Art as Cultural Diplomacy: The Politics of Exhibiting Mexico's Revolutionary Modernism in MEXIQUE 1900-1950: Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, José Clemente Orozco et les avant-gardes

This winter's exhibit at the Grand Palais, *MEXIQUE 1900-1950: Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, José Clemente Orozco et les avant-gardes*, was conceived as part of a broader effort to strengthen diplomatic relations between Mexico and France. A high profile court battle in Mexico involving a French citizen who was found guilty of human trafficking without a fair trial created a diplomatic rift between the two nations in 2008.[1] Despite facing considerable pressure from the French government, the court battle dragged on for several years, prompting France to cancel an annual festival dedicated to promoting commercial and cultural relations between the two nations in 2011.[2] Florence Cassez was finally released under a new government administration eager to sign more trade agreements with the European nation. As a symbolic gesture of political rapprochement, the idea of the exhibit first emerged in a conversation between Enrique Peña Nieto and François Hollande during the Mexican president's state visit to France in the summer of 2015.[3]

Seeking to counteract negative images of Mexico in the French media, the exhibit recalls a period in Franco-Mexican cultural relations that was once characterized by intellectual exchange and artistic cross-fertilization. In other words, by emphasizing not only how Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo played a vital role in the Parisian avant-garde of the early twentieth-century, but moreover, how André Bréton and Antonin Artaud turned to Mexico as a space of aesthetic and revolutionary promise, it offers a countervailing image of the Mesoamerican nation. Advertised as the largest retrospective of modern Mexican art ever on display abroad, the exhibit signals an act of cultural diplomacy that aims to make Mexico once again attractive in the eyes of a wary French public.

As its title suggests, the exhibit displays some of the most important works by Mexican artists of the first half of the twentieth-century. By situating their works in a dialogue about the relation between local and global revolutionary movements, it seeks to reveal Mexico's vital role in the history of twentieth-century marxisms. Similarly, by comparing the nationalist aspirations of Mexican artists

with the cosmopolitan concerns of the European avant-garde, it aims to highlight the nation's unique contributions in the development of modern art. Finally, by exploring how each artist helps articulate a new concept of Mexican identity, the exhibit seeks to valorize their role not only as cultural agents, but moreover, as political actors. Emphasizing both the continuities and discontinuities in modern Mexican art, the exhibit represents its history with an eye both toward its past and present manifestations. Given that the exhibit's curator formerly served as the director of Mexico's National Museum of Art (MONAL)—an institution that endeavors to preserve and display the nation's visual art from the 16th to the 20th century—its chronological approach to Mexican modernism is perhaps not altogether surprising.[4]

The exhibit begins by presenting viewers with a vision of the nation's socioeconomic and aesthetic landscape prior to its revolution. By strategically displaying two contrasting works of art at its entrance—Tiburcio Sánchez' *Escandón Arango Family Portrait* (1867) and José María Jara's *The Wake* (1889)—the exhibit introduces viewers to competing facets of nineteenth-century Mexico. On the one hand, Sánchez extols a prominent family's status by depicting bourgeois children posing before their parents' country estate, thus demonstrating how it passes down its wealth from generation to generation. On the other, Jara casts a critical light on Mexico's oligarchic vision of progress by depicting a destitute family mourning the premature death of a child, giving viewers the impression that his passing was the result of their dire economic conditions. Located across from one another, Sánchez' *Family Portrait* and Jara's *The Wake* offer contrasting images of a nation plagued by deep ethnic and socioeconomic divisions. Yet they also reflect Mexico's ambivalent relation to nineteenth-century aesthetic and cultural models. Sánchez completes his portrait of patrician prosperity the same year Juárez overthrows French imperial rule (1867) and Jara's visual rendition of childhood death coincides with a new era of industrial capitalism ushered in by Porfirio Díaz (1889)—an autocratic leader with an affinity for French fashion styles and social mores. Perhaps in an effort to give viewers a sense of the European aesthetic models that Mexican modernists such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and José Clemente Orozco inherit, the exhibit sets the stage for a greater appreciation of the radical nature of their artistic projects.

The exhibit subsequently situates Diego Rivera's trajectory in a continuum that moves from an initial fascination with the European avant-garde toward a more politicized understanding of modern art. By displaying examples of some of his earliest works during his decade-long residence in Paris (1910-1920), it examines how Rivera turns to a social realist vision only after first experimenting with impressionism and cubism. Perhaps no other work on display at the Grand Palais indicates the

intermediary nature of Rivera's artistic production during this period than his *Zapatista Landscape* (1915). Indicating a concern for political developments in his homeland even from a distance, it offers an assemblage of symbols associated with the Zapatista rebellion in southern Mexico over a mountainous landscape. On the one hand, its *sarape* and *sombrero* recall the humble origins of the Zapatista soldiers as peasant farmers with roots in the agrarian communities of southern Mexico. On the other, its rifle and bullet cartridge convey their agency as political actors resolved to alter the course of Mexican history through armed struggle. Simultaneously offering an image of timeless tradition and revolutionary modernity through an assemblage of distinctly Mexican referents and symbols, *Zapatista Landscape* reveals how Rivera pushes the boundaries of abstract art in new directions.

Just as the exhibit considers Rivera's complex relation to the European avant-garde, so, too, does it compare his work with the competing social realist experiments of his fellow countrymen: José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Viewed together as the three great muralists of the Mexican Revolution, the exhibit highlights their differences even though it does so at the risk of oversimplifying some of the inherent tensions and contradictions within their works. Whereas Rivera is depicted as enacting an optimistic vision of Mexico's future as a socialist utopia, Orozco is viewed as articulating a more critical and tragic vision of its revolution's consequences. And whereas Orozco and Rivera are depicted as using a Marxist visual vocabulary for nationally circumscribed purposes, Siqueiros is viewed as exploring Mexico's class struggle in the context of an international workers' movement. However, as art historian Mary Coffey argues, Siqueiros, Orozco and Rivera not only forged distinct revolutionary paths in their works—they engaged in heated debates about the revolutionary nature of public art and competed with one another for government-sponsored projects.[5] Had the exhibit given viewers a more vivid sense of the bitter tensions, conflicts and controversies that defined their relation to one another during their lifetime, it might have offered a more critical understanding of the political function of public art in post-revolutionary Mexico. How does each artist reconcile his distinct revolutionary vision with subsequent government administrations that hired all of them not so much to promote socialist ideals but rather, to bolster its tourist industry and attract foreign investment? Given that the idea of the exhibit emerged out of a desire to restore Franco-Mexican diplomatic relations, an in depth exploration of each artist's complex relation to the Mexican state might have given viewers a more critical understanding of the uses of revolutionary art to pursue neoliberal economic agendas—both past and present.

Perhaps the exhibit's greatest strength lies in its emphasis on the vital role of female artists. By

displaying an unprecedented range of female artists, it highlights their significant role in redefining Mexican national identity. Moreover, by critically exploring the role of gendered tropes in its national cinema, the exhibit explores how the possibilities of women are circumscribed in the imagination of spectators despite having made considerable gains during the decade of armed struggle. It first does so by highlighting the work of lesser known female artists such as Olga Costa, María Izquierdo and Nahui Olin. For example, even as it acknowledges Frida Kahlo's significance as a pioneering artist by displaying works such as *The Two Fridas* (1939) and *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) in a feminist light, the exhibit demonstrates how Olga Costa contributed to a multi-ethnic understanding of Mexican national identity through her innovative representation of female subjects in *The Fruit Vendor* (1951). By depicting a female street vendor selling a diverse range of tropical fruit, the artist metaphorically celebrates the nation's regional and ethnic diversity, on the one hand, and highlights the growing role of women in the informal sector of the nation's economy, on the other. In other words, even as it celebrates the regional and ethnic diversity of the nation, Costa's representation of gendered labor can be viewed as a veiled critique of the limited possibilities of women in the post-revolutionary work force.

Whereas the exhibit challenges patriarchal understandings of Mexican modernism by including a wide range of female artists, it demonstrates how prevailing gender norms are reinforced after the revolution through its critical exploration of female characters in the country's emerging film industry from the 1940s to the 1950s. By demonstrating how traditional female tropes are both recycled and reconfigured in Mexico's golden age cinema (e.g., the Madonna versus the whore, the chaste versus the fallen woman), the exhibit prompts us to consider how the possibilities of women are curtailed in the imagination of viewers despite their vital role as breadwinners and soldiers during the decade of armed struggle (1910-1920).

Yet even as it puts on display a wide range of works by female artists, the Grand Palais exhibit does not give all of them their needed contextualization. Despite depicting Frida Kahlo as a pioneering artist by situating some of her major works in a feminist context, it does not devote Tina Modotti's photography a similar degree of curatorial emphasis. For example, in its display of some of her most celebrated works such as *Workers' Parade* (1926) and *Stadium* (1927), one gets the impression that they were hastily included rather than thoughtfully placed in relation to the rest of the collection. A more careful display of Modotti's work that highlights how she captured the rapid technological transformations taking place around her in post-revolutionary Mexico as cultural critic Rubén Gallo has shown, would have offered viewers a greater appreciation of the path breaking nature of her

photography.[6]

The exhibit draws to a close by considering Mexican modernism's legacies beyond its initial timeframe (1900-1950). By demonstrating how artists such as Miguel Covarrubias, Rufino Tamayo and Mathias Goeritz break with the social realist models of their revolutionary forebears, the exhibit explores how a new generation of artists redefines Mexican art in tandem with the cosmopolitan aspirations of the country in an age of unprecedented economic prosperity. Seeking to explore some of the less overtly political manifestations of twentieth-century Mexican art, the exhibit considers competing models of understanding the nation's aesthetic modernity. For example, by displaying some of Covarrubias' cartoons of totalitarian leaders during his tenure as an editor for *Vogue* in the 1940s, the exhibit demonstrates how even commercial art can carry an unacknowledged yet effective political message. Similarly, by contrasting Tamayo's abstract renderings of Mexican culture with Orozco's social realist approach, the exhibit prompts viewers to compare the universalist aspirations of the former with the particularistic concerns of the latter. Finally, by displaying a miniature model of Luis Barragán and Mathias Goeritz' *Towers of Satellite City* (1958), the exhibit indicates a turning point in Mexican modernism. Rather than hark back at the nation's revolutionary past, Barragán and Goeritz' *Towers of Satellite City* projects an image of global modernity by erecting five building blocks between two highways to indicate the entrance of a newly built suburb.

Casting a long shadow over this period of unprecedented economic prosperity, the Mexican government's violent suppression of a student demonstration that called into question its carefully orchestrated image of a developed nation for the 1968 Mexico City Olympics is perhaps not given its rightful place in the last segment of the exhibit. In other words, even though the exhibit makes reference to the 1968 student massacre, it does not stress its significance in the same way it does so for the Mexican Revolution at the beginning. As art historian Luis Castañeda recently demonstrates, the Mexican government commissioned a series of architectural and design projects in order to establish an image of Mexico as a developed nation for the 1968 Summer Olympics. The student demonstration in Tlatelolco Square threatened to undermine its image of a united and prosperous nation by suggesting that it was a façade that concealed its class and ethnic divisions through their appeals for social and economic justice.[7]

A more sustained exploration of the impact of the 1968 Student Massacre in the visual arts during its last segment would have given the exhibit not only a greater thematic unity—it might have offered the French public an opportunity to engage with the country's recent past in a more meaningful

manner. What are some of the manifestations of the 1968 Student Massacre in literature and art? Similarly, just as some Mexican artists opt for less overtly political artistic models, how do others turn to critical depictions of their nation's authoritarian and repressive government apparatus? Finally, how do contemporary artists understand art as a transformative practice of civic engagement and collective remembrance in light of the nation's more recent tragedies such as the disappearance of the 43 students from the Ayotzinapa rural college? Even though these questions go beyond the bounds of an exhibit conceived to commemorate France and Mexico's political rapprochement, they remain crucial for a deeper understanding of the nation's complex relation to discourses of development in the previous—and present—century.

1. Florence Cassez was sentenced to ninety-six years in prison in 2008 for charges of torture and human trafficking in collusion with her Mexican boyfriend who was a leader of a prominent organized crime group. Her court battle became a cause célèbre in France and helped create a negative image of the Mexican legal system in the French media during those years. After considerable pressure from the French government and a new Mexican administration seeking to cultivate closer economic ties with France, she was released from prison in 2013. ↑
2. Each year the French government holds a festival dedicated to promoting cultural and economic relations with a different country. Even though 2011 had previously been designated as "L'Année du Méxique" (The Year of Mexico), the festival was cancelled at the last minute due to escalating diplomatic tensions between the two nations as a result of the Florence Cassez trial. ↑
3. For a brief overview on how the idea for the exhibit first emerged, see Álex Vicente's review in *El País*, "La cara oculta del arte mexicano." cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2016/10/02/actualidad/1475422771_522970.html?id_externo_rsoc=FB_MX_CM. The trip turned out to be a public relations disaster for the Mexican president. While he was on his way to France, Mexico's most notorious drug lord made a dramatic escape from the nation's highest security prison, shifting the national and international media's attention away from his visit and casting a spell of doubt over his administration's ability and willingness to hold in check the growing power of organized crime groups.↑
4. Agustín Arteaga was the director of the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City between 2013 and 2016 and currently heads the Dallas Museum of Art. ↑
5. *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. 1-24. 25-77. 179-193. ↑
6. *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-garde and the Technological Revolution.* Boston: MIT Press, 2010. 1-30. 31-67. ↑

7. *Spectacular Mexico: Design, Propaganda and the 1968 Olympics.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

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Luis Ramos joined the Liberal Studies Program at NYU in the Fall of 2011 after earning his PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley. His research and teaching interests include: Exile, Diaspora and Migration Studies; Early Modern Travel Narratives; Latin American Intellectual History; and Enlightenment Political Thought in Italy, Spain and the Americas. His current book project, *The Poetics of Independence: Jesuit Historiography and Insurgent Political Thought in Spanish America, 1767-1810*, demonstrates how creole clerics from Spain's New World empire created the conditions for future authors to imagine their homelands as a community of sovereign nations.