

CHARITY MEWBURN  
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

## *Oil, Art, and Politics*

### *The Feminization of Mexico\**

IN FEBRUARY OF 1940, five months after the outbreak of war in Europe, the sophisticated publicity machine of the Museum of Modern Art in the city of New York was thrown into high gear. Its objective was the promotion of a blockbuster exhibition of Mexican art slated to open at the museum in May, three months later, and which was to be jointly organized with the Mexican government of President Lázaro Cárdenas. In its first press releases the museum characterized the upcoming show, *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, as “the most comprehensive display of Mexican art ever to be seen” and continued throughout the various stages of its promotional campaign to encourage speculation on the value of the art to be exhibited.<sup>1</sup> These matters of the art’s worth and the size of the exhibition were points of interest to a significant segment of the American public, whose appreciation of the finite and calculable was arguably more highly-tuned than their sensitivities to the intangible qualities of “art.”<sup>2</sup>

\* This paper was developed through the course of a graduate seminar at the University of British Columbia under the direction of Professor Serge Guilbaut. I would also like to thank Professor Maureen Ryan and Lynn Ruscheinsky for their critical input.

1. “Mexican Art Show Will be Held Here,” *The New York Times* (New York), February 21, 1940, p. 16.

2. The term “American” and “America” are used in most instances throughout this paper to designate the several interests and the identity of the United States. While I am well aware of the sometimes inaccurate and appropriative use of these terms by or in reference to Americans of the United States, I use them provisionally—both for the sake of clarity and to avoid an

Not only was the exhibition purported to be the largest shipment of art ever to cross an international border—conservative estimates calculated it at over one thousand objects with a monetary value of approximately 400 000 dollars—but the progress of the crated show's movements from Mexico to New York City was tracked in the press in the titillating terms of Wild West frontiersmanship. Such reportage exploited the popular Hollywood construction of Mexican-American relations where “the goods” (private property) required protection from bandits: the three box cars of art works, jealously guarded by a detachment of Mexican mounted troops from the origin of their journey in Mexico City up to the Texas border, were there relieved by two Texas Rangers riding in the caboose during the day and sleeping on top of the box cars at night.<sup>3</sup>

For the seasoned art viewer and MOMA habitué,<sup>4</sup> however, the museum's display of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* promised a more sedate but hardly less tantalizing prospect: a privileged insight into an ancient and living culture which was represented as not only demonstrably “American” but also of universal importance, a distinction already acknowledged by Paris, the centre of European modernism.<sup>5</sup>

Occurring at a moment of international crisis, the exhibition's grand scale and celebratory tone may appear to us today as highly ironic. It was, after all, staged as an extravagant celebration of what Americans would have seen as an exotic Other at precisely the moment during the summer of 1940 when

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overly cumbersome style—to distinguish between the citizens and government of the United States and those of Mexico and/or other Latin American countries.

3. See Adriana Williams for this account from the *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), April 14, 1940, in Adriana Williams, *Covarrubias*, edited by Doris Ober, Austin, University of Texas, 1994, p. 115. See also “Mexico Ships Art for Exhibit Here,” *The New York Times* (New York), April 7, 1940, sect. L+, p. 46. The estimated number of objects was inflated to 5 000–6 000 at an insured value of \$ 1 281 388 in “Three Box Cars Bring Mexican Art for Exhibit That Will Open May 15 at Modern Art Museum,” *The New York Times* (New York), April 12, 1940, sect. L+, p. 18. *Time* magazine corroborated these higher figures after the exhibition was underway; see “Mexican Show,” *Time* (New York), May 27, 1940, p. 57.

4. Publicity was geared towards the two types of viewers or “publics” which Alfred Barr (MOMA director at the time of the exhibition) had theorized and which, for the purposes of this article, could be described, in John O'Brian's words, as the “general” and the “ideal.” See John O'Brian, “MOMA's Public Relations, Alfred Barr's Public, and Matisse's American Canonization,” *RACAR* (Quebec), 1991, vol. 18, nos. 1–2, pp. 18–30.

5. The fact that the Jeu de Paume had scheduled an exhibition of what eventually became the

the western European democracies were being represented as falling like dominoes before the Nazi war machine. As such, the phenomenon of the exhibition provokes a range of questions. Why would the premier American modern art museum, well-known for its promotion of European modernism, agree to privilege a broad, historical survey of Mexican art at a moment in the late thirties when American popular fascination with Mexican culture had already been compromised by the political and economic realities of Mexican-American relations? And why indeed, at this precarious international moment, was the Museum of Modern Art itself staging an exhibition around a nation whose contemporary art had become best known for the aggressive national content of the Mexican muralists and its links with a revolutionary communist regime?

It is the contention of this article that the motives driving *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* were strategic on a number of significant fronts, one of which actively accommodated the undeclared internationalist war-time agenda of the Roosevelt administration. I will argue that the high-profile presentation of Mexican culture in the specific context of an elite American but, importantly, “internationalist” institution like the MOMA at the same time served the goals of a certain economic interests. Together with the U.S. government these interests stood to benefit from the establishment of a zone of pan-American solidarity—or, at least, sympathetic coexistence—both during and after the European war.

My argument will involve an analysis of the degree to which these and other American economic concerns were implicated both in the American administration’s war-time policy objectives and in the exhibition’s initial conception and its collaborative curatorial structure. Within these terms the exhibition’s emphasis on what were in effect the ahistorical folk elements of Mexican visual culture served, I will suggest, to defuse the immediate anxieties of significant segments of the American public regarding Mexico’s perceived fascist and communist associations, thus facilitating the Roosevelt agenda. In turn, a transnational construction of the Mexican as timeless, primitive, and receptive addressed the Mexican government’s objectives: it

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main part of the “pre-Spanish” segment of *Twenty Centuries* will be discussed later in the paper. In addition MOMA’s 1933 exhibition *American Sources of Modern Art* (*Aztec, Mayan, Incan*) had drawn the comments of none other than the MOMA-canonized French modernist Henri Matisse on this subject. See the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York), June 1933, p. 3.

not only worked to undermine elements of threat associated with the Mexican identity in the U.S. imagination but also helped to rework that identity into a site of productive economic and tourist possibilities.

It is an important thesis of this article that the staging of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* in 1940 at the MOMA—situated as it was in the symbolic centre of American free-enterprise, New York—made it possible to postulate a relationship between Mexican and American artistic production which rested on a notion of cultural complementarity. Aspects of this relationship were made visible in New York City in the spring and summer of 1940 through the simultaneous staging of *Twenty Centuries*, with the second season of the New York World's Fair. I suggest that this conjunction served to promote a symbolic continental unity in which the technological advances of certain American business interests could be seen to take place within a “natural” teleological progression which could include Mexico while, at the same time, it worked to provide certain American artistic communities with the international legitimation they anxiously sought.

Furthermore, I argue that ultimately it was within the exhibition itself—and particularly through its representation in the official documentation—that Mexico was framed as the “natural” continental antecedent of modern American culture and civilization. This construct relied upon the virtual eradication of the contemporary signs of artistic avant-gardism, aggressive cultural nationalism, and revolutionary ideologies which were generally associated in the United States with the Mexican modernists. The process through which this set of associations was enacted, dependent as it was upon a relationship to American artistic aspirations with respect to European avant-garde production, is characterized here as one of symbolic depoliticization and feminization. On one hand, this representational manoeuvre hypothetically provided contemporary American artists working in the latest of European styles with “authentic,” that is non-European, roots. On the other hand, seen within Roosevelt's construction of a pan-American identity, the exhibition's strategic formulation was able to offer up to the United States an admirable cultural pedigree appropriate to its growing status as a nation of international economic prominence.

Finally, this article will contend that for the Museum of Modern Art itself—aware as it was of the general disorientation, disillusionment, and lack of focus in the American artistic scene—the timing of this particular exhibition, relative to the impending threat of the German occupation of

Paris, provided it with an optimum opportunity to establish its own credentials as the premier modern art museum in the world.

While the analysis of exhibitions as sites where contesting national ideologies are articulated has been the subject of numerous recent studies,<sup>6</sup> this approach continues to yield relevant insights into the question of how culture has worked in specific historical circumstances. As a Canadian, I believe that such an analysis is especially relevant in our own time of crisis—a moment when Canada's bilateral relations with the United States require new negotiating strategies that recognize a tri-lateral political and economic reality that includes Mexico. Within this neocolonial paradigm, notions of “primitivism” in relation to progress and the modern can have particularly powerful implications, and the unravelling of the history of such significations becomes particularly important.

The representational strategies exercised in and through *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* can be usefully framed within two paradigms which construct the notion of “culture” to serve a range of purposes: the first, that of cultural diplomacy, requires a delicate and often ambiguous balancing act between governments through which “culture” operates as a symbolic site of political brokerage that momentarily effaces unequal power relations. The second, American cultural control or management, a “soft” version of cultural colonization, approximates the process of transformation inscribed in the official *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* document, the exhibition catalogue. What I

6. For early studies that point to the charged ideological nature of museums' exhibiting practices see Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” *Art History* (Oxford-Boston), 1980, no. 3, p. 448, and Annie E. Coombes, “Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities,” *Oxford Art Journal* (Oxford-Boston), 1988, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 57–67. More recently, Brian Wallis analyzes contemporary “cultural festivals” as public relations exercises in the marketing of national identities; see Wallis, “Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy,” *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, edited by Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1994, pp. 265–281. For analyses that deal directly with the economic and political dynamics that have shaped U.S.-Mexican cultural relations and exhibiting practices see, for example, Shifra M. Goldman, “Painting, Petroleum, Politics, Profits: U.S.-Mexico Cultural Exchange,” *Left Curve* (San Francisco), 1987, no. 12, pp. 12–22, and Shifra M. Goldman, “Metropolitan Splendors: The Buying and Selling of Mexico,” *Third Text* (London), 1991, no. 14, pp. 17–25. For a recent anthology of studies exploring the museum as a symbol and site of a range of social relations see *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*, edited by Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

will be demonstrating, particularly through the analysis of the illustrations in the catalogue's "modern" section, is how the show's curatorial emphasis on the Mexican pre-Spanish and folk arts set the stage for a recasting of contemporary Mexican art and politics as "safe" and receptive to American objectives, both in the realm of artistic representation and in political matters. What this "colonialist" project relies on, as I have suggested, is the general but complex primitivization of Mexican culture, which includes the feminization of specific "dangerous" elements, in particular the work of the so-called Big Three Mexican muralists, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros—notorious in the United States through the early and mid-thirties.

The active participation of the Mexican curatorial team in this collaborative construction of a primitive Mexico raises other questions. Foremost among them is to what extent *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* was a case of Mexican self-representation. What will become obvious is that the interconnectedness of American and Mexican interests at the level of the individual curators and certain MOMA officials and associates, as well as at the government level, renders the issue extremely ambiguous. On the other hand, documentation of the exhibition reveals, through the occasional irruption of ideological differences at particular points in the representation, that some degree of struggle over identity construction did indeed exist.

According to press reviews,<sup>7</sup> *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, once installed, overwhelmed the space of the ten-year-old MOMA building. Constructed as a narrative of evolutionary progress that essentialized the Mexican in terms of religious feeling and purity of creative expression, three main chronological sections—pre-Spanish, colonial, and modern—ascended in sequence up through the third, top floor, interspersed throughout with a fourth component, the folk or popular arts. The pre-Spanish segment—the greater part of which had been slated for Paris' Jeu de Paume before the outbreak of war in Europe had prevented its transportation—was privileged in terms of space, occupying the entire first floor of the museum and spilling out into the outdoor sculpture garden. The substantial folk art section, threaded throughout the exhibition, occupied galleries on all floors, as well as the sculpture garden on the ground level. Here, in the informal environment of a simulated Mexican marketplace, where everyday contemporary

7. See, for example, Edward Alden Jewell, "Mexican Art Show Spans 2000 Years [review of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*]," *The New York Times* (New York), May 15, 1940, p. 28, and Edward Alden Jewell, "Mexican Show," *Time* (New York), May 27, 1940, p. 57.

crafts were displayed and sold,<sup>8</sup> folk arts were placed in conjunction with pre-Spanish sculptural works. The display of colonial and modern art works occupied galleries on the second and third floors respectively. On the third floor, in addition to the folk and modern, a gallery was turned over to Mexican children's art. Of significance to the installation plan on this final floor—and particularly so in the context of a modern art museum—was the implication, as I will ultimately be asserting in this paper, that the show's construction of Mexican modern art relied upon several interrelated representations of the “primitive.” What was important to the impact of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* was that this construction of the “primitive” did *not* work in any obvious or monolithic way. Rather it drew on the subtle differentiations in contemporaneous readings of an archaic past, notions of the folk, and representations of a racial and religious Other in order to tame dominant American concerns about Mexico as a vital, progressive, and changing milieu.

The catalogue cover itself (figure 1),<sup>9</sup> marking the official site of the exhibition's textual representation, gave succinct visual characterization to the primitivist strategy of the collaborative Mexican-MOMA enterprise. The cover's design incorporated a diagonal film-like “celluloid” strip<sup>10</sup> which opened with an image of an Aztec warrior and flowed smoothly down through the designated ages from pre-Spanish through colonial to modern, ending with the painting of a young contemporary female. Among this visual series it is the mask-like toy—designated on the cover as “folk art” in English and “popular” in Spanish—which resists the historical categorization assigned the other images. The folk object thus supplies the unifying trans-historical component in the series, foreshadowing its central importance to the exhibition's construction of Mexico and its arts. What I will be arguing is that it is through this conflation of the folkloric and the archaic along with a specific representation of modern art that an ultimately useful Mexican as primitive was generated. What I call the exhibition's “Mexican primitive” would be capable of functioning simultaneously in the service of two distinct and opposing ideological positions: those of, on one hand, the “revolu-

8. Marion Oettinger, Jr., *Folk Treasures of Mexico*, New York, Abrams, 1990, pp. 51–52.

9. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art in collaboration with the Mexican government, 1940.

10. This design strategy works to incorporate the U.S. and the MOMA into the evolutionary construct via the modern scopic technology of film.

tionary” Cárdenas government of Mexico, in power when the exhibition was organized and, on the other, the interests of the MOMA, a private elite American cultural institution.

*Roosevelt, the MOMA and the Symbolic Freedom of Art*

One year prior to the opening of the Mexican exhibition, while the European democracies hovered on the brink of war, President Roosevelt had himself enacted a symbolic performance that underlined the strength and resolution of American democracy. In a CBS broadcast on the occasion of the opening of the MOMA’s new and permanent quarters in May of 1939, Roosevelt had linked art to civilization and to institutions such as the MOMA, which he saw as the product of a democratic nation :

We are dedicating this building to the cause of peace and to the pursuits of peace [...]. The arts that ennoble and refine life flourish only in the atmosphere of peace. And in this hour of dedication we are glad again to bear witness before all the world to our faith in the sanctity of free institutions. For we know that only where men are free can the arts flourish and the civilization of national culture reach full flower.

The arts cannot thrive except where men are free to be themselves and to be in charge of the discipline of their own energies and ardors. The conditions for democracy and for art are one and the same.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to recognize that at the time of this statement Roosevelt’s official position on America’s foreign policy in Europe was non-interventionist. This position conformed with a powerful isolationist trend in public opinion which had developed since World War I and throughout the Depression of the thirties and which, in large part, grew out of Americans’ resentment for their country’s historical role as Europe’s Other. As a result, by 1939 Americans objected to involvement in the European situation for a number of reasons and in varying degrees. Among the isolationist constituencies were, for example, a large segment of the population, both private

11. The opening statements of Roosevelt’s 1939 dedication of the MOMA building are taken from Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, New York, Atheneum, 1973, p. 206.



and corporate, who wished to protect their hard-won domestic economic recovery from the Depression from outside interference and others who nurtured a deep-seated suspicion of their World War I European allies, especially England, for having reneged on their wartime loans. Still others were opposed to joining the European war on pacifist grounds.<sup>12</sup>

This general antipathy to the idea of being drawn into a “foreign” war explains why Roosevelt’s short speech—while framed in terms of peace—implicitly set the parameters for entry into the approaching European war by equating the “sacrosanct” principles of free enterprise with those of democracy. Although the mention of war was explicitly avoided, and the statement was left sufficiently general and oblique to avoid the ire of most isolationists, one suspects that its connection with an elite American institution with international interests would have been an early public indication of an upcoming change in foreign policy. Indeed, six months later Roosevelt lifted the ban on the sale of arms to England, an action followed by steadily greater involvement in the Allied cause.

Aside from its obvious references to the threat of war in Europe, Roosevelt’s statement on the opening of the MOMA’s building strongly implied that it was fascism—rather than war—that posed the greater threat to American democracy. The president’s reference to a “civilization of national culture” was implicitly set up as the American alternative to fascist constructions of social identity, which relied on race, rather than a history of shared cultural experience, as the national determinant.

That this rhetorical device should have had a unifying effect on its listeners was not accidental. Roosevelt was cleverly exploiting a visceral concern shared by virtually all Americans by the end of the thirties—left, liberal, conservative, isolationist and internationalist. Cultural historian Cecile Whiting has succinctly characterized the anxieties of the period in these terms: “the spread of fascism gripped the attention of the American public, influencing virtually every aspect of the political, economic, and social life of the United States; it shaped debates about economic and foreign policy at home and eventually propelled the country into war.”<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, it was suspected that European fascism had a strong corollary closer to home, in Latin America. This suspicion contributed to a perva-

12. William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*, Toronto, Bantam, 1975, p. 174.

13. Cecile Whiting, *Anti-Fascism in American Art*, New Haven, Yale University, 1989, pp. 1-2.

sive sense of unease and vulnerability among Americans concerning the United States' traditionally weak relationship with its Latin American neighbours. This arose from two predominant historical factors: first, Latin America's cultural and economic ties with Europe (particularly Spain, Portugal and Britain) vastly outweighed connections with the United States;<sup>14</sup> and, second, the United States' traditional application of its interventionist Monroe Doctrine in Latin America, along with the ethnocentrism of American expatriate communities, had long fueled an anti-Americanism powerful enough to undermine the stability of the region.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the worsening global scene, then, Latin America's problematic relationship with the United States and its political allegiances with certain European countries, including Germany and Italy, were viewed in the United States as requiring remedial American strategies. A foreign policy plan that could accomplish the goals of hemispheric security with the least resistance from its southern neighbours took on a high priority. In order to meet this objective, Roosevelt formulated the conciliatory Good Neighbor Policy. Its promotion of non-interventionist practices to advance pan-American solidarity would ultimately serve American political, military, and economic purposes by consolidating a united hemispheric front against the Axis powers and by ensuring access to resources and markets upon which the American economy could rely whether or not the United States entered the war in Europe.<sup>16</sup> It is within this historical framework that Mexico's special relevance can be situated and the museum's role articulated.

*The Rockefeller Connection:  
Art, Big Business, and Compromise—the Good Neighbor Policy*

Roosevelt's address on the occasion of the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's new building marked the beginning of Nelson A. Rockefeller's

14. Frederick B. Pike, *FDR's Good Neighbor Policy*, Austin, University of Texas, 1995, pp. 236–237. See Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1981, for a history of German involvement in Mexico including its fascist presence and activities.

15. Pike, op. cit., p. 232.

16. For a thorough discussion of the complex and shifting cultural conditions and perceptions in both the United States and Latin America which precipitated and supported this pragmatic "diplomatic" policy see Pike, op. cit.

tenure as its president.<sup>17</sup> Because of Rockefeller's various capacities (he was, while president of the Museum of Modern Art, a corporate multinationalist with interests in Central and South America as well as in Europe; an administrative advisor and diplomatic liaison to Latin America for the Roosevelt government; an avid collector of "primitive" art—with a special interest in pre-Spanish and Mexican folk arts) he will serve as a useful nexus for the purposes of this analysis. Indeed it is through Rockefeller's connections—economic, political, and cultural—that the reciprocal flow of interests between the United States and Mexico can be articulated, with Mexico symbolically representing the United States' stake in and anxiety about the rest of Latin America.

Most pointedly, it was Rockefeller who seems to have been a key initiator of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, at least at the top Mexican government levels.<sup>18</sup> His February 1940 announcement of the upcoming exhibition referred to the "widespread interest throughout this country in our Latin-American neighbors."<sup>19</sup> Beyond the general American public's deep concern about its own security relative to the Latin American countries, cultural interest in the United States' closest neighbour, Mexico had been steadily increasing throughout the twenties and thirties. For at least some conservatives this arose from a skeptical curiosity about the cultural manifestations of a modern "revolutionary" state; for others, for example artists and intellectuals on the left (like utopian writer and social critic Waldo Frank), the integrated life of the Mexican "primitive"—seen as exemplary of "feminine" culture—provided a necessary spiritual antidote to what was characterized as the American's predominantly "masculine" cultural attributes, in particular an obsession with individualism and materialism.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly, the election of Lázaro Cárdenas in 1934 had forced Americans to focus more sharply on Mexican matters. American business had for some time treated Mexico as an extension of its own economic territory. As a

17. Lynes, op. cit., pp. 201-206.

18. Oettinger, op. cit., p. 51, and Joe Alex Morris, *Nelson Rockefeller*, New York, Harper, 1960, pp. 123-125.

19. "Mexican Art Show Will Be Held Here," *The New York Times* (New York), February 21, 1940, p. 16.

20. Pike, op. cit., p. 89; Frederick B. Pike, *The United States and Latin America*, Austin, University of Texas, 1992, pp. 248-255, and Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama, 1992, p. 69.

result, when President Cárdenas moved away from his predecessors' policies of accommodation of U.S. investment and ownership to a revived revolutionary "politics of the masses," bilateral relations underwent a severe strain.<sup>21</sup> His enactment of aggressive programs of labour and agrarian reform that put pressure on American (and other foreign) corporate practices was branded by many conservative Americans as a manifestation of a dangerous communist threat rather than as the declaration of national sovereignty that it, in fact, was.<sup>22</sup>

The American media gave dramatic coverage to events in 1938 when President Cárdenas boldly expropriated foreign oil companies as a reaction

21. Among the American media closely watching events in Mexico was the magazine *Fortune*, representing the interests of the American business and corporate world, including Rockefeller's Standard Oil. Interrupting the sequence in a series of articles on South American countries in October 1938 to focus specifically on Mexico (directly post-expropriation), *Fortune* defined the nation's situation in terms of a "communist" revolution, a rhetoric sure to fan aggravated American anxieties over both domestic and foreign investment security. The article was entitled "Mexico in Revolution: to the Peasants, the Land; to Labor, the Factories; to the Government, Oil and Other Foreign Possessions: a Revolt of the Masses in the U.S. Back Yard." The country was identified as "the most dramatic task afoot in the Western Hemisphere"—in this pivotal year and in this forum the problem of Mexico could be formulated particularly cogently: how to turn a volatile and potentially hostile pre-industrial country into a satellite producer-consumer industrialized economy. See *Fortune* (New York), October 1938, pp. 74+.

22. For a brief analysis of the complex character of the left during Cárdenas' presidency—as well as a general survey of the historiographic evaluations of the period—see Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy," *Journal of Latin American Studies* (London), 1994, no. 26, pp. 73-107. In terms of its objectives, Knight characterizes Cárdenas' presidency as "genuinely radical." However, Knight stresses that Cardenism must be understood as a coalition of individuals and groups whose motivations and agendas were often in conflict (sometimes on specific ideological grounds), a fact that ultimately curtailed the effectiveness of many of Cárdenas' policies. For other discussions in English of some of the complexities of the revolutionary discourse as it relates to Cardenism see Alan Knight, "Revolutionary Project, Recalcitrant People: Mexico, 1910-1940," in *The Revolutionary Process in Mexico: Essays on Political and Social Change, 1880-1840*, edited by Jaime E. Rodríguez O., Los Angeles-Irvine, University of California at Los Angeles (Latin American Center Publications)-Mexico/Chicano Project, 1990, pp. 227-264. However, what is important to remember in the context of this paper is that, in spite of the reality, it is highly unlikely that the "average" U.S. citizen would have understood the subtleties of Cardenism's internal dynamics. Rather, he or she would be influenced by the mainstream American media's representation of Mexican events such as land reform, labour unrest, and resource nationalization as threatening to the interests of an American notion of "democracy."

against their intransigence to labour's (and his own government's) demands.<sup>23</sup> Rockefeller's own interests in Standard Oil's Mexican operations were directly impacted. Although the American public was generally unsympathetic to the oil industry's loss,<sup>24</sup> its uneasy mood was aggravated by the intractable stance of the Mexican government over this issue. Worse still, the public's misgivings about communism and its fear of fascism would have been exacerbated by an international event perceived to have significant implications for Mexico—and, by extension, the United States. That event was the 1939 signing of the German-Soviet pact, with its suggestion that communism and fascism, once believed to be arch-enemies, might actually join forces in Europe against the democratic world.

Americans had reason to question how all this might translate in terms of Mexican politics, since it had become widespread knowledge in the late thirties that fascist factions were among the right-wing constituencies who were preparing to fight Cárdenas in the upcoming Mexican national election.<sup>25</sup> The troubling possibility of a fascist government on its southern border was compounded by another, and more immediate, infringement on the United States' interests—Germany was courting Mexico for the provision of oil and other resources towards its war effort. For President Roosevelt the situation presented a compelling inducement towards establishing friendly relations with Cárdenas' "communist" regime.<sup>26</sup>

It was Rockefeller who had made the diplomatic overture to Cárdenas in the hope of coming to a compromise between the American oil companies and the Mexican government.<sup>27</sup> Cárdenas' position was inflexible—the expropriation of the oil interests had been celebrated in Mexico in rare solidarity across all political lines as a symbolic act of economic and political nationalism and as a rejection of foreign domination after a history of U.S.

23. Pike, *FDR's*, pp. 193–194; "Mexico in Revolution," *Fortune* (New York), October 1938, p. 82.

24. Alan Knight, *U.S.-Mexican Relations, 1910–1940*, San Diego, University of California, 1987, p. 94. This book is invaluable for its analysis of significant elements of Mexican-American relations from the period of the Revolution until the end of the Cárdenas presidency.

25. Alan Knight, "The Politics of the Expropriation," in *The Mexican Petroleum Industry in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Jonathan C. Brown and Alan Knight, Austin, University of Texas, 1992, pp. 116–117.

26. See Pike, "The Good Neighbor's Romance with Mexico," in Pike, *FDR's*, pp. 185–198.

27. Cary Reich, *The Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, New York, Doubleday, 1996, p. 170.

land seizures and intervention on Mexican soil.<sup>28</sup> Any compromise was incompatible with what was represented as this new and general Mexican experience of dignity, self-respect and independence.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, however, it was at this meeting, and ostensibly as a gesture of conciliation between the two countries, that Cárdenas did agree informally to Rockefeller's suggestion of a collaborative exhibition of Mexican art.<sup>30</sup>

Rockefeller's diplomatic intervention with Cárdenas had neatly dovetailed with the style and objectives of Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy. While his meeting with the Mexican president addressed Cárdenas' complaint of indifference and ethnocentrism among the American multinational community in Mexico,<sup>31</sup> it alerted Rockefeller to the necessity of a visible change in American business attitudes towards the rest of Latin America.<sup>32</sup> In fact, it constituted a preliminary but significant step towards the accomplishment of crucial national and corporate economic goals: to improve the American profile in order to protect existing international investments and encourage the possibility of further capital expansion into an area that already accounted for an enormous proportion of American foreign investment.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Rockefeller was himself instrumental in advocating that the multinationals demonstrate their good will through active social and eco-

28. Knight, *U.S.-Mexican Relations*, pp. 84-89.

29. This was not, however, a monolithic response. In "Cardenismo...", pp. 87-88, Knight observes that "amid the well-orchestrated patriotic demonstrations of spring 1938, the business and professional classes remained relatively silent and circumspect." See also Knight, "The Politics of the Expropriation," pp. 104-110.

30. Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-125. This seems to be corroborated by the contents of a telegram from Nelson Rockefeller to President Cárdenas dated December 14, 1939 which is among the correspondence between the Mexican and MOMA organizers of *Twenty Centuries* held in Mexico City's Archivo General de la Nación. The telegram appears to confirm that this earlier, informal agreement to hold a Mexican exhibition at the MOMA was made within the context of the oil expropriation discussions between the two men in Jiquilpan de Juárez, the Mexican "presidential hideaway." I am indebted to one of the editorial readers of this article for accessing copies of those documents.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Rockefeller had become particularly sensitive to American ethnocentrism as a result of his travels in Asia and South America, especially Venezuela. See Elizabeth Anne Cobbs, *The Rich Neighbor Policy: Rockefeller and Kaiser in Brazil*, New Haven, Yale University, 1992, pp. 25-33.

33. For an idea of the degree of American business' economic commitment in Mexico in the late thirties see "Mexico in Revolution," *Fortune* (New York), October 1938, p. 74+.

conomic initiatives within their host communities throughout Latin America.<sup>34</sup>

The escalation of events in Mexico provided a test case for Roosevelt's policy. Indeed, if Mexico served to symbolize both a real and emblematic danger to the United States in the late thirties, a diplomatic strategy for dealing with it could be extrapolated throughout Central and South America.<sup>35</sup> As I have already suggested, both Rockefeller and Roosevelt were acutely concerned about pan-American allegiance, not least for the supply of oil and other resources in the upcoming war effort.<sup>36</sup> In June of 1940, during the course of the Mexican exhibition, the mutual interests of both the United States and Mexico and their related purposes were publicly acknowledged as taking precedence over partisan American allegiance when the Democrat Roosevelt appointed Rockefeller, a Republican, to the position of Coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs.<sup>37</sup> Their common aim was articulated in an official office document entitled "Hemisphere Economic Policy," which clearly and succinctly described U.S. objectives in Latin America:

If the United States is to maintain its security and its political and economic hemisphere position it must take economic measures at once to secure economic prosperity in Central and South America, and to establish this prosperity in the frame of hemisphere economic cooperation and *dependence*.<sup>38</sup>

Expressed in these terms of political and economic security, the mandate would have been broadly palatable.<sup>39</sup> The perceived importance of a pan-American policy was shared not only across elite positions—internationalist, interventionist, isolationist—but also at the grassroots level. Mexico's per-

34. For an analysis of American philanthropic objectives and strategies in Latin America and elsewhere see Edward E. Berman, *The Ideology of Philanthropy*, Albany, State University of New York, 1983, and *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism: The Foundations at Home and Abroad*, edited by Robert F. Arnove, Boston, G.K. Hall, 1980.

35. Pike, *FDR's*, pp. 194-195.

36. "Standard Oil Co.: III," *Fortune* (New York), June 1940, p. 107.

37. Cobbs, op. cit., p. 36.

38. Ibid., pp. 33-34. My italics.

39. See "The Fifth *Fortune* Round Table: America's Stake in the Present War and the Future World Order," *Fortune* (New York), January 1940, p. 70+. By now, even the elite corporate isolationists, who had resisted Roosevelt's incentives to build up foreign markets

ceived volatility could be inferred as a danger across the whole of Latin America. But, more precisely, among all segments of American society there existed a telescoped anxiety over Mexico itself. The level of this pervasive anxiety had its origins in a very specific moment with curious parallels to the situation in 1940. The year was 1917 and the event was the interception of the “Zimmermann Telegram.”<sup>40</sup>

In 1916 an American military force had crossed the Mexican border in pursuit of Mexican bandits against protests by the Mexican government. Relations between the United States and Germany were also deteriorating. In January 1917 the German state secretary for Foreign Affairs, Arthur Zimmermann, dispatched a telegram to the German minister at Mexico City, telling him what to say to the Mexican president. He was to say that if the United States went to war with Germany, Germany would form an alliance with Mexico and if possible with Japan enabling Mexico to get back its “lost territories.” These latter referred to the region conquered by the United States from Mexico in 1848—Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona (California was not mentioned by Zimmermann). The telegram was intercepted and decoded by the British and passed on by them to Washington. Printed in the newspapers, it shocked public opinion in the United States.<sup>41</sup>

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through investments on foreign soil, were looking at Latin America with an intense interest. In January 1940, a “round table” discussion (recorded in *Fortune*) addressed the question of U.S. international relations. Panelists included chairmen of national corporations such as Goodyear, *Time*, Westinghouse and Pan American Airways, along with high-placed lawyers, army, navy, labour, and consumer representatives, university deans, and college presidents. Characterized by the magazine as “representative citizens,” the group agreed with the dominant public opinion on isolationism but stressed the importance of framing foreign policy in terms of the Western Hemisphere, always equating the principles of democracy with the exercise of free trade. They recommended the intensification of trade relations with Latin America and the extension of certain financial credits to ensure that Latin America would resist the establishment of fascist air bases within its various national territories. The American panelists also wanted to safeguard American economic and political viability in the event of a protracted war in Europe and, possibly, its extension to Asia.

<sup>40</sup> For a thorough discussion of events leading up to and surrounding the publication of the “Zimmerman Telegram,” see Katz, *op. cit.*, pp. 350–367.

<sup>41</sup> R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *History of the Modern World*, New York, Knopf, 1984, p. 675.



The staging of a gala exhibition of Mexican art in New York in 1940 addressed some of these renewed fears. Undoubtedly, it served President Roosevelt's need to demonstrate an alternative to the hard-core interventionist positions of conservatives, including key members of the Senate Military Affairs Committee<sup>42</sup> who had already responded to Mexico's fascist "affiliations" and "communist" activities with aggressive sabre-rattling; at the same time, the MOMA show attempted to build popular support and confidence both at home and, at least emblematically, in Mexico and Latin America for Roosevelt's diplomatic approach to hemispheric security.<sup>43</sup> From this point of view *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* can be seen as a cultural staging of the Good Neighbor policy, with all its political and economic ramifications, arising directly from the 1939 meeting between Cárdenas and Rockefeller to discuss the oil-expropriation matter. Between the government of Mexico and the MOMA the construction of Mexico as a specifically benign "primitive" culture would provide a site from which to defuse anxieties over perceived Mexican anti-Americanism and from which "communist" practices could be naturalized as innocuous cultural markers of an alternative exotic and spiritually-driven lifestyle. At the same time, the exhibition could assist in the redefinition of the American identity in terms of continental solidarity.

Having put up its substantial cultural collateral, what did Mexico stand to gain? Simply put, it could hope for movement towards the normalization of restructured economic relations with the United States—without which Mexico was on the brink of bankruptcy—while maintaining its newly-asserted national dignity. After nationalization of the oil companies in 1938, the U.S. Treasury had abruptly ended its large annual purchases of Mexican silver; the peso had dropped substantially against the American dollar. Forced to search for export outlets, Mexico had resorted to trade-bartering its oil with Germany and Italy, an activity the Mexican government itself found highly uncomfortable.<sup>44</sup> In the meantime, the U.S. State Department

42. Pike, *FDR's* p. 194.

43. Much of American business culture was antagonistic to friendly diplomacy in Latin America and supported instead the traditional interventionist Monroe Doctrine style.

44. See "Mexico in Revolution," *Fortune* (New York), October 1938, p. 74+. The hard-core cardenists in the Cárdenas government had substantial ideological affinities with Roosevelt's New Deal policies, and appreciated Roosevelt's adherence to the Good Neighbor Policy, which had prevented the U.S. State Department from interceding with a heavy hand in spite of the oil companies' request in 1938.

had pressured Mexico to make good on its historic promises of compensation to American landholders whose possessions had been seized over the previous twenty years. Along with these external factors, Cárdenas' own reforms had cost the Mexican Treasury almost more than it could bear. It was time to demonstrate conciliation.

This does not fully explain why a fiercely independent Mexican government would promote a primitivizing representation of its cultural history for American consumption. However, a convincing argument can be made that, through the construction of a *modern* Mexican identity around notions of the "primitive"—that is the exotic, the natural and the feminine—the Mexican government's offer of an accommodating, complementary culture could hope to assuage American anxieties on several fronts. Contextualized within a modernist aesthetic, such as was provided by the Museum of Modern Art, a passive and, in representation, primitive and receptive Mexico could hope to (re)gain the confidence of American capital, the resumption of U.S. oil purchases, the relaxation of the American government's debt repayment demands,<sup>45</sup> the restimulation of tourist travel, the establishment of U.S. markets for Mexican arts and crafts,<sup>46</sup> and, crucially, the support for a liberal government in the upcoming Mexican elections. In return it could offer the United States something of incalculable value: the cultural component it would need to complete its newly resurgent and increasing hemispheric sense of Manifest Destiny,<sup>47</sup> that is, a claim to an ancient and civilized (pan-) "American" past that had recently proven itself internationally within a modernist idiom. Here I refer, of course, to the revolutionary Mexican muralists.

### *The Search for an "American" Art*

*Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* opened on May 10, 1940. Though hastily conceived and assembled, it was vigorously promoted in order to take advantage of the second summer season of the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair at Flushing Meadow and its projected attraction of an unusually broad

45. "Mexico," *Fortune* (New York), October 1938, p. 74+.

46. Oettinger, op. cit., p. 52.

47. "The U.S. and the World," *Fortune* (New York), September 1940, p. 42+.

and diverse audience of American visitors.<sup>48</sup> Organized by officials of the city of New York to stimulate the local economy, the two-year New York World's Fair staged a flamboyant celebration of American corporate technology and consumer confidence after years of severe economic depression. The fair's initial (1939) theme, "The World of Tomorrow,"<sup>49</sup> was articulated by its national corporate participants—such as Westinghouse, General Motors, AT&T, and Eastman Kodak—through a populist rhetoric aimed to revive American consumption of the domestic product. Through the use of futuristic architectural, technological and artistic languages in conjunction with popular entertainments (including burlesques), together aiming to convince the viewer of the joys and benefits arising from the healthy functioning of the machinery of state capitalism,<sup>50</sup> the fair constructed a public display of the optimistic side of the American corporate isolationist stance in relation to the disturbing reality in Europe. The message conveyed by its high-tech ethos was that the United States, focusing its rational and productive energies inward, could carry on impervious to disintegration elsewhere.<sup>51</sup>

It is productive to see the juxtaposition of these two high-profile festive events, the exhibition and the fair, as a neat metaphor for the main contesting visions which characterized American attitudes towards their government's formulation of foreign policy—with the fair working to evoke American isolationist policies and, in this context, the Mexican exhibition calling up the internationalist alternatives which would eventually prevail in bringing America into the war with its Western European allies. In addition, each event promoted its particular construction of modern American art which, at least roughly, corresponded to those broadly-sketched political positions. A survey of the predominant art approaches in the late thirties

48. The public towards whom the World's Fair was aimed could be said to have represented Barr's "general," as opposed to "ideal" public. See O'Brian, op. cit., pp. 21-24.

49. The Fair's theme was changed for its second season (1940) to "For Peace and Democracy"—in deference to the European war which was reclaiming several of its foreign state exhibitors.

50. See Joseph Wood Krutch, "A Report of the Fair," *The Nation* (New York), June 24, 1939, pp. 722-723; Sidney M. Shalett, "Epitaph for the World's Fair," *Harper's* (New York), December 1940, pp. 22-31.

51. See Helen A. Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair*, New York, Queens Museum, 1980.

will elucidate the position taken up in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* in relation to other “national” art discourses, one of which was promoted in the exhibition halls behind the glossy futuristic murals which decorated the fair’s exterior face.

What this examination will show is how, by 1939—in spite of the success of Roosevelt’s New Deal program on the economic front (achieved through a multi-leveled rhetoric that was able to encompass a range of American political positions)—international and national events, both political and artistic, contributed to a severe identity crisis among American artistic and intellectual communities. Just as the general mood in the United States could be characterized as a mixture of tentative optimism and gloomy uncertainty, the artistic scene was fragmented and oppositional—sure of its potential, but acutely demoralized by its lack of direction and its political impotence. I will argue that the confusion this state of affairs created allowed the Museum of Modern Art to strategize a position from which it could offer authority and stability, and that Mexico, by virtue of its proven cultural and artistic lineage and, in particular, its “American” archaic roots provided the perfect vehicle for this purpose.

During the second half of the decade the two broadly-determined camps, one isolationist in outlook and regionalist in aesthetic, the other internationalist in outlook and originally committed to a heterogeneous art of social content, had undergone significant and traumatic changes. For the latter, the defeat of the Spanish Loyalists by the Hitler and Mussolini war machines spelled the end of the Popular Front alliance between leftists and liberals. Disillusioned by this failure and by the impotence of their own anti-fascist propaganda to influence the outcome of the Spanish Civil War, and still further by the Moscow Trials and the signing of the German-Soviet pact, a significant group of artists on the left reassessed the nature of their socially-critical role in times of political crisis. Many rejected forms of social realism, as practiced both individually and collectively through the publicly-funded Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project, to take up instead an independent and individualistic art as advocated in the 1938 Breton-Trotzky-Rivera manifesto, “Towards a Free and Revolutionary Art.” Many of these artists who now turned away from explicit political critique and/or social comment had, in the mid thirties, enthusiastically embraced the Mexican muralists’ example of linking indigenous primitive sources and social protest within the language of modernism. Indeed, the work of the Mexican

muralists, in particular Rivera and Orozco, had come to symbolize for the American left the continental utopian promise generated by Mexico's Indian roots, on both artistic and political fronts.<sup>52</sup>

However, in the less optimistic climate of the late thirties, Mexico's significance for the American avant-garde shifted. It was Breton, Trotsky, and Rivera's "Mexican Manifesto" that liberated artistic practice from political dogma and redirected it towards the possibilities of a private and autonomous avant-garde art for art's sake, in the tradition of European modernism. Then, with the assassination of Trotsky on Mexican soil in 1940, Mexico's progressive political and revolutionary aura was shattered, the continental possibilities of its communist utopian model rendered defunct. For many of those artists who, inspired by the Manifesto, had returned their focus to the inspirational wellspring of French modernism, Mexico's importance was not, however, irretrievably destroyed but rather reconstructed to function within the traditional modernist, private and independent, framework. Ultimately, the American avant-garde was to reformulate Mexico as the continental source of an originary and universal "primitive," representing subconscious and anarchistic tendencies. Moreover, for the Americans the Mexican "primitive" had a certain advantage over some of the forms of representation associated with the "simple" and the "uncivilized" traditionally taken up by the European avant-garde: it was unspoiled by a past colonialist relationship with the United States.<sup>53</sup> However, this fertile potential was not yet developed in 1940, when France's capitulation to the Nazis, along with what appeared to be the accompanying death of French art, delivered a final and symbolically devastating blow to the American artistic left.

On the other significant front, American Scene painters and their more

52. Among those artists, working for the WPA in the mid-thirties, were Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock, Gottlieb, Reinhardt, and Rothko. They would eventually become associated with the first wave of a universally-recognized modernism originating in the United States, the future so-called Abstract Expressionists. See Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900*, New York, Praeger, 1967, pp. 126-127.

53. For an analysis of the shifting construction of Mexico's "primitive" identity during the thirties and forties at the hands of the American avant-garde, including its relationship to Breton's surrealist agenda, see Serge Guilbaut, "Azteques et celtes a l'assaut de l'histoire contemporaine," in *Arte, historia e identidad en América: visiones comparativas. XVII Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte*, edited by Juana Gutiérrez Haces, Renato González Mello, and Gustavo Curiel, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas), 1994, vol. 3, pp. 809-821.

vocally isolationist sub-category, the Regionalists,<sup>54</sup> were staunch nationalists. While associating themselves with the local roots and values of the American heartland, the Regionalists held extreme attitudes that dictated a rejection of French artistic leadership in favour of an “uncontaminated” American production. In 1938, the year prior to the New York World’s Fair exhibition, which included these two American groups, both factions (the more moderate and the extreme) had suffered a serious blow at the hands of French critics for their significant role as representatives of American modern art in the MOMA’s *Trois siècles d’art aux États-Unis* exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, the first comprehensive show of American art to be shown in any European city.<sup>55</sup> Relying overwhelmingly on parochial subject matter and academic illusionism to distinguish a “national” American art, the Regionalists in particular had been slammed for their “derivativeness” and lack of indigenous traditions. Parisian critics considered the country too young to have produced art which merited comparison with the long and eminent French tradition. The critics did, however, single out American film and architecture for special mention, characterizing them as the true exemplars of the youthful American national character. Evidently, it was in these non-painting genres that American modernism could be taken seriously. In addition, critics did praise the early colonial “primitives,” and in so doing eliminated any realistic American threat to European modernism by constructing their most “successful” painting as the naive Other to the avant-garde production of European civilizations.<sup>56</sup>

The overall result of this European reception was an acceleration of the search among American artists and critics for a worthy “American art,” suitably symbolic of the nation’s growing international power. In a book plaintively entitled *Have We an American Art?* Edward Alden Jewell, *The New York Times* art critic, postulated an “authentic” American art which drew on the American sociological and geographical experience, but was capable of speaking a language of “universality” (as opposed to an imitative “internationalism”), presumably by taking up a modernist idiom.<sup>57</sup> However, Forbes

54. Rose, op. cit., p. 115+.

55. For MOMA’s representation of the exhibition see the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York), April-May 1938.

56. French critical reception is fully delineated in Edward Alden Jewell, *Have We an American Art?* New York, Longman, 1939.

57. Ibid.

Watson, representing the American Federation of the Arts, remained resolutely nationalist and anti-modernist, advocating a “democratic” art free from the French domination pushed by dealers and museums<sup>58</sup> and formulated instead through a direct communication with its American public (the language of realism).<sup>59</sup>

The search for an “American art” continued unabated during the first season of the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair. Moreover, the art exhibition sites on the fair grounds functioned as battlefields for the American Regionalists, this time fending off criticism from many of their own American artist peers and critics. The fair’s vigorous nationalist outlook paralleled Watson’s position described above. The juried art (distinct from the murals which were planned as part of the original design of the fair) was roundly criticized by Christopher Lazare in the left-wing journal, *The Nation*, as mere reportage of the American scene—an indiscriminate conglomeration of parochial works in a “provincial dialect” seemingly chosen on the basis of regional representation alone. Lazare lambasted these artists for a “shockingly chauvinistic emphasis on specific national characteristics,” by which he inferred the absence of a modernist idiom, with its universal associations, but also the regionalism in the thirties that was associated with the self-promoting realism of fascist art.<sup>60</sup>

The overwhelmingly negative critical reception in the American press jarred the fair into reworking its art exhibition strategy component for 1940, resulting this time in a heterogeneous mix of rotating shows that resisted one dominant aesthetic. Significantly, a representation of the American avant-garde, international in character and aligned with the principles of French modernism, was this time evident among the exhibitors, under the guise of

58. This was certainly a pointed critique against the MOMA.

59. Forbes Watson, *American Painting Today*, Washington, D.C., American Federation of Arts, 1939.

60. Christopher Lazare, “American Art at the Fair,” *The Nation* (New York), July 1, 1939, pp. 23-24. Lazare was referring specifically to the exhibition organized by Holger Cahill, national director of the Federal Arts Project (and Acting Director of the MOMA from 1932-1933 and organizer of the 1933 exhibition *American Sources of American Art*, America’s answer to European modernism’s archaic lineage) for the first—and at that stage, only—season of the fair. Entitled *American Art Today*, it was intended as a representation of American contemporary art “with roots in all parts of the country” and can be understood as an attempt to continue, this time by way of easel art, the promotion of American artists’ integration into the mainstream economy that had been the purpose of Roosevelt’s WPA program. Cahill’s

the New York-based group, the American Abstract Artists.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, the lack of a common American artistic base was perhaps the exhibition program's most salient characteristic.

Within this disillusioned and disoriented artistic climate, the Museum of Modern Art was perfectly situated to act as a beacon. Although neither particularly American nor democratic in its exhibition history,<sup>62</sup> the MOMA shared with the Roosevelt administration an interest in providing the basis for American hegemony within the near future. Starting with its first exhibition in 1929 of the work of Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and Van Gogh and its subsequent mounting of the first American one-man exhibitions of Matisse (1931) and Van Gogh (1935, 1937)—as well as its authoritative 1936 aggregate shows, *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*—the MOMA had foregrounded a specific European-derived modernist lineage while legitimating itself as the premier American museum in the realm of European modernism. Significantly, through the early inclusion of Diego Rivera in a one-man show in 1931, the MOMA opened up the possibility of the production of legitimate and up-to-date modernism on “American” soil.

If the MOMA could successfully position itself to take over the banner of modernism from its disintegrating seat in Paris, in part by providing refuge

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emphasis on “democratic” referred to the selection process which, in critical terms, seems to have failed miserably to produce an exhibition of a creditable artistic standard. As a form of patriotic defense, the American modernist Stuart Davis could go no farther than to praise its symbolic value as a unifying force among artists’ organizations and as a gesture against fascist censorship. See Stuart Davis, letter, *The Nation* (New York), July 22, 1939, p. 112.

61. “Art Project Highlights Living American Art at New York Fair,” *Art Digest* (New York), June 1, 1940, pp. 10–13.

62. With some effort the MOMA could make a case for a proven leadership role in American art. In response to ongoing complaints that it had been hostile towards American modernists, the museum pointed towards the dangers of a strictly nationalist policy (calling up the spectre of fascist art) justifying its adherence to notions of “quality” while enumerating, in self defense, its inclusions of American art exhibitions and acquisitions throughout its ten-year existence. See “American Art at the Museum,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York), November 1940, pp. 3–4. (One suspects that the citation of the critically disastrous *Trois siècles d'art aux États-Unis* as proof of the Museum’s support of American art served the museum’s ideological position well in the context of these accusations.) Its early insertion of Rivera into the canon had opened a space for a modernism rooted outside of Europe; its 1933 exhibition *American Sources of Modern Art* (*Aztec, Mayan, Incan*) suggested the sources could be continental; the fact that it had intercepted the pre-Spanish segment of *Twenty Centuries* from its original destination, Paris, emphasized the credibility of these “American” origins.



and support for well-known European modernists displaced by the war and, therefore, a tangible working example for an American avant-garde, New York's artistic leadership might well be secured in its name. Add to this picture the museum's participation in the reassertion of archaic artistic roots on the continental soil itself through the exhibition of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* and American artists might well construct a viable and universally-recognized "national" modernism.<sup>63</sup>

### *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*

While the original impetus for *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* may not be easily narrowed down to one individual,<sup>64</sup> the initial steps in its organization seem to have come from Alfred Barr, director of the MOMA, and the diplomatic maneuvering from Nelson Rockefeller, its president. That Barr, already aware that the pre-Spanish exhibition for Paris could be appropriated to MOMA's purposes, selected Miguel Covarrubias and René d'Harnoncourt as the senior organizers, suggests that a highly convincing modernist construction was being worked out in the very early stages of plans for the exhibition. Although d'Harnoncourt seems to have declined the invitation,<sup>65</sup> Barr's selection of both this curator and Covarrubias, the latter an intermittent resident of New York throughout the twenties and thirties, is notable for two reasons which would have had a significant bearing on the particular impact of the exhibition. First, the two men were well-known in both Mexico and the United States for their commitment to the elevation of indigenous cultures in North America; their respective activities aligned them in different ways with the values promoted through the official Mexican

63. American modernists had already for some time turned their attention towards native American art in their search for cultural sources. Consider, for example, the artistic community gathered in Santa Fe, New Mexico by the late teens and early twenties. For an analysis of this trend see Sergio Allen, "Indian Space Painters," M.A. thesis, New York, City University of New York, 1995, pp. 115-144.

64. Lynes, op. cit., p. 223.

65. Other than in Williams, op. cit., p. 111, there is no mention of d'Harnoncourt's participation in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*—either in the official catalogue or in any contemporaneous coverage of the exhibition. One suspects that he was concentrating all his energies instead on preparations for his important 1941 exhibition *Indian Art of the United States*.

nationalist discourse of *indigenismo*. Second, both had a long association with and intense interest in the Mexican folk arts.

René d'Harnoncourt had organized the highly popular and critically successful exhibition of Mexican fine and applied arts at the Metropolitan Museum in 1930, within which he had drawn a direct evolutionary lineage from the pre-conquest Indian to the contemporary painter through the Mexican folk arts. Afterwards, from the mid-1930s, his professional association with the U.S. Department of the Interior's Indian Arts and Crafts Board aligned him with a reformed government agenda sympathetic to his construction of advanced indigenous cultural aesthetics:<sup>66</sup> the Department aimed to protect as credible and valuable the "communally-centred" ethos of native American culture, an agenda that borrowed from the official Mexican approach.<sup>67</sup>

Covarrubias, himself a modernist painter of the "Mexican school" represented in d'Harnoncourt's 1930 Mexican show, had been involved with Roberto Montenegro and others in the 1924 exhibition of Mexican folk art that had traveled to Los Angeles, Argentina and Brazil. Furthermore, his association with Alfonso Caso, curator of the pre-Spanish segment of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, included a mutual interest in the folk arts which had resulted in a major Mexican exhibition in 1922. At the same time, Covarrubias' other, and overriding, passion and expertise lay in the realm of pre-Spanish art. This interest can also be seen to be intimately connected with the strongly-held pro-Indian ideology Covarrubias inherited from his

66. It was perhaps in the 1941 MOMA exhibition *Indian Art of the United States*, which followed shortly after *Twenty Centuries*, that d'Harnoncourt brought his own construction of American indigenous cultural aesthetics to its symbolic culmination. It was here that he actively promoted native production as legitimate art on a par with European avant-garde production—rather than as ethnographic curiosity; see Allen, op. cit., p. 123. However, d'Harnoncourt's interest in and involvement with the promotion of the native arts and crafts of all the Americas continued unabated into the 1940's, both within the context of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board and, after 1945, from his position as director of the MOMA. D'Harnoncourt's cultural politics appear to have dovetailed with the broader "diplomatic" interests of Nelson Rockefeller, who had hired him to the MOMA post. For documentation of these related activities see the René d'Harnoncourt Papers (02.750084), Archives of American Art, rolls 2921, 2922, 3830, and 3831.

67. See Delpar, op. cit., pp. 120-124, for a shorthand account of the anti-assimilationist, Mexican-inspired principles promoted by John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933-1945.

father,<sup>68</sup> and which was promoted by the Cárdenas government. In the eyes of Alfred Barr, these combined skills and sensibilities in the pre-Spanish, folk and modern would have undoubtedly validated Covarrubias as a perfect candidate for the curatorship of the modern section, where the supposedly innate qualities of the transhistorical “Mexican primitive” could be seen to predominate.<sup>69</sup> In addition to these factors, Covarrubias could offer the bonus of a somewhat familiar and intriguing American profile: his caricatures for *Vanity Fair*<sup>70</sup> and, on occasion, *Fortune* magazine gave him a popular and friendly, while somewhat exotic, “American” persona that might enhance the festive environment the exhibition intended to create.<sup>71</sup>

Renowned Mexican archaeologist Alfonso Caso, whose appointment as Commissioner-General would have been the Mexican government’s logical choice as the authoritative voice for this “official” survey of Mexican art, also enjoyed a high profile in the United States. Caso’s reputation was popularized by his 1932 discovery of the treasures of Tomb 7 at Monte Albán, which had contributed significantly to a popular sense that a worthy American alternative to the European lineage drawn from the Egyptians through the civilizations of ancient Greece or Rome was now uncontestable. Caso himself drew comparisons that prompted the American press to construct parallels between Mexico and Egypt with the discoveries at Tutankhamon’s tomb in 1922.<sup>72</sup> His American curatorial assistant, George Vaillant, also the Associate Curator of Mexican archeology at the American Museum of Natural History, had worked near Caso in the Valley of Mexico and postulated that another culture actually predated what had, until the thirties, been designated as “archaic” in the Valley, implying a still more ancient past than previously hypothesized.<sup>73</sup> Vaillant supplemented Caso’s pre-Spanish seg-

68. Williams, op. cit., pp. 104-107.

69. On the other hand, there were criticisms of the selection of Covarrubias from a number of Mexican artists who felt his sojourn in the United States compromised his authoritative knowledge of the contemporary Mexican scene. See *ibid.*, p. 113.

70. At the time of his hiring, *Vanity Fair*’s editor, Frank Crowninshield, served as a MOMA trustee.

71. The “environment,” unlike the traditional gallery experience, was to include a Mexican marketplace and a programme of the evolutionary progress of Mexican music, composed and conducted by Carlos Chávez.

72. Delpar, op. cit., p. 112.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

ment of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* with items from the Natural History Museum's collection, thereby enacting an erasure of the boundary between artifact and art that the MOMA and its catalogue were to accomplish on a grand scale.

Roberto Montenegro, also a modernist whose work was included in the exhibition, curated the folk, or popular, art section.<sup>74</sup> A key promoter of Mexican folk arts from the time of his collaborative organization of the 1921 centenary exhibition celebrating Mexican independence, he was also distinguished as the founder of the Museo de Artes Populares in Mexico City. Furthermore, since the early thirties he had been Nelson Rockefeller's close advisor and one of his trusted collectors of Mexican folk art. An enthusiastic primitivist himself—who eventually established the Museum of Primitive Art in New York—Rockefeller commissioned Montenegro to buy a significant number of folk art pieces for inclusion in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, with the arrangement that these objects would revert to his private collection at the show's closure.<sup>75</sup> It was largely Rockefeller's financial involvement that made it possible for the exhibition to cover major historical, geographical, and topographical areas of Mexican folk art.<sup>76</sup> Finally, Professor Manuel Toussaint, director of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas of the National University of Mexico and a scholar of Mexican colonial art and architecture, curated the colonial segment.

As the foregoing survey of the curatorial cast suggests, the credentials of those chosen to be associated with *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* were weighted heavily towards the pre-Spanish and the folk, a logical situation given the legitimization projects of each of the major collaborators. But what is particularly remarkable is how the Mexican government's "official" version of its country's cultural history should so well serve Rockefeller's double

74. The terms "folk" and "popular" are in some cases used interchangeably in the catalogues. While the permanent catalogue designates "Folk Art" as one of the four main curatorial categories in the exhibition, the painting production specific to this section is labeled "popular." In both cases a non-European or "authentic" art is implied. The temporary catalogue published by the MOMA while the printing of the official catalogue was delayed designates the section in question "Folk and Popular Art". Both "forms" are represented as the "natural" result of a racial continuum. See the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York), May 1940, p. 8.

75. Oettinger, op. cit., p. 51.

76. Ibid., p. 67.



Figure 1. Cover of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* catalogue (1940). Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

agenda of pan-American diplomacy and the modernist interests of the museum. However, any collaboration requires compromise and some ideological differences between the Mexicans and the Americans, which will be discussed below, did indeed surface. Such ruptures are revealed in the reception of the exhibition, through media reviews, and in this case, in its official documentation.

Before examining those, however, it is useful to reconsider the exhibition strategy, taking into consideration how it would function in relation to the overall futuristic effect of New York's other highly visible event, the World's Fair. A glance at the catalogue cover (figure 1)<sup>77</sup> alongside almost any image of the fair<sup>78</sup> is capable of demonstrating how the simultaneous staging of these two events constructed a smooth continental teleology where the virile technocratic American "World of Tomorrow" was mediated by what could be characterized as the "natural" and more "feminine" spirit of the Mexican primitive.<sup>79</sup>

A study of press reviews and catalogues<sup>80</sup> suggest that *Twenty Centuries'* installation strategy reinforced an evolutionary logic that privileged the Mexican "primitive" as it had survived transhistorically from the archaic up to and *within* the modern. Crucially, the emphasis on this "primitive" could serve the purpose of pan-Americanism by effacing the signs of the nationalistic social and political engagement and revolutionary ideology for which the Mexicans were widely known in the United States by 1940, primarily through their public murals. This strategy, corroborated in both the official catalogue's text and illustrations, relied upon a formalist interpretation of Mexican art that was supported by an official primitivizing discourse of *indigenismo*. A construction deployed in the service of cultural nationalism,<sup>81</sup>

77. *Twenty Centuries'* cover.

78. See, for example, the aerial view of the fair and an adjacent parking lot in Harrison, op. cit., pp. 18-19. There are countless other visual examples of the fair's "advanced" technological emphasis in Harrison's publication.

79. For an historical analysis of the American "civilization-nature debate," that is the American desire to feminize the "primitive Other" in order either to dominate it or to appropriate what were assumed by some to be its restorative or balancing powers, see Pike, *The United States*.

80. The "official" catalogue's delay in Mexico necessitated a temporary substitute, published as the May 1940 *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*.

81. See Karen Cordero Reiman, "Constructing a Modern Mexican Art, 1910-1940," in

*indigenismo* derived from a left-wing philosophy first developed in Latin America. Also espoused among certain citizens of the United States early in the twentieth century, *indigenismo* idealized American aboriginal peoples as a living link to a noble past through two essential qualities: a strong religious sense and a communal social practice.<sup>82</sup> Through various cultural and political applications of this philosophy the modern Mexican could be seen to be dominated by the pure blood of the Indian who, despite ethnic absorption and even colonial decimation, managed to reemerge with his or her vigorous identity intact.<sup>83</sup>

The concept of *indigenismo* was manipulated to serve a range of purposes for various interests. For example, post-Revolutionary Mexican governments relied heavily on its rhetoric to construct the myth of a transhistorical national character which would facilitate the assimilation of a problematic ethnic Other, the ubiquitous Indian, into a rationalized homogeneous modern Mexican state. As I will discuss shortly, the Aztec (or Highland) past, which was privileged in the service of these aims, represented a potential conflict with the U.S. construct of the Ideal Native. In the United States *indigenismo's* popular romantic evocations rested on associations of a peaceful—rather than militaristic (as Aztec culture was understood to have been)—agrarian civilization located in the past. Revived during the thirties in a renewed search for an “American” indigenous cultural past, which involved a growing interest in the native American, the “American” *indigenismo* can be traced within MOMA’s particular strategy of appropriation of the Mexican “primitive.”

As is well known, many progressive American artists and intellectuals, looking to Europe, had developed an interest in “primitive” art early in the twentieth century. This cultural interest extended more specifically to Mexican pre-Spanish and folk arts in the twenties, both for reasons of sympathy with the Mexican revolution (which, over a period of six to seven years between 1910 and 1917, overthrew the 34-year long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz in favour of a sequence of “reformist” governments) and for the expres-

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James Oles, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1993, p. 29.

82. See *supra*, footnote 20.

83. Within this logic the colonial section of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* was instrumental in constructing a new vocabulary for the pure Indian’s innate artistry.

sive vitality and simplicity of form thought to be lacking in the productions of an increasingly mechanized “advanced” society. During the early thirties the publication of the bilingual periodical *Mexican Folkways* in Mexico City provided one site in what was to become an increasingly diverse network for the promotion of Mexican folklore and peasant culture among Mexican and U.S. intellectuals.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, when Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Frances Flynn Paine, and Dwight Morrow (U.S. ambassador to Mexico), collectors of Mexican folk arts through the twenties, established the Mexican Arts Association in 1930 with the objective of improving inter-cultural understanding and promoting the exposure and sale of Mexican arts and crafts in the United States, they boosted the currency of *indigenismo* in the popular realm.<sup>85</sup>

American folk art itself had already engaged public and artistic attention to the extent that the American Museum of Folk Art was established in 1930 and three years later the Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition entitled *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900*. A continuing concern for issues of authenticity and national culture motivated these projects. Although the 1938 exhibition *Trois Siècles* at the Jeu de Paume was a critical disaster for those American Scene painters who struggled to find a strictly national voice, the authoritative stamp given the American “primitives” at least acknowledged that an “authentic” American expression, one that could be read as naive and non-imitative could exist. Nonetheless, the ancient pedigree necessary to legitimate a national culture was still conspicuously absent.

For many Americans in search of cultural origins within North America, a favourable light had already been cast on the folk arts of Mexico. René d’Harnoncourt’s 1930 exhibition of Mexican folk (or “applied”) and modern art in *Mexican Arts* at the Metropolitan Museum had toured the country to favourable reviews that stressed its effectiveness in blasting negative stereotypes of the Mexican and expressed appreciation for the spontaneous and uninflated expression of a living culture.<sup>86</sup> Diego Rivera’s one-man exhibition at the MOMA in 1931 had demonstrated how the fusion of the continental archaic and folk could produce a modern national expression. And signi-

84. Delpar, op. cit., p. 36.

85. Ibid., pp. 138-139.

86. Ibid., pp. 143-146.



ificantly, in 1933, the same year in which it held the American folk art show, the Museum of Modern Art suggested “local” originary possibilities for American modernists when it mounted *American Sources of Modern Art (Aztec, Mayan, Incan)*—an exhibition that played upon European modernism’s well-known turn to the arts of non-European and “primitive” cultures as sources for a rejection of academic naturalism.

John McAndrew’s installation strategy for *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* forcefully underlined the authoritative role played by the folk arts in establishing a cultural identity. According to Edward Alden Jewell of *The New York Times*, it may have been Montenegro’s intention to capture some effect of the experience which had greeted the sixteenth-century Spanish conquerors upon their arrival at the great market of Tenochtitlan,<sup>87</sup> to which end a microcosmic simulation was constructed in the gallery’s outdoor garden. The effect would have been augmented by the strategic arrangement of the folk arts throughout the museum floors, a display tactic that called up a touristic viewing experience that could neatly serve the diplomatic aims of the exhibition. More importantly, in terms of the museum’s objectives, by threading folk or popular objects through the exhibition rather than confining them to individual galleries, folk art’s central function in the modernist evolutionary construction was emphatically stressed. It worked as a constant visual referent for the “authenticity” of each progressive epoch, stressing what was referred to in the catalogue as the “spiritual and plastic grace” innate to the Mexican sensibility.

Indeed, the discourse of *indigenismo*, which transforms aboriginal American folk arts from ethnographic or anthropological markers into universal cultural carriers—or “art”—was used to construct the foundation for the development of a pan-American identity which could hold its own economically and culturally against Europe. For both the United States and the Latin American republics the stigma of identification as Europe’s Other stimulated efforts to formulate a continental logic that rested on the fusion of new non-European opposites derived from shared “primitive” (Indian) sources and a modern “American” experience.<sup>88</sup> Alfonso Caso’s introductory catalogue

87. Edward Alden Jewell, “The Realm of Art: Mexico, the Panorama or Mexican Culture,” *The New York Times* (New York), May 19, 1940, p. x7.

88. Sabine Mabardi, “The Politics of the Modern and the Primitive: Diego Rivera at MOMA in 1931,” *Curare* (Mexico), 1996, autumn, no. 9, pp. 6-7.

essay for *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* explicitly offers Mexico's crucial contribution to the construction of such a shared non-European cultural identity with these words:

Thus, when we are confronted with a whole culture and style entirely independent of any Asiatic or European influence, as with the aboriginal art of America, we may see it as a new revelation, and everyone may experience, now in the twentieth century, an artistic discovery of America.

For this reason, we believe that *this exhibition of pre-Spanish art* in New York ought to give a new vision to the public, above all to the artists of the United States; *we hope it may be translated into works of modern American art rooted in the older art of our own continent.*<sup>89</sup>

The approximately 200-page official catalogue which accompanied the exhibition was printed in both Spanish and English and contained forwards by the Mexican Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores—Rockefeller's counterpart—and the museum. There are curatorial essays for each of the four sections and 175 reproductions—twenty in colour—distributed roughly evenly among them. Both the catalogue essays and the captions stress a formalist reading of Mexican art and culture.

The delayed arrival of the official catalogue from its printing in Mexico (supervised by MOMA's Monroe Wheeler) necessitated a temporary version printed by the museum as the major part of its May 1940 *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*. This "substitute catalogue's" cover design (figure 2)<sup>90</sup>—serving a double function as the *Bulletin's* May cover—shows a racialized representation of the so-called primitive—a series of overlapping profiles of Mayan women before a village landscape. The use of Roberto Montenegro's *Maya Women* in this temporary circumstance invites us to interrogate its use as ideology, leading us back to the central role of archaeological projects in forging cultural nationalisms as well as cultural pan-Americanism.<sup>91</sup>

89. *Twenty Centuries* p. 23. My italics.

90. *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York), May 1940. The image also appears on p. 155 of the "official" catalogue.

91. See Thomas C. Patterson, "The Last Sixty Years: Toward a Social History of Americanist Archeology in the United States," *American Anthropologist* (Washington), 1986, no. 88, pp. 7-25.



Figure 2. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, p. 155, in which Roberto Montenegro's *Maya Women* is reproduced.

The use of a Mayan referent worked particularly well for the purposes of American appropriation of a Mexican past, given the dominance of American (U.S.) archaeologists' construction of the pre-Spanish Mayan civilization, as opposed to the Aztec or others, as a peaceful agrarian society that stood as a direct antecedent to American democracy and as America's answer to Europe's Greeks.<sup>92</sup> American claims for an innate democratic character which found an independent (non-European) rationale in the ancient Maya were particularly urgent now, given the appearance of disintegration of democracy in Europe. Nonetheless, the official catalogue itself, printed in Mexico presumably under the ultimate control of the Mexican government, makes no originary claim for the Maya.<sup>93</sup> Both textually and pictorially the

92. Delpar, op. cit., pp. 99-113, and James Oles, "South of the Border: American Artists in Mexico, 1914-1947," in James Oles, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1993, pp. 165-167.

93. The sequence of several plates of Olmec objects at the beginning of the catalogue's "pre-Spanish" section indicates Mexican archeologists' emerging suspicion that they might be representative of a highly important originary culture in the Central American region. Covarrubias himself was a central player in the formulation of this hypothesis. In April and May of 1942,

Maya are relegated to a secondary status among a mixed group of cultures; objects originating from the Valley of Mexico, particularly Aztec, take visual precedence. In fact, reviews tell us<sup>94</sup> that the exhibition emphasized the forbidding eight-foot Aztec sculpture *Coatlicue*, goddess of the earth and death,<sup>95</sup> by placing it prominently in the sculpture garden. The caption—which accompanies its photographic reproduction in the official catalogue and which reads “one of the most important monuments of native art in America”—suggests the possibility of a curatorial conflict between the MOMA and the Mexican government over at least this aspect of representational matters. Aztecs—indeed all Highland societies—were favoured by Mexican post-revolutionary governments in their nationalistic construction of history, primarily because of the Aztecs’ geographic proximity, past or present, to the modern Mexican capital. On the other hand, American archaeology’s Mayanist project opposed the Mexican construction by representing the Aztec as militaristic and socially degraded by comparison with the earlier Maya.<sup>96</sup>

The widespread popular acceptance of a construction of the Aztec as savagely violent as well as militaristic did not suit MOMA’s claim for a continental past that needed to be marked out as distinctly distant from any fascist associations. Nor could it be expected to assist the American administration’s soft-peddalling of Mexico as a pacific and reliable neighbour. Indeed, considering the conflagration in Europe, Americans would presumably find any construction of a shared continental past anchored in what could be perceived as a kind of fascist militarism repelling. This raises the sticky question of identity-construction within the relations of power represented by the entire collaborative exhibition process. Ultimately, although the Mexican

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at a round table conference of Mexican and American archaeologists, Caso, Covarrubias, and Moreno pronounced their thesis, which ultimately proved to be correct, that the Olmec culture was the “mother” of all Mesoamerican cultures, including the Maya. This met with considerable resistance from the Americans, “who remained vested in the seniority of the Mayas”. See Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 92–95, 120–123, and 143–148.

94. See, for example, Jewell, “Mexican Art Show...,” p. 28, and Edward Alden Jewell, “The Realm of Art,” *The New York Times* (New York), May 19, 1940, p. x7. See also “Mexico’s Art Through Twenty Centuries Installed in Modern Museum [review of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*],” *Art Digest* (New York), June 1, 1940, pp. 15 and 34.

95. *Twenty Centuries*, p. 43.

96. Patterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–13 and 21–25.

government maintained the right to the representation of its national culture, to some degree its assertion threatened to destabilize the pan-American spirit of the mutual enterprise.

The uses to be made of the past ran into other problems. By this I mean that the construct of an evolutionary progression led directly to the fervent nationalist, and often revolutionary, rhetoric of the notorious Mexican moderns—Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco. Though widely known in the U.S.—if only by reputation—for their official production in Mexico,<sup>97</sup> the muralists caused significant public reverberations and heated debate in the United States as a result of a number of murals executed at various venues. For example, Rivera's *Portrait of Detroit* painted at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1932–33 drew virulent comment from the Detroit media for its “un-American” approach and from religious groups for its “sacrilegious” use of traditional religious iconography.<sup>98</sup> A year later Rivera's very public run-in with the Eastern American establishment over the Leninist content of his mural for Rockefeller Center in 1934 further tainted his reputation in the United States<sup>99</sup>—although he was later restored to Rockefeller's (and American business culture's) favour.<sup>100</sup> At about the same time Siqueiros' Los

97. Cordero Reiman, op. cit., pp. 25–27 and 37. Anita Brenner's *Idols behind Altars* (1929) was instrumental in establishing a canon of Mexican artists in the United States in the late twenties and thirties.

98. Jacinto Quirarte, “Mexican and Mexican American Artists in the United States: 1920–1970,” in *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920–1970*, New York, Abrams (for The Bronx Museum of the Arts), 1988, p. 26.

99. See Delpar, op. cit., pp. 152–153, for a concise description of the event at Rockefeller Center; for another account of the run-in between Rivera and Rockefeller, see Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, New York, Stein and Day, 1963, p. 380; for Diego Rivera's own account see Diego Rivera with Gladys March, *My Art, My Life, an Autobiography*, New York, Citadel, 1960, p. 265. Max Kozloff, “The Rivera Frescoes of Modern Industry at the Detroit Institute of Arts: Proletarian Art under Capitalist Patronage [1974],” in *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*, edited by Henry A. Millon and L. Nochlin, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1978, pp. 216–289, discusses the phenomenon of Rivera's most infamous mural work in the United States, which was produced for the Rockefeller and Ford corporate elite.

100. *Fortune*, the magazine of American corporate culture, later employed Rivera to illustrate their October 1938 article, “Mexico in Revolution”. In addition, in 1940, he painted a series of moveable frescoes for the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco; see Delpar, op. cit., p. 163. Oettinger, op. cit., p. 43, refers to the renewal of friendly relations between Rivera and Rockefeller at some time after 1933.

Angeles mural, *Tropical America*, was vigorously condemned for its critique of U.S. imperialism and its implicit call to arms; Orozco's work at Dartmouth College, the *Epic of American Civilization*, incited vocal discontent for its imposition of a "foreign" mythology on a quintessentially "American" institution.<sup>101</sup>

As the best-known representatives of the Mexican modern in the U.S. these artists were capable of provoking a popular curiosity about the culture as a whole: in short, they had great box office appeal. On the other hand, for what might be called Alfred Barr's "ideal public," their cultural capital as the most accomplished proponents of an "authentic" modernism<sup>102</sup> (one that included small-scale "private" works and took its sources from its own indigenous antecedents) on continental soil, remained uncontested. However, for the Mexican government, anxious to assuage general American misgivings about Mexico on the economic and political fronts, and for Rockefeller and Roosevelt, mutually interested in reassuring the American people, the references by these artists to a recent violent, revolutionary, and nationalist past, as well as their renown among many for subversive artistic production in the United States, required careful moderation.<sup>103</sup>

I suggest that for these reasons, under the rubric of pan-American solidarity, the exhibition subverted popular expectations and instead subjected the charged nationalism and critical social comment in the work of these notorious North American contemporary artists—Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros—to a process of emasculation through historicization.<sup>104</sup> The project was effected by the overwhelming predominance in the modern section

101. Quirarte, op. cit., p. 27.

102. Rita Eder, "El muralismo mexicano: modernismo y modernidad," in *Modernidad y modernización en el arte mexicano: 1920-1960*, Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (Museo Nacional de Arte), 1991, pp. 67-81, discusses the particularities of the Mexican modernist position as articulated through the work of the muralists.

103. In spite of the museum's claim that the muralists constituted the "climax" of the modern segment of the exhibition, its devotion of one gallery to mural-related works, that is, photographs of murals and three Rivera panels created for the 1931 MOMA show, provoked only disappointed responses from expectant viewers. For an inventory of works shown see the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York), May 1940, p. 9. For reviewers' comments see the "Conclusion" of this paper.

104. Covarrubias' catalogue text, *Twenty Centuries*, p. 141, treats the mural movement as a chapter in the "dogged struggle against the bonds that held [the art of Mexico] fast to the decaying cultures of Europe," a struggle he suggests that has been successfully completed by

of an easel art which strictly controlled what had come to be known popularly as the characteristic Mexican *machismo*. Instead, the project capitalized on the construction of what I call a “feminine primitive” in relation to Mexican culture, and gave primary—though not exclusive—focus to non-narrative and, for the “general” American audience,<sup>105</sup> apolitical subject matter. This included landscapes, genre scenes depicting traditional Mexican practices,<sup>106</sup> and a predominance of female and child portraits and figure studies. This refocusing of attention served to rework the muralists into a new market-driven and elitist paradigm which effectively downplayed their radical contribution to both Mexican and American art.<sup>107</sup>

A partial, but significant, exception to this shift of focus took the form of a work commissioned by the MOMA from Orozco: this was an interchangeable six-panel fresco painted at the museum in front of the public over the course of a week-and-a-half during *Twenty Centuries*’ run. The *Dive Bomber*, as it was titled, avoided strictly nationalistic or partisan subject matter in favour of what could be seen more constructively, given the unifying diplomatic objectives of the exhibition, as a contemporary and pan-American concern—a critique of the destructive technology of war. The project was documented in the August 1940 issue of the museum’s *Bulletin*, where it was

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their successors. One is forced to question whether the easel art of which he is speaking has, indeed, broken those bonds or instead reformed them.

105. See *supra*, footnote 4.

106. For example, Rivera’s mural art appears in the catalogue by way of a photograph of one of his fresco series for the Secretaría de Educación Pública headquarters in Mexico City, *The Day of the Dead* (1925). Though it could have been read as a very political affirmation of a traditional society, I argue that for the “general” public, attracted by the festive atmosphere of the exhibition and most familiar with the muralists’ reputation as radical revolutionaries, it would more likely be read by many as an anomaly within Rivera’s production.

107. I suggest that it was for all these reasons, and to efface any critical stance towards the political culture of the United States, that any references to the *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie*, Siqueiros’ very powerful and technically innovative visual polemic against fascism and nazism were absent from the exhibition. Painted in 1939–1940, after the artist’s return from the Spanish Civil War for the headquarters of the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas in Mexico City, the work, in fact, condemns industrial and financial capital as the ultimate causes of these totalitarian movements, thereby associating itself with radical socialism and rendering its particular brand of anti-fascism counterproductive to the aims of the exhibition. For an account of its production and its symbolic importance see Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*, London, Laurence King, 1993, pp. 151–159.

described overwhelmingly in terms of technical process. There, Orozco's own explanatory comments about the work chastised the American public for their tendency to look for narrative, or theatrical, content in painting and instead asserted the supremacy of formal values<sup>108</sup>—a notable deviation from the social commitment for which the muralists were known.

The fact that this fresco (or mural) “event” was neither recorded in the catalogue nor announced as an attraction prior to the opening of the exhibition prompts questions about its strategic usefulness. What appears to be relevant in the search for answers is that reviews of the exhibition, which I will discuss later in this article, generally expressed disappointment at the lack of representation of the work for which the Mexican muralists were best known, alluding always to the “innovative” contribution of their medium and the power of their historical content. I suggest as plausible that it was to mitigate the audiences' disappointment at that absence that this unexpected public relations event, focusing equally on the persona and the production, was appended to the exhibition.

The otherwise radical and uncompromising “depoliticization” of the muralists' collective, socially-conscious, and public emphases, emerges when the official catalogue is viewed as a strategic site for representation and, in particular, as a curatorial guide to the reading of the exhibition. Here, the Big Three—Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros—are indeed given a quotient of privileged treatment by way of full-page colour reproductions some of their work,<sup>109</sup> but for a large segment of the target audience the images could be read as uncharacteristically devoid of the political content and references to social struggle which they had come to expect. Indeed, their subject matter is, in the majority of cases, essentialized not only by a non-narrative focus on the female body,<sup>110</sup> but also through the catalogue entries. For example,

108. The interchangeability of the panels subverted the tendency to read them narratively, underlining an emphasis on the work's self-referentiality and formal integrity.

109. They are given three of the six color reproductions; in total they constitute six of the twenty-six reproductions of modern Mexican painting.

110. An exception, the color reproduction of Orozco's *Fire* images a single male figure, severely foreshortened, and painted in a dramatically expressionistic mode. It represents the central figure in a mythic theme from the dome in the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara and it appears to be one of the photographs used to illustrate the mural movement. Its focus on the lone central figure significantly deletes the surrounding struggling figures. As a single isolated representation from a larger production, it is emptied out of political or social content.



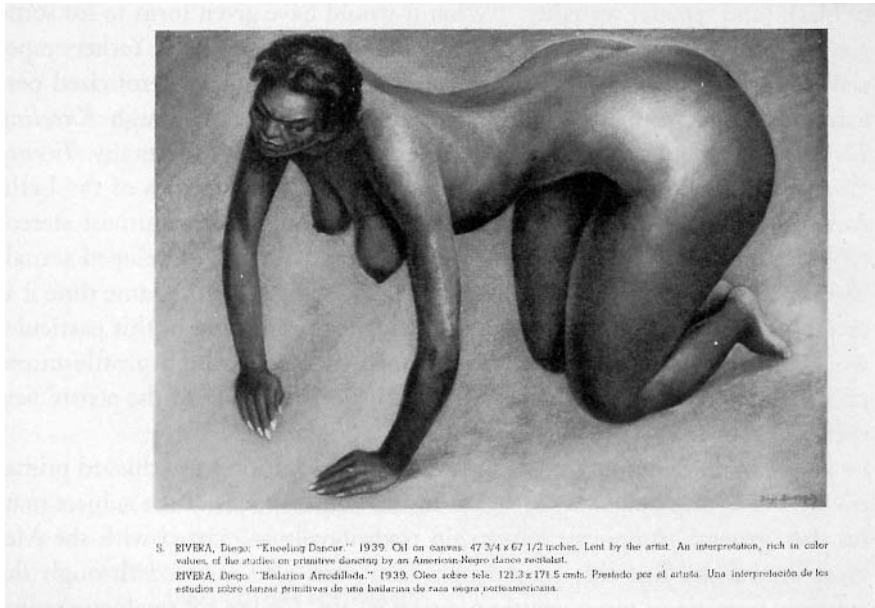


Figure 3. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, plate s, in which Diego Rivera's *Kneeling Dancer* (1939) is reproduced.

Siqueiros' *María Asúnsolo* of 1935 (figure 7),<sup>111</sup> a three-quarter length portrait of a seated girl executed with reference to the "naive" vocabulary of folk art, is assessed in the catalogue in terms of technical innovation and formal mastery. Diego Rivera's *Kneeling Dancer* of 1939 (figure 3),<sup>112</sup> a representation of a black female nude, is described in the catalogue as "an interpretation, rich in color values, of the studies on primitive dancing by an American-Negro dance recitalist." However, despite the catalogue's neutral claim that it was an "interpretation" of another's artistic representation, this image's singular focus on an objectified female body—the crouching hands-and knees-posture, claw-like nails, pendulous breasts, thin waist, huge curving hips and thighs, skin tones and shiny (as though oiled) skin texture—it was clearly capable of evoking for American viewers essentializing primitivist stereotypes

111. *Twenty Centuries* p. 164.

112. *Ibid.*, plate s, n.p.

of black (and female) sexuality.<sup>113</sup> What it would have given form to for some viewers was the celebratory “cult of the natural” and, for New Yorkers especially, its relation to the Harlem Renaissance—including the eroticized performances of “primitivist” dancer Josephine Baker.<sup>114</sup> Although *Kneeling Dancer* represents an “American” subject, the tendency for many *Twenty Centuries* viewers to conflate the imagined racial characteristics of the Latin American with those of the “Negro” within a feminized primitivist stereotype that stressed both passionate sensibilities and a highly-developed sexuality would undoubtedly inflect the painting’s reading.<sup>115</sup> At the same time it is credible that, at least by virtue of the catalogue’s promotion of this particular work, American audiences pre-conditioned by Rivera’s high-profile mural production would have sensed a radical shift in the nature of the artists’ aesthetic and social interests.

As I have been arguing, such apparent depoliticization was achieved primarily by subverting public expectations in the United States of the subject matter the “general” American viewership traditionally associated with the Mexican muralists. But this “depoliticization” was also asserted through the strategic framing of more overtly political works. Of the six catalogue reproductions of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros’s work, only one, Orozco’s 1933 canvas *Zapatistas* (figure 4)<sup>116</sup> made direct reference to a recent revolutionary past. The image shows a compressed group of uniformly-clad armed males and unarmed females marching below several mounted male figures. Undoubtedly, given both its formal arrangement and its explicit title—referring to guerrilla peasant forces which, under the leadership of Emiliano Zapata, rose up against large landholders during the Mexican Revolution—this work could be read as expression of the concerted peasant energy harnessed in the service of an historic war of liberation against a tyrannical past. However, given the often problematic reputation in the United States of the radical agrarian and labour reform programs of Mexico’s current Cárdenas regime, as well as the recent corporate American experience of expropriation, the painting’s subject matter would have had a multi-layered contemporary U.S.

113. For the historical currency of American stereotypes linking the “black” and other to notions of the “feminine,” see Pike, *The United States*, pp. 6–7, 55, 91, 131, 182–185, and 291–293.

114. For a discussion of the various permutations what Pike has called the “cult of the natural” in the United States in the 1920’s see *ibid.*, pp. 229–235 and 252–253.

115. Pike, *The United States*, pp. 55, 131, 252–255, and 291–292.

116. *Twenty Centuries*, p. 154.



Figure 4. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, p. 154, in which José Clemente Orozco's, *Zapatas* (1931) and *Brothel Dance* (1909-1915) are reproduced.

resonance. What is of interest here is that, in the catalogue at least, these potentially disturbing political connotations were carefully bounded by a strategy which relegated the work to a secondary status through its relatively small size and black-and-white reproduction.

Further decontextualizing and defusing the power of the subject was the placement of this image on the page with another Orozco—a representation of a seemingly unrestrained group of dancing women entitled *Brothel Dance* (figure 4)<sup>117</sup> which, in its conflation of race, gender, and sexuality, would have called up a particular and somewhat unflattering American stereotype of the Mexican.<sup>118</sup> Yet this juxtaposition held in check the specific economic implications inherent in the representation of the Zapatist guerrillas by referencing another form of labour exchange—one that rested on gender and sexuality.

What I am arguing here is that the strategic manipulation of what could

117. Ibid., 154.

118. Pike, *FDR's*, pp. III-III.

be seen as dangerously politicized images capable of contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypes of the Mexican and his culture as revolutionary was an important subtext of the exhibition as a whole, both in its installation and in the catalogue. That Orozco's *Zapatistas*—ostensibly an image of the revolutionary war machine—was countered on its facing page with a full-page reproduction of *Maya Women* (figure 2), by Roberto Montenegro,<sup>119</sup> provides an additional illustration to this claim. While the juxtaposition may have functioned in part to demonstrate the historic complexity of Mexican culture through references to both its Aztec (warrior) and Mayan (pacific) pasts, I want to suggest that *Maya Women's* prominent size and placement within the catalogue rested significantly on additional considerations. Specifically, given the exhibition's bilateral agendas, the catalogue treatment of this painting could well have been read for its “diplomatic” connotations. As has been noted, *Maya Women* served as the first, albeit temporary, catalogue cover for the exhibition in the MOMA's *Bulletin*. The painting's imagery set repetitive female profiles with slanting eyes and prominent noses and mouths, that indicated a racialized physiognomy, against a non-industrialized landscape background of thatched huts. The reproduction's large size relative to the two images on the facing page worked to mediate the militant content of *Zapatistas* and to assert an idealized *indigenista* stereotype of the Mexican more palatable to the official American agenda of pan-Americanism: a peaceful, passive, and agrarian Mexican primitive which, through the serial treatment of the profile, could evoke associations with representations of Greece, the idealized prototype of western civilization.<sup>120</sup> Thus, the dominant treatment given to *Maya Women* not only subverted the “political” content of *Zapatistas*, it also reinforced the American construction of links with the indigenous peasant of the ancient Maya past. In this way, the *Zapatistas'* potential evocation of the contemporary Mexican peasant's links with problems of social and political inequality, labour unrest, and agrarian revolt—all of which were of concern to various American constituencies at

119. *Twenty Centuries*, p. 155.

120. This had been a prominent American construct of the ancient Maya since the mid-nineteenth century. See Lynn Ruschensky, “The Monjas Complex at Chichen Itzá, Yucatán: Gendered Spaces, Domestic Labour, and Ideology,” M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1994, pp. 8–10 and 24–27. For a description of American artistic and popular constructions of Mexican pre-Spanish civilizations see James Oles, “South of the Border,” in *South of the Border*, pp. 155–167.



R. RUIZ, Antonio. "Street Meeting." 1935. Oil on canvas. 16 3/4 x 17 inches. Lent by the artist. A candid commentary of a phase of the contemporary Mexican political scene painted with precision and native gusto.  
 RUIZ, Antonio. "Mita Callejera." 1935. Oil on canvas. 42.5 x 43 cm. Lent by the artist. Un comentario cándido, imparcial, de un aspecto de la escena política mexicana contemporánea, pintado con precisión y entusiasmo nativos.

Figure 5. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, plate R, in which Antonio Ruiz' *Street Meeting* (1935) is reproduced.

the time of the exhibition—was radically recontextualized to become a mere incident in a larger transhistorical configuration.

Perhaps the most overtly political work in the catalogue was a 1935 painting by lesser-known artist Antonio Ruiz. Entitled *Street Meeting* (figure 5),<sup>121</sup> this small oil on canvas (16 3/4 × 17 inches) was highlighted, in spite of its potentially inflammatory content, in a full-page colour plate. Although the caption describes the image as "a candid commentary of a phase of the contemporary Mexican political scene painted with precision and native gusto," it is highly unlikely that, given events of the intervening years, American audiences in 1940 would have interpreted its Mexican subject matter either as strictly local or as "a phase" safely embedded in the past. What is significant to the interpretation of this painting by the majority of American view-

121. *Twenty Centuries*, n.p.

ers at the time of the exhibition is that communism, generally constructed in the United States as an international movement inimical to the free-enterprise and democratic principles of the United States, is here prominently linked by way of signs and symbols to the unionization of workers in Mexico. In light of the central importance accorded the workers' movement within the Cárdenas agenda, this implied association of workers with the Communist Party's activities and ideology would most certainly have worked to undermine American confidence in the potential for friendly bilateral relations.

A large column of white-clad workers carrying banners identifying themselves as members of a Marxist agrarian workers' union is depicted in the centre of the painting. They appear to listen to the exhortations of an orator on the left who, clutching a flag displaying the hammer and sickle insignia—emblem of the proletariat and peasantry—directs his speech towards a group of poor urban workers, some of whom raise their fists in political greeting. On the opposite side of the image a group of individuals, some of whom listen passively while others salute in apparent support of the rhetoric—stand beside a large portrait of Lenin. Gesturing across the figure of an urban worker stomping on the Nazi insignia, one of these individuals indicates a shattered Christian icon in the foreground. Meanwhile, a prominently-placed worker appears ready to distribute a supply of the small “communist” flags.<sup>122</sup>

It is clear that most American viewers of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* would have been unaware of the complex political reality of Mexico in 1935 to which the painting, in fact, referred. Instead, for these “foreign” viewers of the Mexican scene the predominance of signs of social protest and “anti-democratic” leftist allegiance would have signaled a disturbing possibility within which I suggest the isolated anti-fascist gesture would have had little compensatory effect. Only the well-informed American viewer in 1940 would have known that the work—through its strategic disposition of individual subjects and groups—actually constituted an ironic commentary on the conflicts within the “ample but homogeneous front” formed by the Cár-

122. The hammer and sickle symbol was developed in Russia in 1918 as an emblem of the proletariat and the peasantry. It was thereafter incorporated into the design of the Soviet flag and those of other communist bloc countries and has been associated—often without adequate attention to historic and geographic specificities—with international communism ever since.

denas government and the Left to face certain rightist enemies of the administration not depicted in the painting.<sup>123</sup> Such a viewer may have been able to identify the orator in the image as the Marxist union leader, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, head in 1935 of the break-away labour organization Confederación General de Obreros y Campesinos de México. The same viewer might have been aware of Lombardo's conflict with both the Mexican communist party and the traditional Confederación Regional Obrero Mexicana union leadership and the complex discrepancies between his politics, directed by a commitment to national autonomy and social justice, and theirs. Undoubtedly, this viewer's reading would also have been inflected by some knowledge of events and shifting relationships involving Lombardo since the execution of the painting in 1935. This history included the ongoing struggle between Lombardo and President Cárdenas for the control over the organization of agrarian workers, a group prominently indexed in *Street Meeting*.<sup>124</sup> At the same time this viewer would have been aware that it was under the Lombardo's leadership that the oil workers' union had delivered their fatal blow to the foreign-owned oil industry, ending in its nationalization.<sup>125</sup>

I am contending, however, that for the majority of the exhibition's viewers these and more nuanced readings would have been inaccessible. Instead most would have registered the signs of communist and fascist alignments in Mexico and extrapolated from them to the dangers playing out in the international scene. As I have earlier suggested, one of these perceived dangers would have been represented by the 1939 signing of the Soviet-German pact. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that any but the politically-astute viewer, alert to the fact that Mexico's contemporary brand of Cardenist "communism" had more in common with Roosevelt's New Deal poli-

123. I owe a debt to one of the editorial readers of this article in clarifying the identities of the individual subjects of this painting.

124. A study of some of the issues and players operative through the transition from the *maximato* years into the Cardenist presidency is offered by Tzvi Medin, *El Maximato presidencial: historia política del maximato, 1928-1935*, Mexico, Era, 1982 (Problemas de México), "Del maximato al presidencialismo," pp. 145-161.

125. For a concise analysis of the importance of Lombardo to the Mexican workers' movement and the formulation of its relationship to the state see Arnaldo Córdova, *La nación y la constitución: la lucha por la democracia en México*, Mexico, Claves Latinoamericanas, 1989, "Política exterior y movimiento de masas en México," pp. 259-269. For an early analysis of Lombardo's particular brand of Marxism see Robert Paul Millon, *Mexican Marxist: Vicente Lombardo Toledano*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1966.

tics than with Soviet ideology, could have read the painting's subject matter without discomfort. For the majority, unfamiliar with the subtleties of Cárdenas' politics, any representation of social unrest in Mexico in 1940—in spite of anti-fascist references—risked fueling already high anxieties around issues of American national security.

Nevertheless, here the catalogue employs a representational strategy that allows for the foregrounding of a “political” Mexican modern while simultaneously managing the painting's potentially problematic connotations. Not only is *Street Meeting's* topical power restrained by the accompanying text, which effectively downplays its overtly political content by characterizing it primarily as an expression of “native gusto,” but its visual and social impact is dramatically modified by its startling juxtaposition with a full-page colour reproduction of Rivera's *Kneeling Dancer* (figure 3). Once again, while the “political” is given lip-service, its problematic subject matter is defused by a strategic proximity to imagery of the “sexually-available” female body.

However, the politics of primitivization and feminization are more subtly enacted than I have suggested to this point. While I am arguing that the exhibition's curatorial emphasis on the archaic and the folk represents a strategy throughout *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* to primitivize Mexico and its art for American audiences, I want to emphasize that it was in the modern section that the process was taken to its most complex level. In order to serve the overriding diplomatic aims of the exhibition—that is, to establish grounds for a pan-American “partnership” that required the U.S. public's confidence in its often problematic continental neighbour—it was necessary to transform Mexico from a potentially dangerous “primitive Other” into a subdued, compliant, and integrated relation. The accomplishment of this goal depended, I suggest, on absorbing Mexico into a unified “American” whole within which the U.S. could play the dominant “masculine” role to its receptive “feminine” Mexican counterpart.<sup>126</sup> For this purpose, the representational transformation of the contemporary Mexican required a more radical feminizing operation that I have yet articulated. However, I want to suggest that the catalogue's treatment of the painting just discussed, Antonio Ruiz's *Street Meeting*, was strategic to this project and, indeed, to the reading of the exhibition as a whole.

126. See Pike, *The United States*, pp. 248–255.



Significantly, Ruiz's work is the only overtly politicized image in the exhibition that is either reproduced in colour or blown up to full-page proportions. Apart from one full-page and colour pair in the pre-Spanish section, its juxtaposition with a second full-page colour plate is unique in the catalogue. The fact that the accompanying plate represents a painting by muralist Diego Rivera bears an importance to which I will return shortly.

I have already pointed out how *Street Meeting's* political content was controlled to some degree by its placement adjacent to Rivera's primitivizing *Kneeling Dancer*. Although the highly-sexualized associations evoked by this latter image in a sense contaminated the more "serious" content of the former, it was, in fact, Ruiz's visual language itself that ultimately trivialized the subject matter. Ruiz has deliberately used the "naive" child-like language associated with folk or popular art<sup>127</sup>—a seemingly coarse approach that, in this case, employs bright colours in a crowded picture plane, simplified forms, unnatural proportions; in short, a language that approaches caricature—to represent a political event of some contemporary Mexican significance. The overall effect of this means of representation would suggest to the general American public the vivid imagination of a simple and unschooled artist (indeed, it is important to remember that the art of another "safe primitive"—children—was installed on the same floor.) Moreover, the predominantly "peasant" protagonists (inclusive of the dark-skinned, overalled and often bare-footed townfolk) would be read as naive, the potentially dangerous contemporary "primitive" was thus contained and qualified within the formal language of the work.

Within this merging of form and content the activities in which the protagonists are engaged *themselves* become implicated. Through the mediation of a "naive" folk language, the political association of the Mexican with dangerous foreign Others represented by the international movements of either the Soviet Communist Party (here indexed by the hammer and sickle) or German fascism (indexed by the swastika) is drastically reduced.<sup>128</sup> What could have been read through a more "sophisticated" visual language as a serious political undertaking on the part of the majority of the Mexican

<sup>127</sup>. The term "naive" is used in relation to "popular painting" in the both the official and temporary catalogues.

<sup>128</sup>. As I have earlier suggested, most American audiences, ignorant of the subtleties of Mexican domestic politics, would have read these political emblems reductively.

population is thereby transformed into a case of foreign exploitation of a naive populace, easily as susceptible to present conciliatory American advances as to these enemy opportunists. What I am suggesting here is that this painting was given privileged catalogue treatment specifically because its particular “primitive” means of expression worked to defuse American fears: for an American audience, its anecdotal childlike language was capable of transforming the perceived threat of nationwide Mexican social revolution into a mere incident of local street rioting.

What the catalogue’s pairing of Ruiz’s *Street Meeting* with Rivera’s *Kneeling Dancer* accomplishes on a representational level is the political emasculation of the production of the modern Mexican artists best-known to the American public, the muralists. As I have pointed out, viewed in New York—the site of Rivera’s notorious 1933 conflict over the Rockefeller Center commission in which the inclusion of a portrait of Lenin in an “American” mural had been at issue<sup>129</sup> as an adversarial political statement—this particular example of Rivera’s current work could have appeared to a large proportion of American viewers to be devoid of any political reference whatsoever. In fact, here, Rivera’s non-didactic, “apolitical” subject matter, an “American primitive,” could well have suggested that the artist—himself a problematic “primitive” in that he was a Mexican, a revolutionary,<sup>130</sup> and reputed to be unpredictable and uncontrollable—had, over the course of six years, taken up interests far less threatening to American audiences.

In the catalogue, *Kneeling Dancer*’s juxtaposition with *Street Meeting* underlined certain similarities which allowed the exhibition to function in an essentializing way—namely, the emphasis on what Americans could read as “primitive” stereotypes and a shared artistic sensibility which rested on expressive elements like colour. Certainly, the fact that both paintings were dominated by a palette of earth tones is clearly exploited by the catalogue arrangement. But although Rivera also takes up what could be consumed as a “primitive” subject—a racialized female nude with particular associations for American viewers—his overall visual language clearly appears to be more

129. For a provocative analysis of the historical significance of Rivera’s mural *Man at the Crossroads*, see Robert Linsley, “Utopia Will Not Be Televised,” *Oxford Art Journal* (Oxford-Boston), 1994, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 48–62.

130. It is well known that Rivera’s “revolutionary” claims were challenged by his fellow muralists and by Marxists who saw his willingness to work for the leaders of corporate capital, such as the Rockefellers and the Fords, as selling out to the values of bourgeois capitalism.

informed, or sophisticated, than Ruiz's. His "primitive," as opposed to Ruiz's, is expressed through a relatively refined treatment of light, modeling, and foreshortening, and an emphasis on contour—in short, through a language verging on academic naturalism.

What I am suggesting is that a hierarchy of visual languages could be read within this paired arrangement and that, within this framing, Rivera's easel painting would have been privileged by the museum's "general" viewing public as the significantly more accomplished of the two (in other words, more like the familiar language of some contemporary American production). Considering that part of the exhibition's diplomatic purpose was to soften the isolationist sentiments of a large segment of its projected audience, this representational strategy would have allowed Rivera (and by extension the other well-known muralists) to retain a contemporary visibility along with a certain art historical stature. However, since it was this particular work that represented the up-to-date production of the most infamous muralist, the danger called up by his past political and artistic activities was symbolically and radically deflated.<sup>131</sup>

While the problematic nature of Mexico's politics, both past and present, was a matter of public record, it was the exhibition's function to manage its impact on U.S.-Mexico relations in 1940. The significance that I have been attributing to the treatment of these two paintings in the exhibition catalogue, just discussed, in large part rests upon their ability to illustrate how the catalogue—as a site of documentary representation—could rework certain effects of the exhibition's installation. For example, the catalogue's full-page treatment of each of these two works in no way suggests the impact of the vast discrepancy in their actual sizes—Ruiz's *Street Meeting* at 16 3/4 by 17 inches, compared with Rivera's *Kneeling Dancer* at 47 3/4 by 67 1/2 inches. Within the context of the exhibition's physical space, the intimate size of Ruiz's tiny easel painting—relative to the earlier politically-associated works (the murals)—would have drastically mediated its political impact. However, the catalogue's eradication of the size difference effectively drew out the work's particular powers to primitivize, in the "benign" terms discussed, the contemporary Mexican political scene. In other words, it was through this

131. Some of these activities formed part of the very recent past, one of which was his association with one of the leading communist dissidents, Leon Trotsky, through the signing of the manifesto "For a Free and Independent Art" in 1939.

process of re-presentation in the catalogue that particular readings of the exhibition's installation were organized and directed. Without such representational controls, it is likely that the exhibition's important essentializing function would have been substantially diminished.

Furthermore, this particular Ruiz-Rivera pairing enacted a crucial step in the process of emasculating and historicizing the work of the Mexican muralists. The fact that a very small and "naive" work by a lesser-known artist was selected to represent the political interests of modern Mexican artists over the well-known, innovative, and relatively large-scale work associated with the Mexican muralists can be said to have recast the muralists' most significant artistic contribution in a somewhat trivial light. Indeed, as would have been obvious to the artistically-informed viewer, Rivera's use of a language of academic naturalism in combination with his choice of subject matter represented an enigmatic "regression" for any artist who had once consciously rejected both in favour of an avant-garde language of social reform.

In addition to these two particular colour images, the modern section of the catalogue featured other reproductions illustrative of a striking emphasis overall upon seemingly "benign" subject matter, apparently stripped of political content and, for the most part, conspicuously lacking the critical intellectual edge of visual languages associated with the most recent European modernist production with which the American avant-garde was coming to be associated.<sup>132</sup> It was through this representational process that Mexico was reconstructed and offered up as fecund, bucolic, and undeveloped. Not surprisingly, it is the Mexican female figure that was repeatedly foregrounded.

The primitivization of the modern Mexican through visual representation rested upon association with the essentializing characteristics of the timeless and the "natural". It follows, then, that the virtual expunging of his-

<sup>132</sup>. Picasso's *Guernica*, exhibited and housed by the museum from the beginning of the war, was, for Americans, a contemporary and high-profile example of this kind of European modernism. Then, and slightly earlier, in the late thirties, many members of the American avant-garde were associated with the group known as the American Abstract Artists (founded in 1936); their work, dominated by the languages of geometric abstraction, was resolutely ignored by the MOMA. However, they and other progressive artists generated some critical coverage and found exhibiting venues at private New York galleries during this period. Concurrently, leading European artists were arriving in New York in substantial numbers—the influence of their presence was significant both to these previously-mentioned artists' development and to the Museum of Modern Art's agenda as discussed in the body of this paper.

toric narrative and the suppression of collective and political aims in favour of private and “apolitical” easel painting which overwhelmingly capitalized on the female form as the sign of the immutable Mexican spirit can be seen to represent a symbolic feminization of Mexico. I have suggested earlier that these configurations can be read as a strategy to bring both the modern Mexican nation and its art into a position of compliant submission—at least in representation.

Two of the six colour illustrations in the modern section of the catalogue—images of single female children—serve as useful touchpoints here: Tamayo’s *Pretty Girl* of 1937 (figure 6)<sup>133</sup> and Siqueiros’ *María Asúnsolo* of 1935 (figure 7). Tamayo’s painting depicts a full-length young Mexican female holding a bouquet of flowers as she looks out towards the viewer. She stands against an ambiguous background of disembodied European architectural features, a watering can, a diminutive Mexican flag, and a dove in flight, which together could have been taken as highly evocative of Mexico’s precarious situation in relation to world events in 1940. Spools of thread scattered at her feet suggest an abandoned female occupation and a willingness to take up another role. On the other hand, the young Mexican female subject of *María Asúnsolo*, gazing passively out towards the viewer, emerges from a darkened background which lacks any suggestion of particularity or historical specificity. Both young girls, however, are pictured in indigenous dress that makes concessions to Euro-American modes. Their costumes, in conjunction with the open, direct, and unprovocative quality of the gaze, suggest they would have read as emblems for a seeming willingness to participate in a project of modernization or, stated differently, American patrimony. In fact, these images, which we might read as the antithesis to the “politics of revolution” usually associated with Mexican muralism, actively refute it. The primitivizing process here transforms any threat of a contemporary savage or barbaric Other into one that is both feminized and, for all intents and purposes, infantilized.

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Hans Hofmann, teaching in New York from 1934, had been exposing members of the American avant-garde to the “most advanced concepts of European painting” for some time. See Rose, op. cit., pp. 143–154.

<sup>133</sup>. *Twenty Centuries*, p. 168.



Figure 6. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, p. 168, in which Rufino Tamayo's *Pretty Girl* is reproduced.



Figure 7. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, p. 164, in which David Alfaro Siqueiros' *María Asúnsolo* (1935) is reproduced.

### Conclusion

According to press reviews, modern Mexican art as represented in the show was downright flaccid: Paul Rosenfeld of *The Nation* suggested that the modern section “as a whole disconcerts with a feeling of effort and inflation.”<sup>134</sup> Edward Alden Jewell of *The New York Times* remarked that one gallery contained “some of the most ghastly surrealist conceptions ever shown in New York.”<sup>135</sup> In a later review he conceded his disappointment that the “supreme expression” of modern Mexico, its murals, could not in any practical terms be present.<sup>136</sup> This is a sentiment repeated often in the popular press and only occasionally in the art press; the latter which seems to have taken its lead from the official line before actually seeing the show, and is generally repetitive, essentializing, and uncritical.<sup>137</sup> An exception was Mexican artist Jean Charlot, writing for the *Magazine of Art*.<sup>138</sup> A modernist and fervent champion of Mexican indigenous arts, Charlot started off with a general scathing critique of the standard colonialist primitivization of Mexican culture, cynical about the ability of a “sentimental” American audience to appreciate the spiritual and formal qualities it embodied. While supporting the official seamless teleology presented by the exhibition, Charlot, more succinctly than anyone else, pointed to the evisceration it performed.<sup>139</sup> Given the political and social reality of a Western world at war, he insisted

134. Paul Rosenfeld, “The Genius of Mexico,” *The Nation* (New York), May 25, 1940, pp. 661-662.

135. Jewell, “Mexican Art Show,” p. 28.

136. Jewell, “The Realm of Art,” p. x7.

137. Bryan Holme, “New York,” *Studio* (London), May 1940, p. 189; Jeannette Lowe, “Bimillennial View of Mexican Art: Brilliant Survey at the Museum of Modern Art,” *Art News* (New York), May 25, 1940, pp. 6-8 and 16; Elizabeth McCausland, “XX Centuries of Mexican Art,” *Parnassus* (New York), 1940, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 34-35; “Mexico’s Art Through Twenty Centuries Installed in Modern Museum,” *Art Digest* (New York), June 1, 1940, pp. 15 and 34. In this vein see also the review by Anita Brenner, “Living Art of Mexico,” *The New York Times Magazine* (New York), May 12, 1940, vol. VII, pp. 6-7 and 29.

138. Jean Charlot, “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art,” *Magazine of Art* (Washington), 1940, no. 7, p. 398.

139. An interesting representational conflict concerning the muralists reveals itself in a comparison of the official and the temporary catalogues, indicating that, in fact, this seamless, monolithic narrative has its sites of rupture. While the Mexicans avoid a hierarchical privileging of the muralists to focus on their modern easel artists, the temporary catalogue produced

that a greater effort should have been made to represent the virile, socially and politically-committed, and collectively-produced mural art of the early to mid-twenties through the use of related works (“geometric diagrams, studies of details from nature, full-scale tracings used on the wall”).<sup>140</sup> Overall, he saw the show’s approach as an evasion of art’s social responsibility and characterized it as a view through a “rose lorgnette,” unarguably an emasculating—and feminizing—metaphor.

As a French expatriate, acutely aware of his country of origin’s danger, Charlot’s critique was understandable. The celebratory and touristic nature of the exhibition and its apparent insularity in relation to the European situation appeared to be a serious misreading of the war’s implications. It was undoubtedly an acute discomfort that the United States appeared disinterested in joining the European democracies in their fight against fascism, and that his adoptive country, Mexico, should paper over its willingness to deal with the enemy. On the other hand, neither he nor the rest of the public could have known that the initial shipments of arms to England in late 1939 were intended to lead to a greater and then full U.S. commitment to the Allied cause. Nor could he have known that, with this intention as his ultimate foreign policy objective, Roosevelt’s immediate goal was the creation of a solid and secure pan-American bloc. The shrewd observer of political innuendo might have probed the significance of Mexico’s association with the political internationalism of the Eastern establishment, as represented both by the museum and Rockefeller himself.

From the American diplomatic point of view, the festive celebration of Mexico in New York, the United States’ headquarters of corporate capitalism, at the same time as the New York World’s Fair visibly promoted the notion of economic and cultural cooperation. For American nationalists whose visits to the museum were an incidental supplement to an “experience” of the fair, *Twenty Centuries’* presentation of Mexican culture could be

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by the museum highlights as “the climax” of the exhibition of modern Mexican art a gallery “devoted to the work of the three great mural painters Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros.” Somewhat misleading, this actually refers to a room of the easel works earlier described in terms of their catalogue reproduction. On the whole, reviews indicate that popular expectation was disappointed by this conflicted construction of the modern.

<sup>140</sup>. According to the temporary catalogue put out by the museum, mural painting was represented by “photographs, preparatory studies and several large portable frescoes on metal frames”—evidently the three Rivera panels.



consumed as another site of entertainment and distraction, due principally to the pervasive effect of the folk art segment and the Mexican market place situated in the museum's garden. Overall, the concurrence of the two events articulated the possibilities of a pan-American future by highlighting the construction of a cultural complementarity between the two nations.

For the Mexican government's part, the exhibition could be characterized as one step in the process of rebuilding the confidence of American capital. By explicitly offering the United States a stake in its archaic past, *Twenty Centuries* provided Mexico with an opportunity to market itself to American viewers in a magnanimous light. By virtue of its festive spirit, the conditions for a non-confrontational, even friendly, future of cultural exchange was established. What I have suggested in this article is that the contemporary "positive" identity necessary to ensure the economic project was constructed at the expense of the virile national mural school that had demonstrated Mexico's artistic leadership in the recent past. That its climatic moment had indeed passed was not a construction, but the debasement of its symbolic power in relation to successive Mexican artistic developments was. The transformative process of emasculation and feminization of the work of the Mexican muralists was accomplished through strategic juxtapositions and the prominence given their contemporary easel works. The reductive historicization of their socially-motivated public mural art allowed for the representation of modern Mexican art and culture as passive, fertile, and willing to enter into relations with the United States. Consideration that Cárdenas' expropriation of American oil properties had generated such an overwhelming demonstration of Mexican public support for national sovereignty only two years earlier provokes the question of whether the majority of Mexicans themselves would have condoned this appearance of complacency.

Perhaps the microcosmic Mexican marketplace set up within the museum provides the best metaphor for the cultural transaction represented by *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*. Packaged as the product of a noble indigenous lineage, Mexico traded its accumulated capital—oil, raw materials, dependability as a war ally, and its culture—in return for financial recovery and national security. The success of this strategy is part of the historical record.<sup>141</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, in its turn, acquired an American archaic past with its living indigenous cultural counterpart. It is significant

141. For a succinct summary of the material benefits to Mexico due to its conciliatory

that the following year, with the museum's staging of René d'Harnoncourt's *Indian Arts of the United States*, the native American (U.S.) and his or her production, for so long culturally marginalized, experienced a significant boost in stature, moving from dubious indigent to creative genius and from curio to "art." The ability to offer incoming avant-garde European modernists, refugees from the war, and their American counterparts such rich cultural capital set the museum up for a powerful leadership role in a reconstituted international terrain.

Furthermore, the primitivizing process enacted in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* had another role that was particularly significant for modern art and for the museum. Up until the last years of the 1930s, the Mexican muralists, with their national and political associations, remained the dominant and virile representatives of contemporary Mexican art in the United States. With their work effectively depoliticized and construed as one small step in an evolution towards the present, and towards the private market of easel art, a space was opened for the new American modernist. After all, naive paintings, academic figurative nudes and genre scenes executed in modern, but no longer avant-garde vocabularies, folk art, children's art, and paintings of young Mexican females were a far cry from the kinds of cubist, surrealist, and abstract vocabularies promoted by the MOMA and being saved at that same moment from the collapse of Europe.♣

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stance, see George W. Grayson, *The United States and Mexico: Pattern of Influence*, New York, Praeger, 1984, pp. 25-28.

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