

“I was Always Attracted to Mella”

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Said restorer Amanda Torres Rodríguez who around these days works on the mortuary mask of the communist and revolutionary leader murdered in Mexico in year 1929.

In some sort of attic at the rectorate of Havana University (HU), surrounded by books, papers, and several articles at an old desk, and always accompanied by a cup of coffee, Amanda Torres Rodríguez works every day on the mortuary mask of Julio Antonio Mella.

Fresh out of the university—University of Arts graduate, specialized in Conservation and Restoration—the girl took upon the commitment and responsibility of restoring the piece, as close to its original state as possible.

“I am a lucky girl”, she said to CubaSi while we talk for a while about her work and the work of Mella, revolutionary and communist killed in Mexico when he was barely 26 years old.

Starting her professional life, in fact, with this work makes her think of her as a lucky person; because she was always attracted by the life and work of Julio Antonio Mella whose enigmatic death still awakes interest.

How do you stumble over the mask?

“Once professor Alexis Martin who teaches stony materials, commented that he had seen the mask and that it needed restoration.

“I was interested in plaster works. Before entering San Alejandro Art School, where I studied carving, I had studied at the workshop Gaspar Melchor from Jovellanos, in Old Havana, where I learned elementary details on how to work this material, to make molds, among other things.

“So once we were working on a marble sculpture at the Arts and Letters Faculty, I began to get familiar with the

institution to see if could work on my diploma paper there. That's how I did the restoration of a piece (larger than that of Mella); a reproduction of the 1st century B.C., a sort of theater mask.

“The diploma work had good results and it allowed checking several hypotheses, then the directress of Patrimony at Havana University, Doctor Claudia Felipe Torres, asked me if I'd be capable and was willing to restore Mella's mask. Something I wanted since I knew the state in which it was in.

“I was thrilled at the idea. The piece was donated to Cuba in 1996, delivered to Raúl Castro Ruz by the Mexican Félix Ibarra Martínez, nephew of Alberto Martínez who was one of Mella's biggest friends, and he preserved it for many years.

“In search of information I found that a year later, in 1997, several replicas of the mask were made. One of them is here at the Havana University and the other in the University of Camagüey; which has contributed to its deterioration.”

Once in your hands, what was the first thing you did?

“I ran a full analysis on the mask and I discovered that the hypothesis of Alexis as for the piece to contained salt was true. We must consider that plaster is more soluble in sodium chloride than in water.

“That is, salt is a threat, because it can lead to the dissolution and degradation of the plaster. When you work this type of permeable material you realize it's very similar to a pumice stone or a sponge, since everything that falls on top of it will be absorbed.

“The mask was made on his death and the person that took the mold of the face used salt to accelerate the hardening and it was a quick job. Let's not forget the circumstances surrounding his murder and the turmoil in which Mexico was summoned in those years.”

How long have you been working on the mask and what other task you have performed on it?

“It's been like 20 days. First thing I did was something necessary; desalinize it applying an agar gel, a natural hydrocolloid extracted from algae that allows a quick drying. In this case it contributed to moisten the surface and wash away the salt.

“I did not apply the gel directly, because it's a damaged surface, but using washi (Japanese paper). It's a process with different steps, first you must protect the piece, and after the gel is applied check that there are not remains.

“Today I am confident that the work was treated several times. When the replicas were made certain substances were applied as well as grease to dismount the copies. All that and the initial salt brought harmful consequences to the surface that also shows dents and scrapings.”

You told me that you looked for information on the conditions in which his death took place. The details are important and can clear out doubts to what happened at the crucial moment of the murder...

“Mella not only strikes me his capacity as historical leader, but his sensibility and lucidity; the love letters to Tina Modotti, (whom might have been involved in his crime); his smart speech, when for example he spoke to workers in the manifestations in Mexico. He was an intellectual, not only a leader. He did many things with only 26 years old.”

How do you assess your work?

“It's very important, because it's a historical piece. It's his last face which is more than a picture. Right now I can determine to what extent his cheekbones were, how much black hair he had, how round they were his eyes, how thick his lips.

“All that I can tell from the mask I have in my hands. Today I see some of his sculptures and I no longer consider them in his face so exact. Of course, it's the interpretations artists have made of his face. Sometimes with protruding cheekbone, almond-shape eyes. However, his were round, and his hair like mine, not so wavy.”

How much have you approached Mella the fact of having the chance to work with his mortuary mask?

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“Although I had read enough about Mella and I kept newspaper clips published on his life and work, the mask—undoubtedly—has helped me to know him more. Right now I am about to add the final protection.

“In fact plaster does not need protection, but I will use an acrylic solution to mitigate powder and humidity. The purpose is to preserve the work 20 more years and that future generations can appreciate Mella’s face as real as possible.”

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