



POTS OF PROMISE

Mexicans and Pottery at Hull-House, 1920-40

Margaret Stobel

Ediff

Clay K. Camp

Victor King

Don G. M.



EDITED BY

*Cheryl R. Ganz
and Margaret Strobel*

FOREWORD BY

Vicki L. Ruiz



*Published with the
Jane Addams Hull-House Museum by the*

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

Urbana and Chicago

2004

We have seen frequently that natives [and] mestizos in rural districts in Mexico have not much notion of their nationality or their country. They know their town and the region in which it is situated, and this is a "little country" for them. [But, as] immigrants in the United States, [they] learn immediately what their mother country means, and they think of it and speak of it with love.

—Manuel Gamio, anthropologist, about 1929

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Mexican migrants from across Chicago gathered in Pilsen Park on September 16, 1924, to commemorate the 114th anniversary of Mexican independence. After an opening performance by a folkloric military-style band known as an *orquesta típica*, Florencio Santiago strode onto the stage. As a representative of the Mexican Fraternal Society of Chicago, the mutual aid society that sponsored the event, Santiago exhorted members of the crowd to “preserve” their Mexican citizenship and honor their national culture. His speech opened the way for an evening filled with musical performances, readings of Mexican patriotic poetry, and a late-night dance with live music. A journalist from a Spanish-language newspaper hoped that the “American public who observed this fiesta noted the solidarity of the Mexicans and the love which is hidden in their hearts for the[ir] beloved” Mexico. Similar celebrations unfolded simultaneously in parks and on beaches across the Chicago area. The value of these events, according to the same local newspaper, lay in their power to unite diverse Mexican migrants who otherwise would have remained atomized. “The 16th of September,” the newspaper declared, “has the power of gathering them together” so they might learn about and celebrate a shared nationality.¹

FORGING A MEXICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CHICAGO

*Mexican Migrants
and Hull-House*

RICK A. LÓPEZ



From today's perspective it might seem only natural that the migrants would unite around their Mexican identity. In 1924, however, Mexico was only beginning to create a definable national culture. As the newspaper suggested, the 1924 effort to create a Mexican community aimed to unite around a new national identity people who had little in common other than the fact they all had come from territory politically claimed by the Mexican state. Manuel Gamio suggests that it was in the United States that migrants, who had previously looked to their home communities rather than toward the Mexican nation, learned what it meant to be Mexican and speak of Mexico with love.

The Mexican migrant community in Chicago came to embrace a patriotic Mexican identity thanks to the efforts of grass-roots organizations such as *mutualistas*, mutual aid societies created by prominent citizens so members could help one another in times of need and support one another's political and economic interests. Across Chicago, mutual aid societies endeavored to unify the migrants around a Mexican national identity. The existence of such a community might, they hoped, represent a political block capable of intervening in U.S. and Mexican politics. On a less altruistic note, they expected that such a unified community might act as a reliable consumer base for fraternal orders' life insurance policies.

There was no preexisting Mexican national identity that bound migrants. Mexico was a culturally and politically fragmented country, not yet culturally or socially integrated into what we now think of as a modern nation-state. Just as a unifying identity had to be created in Mexico, one also had to be created among the migrants. The emergence of a deeply felt cultural nationalism among Chicago's Mexican migrants emerged in two stages. First, begin-

ning in the early 1920s such groups as the Mexican Fraternal Society of Mexico, together with many other civic and commercial organizations, promulgated a sense of patriotism among working-class migrants. This patriotism linked the migrants to Mexico through such shared civic celebrations as Cinco de Mayo, patriotic heroes like Benito Juárez, and an emphasis on honoring their Mexican citizenship. The second phase, beginning in the late 1920s, urged the migrants to embrace a cultural, rather than simply a patriotic or civic, identification with the Mexican nation. This second phase emphasized the importance of new forms of cultural nationalism emerging out of postrevolutionary Mexico, especially newly esteemed styles of folkloric dance, dress, music, and arts that self-consciously drew upon rural mestizo and indigenous sources. Hull-House was one of the many organizations that facilitated this second phase. It was not the only such organization, nor was it necessarily the most important. But a discussion of what it did, why, and how is instructive for understanding how the migrants became culturally united as *mexicanos*.

The national integration project in Mexico and the community-formation project in Chicago, were, in fact, virtually inseparable. Their inseparability compels us to revise how we think about nations and national boundaries, about the relationship between cultural practices (particularly aesthetics) and ethnic identities, and about the connection between a Mexican national identity and a Mexican American ethnic identity. To understand fully how migrants gradually became Mexican Americans, as George Sánchez expertly has done for Los Angeles, we must also consider how they became Mexicans.²

In his now-classic study of national communities, Benedict Anderson emphasizes the im-

portance of the growth of newspaper readership and the emergence of a national language to the consolidation of an imagined national community, a community of individuals who would never meet the thousands, perhaps even millions, of others with whom they imagine sharing certain bonds. Postcolonial critic Edward Said adds to our understanding of the process described by Anderson by showing that it is "the *practice* of a national culture . . . from folktales and heroes to epic poetry, novels, and drama" that gives meaning and substance to the national collectivity.³ With this, Said reminds us that newspapers, a reading public, and a common language constituted only part of what has shaped the bonds of any particular national community. Of equal importance was the continually reinforced belief in a shared culture as expressed through art, aesthetics, music, stories, and other forms of expression that narrated cultural nationhood, thereby endowing form and content to the emerging national identity.

The celebrations in Chicago in 1924 were rich in cultural content, ranging from the military-style bands to patriotic poetry, but contained little of the cultural production that we now consider so recognizably Mexican: folkloric dancers performing regional dances in brightly colored vestures, mariachi troupes singing folk ballads, displays of handicrafts, and stands serving peasant dishes.

Chicago migrants lived beyond the political boundaries of Mexico. Yet as they adopted these novel versions of *mexicanidad*, starting in the late 1920s, they helped define Mexico's modern, postrevolutionary national identity. In their personal experiences and collective nationalist activities in Chicago they drew upon and reshaped the ideas and symbols that emerged from the unifying nationalist project that followed the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20. Migrants in

Chicago were not duped into embracing a distant and irrelevant invented nationalism; rather, they used Mexican nationalism as a tool for engaging the urban politics of metropolitan Chicago and addressing anxieties about the dangers of navigating the modern multiethnic spaces of the city. An examination of Hull-House's activities in relation to Chicago's Mexican migrant communities offers unique insight into the communities' cultural transformation during the 1920s and 1930s.

JANE ADDAMS, HULL-HOUSE, AND MEXICO

Hull-House holds an important place in the story of European immigrants to Chicago. It looms equally large in the history of the Mexican migrant community, but here it offers a few surprises. One of Hull-House's strongest links to the Mexican migrants was through the Hull-House Kilns, which offered migrants the facilities and training to create "Mexican" handicrafts and market them to the public. Hull-House leaders reached out to Mexican migrants on Chicago's Near West Side. But they did not stop there. They also reached across the U.S.-Mexican border into the heart of Mexico itself, effectively linking the local migrant population to the emerging Mexican national community.

In 1925 Jane Addams embarked on a tour of Mexico in the name of international understanding. The violence of the Mexican Revolution had ended only five years earlier. As fighting waned, U.S. intellectuals, artists, and social and political idealists headed south to witness the revolutionary experiment that promised to elevate Mexico's rural masses. Mexico's new cultural and political leadership aspired to forge an inclusive, ethnicized (as op-

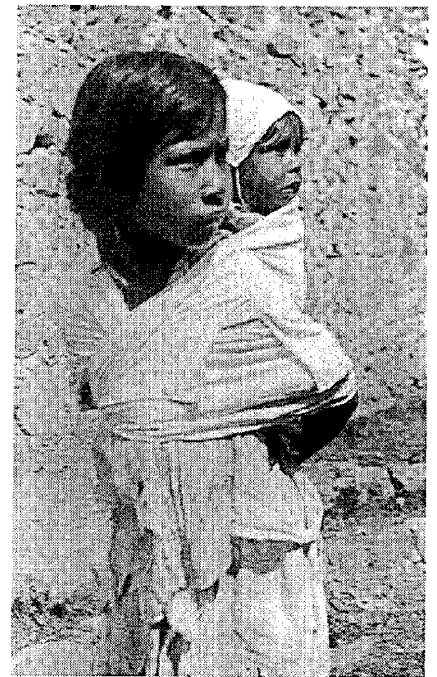


(Left to right): A young Mexican, Jane Addams, Lillian Wald from New York's Henry Street Settlement, and Eléna Landazuri at ruins in Mexico, photographed by Mary Rozet Smith, Addams's partner. Landazuri, who had studied sociology at the University of Chicago and worked with Robert Redfield on his study of Tepoztlán, served as one of the hosts for Addams's visit to Mexico City.

Young Mexican men photographed by Jane Addams and Mary Rozet Smith.



Right: A Mexican girl with a baby photographed by Jane Addams and Mary Rozet Smith.



posed to Europeanized) national cultural identity that might finally bring unity and stability. Addams found that the aspirations of the Mexican reformers paralleled her own social concerns, particularly her faith in uplift and social inclusion.

By the time of Addams's 1925 visit, Mexico's intellectual and political mavericks had become adept at providing North American guests with social, political, and artistic tours of their revolutionary project. Addams's fame as a pacifist, suffragist, and social reformer preceded her, and she found a warm reception from women's rights organizations as well as from government and social leaders. One Mexican luminary eager to guide her through the revolutionary reforms was Manuel Gamio, the well-known Mexican anthropologist and state official who shared many of the ideals propounded by his Columbia University mentor Franz Boas and by University of Chicago educator John Dewey. Gamio had gained fame for his 1916 book *Forjando patria* (roughly translatable as *Forging the Nation*).

Like Dewey, Addams was a pioneer in U.S. pragmatism. As such, she took an interest in Gamio's call for a practical anthropology capable of uplifting indigenous communities and helping them contribute to the Mexican nation. Given her previous experimentation with the Labor Museum at Hull-House, founded in 1900, which helped aging European immigrants teach a new generation the handicraft traditions of their homelands, she may also have been attracted to Gamio's nationalist call to celebrate the unifying potential of previously disparaged rural vernacular traditions, especially such aesthetic expressions as music, dances, and, above all, handicrafts.

Addams's diaries reveal that she also met with many other Mexican activists and reform-

ers. One of these was the educator Eulalia Guzmán. The famous Minister of Education José Vasconcelos (1921-24) provided the spiritual vision for a new public system to bring the benefits of education and social reform, along with a new brand of nationalism, to the Mexican masses. But people such as Guzmán provided the day-to-day leadership and pragmatic vision to transform Vasconcelos's ideals into reality. Addams also met with Esperanza Velázquez Bringas, an avid revolutionary lawyer who worked within the Ministry of Education, and even won a personal audience with President Plutarco Elías Calles. We know little about the content of Addams's discussions with her Mexican colleagues or of her meetings with such resident foreigners as editor of *The Nation* Ernest Gruening, who was in Mexico working on a book on the revolution. The people she met were far from homogeneous, yet they shared reformist, progressive ideals, and they all supported the Mexican project of national integration and cultural inclusion.

Although the prominence of her guides was remarkable, the content and itinerary of Addams's tour was typical. Guides showed her through villages, rural workshops, churches, and schools as well as the modern slums surrounding the national capital. As they flaunted the problems inherited from the previous regime, the Mexican reformers detailed how the revolution would address such challenges.

If Jane Addams and countless other North American visitors, including Hull-House teachers and artists Wallace Kirkland, Emily Edwards, and Morris Topchevsky, visited Mexico to learn more about the cultural and social dimensions of the Mexican Revolution, Mexican artists reciprocated by bringing their artistic and social messages directly to the United States. Among them was photographer

Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who taught at Hull-House for several months in 1936. He arrived after playing a key role in the validation of popular culture in Mexico as photographer for the interdisciplinary journal *Mexican Folkways*, one of the first publications to take an interest in the cultures and traditions of rural Mexicans and the first to promote them as central to the national culture. During the late 1920s through the 1930s, Addams and the other teachers at Hull-House learned from Mexican artists and cultural leaders. They used that knowledge to shape programs aimed at the Mexican migrant community on Chicago's Near West Side, near Hull-House.

REVOLUTION, NATION-BUILDING, AND ART IN MEXICO

Jane Addams visited Mexico during a time of dramatic cultural and political transformation when leaders took unprecedented interest in unifying the population into a modern nation. Before the revolution, the ruling elites promoted a narrow, exclusive, and Europhilic definition of the Mexican nation that excluded the popular classes. They celebrated ancient Aztec and Mayan glories but disparaged the largely indigenous peasantry. On the eve of the revolution, Mexico lacked a unifying national culture. Most communities shared a political structure, but, culturally, they remained divided by region, ethnicity, language, and class.

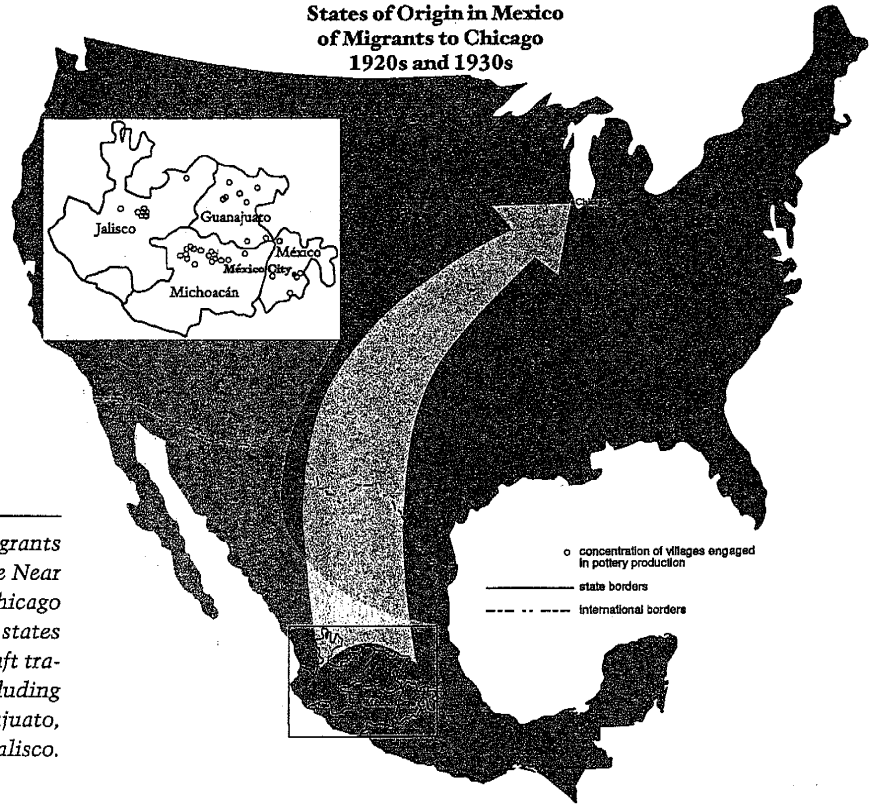
The revolution that erupted in 1910 seemed to confirm the ruling classes' worst fears: dissolution of the tenuously centralized state, the reemergence of localized conflicts, and forcible entry of popular leaders onto the national stage. The leadership that emerged in 1920 at the end of the revolution held no illusions. It could not afford to ignore the fragmentation of the coun-

try. In 1917, as the revolution entered its denouement, the journalist and politician Luis Cabrera quipped that some commentators speak "of the Mexican *people* and of the characteristics of such a people without taking into consideration that the Mexican people" is "an agglomeration . . . still in the process of formation." Cabrera and other postrevolutionary nationalists declared that the need to "unit[e] Mexicans among themselves" was one of the most urgent yet daunting tasks of the postrevolutionary government.⁴

After the revolution, leaders promoted a unifying mestizo (racially and culturally mixed) national culture that drew on the practices of the popular classes. Postrevolutionary modernist artists and intellectuals now looked upon their homeland with new eyes, fascinated above all with its exotic cultures, indigenous faces, and unfamiliar aesthetics. They launched Mexico into an era of cultural and political innovation and retroactively imbued the revolution with a mandate for cultural and aesthetic reconstruction and national integration.

As the postrevolutionary project grew, artists began to paint the Mexico around them and search for a distinctly Mexican aesthetic. Urban musicians ventured into the countryside to document rural songs and revise them into the mariachi and *ranchera* music that we now find so recognizably Mexican. Choreographers took notice of popular dances and created the modern renditions of such dances as the *jarabe tapatío*, known to U.S. audiences as the Mexican Hat Dance (photograph page 40). Chefs began to explore peasant dishes and develop a national cuisine that by the 1930s and 1940s would be accepted across the country and even into polite circles. In short, the 1920s saw the birth of the aesthetic and artistic forms that now strike us as typically Mexican. One jour-

States of Origin in Mexico
of Migrants to Chicago
1920s and 1930s



Many Mexican migrants who settled on the Near West Side of Chicago originated from states that had strong craft traditions, including Michoacán, Guanajuato, and Jalisco.

nalist declared in 1921, "Our artistic revolution consists . . . in separating ourselves from the foreign, in moving away from foreign influence to marshal our own artistic manifestations toward something genuinely created and developed by the people." All "of this is just a start, a great beginning," he declared. "Later, when '*mexicanismo*' is more profound, it will be more sincere. Then we will see—ever more rooted in our customs and arts—*lo mexicano* [that which is genuinely Mexican]."⁵ Handicrafts were one of the primary things they looked to for authentic *mexicanidad*.

Mexican nationalists did not validate popular arts out of a nostalgia for simpler times or from an antimodernist longing for handmade crafts, as did U.S. craft promoters who drew on the ideas propounded by Englishman William Morris. Instead, the Mexican fascination with crafts emanated from a desire to validate *lo nuestro* (that which is authentically ours), shed foreign cultural imperialism, and forge a distinctly Mexican national character. Such a national identity was to be rooted in the culture of the masses not out of an effort to recapture a pasto-

ral past (for which Mexican cultural leaders felt little, if any, romantic nostalgia) but rather because they saw the rural peasantry as the segment of the population least contaminated by Western "artifice." Handicraft production harnessed to the enterprise of national integration promised to lay the foundation for a distinctively Mexican mode of modernization that might unify the masses and prepare them for economic development while avoiding the excesses that supposedly afflicted the United States and Europe.

Mexican nationalists argued that artisans were romantically selfless craftspeople driven by their collective subconscious to create naive expressions of their worldview and that they were driven by personal and communal, rather than monetary or political, concerns. This view was avidly promoted by Mexico City cultural leaders, who taught it to visitors such as Jane Addams.

Most of Chicago's Mexican migrants came from the central region, from the states of Jalisco and Michoacán in the west, across Guanajuato, Querétaro, and Zacatecas in the

center, and Puebla and Tlaxcala to the east. This region was one of the most densely populated in the country and one of the best connected in terms of roads and rail lines. Craftspeople of the region readily engaged cosmopolitan tastes emanating from Mexico City and became adept at interacting with the growing collectors' and tourist market. When a postrevolutionary national identity began to take form in the 1920s, it spread rapidly across this central region.

The reality of craftspeople in central Mexico during this period was quite different from the infantilizing version promoted by cultural elites. The discrepancy can be seen in a 1935 letter from a group of artisans just outside Guadalajara who had organized themselves into a cooperative called the *Cooperativa de Alfareros Fabricantes de Tlaquepaque* (Cooperative of Potters of Tlaquepaque). Their letter to the federal minister of industry in Mexico City asked the department to commission from the famous muralist Diego Rivera, who was working on a mural for the Ministry of Industry at that time, a few drawings for pottery designs that would be both modern and authentically Mexican. Through letters such as this one, artisans regularly demonstrated their market savvy and strong concern for buyers' tastes. They were well aware of the market for creative combinations of the primitive and the modern, the traditional with the avant-garde, and the local with the cosmopolitan. They knew that Rivera had become famous for his ability to blend cosmopolitan aesthetic tastes with Mexican folkloric styles. The drafters of the letter explained their hope that Rivera's name and his unique blending of styles would improve their crafts' marketability. Because Rivera was overworked, the ministry commissioned his disciple, Rafael Balderrama, to execute the designs.⁶

Artisans interacted with high artists, buyers, and promoters to make their way through this period of rapid cultural, political, and economic transformation. In the process they, together with such artists as Rivera, helped consolidate a "Mexican" visual tradition. Like other emerging postrevolutionary national traditions, pottery embodied the new spirit of *mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixing) and helped displace prerevolutionary elitist views of a Eurocentric national culture.

In the 1920s, then, at the very moment that migrants began arriving in Chicago in appreciable numbers drawn by employment in the railroad, meat packing, and steel industries, Mexico was experiencing a transformation. Amid social, political, and cultural flux, Mexico could not offer migrants a base for stability and unchanging traditions, as scholars too often presume and as migrants at the time nostalgically imagined.

SOCIAL REFORM, CULTURAL REVIVAL, AND THE ARTS AT HULL-HOUSE

When the Hull-House Art School began its pottery training programs among the Mexican migrant population in Chicago's Near West Side during the 1920s, it borrowed its definitions of *mexicanidad* from the cultural movement in postrevolutionary Mexico. Rather than ask migrants about their own traditions, Hull-House teachers and artists appear to have encouraged them to look to the new national culture being defined by the new coterie of Mexican artists, intellectuals, and politicians centered in Mexico City. Hull-House residents appear to have operated from the postrevolutionary Mexican idea that the Mexican popular classes possessed a "native feeling for musical and artistic



The Mexican fiesta at Hull-House became an annual event open to everyone in the neighborhood. Fiestas featured music, dancing, food, and craft sales, all outdoors in the complex's decorated alleyways.

A flyer promoting the Festival of Mexican Culture, 1937.



Art!
 Music!
 Puppets!
 Dancing!
 Pageantry!

You are invited to share in the joy of two fete days of the

**FESTIVAL OF MEXICAN
 . . . CULTURE . . .**

Saturday & Sunday June 5 and 6, at Hull House
 2:30 to 10:30 p. m. 800 S. Halstead

PROGRAM
 DRAMATIC
 EPISODES
 REPRESENTING
 MEXICO:
 Pre-Cortesian
 Colonial
 Contemporary

EXHIBITS
 FINE ART & CRAFTS FROM
 OLD MEXICO
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expression," manifested through a natural manual dexterity and an organic inclination toward such previously disparaged handicrafts as pottery.⁷

Although the migrants had departed from Mexico "mid-stream" during (or in many cases even before) the nationalist project, Hull-House programs actively incorporated them into Mexico's project of integration. The Kilns and other Hull-House programs such as folkloric celebrations of official Mexican holidays helped transform the emerging patriotism of the migrants into a form of cultural nationalism that had a definable aesthetic and cultural content borrowed directly from Mexico City.

Esperanza Domínguez McNeilly, a Mexican migrant who arrived in Chicago in the late 1930s and later worked as a nurse at the Hull-House summer camp, explained that Mexican festivals and other events at Hull-House helped migrants "honor their culture" and create a sense of community. Throughout her adult life, McNeilly expressed a strong ethnic pride that she traced back to her experiences at Hull-House.⁸ Although Hull-House encouraged acculturation, it also helped migrants

learn about and embrace Mexican national culture.

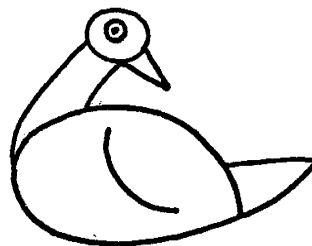
It is important to underscore that although Hull-House programs helped Mexican migrants like McNeilly navigate new experiences in Chicago by connecting to *mexicanidad*, it did not connect the migrants to their own unique migratory backgrounds or even their *patrias chicas* (ancestral homelands). Instead, Hull-House connected the migrants to the new definition of a folkloric, homogenous, and ethnicized national character as it was emerging out of Mexico City.

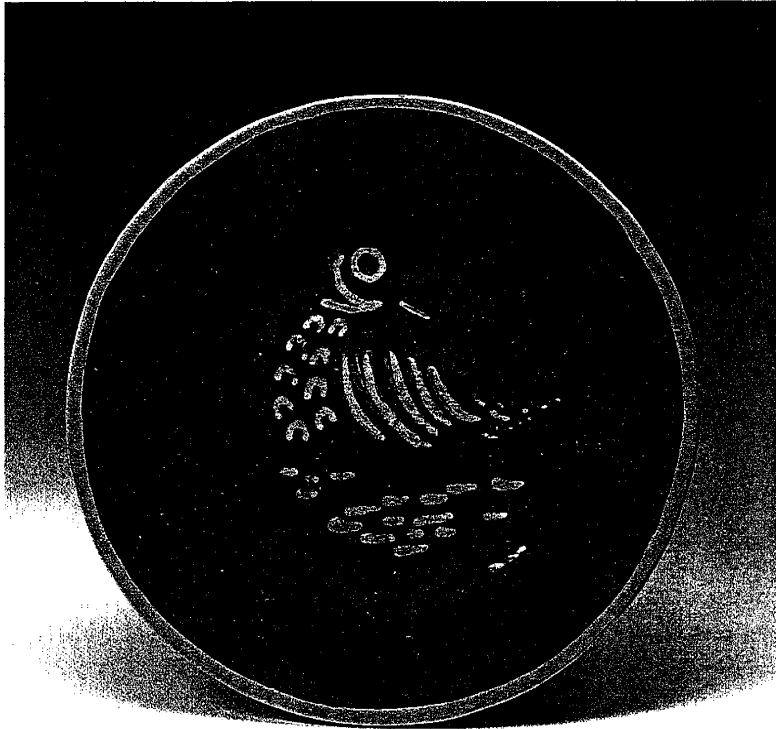
Aesthetically, rural art in Mexico varied dramatically across regions. Even within a single region such as central Mexico, the source for many Mexican migrants in Chicago, styles ranged from art deco to "Aztec," from regionally based tastes to nationalized versions of the folkloric, and from Asiatic to European. What, then, was meant by "a traditional Mexican style" of craftsmanship or cultural performance? By "Mexican," Hull-House coordinators and teachers meant specifically the new style that was becoming validated and nationalized within Mexico after the revolution. It



Following rules for repetition, the seven Best Maugard motifs generate an infinite number of combinations and designs. In these examples, circles and lines create horizontal border designs. The center cross with arms bent originated in many ancient cultures. The patterns were used on Hull-House Kilns pottery.

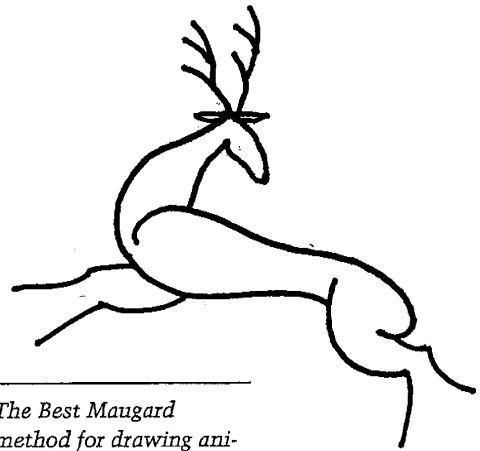
The Best Maugard method for drawing birds consisted of an egg-shaped body with other parts drawn separately.





Bird design in dark blue, rust red, yellow, white, and olive green on a plate (d. 1 1/8 in.).

Works by Mexican potters at Hull-House. The vase in the front right features running deer symbols based on the Best Maugard method for creative design.



The Best Maugard method for drawing animals such as this deer began with joining two circles to form the body and then adding the neck, head, legs, and tail. Careful combinations of motifs created both a symbol of an animal and a sense of motion.



was a modernist form that blended diverse regional styles and erased overtly modern influences in favor of "authentically indigenous," seemingly primitive expressions.

One of the main sources upon which Hull-House Kilns teachers drew to teach migrants to create "Mexican" art was the motif book created by the Mexican nationalist artist Adolfo Best Maugard. Best Maugard claimed to have developed an art method by which students could combine a set of seven basic motifs to express a profoundly and uniquely Mexican sensibility. His theory evolved from his experiences with Franz Boas, the Columbia University anthropologist for whom Best Maugard worked and who was already famous for his theories of cultural relativism. After making thousands of drawings of designs found on the Mexican pottery shards Boas had collected, Best Maugard noticed that the motifs "had been repeating." So he "divided them and realized that there were only seven fundamental motifs of drawing, the basic universal forms of decorative art, there were seven, like the musical notes, and the basic colors."⁹ From those seven basic motifs, he observed, every culture in the world had created its own distinctive aesthetic.

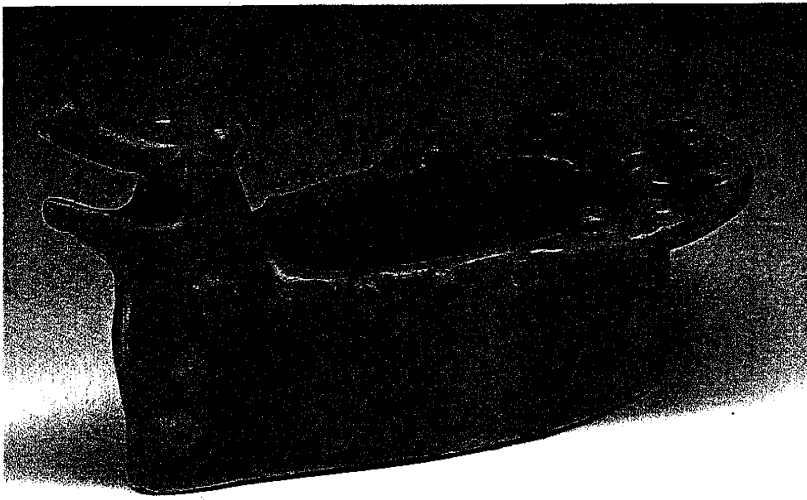
Best Maugard published his ideas in 1923 as *Método de dibujo: Tradición, resurgimiento y evolución del arte mexicano* (literally: Method for Design: The Tradition, Resurgence, and Evolution of Mexican Art). The book outlined an art education program through which students would combine and improvise upon the basic motifs to create authentically Mexican art, and public schools in Mexico eagerly adopted the method. Three years later, Best Maugard published a revised and translated version of the book, *A Method for Creative Design*. Myrtle Meritt French adopted that version to teach

Mexican migrants at the Hull-House Kilns to create Mexican-influenced pottery.

Rather than rely solely on books such as Best Maugard's, teachers at Hull-House traveled directly to Mexico to experience the Mexican renaissance firsthand. Emily Edwards, the second director of the Hull-House art program, studied painting in Mexico and drew inspiration from the nationalist, pro-indigenous murals of Diego Rivera. Morris Topchevsky, another teacher at Hull-House, studied at the San Carlos Academy in Mexico City. From Mexico City colleagues they adopted a particular understanding of what it meant to be authentically Mexican, and, by using Best Maugard's book and collaborating with such visiting Mexican artists as Manuel Álvarez Bravo, they passed on that understanding to Mexican migrant students at Hull-House.

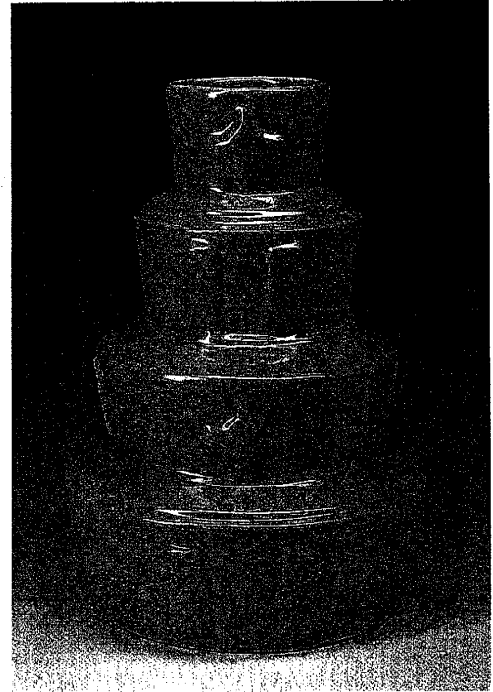
The Mexican promotion of popular arts dovetailed with the arts and crafts movement in the United States during the 1920s and early 1930s to create what one historian has termed the "enormous vogue of things Mexican" from the mid-1920s through the mid-1930s.¹⁰ The Hull-House Kilns tapped into the U.S. interest in things Mexican. It trained migrants to create Mexican arts, and it promoted and marketed their work. In the meantime, the Mexican migrants who worked as potters at Hull-House learned, reproduced, sold, and celebrated a form of Mexicanness that, in fact, was not drawn from their own personal life experiences.

Given the source of *mexicanidad* celebrated at Hull-House and by Mexican nationalists, we must ask to what degree the "imagined Mexican community" and the kind of collective identity promoted within Mexico and embodied in Hull-House's Mexican pottery reflected (or helped shape) the lives of the migrants themselves. To what degree did the *mexicani-*



Above: Orange-red stylized animal head on tray (h. 3½ x 6⅞ x 4 in.) is incised "CF" for Camillo Fuentes and has "Hull-House Art School" rubber-stamped on its bottom.

Right: Yellow glazed tiered vase (h. 9 in.).



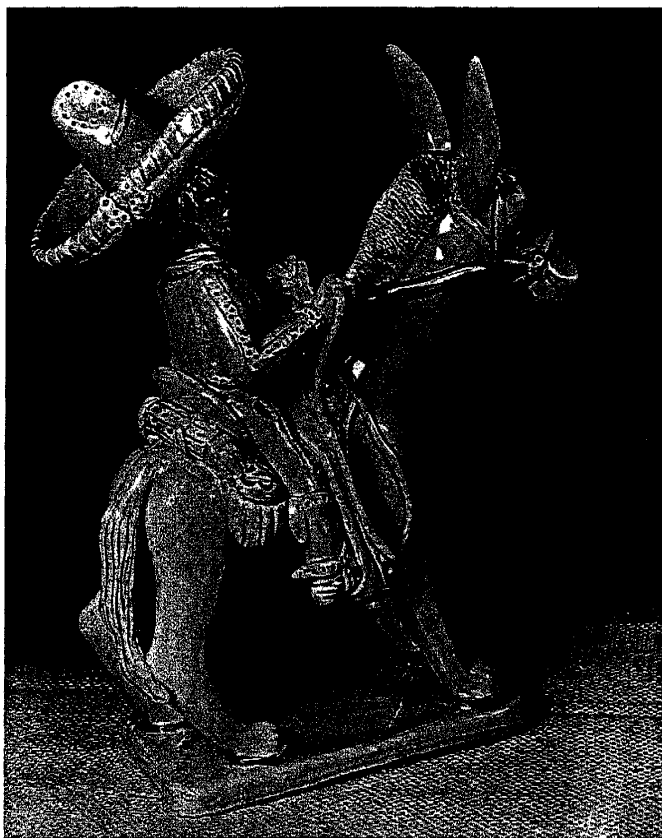
dad invoked by these Mexican arts resonate with the cultural identity of Mexican migrants in Chicago?

CHICAGO'S MEXICAN MIGRANTS

Scholars often dismiss Hull-House reformers as single-mindedly driven by a sense of Anglo-Protestant superiority, but a study of Hull-House's interactions with the Mexican migrant population during the 1920s and early 1930s complicates such an image. Rather than look down on the migrants, reformers tried to understand them. In their efforts to do so, however, they seem to have leaned upon Mexico City nationalists. From these intellectuals and reformers, it appears, Hull-House residents learned

to view their migrant neighbors as natural artisans able to express, through handicrafts, the essence of Mexican national culture.

The ideas of Mexico City and Hull-House reformers bore only a tenuous connection to the experiences of the migrants who arrived on Chicago's Near West Side. In the late 1920s only 15 percent of the Mexicans in Chicago came directly from Mexico. Forty-nine percent arrived after stopping over elsewhere in the United States (usually in the Midwest) for two to eight years—32 percent for more than eight years.¹¹ Based on what is known about later immigrants, we can hypothesize that most of the migrants spent several additional years moving about Mexico before crossing the border. Given their extended absence from their homeland and relative youth, it was the process of migra-



Cowboys on horseback were a popular cultural image for the Mexican artists at Hull-House.



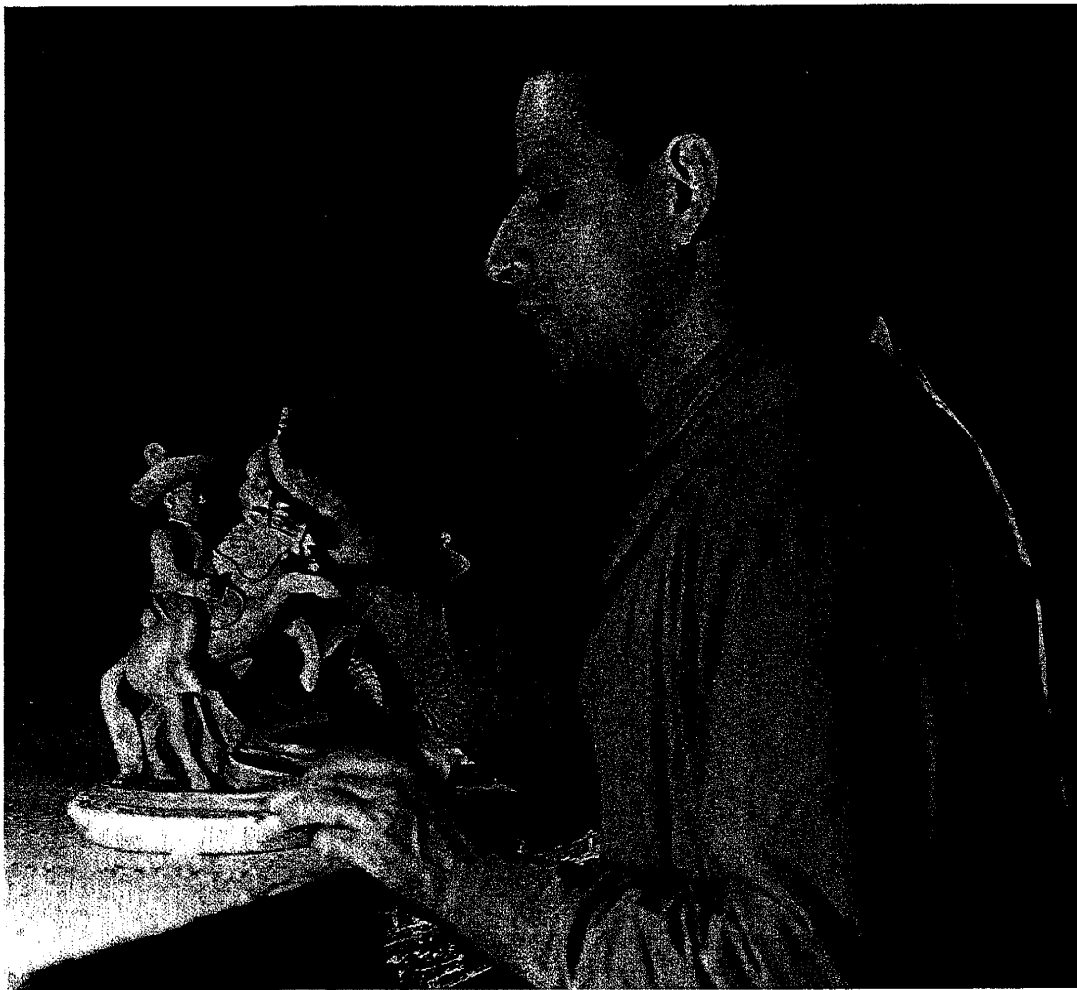
A traveling Mexican band with folk instruments, by Miguel Juárez.

tion that shaped their lives rather than a cultural persistence emanating from central Mexico, whether based on handicrafts or otherwise. The personal experiences upon which they might have drawn to create community in Chicago, then, were born of migration. Moreover, few if any of the migrants who became potters at the Hull-House Kilns had previous experience with the craft. Thus, in addition to leaving central Mexico without a strong sense of nationalized cultural identity, the migrants left with little, if any, direct experience producing the handicrafts that Hull-House reformers assumed they were predisposed to create. Their embrace of a Mexican nationality might be understood best as a product of cultural innovation rather than a perpetuation of ancestral traditions. Despite its recent invention, this unifying and supposedly stable, or traditional, national culture began to supersede regional and migra-

tory identities. As migrants discovered and embraced the cultural dimensions of their Mexicanness within the context of an extended absence from Mexican soil, Hull-House became one of the sites for the construction and enactment of this unifying *mexicanidad*.

FORJANDO PATRIA IN CHICAGO

Hull-House was one of the many civic and cultural organizations that helped contribute to a deepening of the cultural content of *mexicanidad* and also helped link the migrants with the Mexican project of national integration. Yet it would be a mistake to view it simply as a top-down process. Much of the push for unification and the search for a Mexican identity in Chicago came from within the community itself. Whether the impulse came from the top or the bottom, however, it faced serious obstacles. Al-



Mexican potter at Hull-House finishing a figurine of a mounted Charro.

though most of them spoke Spanish (which was atypical for Mexico where in 1916 Gamio estimated that 75 percent of the population spoke no Spanish), they were nonetheless a heterogeneous group. That diversity, together with the lack of a preexisting national unity exacerbated by the experience of migration, made it difficult for local leaders (such as Spanish-language journalists, community activists, and budding politicians who sought to capitalize on an ethnic block of support) to turn the migrants into a cohesive community. In the Hull-House area, proponents of unification faced the added challenge of working with a population that was dispersed throughout the neighborhood rather than concentrated in particular blocks or along specific streets.¹²

Recent studies of migrants in Chicago demonstrate that what the migrants did share, in addition to the Spanish language, was exposure

to anti-Mexican discrimination. Whether or not they saw themselves as united, they were discriminated against as a unit. One migrant in 1925 gave the opinion that in Chicago they were all treated as though part of a unit and that it made no difference how one defined himself or herself, because, according to whites, "We will always remain Mexicans." Or, as another migrant explained, "[We are] all Mexicans anyway because the *guëros* [Anglos] always treat us alike."¹³

Migrants used Mexican patriotism to engage in local struggles over identity, racism, religion, and politics. Pressure by dominant society for Mexicans to acculturate and adopt "American" identities was countered in the 1920s by pressure from leaders within the Mexican migrant community to invigorate an allegiance to Mexico. Moreover, ethnic alliances were the norm in Chicago, and Mexicans



A dancing couple at the Hull-House fiesta, a celebration of folkloric traditions that helped define a homogenous Mexican identity.

soon learned that the only way they could exert a political voice was to mobilize along ethnic lines.

One of the earliest ways migrants used their newfound patriotism was to counter Americanization projects and critique compatriots who veered from the emerging ideals of self-conscious identification with Mexico. One example occurred in a Spanish-language newspaper article published in 1925, two years before the creation of the Hull-House Kilns and at a time when Mexican national identity among migrants still lacked much of the folkloric content it would acquire during the late 1920s and 1930s. The author exalted the ideal migrant as one who "proclaims his [Mexican] nationality once and a thousand times, not denying it even if he is in grave danger." That ideal was then contrasted to the "renegade Mexican" who denies his background: "This type of Mexican to whom we refer, dresses regularly in the 'jazzz' [sic] style, and has forgotten the little and bad

Spanish which he learned in his country. He regards everything Mexican as bad, and antiquated. He chews tobacco, and worst of all, he denies his nationality, no matter how dark-skinned he is." The author denounced individuals by name for weakening the community by "passing themselves off as Spanish [instead of Mexican] before the authorities and before all who have had the disgrace to know them." Had those individuals, he asked, gained anything by denying their true nationality? He challenged them to write to the newspaper and explain "what they have gained or how they have bettered their situations by passing themselves off for Spaniards." Such denunciations were not personal attacks, the reporter claimed, but "part of the campaign of purification in which we have engaged."¹⁴ Threats of public shame in the pages of newspapers and on the tongues of neighbors pressured migrants to proclaim their Mexican nationality. Those who leveled such threats did not encourage

migrants to focus on their ancestral *patrias chicas* or their migratory experience. On the contrary, they urged them to honor a prescribed patriotism.

Some migrants agreed that they should reinforce their ethnic ties to Mexico but argued that economic and political success in Chicago demanded U.S. citizenship. By the mid-1920s, as tensions within the community grew over Americanization and Mexicanization, and despite some voices calling for the adoption of U.S. citizenship, the very suggestion that one might follow this advice was enough to earn public and private condemnation. Historian Gabriela Arredondo recounts a case in which a government relief worker tried to convince a Mexican migrant family to apply for U.S. citizenship so they could apply for aid. When the González family resisted, the aid worker confided that their neighbor, a Mrs. Díaz, had already changed her citizenship and was as a result now benefiting from relief funds. Rather than be swayed by this news, the family was aghast. "Did Mary Díaz change flags!?" they asked with shock.¹⁵ Even the head of the Benito Juárez Society of Chicago won fellow migrants' ire when in 1925 he urged them to apply for U.S. citizenship so they could more effectively participate in local politics. He was stung by accusations of selling out his homeland and denying his identity.¹⁶

Spanish-language editorialists urged migrants to embrace their Mexican citizenship but warned them to keep their distance from all celebrations of U.S. patriotism, especially commemorations of the Fourth of July. One editorialist fanned migrants' fears of white prejudice by warning them of "a barrier of racial hates [sic]" erected by Chicago's whites. It would be best, he urged, for migrants not "to present ourselves and mingle with [whites], for

our own good and for the name of the country we should stay away from their festivity."¹⁷

Trapped between the black and white color line in Chicago, migrants carved out their space in politics by learning to act as proud Mexican nationals.¹⁸ Despite frustration with U.S. prejudice against dark skin, migrants themselves openly expressed racism against people of dark skin, not only African Americans but also their own darker (that is, indigenous) compatriots. One, for example, explained that she was embarrassed to associate with another. "What will the Americans think?" she asked. "He is so dark."¹⁹ Migrants often asserted that racial prejudice was peculiar to the United States, but, in fact, racial prejudice permeated all levels of Mexican society and manifested itself through prejudice against Indians and Afro-Mexicans and also in the tendency for individuals to look down on those who had darker skin or who observed indigenous cultural practices. In Chicago, migrants aspired toward a common ethnic and national identity as Mexicans, but, like most national groups, they were unable to entirely set aside their own intergroup racial biases.

To exert a political voice in Chicago, migrant leaders knew they had to mobilize as an ethnic block. In this setting, the growing pressure within the community for individuals to identify themselves as Mexican sojourners temporarily displaced to the United States conflicted with a countervailing pressure to identify themselves as ethnic U.S. citizens. Out of that tension such groups as mutual aid societies gained cultural authority for their efforts to unite the population around post-revolutionary *mexicanidad*. On the one hand, these organizers taught Mexican history, sponsored celebrations of Mexican holidays, and encouraged migrants to proclaim proudly their

mexicanidad and define themselves as foreigners within the U.S. context. On the other hand, they aspired to transform migrants into a homogeneous ethnic block capable of promoting its own political agenda as part of the Chicago political landscape.

By sponsoring events such as *orquesta típica* performances and patriotic celebrations, they, in the words of one member, hoped to help transform the migrants into "a homogeneous group that may accomplish *our* final end, that is, to give *our* best efforts for the good of *our* beloved country."²⁰ Such comments (or those like the one quoted at the beginning of this chapter about the power of events like September 16 to unite the community) make it clear that cultural forms—music, the arts, and dances that narrated and gave aesthetic expression to national identity—were becoming just as important as pragmatic experiences around work and politics or against racism in shaping a Mexican identity for migrants.

Those kinds of cultural expressions made being Mexican a cultural and national identity, not just a political or patriotic identity. The cultural dimension of this identity was all the more important for migrants who left their country partly out of dissatisfaction with the state and its institutions. When they celebrated their Mexican nationality, they did not express faith in Mexican institutions. Instead, they laid claim to a way of life based on food, music, and social mores. A way of life that they trusted bonded them to other migrants in Chicago and to other citizens across Mexico.

As a result of their experiences in Chicago and at Hull-House, migrants looked beyond ancestral *patrias chicas* toward a larger, imagined community. They learned to celebrate not the local traditions of their forebears, and not

their long migrations across Mexico and through the U.S. Midwest, but rather the nationalized forms gaining currency across Mexico. Mexicans in Chicago, then, stretched the Mexican project of nation-formation far beyond the country's political boundaries.

The forms they increasingly celebrated were the same ones promoted by Mexico City nationalists, particularly after Hull-House expanded its role among them in the late 1920s. The pottery program and Mexican fiestas sponsored by Hull-House linked the nationalist project in Mexico to the migrants' search for identity, and institutions such as the Hull-House Kilns helped them learn about and celebrate emerging nationalist art forms. In so doing they helped infuse the migrants' emerging nationalism with distinctive cultural content that grew out of the Mexican nationalist project centered in Mexico City.

Despite the links between the Chicago migrants' search for identity and the Mexico City-based nationalist project, there is a significant difference between how Mexicanness was elaborated in late-1920s Chicago and in late-1920s Mexico City. Within Mexico, cultural nationalists promoted a collective national culture that incorporated diverse ethnicities and languages into a Hispanicized and "modern" whole. But in Chicago, instead of focusing on a plural-ethnic society, migrants celebrated their Mexican nationality as a homogeneous ethnicity unto itself. The turn toward a homogenized mestizo Mexican national identity signaled a flattening out of internal diversity and multiple ethnicities and languages contained within Mexico and even among the migrants.

**BEING MEXICAN IN CHICAGO:
THE MYTHICAL OPPOSITION BETWEEN
AUTHENTIC MEXICANIDAD AND
DECADENT POCHISMO**

It was in the daily practice of culture, art, music, and the other expressions of cultural identity and community solidarity that Mexican migrants in 1920s Chicago forged a collective identity and gave it relevance for their lives. In this realm, such organizations as Hull-House took on particular importance for the migrants of the Near West Side, Chicago's largest concentration of Mexicans at the time. Hull-House provided recreational and cultural activities, including pottery classes and folkloric festivals, that not only eased the transition into U.S. society but also helped provide the cultural discourses and practices that aided migrants in defining themselves as a united ethnic community. Certainly, Hull-House helped them navigate U.S. society. Just as important, it also helped them forge a unified community around postrevolutionary Mexican culture. In this way Hull-House became a forum for extending the Mexican state project of national integration beyond Mexico's political boundaries. It did not pressure migrants on the Near West Side to leave behind their southern homeland. Instead, it helped transform their longing for home into something that in form and content emerged as consonant and co-eval with the Mexican identity and culture coming from the Central Plateau.

It is important to reiterate that Hull-House, rather than encouraging migrants to form a distinctive Mexican American identity that drew upon migrants' personal experiences, encouraged them to identify as members of the Mexican national community, temporarily or permanently displaced to Chicago. It is ironic that by focusing on the emerging Mexican national tra-

ditions rather than the vernacular traditions born of migrants' personal experiences, Hull-House joined with other forces such as Mexican mutual aid societies to define the migrant community as in-between, hybrid, and needing to reach out either to mainstream Anglo-Saxon America or to mestizo, postrevolutionary Mexico.

Hull-House contributed to, rather than challenged, migrants' growing sense that cultural wholeness existed only in being purely Mexican or purely "American." The search for cultural poles carried within it an inherent denigration of migrants' personal experiences as migrants and as culturally diverse individuals.

Perhaps the migrants found the idea of a stable, traditional *mexicanidad* alluring because of their anxieties about their offsprings' abilities to navigate the urban setting of Chicago. Perhaps they were anxious about the widening gap between their own values and those of their children. The migrants seem to have found attractive the sense of wholeness promised by the new (yet "timeless") postrevolutionary *mexicanidad*. They seem to have embraced a mythically stable Mexican national tradition as a foundation to critique the supposedly hybrid and inauthentic urban experiences of their own children or, more often, their next-door neighbors' children.

As migrants in Chicago struggled to define themselves as Mexican, as American, or, eventually, as Mexican American, they feared that their offspring might become *pochos*. In vernacular parlance, a *pochito* was a cultural bastard who no longer knew how to recognize or appreciate the authentic culture of the Mexican homeland yet also failed to become a true North American. Behind the term lay the myth that all Mexicans, before migration, shared a unified national culture, and that the urban realities of

life in Chicago endangered one's place within this national culture. Yet, as the foregoing historical examination demonstrates, the idea of Mexican authenticity emerged concurrently with, rather than predated, the idea of *pochismo*. The two categories were created simultaneously within the context of debates over cultural integration, nationality, and authenticity.

As the Great Depression deepened, many migrants returned to Mexico. If they had left Mexico as peasants or workers focused on their *patrias chicas*, perhaps they returned as Mexican citizens ready to pledge allegiance to a modern nation-state. Within Chicago, Hull-House, together with other organizations, created the cultural bridges that linked local migrants with the cultural transformations underway in Mexico.

Those migrants who stayed in Chicago continued to acculturate to U.S. society. They did not disappear into the social fabric of the city; instead, they embraced a Mexican identity and continued the uneven, back-and-forth approach toward becoming Mexican American. Studies of

Mexican migrants or of the Mexican American community cannot take for granted a solid, preexisting definition of Mexicanness that supposedly provided a cultural center and offered stability to migrants who suddenly found themselves amid uncertainty in the United States. When we acknowledge that the emergence of an "American" identity, a Mexican identity, and a Mexican American identity were simultaneous rather than sequential occurrences, we can begin to ask about the implications this insight might hold for understanding the emergence and development of Chicano culture.

Whether migrants stayed in Chicago or returned to Mexico, they often accepted, at least in part, postrevolutionary *mexicanidad*. Each confronted the difficulty of fitting his or her unique past and aspirations into new definitions of a timeless, collective Mexican national culture. Perhaps Esperanza Domínguez McNeilly was not alone in her effort to embrace both Americanization and Mexicanization in a personal struggle finally to become "a whole person."²¹

NOTES

The writing of this chapter was funded by the Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in History at Northwestern University. Thanks to Peg Strobel for encouraging my interest in the Mexicans of Chicago, to Cheryl Ganz for her help with sources, and to Frank Safford for helping bring me to the area. I especially thank Michael McCoyer for his help with the archives and for sharing material he collected from the Redfield Papers at the University of Chicago.

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