

LINDA CHRISTENSEN

Writer, 2017
Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

C. M. MAYO

Tulpa Max

Notes On the Afterlife of a Resurrection

In a manner of speaking, we historical novelists are in the resurrection business. But who, or rather, what precisely is it that we bring to life? These characters infused by our imaginations, yet based on beings who were once flesh, blood, and bone, can they escape the page and, like the *tulpas* of Tibetan esoteric tradition, take on a will of their own and haunt their creators? In the case of Maximilian von Habsburg, that Archduke of Austria who ended both his reign as Emperor of Mexico and his life before a firing squad in Querétaro 150 years ago, and whom I made a character in my novel based on the true story of Agustín de Iturbide y Green, *The Last Prince of the Mexican Empire*, I must confess that yes, he haunts me.

To start with, soon after the novel's publication (more years ago than I would care to count), Tulpa Max, as it were, prompted a little avalanche of correspondence that continues rumbling into my email inbox to this day.

Had I seen the mega alebrije, Amor por México, Maximiliano y Carlota?

Did I believe that Maximilian was a Mason?

What did I think of the legend of Justo Armas, was he really Maximilian, having escaped that firing squad to make a new life in El Salvador?

From another reader, Maruja González, friend of a friend in San Miguel de Allende, I received, along with her generous permission to post it on my blog, a family story about the dessert prepared for Maximilian on his visit to that city in 1864. It so happened that Maximilian had stayed in her great-great-grandparents' house,

and there they made him a very solemn banquet with music and soloists, and all the ladies, their hair coiffured, lamented very much the absence of the empress, Carlota, as they were already calling her with affection. All these ladies of the cream of San Miguel society jostled to outdo each other in making the most elaborate, brilliant, and exquisite delicacies. One of my aunts had the honor of preparing some pears in syrup for the monarch, who turned upside down in praise for this most wonderful dessert.¹

¹ My translation from the Spanish.

I bring as much empathy as I can muster to my portrait of Maximilian, but empathy—seeing with the heart—is the novelist’s first, best, and most powerful faculty, and it does not necessarily imply sympathy for that character’s actions or ideas.

An email as if from beyond the tomb, for it literally had to do with a tombstone, came from Jean Pierre d’Huart, great-grandnephew of the officer shot in the head on the highway near Río Frío in March of 1866. That officer was a high-ranking member of the delegation that came to Mexico after the death of Carlota’s father, King Leopold of Belgium, and the assumption to that throne of her brother, Leopold II (yes, he of Congo infamy). That bandits would so brazenly attack such a party on that highway—the major artery connecting Mexico City and Veracruz, gateway to Europe—was at the time and to this day widely considered, both in Mexico and abroad, a turning point for Maximilian’s reign, a harbinger of its end. I had it wrong in the novel, my correspondent gently informed me. The Baron d’Huart murdered near Río Frío was not Charles, then serving in Mexico with the French Imperial Army, but

his distant cousin, Frédéric Victor. Attached was a photograph taken in Tintigny, Belgium, of the very tombstone, wreathed in vines and its base tufted with moss.

But the most Edgar-Allen-Poe-esque email to date came from a friend, Roberto Wallentin, with the Spanish translation by his father, Dr. Roberto Wallentin, of a Hungarian newspaper article from 1876 by Dr. Szender Ede. Experts on the period will recognize Dr. Szender Ede as the individual responsible for the grotesquely inept embalming of Maximilian’s corpse. Dr. Szender Ede tells us:

While I was working on the embalming, and afterward as well, many people asked if I could get for them some of the personal belongings of the deceased. To my knowledge, during his imprisonment in Querétaro, through various different people, he sent all of his personal belongings to members of his family. The only thing left in his room was the iron frame of the bed in which he slept. Dr. Rivadeneyra assured Dr. Basch that the emperor had promised him that and so, on good faith, Dr. Basch authorized the “donation” to him. On the other hand, Dr. Licea (and this was also commented upon in the Mexican press) made a genuine business with objects that, according to him, had belonged to Maximilian. I kept some clippings of Maximilian’s hair, and most of those I gave to my friends in San Luis Potosí.²

More than messages from the depths of cyberspace, however, Tulpa Max prompts comments, generally kind ones, but on occasion cutting. As the latter have revealed, and not entirely to my surprise, many Mexicans are dead certain that, for having published a novel that has to do with Maximilian, its author must be enthralled by both the red-bearded charms and anachronistic political philosophy of that antique aristocrat. Obviously, such persons have not read my book, in which, closely following the documented history, Maximilian is capable—as in his dealings with the young American mother of Agustín de Iturbide y Green and in his Black Decree (that anyone

² My translation from that translation.

found with a weapon could be summarily executed), not to mention his reinstating slavery—of dunderheaded heartlessness. True, I bring as much empathy as I can muster to my portrait of Maximilian, but empathy—seeing with the heart—is the novelist’s first, best, and most powerful faculty, and it does not necessarily imply sympathy for that character’s actions or ideas.

There are many ways to buy a yacht; unless your name is J. K. Rowling, writing a novel is not one of them. By far my richest reward for having resurrected Maximilian has been the cornucopia of opportunities for “the feast of reason and the flow of soul.” I quote the English poet Alexander Pope, as I like to think Maximilian would, to describe tête-à-têtes with readers, fellow writers, and scholars of that exotic, bloody, labyrinthine, and transnational firecracker of an episode of Mexican history.

So I must thank Tulpa Max for my romp of a tour through Querétaro with novelist Araceli Ardón. And also for that lunch in the Zona Rosa with historians Amparo Gómez Tepexicuapan and Michael K. Schuessler where, over egg rolls and sweet-and-sour shrimp, I think it was, and a minor earthquake in the middle of it all, we talked about Maximilian’s declarations in Nahuatl and Maximilian’s gardener, Wilhelm Knechtel, and the 1865 visit of the Kickapoos.

Because I knew it would be fascinating fun, I interviewed Mexican historian Alan Rojas Orzechowski for my blog about his research on Maximilian’s court painter, Santiago Rebull—later Diego Rivera’s professor. On Guadalupe Loaeza’s radio program I chatted with her and Verónica González Laporte about Maximilian’s palace balls, Carlota’s madness, and that unlikely wife of French Marshal Achille Bazaine, Pepita de la Peña. And there was one shining moment of an afternoon on the cool and plant-filled terrace of the Centro de Estudios de Historia de México in Chimalistac when I chanced to talk with Luis Reed Torres about one of Maximilian’s undeservedly forgotten generals, Manuel Ramírez de Arellano, who escaped a firing squad only to die of fever in Italy.

I went to Puebla just for the joy of listening to Margarita López Cano talk about operas by Bellini and by Verdi in the time of Maximilian.

Most memorable was an entire afternoon of a lunch with Guillermo Tovar de Teresa in his old (and assuredly

haunted) house in Colonia Roma—lace tablecloth, and rain pattering on the windows. I had always wanted to meet the author of that glorious book about Mexico City, *La ciudad de los palacios* (*The City of Palaces*). We talked until it grew dark about Maximilian and the Iturbides and Miramón and the rarest of rare books.

Speaking of rare books, I treasure my autographed copies of the works of Austrian historian Konrad Ratz, until his passing in 2014, a tireless researcher into the life and government of Maximilian. It was a great honor to have presented his and Amparo Gómez Tepexicuapan’s book, *Los viajes de Maximiliano en México* (*Maximilian’s Travels in Mexico*) one twinkly night in Chapultepec Castle, no less.

Tulpa Max, who so loves nothing more than to hear about himself (even his desiccated corpse, with eyes pried from a statue of the Virgin laid over his orbital sockets and his legs broken so as to fit into the box) is standing a little straighter now. The color has risen to his cheeks and his eyes shine open and bright like a fox’s. He runs a gloved hand down his beard, and he sniffs what he wishes were a sea breeze. But it’s just the humble perfume of my mug of coffee. No garlic, not yet.

Now if you will excuse me, dear reader, I must check my email.

C. M. Mayo is the author of several works on Mexico, including the novel *The Last Prince of the Mexican Empire*, which was named a Library Journal Best Book of 2009. A resident of Mexico City for some thirty years, she is also a noted translator of Mexican literature. Her most recent book, published in 2014, is *Metaphysical Odyssey into the Mexican Revolution: Francisco I. Madero and His Secret Book, Spiritist Manual*. www.cmmayo.com