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Artistic and Political Strategies in the Mexican Pavilion, US Centennial Exposition (1876)*

Dafne Cruz Porchini

Abstract

The role of international exhibitions in promoting ideas of national identity has often been discussed in art history and visual culture historiography. In the second half of the 19th century, there was a frenzied idea of nationhood, where countries from Latin America put emphasis on sustaining the individual character of their region stressing its history and traditions. From a transcultural perspective, this essay will explore a case in point by focusing on the artistic and political strategies which characterized the Mexican Pavilion at the American Centennial Exposition in 1876. It will explore its relative “peripheral” constitution (Filipová 2015, 4) with specific cultural agendas. The “periphery” in this context applies to both, Mexico’s political self-understanding vis-à-vis the hosting United Nations of America as well as how its pavilion spatially and symbolically figured in the larger display of the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The “periphery” is thus not only associated with marginality, but explored as a pivotal spatial category in which cultural and ethnic tensions interrelate and further productively entangle.

Consequently, I will examine the microhistory of the exhibition in relation with local and global circumstances. According to Mary Louise Pratt, transculturation is used to describe how subordinated or marginal groups “select and invent from material transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (Pratt 1991, 36). In fact, transcultural processes characterize the “contact zone” as well as the “colonial frontier” and inform particular modes of representation. Methodologically, a focus on “transcultural contact” thus emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers not in terms of difference, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, while also accounting for often radically asymmetrical power relations. Pratt pointed out: “I refer to the space of imperial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 1991, 36, 37).

In this essay, I will highlight the influence of the Mexican exhibit in Philadelphia in 1876, which capitalized ideas of exoticism and utopian visions, in addition to the display of natural resources and the inclusion of art as an important element of the country’s international image. It will explain the Mexican participation from “colonized subjects” in the way they represented the idea of a modern nation and how it was used to depict and embody the transference of culture conceived from within the interests of the metropolis and dominant culture.

Keywords: centennial exposition • world’s fairs • national pavilions • Latin American art • cultural identities

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The cover of the book *Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition (1876)*, edited by the British-American illustrator Frank Leslie, pictures five allegorical figures at the edge of a cliff, accompanied by a globe on which the continents are outlined (fig. 1). The central female



Fig. 1: Frank Leslie, *Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition (1876)*, Pennsylvania, 1877. The Free Library, Philadelphia.

body is particularly noteworthy: she wears the flag of the United States of America held up by a belt, and a golden headdress decorated by the Union stars. With one hand, she points to the woman next to her, while with the other hand, she gently touches the shoulder of her companion. Her attributes indicate the second woman to be the representation of Europe: She is crowned, wears a purple robe and carries a coat of arms and an olive branch. These two individuals interact in a symbolic way: The former Columbia—here the United States of America—seems to demonstrate her nation's achievements to Europe, while Asia, in profile and excluded from the interaction of the first two figures, seems eager to pay attention to them.

At the same time, we can see two dark-skinned allegories. On the left side, a kneeling Native American—wearing leather boots and a feather headdress—watches this *new* America closely. This figure has the physical features of the typical Native American, as if she embodies the stereotyped racial synthesis of the native Comanches, Cherokees or Sioux. The portrayal of the Native American immediately determines her subordinate position to the United States. On the other hand, Africa, shown with a bare chest, next to a bag of arrows on the ground looks off into the distance.

The different allegorical representations of the American continent first represented in the 17th century in Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, seem to converge into a single image here (Gravelot and Cochin 1994, 32; Rodríguez Moya 2008). In the spatial positioning of these allegories, the United States acquires a new and more important position: She is the visual synthesis of the glorification of freedom—similar to the French *Marianne*—but also represents a symbol of progress and civilization of the entire *American continent*. Even in sculptural representations, the United States generally appears victorious, wearing a Roman-style tunic, while her free-flowing hair is adorned with the Union stars and she is accompanied by a bald eagle. It is significant that the Latin American nations are generally absent in the sculptural allegories. Returning our attention to the book cover, we can see from top to bottom the means of

transportation in northeastern Pennsylvania: railroads, ships, telegraph cables, and posts. In the upper part, several emblematic buildings are illustrated, as well as new buildings in the Fairmount Park district. The sun is setting in Philadelphia, while a train quickly passes through, and the ships navigate between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. This image sums up the fundamental premise of the Centennial Exhibition: the power and desire for superiority from the United States of America. The allegory of the nation aims to assemble the entire continent, reflecting the idea of nation's growth and progress prevalent at the time in the country's East Coast population.

The Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, officially known as the *International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine*, was on display from May to November 1876 and took place in the city's largest park, where it received ten million visitors. The event commemorated the centennial of the Declaration of Independence, but also sought the promotion of science, arts and industry. The event, also known as the *Centennial Exhibition*, aimed to reconstruct a national identity and foster unity in the United States after the Civil War (1861-1865). The United States hoped to *mimic* the European exhibitions structured by 19th-century nationalist imagery, as well as demonstrate at all costs that it was internationally on par with countries such as France and Germany.¹

The city of Philadelphia was chosen as the host of this exhibition due to its history as the place of the independence movement and its efficient ground and sea transportation systems (Giberti, 2002); the city also provided sufficient land near the river to enable the new constructions required for the event. Both the United States government and the organizers from the private sector—mostly businessmen—established the fundamental premise of creating bonds of “peace and friendship among all the world's people”, as well as praising the advances of civilization. The exhibition would serve as tangible evidence of what the United States, as a young nation, aspired to achieve through its scientific inventions, commercial and industrial achievements, as well as a remarkable development of its engineering and infrastructure (Giberti 2002).

The construction work stressed the use of technology, particularly in the thematic pavilions of agriculture, horticulture, and the arts, among others. The building commonly known as the *Monster Edifice*—monumental in size, symmetrical, and Neoclassical in style with an enormous rotunda—was a remarkable example of the achievements in modern engineering thanks to the use of iron and steel; a huge machine was placed in its center, provoking fascination, curiosity and fear among the visitors with its giant dimensions (Howe 2002, 642). The organizers imagined the exhibition as a *sheer* representation of knowledge, in which the space attempted to reconcile empirical knowledge with an ideal intellectual project, illustrated in part by the strong impulse towards the rational organization of objects within the space (Giberti 2002). Additionally, the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition extended an encyclopedia

¹ The first American world's fair *Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations* (1853-1854) had been presented in New York. See Joep Leerssen and Eric Storm (eds.), *World Fairs and the Global Moulding of National Identities. International Exhibitions as Cultural Platforms, 1851-1958* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

of modern industry and science, eclectically portraying the contrasts between the past and the present, exoticism and innovation (Howe 2002, 643). In this way, the exhibition became an architectural and theatrical spectacle, inviting the public to participate in a great simulation of *control*.

The sense of theater and spectacle coexisted with a scientific interest driven by systems of classification. The rational order of the systemization of objects was an attempt to praise the accomplishments of humanity and its journey towards progress. In this way, the general parameters of the exhibit were distinctly: the purpose of the objects on display was not merely an act of *accumulation*, but the concrete demonstration of knowledge and dominance. The United States of America pavilion occupied the largest part of the exhibition space, while other countries' pavilions tried to mediate with a larger global audience (Giberti 2002). Meanwhile, the display cabinets were used as modern and rational artifacts to exhibit commercial objects. The official catalogues of each pavilion channeled a strong institutional mission: They contained extremely precise information about the scientific and artistic objects from national and foreign participants, which the organizers requested well in advance from the various countries. Thus, the sections dedicated to Mexico, Brazil, Egypt, and China, among others, created similar exhibits, displaying simultaneously maps, diagrams and illustrations, combined with examples of the wildlife characteristic to their regions. Twelve Latin American nations were located around the main American pavilion.

As we can see in the image of the aforementioned exemplary Native American kneeling beside the allegory of the United States, the Centennial Exhibition held a distorted view of the Native Americans that inhabited their territory, causing important racial contradictions between this perception and the real events across the country.² Even the United States citizens themselves had to confront the intersectionally existent tension between the “ethnic and regional diversity” (Tenkotte 1987, 5) and the double standard this meant for people who were perceived as the “racialized other of the white settler”. This process was similar to the idea of “national reconstruction” which was shaped in many ways since the promptly growing industrial economy, most conspicuously in agricultural production, and communications systems brought about various social transformations (Pani 2016). For this reason, the organizing committee of the Centennial Exhibition, comprising mostly of businessmen and politicians from the East Coast, firmly believed that the smaller exhibitions inside the large buildings proved that the future growth and progress of the United States could only be achieved through guidance from the leadership of the ‘superior’ Anglo-Saxon US citizens (Rydell, Findling and Pelle 2002, 23).

The international exhibitions in the United States in the final decades of the 19th century were characterized by the importance placed on the economic expansion of the country after the Civil War, which led to a new stage of massive industrialization—especially in railroads and the telegraph system—paralleling its political and military expansion. Thus, these events served

2 Robert W. Rydell in *All the World's a Fair. Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) discusses, from a cultural and economic perspective, that the United States world's fairs were used to legitimate racial exploitation. Rydell explains the formation of an ideology of progress going hand in hand with scientific racism.

as a backdrop for national reconstruction, in which liberal paternalism and its colonial conception were important factors. All these factors could explain the success of the Centennial Exhibition and that, to a certain extent, laid the groundwork for the exhibitions organized in the following forty years: Boston (1883), Chicago (1893), Atlanta (1895), Omaha (1898), Buffalo (1901), St. Louis (1904), Seattle (1909), San Diego, and San Francisco (both in 1915) (see Loock 2014).

The Mexican Section and the commissioners

Mexico took part in the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition and it was its first important participation in the international fairs. Besides the small exotistic presentation held in London in 1851, the country sought to put forth a reformist image (Buzard, Childer and Gillooly 2007, 27). To accomplish this, Mexico was involved in complex diplomatic negotiations with the United States, which were featured in the national and foreign press (see Camacho 2016).

In the final two decades of the 19th century, 'promotional literature' was implemented and formed the basis of an historical compendium that explained the nation's evolutionary development, economic expectation and financial and commercial information (Riguzzi 1988, 142; Riguzzi 2010, 127-163). In 1879, the diplomat Matías Romero wrote several essays on the current condition of Mexico and the increase of commerce with the United States, which was directed at the Association of Producers of Chicago, an organization that had expressed doubts on the convenience of operating in Mexico. Romero's essay—edited by the Secretary of Hacienda—contained, in addition to an analysis of the country's assets, data, and statistics that should demonstrate the reality of Mexican progress. It is worth mentioning that Romero's writings became a guide for the future dissemination of the national image. At the same time, the national press began to emphasize a new level of relations between the two countries:

[...] The United States and Mexico will soon be joined by an international railroad that will bring great benefits to both countries, naturally drawn to unity and the strengthening of their commercial relations. Mexico is the richest country in America: its vegetation, the fertility of its soil, its rivers and above all, the enterprising character of its inhabitants will earn it the place it deserves amongst all these nations (*El Propagador Industrial* 1876, n.p.).

Prior to this, the Minister of State and Foreign Relations and the President of the Commission, Manuel Romero Rubio, wrote a letter to the organizers announcing the commissioners appointed by the government of the Republic to carry out the work in Philadelphia, whose objective was the presentation of "Mexican natural and artistic productions." According to Romero Rubio, the event was arranged by the government of the "powerful American Union," and should represent Mexican creativity on an equal level as the "more advanced nations" and "the performance of our commission would reveal the confidence of our government

and the highly dignified and learned thinking harbored by the people and government of the United States.” Romero Rubio placed special emphasis on the “close bonds of friendship and commerce” between the two countries, as well as the “identity of its political institutions.” He also mentioned that “Mexico believes that the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition will contribute greatly to broadening these interest relationships and to effectively promoting prosperity and the well-being of all the countries invited” (Philadelphia City Archives, *Letter from Manuel Romero Rubio to Alfred T. Goshorn, 1874*). Alfred T. Goshorn—General Director of the International Commissions of the Philadelphia Exhibition— was informed of the appointment of Gabriel Mancera as Special Commissioner, approved by the Mexican government to supervise the role of the country in the Philadelphia Exhibition, a duty whose purpose was “to examine the space assigned to our country and analyze the appropriate means for the success of this Commission in this great celebration of labor and industry” (Philadelphia City Archives, *Letter from Manuel Romero Rubio to Alfred T. Goshorn, 1874*).

The reports written by Mancera—head of the preliminary organization of the event in Philadelphia—go into detail about the United States exhibition and the effect this could have in Mexico. Mancera directly explained the way in which the simple stand dedicated to Mexico would be set up, as well as presenting all the commercial advantages that the country’s participation would entail. At the end of these long reports, Mancera made a list of the objects that should be collected to take to Philadelphia; and these products ranged from wood, medicinal plants, coffee, cacao, tobacco, fruits, pulque, minerals, traditional costumes, photographs of archaeological sites and monuments, antiques, paintings, lithographs and engravings, sculptures, and antique books and manuscripts (Mancera 1875).

The United States Ambassador of that time, John W. Foster, approved the appointment of the commissioners and thus expressed to the Minister of State, Hamilton Fish: “The gentlemen who compose the Commission are prominent and influential citizens of this Republic, and will be able to secure an attractive and creditable representation on the part of Mexico” (Philadelphia City Archives, *Letter from John W. Foster to Hamilton Fish, 1874*). Diplomatic channels hoped for the successful performance of the commission and that the Mexican participation would be the most dignified possible, and it was clear that the United States authorities were very attentive to the commission’s activities.

Furthermore, the general report of the commissioners explained that their intention was to reveal “the new moment of the young Mexican nation” through its “industrial and moral vitality” (Philadelphia International Exhibition 1876, 5). The Mexican organizers said they would not represent “historical aspects” in the Mexican exhibition in order to prioritize national products and manufacturing. The general idea was to present Mexico as fertile ground for foreign investment: “the country’s political disruptions are coming to an end; peace in Mexico is guaranteed for the future, and there are hopes to live in tranquility and progress.” (Philadelphia International Exhibition 1876, 5)

Despite the optimistic intentions of the Mexican commissioners, *The New York Times* revealed certain prejudices through references to the instability and immaturity of the Mexican government, as well as by harshly criticizing the Mexican delegation in Philadelphia:

The Mexican Commissioners who are to exhibit the production of their native country at the Centennial Exhibition, have reached this City, in Company with 228 large packing-cases. Of course, it is idle to imagine the contents of these cases may be. If 200 of them contain cigars for the use of the Commissioners, the remaining twenty-eight would still be sufficient to hold a quantity of interesting and valuable articles [...] their chief industries are, unfortunately, of a kind that cannot be adequately illustrated at any exhibition in a foreign and remote country [...]. To box up a revolution and send it to Philadelphia is impossible. Just at present, the Early Spring Revolution is in full bloom all over the Mexican plains, and before the exhibition closes, the regular Midsummer and Fall Revolutions, will have reached maturity (*The New York Times* 1876, 6).

Political cartoons and new displays

In the national context, the Mexican newspaper *El Ahuizote*, decided to go even further with the criticism regarding the Mexican pavilion. The political cartoons of José María Villasana dated in February and July of 1876 were ironic about both the political crisis and the commissioners of the country (fig. 2). We can see and read the heading, “Philadelphia. Mexican Department,” and below a sign reading, “Aztec Facade,” which indicates the entrance to the Mexican section of the Exhibition. Some visitors can be seen right at the entrance and inside, while two strange (anthropomorphic) figures who carry smoking vessels seem to guard the pre-Columbian temple located beside some curtains. Beside the main entrance we see a representation of the Mexican President Miguel Lerdo de Tejada’s head with large eyes, while the details of the reliefs on the left represent scenes that are perhaps alluding to the presiden-



Fig. 2: José María Villasana, “Filadelfia. Departamento de México”, *El Ahuizote*, T. III, no. 29, 21 July, 1876. Miguel Lerdo de Tejada Library, Mexico City.

tial period. In this first relief from top to bottom, labeled “Tívoli,” Lerdo is represented as a warrior—brandishing a *macahuitl*—and he seems to address three men—probably his ministers and members of his cabinet—who are also wearing feather headdresses and Mexica battle shields. In the second relief, Villasana directly represents the battle between the politician and another character with spectacles while their noses clash. In the third scene, there is a reversal of roles: Lerdo is no longer a Mexica warrior, but rather a religious figure or priest: He is sitting in a tall chair and wears a religious cap on his head. With a sym-

bolic gesture of his hands, he seems to signal to two men kneeling before him, labeled by the words “Senate” and “Congress,” clearly suggesting his power to make legal changes that will allow for his reelection, a situation in which he ultimately obtained the legislative power’s support.

A few months earlier, Villasana had ridiculed the exhibition’s delegates. The cartoon titled *Grand sale of public resources that will begin in 40 days* reveals the distrust of Mexican participation in the United States (fig. 3). On the left side, a hand holds a chair hanging from a series of letters and documents; a group of four men of different statures, dressed in coats and top hats—probably the commissioners of the exhibition—travels to Veracruz to board a ship to the United States. Through its expression, the cartoon aims to show that the commissioners of the exhibition—men of the scientific and intellectual elite, had left their public positions to travel to the neighboring country, while leaving their country in the midst of a political crisis. It is likely both images were allusions to Lerdo de Tejada’s lack of popularity and supporters during his political movements.



Fig. 3: José María Villasana, “Gran barata de destinos públicos que comenzará dentro de 40 días”, *El Ahuizote*, T. III, no. 6, 11 February, 1876. Miguel Lerdo de Tejada Library, Mexico City.

Despite the entanglement of the political circumstances and the bitter criticism against them, the Mexican delegates continued their work in Philadelphia. Thus, the Mexican department or section occupied a small part of a building measuring 1082 square meters (Tenorio Trillo 1998, 67). On display were samples of agriculture, textiles, mining, metalworks, and archaeological objects, among other things, while the artistic section was situated in the building devoted to the fine arts. The Mexican pavilion’s construction was a Neoclassical structure with arches composed of architectonic motifs from Mexica temples, while inside was a display of objects in the traditional style of 19th-century artistic and industrial installations.



Fig. 4: Mexican Pavilion in the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876, The Free Library, Philadelphia.

Other newspapers published short descriptions of the Mexican exhibition space, which was divided into four sections with twenty-six display windows (fig. 4). These vertical displays were covered by glass and joined by arches

and exhibited textiles, products made from maguey and henequen, grains, examples of mining and metalworking, tobacco, alcoholic drinks, chemical products, and medicinal plants, among other objects. There were also “handicrafts of Mexican women,” which were objects of “admiration of the Americas”. A set of wax forms was especially remarkable, which represented “all the tropical fruits of Mexico” and was a total success given that “It would have been impossible to create a more joyous representation of the great diversity of fruits in our country, there was no better method to make them known abroad [...]” (Camacho 2016, 233).

As stated *El Proteccionista* (1876, n.p.), the “pavilion presented all the remarkable and unique characteristics of Aztec architecture from the reign of Moctezuma;” while “the historical relics of the ancient art of that civilized and strange people constitute the most interesting detail of this section.”

The artistic section

Many articles printed in the national press mentioned the existence of a “new Mexican culture” whose desire for transformation kept with the spirit of the Constitution of 1857 (Widdifield 1996, 65). The evolutionary phase of national art and culture went hand in hand with the ideals of progress in the country, which also coincided with the invitation by the United States to participate in the Centennial Exhibition. It was believed that art could have an impact on US-American society given that it would eliminate the presumed ideas about Mexico, and demonstrate its own perception of a modern country (this discussion was extensive in several studies regarding the post-revolutionary years. See Delpar 1992 and López 2010). For this reason, and as part of the strategy of the acceptance of Mexico in the United States, the Mexican commission decided to unveil artworks that would portray the country’s “national dignity” (Widdifield 1996, 65) through painting, sculpture, graphic arts and the most innovative medium of the time, photography. The works were sent to an annex of Memorial Hall along with works from Argentina, Brazil, and Chile.

The artistic selection was based on a search for the artworks considered most representative of a ‘Mexican School of Painting,’ to suggest that Mexico was much the same as the most sophisticated cultures, while also defending its national character. This was specified by Romero Rubio himself: “This Commission, wishing to make the Mexican School of Painting known abroad, has disposed to send to the Philadelphia Exhibition a picture of each the national artists from the sixteenth-century to our days. I enclose herein a list of the said pictures, which includes also sculptural works, that are to be send to the mentioned exhibition” (Philadelphia City Archives, *Note from Romero Rubio, President of the Commission to Manuel M. de Zamacona*, 1876).

As Stacie Widdifield argues, Lerdo de Tejada had entrusted the Academy with the execution of works addressed to the victory of independence, perhaps in order to identify certain similarities with the American Independence (Widdifield 1996, 69-70). The delivery included sixty paintings from the Academy of San Carlos and some from private collections. Among the

paintings of New Spain were works by José de Alcívar, Miguel Cabrera, José de Ibarra, and José Juárez, among others, whose works were housed in the collections of the Academy of San Carlos.³

One of the newspapers depicted the Mexican art selection: “The paintings presented are among the best in the Exhibition, and the moderns—in particular—demonstrate the high degree of artistic culture which Mexican painters have reached [...]” (*El Correo Germánico* 1876, 1). Other reviews emphasized the awards given to the famous painter José María Velasco and the photography of *Cruces and Campa*, and also wrote of the overall presence of Mexican art in the Exhibition: “The paintings of Mexico, according to the opinions of impartial spectators, are among the best of the Exhibition, so much so that our artists can rest assured that they are not lagging behind the Europeans or Americans” (Camacho 2016, 234).

All the artworks were inscribed in the official catalogue of the Mexican section, as well as in the commissioners’ report. While Lerdo de Tejada privileged history painting, the commissioners decided to display *costumbrista* and religious painting since these artworks could illustrate the knowledge and use of European cultural-artistic traditions by Mexican artists. In fact, the visual objects were shown to convey a message between national identity and historical legitimation. For this reason, various paintings represented moments of European history such as *Christopher Columbus before the Catholic Kings* (1850) by Juan Cordero, *The Death of Marat* (1875) by Santiago Rebull, or *Galileo explaining the new astronomical theories in the University of Padua* (1873) by Félix Parra, while the sculptures represented mythological subjects of classical antiquity. The selected works corresponded to the “taste and ideals of Mexican society” (Fuente Salcido 1984, 124). The works had been exhibited in the annual exhibitions of the Academy, visited by collectors, subscribers, businessmen, intellectuals, and also politicians. The landscape genre was central in the artistic section. José María Velasco won a medal in the Philadelphia exhibition for his work *The Valley of Mexico from the hill of Magdalena* (1875), which had gained immediate fame when it was exhibited for the first time in the Academy of San Carlos. This work by Velasco portrays the volcanoes, as well as the Lakes of Texcoco and Chalco, while Mexico City can be seen in the distance. In this painting, the perspective is widened and the sense of monumentality is increased, while the small human figures—a woman and a child—suggest a life continuity (Ramírez 2004, 281). The pictorial description of the national landscape—as represented in the artistic sections of Mexico and Brazil—allowed for a visual comparison with the US-American landscape paintings in terms of scale and diversity (Manthorne 2014, 178). The display of these landscapes also contributed to the promotion of the identity of these regional pavilions, still referred to as the ‘New World,’ which made a distinction from Europe, emphasizing above all their natural resources, and bringing importance to a shared Pan-American “national pride” in a natural America (Böger 2010, 84). The pavilion of the Photographic Association of the Centennial Exhibition displayed photographs from the United States, Latin America, Europe and Asia. The works sent were landscapes, “animal studies”, portraits, colored-stereoscopic portraits, architectural photos, and

3 The Academy of San Carlos was the first academy of arts in Latin America. It was founded in 1781 during the viceregal period. See Charlot 1962, and Niell and Widdifield 2013.

chromolithographs. The Mexican representatives, headed by the photographic society of Antíoco Cruces and Luís Campa, won a diploma and a medal thanks to their “quality of photographic portraiture,” “technical and artistic excellence” and the genre represented (Massé Zendejas 1988, 32). This recognition on behalf of the exhibition’s organizers consolidated the photographic studio’s national prestige.

The reviews of the time tried to convey to the public:

[...] the portraits that these distinguished artists have brought to the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition are an honor for Mexico [...]. They are the first evidence of the special process of Mr. Cruces and Mr. Campa, who isolate the figure against the background, bestowing an admirable vagueness upon it, which exalts the person in a singular fashion, immediately calling the observer’s gaze towards the figure’s bust (*La Colonia Española* 1876, n.p.).

Other photographs on display were images of architecture and railroads, given that the objective was to illustrate the country’s modern elements as ‘works of engineering,’ fundamental to engage economic investment. The studio of Cruces and Campa was active in Mexico City from 1862 to 1877; it became popular among Mexican society thanks to the photographic *carte de visite*, characterized by the constructed scenario in which the subjects posed. Their photographs displayed a clear interest in modernity, which was equal to the interest in exploring different components of Mexican society and then portraying them in an international event, aligned with the organizers’ proposal to *democratize* art and place it at the service of society. By the early 1870s, *carte de visite* photographs remarked the integration of the ‘popular types’ that would ultimately give rise to a series of stereotypes about Mexico (see Debroise 2001). For example, these images represented trade activities of both men and women: policemen, soldiers, vendors of tamales, candles, pulque, fruit, etc., who all appeared carrying out their labor with their work tools, while the curtains in the background denote—and symbolically reconstruct—the social environment.

As Patricia Massé explains, these photographs consolidated a *costumbrista* visual project that “reflects the desire for order and social security in a country that is establishing itself as an independent republic” (Massé Zendejas 1988, 121-122). These images adjust the physical traits of the subject to social aspects linked with economic power, in such a way that this format serves as a legitimizing medium and a form of representation that adheres to an internationally accepted and disseminated canon.⁴ However, as Olivier Debroise has mentioned, understanding the country does not require merely a “panoramic” vision, as Cruces and Campa attempted “in following the tradition of the *casta* paintings of the 18th century”; what was really needed was a more profound explanation of social and ethnic differences (Debroise 1994, 164). Therefore, the very fact of displaying this kind of photograph served as an exercise

4 The construction of Mexican identities and their visual representations defined the literature, painting and photography of the era. The *costumbrismo* genre was used to establish popular stereotypes and determined the control and circulation of these images. For the Philadelphia exhibition, the photographs were conceived of as part of a national imaginary in an international context.

of “documentation, classification, typology, and recognition” of society, which would ultimately compile certain symbolic attributes that would shape the nation (Uslenghi 2016, 87-88).

Among the photographs sent to Philadelphia, feminine ‘popular types’ were privileged such a cultural agency, denoting the need to construct new models “that would respond to the demands of a newly founded country that sought to articulate, through literature and visual



Fig. 5: Cruces y Campa, *Mujer de Mérida*, ca. 1870, The Charles Hunt Collection of Cruces y Campa Mexican Occupations, The Latin American Library, Tulane University.

works, its own image, singular and distinct” (Velázquez Guadarrama 2018, 222) (fig. 5). *Woman from Mérida* visually represents both the woman’s place of origin as well as regional diversity; while *Young fruit vendors* recreated—with a documentary intention—an urban environment that conveys exoticism’s appropriation of resources, as well as the coexistence and opposition of two economic systems (Uslenghi 2016, 87-88). Thus, the ‘Mexican types’ portrayed by Cruces and Campa offered a panoramic image to the outside world of a process of economic transformation that the country desired to put on display at the time and was also accompanied by the mass circulation of images.

In the same sense, a book by Antonio García Cubas was exhibited in the scientific section, *The Republic of Mexico in 1876. A Political and Ethnographical Division of the Population, Character, Habits, Costumes and Vocations of its Inhabitants*, which was created specifically for the Centennial Exhibition. The objective of this English-language book was to clarify the ideas about Mexico, as well as to narrate the real situation of the country, above all in terms of its natural resources. *The Republic of Mexico in 1876* put forth a cul-

tural panorama of the country; it included a two-page map, as well as colored images and statistical information. The lithographs, signed by “Debray and Co.”, dialogued with the exhibition spaces of the photographs of Cruces and Campa, given that both presented a visual and scientific sample of Mexico’s different social sectors. These representations contributed to the consolidation of a narrative of the country, since it was important to present evidence of an enduring peacemaking process, despite the Tuxtepec rebellion headed by Porfirio Díaz that was taking place at that time.

The images in the book by García Cubas portrayed different groups of people in daily-life activities: the upper class walking through the cobblestone streets of Mexico City and attending mass, while the middle class of a different region—perhaps Veracruz—is transported by boat while listening to music (figs. 6 and 7). In another picture which illustrates three *costumbrista* scenes, we see an elegant and aristocratic dance: a room with a *charro* and a *china poblana*, accompanied by another couple who is dancing the ‘Mexican hat dance’ from Jalisco (in Spanish, the *jarabe tapatío*). In this image of peace and progress, both García Cubas and



Fig. 6 and 7: Victor Debray, illustrator, Antonio García Cubas, *The Republic of Mexico in 1876. A Political and Ethnographical Division of the Population, Character, Habits, Costumes and Vocations of its Inhabitants*. Mexico: "La Enseñanza" Printing Office, 1876, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

the illustrator, Victor Debray, seemingly intended to illustrate the indigenous diversity of the country—though slightly idealized—and portrayed the typological inhabitants in the traditional clothing of their regions. In these cases, the aim was to create a thorough awareness of the national territory while also highlighting the hegemonic significance of a central government. Furthermore, an image was constructed of a nation of history—conscious of its own identity—but simultaneously, and perhaps more importantly, “open to expansion and progress” (Ramírez 2004, 290; Carrera 2011). Finally, the images were widely distributed—considered appropriate for international consumption—while also illustrating the cultural wealth of the country.

Conclusion

The cultural and artistic politics of the world's fairs at the end of the 19th century can be analyzed from a decolonial perspective. The nations of Latin America sought to be seen as similar to the 'modern' colonial powers: France, Great Britain and the United States. In order to achieve this, Mexico in 1876 imported models of 'modern civilization,' creating a unique combination of cosmopolitan and local strategies that were used to favorably reassess Mexican artistic and cultural production. Thus, Mexico's participation in the world's fairs is evidence of its first attempts at international recognition and the construction of a national identity. The study of Latin American pavilions shows the need to focus the debate around the fairs on the inclusion, but also the rupture, of dominant cultural expression, which demonstrate an internal colonialism within the Americas.

In its own context, the Philadelphia Exhibition in 1876 served to promote national unity after the United States Civil War while simultaneously establishing a very particular narrative that demonstrated the clear interest of Latin American countries to distinguish themselves from Europe. For example, Brazil presented a "carefully crafted self-portrait based in nature and raw material, and buttressed by photographs and paintings featuring picturesque views of ports and coastlines, inland mountains, and the mighty Amazon" (Manthorne 2014, 178). At the same time, the great contribution of the Centennial Exhibition was to visualize the remaining abstract idea of progress through a symbolic practice. For the organizers, art played a central role since the intention was to position not only art production in the United States, but also the "national painting schools" of Latin America, in addition to conveying a Pan-American front where Mexico played an essential role.

The Mexican section in Philadelphia set the parameters for national participation in these events abroad. Through a huge variety of natural resources, works of art, and scientific objects, Porfirio Díaz's government took advantage of this concept of Mexico held by other countries, initially conceived by President Lerdo de Tejada. After Philadelphia, and before the end of the 19th century, Mexico was included in the Cotton Centennial Exhibition in New Orleans (1884-1885) and the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893). However, with the intention of broadening the international relations, the Mexican government—years before going to France— also decided to participate international events such as the South American Continental Exhibition in Buenos Aires (1882) and the Great Industrial Exhibition of Berlin (1896). In these spaces, based on the formula carried out by the Mexican commissioners in Philadelphia, priority was given to illustrations and photographs that visually represented the 'exotic' and national resources too.

Mexico's participation in the international scene served to draw attention to the possibilities of development—as in Brazil—for the establishment of new markets and strategic alliances that would be central to Porfirio Díaz's government. It is crucial that the United States were a fertile ground for experimentation to carry out strategies and forms of national promotion, initially conceived of as a way of obtaining international acknowledgement.

As I pointed out, the United States displayed strategies on peace and stability when allowing countries like Mexico and Brazil, which were ‘in the margins’ to begin participating in this ‘productive peace’ based on economics. Thus, we can develop a transnational perspective here: in a “global exhibitionary network” (Filipová 2015, 15); the United States took advantage of the circumstances as a kind of *ethnographic display* in which Western moral superiority was used to exemplify or illustrate its own allegory of peace. The Mexican government carried out an *appropriation practice* that it presented in an international arena. In this sense, the exhibitions were platforms that fostered the transnational construction of nations, and the Mexican pavilion was no exception. The *Kunstgeographie* also determines the artistic-cultural exchange and the dissemination of concepts and forms of mobility. Therefore, a new map of artistic geography could establish the parameters for the circulation, dissemination and reception of artistic ideas (Da Costa Kaufmann 2004, 85).

In the end, the objective for Latin American countries was to “bring into coexistence, finally, the mythical—although violent—past and the optimal, pacific present, charged with a triumphant future” (Tenorio Trillo 2018, 97, 217). In the complex relationship—and shared history—with the United States, it was common that the Latin American countries sought to promote the image of a flourishing modern nation.

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