

The
EAGLE
and the
VIRGIN



Nation
and Cultural
Revolution in
Mexico,
1920–1940

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Duke University Press
Durham and London

2006



The Noche Mexicana
and the Exhibition of Popular Arts:
Two Ways of Exalting Indianness.

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After watching the Mexican revolution from Europe, Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), Roberto Montenegro, Jorge Enciso, and Adolfo Best Maugard, among other artists and intellectuals, answered the patriotic call to come home and help to rebuild the nation. Imbued with modernist sensibilities, they looked on Mexico and its people with new eyes, fascinated above all with the nation's distinctive nativist qualities. Living indigenous cultures, despite centuries of disparagement, seemed to offer a source for a new national culture that might unite the nation while propelling Mexico into the highest ranks of cultural modernity. In 1921 a number of these artists and intellectuals organized public displays for the massive state-sponsored celebration of the centennial of Mexico's independence. Among the most innovative of these events were the Exhibition of Popular Arts by Enciso, Montenegro, and Atl, and the Noche Mexicana by Best Maugard. Together they expressed the search for an indigenous-based national identity—an identity that event organizers hoped might help unite the historically fragmented, war-torn population.

Both events recast native craft industries from symbols of peasant backwardness into integral components of Mexican identity. Yet they represented contrasting visions of the role that indigenous cultures should play in the formation of the national self. They clashed in their assumptions about the relationship between Indianness and Mexicanness. Both reveal the extent to which the turn toward an “ethnicized” or “Indianized” definition of Mexico's national culture did not flow inevitably out of Mexico's historical experience, as is generally assumed, but instead resulted from a distinct movement led by cosmopolitan nationalists inside and outside the government. And far from occurring uniquely within Mexico, this generation's turn toward things native,

and away from “Europeanized artificiality,” occurred in a profoundly transnational context in artistic and intellectual circles across Europe, Russia, the Americas, India, and Japan.

The Centennial Celebrations

By mid-May 1921, when events sponsored by the newspaper *El Universal* and other private organizations had generated public excitement for the upcoming centennial, the new minister of foreign relations, Alberto Pani (recently returned from living in Paris), became convinced that the fledgling state should take the organizational and financial reins of the commemoration. Pani had previously stressed the need to study and publicize the diverse languages, customs, aesthetics, and composition of the peoples of Mexico so as to unite them culturally. He conceded that rural cultures were crude and splintered, and that it might take years to forge a common culture. The government, he insisted, should play a leading role in this transformation. State sponsorship of a popularly oriented centennial celebration was a first step in this state-led transformation.

President Álvaro Obregón, who saw the centennial celebrations as a means of crafting a populist image for his regime and a unifying identity for the fragmented nation, backed Pani’s plan. With a mere four months to coordinate one of the largest, most public displays in Mexican history, Obregón ordered his cabinet to appoint prominent intellectuals to a planning committee and immediately issued invitations to foreign envoys. After intense public debate, he won passage of a controversial one-time tax on middle- and upper-income earners to help fund the events.¹

To contrast with what they defined as the elitist quality of Porfirio Díaz’s 1910 centennial celebrations, the month-long commemoration was to be of “essentially popular character.” But it was far from clear what the committee meant by “popular.” Some of the events, such as street parades, offered public access. Others like bullfights, circuses, and sporting events had a proven appeal to nonelite audiences. As September drew near, promoters and journalists asserted that this was not enough. The centennial needed events rooted in rural popular culture (“folk culture” and “indigenous culture” were other frequently invoked terms). Even the newspaper *Excelsior*, skeptical of the new cultural orientation, affirmed that the events should celebrate folk culture and not *cursi* (pretentious and tacky) European styles.²

But who were these rural popular classes of which everyone spoke, and

how would their culture make the events more Mexican? This question posed a problem not only for the celebrations but also for the postrevolutionary regime, whose very mandate was based on its supposed advocacy of the popular classes that had fought in the revolution. Some people emphasized the country’s Spanish colonial heritage as the basis for a shared cultural nation, while others emphasized a romanticized pre-Hispanic past. A brief glance at the statuary along Paseo de la Reforma sufficed to confirm that there was nothing particularly revolutionary about the celebration of Mexico’s Spanish, Aztec, and Maya roots. What was new was that after the revolution these were joined by a novel populist discourse that cast rural Mexicans as Indian and placed their culture at the center of postrevolutionary national identity. The Noche Mexicana and the Exhibition of Popular Arts were among the centennial events that focused most self-consciously on this emerging interpretation of popular cultures.

“The Germ for Artistic Expression”

In August 1921 the Centennial Committee contracted Adolfo Best Maugard to plan a garden party to celebrate the new paved roads and electric lighting in Chapultepec Park—an homage to modern improvements typical of the Porfiriato. Best transformed the staid gathering into an exuberant outpouring of postrevolutionary nationalism modeled after regional *ferias* (regional fairs) and christened it “Noche Mexicana.”³

He drew inspiration from the indigenous aesthetics of his homeland. In New York at Columbia University, Best had worked for Franz Boas, pioneer in theories of cultural relativism. Best had illustrated pre-Hispanic pottery shards that would later inspire his own theory of a common seven-motif origin for world (and Mexican) art. In modernist avant-garde circles in Europe, he had become familiar with German and Russian neoromantic nationalism within a revalorization of intuition, emotion, and the primitive and veneration for popular traditions as carriers of the collective spirit.⁴

Best transformed the old-fashioned garden party into a grand experiment uniting cosmopolitan modernism, popular revolution, and postrevolutionary nationalism, so as to forge a new aesthetic vocabulary of Mexicanidad. A leading commentator declared the event unprecedented, magical, and “genuinely Mexican.” Another announced that the “soul of the Republic, dispersed and almost forgotten by our foreign-oriented intellectuals,” had been rediscovered and made palpable by the Noche Mexicana and the Exhibition of Popular Arts.

The Noche Mexicana, free to the general public, was reportedly packed with thousands of people from all walks of life, including special guests—President Obregón, foreign envoys, government officials, artists and literati, and members of prominent families. It won two repeat performances in September and October and was later restaged at the Teatro Arbeu.

As the park opened, visitors wandered along its newly paved roads, lit by the freshly installed electric streetlights and hundreds of small illuminated stars dangling from tree branches. Originally planned as the focus for a celebration of modernity, these became mere background for Best's gala tribute to a folkloric Mexicanidad. Guests wandered through the festival, stopping at the many booths from which elite white women served lower-class Mexican food and drinks. Best Maugard supervised the women's choice of regional costumes and saw to it that all the booths were "authentically" decorated "with blankets, woven mats, shawls, flags, and . . . art objects . . . typical of the Mexican nation." The "damas" sold "refreshments of the kind classically prepared in *tapatio* clay jugs [from Tonalá, outside Guadalajara] then served in gourds beautifully decorated by the Indians of Pátzcuaro." They also sold popular food and beverages—*pollo asado*, *enchiladas*, *tamales*, *buñuelos*, *atole*, and hot chocolate—served on ceramics from Guadalajara and Texcoco.⁵

At each street corner, guests encountered small stages on which Yucatecan troubadours, dancing *charros* and *chinas poblanas*, and Yaqui performers mesmerized the audience with "exotic" performances. A spectacular fireworks display inaugurated the evening's entertainment. Special guests were led to viewing stands constructed on the Avenida de Lago bridge, and everyone else pressed around the edges of the lake. From a brightly lit island stage in the middle of the lake, Miguel Lerdo de Tejada's 350-member Orquesta Típica del Centenario accompanied regional dancers attired in the beautiful costume of the Tehuana of the Oaxaca Isthmus. Then, from the side, a replica of the volcano Popocatepetl erupted from the waters with lights and pyrotechnics, topped off by an overflight of planes trailed by multicolored flames. Clapping hands, bold strings, and stomping feet drew attention back to the stage where over a hundred colorfully adorned *chinas poblanas* and *charros* burst into a modernized rendition of the *jarabe tapatio* entitled "Fantasía Mexicana."

"Fantasía Mexicana" had originally been staged by Best and choreographed by Anna Pavlova of the Ballets Russes in 1919 as an avant-garde performance in New York City, then repeated in Mexico the same year. The *jarabe tapatio* dated back to the colonial-era Jalisco but remained a regional dance and Mexico City vaudeville act until Pavlova's and Best's transformation (see fig-



FIG. 1. Anna Pavlova as a *china poblana*, *El Universal*, September 16, 1921. Photograph by Rick López. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Lerdo de Tejada, Mexico City.

ures 1 and 2). For the centennial, Maria Cristina Pereda, her brother, and Castro Padilla modified Pavlova's act, expanding it into a massive folkloric outpouring danced by several hundred couples. Their rendition would be reworked in 1929 by Gloria and Nelli Campobello, who would emerge as major choreographers of a revolutionary, folkloric, and nationalist aesthetic.⁶

In September 1921, the Noche Mexicana was novel in scale and bold in its celebration of previously devalued aesthetic forms. During the Porfiriato, artists had celebrated preconquest civilizations while disparaging contemporary indigenous people. Their handicrafts had been treated as embarrassing evidence of Mexican backwardness. Occasional attempts to bring them into national art did not transcend the conventions of European academicism. In his Noche Mexicana, Best did not suggest incorporating new subjects into old

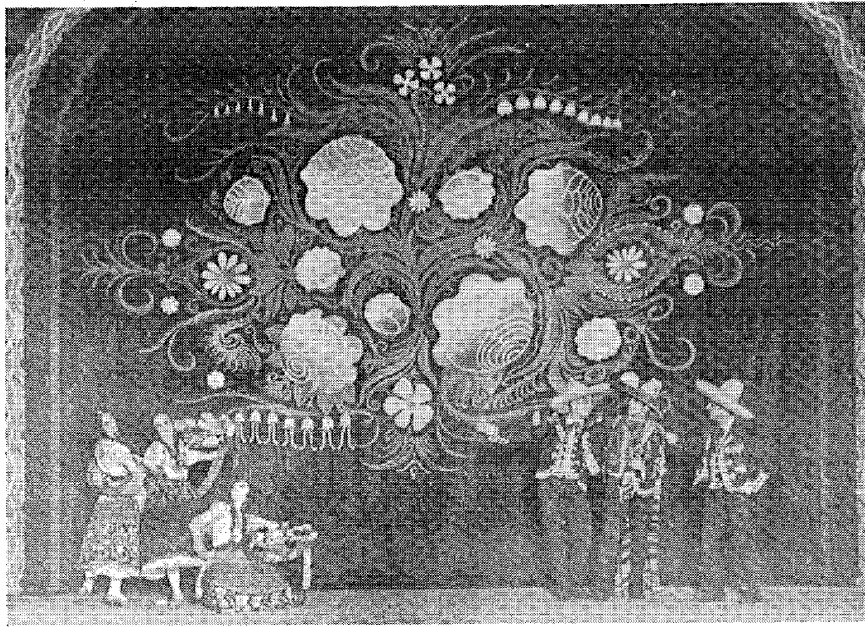


FIG. 2. Performance of the *jarabe tapatío* with stage set by Adolfo Best Maugard. Photograph by Rick López. Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College. Reproduced from Frances Toor, *Mexican Folkways* 6, no. 1 (1930): 32.

artistic forms. He proposed a distinctive aesthetic language inspired by the popular art of Mexico's "Indian classes."⁷ He strove to demonstrate how popular traditions, when filtered and refined by the modern, cosmopolitan artist, could provide the aesthetic expression of the Mexican nation.

The experiment was jolting. Some public response was decidedly negative. But one of the most respected critics, Francisco Zamora (who went by the nom de plume Jerónimo Coignard), raised his pen in Best's defense. Writing of the *Noche Mexicana* (and its restaging in the Teatro Arbeu), Coignard conceded that the dances were not great. Neither were they "una lata" (a tedious bore), as "certain snobbish theater critics" had charged. The problem, he explained, was that because Best called them "ballet," the audience expected more than folk dances could deliver. Coignard agreed that classical ballet would have been more refined, but he countered that such a performance would have offered nothing new. Based on the "manner of Mexico," "*Fantasia Mexicana*" was novel and praiseworthy.⁸

Coignard found himself pressed into the role of apologist for vernacular

art. He lamented his countrymen's low regard for things "truly" Mexican. Rather than appreciate their own, most middle- and upper-class Mexicans lived "in the reflected images of other peoples, whom we have imitated as if we had no aesthetic traditions of our own from which to make our own art." This represented an unfortunate loss for the nation, because apart from Europeanized art, "each country has its own vigorous manifestations, its own peculiar art born from the spontaneity and primitiveness of the humble classes." He conceded that popular aesthetic expression was crude, but it provided "the germ for artistic expression, ready to be developed and refined by men of talent" who could use it as the inspiration for a nationalist art that remained "faithful to the sentiments and thought of the popular soul of Mexico."

He complained that everyone loved Russian ballet, inspired by popular dances, but when Best created a performance based on "what is ours, we see it as disconcerting." To break away from foreign influences, Coignard recommended that Mexico's professional artists appropriate popular expression just as Europeans had done. By this formulation, popular aesthetics remained devoid of form or meaning until interpreted by elite artists with Western sensibilities. "*Fantasia Mexicana*," Coignard argued, needed to be understood as a revolutionary first step toward Mexico's nationalist modernity and aesthetic liberation.

Neither Coignard nor Best Maugard argued that popular arts had any direct value except as raw material for elite artists. José Vasconcelos, who left an unrivaled cultural stamp on 1920s Mexico, shared this perspective. Like that of Best and Coignard, Vasconcelos's populism was tempered by an unbending cultural elitism. As minister of public education, he supported efforts to promote popular crafts, but he did not consider the vernacular industries to be "art." True art could not "arise spontaneously from the people." It had to be nurtured and required "intervention by the cultured artists." It also demanded state patronage, "since artists cannot produce anything when abandoned to their own resources, and only the government" was able to direct and systematize artistic production. Vasconcelos advocated a nationalist regeneration that was sympathetic to the rural masses, but one that avoided sinking into what he saw as the morass of provincial and lower-class ignorance.

Despite commonalities, the vision that Best promoted through his *Noche Mexicana* drew on antirationalist modernism, not on Vasconcelos's classical liberal humanism. Vasconcelos saw all the lower classes as uniformly uncultured yet redeemable by Western humanism. Not surprisingly, he insisted that the highlight of the centennial events was a performance by a European opera

company. Only the opera provided an edifying model for the masses—a model apart from bullfights, Indian beauty contests, popular music and dances, and exhibits of indigenous handicrafts. Best, by contrast, focused on a nativist search for the essence of the Mexican “race.” He cast the rural poor as Indian and saw their culture as the germ of true Mexicanness. While Vasconcelos felt that Western art and Greek classics should be used to elevate the depraved masses, Best advocated the adoption of popular aesthetics “as a base from which to move forward [and] evolve” so as to produce “our own expression” that is “genuinely Mexican.”⁹

Despite differences, Vasconcelos, Best Maugard, Coignard, and fellow travelers were united in their call for an elite-led transformation by “men of talent” such as themselves. Within this project, the main alternative came from an expanding group of artists and intellectuals that included Dr. Atl, Jorge Enciso, Roberto Montenegro, and Manuel Gamio. In their view, far from a mere “germ” for the creation of Mexicanidad, popular arts embodied the ultimate expression of a primordial Mexicanidad. Their Exhibition of Popular Arts emerged as one of the earliest public testaments to this perspective.

“Making Known the Indian Civilization”

Today the Exhibition of Popular Arts lives on among art historians, collectors, *indigenistas*, and nationalists as one of the most important events in the history of popular arts, and as the most remembered event of the centennial. Yet it was not even on the original centennial agenda. The exhibition was dreamed up by Enciso and Montenegro, who offered to fill a slot left by the cancellation of the industrial fair, which was to have been the centennial’s centerpiece.

The exhibition had three objectives. First, it would bring together popular art from every part of the republic on the assumption that these diverse arts shared a common aesthetic basis that, once recognized, might reveal an inherent national cohesiveness. Second, it would offer examples of what the organizers considered high-quality popular arts. The structure of the exhibition, the tours, the docents, and the catalog were to teach the audience why these objects should be considered art, rather than mere curiosities, and why they should be considered authentic national art, rather than evidence of national fragmentation or indigenous backwardness. Third, the organizers hoped to teach the urban middle and upper classes to admire and seek to acquire these newly valorized markers of Mexicanidad. Demand by a public willing to pay

fair prices would, it was hoped, bring economic uplift to the countryside and encourage continued production of “authentic” popular art.

Only three months before the centennial, Enciso and Montenegro, together with their mentor Dr. Atl, won official confirmation as the Comisión de la Exposición de Arte Popular (hereafter the Comisión). In addition to time constraints, their aspiration to create an aesthetic encyclopedia of Mexico faced other obstacles. In all of Mexico there was not a single collection that was even vaguely comprehensive. Second, there was not a single person, group, or agency with the knowledge needed to assemble such a collection. Very little was known about the languages or cultures of rural Mexico, much less about their popular arts. To get the ball rolling, Enciso, Montenegro, and Atl contributed their own recently assembled collections and solicited contributions from close associates. They undertook a few minor collecting expeditions to areas they knew, such as Tonalá and Pátzcuaro. They also enlisted the collaboration and collections of the North American art dealer Frederick Davis and ethnologists Miguel Othón de Mendizábal and Renato Molina Enríquez at the recently created Department for the Promotion of Indigenous Industries (Departamento del Fomento de las Industrias Aborígenes) of the Museo Nacional.¹⁰ Still, lacking local knowledge and objects, they turned to regional authorities.

Enciso sent a circular to state governors urging collaboration in this nationalist venture. Enciso explained that the Comisión sought objects of popular manufacture, whether for decoration (including paintings and toys) or for domestic use, “like furniture, weavings, blankets, belts and runners, shawls, indigenous outfits, silk embroidery, woolens, . . . [and] ceramics of all types of manufacture.” He urged them to send “samples of the popular art” from their states.

To the Comisión’s consternation, governors and their regional subordinates reported that the Indians in their states produced no art. Enciso sent a second missive in which he insisted that there was no region in the “vast territory” of Mexico where “the Indians do not offer manifestations of primitive art and talent, putting their hands to the products found in their native region.” He explained that “these objects that they create, following the traditions of their ancestors and guided by their own artistic sensibility, . . . are works of art esteemed by the national and international public.”

The circular promised long-term benefits in exchange for cooperation. He emphasized that the exhibition was “conceived as part of a political plan to rehabilitate our Indian classes” by promoting their crafts. He asked the governors

to publicize the search and to teach the artisans about its potential benefits. The federal government, in turn, would cover all transportation costs and, on request, would sell the objects on the artisans' behalf.¹¹

Locals familiar with their region's craft production were confused: Did the Comisión want the cheap objects produced by local impoverished artisans, or did it want works of art? This confusion frustrated Enciso, but he had no other choice than to rely on these contacts for collecting objects and information about producers.

Enciso was learning that didacticism and specificity were vital to the construction of popular art as a subject. If his request was to make sense on the local level, he had to teach local mediators which crafts the Comisión considered valuable and why they should be thought of as art. His efforts to create an encyclopedic exhibition were stymied by the gaps that emerged between his own modernist validation of authenticity, the collective subconscious, and the modern cultural nation, and local prejudice against "backward" Indians and their "curiosities."

Ironically, Enciso had to rely on local knowledge at the very moment he was attempting to transform local assumptions and power relations. He depended on local government authorities for information, the delivery of which might affect local structures of power. The more local his contacts, the more imbricated they were in structures of artisanal production and marketing, and thus the less willing they were to facilitate new direct contacts between artisans and urban connoisseurs and markets. The act of collecting Mexican arts was not neutral; it was a process that had to navigate among global intellectual trends, central authority, and local politics and economic relations.¹²

When the exhibition opened on September 19, 1921, at 85 Avenida Juárez, Montenegro, Atl, and Enciso were rewarded with rounds of praise from the public, state officials, and the press. At the opening, flags, banners, and a military band announced the arrival of President Obregón and his retinue of government ministers, the diplomatic corps, members of the Centennial Committee, regional representatives, and foreign envoys. The exhibition treated visitors to folk singers, Yucatecan dancers, Lerdo de Tejada's Orquesta Típica del Centenario, and a *merienda* (afternoon snack) of fresh tamales, *atole*, and chocolate served from decorated booths similar to those that would be used at the Noche Mexicana in the following week. The inauguration was by invitation only. Afterward the exhibition was free and open to the public. Contemporary accounts suggest heavy attendance by Mexicans of various classes and foreign visitors.

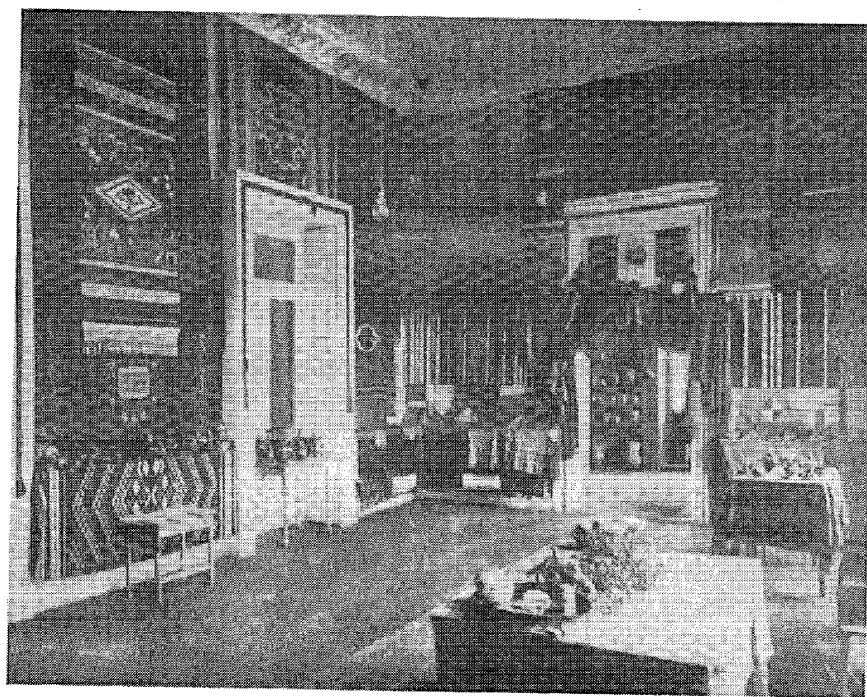


FIG. 3. A gallery in the Exhibition of Popular Arts. Photograph by Rick López. Reproduced from Frances Toor, *Mexican Popular Arts* (Mexico City: Studios of Frances Toor, 1939).

After witnessing a series of musical performances and dioramas, visitors followed tour guides through two floors of galleries crowded with popular objects arranged by category: lacquerware, ceramics, toys, weavings, wooden tools, paintings, and leatherwork. In place of the sparse walls typical of museum exhibitions, guests encountered rooms filled to capacity with objects arrayed on crowded shelves, stands, and tables, with textiles covering the walls. Designed to evoke the packed shelves of a curio shop or a stall in a regional outdoor market, the exhibition provided some of the flavor of the milieu where buyers might actually encounter such objects for sale (see figure 3). The exhibition taught visitors to recognize authentic popular arts and to identify them as "indigenous" and "*muy nuestro*." It also made clear that not just the objects but the entire way of life they represented was on display, and that value lay not in the visuality of the individual works but in the cultural wholeness of which they were a part.

The Exhibition of Popular Arts awoke public interest. On the one hand, the exhibition amazed audiences with displays they found “very exotic and original.” On the other hand, it created a new appreciation for *artesanías* as artistic, nationalist, and commercially important. The exhibition also created a fashion in which “people of good taste” began to decorate their homes “in the style of the Exhibition.” Families with money transformed entire rooms into miniature exhibitions, while those with lesser means confined *artesanías* to a special corner—practices that endured even as memory of the exhibition faded. The show also inspired elite painters in the aesthetic possibilities suggested by popular styles.

Like Best’s ballet, the exhibition had its detractors. The critic S. Suárez Longoria argued that even though a group of misguided artists might call these crafts “popular arts” and put them in a museum, they remained mere trinkets and “curiosities.” But even he conceded that the exhibition was an impressive nationalist achievement.¹³ In the end, most of the public, including the harshest critics, received the exhibition as a positive sign of the ongoing cultural revolution and a vibrant expression of nationalism. Most importantly, critics, the general public, private enterprise, and the state all seemed to embrace the exhibition as an eye-opening revelation of the “real” Mexico.

“La manera de ser del pueblo mexicano”

Roberto Montenegro and Jorge Enciso collected, curated, and promoted the exhibition. But their mentor Dr. Atl wrote the accompanying catalog. More than merely compiling an inventory, Atl provided readers with a groundbreaking treatise on how to judge the value of art, the nature of the Mexican peasantry, and the essence of the nation.

After a decade and a half of study and political activism in Rome, Paris, and Spain, Atl threw himself into the Mexican Revolution, first as a propagandist in Europe and then as a syndicalist and intellectual in Mexico, winning broad support for Carranza and, later, Obregón.¹⁴ When the violence of the revolution subsided, Atl dedicated himself to national reconstruction. He assumed government posts, spearheading the mural movement and emerging as a dominant figure in the search for a Mexican aesthetic. Atl claimed disenchantment with the “-isms” of the European avant-garde art world. He charged that most European modernists were charlatans and opportunists working in cahoots with gallery owners and art critics to manipulate public opinion and to hijack the category of “modern.” They conspired “against the feeling and aesthetics

of the collective” and were antithetical to the revolutionary project of cultural regeneration.

He did not abandon European modernism altogether. In his search for Mexican authenticity, he found inspiration in Continental theories of intuition and the collective subconscious. He had read Kant, Fouillee, Schopenhauer, and particularly the French philosopher Henri Bergson. He concluded that popular arts represented the most intuitive, most genuine expression of the Mexican people and nation.

When Alberto Pani asked him to write the catalog, Atl jumped at the opportunity. Instead of a simple description of the objects, he wrote a thesis on race, authenticity, and postrevolutionary populist nationalism. The first edition of the catalog found a ready audience among Mexican and foreign intellectuals and artists and sold out almost immediately. Several months later, Pani, by then minister of industry and commerce, invited Atl to write a second, expanded edition. Pani’s ministry initially hoped that the catalog’s second edition might accompany the exhibition as it traveled to Brazil and Argentina, but Atl and Pani decided that it would be better to extend the time for the book so as to produce a better publication. Since Atl knew that the catalog would not travel with the show, he aimed it at a Mexican, rather than a South American, audience. Whereas the first edition was a slim catalog with short essays and few illustrations, the second edition ran into several hundred pages of argumentation and analysis.

Atl stated that “until now there has been no book to present, classify, or evaluate that which after revolutionary passion, is *lo más mexicano de México: las artes populares*” (the most Mexican of Mexico: the popular arts). The idea that popular arts were “the most Mexican” aspect of Mexico and the “most characteristic manifestations of the way of being of the Mexican people” (*la manera de ser del pueblo mexicano*) became central to their valorization. And the compelling manner in which Atl set out his assertion has made his book the single most influential, enduring work on Mexican popular art.

In 448 pages of text and lavish illustrations, *Las artes populares en México* constructed these as a transhistorical subject naturally delimited by, and cohesive within, Mexico’s political borders. It was unique in its attention to *contemporary* arts rather than prequest and colonial objects. Crucially, Atl excluded objects that he judged to be exclusively shaped by modern or foreign styles, materials, or uses. He reasoned that because items like the *talavera* (majolica) pottery of Puebla were not Indian in character, they were not reflective of the Mexican popular spirit and therefore had no place in a catalog concerned with

“essentially Indian production” and the “great artistic sensibility” and “manual skill of the Mexican people [that] up to now have not been well understood” or appreciated. Though some of the included crafts, such as metal or leatherwork, had originated abroad, Atl assured his readers that unlike talavera, these arts had been interpreted and transformed by indigenous hands, such that they now carried “the stamp and vigor of the Indian races,” which made them authentically Mexican. Unless they carried clear signs of Indianness, then, popular arts could not be considered truly Mexican.

Race and Indianness were central to Atl’s promotion of artesanías. Indigenous cultural influences provided the shared traits and collective distinctiveness that constituted a “true national culture,” something shared by populations throughout Mexico. *Mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixing) was emerging as the symbol of Mexican nationality, but mestizaje presented a distinct problem. The worthiness of the European side of this equation seemed self-evident. But the indigenous side still needed definition and validation. According to the emerging nationalist rhetoric first clearly articulated by Manuel Gamio in 1916, to be truly Mexican, one had to be part indigenous or at least to embrace the idea that indigenousness was vital to the national consciousness. Rejection of Mexico’s contemporary indigenous peoples and cultures, *de rigueur* before the revolution, was now criticized as a mark of unpatriotic xenophilia. Even so, this did not resolve the problem that even the staunchest advocates of *indigenismo* remained uncertain what, if anything, was worth admiring in things Indian. Nor did Atl have much of a grasp of the specificities of Mexico’s subcultures. Rather, he cast a modernist optic of the “primitive” onto a broad array of objects crafted by artists representing a diversity of subcultures, some urban as well as rural, and called them “Indian.”

For Atl, Indians represented an unadulterated bastion of Mexican authenticity. They created their art intuitively from their, and the nation’s, collective subconscious rather than from artificial learning or imitation of Europe. Atl stated that it “has not seemed appropriate to me to weigh down this monograph with technical definitions, chemical analysis of the primary materials employed in Indian ceramics, or erudite depositions.” Such details were irrelevant when “dealing with things that are completely spontaneous and that must be shown simply, since they are that way [simple], so as not to present them out of character.” The catalog and the Exhibition of Popular Arts constructed artesanías as Indian, spontaneous, and wholly Mexican in spirit. Crafts became art insofar as they were understood as embodiments of the natural, agentless expressions of the deep Mexican spiritual subconscious. While Atl validated both

indigenous and mestizo arts, indigenousness remained central to their value. He insisted that Mexican crafts became more perfect and “more complete the more Indian their producers.”

Atl’s emphasis on Indianness, spontaneity, authenticity, the collective subconscious, manual industries, and premodernity did not make him *anti*modern. On the contrary, he saw such traits as providing Mexico with a distinct path *toward* modernization. He foretold that the “day is not far when most of the *manufacturas indígenas* will be substituted by products of mechanization.” When that day comes, “this book . . . will have considerable importance” as a “testament to the intelligence and deep artistic sensibility of the Mexican people.” Atl welcomed Mexico’s belated “industrial evolution” and expressed his faith that traditional artisans would play a key role in constructing the country’s future modernity. Yet he also hoped that the “authentic” aesthetic traditions of rural Mexican arts might be preserved by the creation of markets for “authentic” popular arts.

Atl distinguished between creating markets for popular arts, which he favored, and creating popular arts for markets, which he condemned. Authentic crafts were the result “of a particular way of being, intimately tied to the idiosyncrasy of the producers,” such that “to touch them,” to affect their appearance or methods of production, was “to destroy them.” He saw popular arts not as unchanging but rather as a fragile ecological system in which one had to take care not to disrupt the naturally evolving expression of indigenous artisans. He mocked Luis Murillo’s efforts in Tonalá to “improve” pottery designs by trying to return them to a pre-Hispanic state through the introduction of ancient Aztec and Mayan designs. Equally misguided, according to Atl, were efforts to make the popular arts “evolve” into elite modern forms. He condemned the composer Manuel Ponce’s creation of classical music based on popular Mexican tunes. One would presume that Atl similarly frowned on the ideas of Best Maugard, Jerónimo Coignard, and José Vasconcelos. “Popular music,” Atl asserted, “does not need to be dressed up, and the blanket of Oaxaca [and] the jug of Guadalajara do not need modifications.” We should learn to appreciate “the works of the people just as they are,” and “we should not try to transform them claiming a spirit of progress.”¹⁵ The only way to save the popular arts was by helping producers acquire primary materials, excusing artisans from taxation (so as to limit their need for cash), and creating urban markets where they could sell directly and liberate themselves from reliance on profiteering middlemen. Other kinds of assistance could “only result in prostitution of the Popular Arts.”

According to Atl, the ideal artisan should demonstrate an intuitive passion for artistic creation, unencumbered with concerns about the market. Atl saw no better example of authentically Mexican artisans than those of Tonalá. Atl claimed to recall a conversation with the Tonaltecan artisan Jicarías Jimón, who supposedly stated: “I paint because something inside me drives me to work with melancholy—and I paint to cover the surface of a jug. I want only one thing: to be able to decorate my jugs so as to give them as gifts, not to sell them.” That the artisan might have said this is questionable, but the fact that Atl claimed that Jimón did reveals Atl’s idealization of indigenous artisans as primitive producers isolated from modern commercialization.

For particularly “authentic” places like Oaxaca or Tonalá, Atl’s catalog juxtaposed photographs of artisans with images of their homes and artesanías. Like the objects they made, the artisans, their homes, and their entire way of life became embodiments of the vital spirit of Mexican authenticity and collective racial subconscious (see figure 4). Atl contrasted the idealized artisans of Tonalá to those of Metepec (near Toluca), whom he criticized for an apparent lack of dedication to the joys of creation. Their concern with the market, which had “nothing to do with the spirit of these arts,” had supposedly corrupted their crafts. Unlike the Tonaltecos or Oaxaqueños, the artisans of Metepec symbolized the decadence and the wayward path that threatened all handicrafts and endangered the nation’s pristine cultural patrimony.

Previously, art in Mexico had been valued primarily for its classical references, rationality, and highly refined skill. Atl veered from this trajectory even more profoundly than did Best Maugard. He insisted on the need to esteem popular art for its independence from Western visual traditions, for its rawness and immediacy, and for its spiritual authenticity derived from intuitive and subconscious impulses. He understood peasant and non-Western art as expressions of a creativity that did not originate from the individual artist. Such art was the expression of something larger than the artisans themselves, reflective of something deeper than their consciousness, and created by something more profound than mere technical process. Mexico’s handicrafts were expressions of an entire collective history, of a race, and of a nation. Popular arts production could not be rationalized, and their aesthetics could not be improved on.

This issue separated the exhibition from the Noche Mexicana and, by extension, separated Atl, Montenegro, and Enciso from Best Maugard, Vasconcelos, Ponce, and Coignard. Whereas Best and Vasconcelos valued the popular as raw material for the creation of art or viewed its valorization as the first step toward attracting the popular classes into an appreciation of “high art,” Atl,



FIG. 4. *Left*, jar by Adamo Galván of Tonalá; *right*, Tonalá artisan Ladislao Ortega, photographed as if he were the jar being valorized as passive and authentic. Reproduced from Dr. Atl, *Las artes populares en México*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City, 1922).

Enciso, and Montenegro promoted popular arts as artistic creations in their own right.¹⁶

However, the exhibition catalog denied artisans any agency in the process of creation or even in their own lives, nor did it recognize their real practices. Dr. Atl’s artisans did not learn, study, practice, refine their art, or make difficult economic and political decisions. Instead, they possessed innate skills as a result of being racially indigenous and culturally pristine. Any clear signs of agency or of modern Western influences invariably detracted from their work’s value. The perspective embodied in the Exhibition of Popular Arts contrasted with that of the Noche Mexicana. But the exhibition’s discourse was not inherently any more liberating for the artisan.

Conclusion

The eventual embrace of a popularly based Mexicanidad was not an inevitable outcome of Mexican mestizaje, as is generally assumed. Neither was it born solely out of the revolution or from European modernism. Instead, postrevolutionary Mexican national identity was born out of a particular historical moment. Through the Noche Mexicana and the Exhibition of Popular Arts, we can begin to understand the uneven process by which popular arts were validated and embraced as part of the ideal of an inclusive primordialist national identity rooted in popular culture.

It was a time when Mexican intellectuals were returning from Europe, bringing with them ongoing conversations and philosophical problems that they had engaged in Rome, Paris, and Barcelona. They were drawn home in part by financial reasons, but above all by a desire to take part in rebuilding the nation after the first revolution of the century. Returnees looked at their homeland through a novel intellectual prism that reveled in its "exotic," non-European, indigenous qualities. Allied with the new state, they forged nationalist aesthetics and cultural criteria for reassessing the nature and value of art, the meaning of the nation, and the significance of indigeness.

What emerged was a new way of thinking about the indigenous populations, national art, and what it meant to be Mexican. The Noche Mexicana embodied the argument that the culture of the masses was raw material for the production of an elevated national art by men of talent and training. The Exhibition of Popular Arts, by contrast, called for a more radical redefinition of aesthetic value. It singled out indigeness as the most Mexican aspect of Mexico, and popular art as the most unmediated, most authentic expression of this Mexicanidad. It was from its immediacy and its independence from European training that such art derived its nationalist and aesthetic value. The Exhibition of Popular Arts and the Noche Mexicana together signaled a transition in Mexican thought, when the outlines of what was to be esteemed as vital to the postrevolutionary nation were far from clear. The view represented by Best's Noche Mexicana dominated the first part of the 1920s. But by the middle of the decade, the view embodied in the Exhibition of Popular Arts gained ground and left its own mark on Mexico's national identity, on state policies, and on the conservation of the nation's cultural patrimony.

In the coming decades, Mexican intellectuals would devote their attention to studying the Mexican rural classes so as to make them known in new ways and to valorize rural aesthetics and material production as an essentialization of

Mexicanidad auténtica. They would advance rural exploration and cultural discovery based on metropolitan concerns for accumulating, systematizing, promulgating, and hierarchically ordering knowledge about the "real" Mexican nation in all its parts. In the hands of nationalist artists and literati and resident foreign sympathizers, the popular arts would become integral to the process of Mexican nation building. Even today, for Mexicans and foreigners alike, to hold in one's hands a piece of Mexican popular art is to hold something larger than a mere object; it is to hold Mexico in all its diversity, its rich past, its complex present, and its uncertain future. But oftentimes it is also to hold on to a "deep" Mexico in which the masses can contribute only passively to the nation, through their instincts and intuition, not through their self-determined cultural or political genius. In this way, the possibilities, but also the baggage, of the legacy of the Noche Mexicana and the Exhibition of Popular Arts remain with us today.

Notes

1. Alberto Pani, *Una encuesta sobre educación popular* (Mexico, 1918); and Pani, "The Sanitary and Educational Problems of Mexico," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1917), suppl., 22-26; L-E-955 to 966, 1921, Sría de Relaciones Ext., Archivo Histórico (hereafter AHSRE); 104-C5, 1921, Archivo General de la Nación, Presidencial Archives (hereafter AGN); José Vasconcelos, *El desastre*, 4th ed. (Mexico: Botas, 1938), 54-58; Dr. Atl, *Las artes populares en México* (1922; Mexico: INI, 1980), 7; *El Universal* (hereafter *EU*), July 8, 1921; May 14, 1921; July 19, 1921; July 17, 1921; August 24, 1921.
2. *EU*, May 15, 1921; May 21, 1921; editorial, *Excelsior* (hereafter *EX*), August 21, 1921.
3. L-E-1652, Libro de Actas, Acta no. 19, June 16, 1921, AHSRE; *EU*, June 25, 1921; September 6, 1921.
4. F. Boas to A. Best Maugard, December 8, 1926, American Philosophical Society, Professional Correspondence of Franz Boas, Philadelphia, Pa., Microfilm; A. Best Maugard, interview, 1964, BMP/59, Biblioteca del INBA, Archivo General (hereafter INBA); and Karen Cordero, "Para devolver su inocencia a la nación," in *Abraham Angel y su tiempo* (Toluca: MBA, n.d.), 12-13.
5. *EU*, September 29, 1921; *El Universal Ilustrado* (hereafter *EUI*) 230 (September 29, 1921): 26-27; *EU*, September 1, 1921; September 6, 1921; September 28, 1921; *EX*, September 1, 1921.
6. *EU*, September 28-29, 1921; *EX*, September 1, 1921; Frances Toor, "El jarabe antiguo y moderno," *Mexican Folkways* (hereafter *MF*) 6, no. 1 (1930): 32-33.
7. A. Best Maugard, "Conferencia sobre México" (from a speech, October 2, 1922, San Francisco), BMP/59, INBA; José Juan Tablada, "La función social del arte," and

Pedro Henríquez Ureña, "Arte Mexicano," in Adolfo Best Maugard, *Método de dibujo: Tradición, resurgimiento y evolución del arte mexicano* (Mexico City: SEP, 1923); and Cordero, "Para devolver," 18.

8. Jerónimo Coignard (Francisco Zamora), "El valor efectivo de ballet mexicano," *EUI* 4, no. 232 (October 13, 1921): 32.

9. Vasconcelos, *El desastre*, 23, 56–57; Best, *Manuales*, 9, 17–18.

10. *EU*, June 2, 1921; June 5, 1921; June 25, 1921; September 25, 1921. Atl, "Artes Populares de Mexico," typescript, unpublished 3rd ed. of *Artes Populares en México*, caja 4a, exp. 2, Fondo Reservado de la Biblioteca Nacional de México, Archivo Doctor Atl (hereafter BNA); Atl, *Artes* (1980), 21–27; Gov. of Yuc., circ. 5075, July 6, 1921, leg. 680, Archivo General del Edo. de Yucatán, Ejecutivo/Gobernación, Mérida, Yucatán (hereafter AGY); L-E-1652, Libro de Actas, Acta 8, June 3, 1921, AHSRE.

11. Gov. of Yuc., circular 5075, July 6, 1921; Jorge Enciso to Gov. of Yucatán, July 13, 1921; and Gov. of Yucatán to the Comisión Organizadora de la Fiestas del Centenario, July 27, 1921, legajo 680, AGY; "La Exposición de Arte Popular," *EU*, July 8, 1921.

12. For a discussion of these local tensions, see Rick López, "Lo más mexicano de México: Popular Arts, Indians, and Urban Intellectuals in the Ethnicization of Post-revolutionary National Culture, 1920–1972" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2001).

13. *EU*, September 19–20, 1921; *EX*, September 20, 1921; Frances Toor, "Mexican Folkways," *MF* 7, no. 4 (October–December 1932): 205–11; Atl, *Artes* (1980), 21–22; Frances Toor, *Mexican Popular Arts* (Mexico City: Frances Toor Studios, 1939), 11; S. Suárez Longoria, "La exposición de arte popular," *Azulejos*, October 1921, 29–30.

14. Dr. Atl, typescript, "El mundo será Comunista," n.d., caja 2, exp. 41; Atl, typescript, "La revolución mexicana y los mexicanos en París," n.d., caja 2a, exp. 94; Atl, typescript, "Primer Guión para la autobiografía," 1959, caja 6, exp. 5; typescript, "Notas de un serie de entrevistas," caja 6, exp. 9, BNA; and José Clemente Orozco, *Autobiografía* (1945; Mexico City: Era, 1996), 40–45.

15. Dr. Atl, typescript, "Sobre las modas pictóricas," n.d., caja 2a, exp. 106; Atl, typescript with marginalia, n.d., caja 4a, exp. 10, BNA. Also see Juan del Sena, "El Doctor Atl conferencista," *EUI* 5, no. 194 (January 2, 1921): 8–9; Atl, *Las artes populares en México*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Mexico City: Librería "Cultural," 1922); Atl, *Artes* (1980), 7–49, 437–44; Atl, "Artes Populares de Mexico," unpublished 3rd ed., caja 4a, exp. 2, BNA; M. Teresa Pomar A., "Presentación," in Atl, *Artes* (1980), ix; and Manuel Gamio, *Forjando patria* (1916; Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1992). For a discussion of the international, national, and local impacts of projects to create a market for popular arts, see López, "Lo más mexicano de México."

16. Atl, *Artes* (1980), n.p., 28, 46–47, 86, 110, 125, 135, 150–53, 443–44.