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# A Photographic Portrait of the Directors: The Visual Manifesto of a Discipline in Mexico

in memoriam collegarum qui nos in pandemia relinquerunt

ere (fig. 1) is an image of Manuel Toussaint y Ritter (1890–1955) and Justino Fernández García (1904– 1972). In perfect symmetry the shapes of bodies and objects orchestrate the composition: two people, a table, a framed photographic print, set before an austere white background. The wall's weatherworn texture extends over the floor's stone surface, at once signaling the fragile condition of its construction and of a discipline in construction. The photograph was taken around 1940, possibly in the College of San Ildefonso (1588), university campus, home to the National Preparatory School, and to the *Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* – the institution that is the subject of this essay.

### A VISUAL MANIFESTO

The photographic double portrait visually articulates the processes behind the founding and institutional *modus operandi* of a discipline in Mexico: Art History and Aesthetic criticism at the crossroads of the multiple cultural transmissions that have shaped the Mexican nation. Its establishment owed much to the initiative of Manuel Toussaint, pictured to the left, and his resolution "to reveal the concrete artistic fact that will demonstrate the ac-

curacy of our assertions in a documented form" (Toussaint 1948, IX). From the foundation of this conviction he structured the study of Mexican art into a uniform academic discipline, bringing the history of the art of Mexico to Mexican scholarship and founding an Institutional Chair in Art History at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the National University of Mexico (1934), as well as a Laboratorio de Arte (Art Laboratory, 1935), which later on became the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas (Institute of Aesthetic Research; Manrique 1995, 54f.). Toussaint looks outside the frame, gazing beyond a fixed point. It is a gesture that suggests an exercise in contemplation, where introspective reflection is visually projected onto what is yet to be learned. Inner knowledge: the self-reflection of what was (the past journeyed and brought



Fig. 1 Unknown, Manuel Toussaint and Justino Fernández, ca. 1940. Photography, black and white (© Archivo Fotográfico "Manuel Toussaint", Colección Retrato e Historia, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Inv. NRH001306)

forth in his book *Paseos coloniales*, 1939), to understand what is and only so, to shape the future.

To the side of Toussaint sits his disciple Justino Fernández who would become the Institute's director upon its founder's death. His critical gaze, accentuated by his glasses, is turned towards the camera lens while his half open lips perhaps shaping the word that seconded the founding moment and with which he seems to confront his viewers, the present and future generations: "'Aesthetics' [...]; is it not the word that gives the Institute its name?" (Fernández 1957a, 6). As if sensing a possible attack on Toussaint, exposing his teacher's positivist approach, and on his empirical use of documentary sources, Fernández seems to answer future generations of Mexican art historians by stating: "In effect, that purpose could not be lacking, in particular if aesthetics is understood as



Fig. 2 Facade of the former monastery of San Agustin in Acolman (Estado de México) (https: //en. wikipedia.org/wiki/ Acol man#/media/ File: FacadeAcolman2.jpg)

belonging to human expression, especially in art, and not as abstract speculation" (ibid.). He championed not the abstract, but a concrete aesthetics, based on the perception of artistic matter (material): the monument itself.

The framed photograph between them is a picture of the facade of the temple of San Agustin in Acolman (Estado de México), a Franciscan foundation ceded to the Augustinian order in 1536 (fig. 2). Crowned by a bell-gable and surrounded by battlements, the austere fortress complex is an example of 16th century Mendicant religious architecture. Built by the local indigenous population under the friars' guidance and forged by means of the cultural and artistic transferences the American continent received after the Spanish conquest, it is key to Mexican identity. Set at the center of the image, its placement seems premeditated. It draws attention to the shared interest of the guardians of a spiritual strength turned to stone: material culture, and the study of its objects set in the dynamics of reappropriation, reuse and re-functionalization, confluence of visions, forms, and styles. The artistic and aesthetic valuation of these objects, as both founders had foreseen would be achieved once it was agreed that "research on the history of the art had to come first, in order to open the very possibility of producing aesthetic research fully knowledgeable of art history, of our art history in particular" (Fernández 1957a, 6). This tacit agreement between the

Institute's stalwarts on how to approach the artistic object (method) is highlighted by the instrument (photography/medium) and by the genre (portraiture) this image of Toussaint and Fernández belongs to.

L he portrait symbolizes both scholars' shared interests and approaches, asserting their priorities for Mexican Art History and Aesthetic studies: their aim was the rescue of the national heritage and the advancement of its study to educate Mexican society in the construction of a national aesthetic from a "reflective and comparative" perspective; an aim achieved only by the systematic formulation of photographic and documentary records in an institutional framework guaranteeing legal operation and substantive law. The photograph between them is the documented monument - the center of their work. If understood as a positivist instrument, it presents art history with the faculty to operate by means of documenting facts, providing critical-aesthetic discourse with the empirical ground it needed to articulate its evaluative interpretations. In this sense, it can be understood to be the cornerstone of the Institute's creation, deliberately placed at the center of the composition and framed by the directors who appear as institutional pillars, thus establishing visual parallels with the statues in the niches (Saint Peter and Saint Paul), in turn framed by the temple's Plateresque columns. Thus, a genealogy can be traced. The founders (Toussaint and Fernández) evoke the sobriety and relevance of a construction which culminates in a bell-gable, a symbol for architectural austerity that mirrors the conditions that determined the discipline's founding. How did this come to be, and under what circumstances?

## ANTECEDENTS

An important antecedent was the establishment of the National Academy of San Carlos, on December 25, 1783 (Báez Macías 2009, appendix, 277f.). Reflecting the ideas introduced to New Spain in the wake of the Bourbon Reforms, its creation was a remarkable event for the instruction in and production of the fine arts in the Americas. It would be the earliest fine art museum on the continent, holding the first painting and sculpture gallery and the first specialized art library. The centralization of artistic education under this model of enlightened absolutism was constitutive to the institutionalization of the study of Fine Arts in Mexico, despite the economic hardship the Academy was subjected to in its early years and the obstruction it suffered throughout the Wars of Independence (1810-20), followed by the political-economic crisis of Mexico's fledgling governments until the mid-nineteenth century (ibid., 51-64).

Another milestone was reached by the educational reforms promoted by the laws of 1867 under the liberal government of Benito Juárez. The National Academy of San Carlos was transformed into the National School of Fine Arts and a systematic re-structuring of its curricula was carried out. Here, the history of fine arts and aesthetic appreciation was first taught, making it the place of birth of the discipline in Mexico (Báez Macías 2010, 30-33). In 1910, under President Justo Sierra, many of Mexico City's higher education schools and colleges were united in the newly-founded National University of Mexico. As a national institution, the university was charged with the organization of the nation's education (Manrique 1995, 54). The teaching of Fine Art was part of this remit, but a more sustained impulse to study Mexican art from a theoreticalmethodological stance coupled with formal descriptive scholarly exercise would not come to be until the 1930 s, once the country's long revolutionary phase (1910–20) was over (Báez Macías 2010, 32).

#### A NEW METHOD FOR THE FUTURE HISTORIANS OF ART

The development of 'modern' Art History in Mexico is intrinsically connected with the name of Manuel Toussaint, a former student of the Academy of San Carlos, and secretary to the educational reformer José Vasconcelos. In 1934 Manuel Toussaint addressed a petition to Manuel Ocaranza, then Dean of the University of Mexico, asking for the foundation of what he called an Art Laboratory (Laboratorio de Arte) - following the example of Spain, and more precisely of Diego Angulo Íñiguez, first professor in Spanish Colonial Art at the Laboratorio de Arte at the University of Seville. The Mexican laboratory should be the space, according to Toussaint, where "future historians of our artistic movement" will be formed once they are provided with the "necessary discipline and the precise method" needed to fulfill the "requirements of seriousness and validity [required] for this type of work" (Toussaint 1934b).

Provided with an institutional structure that fulfilled the academic needs of the different scientific and humanistic disciplines, once the University was organized into research institutes, to address the nation's cultural heritage, Toussaint implemented practical and theoretical tools and protocols, crucial to the analysis of art and its history. The undertaking was divided in two areas. First foundational research in pursuit of three objectives: the "creation of files holding all data" on the works of art, the "confirmation of a photographic archive of works of art" and the "organization of series of diagrams, plans, maps, and drawings of the monuments"; secondly it was to generate and disseminate knowledge, focused on "availing the results and research to the general public" through the organization of "university courses, sessions, excursions and conferences at sites and museums" and by the "publication of a series of monographs".

The earliest was conceived under the title Historia del arte en México presented in three volumes: El arte moderno en México. Breve historia: siglo XIX v XX by Justino Fernández (1937), Arte precolombino de México y de la América Central by Salvador Toscano (1944), and Arte colonial en México by Manuel Toussaint (1948). In his book's prologue, Toussaint advanced a "method" nourished by "catalogues of the works of art and the artists" to "record the concrete artistic fact" and thus demonstrate "the exactitude of the argument in a documented manner" (Toussaint 1948, IX). The task of publishing early research would be complemented by the formation of the journal Anales in 1937 where documents, works of art, essays and articles would be published to disseminate outcomes of scholarly research in a timely manner.

#### A "BATTERY" AT THE HEART OF A LABORATORY

The founding of the Laboratorio de Arte at the University was decreed in 1935. By its naming Toussaint underlined the empirical and scientific character with which he wanted to endow the nascent discipline, conferring it equal status as the hard sciences. As a 'laboratory', on the one hand, the discipline's formulation was stated and, on the other, its mode of operation was presented: research empirically carried out with methodological rigor and exactitude. The plan was of enormous relevance to the preservation and dissemination of the nation's cultural heritage: with the establishment of an archive and the documentation of the arts of Mexico and their artists, the Laboratory was not only to advance practices for the collection and conservation of knowledge, but it was also meant to generate knowledge. It was to fulfill fundamental functions: safeguard valuable materials to make available to a large audience, and through this practice contribute to the configuration of knowledge in the study of the arts in Mexico, then divided in painting, architecture, sculpture, and the industrial arts. Consequently, many efforts were made to bring together visual data and to achieve a systematic collection of visual

sources (photographic and graphic material and images: snapshots, prints, sketches, diagrams, plans, etc.) that would soon yield the Laboratory's earliest monographic publications. Here, the importance of the formulation of a database is worth emphasizing, mainly the fact that visual data was systematically gathered by the period's photographic technology: its constitution would coalesce in an epistemology of "comparative viewing" (Caraffa 2009), through which visual relations and formal analysis could be established to then conceive theoretical models susceptible to change, concurrent to the cultural frameworks that "future historians of our artistic movements" were to convey (Toussaint 1934a).

Only by means of the exact, precise, scientific knowledge of the nation's artistic expressions could their historical development be understood, and a solid foundation be built; sound enough to enable "each artistic judgment to find its stylistic verification through the confrontation with documented examples" and to "bring to light, disseminate and understand the artistic thought of Mexican people" (Fernández 1957b, 9f.). Upon the University's reorganization in 1937, the Laboratory of Art was incorporated into the Institute of Aesthetic Research under Rafael López Granados. The development of an institute with this positivist remit was promising, though, as before in the National Academy of San Carlos and the National School of Fine Arts, the discipline was hampered by the University's economic situation, in detriment to the development of the project formulated by Manuel Toussaint, who would succeed López Granados in 1939 as the Institute's director. Given its scarce funding and modest infrastructure - much lower than what was required - the task at hand must have seemed immense, especially when considering the size and diversity of the nation's cultural heritage, as well as its deplorable state of conservation. The fledgling art historical community faced many obstacles - but managed to overcome them on account of the tenacity and dedication of its members.

It was not until the first half of the twentieth century that the Institute found the opportunity to

fully develop; after being housed in different temporary venues, it was reestablished on the newly inaugurated University campus and Justino Fernández became director. In 1956, two decades after the Laboratory's establishment, Toussaint's disciple, assistant, and successor consolidated the themes and subjects (research surrounding the history of Mexican art and its relationship with universal art history), determined the manner and process (publication of research and the organization of chairs, courses, and conferences) and offered methodological courses to follow. Fernández implemented his mentor's scientificpositivist tradition, "the gathering of data, that is the documentation of facts and their description" (the phase when the "accumulation of material" takes place), and to which Fernández incorporated a relevant component, namely the "significant interpretation of expressions, facts, documents, and of data found, so that they make sense to us, to our time, in a broad humanistic plan" (ibid., 7).

his call for a meaningful interpretation, impossible without the "accumulation of material" rests on his teacher's positivist approach while it articulates the origins and basis of the Art Laboratory. Justino Fernández' methodological structure, extracted from Toussaint's approach would serve as guide and instrument to future generations of Mexican and Latin American art historians and critics who would take: 1) an affective, spiritual, poetic approach to the work of art; search for 2) its stylistic or formal appreciation; and 3) its historical positioning; by 4) historical documentation and 5) its comparison with other works by 6) a synthetic critical judgment (ibid., 18). With the establishment of these six methodological systematized Toussaint's steps Fernández academic legacy into a theoretical and methodological practice that should dictate the course the institute would follow and substantiate his famous trilogy, subsequently published as Estética del arte Mexicano (1972), Fernández aspired to draw a picture of the aesthetics of Mexican art from pre-Hispanic times to the

present: Coatlicue. Estética del arte indígena antiguo (1954), El retablo de los Reyes. Estética del arte de la Nueva España (1959) and El Hombre. Estética del arte moderno y contemporáneo (1962). Throughout its three parts he sought to extract "through formal, historical, objective analysis and an adequate and firm interpretation of the object, its final or deepest meaning and human sensation, so nothing neither remained solely on the plane of knowledge, or scholarship, nor as an interpretation lacking the necessary information and objective basis" (Fernández 1972, 171).

#### **RATIONALIZING FIRST INTUITIONS**

A disciple of Toussaint and follower of the aesthetic philosophical movements of the Spanish exiles in Mexico, who had become the main translators and transmitters of German scholarship in Latin America through their teachings and editorial activities in the Mexican academy - such as José Gaos and José Ortega y Gasset (del Conde 1995, 126) - Fernández explored Mexican artistic production from an "impure aesthetic" (Fernández 1972, 18). He underlines his empirical method, unleashed by the work of art's factual and material its aesthetic concretion and assessment, conditioned by the scope of its cultural context, to then proceed in the analysis of the evaluations, thus placing perception and phenomenological aspects at the forefront of any theoretical formulation. Echoes of an 'aesthetics from below' are undoubtedly present, as advanced by the nascent field of psychology - a connection made towards the end of the nineteenth century in German scholarship, as the Spanish philosopher Miguel Bueno emphasised in an article in the institute's journal Anales (Bueno 1962).

For Fernández, art criticism and art history could not be devoted only to an "aesthetic of the first impression", both had to be put into effect by means of a method that would allow for the "rationalization of primary intuitions" (Fernández 1957b, 9). He understood that to "march forward, reaffirm or renovate information or opinions", one had to "do as Doctor Toussaint had noted: actively continue to research in archives and in the works of art in a direct manner", with the understanding that other than that "studies reflecting on interpretation, were needed", because that is "where the true original creation arises" (Fernández 1957a, 21). Justino Fernández' program is a clear and forceful testimony of what is rooted in the double portrait's composition: the student retrieved the teacher's legacy and systematized it to pave an institutional academic future path for the discipline. Certainly, the salvaging and safekeeping of sources, documents, and works of art, their description and classification, is reflected in the publications focused on Mexican art published during the 1960s, while the demand to "rationalize" would find a clear methodological channel brought on by the influence of iconological studies in Mexico.

Handwritten notes by Justino Fernández, recorded before his death in 1972, reveal the elaboration of a theoretical-methodological model interpretation that incorporated Erwin of Panofsky's iconology and sought the exploration of the symbolic content of the works of art (de la Fuente 1973, 43–46), placing iconological research between the formalist approach belonging to art history and a materialist historical stance bordering on a sociology of art, analyzing art as a social phenomenon. This was aimed primarily at better understanding Mexican artistic production though, as Justino Fernández notes, "it is not possible to speak of our art as an expression isolated from the other arts of other people and times", so it is "necessary to extend our sights towards universal art, especially towards certain aspects with which ours must relate, to finally give it the place that belongs to it in the history of art and culture" (Fernández 1957a, 7). Not the one without the other: that is what the photographic portrait of the directors is all about. The Plateresque style of the temple's facade heralds foreign forms coming from Western culture manufactured and enriched by indigenous materials, hands, skills, ingeniousness, and beliefs: a mixture (mestizaje). It shows that the exploration of Mexican identity can be better understood from this dynamic, first explored in Fernández' pioneering trilogy on Mexican art.

#### MEMORY IS PRESERVED BY ITS LIVING BEARERS

The decisive approach established by the directors can be glimpsed in today's generations of art historians. The Institute's program still echoes its founding priorities, as evidenced by the balance presented in the commemorative publication Historia del arte y estudios de cultura visual. 85 años del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas (2020). Its chapters broadly follow the periodization and fields of study determined by the institute's founders: ancient American and indigenous art; viceregal art of New Spain; the arts of the 19th century; modern and contemporary art, and incorporate findings stemming from Visual culture and Material Studies. Since the 1990s, Mexican Art History has opened itself, naturally, to recent international trends such as structuralist semiotics and critical theory, as well as the interdisciplinary field of Visual culture.

The symmetric parallelism between the statues set in the facade's niches and the institutional pillars pictured in the double portrait has been mentioned. For some, the subtle and fine correspondence that reveals itself when viewing the photograph might very well be understood as accidental, yet the case is quite the opposite. The photographic portrait fulfills a clear function. It acknowledges the institute's founders standing before future generations of art historians in a visual construction of their founding *ethos* that manifests itself and is repeatedly reconstructed every time the portrait is viewed. In it we perceive ourselves - heirs to a legacy - and recognize that we are the successors of a genealogical continuation. Moreover, photographic portraiture is a genre used to educate; it brings forth individuals and their impact on society, and as such the double portrait of Toussaint and Fernández compels its viewers to fulfill and carry out the legacy they placed in our hands to keep the institution alive.

As Jorge Alberto Manrique Castañeda, the Institute's fourth director between 1974 and 1980, clearly asserted while reasoning on the timeliness of the photographic portrait of the Institute's directors: "to know our present and past art is to know ourselves and understand ourselves as

individuals and as a community; our current interpretations can only be a dialogue with what is proposed by the teacher, who continues to be a cornerstone and a capital point of reference" (Manrique n. d., 3f.). Let us remember that portraits of individuals serve as elements of social cohesion (Joschke 2013). And in this sense, our double portrait, - which opens the photographic series placed across the back wall of the Francisco de la Maza lecture hall staging the genealogy of the institute's directors - represents not only a memorial to its founding fathers. Its visual efficacy gives meaning to the present and future generations of academics by means of their self-identification with the scholars who established the foundations of the institutionalization of the history of art and aesthetic criticism in Mexico.

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