired to be a professional mythologizer in the mold of, say the late Joseph Campbell. Thus, all of the aforementioned intricacies of the jaguar mystique could scarcely have been in the forefront of Arreguín’s awareness as he worked at his canvas. He is a thoughtful craftsman and pre-plans his images, making careful preparatory drawings on the picture surface before applying color. But in that process, many of the decisions taken are made on an intuitive basis. When we speak of intuition, we speak, to be sure, of a complex phenomenon. It can consist of sights half-seen, words half-heard or half-read and allowed to sink to a subliminal level before the conscious

mind can grasp and hold them. At times, intuition seems to consist simply of inspired guess-work. It should come as no surprise, then, that a work of art may carry implicit meanings not necessarily explicit for the artist when he or she produced it. Surely, part of great art's profundity lies in a certain open-endedness— an ability to touch chords heard dimly, if at all, at the time of creation.

Not that the chords of mythology were sounding softly in Mexico, when Arreguín grew to young manhood there. *Despite the determined, often brutal, efforts of the Spanish colonists to suppress the pagan "superstitions" of the Indians, much pre-Columbian myth survived, more-or-less in-tact, as folklore through colonial into modern times.* As a child, the artist was raised in the house of his grandparents in Morelia, capital of the Mexican state of Michoacán, where the older Indian maids had curious and sometimes disturbing, things to recount. One of their stories Arreguín still recalls rather vividly—one which told of feline creatures which were able to change into men by night. *This tale is a fairly obvious echo of the shamanistic transformation most fundamental for ancient Middle America, below the Tropic of Cancer and for isolated areas of the region through the twentieth century: man-into-jaguar, jaguar-into-man.*

The great cat also lives in Arreguín's imagination, as the hero of another narrative vividly remembered from his boyhood. People said that jaguars (*tigres*) could steal into their houses while the family slept and kidnap their children, but not to eat them: instead, to play with them. The animal was able to accomplish this feat by irradiating the darkness with its brilliance ("Tyger, Tyger burning bright") to the point of deceiving the children into thinking that the day had come and it was therefore time for games. In this tale, the creature acquires a diurnal aspect without losing its nocturnal habits, nor does it altogether lose its ancient mantle of authority, for any beast which can turn night into day is still powerful and magical indeed. Nevertheless, one is aware that, here, the jaguar has been transformed by the folk imagination into a basically benign, if somewhat mischievous, envoy from the natural world to the human. As will be noted later, by the twentieth century, the Yucatec Maya had subjected *their* jaguars to a similar conversion.

It would be a major distortion to claim that Arreguín's childhood was jaguar-obsessed; however, it was definitely jaguar-familiar. From time to time, Michoacán was

visited by small, carnival gatherings centered around *volantines*—carousels which children and young girls liked to ride as their elders looked on. Like merry-go-rounds in the United States, the Mexican *volantines* featured horses, but interspersed with jaguars and these latter were invariably Arreguín's favorite mount. Still, if in the artist's pre-adolescent world, children could play with jaguars and even ride them, adults enjoyed no such prerogatives. At an early age, he acquired marionettes (*píretes* in Spanish) and, in the creative scenarios which he devised for them, *the most potent character, was as one might expect, that great feline known to much of ancient Mesoamerica as "The Lord of the Animals."* In Arreguín's theatrical performances, grown-ups simply could not tame the jaguar. Even witches had to yield to it, and any man or woman who came too close was apt to be met with a savage response.

Arreguín's recognition of the animal's dangerous side may have represented another survival from pre-Columbian times. *In regard to the "tigre" dances in the adjacent state of Guerrero, Donald Cordry observes that the respect in which the jaguar was still held there was surprising, considering how long it had been extinct in western Mexico. When the Spaniards conquered Michoacán the local, high civilization— that of the Tarascans— honored the creature as a symbol of kingship and bravery in war: besides the supreme ruler, the cazonci, it seems that only the captain general was allowed to wear the jaguar armband and headdress as he led his troops into battle.* History can cast some very long shadows indeed.

Arreguín had already begun to make drawings of whatever subjects caught his fancy in a perfectly spontaneous way, as children will, but this freedom was cut short when his grandfather enrolled him in art school at the age of eleven. He cannot recall ever having depicted the jaguar before—perhaps he did not need to since he still had his jaguar marionettes to contemplate—and was not presented the opportunity after entering academic art training. He was subjected to the kind of rigid traditional study which some would have found stultifying; copying from classical sculpture busts and later, from objects arranged as still-lives, all directed towards the mastery of optical realism. Arreguín, however, loved the regimen. The very atmosphere of the school stimulated him. There was something profoundly sympathetic to his temperament in the challenge

to achieve precision and control posed by the school's methods. It was in this setting that he resolved to pursue a career as a professional painter. Unfortunately, certain events were about to occur which would delay his course of action for many years.

As a result of family problems in Morelia, he was sent to live in Mexico City, at the age of fourteen, where his father at last acknowledged his paternity of him. The elder Arreguín expected his son to work for him, and work hard, which left essentially no time for art. As the owner and operator of a construction firm, he intended Arreguín to follow his profession and sent him on a mission which, demanding as it was, proved immensely fruitful artistically, although the results were not to show themselves until much later. Before leaving Morelia, the artist had grown fascinated by the jungle through exposure to films with tropical settings and, by association, this glamorized the jaguar even more for him, since the animal was, after all, a jungle creature. In Mexico City, he encountered no actual jaguars and was estranged from art, but the tropical forest was about to become something much more than an image on a screen.

Señor Arreguín through two brothers-in-law, had access to government contracts, and was instrumental in organizing a team of engineers and their assistants to go to the tiny village of San Luis in Guerrero state, close to its border with the state of Michoacán, for the purpose of building an irrigation system. The town was surrounded and isolated by dense jungle growth, a part of which was cleared to make way for the impending construction. In those days, the jungle was deemed expendable by most educated people in Mexico, as in virtually all the world's countries. If some of it disappeared now and then, what was lost seemed a tiny fraction of an almost infinite resource. Besides, few of the elite truly thought that progress should ever yield to nature.

The native inhabitants of the region, however, laughed at the technocrats from Mexico City, a place so remote and alien that it seemed to them entirely unreal. They had their own ideas about the jungle, which they called *la maleza* instead of *la selva* or *la jungla*, speaking of it as if it were a single volitional entity with magical power and malefic shrewdness. They viewed the irrigation works being built in their midst as wholly unnatural, those doing the building as, frankly, fools. For the moment, the jungle might

appear to accept such intrusions, but over time it always prevailed against meddlers, Someday, surely *la maleza* would reclaim its own.

The young Arreguín was, of course, among the assistants to the engineers. It was not long before the boy received a warning of the jungle's fierceness. He was lodged at the front of a house directly opposite the town's bordello, the most boisterous establishment in San Luis. One night, disturbed and somewhat cowed by the noise from across the way, he took refuge in the kitchen at the rear of his lodgings, falling asleep under a big freestanding oven. When he awakened the next day and crawled out from beneath this object, he saw that it was black with scorpions. Had even one of the creatures attacked him, the results could have been serious. But perhaps the local citizens were right, and the jungle is more like a cunning spirit than a collection of vegetables. If so, it may have sensed that, in the future painter it would find, not an enemy, but a devoted partisan. Or perhaps Alfredo Arreguín was simply lucky. In any case, *la maleza* withheld its sting; upon occasion, it had disquieting moods but, for the most part, it seemed to smile on the boy. *It was as if the forest dressed itself in an extravagant tracery of leaves just for him, went out of its way to flaunt the brilliance of its flowers and birds, gave special instructions in the secrets of its hidden streams.* All these things sank deeply into the artist's mind; he came away with the perception that the jungle had its own motives, its own agenda, and perhaps, even its own rights. Again, as will be mentioned later, the Yucatec Maya, to this day, maintain similar attitudes towards their forests.

At first, returning to Mexico City was almost like migrating from one planet to another, from a work of magic realism to one that was merely real. *He finished his second semester at vocational school* while living with his aunt and uncle, one of his father's brothers. When the following January arrived, he enrolled at Mexico's famous National Preparatory School, often called, not without reason, the cradle of the country's twentieth century mural movement. For the moment, things improved. At about this same time, his father, finally opened his own home to Arreguín, who happily moved in. On his way to work in the jungle, he had sometimes had to pass through extremely isolated stretches of wilderness where he felt himself stared at by invisible eyes—who among

us, finding ourselves alone in the depths of the forest has not had this sense of being watched?—And the feeling had been truly ominous. Now he enjoyed a full family life, surrounded, as he was, by four half-sisters, a half-brother, and a functional father and stepmother, not to mention innumerable servants.

Then, scarcely a year later, disaster struck. As a consequence of sibling rivalry, Arreguín's stepmother was told, falsely, that he had developed more than a fraternal interest in one of his half-sisters, whereupon his father erupted in fury and threw the boy out. Again, he was able to take refuge with his uncle until his father softened enough to arrange for a small stipend so that he could live on his own. He rented space in a shabby rooming house not far from his father's residence in Colonia del Valle, one of Mexico City's wealthiest districts. He had taken up with a group of affluent teenagers who could not understand why he had to exist in such abject conditions while his father maintained lavish quarters nearby, but who were still willing to adopt him as a kind of mascot.

Once, during an impromptu street party, he dressed himself as a jaguar, donning a spotted coat and painting false whiskers on his face, after which he seated himself in a derelict car where his friends paid him mock homage. *Without conscious intent, he was echoing rituals which still had genuine mythical roots in parts of the country, as, for example, among the Yucatec Maya, some of whose pre-Lenten celebrants wear the jaguar's complete skin, head and all.* Then, too, there were the masked *tigre* performances that stretched across south central Mexico, always focused on the creature which Horcasitas called "the slyest of all the beasts of ancient Mesoamerica" and urged to "*fight on wildly in the fray; die a thousand times in our village fiestas.*" However, too much should not be made of Arreguín's prank; it was an ironic salute to an animal whose scent he then lost completely. He was not to pick the jaguar's trail up again until some twenty-five years later—an inordinately long period of time, one might think,—but, considering the results, well worth the wait.

His early adulthood in Mexico City remained fairly bleak. The future artist had long since lost all interest in art and was deeply alienated from his family. While he continued to see his father on weekends, these meetings were usually stiff, and Arreguín

rarely ceased to feel constrained by poverty and his own anger. Hence, when an opportunity to emigrate to the United States presented itself, he did not hesitate for very long before exploiting it, although, had he been able to foresee some of the things which lay ahead, he might have hesitated longer. During its passage through the Aztec underworld, the jaguar endured cruel tests before emerging re-born. Arreguín was about to face serious tests of his own as a stranger in a strange land, and, once or twice, almost literally as a traveller through hell.