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*Beneath*

## BEYOND THE SIGN OF "OTHERNESS"

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### 1. *Universal Points of View: Philosophy and Culture*

Part of the approach of this paper was conceived, perhaps, under the light of Octavio Paz's writings *Los privilegios de la vista* (1978). An artist himself, he distinguished three "constituent characteristics of Mesoamerican civilization", namely: originality, isolation, and "otherness". Moreover, he applied the concept of "expression" to Mesoamerican art:

what it says is said with such a concentrated energy that that saying is always expressive... A Maya deity covered by attributes and signs is not a sculpture that we can read as a text, but a sculpture/text. Fusion of reading and contemplation, two dissociated acts in Occident (Paz, 1978: 50).

There is no doubt about the many values implied in the æsthetic expressions of humankind. Artists perpetuate and transmit cultural values throughout the work of art, and create something original and revealer. Art reveals the way in which societies perceive, understand, and explain their world. Through art humankind shapes the Universe; this is translated into a language harmonically constructed of materials, spaces, forms, lines, colors, textures, proportions, images plentiful of symbols and meanings. All over the world, museums offer a great amount of such expressions: painting, sculpture, metallurgy, architecture and so forth.

In the same way, works of art are extraordinary media to know cultural developments, whether of an epoch or a region. They allow a deeper approach to humankind, of its restlessness dealing with origin and destiny, with nature and gods. This is also true, and most important, when we lack written sources to approach human past. The principal vehicle to interpret a culture, its origins, evolution, influences, decay and collapse, is the comprehension of those artistic expressions that endure into our times. (1)

This is particularly clear in the case of pre-Columbian art. We also face here a crucial difference: it falls apart from Western canons. My intention is to offer a summary of some opinions about Mexican conception of Mesoamerican art, aiming to find out the differences between West and Non West. To date we consider it art, but the path of comprehension has been long and troubled. I think one reason deals with several predominant ideologies born at the main centers of political power or of artistic production: Spain, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and recently the United States. This assertion includes approximately the time span between XVIth and XXth centuries.

## 2. *Initial and Long Steps*

The oldest origins of such comprehension go back to the XVIth century, when soldiers and friars expressed their opinions about Indian societies and their cultural achievements. At the same time two main routes for the proper understanding of pre-Columbian art born: one of acceptance and one of rejection. Similarities, obviously, were accepted, namely artistic forms close to naturalism, to "beauty", but those that differ did not have the same luck, I mean that of unintelligible, confusing or "monstrous" forms (2) (3)



Renaissance postulated a new address to understand the world. Human being occupied the center of attention and there was a reevaluation of the legacy of Classic Greece and Rome —including their pagan gods and their naked images—. At the same time, it was an aim to suppress differences that seemed to deny the unity of humankind. In the field of arts, definitions took base upon *Scienza Nuova*, and thus become the characterization of "noble arts": architecture, sculpture, painting, and music. It is important to remind that naturalism in Renaissance sculpture and painting was one of the most pursued purposes.

On the other hand, the New World puzzled refined Europe. News arrived of almost naked inhabitants but of social and urban life plenty of complexity —almost as Europe herself—. Those men worshipped "Satan and his cohorts" with assassin, bloody rituals, and under any circumstance they cut their flesh to pour blood. Nevertheless they were capable of creating magnificent works and crafts; they also have "languages to sing divinely" chants replenished of beautiful metaphors.

This background can explain that European conquerors thought contradictorily about the whole panorama of Indian works of art. On the one hand, architecture, metal and feather works received laudatory commentaries due to the beauty of forms; as well as proportions and firmness of buildings, the magnificence represented by the jewels sculpted in fine stones or cast in metals, and the virtuosity of many objects in feather mosaic. Paradoxically, sculpture and painting were condemned to silence and repudiation; they were even seen with open horror as "things of Satan". It is enough to read the *Cartas de relación* of Hernán Cortés, or the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* of Bernal Díaz. Through their pages we appreciate the first amazement about the *rei publicæ* and



harmony in which Indians lived, expressed in several levels of emotion and appreciation; at the same time these qualifications completely oppose to the values assigned to the artistic works, and consequently reject them.

Nevertheless, let us bring to mind the only enthusiastic description by Albrecht Dürer, written in 1520 at Brussels.

American works of art were welcome, but other factors intervened, particularly the dreadful question about the "humankind of Indians". Were they children of God, rational beings with soul? Why did they kill their akin and, at the same time, have the capability of making art? Theologically they were granted "humankind", but their æsthetic production was condemned during almost three centuries. No matter some works caused admiration, or perhaps astonishment, most of them were rejected.

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During XVIIth century there were few intentions to understand American art and its authors. I must point out that the general feeling about Indians moved from the "diabolical wild man" to the "tamed, idyllic wild man", as we can see in Theodor de Bry's engravings. Therefore, the "barbaric Indian" became not only tamed but also worthy of inclusion into the History of Christianity; his own history was remembered as heroic gests, and Mesoamerican past evolved to one of the foundations of nationalism. Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora exemplifies in New Spain this change of thinking when in 1628 the City of Mexico erected a "triumphal arch" to welcome Viceroy Earl De Paredes: there appeared Mexica rulers and their god Huitzilopochtli (Fernández, 1972: 37). The art remained in obscurity.

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A series of linked events occurred in XVIIIth century, dealing with the discovery of Pre Hispanic monuments. On the one hand, among 1750 and 1770 the ruins of Palenque were discovered, in 1790 two Mexica sculptures saw the

light; in 1791 and 1792 Xochicalco and Tajín also were discovered. On the other, Jesuit Order was banished from Spanish domains in 1767. Consequently, pre-Columbian past and art were discussed and studied with renewed intensity.

For example, Ramón de Ordóñez y Aguiar, ecclesiastic of Ciudad Real de Chiapa, wrote the *Historia de la creación del cielo y de la tierra conforme al sistema de la gentilidad americana*, after ten years of research inscribed into the spirit of Enlightenment. He wanted to study the ruins and to learn who lived in it (De la Fuente, 1965: 69-72; De la Fuente and Schávelzon, 1976: 149). To Ordóñez, Carthage founded Palenque, however the stucco reliefs showed Greco-Roman influence as well as hieroglyphs from Egypt; even more, most of the peoples of Ancient Near East had left evidence of visiting Palenque. Hence, Ordóñez denied the Maya roots of Palenque, idea followed by several explorers, among them José Antonio Calderón, Antonio Bernasconi, Antonio del Río and Ricardo Almendáriz. To all of them, Maya art was an import of Near Ancient East. (10)

In 1790 the vicerojal government ordered to repair the paved-stone streets of the Plaza Mayor at Mexico City; workmen found the colossal statues of Coatlicue, the Piedra del Sol (Stone of the Sun or Aztec Calendar), and the Piedra de Tízoc (Stone of Tízoc). One year later José Antonio de Alzate published the *Descripción de las antigüedades de Xochicalco*, and the following one Antonio de León y Gama published the *Descripción* <sup>histórica y cronológica</sup> *de las dos piedras* (1792), that is to say Coatlicue and the Piedra del Sol. Both texts glorified the skill of ancient Mexicans to built magnificent buildings and cover them with impressive polychrome reliefs, and to carve in striking manner basalt stone. (11)

It is worth to add that in the very same century the feeling of difference between "Gachupines" or Spain-born people, and Americans or New Spain-born (12)



people was increasingly deep. In such a way, archaeological discoveries made clear that there was a close past in which to find the roots of a new spirit of identity. Works of art clearly spoke of it.

Jesuits in exile also did it, as recorded by friar Pedro José Márquez in his book *Due antichi monumenti di architettura messicana*, published in Rome in 1804 (Gutiérrez, 1988: 178). Father Márquez, dilettante on Greek and Roman archaeology, called attention to Europe that in Mexico flourished ancient civilizations, attested by the ruins of numerous cities, great buildings, exquisite mural paintings, sculptures and several artistic objects. He elevated Pre Hispanic art at the same heights that Greece's.

I must remark the effort obtained by the two priests, who made a hit in the appreciation of Mesoamerican art. Indeed, their asserts founded a new comprehension far beyond the rejection, for they willingly compared it with the Old World civilizations. However, Platonic conceptions on beauty, its goodness, true, and origin supported by "natural reason" pervaded their ideas. This was another battle suffered by pre-Columbian art until the first half of XXth century.

As a result, in the first decades of XIXth century the new Mexican Republic attested the arrival of many personages coming from the Old World, motivated by several interests. One of these was to know the then famous ruins of the ancient civilizations that flourished before the Conquest. It was also the epoch when the *Wunderkammern*, *Naturalia* and *Artificialia* grew at European courts. Kings and noblemen disposed rooms at their palaces to store a great diversity of cultural objects, as "*chinoisseries*", and some coming from America. (13)

If XVIth century Europe enjoyed pre-Columbian art, in XIXth century it was considered "exotic", "primitive", and even "barbarian". Of course its meanings



remained hidden to Western eyes; there were neither explanations nor comprehension of who, when, how and why developed such cultures and their artistic manifestations. For they broke the European canons, and understanding became useless. America saw many visitors, some of them with the simple desire of satisfy their curiosity, some in the eagerness to provide *Wunderkammern* and *Artificialia*; others, to investigate.

One of the most famous visitors was Alexander von Humboldt. Through several years he stayed at America, collecting many data for his grand task book *Kosmos*. Part of those data appeared at Paris: the *Relation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (three volumes, 1814-1825), and *Vue des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (1816) (cf. Zea and Magallón, 1999: *passim*). Thanks to them, Europe became aware of Palenque, Teotihuacán and Xochicalco. Let us remind that Von Humboldt was the first one to differentiate Mayas and Mexicas, based upon the style of painted codexes. Furthermore, Von Humboldt said that Coatlicue could compare to Greek statuary. Few years later, in 1831 Lord Edward King, Viscount of Kingsborough, published in London nine elegant volumes called *Antiquities of Mexico* (De la Fuente and Schávelzon, 1976: 149). 14

Western world, therefore, disposed to accept ancient America; and has not stopped since then to look at Mesoamerican art inquisitively. Efforts of explanation and comprehension turned once again to the disjunction West-Non West, Art-Non Art, no matter the Renaissance precedents. Therefore there were discussions that favored one conception or another.

We can cite numerous examples, but let us bring forth John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood. Both in *Incidents of travel in Central America*,

*Chiapas, and Yucatán* (1841), and *Incidents of travel in Yucatan* (1843) they argue that pre-Columbian civilizations were autochthonous, original, as demonstrated by the Mayas. Furthermore, Maya art redeemed the whole Pre Hispanic civilizations and art, and gave guide lines of approximation to the present. America was not savage. They also established the belief, as I have heard, of a current certainty of some North Americans to believe themselves direct heirs of the Classic Mayas. |

Ironically, XIXth century Mexican scholars kept strong ties with Academies following the models of Europe. In 1825 President Guadalupe Victoria ordered the creation of the Museo Nacional at the University; yet it had to wait until 1831 to exist. *A few years later* (1843), the Academia de San Carlos was reorganized. The political circumstances prevent the settling of the aforementioned points of view. The years 1846-1848 and 1862-1867 saw Mexico involved in two wars, respectively against the United States—including the lost of Arizona, California, Nuevo Mexico and Texas—and France.

During the government of President Benito Juárez, political and cultural atmospheres tried to create a sense of national unity against the invaders and their own cultures. Its characteristic was a pursuit of emblems that unified the whole country, rather as an emotional defensive project than as a clear identification of national feeling. The logical path was at hand throughout Mesoamerican past and art, and the State provided it: Mexican art—actually Mexica art— became the pivotal emblem of the desired feeling of nationality. In addition, it is also pertinent to note that Emperor Maximilian tried to revive the National Museum; he provided the apartments of the Casa de Moneda. This situation was maintained during the government of President Porfirio Díaz.

### 3. *Mexican Evolution of pre-Columbian Art at the end of XIXth Century.*



Under the government of Díaz, the revaluation of pre-Columbian past became an important task. For example, Mexico's Pavilion at the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1889, represented characteristics of Indian monuments. Architecturally the Pyramid of Feathered Serpents at Xochicalco —considered Aztec— and many buildings at Mitla served as source of motives. The exterior walls displayed modern bronze reliefs of Mexica gods and goddesses as well as "heroes": Cuitláhuac, Cacama, Netzahualcóyotl, Cuauhtémoc. The whole conception answered the nationalist and centralist zeal of Antonio Peñafiel and Alfredo Chavero, as represented by Aztec culture (Ramírez, 1988: *passim*), to which we now refer to as Mexica.

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I dare to sustain here that Aztec culture became a model. Ruins and monuments found at Mitla, Tajín, Tula, Teotihuacán, Xochicalco, Tenochtitlán and many sites were considered "Mexicans"; better said "Toltecs or Teotihuacanos". All formed a cultural group, far from bloody rituals, that became one of the main obstacles to understand Mexica aesthetics. Those were also the noble precedents of Aztec culture. By the way, Mayas were a clearly different and little known civilization.

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It is on purpose to remind that Alfredo Chavero, according to the State ideology, thought of Mesoamerican art—including architecture, sculpture, painting, and ceramics— looking for reveal the whole panorama of ancient civilizations. Hence, ancient art became solidly accepted. It received a new impulse during the first decades of XXth century. I will refer briefly to some examples.

#### 4. *The Astonishment of "Otherness" among Mexicans.*

One was the addition of Pre Hispanic motives in the Palacio de Bellas Artes. As part of the celebrations of the first centennial of Independence War,

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President Díaz wanted to inaugurate a new National Theater. According to the eclectic *Art Nouveau*, Adamo Boari included several ornaments motivated on Mesoamerican cultures; among them serpents, masks and, mainly, a modern interpretation of the head of the Caballero Águila (Eagle Warrior) (1910).

Another one was the appropriation and transformation of Pre Hispanic legends and symbols, together with those of Colonial past. As part of a personal æsthetic language, and also as a research, Saturnino Herrán painted several *panneaux décoratives*. He depicted not only the striking contrasts of daily life in modern Mexico, yet he took advantage in incorporating the above mentioned symbols. One of his greatest *panneaux* is "Nuestros dioses" (Our gods) (1915), in which central section Herrán masterly and insightfully merged the images of Crucified Christ and of Old Mother Coatlicue. Many scholars have analyzed the complete *panneau*, and have expressed the extraordinary strength of the almost melted bodies of Coatlicue and Christ, but few —to my knowledge— have considered it as the most eloquent image of the birth of our nationalism. Modern Mexican artists (for example Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros) have glossed Herrán's works, as it happens for instance with "El tormento de Cuauhtémoc" (The torture of Cuauhtemoc) and "Cuauhtémoc redivivo" (Cuauhtemoc revived), both by Siqueiros.

After the battles of Revolution calmed down, the Mexican State searched for elements that recalled a feeling of national unity. Music, literature, architecture, painting, and sculpture developed different ways to denote it. Music and mural painting were the two main exponents.

In the music, Julián Carrillo, Manuel María Ponce, Carlos Chávez, and Silvestre Revueltas direct their attention to pursuit all that could be the roots for

Mexican identity. Each one reached his own purpose, and nowadays they symbolize the musical nationalism, whether in Mexico or in other countries. Examples go from several "sonido trece" (thirteen-sound) works by Carrillo to "Sinfonía India" (Indian Symphony) by Chávez and "La Noche de los Mayas" (The Nighth of the Mayas) by Revueltas. In addition, one composer wrote the music for a ballet named "Bonampak" after the discovery of the famous Maya murals, and another one composed "Imágenes del Quinto Sol" (Images of the Fifth Sun). Such ballets are contemporary reconstructions on stage of Mexican past. 34

Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco choose to depict Mesoamerican past from two utterly different points of view.

Rivera focused in agriculture, arts, religion and war, but conspicuously avoided the topic of human sacrifices. He idealized Pre Hispanic civilizations, and interpreted them with disregard of the bloody aspects. His murals account for such idealization. Rivera created the most amazing images of pre-Columbian past: those of an original world, organized and creative. In short: Rivera displayed that past as he wanted it to be, not as it was actually. 35  
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On his own, Orozco thought of Mesoamerican past as a closed entity, and perceived it under a dramatic sign of existence: violence, reflected in the extreme cruelty of human sacrifices. In a certain manner, Orozco's conception of pre-Columbian civilization was close to an apocalyptic vision, somber, brutal, censurable. 37  
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Both of them saw the Conquest and the Colonial period in different ways. Rivera considered Cortés a monster; New Spain was unworthy. In doing so, he denied one element of national identity. Orozco was more generous: Cortés and La Malinche were the origin of modern Mexico, even if its birth was also violent. 39  
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As can be noticed, nearby the end of XIXth century and the beginning of XXth century, Mexican intellectual milieu did not concern with defining the separation between West and Non West. As many Mexican thinkers and artists did —as well as the State—, the main affair was to delineate the elements of national feeling and identity through Mesoamerican past.

##### 5. *Towards a Philosophical Comprehension.*

Philosophy rendered another tendency of study. Alfonso Caso published in 1917 his "Ensayo de una clasificación de las artes" ("Essay on a Classification of Arts"). Caso arose his ideas from Kant's philosophy, and applied it to the analysis of Mexica art compared with written Colonial sources. He assembled artistic manifestations in three groups: visual (architecture, decorative, sculpture, painting), hearing (music and poetry) and visual-hearing (drama and dance). As a result he opened a new way to classify most of pre-Columbian works, as well as new focuses and possibilities in its study.

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During the 1920-1940 decades, analysis of art moved from expressive forms —that were ignored— to descriptions of specific examples, based upon historical data and methods. One reason was that Archaeology and Ethnology accomplished great advances in rescuing items, reconstructing and registering cultural facts.

In such circumstances, José Juan Tablada wrote his *Historia del arte en México (History of Art in Mexico)* (1927). Tablada contributed thus to the affirmation of Mexican art by its own right, for it was the time of improvement of art criterion and nationalism after the Mexican Revolution. <sup>His</sup> This study is devoted to all Mexican art, but when dealing with Pre Hispanic art, Tablada classified it as a totality. He was the very first modern Art Historian to grant real importance to

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Mesoamerican art. He described it in descending order: from painting (murals, codexes, and also feather works), sculpture, and architecture, to "minor arts": textiles, feather works, metal works, and ceramics. Tablada also denotes some characteristics of indigenous art: it is religious, ornamental, ritual, sophisticated, and reveals an expressive purpose. In short, Tablada's view deals <sup>in some way</sup> with actual aesthetics.

Eulalia Guzmán followed the steps of her predecessors and colleagues. She combined their ideas with her own and with the modern criterion of national renewal. In 1933 she published an extraordinary and crucial essay, "Caracteres fundamentales del arte antiguo mexicano. Su sentido fundamental" ("Fundamental Traits of Ancient Mexican Art. Its Fundamental Ways"). Among her many statements, she considered the cultural unity of Mesoamerica and argued of "beauty" in terms of "significant expression" or "meaningful forms". As Tablada, she spoke of the main features of pre-Columbian art: accentuated rhythm, repetition of motives, sophistication, ornamentalism, symbolism, religious and magical ways.

Some years later, in 1940, Edmundo O'Gorman set up a quite new path of comprehension. He wrote a brief but thoughtful article: "El arte o de la monstruosidad" ("The Art or on the Monstruosity"). Here he expressed the transforming necessity of art taken as "the clearest manifestation of actuality and strength of our mythical conscience". O'Gorman discuss topics as "the proper nature of what is called Ancient Mexican art", and settle its links with modern Western humankind. To achieve his purposes, O'Gorman records the difference between "simple meditation" and "critical-historical meditation". Consequently he suggests scholars to dismiss "one's selfness" (Occident) to understand

"strangeness" (pre-Columbian America). In his opinion, the first scrutiny must focus on the existence or nonexistence of the artistic aim of the studied object, but far away from Western conceptions. Only in this way a dialogue can be settled with ancient American cultures and their artistic manifestations.

No wonder that in this years Manuel Gamio founded the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia. This School displayed the awareness about fulfilling, in the academic fields, the quest for national identity.

All aforementioned data conform chapters in Mexico's history towards understanding Mesoamerican past. Accents fell upon economy and social structures as means of comprehension of artistic and ideological expressions. Moreover, religion, philosophy and originality marked the main path of æsthetic and historic analysis.

I must add a peculiarity of Mexico's history since Independence. Our country struggled between two paths: to bind or to free from the image presented by Europe as a cultural canon. In other words, challenges are "not being Occidental" or "being Occidental". Art talks of such situation. On the one hand, thinking of artistry of æsthetic expressions implies to accept or to reject a diverse artistic reality (*cf.* Manrique, 1977; O'Gorman, 1940). On the other, Mexico looks for and supports its own being through artistic manifestations. Acceptance of Mesoamerican art shows that the difference between West and Non West is old-fashioned.

## 6. *Walking Toward Origins.*

The fields of philosophy and literature were once again step on by Miguel León-Portilla and Justino Fernández.

León-Portilla used Colonial sources to investigate wisely the náhuatl concept of *toltecáyotl*, its importance to artistic creation and historical progress. His findings appeared in *La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes* (*Nahuatl Philosophy Analyzed in its Sources*) (1956) and the now revised *Quince poetas del mundo náhuatl* (*Fifteen Poets of Nahuatl World*) (1997). 426

Meanwhile Justino Fernández analyzed the *Estética del arte mexicano* (*Mexican Art Aesthetics*) (1958) from three models: Coatlicue, the Retablo de los Reyes at Mexico City's Cathedral, and Orozco's "El Hombre". His perspective undertook history and historiography, history of art and philosophy. Fernández retrieved not only the æsthetic meanings derived from the artistic prototypes he chose, but equally their merit as emblems of Mexican nationalism. 43

In recent years Miguel León-Portilla has been worried about the preservation of náhuatl literature as one variety of culture expression. At the UNAM, he leads a group of *nahuatlitos*, whose efforts transcend the recovering of ancient literary traditions. They have also bring forth the core of aboriginal thought interspersed with Colonial and Modern legacy (since Independence to date). I think that his attempts coincide with those of Manuel Gamio, related to the incorporation of indigenous people to the modern State but keeping alive their civilization.

Another instance of the previous effort comes from the study of modern religion, rituals, languages, and urban and farmland groups, as well as their links and transformations. Pioneer works of several scholars, for example Roberto Williams (at Veracruz), Alfonso Villa Rojas (related to the Mayas), and Félix Báez-Jorge (mainly in Anthropology and Ethnology all over the country), nourish these new analysis that invite to further study.



7. *A Theory on National Identity.*

Since long ago, Mesoamerican works of art are accepted in Mexico without further debate. Pre Hispanic cultures and history are fairly included into our national legacy as an intrinsic element. They have become distinguished part of our national identity, but their subordination to State requirements still deserves deeper analysis.

As an example I want to recall a remark of Francisco de la Maza —a Colonial Art scholar— referred to the Museo Nacional de Antropología. He said that the building and its space arrangement bore in mind a three-aisles-Cathedral, which main altar was the Mexica room. Side aisles display other civilizations of ancient Mexico. Center to right: Toltec, Teotihuacán, Preclassic, Origins, and Introduction to Anthropology. To left: Oaxaca, Gulf Coast, Maya, and after a gap, Occidente and Northwest. Evidently, this pattern also marks the pre-Columbian understanding as seen by Mexican State and offered to the world.

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This was, and actually is, the pivotal axis of the official feeling and discourse of national identity. The whole Mesoamerican past appears as a tree: the trunk corresponds to Mexica civilization; two main branches are Toltec and Oaxaca; next are Teotihuacán, Preclassic Central Plateau, Gulf Coast, and Maya; the most far and little branches correspond to Occidente and Northwest. Arrangement of second floor rooms —devoted to modern Mexico ethnic groups— is identical to those at the main floor. Ancient and modern Indians deserve the very same lecture. However, itinerary begins with Anthropology room and concludes at the opposite side with Occidente and Northwest: from humble civilizations to complex ones, Mexica the main one. Besides there is a clear "chronological evolution"

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since Origins to Mexicas —right aisle— while the rest of Mesoamerica —left aisle— appears as a mosaic with no correlated period of time frames.

In my opinion, The Museo Nacional de Antropología portrays the most painstaking State conception about Mesoamerican past. In other words, Mexican State affords —in the Museum— the idea of a system of national culture, instead of a national system of culture. Sanction to any divergent cultural element or an unconventional point of view is rather impossible. Moreover, such physical grouping of Pre Hispanic cultures mirrors, one hundred years later, the "emotional defense" pursued by Juárez and his successors.

On the other hand, the national feeling as represented by Rivera, Orozco, Chávez, Revueltas and so many artists, had its counterpart at the Museo Nacional. The aim was to provide a theoretical shelter to safeguard "Mexican Selfhood": pre-Columbian past, supposed in terms of the innermost and unattainable essence. Consequently Mesoamerica becomes metaphysical, godlike; and Mexican nationalism becomes centralistic. But the essence that prevails is to honor the past as principal root of identity. 46

Let me tell you some scarce data about the importance given by the government to the <sup>the columbian past since 1825</sup> National Museum since 1825, when President Guadalupe Victoria established it. <sup>The National Museum.</sup> In the same year, the so called "Aztec Calendar" was removed from Mexico City's Cathedral to the above mentioned Museum, in order to reinforce the meaning of political unity. Several years later, in April 16, 1906, as journals of the time say, 75 years old President Porfirio Díaz —by the way, of Zapotec ascendant— accompanied by Justo Sierra, Ministry of Education and Rector of the University, and also by archaeologist Leopoldo Batres —then in charge of excavations and reconstructions at Teotihuacán—, went up the Pyramid 47 48

of the Sun as a remembrance to his ancestors, as he did in boyhood at native Monte Alban and Mitla.

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Around the decade of 1940, the efforts of well-known Mexican archaeologist Manuel Gamio were successful with the foundation of the National School of Anthropology and History, as I have said. The School supplied the goal of Mexican State to educate scholars in order to preserve and enrich Mexico's past, since origins to modern times.

Everything that could have the slightest touch of political meaning was named national, as the School <sup>of Anthropology</sup> itself. So, of course, the new National Museum of Anthropology —inaugurated in 1964 by President Adolfo López Mateos, and now being remodeled— opens its doors to speak the truth about the heritage of Mexican people. The scientific and most accurate vision of Pre Hispanic universe is expressed through the masterpieces of art kept in its huge and solemn spaces, as if to house and perpetuate the icons of the only and unequal origin: the one that comes from pre-Columbian world.

Many events that symbolize this recreation of the past have had scenarios all over the world sponsored by Mexican governments: the exhibit *Mexico: Splendors of 30 Centuries*, exposed at three major cities in the United States; *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, at the capital of North America; and something else that is rather amazing: the incredible pavilion at the British Museum to exhibit the major treasures of Mesoamerican art that were taken out of Mexico and Central America in late XIXth century.

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In brief, all presidents of Mexico have shown their tribute to indigenous past, and they have been present at archaeological discoveries and pre-Columbian



exhibits. President Zedillo has witnessed at least 24 events related to Mesoamerican past.

What does this mean? I believe that there is a profound conviction that we have the privilege of inherit one of the primary civilizations in the world. It is certainly a universal cultural patrimony, perhaps the reflection of a global new perception of the world. Nevertheless, in this Western world of globalization, Asia, Africa and pre-Columbian America have their sign of "otherness". Mexico's indigenous past is not West to study and comprehension, because we are not truly Occidentals, since we have something of a late tradition of Western ideas. Perhaps we might be included as Non West, which is partially true, considering that our origins go back beyond the centuries and came mixed to create a new identity: that of Mexicans.

I also perceive a fundamental peculiarity. I have said that in Mexico the break between West and Non West is old-fashioned. We do not look for ties with remote past; for it is ever apparent in several ways. Pre-Columbian past is an intrinsic part of our life; so there is no need to establish links between past and present, between West and Non West. Indeed, countries like Mexico (<sup>and others in</sup> Latin America, <sup>and</sup> Asia, and Africa) do not distinguish such a difference because it is not part of the idiosyncrasy; we do not need to do so. As a matter of fact, relatively and historically new or rich countries are looking for such bonds to face successfully globalization, since it involves national identity.

Furthermore there have been changes, new viewpoints that sustain such ideology but with a slight shift in the conception. Recent works are focused on multidisciplinary approaches; historical and specialized subjects that converge in various disciplines.

At the time of the Conquest, America and Europe gave rise to a new nation. Non West and West grew together and had lots of children, Mexicans among them. In my opinion, the divorce West-Non West is inaccurate and untrue, at least in Mexico's intellectual environment. This clarifies why Mexican scholars are not interested in explaining the differences between West and Non West. Our concern is to pursuit a proper and actual emblem of identity. We are assembling a new kind of comprehension rooted in our history, our common historical memory, aiming to conceive pre-Columbian civilizations as a coherent unity, but distinguishing differences among elements.

One of the means is supplied by the study of pre-Columbian art, as I have tried to demonstrate in the previous pages according to the brief reexamination of authors. History shows it in the writings in Spanish aimed to one of the largest languages in the world (over 400 million speakers).

Indians, ancient and modern, suffered a transformation. They were concealed nobility through myth and legend; their supposed unknown grandeur was modernized by a world of <sup>wonderful</sup> beautiful images (whether in painting, music, sculpture, or literature). They also match the illusions of Mexicans, allowing us to live a kind of fantastic reality, palliative to historical wounds (United States and France invasions, Maximilian von Habsburg unsuccessful Empire, Mexican Revolution). They even join the nationalist fever that was *a la mode* during 1940-1950 decades, due to the incipient industrialization of our country (as a result of Second World War). No wonder that José Moreno Villa —a refugee Spanish scholar, and Mexican by adoption — wrote sixty years ago the following dialogue:

the history of Mexico is on feet. Here no one is dead, no matter assassinations and executions. They are alive: Cuauhtemoc, Cortés, Maximilian, don Porfirio, and all the conquerors, and all the conquered.



This is Mexico's originality. All her past is palpitating actuality. Past is not dead (Moreno, 1992: 223).

Rescue and expansion of those chapters of Mesoamerican history had a powerful ideological motivation. Both characteristics delineate a new focus on self knowledge and a new effort to define self identity and aspirations. Maybe we deal with "how it could be". So pre-Columbian art appears upsetting, and moves hither and thither, from "being" to "not being" Western for the outsiders. Thinking of artistic expressions involves to embrace or to refuse "otherness". I am of the opinion that such condition pervades —at several levels— the aforementioned synopsis of conceptions: pre-Columbian civilizations and art have struggled between binding and freeing from the prototype offered by West. We have looked to forget and to remember the merits of pre-Columbian æsthetics; we exalted them —"not being West"— as well as repudiate them —"being West"—.

This contradictory being has led us to seek and sustain our selfhood in artistic expressions. And I see here one of the ineluctable characteristics that permeate our comprehension of Mesoamerican art. I do emphasize it is a history of fighting midway admitting or excluding "the other one", pre-Columbian America.

Five centuries ago two "othernesses" clashed, entire in themselves but scarce to each other. Ancient America challenged her own "otherness" to which Europe replied with admiration and disdain. In the origin was the certainty of refuse "the others" and their open difference. Today such antagonism is fruitless. To West recognition, including European and North American scholars, pre-Columbian past and art is a recent topic, an affair of mind-opening to different cultural systems. It is an effect of knowing "others", inasmuch as it also happened with African and Islamic arts through XIXth century.

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To Mexico is a result of epochs of crisis, of overthrow of traditional values, besides our political, economical, and social development, as implied by Independence, Reform, and Revolution wars.

? / I have no reticence to assert that modern progression toward intellectual and emotional comprehension of ancient pre-Columbian art had led to coexistence of different canons: those of Occident and those of the New World. The aim is to multiply studies that collaborate to spread the acceptance of different ways of being. One direction is the study of art. Mexican art —and mainly pre-Columbian art— mirrors our psyche with universal meanings, and shapes a fairest image of the world we live in, beyond West.

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