

CASA MAÑANA

THE MORROW COLLECTION OF MEXICAN POPULAR ARTS

*Edited by Susan Danly
Introduction by Ilan Stavans*

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Banco de México, Fideicomiso Museos Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo, fig. 27, figs. 41–45, page 146.

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THE MORROWS IN MEXICO

NATIONALIST POLITICS, FOREIGN PATRONAGE,
AND THE PROMOTION OF MEXICAN POPULAR ARTS

Rick A. López

Dwight Morrow's ambassadorship to Mexico (1927-30) served as a prelude to the Good Neighbor Policy later adopted by the U.S. government in the 1930s and 1940s. This is a fact generally acknowledged by studies of U.S.-Mexican relations. But these same studies overlook the equally indelible mark that Dwight Morrow and his wife, Elizabeth Cutter Morrow, left upon Mexican national culture and U.S.-Mexican cultural relations. Consideration of the parallels between Dwight Morrow's diplomacy and the couple's cultural activities raises important questions about how we commonly think about cultural imperialism. Such consideration suggests that cultural imperialism has not always acted bluntly or nefariously, and that it has sometimes been impossible to draw a line between what was foreign and what was national.

When Dwight Morrow arrived as ambassador on October 23, 1927, he entered a country that was reconstructing itself after ten years of revolution, one hundred years of imperialism and internecine warfare, and three hundred years of colonialism. He was entering a society in

transition and encountering a people for whom the past weighed heavily upon the present.

After Mexico won independence from the Spanish empire (1810-21), it was almost immediately racked by factional fighting and racial, class, and regional conflicts. This domestic volatility was exacerbated by the secession of Texas in 1836 (annexed by the United States six years later), a caste war and attempted secession in the Yucatán Peninsula, a war against U.S. imperialism that ended in 1848 with Mexico losing more than half of its territory (followed by the forced sale of the Gadsden Purchase of 1853), and a French intervention that temporarily imposed a Hapsburg emperor on Mexico (1864-67). The regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) temporarily quelled endemic instability and stanchd foreign intervention. Under Díaz's stern rule the government stabilized its finances, pacified the countryside, and inaugurated an era of rapid modernization and economic expansion. It lured foreign expertise and investment with lucrative contracts, social tranquility, high profit margins, and a compliant

labor force. Profits soared for industrialists, landowners, and investors, and the federal treasury celebrated an unprecedented budget surplus. The rural poor paid the price for this prosperity, which was achieved through labor repression, depressed wages, forced peonage, appropriation of peasant lands, and tight control of local politics by regional strongmen personally loyal to the dictatorship.

When Díaz rebuffed efforts to open the political system, the situation exploded into the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Rebels expelled the Porfirian dictatorship, but soon split among themselves and dragged the country into a decade of violence beyond the control of any one class or faction. The revolution dissolved central authority and left the country with a 10 percent decline in population. The fragile economic and infrastructural base was left in shambles, and Mexico entered an economic recession. In the absence of a stable central government, political and economic authority devolved into the hands of regional *caudillos*, each capable of rousing on short notice thousands of peasants into battle to topple opposing leaders.

In addition to its own internal divisions, the Mexican Revolution was plagued by foreign interference, particularly from North America. The United States invaded twice during the conflict (in 1914 and again in 1916) and relentlessly manipulated the outcome of the revolution through formal and informal channels, including gunrunning and clandestine negotiations with rebels perceived to be amenable to U.S. interests.

After 1920 the triumphant northern faction assumed federal stewardship and General Álvaro Obregón won the presidency. As chief executive (1920–24), Obregón was a consummate negotiator who won the allegiance of military leaders, intellectuals and artists, regional strongmen, labor leaders, rural revolutionaries, and agrarian reform activists. With broad domestic support his regime stabilized the federal government and began the process of creating a postrevolutionary state. In

the meantime, cultural and political leaders began the task of instilling the recent revolution with a nationalist narrative and purpose. Fallen revolutionary leaders like Emiliano Zapata, Francisco (Pancho) Villa, and Francisco Madero became ideologically united posthumously as the revolution was mythologized. Increasingly, fallen heroes were seen as having given their lives for the popular classes who were now rhetorically elevated as the heirs of the Mexican Revolution. In the process, the new leadership defined its task as that of discovering and fulfilling the interests and needs of the Mexican people.

The United States withheld recognition of the Obregón government until 1923, when the two countries signed the Bucareli agreements, which exchanged diplomatic recognition for exceptional guarantees for U.S. property holders and indemnity claimants. Obregón's handpicked successor, Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–28), not only faced the continued threats of imperialist aggression and the challenges of national integration and state formation, but also had to confront international debt problems, a religious civil war (1926–29), and the inflexible demands of U.S. oil companies for exemptions from the Mexican Constitution and revolutionary reforms.

With the United States' invasion of Nicaragua in 1926, Mexican leaders were understandably troubled in 1927 when their northern neighbor threatened military intervention in the name of special legal exceptions for U.S. oil companies operating in Mexico. Ambassador James Sheffield (1924–27) fanned the flames of conflict with his constant attempts to force Mexican compliance through threats and intimidation, which he insisted were the only ways to deal with "a Latin-Indian mind, filled with hatred." Sheffield and the U.S. business community in Mexico also frequently insulted postrevolutionary leaders by openly praising the prerevolutionary dictatorship, while dismissing current leaders as Bolshevik conspirators unfit to rule their own country.¹

Domestic pressures in the United States compelled Coolidge to cool off the situation just as it approached the boiling point. He decided to replace Ambassador Sheffield, who had proven himself a firebrand and a racist, with someone who could cultivate cordial relations between the two countries and resolve the economic and political impasse. Coolidge's old Amherst College classmate, political supporter, and policy advisor Dwight Whitney Morrow stood at the top of the candidate list.

Dwight Morrow, with his subtle negotiating skills and reputation for honoring national sovereignty, seemed the obvious choice for improving U.S.-Mexican relations. During his years as a corporate lawyer and J. P. Morgan partner, he had demonstrated a deep understanding of Latin America and had made nonintervention and respect for national sovereignty his leitmotifs. Morrow liked to see himself as a man of the people and a populist. While he may have abstractly favored large ideals, he acted conservatively, promoting "rational" incremental reforms, the status quo, and corporate expansion. When speaking in favor of the League of Nations, for instance, he insisted that "all advances in international cooperation [must] come slowly." His biographer aptly summarized this side of Morrow when he wrote that the ambassador liked "vast idealism in theory," but "always preferred tiny idealisms in practice."² The supposed opposition between the ideal and the possible guided Morrow's career in law and finance and would undergird his activities in Mexico.

Although he worked as a corporate lawyer and international financier, Dwight Morrow had long been drawn to academia and diplomacy. As early as 1910 Elizabeth Morrow had confided to her diary that her husband was "dissatisfied with his work" in corporate law and finance and would have preferred "politics or law school teaching." Although the couple's desire for material comfort compelled him to reject a law professorship at

Columbia University and the presidency of Yale University, Morrow still harbored hopes of eventually leaving law and finance for something more intellectually and politically engaging. When he became a partner in J. P. Morgan he began to worry that his banking ties might limit his future political ambitions. Very much a man of his class and era, torn between desires for financial prosperity, moral virtuousness, and spiritual fulfillment, Morrow justified his career decisions to himself, stating:

Capital has a tremendous influence directly and indirectly upon government. I suppose this will continue to be true until the capitalist system is abolished, which it may be some day. Meanwhile, some owners of capital will use their power wisely and some will use it unwisely.

Morrow felt that he could help assure that capital might be used wisely. At the same time, through acrobatics of reasoning, he insisted that even his efforts to eviscerate the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 served the greater good.³

During World War I, Morrow took a leave of absence from J. P. Morgan first to participate in strategic planning, then to assist in postwar reconstruction. He returned to the firm after the war, but after the invigoration of wartime mobilization, he found New York banking dull and monotonous, if lucrative. He immersed himself in public life (chairing academic, charity, and civic organizations) and soon became an active member of the Republican Party and a major backer of future U.S. President Calvin Coolidge. He also acted as a government advisor, consistently counseling against U.S. aggression and insisting that a war in defense of financial interests (whether for oil or debt) "does not and cannot accomplish the desired result." Between 1914 and 1927 he served on several banking commissions to attract international investment to Mexico, to improve its

credit rating, and to continually renegotiate the country's loans.⁴

His knowledge of Mexico, his skill as a negotiator, and his desire to keep the two countries out of war made him an ideal candidate for the ambassadorship vacated by James Sheffield. But when Coolidge offered him the post, Morrow's wife Elizabeth was unenthusiastic. The couple had met while Dwight was a student at Amherst College and she was at nearby Smith College, and they married soon after her return from post-graduate studies at the Sorbonne in France. Elizabeth had agreed to abandon the artistic and social circles of Cleveland to follow her new husband to the east coast. And now that she had firmly established herself in the New York area and was raising a family, she was reluctant to pick up and leave. To Elizabeth Morrow, Mexico represented a social and cultural exile. She complained that her husband deserved better after his years of support for Coolidge.⁵ But her husband's enthusiasm for the post soon swayed her.

When the Morrows arrived in Mexico City, the United States and Mexico seemed poised on the brink of war. As U.S. opinion had it, postrevolutionary Mexico was a pit of banditry, disorder, and mismanagement that could spill over into chaos at any moment. This was precisely the kind of intellectual, diplomatic, and economic challenge Dwight Morrow needed. The short, disheveled ambassador was greeted warmly by the Mexican public and viewed with circumspection by journalists and politicians. Conscious of Morrow's connections to New York banking and corporate law, a reporter from the Mexico City newspaper *El Universal* declared that Mexico could now "deal directly with a leader of the dominant class in the United States rather than with an intermediary who could only guess what his distant clients expected of him." Even *El Machete*, the Mexican Communist newspaper, which denounced Morrow's appointment as proof that Wall Street dictated U.S. foreign policy, argued that at least

Morrow, as a banker, belonged to a rival clique to the oilmen.⁶

International leaders, Mexican officials, and the new ambassador quickly facilitated a rapprochement between Mexico and the United States. Several Latin American leaders wrote President Calles praising Morrow's respect for national autonomy. Morrow knew that Mexican leaders would read the U.S. newspapers, so prior to his departure for Mexico he held several press conferences in which he praised Mexican leaders and expressed his optimism about a diplomatic resolution. He also met with Mexican and North American labor leaders, bankers, politicians, oil men, and scholars, read many books on Mexico, and examined State Department records, all in an effort to gain a better understanding of the historical basis and the various sides of the political debacle. In Mexico a number of government officials unofficially advised Morrow of Calles's willingness to reverse much of the petroleum legislation if it could be done without overt pressure from Washington.⁷

Mexicans welcomed Morrow's personable style—dubbed "ham and eggs diplomacy" after he and President Calles began holding informal meetings over breakfast—as a relief from Sheffield's hard-line approach (fig. 12). His unencumbered style soon opened up genuine lines of communication. And though critics of Mexico's repression of Catholicism lashed out at Morrow for cozying up to Calles, the ambassador accepted these charges as the price for opening an international dialogue.⁸ To smooth tensions, Morrow also politely shunned the anti-Mexican embassy staff, preferring to rely on his own private staff of advisors and analysts.

His first concern was to resolve the impasse over oil regulations. In a reversal of previous U.S. policy, Morrow announced to Calles that petroleum matters were not a diplomatic problem, but a domestic issue to be decided within the Mexican legal system. Pleased with the ambas-

sador's overture and eager to reciprocate, Calles flexed his political muscle to assure that the Mexican Supreme Court rejected as unconstitutional the application of revolutionary reforms to the U.S. oil companies. The ambassador and the president adopted a similar strategy of graciousness and reciprocity to iron out conflicts over land, religion, and debt (though it is important to note that the conflicts were merely cooled or postponed rather than resolved). The ambassador, for example, forced U.S. plaintiffs to plead their cases within the Mexican judicial system rather than to the embassy. In exchange, Mexican officials made sure that many court rulings favored North American plaintiffs.⁹

A year after Morrow was appointed, Washington officially supported his diplomatic approach with an unprecedented statement: "The [U.S. State] Department feels, as does Ambassador Morrow, that such questions, if any, as may hereafter arise, can be settled through the due operation of the Mexican administrative departments and the Mexican Courts."¹⁰ This new atmosphere of good feeling gave both Morrow and Calles maneuvering space to pursue their own agendas. For Morrow this meant shoring up U.S. financial and diplomatic interests, and for Calles it meant consolidating domestic authority.

Over time Morrow's disarming mantra of respect for national sovereignty enabled him to surreptitiously manipulate Mexico's internal political and economic decisions. He used his

Fig. 12. *Sarape*, ca. 1927. Mead Art Museum. Gift of the children of Dwight W. Morrow (Class of 1895) and Elizabeth C. Morrow (1955-715). This type of "presentation" piece from the Morrow Collection features a portrait of President Calles. Other popular figures featured on sarapes of the period included the Morrow's son-in-law, Charles Lindbergh, and George Washington.



influence with the Mexican government and the Catholic Church to negotiate a *modus vivendi* in the Mexican religious civil war. Morrow also gained the confidence of the Mexican finance minister, Luis Montes de Oca, and the two began meeting regularly in Mexico City and at Morrow's weekend home in Cuernavaca. The ex-financier counseled Montes de Oca on international finance and helped draft Mexican letters to the International Committee of Bankers on Mexico. He safeguarded Mexico's credit rating by personally negotiating a moratorium on debt payments and more favorable loan terms. Morrow even gained U.S. military aid to defeat an anti-Calles rebellion within Mexico.¹¹

His influence in Mexican politics ended abruptly in 1930, during the final year of his ambassadorship. Grumbling had already begun about his manipulation of domestic affairs, and he was accused of hypocrisy regarding his expressions of respect for national autonomy. When Morrow announced his 1930 bid for the New Jersey seat in the U.S. Senate and traveled to North America to launch his campaign, critics accused him of using Mexico as a stepping-stone for his own political ambitions. But the real blow fell during a New Jersey political rally when Alexander McNab, an ex-military attaché to Mexico, indiscreetly praised Morrow's ability to manipulate the Mexican government. In a public speech, McNab credited Morrow with the church-state accord of 1929 and with having brought economic stability to Mexico. McNab bragged that "there is no department of government in Mexico which [Morrow] has not advised and directed," and praised the ambassador for having taught Finance Minister Montes de Oca how to do his job. McNab even spoke of the many memos and letters signed by Mexican officials that were actually written by Morrow, and he publicized Morrow's unprecedented influence in determining Mexican government appointments.

Mexican officials scrambled to abate the political fallout. The Mexican ambassador to the United States asked that all future political speeches by McNab be cancelled, but the damage was irreversible. Mexico City newspapers added to the humiliation by printing translations of McNab's speech as proof that government leaders had sold out their country to Wall Street and U.S. imperialists. When the ambassador returned to Mexico from his New Jersey campaign he found that his name had become anathema. Officials refused to meet with him. They even returned his memos unread. Fortunately for Morrow, he won the New Jersey campaign and soon departed for the U.S. Senate.¹²

Morrow's diplomatic style and expressions of respect (rather than demands and dictates) had won him unprecedented influence in Mexican internal affairs and helped assure that Mexico would comply with the will of the United States. George Wythe, the commercial attaché to Mexico, went so far as to claim that "Mr. Morrow [was] more dangerous to Mexico than was Ambassador Sheffield." Whether Morrow was indeed "dangerous" is sure to remain a subject of debate.¹³ But his diplomatic methods certainly blurred the line between imperialism and a respect for sovereignty—a pattern that extended into the cultural activities of Dwight Morrow and his wife, Elizabeth Cutter Morrow.

The famous Mexican novelist and political commentator Carlos Fuentes recently observed that the most enduring legacy of the Mexican Revolution has been the cultural transformation and collective self-discovery that came in its wake. After the revolution, Mexican researchers, artists, and intellectuals "discovered" the country's rural culture. This turn toward *lo nuestro* ("that which is uniquely ours") was driven by a concern for culturally uniting the population, but it was also part of an affirmation of autonomy against the political and cultural imperialism of the United States and Europe.

The nationalist climate placed the Morrows in a delicate position, but they managed to defuse suspicion by publicizing their genuine fascination and respect for Mexican culture. But what did the Morrows mean by “Mexican culture”? Mexican politician and ethnologist Luis Cabrera had just recently declared that when one spoke of the “Mexican people” one had to ask “which people?” because the population was so fragmented as to be “totally foreign to each other.”¹⁴ In a culturally and geographically heterogeneous country recently torn apart by civil war and rife with cultural, political, and racial conflict, there was no simple category of “Mexican culture.” And so when speaking about the Morrows’ celebrating Mexican culture we must also ask what they understood as the nation’s culture.

The Mexico that captured the Morrows’ fascination was the one promoted by postrevolutionary intellectual and political leaders as “Indian Mexico” (fig. 13). This pluralist proindigenous view contrasted sharply with the view that had been espoused by prerevolutionary Mexican elites, who had celebrated their European heritage and Mexico’s Aztec ancient glories while disparaging the present-day “backward Indian masses.” Postrevolutionary nationalists united around a desire to transform Mexico’s geographic diversity and wealth of languages and cultures into a modern, culturally cohesive nation, and to assure that the fruits of development and modernization would serve the masses rather than a small white Europeanized elite. And in their search for a nationally distinctive culture around which to unite the population, they looked to Mexico’s indigenous and peasant traditions.

Some of this reevaluation of the Indian can be traced back to Mexicans’ experiences with European modernism. During their studies in Europe many Mexican artists and scholars had experienced firsthand the European search for national distinctiveness rooted in the peasantry. As the violence of the revolution waned and

these Mexican sojourners returned home, they saw their country and its people through new eyes. The largely indigenous rural population that they had previously overlooked or taken for granted now captured their imaginations as exotic, romantic, and *muy nuestro*. They discovered that, like Europe, Mexico had its own peasantry that could serve as the basis of a distinctive national identity. But unlike Europe, Mexico’s peasantry was racially different from the elite classes, and culturally it seemed to belong to a completely different world. These returning sojourners set out to discover Mexico’s distinctive nationality, which they claimed was rooted in the rural indigenous masses.

In 1921, as part of the Mexican centennial celebrations, several members of the intelligentsia organized a series of nationalist events that exalted Mexico’s living indigenous cultures. Foremost among these events was the Exposition of Mexican Popular Arts, which redefined “curiosities” as art and esteemed popular aesthetics as both Indian and distinctly Mexican. One reporter describing the event noted that “to the eyes of the majority of the attendees, not just the foreigners, but also the Mexicans [from Mexico City],” the arts, clothes, music, and dances of rural Mexico “seemed very exotic and original.”¹⁵ (For further discussion of this exhibition, see James Oles’s essay in this volume.) Inspired by their experiences abroad and by the promises of their revolution, the new cultural leaders esteemed the rural traditions that they discovered and celebrated them as “lo más mexicano de México” (“the most Mexican of Mexico”). Over the course of Obregón’s presidency Mexican arts became more overtly polemical and focused increasingly on Indian and popular aesthetics. Academics, artists, and government officials took a growing interest in the culture of the rural lower classes. Most of the new initiatives emerged under the auspices of the newly created federal Ministry of Public Education

(Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP), which during the early 1920s was headed by José Vasconcelos. Although he was a fervent nationalist committed to culturally unifying the nation, Vasconcelos believed that the masses had to be uplifted by inculcating them into Western classical traditions. Indian and peasant traditions, he argued, were signs of backwardness that needed to be tolerated only until the population learned to understand and appreciate Western art and philosophy. But by the mid-1920s, after

Vasconcelos had left the SEP for an ill-fated political career, pro-Indian nationalists like Manuel Gamio and Moisés Sáenz rose to important positions in the department. They rejected much of Vasconcelos's cultural elitism and instead promoted a positive attitude toward Mexico's indigenous and rural culture.

As Mexican artists and intellectuals searched for "lo nuestro" in music, art, literature, and popular arts, they were increasingly joined by U.S. writers, artists, researchers, and aficionados living



Fig. 13. Canseco Feraud, *The Capital is the Americas fore-finger!!!*
But . . . Mitla is the Race's fore-finger and the Tule is God's Capital,
 watercolor, 1928. Amherst College, Archives and Special
 Collections. The image depicts Dwight Morrow kneeling before
 the ancient and venerated cypress tree of Tule in Oaxaca, said to
 have the largest girth of any tree in the Americas. To either side
 are views of the U.S. Capitol and the Zapotec ruins of Mitla.

in Mexico. Immediately following the outbreak of the revolution, waves of U.S. political tourists and writers flocked south to witness the unfolding of the first popular revolution of the twentieth century. By the middle of the decade, interest in formal politics combined with (and sometimes was displaced by) a fascination with Mexican popular culture and things Indian.¹⁶ These U.S. intellectuals, artists, academics, and journalists were sympathetic to the Mexican postrevolutionary policies of social reform and celebration of Indianness, and they countered the negative images of Mexico promoted by Sheffield and the North American business enclave. Historian Helen Delpar correctly points out that while U.S. intellectuals in Mexico were far from tools of the Mexican government, they did provide “an interpretation of Mexico that represented an alternative to the critical view espoused by many U.S. diplomats, members of Congress, businessmen, and religious leaders.”¹⁷

Many of these foreigners brought with them access to markets and prestigious institutions that helped consolidate the artistic and cultural impulses loosely initiated by Mexicans. To take just one example, in 1929 the Mexican-American art historian and anthropologist Anita Brenner, student of the writer Ernest Gruening and the anthropologist Franz Boas, translated her personal experience with Mexican artists and intellectuals into the first major published account of what she coined the “Mexican Renaissance.” Constructing what would become an enduring narrative of postrevolutionary Mexican arts, Brenner’s account, entitled *Idols Behind Altars*, emphasized artists who drew inspiration from the experiences and aesthetics of Mexico’s popular classes.

Brenner wrote that “in the span of one generation Mexico has come to herself, and has discovered the suffering and hopes of its own people.” The “scenic and racial beauties” of Mexico, she argued, were still “largely unmapped, unexploited” and still distinct from “western civilization.”

According to Brenner, Mexico was a living expression of the profound intermingling and layers of Spanish and indigenous cultures. She drew attention to both high art and vernacular art, arguing that the latter would provide the aesthetic foundation upon which to build something cohesive and truly national.

When Diego Rivera arrived from Europe in 1921 he told reporters that he had returned so as to study the aesthetics of the Indian popular classes, because he believed they could provide an unexplored fount of inspiration and beauty for postrevolutionary nationalist art. Almost a decade later, Brenner suggested the fulfillment of Rivera’s aspiration when she declared: “Folk-art influence is . . . now common in the work of metropolitan artists.” For Brenner as for Rivera and many other members of the bohemian circles of artists and intellectuals of Mexico City, the promotion of vernacular art was part of the broader postrevolutionary emergence of Mexico’s collective and repressed past. *Mexicanidad* assumed metaphysical proportions that could be conveyed fully only by aesthetics, whether in the form of popular art, high art, music, colonial architecture, folk dances, or parallel kinds of supposedly subconscious human expression.¹⁸

The reconsideration of Indianness and the promotion of an ethnicized Mexican national identity were initiated by Mexicans. But foreigners like Anita Brenner, William Spratling, Carleton Beals, Frank Tannenbaum, Ernest Gruening, Stuart Chase, René d’Harnoncourt, and countless others were crucial translators of these loosely coordinated impulses, ideas, and initiatives into a cohesive movement that could be defined, studied, and recounted. The importance of translating events into a cohesive story should not be underestimated. As postcolonial critic Edward Said points out, “nations themselves *are* narrations.” The “power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging,” he argues, “is very important to

[postcolonial] culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them."¹⁹ In postrevolutionary Mexico, foreigners helped promote the narrative of Mexico as it was being constructed by the new generation of cultural nationalists who viewed their country through the lens of international modernism and nationalism.

Mexicans themselves reinforced the authority of these foreigners. In their debates about issues relating to the development of the Mexican countryside, for instance, Mexicans frequently made their case to other Mexicans by citing foreign scholars of Mexico, as if to suggest that the foreign observation was more authoritative. They also sought legitimization through affiliation with U.S. academic and research institutions.²⁰ Not surprisingly, foreigners in turn sparred amongst themselves over the accuracy of their respective claims about Mexico. And just as Mexicans supported their cases by deferring to foreigners' observations, foreigners in turn solicited Mexican approval. In this way foreigners and Mexicans fed off one another, with foreigners often playing the role of scientific observers and Mexican intellectuals and officials cast as passive authenticators.²¹

The importance of foreign narrators lay not in any superior capacity to understand, interpret, or relay the narrative, but rather in the asymmetrical relations of power between the United States and Mexico. Americans north of the border had the time, resources, and authoritative voice to interpret Mexico both to itself and to the rest of the world. And they had the institutional affiliations and market connections to make certain that their narrative dominated.²² Moreover, the narrative promoted by these foreigners neatly reinforced the postrevolutionary Mexican state's efforts to bolster its own legitimacy, to garner international recognition and support, and to promote a unifying national identity for its population. The Mexican government's reliance on foreign specialists and foreign institutions was

heightened by a severe shortage of Mexican researchers. And some Mexicans even went so far as to argue that because foreigners were free of the anti-Indian prejudices that the Mexican middle and upper classes were taught since childhood, they were more open to Mexican indigenous culture, the "real" Mexico, than were nationals, who had to be taught to value things Mexican.²³

By the 1930s, foreign and domestic promotion of indigenous culture as *muy mexicano* was passing from dabbling nationalists, aficionados, artists, and journalists into the hands of increasingly specialized academics, mainly art historians, anthropologists, ethnologists, linguists, historians, archaeologists, and folklorists. This shift toward specialized study was advocated within Mexico by figures like Manuel Gamio, Moisés Sáenz, and Miguel Othón de Mendizábal, as foreign researchers (a disproportionate number of them associated with Franz Boas) poured into Mexico to explore and document its indigenous culture. Specialized Mexican and foreign researchers congregated in Mexico City and fanned out across the Mexican countryside in an effort to "make known" the Mexican people.²⁴

When the Morrows came to Mexico in 1927, they entered the country just when an ethnicized cultural identity was beginning to take hold. Through direct patronage and indirect support stemming from their involvement in a range of U.S. research and arts organizations, the Morrows contributed to the consolidation of an Indianized Mexican national identity. Mexican and foreign artists, collectors, and intellectuals who themselves were avid supporters of an Indianized view of the nation acted as the Morrows' cultural guides (fig. 14). It was this particular ethnicized and romantic view of Mexico as an "Indian nation" that became the object of the Morrows' affection. And it was this Mexico that the Morrows so eagerly promoted both within Mexico and abroad.²⁵

Like many international elites of the era,

Dwight and Elizabeth Morrow celebrated the figure of the premodern artisan who worked with his hands and put his soul into his work. Spanish colonial-style architecture was built and maintained by masons rather than specialized construction companies. Guided by whim rather than plan, this architecture epitomized an imaginary past for which the Morrows nostalgically longed and which they claimed to have found in Mexico. In 1928 and 1929, Dwight Morrow, along with William Spratling, Doctor Atl (Gerardo Murillo), Jorge Enciso, Frederick Davis, and Moisés Sáenz, helped orient the research of U.S. architects Richard Garrison and George

Rustay. The following year, Garrison and Rustay published the first study of Mexican domestic architecture, celebrating its craftsmanship and its blending of Spanish and indigenous traditions. They included examples from across southern Mexico and even provided measured drawings and instructions on how to achieve the same sense of picturesque craftsmanship.²⁶

But it was in Cuernavaca that the Morrows made their most direct expression of affection for colonial Mexican architecture and craftsmanship. They took their first trip to Cuernavaca in 1928, where they lunched at the colonial home of the British minister. The house next door

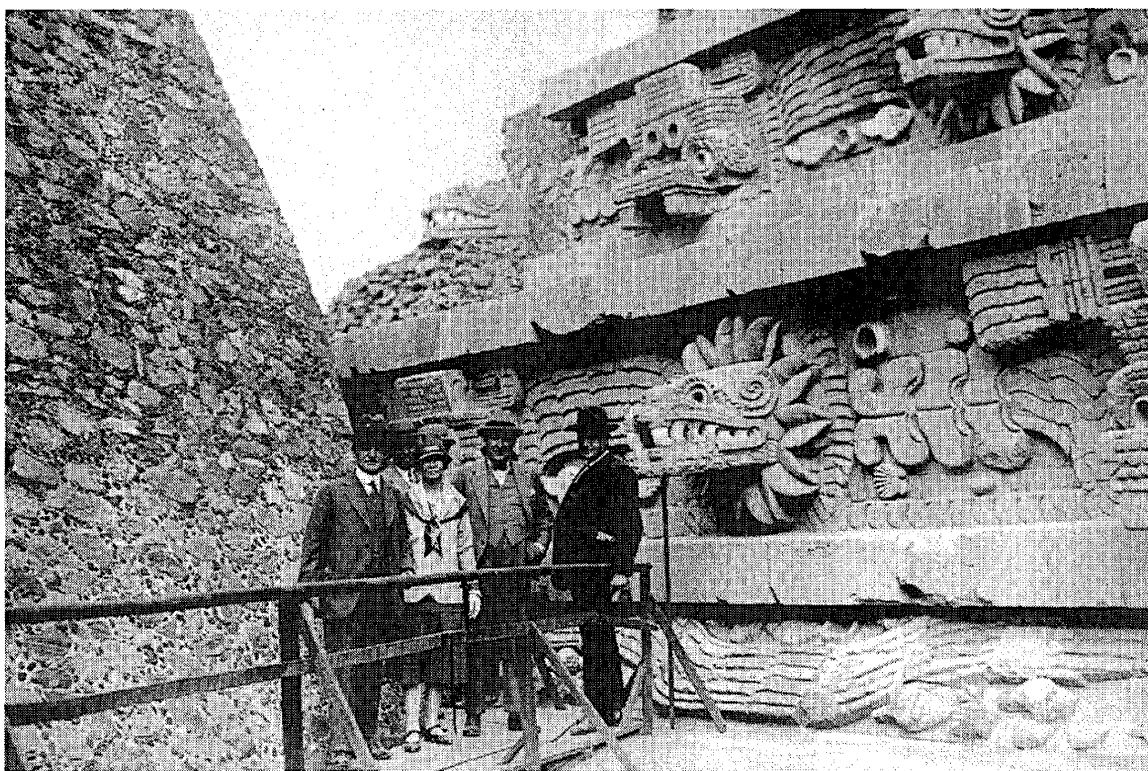


Fig. 14. *Dwight and Elizabeth Morrow Visiting the pre-Columbian Ruins at Teotihuacán, gelatin silver print photograph, 1927.* Amherst College, Archives and Special Collections. The Morrows visited this important archaeological site, the largest city in pre-Hispanic Mexico, soon after their arrival and owned a copy of Manuel Gamio's two-volume treatise on its history.



Fig. 15. *Dwight Morrow Inspecting a Oaxacan Pottery*, August, 1929, gelatin silver print photograph. Amherst College, Archives and Special Collections.

belonged to the expatriate art dealer Frederick Davis, who agreed to sell to the Morrows. They then purchased adjoining lots and hired a mason who, under the supervision of Davis, extended and remodeled portions of the home and built a *mirador* (tower), swimming pool, and gardens looking toward the peaks of the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl. According to his biographer, Harold Nicolson, Dwight Morrow “came to love this house and garden more than he had ever loved a house before” and would “spend hours selecting objects of Mexican handicraft to decorate the rooms, or in placing Indian jars and water-pots at fitting distances upon the steps and terraces”²⁷ (fig. 15; for further discussion of the Morrows’ home in Cuernavaca, see Susan Danly’s essay in this volume).

Scholars sometimes assume that foreigners

saw in Mexico what they wanted to see, while Mexican cultural elites were privileged to the “real” Mexico. A more critical assessment suggests that during the 1920s the views of many of these resident foreigners basically reinforced the discourses already being developed by Mexicans themselves. The discourse was forged by Mexicans, but it was consolidated through foreign scholarship, markets, and institutions. Public figures like Rivera, who came to represent the quintessential expression of this new vision of *mexicanidad*, achieved further fame in Mexico *after* being validated by New York and Parisian art critics. These foreign critiques lent legitimacy to the new orientation of Mexican artists and intellectuals, and this now-validated orientation circulated back into Mexico with ever-greater authority. At the same time, the Morrows and

other foreigners played a similar role internally, by acting as foreign patrons validating nativist art within Mexico.

The couple's collaboration with William Spratling is instructive in this regard. Spratling had come to Mexico in 1926 to study Mexican architecture. He became connected with some of the most prominent Mexican and foreign artists, politicians, and intellectuals engaged in the validation of indigenous culture. Spratling claimed that, in contrast to many of the earliest North American arrivals, who were interested in Mexico as a land of upheaval, he was interested in "normal life in a small Mexican village, avoiding the bloody scandal that newspapers at the time so delighted to play up."²⁸ But it was not until his contact with the Morrors that Spratling was able to make a real mark on Mexican culture through mediating a mural commission and then by creating the Taxco silver-jewelry industry.

Because of their affection for Cuernavaca, the Morrors wanted to leave a gift that would increase the town's prestige. Spratling suggested that they commission Diego Rivera to paint a mural in the Cortés Palace in the center of Cuernavaca. (On Rivera's mural, see the essay by Anthony Lee in this volume.) Spratling acted as intermediary between Dwight Morrow and the artist; both were asked to keep quiet about the fact that Morrow was paying for the mural. Much of Spratling's task in this situation was to avoid turning the connection between a U.S. ambassador and a self-proclaimed Communist artist into an international incident. Spratling negotiated the unusually high fee of U.S.\$12,000 for Rivera, which included a \$2,000 commission for himself. This sum, together with commissions he received for collecting popular art for the Morrors, enabled Spratling to buy a picturesque colonial home in Taxco just a few hours outside of Mexico City.²⁹

Prominent Mexican artists and intellectuals as well as foreign visitors passed through Spratling's Taxco home and imbibed his tales of how the

Mexican countryside was a largely undiscovered territory where childlike Indians were natural artisans who "lived simply" and "close to the soil." Some scholars now attribute Spratling's attitude to foreign exoticization or imperialist arrogance. While there is undoubtedly some truth to this, it is equally imperative that we acknowledge that Spratling learned to view Mexico in this way from his Mexican friends, like Diego Rivera, Roberto Montenegro, Jorge Enciso, Moisés Sáenz, and Doctor Atl, all of whom reveled in the exoticization of rural Mexico.

Spratling maintained close ties with the Morrors, who continued to shape his place within Mexico. On one occasion the ambassador commented to Spratling that though Taxco had once been one of the world's most important sources of silver, it unfortunately no longer had anything to show for it. He proposed that Spratling make something of this heritage. William Spratling soon hired goldsmiths from nearby Iguala and experimented with making silver jewelry in his Taxco shop, Las Delicias. With the Morrors' financial support and Spratling's knowledge of the U.S. art and jewelry market, the workshop became a successful business. Within a few years silversmithing became the most important industry in Taxco and one of the most important crafts in Mexico.³⁰

The Morrors' fascination with popular arts began with their arrival in Mexico. Although Elizabeth Morrow had been reluctant about moving to Mexico she fell in love with the country almost immediately upon their October 1927 arrival. She began private Spanish lessons, and, sometimes accompanied by her husband, she took frequent sightseeing trips with prominent Mexican artists and intellectuals. During her first weeks she became enamored with the sugar and chocolate skulls and skeletons sold by vendors for Day of the Dead (November 2). Elizabeth Morrow then began collecting popular art and became a regular at outdoor markets and antique shops. Many of her acquaintances in Mexico, like Moisés

Sáenz and William Spratling, shared her interest and helped her to learn more about popular arts and rural artisans and to acquire contemporary and antique pieces. But her main guide to Mexican popular arts was René d'Harnoncourt, who collected and sold handicrafts in the curio shop of Frederick Davis.³¹

Within two months of her arrival in Mexico, Elizabeth had become a regular client of d'Harnoncourt, who himself had only recently joined Davis after migrating to Mexico in January 1926. In Vienna, d'Harnoncourt had studied chemistry but was forced to leave when the part of his great grandfather's estate from which he derived his income was expropriated by the government after the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He had no contacts in Mexico and could find no work as a chemist, so he supported himself by sketching bullfights for tourists and touching up advertising photographs. In Vienna, d'Harnoncourt had avidly collected antiques and this background soon landed him a job buying Mexican antiques for a German client in Mexico; before long he was working for Davis.³²

D'Harnoncourt learned about contemporary Mexican crafts by studying the antique ceramics, lacquers, and textiles owned by prominent Mexican families. He also began trekking across the countryside to visit artisan towns. If a town no longer produced a certain sought-after style of art, or any art at all, he would excavate amongst the hills and ancient kilns and trash pits of the town to find remnants of the artistic past. He urged rural artisans he met to "return to the old methods, with the result that some of the old-time designs in lacquer and pottery [were] coming back again." As he gained experience, his trips became more organized, and he began hiring *cargadores* and muleteers to transport goods from Oaxaca, Michoacán, Guerrero, and other parts of Mexico to the capital.³³

Dwight and Elizabeth Morrow first met

d'Harnoncourt shortly after they arrived in Mexico. By December 1927, Elizabeth Morrow had become a regular client of d'Harnoncourt, who was just starting to learn English.³⁴ Over the next few years, he helped her assemble an impressive collection of Mexican popular arts, drew illustrations for her children's book about Mexico, *The Painted Pig* (see fig. 32), advised her on decorating Casa Mañana, and purchased Mexican easel paintings on the Morrows' behalf. D'Harnoncourt also passed time at the Morrows' colonial home in Cuernavaca musing with other national and international guests about the indigenous influences in Mexican arts.

Because of d'Harnoncourt's experience with Mexican popular and high art, his revival of handicrafts in rural Mexico, and his personal amiability and cultured manner, Dwight Morrow and Homer Saint-Gaudens of the Carnegie Foundation hired him in 1929 to collect and curate an international exhibition of popular arts. The exhibit was the brainchild of Dwight and Elizabeth Morrow, who used their connections with the Carnegie Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the American Federation of the Arts to gain sponsorship and venues for the exhibition.³⁵

The idea for the exhibition seems to have grown out of exchanges between Dwight Morrow and Robert De Forest, president of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Morrow met De Forest while attending Columbia Law School with his son, Johnston De Forest. Throughout his career in finance and corporate law Morrow worked closely with Robert De Forest, and the two often served together on trustee boards and fundraising committees. In 1927 De Forest offered to loan Dwight Morrow anything he wanted for the decoration of his home from the materials that archeologist Zelia Nuttall and art dealer Frances Flynn Paine had been collecting for him in Mexico.³⁶ De Forest explained that this particular collection had come together after

he had collected some Mexican majolica (later known as talavera ware) for an exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The ceramics apparently created such a stir and a market for Mexican majolica that he had asked Nuttall to collect other types of material, with the hope of eventually creating an entire Mexican gallery at The Metropolitan Museum, or at least a show on Mexican arts. But Mexican customs had blocked export of the objects, which now languished under Nuttall's custodianship.³⁷

Dwight Morrow was intrigued by the potential for improving international understanding that an international traveling show of Mexican arts offered. In 1929, after discussing the matter with Frederick Keppel, director of the Department of Fine Arts at the Carnegie Institute, Morrow hired William Spratling to draft a proposal for such an exhibition. Keppel and De Forest offered support from The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Federation of Arts, along with "all the machinery" for such an exhibition. Morrow wrote back to inform them that he himself had already secured funding from the Carnegie Foundation, which was sending Saint-Gaudens to make the necessary arrangements. Morrow explained that while many of the exhibition objects would come from regional museums and private Mexican collections, others would also come from Elizabeth's now-substantial collection.³⁸

From a list of six potential curators proposed by Dwight Morrow, Saint-Gaudens selected d'Harnoncourt, who immediately solicited the support and recommendations of Mexican collectors and government officials.³⁹ Moisés Sáenz, an influential director in the Mexican Ministry of Education and a close friend of the Morrrows, was enthusiastic about the show, which he suggested should aim to "orient and invigorate the popular arts and recover the importance of our folklore." Sáenz expressed his hope that the exhibition might travel to both Mexico and the United States, and that it might draw attention to gov-

ernment plans to create a national museum devoted to popular art and a society for the study of folklore (Museo Nacional de Arte Popular and Sociedad para el Fomento del Folk-lore). He stressed the importance of the show for presenting Mexican identity, which he saw as vested in rural indigenous aesthetic expression, and recommended the inclusion of galleries on popular dress, music, dances, popular celebration, myths, popular painting, and murals and a diorama of a typical Mexican Indian house. He also submitted a list of twenty-three prominent artists and intellectuals who he felt would make an effective organizing committee. Without exception, all the people on his list were advocates of "discovering" Mexico's Indianness.⁴⁰

After visiting Mexico, Saint-Gaudens wrote the official plan for the exhibition, which would include four sections: colonial high art, colonial popular art, contemporary high art, and contemporary popular art. Working within Saint-Gaudens's guidelines, and after consultation with Mexican officials, intellectuals, artists, and collectors (most of whom were already his close associates), d'Harnoncourt decided to focus only on those arts that were "truly Mexican"; that is, those that seemed to be influenced by Mexico's indigenous culture (a criterion frequently invoked by Mexicans like Atl, Gamio, and Sáenz). According to this postrevolutionary view of Mexican national culture, European influences were largely a veneer imposed by a small white elite, underneath which Indian culture lay dormant and almost untouched. Following the lead of Manuel Gamio and other Mexican intellectuals, d'Harnoncourt wrote that Mexico had long been ruled "by a class which did not recognize the existence of a Mexican civilization, and which was in any case incapable of understanding either its value or its strength." D'Harnoncourt, together with his Mexican and North American collaborators, hoped that the *Mexican Arts* show would demonstrate to

Mexicans and North Americans alike the long development of Mexico's unique culture.

Displayed side by side with contemporary paintings of the "Mexican Renaissance," popular art was valued as an expression of the collective subconscious of the nation, an "authentic" and unmediated expression of true Mexican identity, "the truest form of self expression of the Mexican people." In the text for the exhibition and in the many speeches he gave as he traveled with the show, d'Harnoncourt stressed the Indianness of the artisans, who, he explained, worked in "remote parts of the country still unknown" and untouched by modernity, foreign influences, or dehumanizing mass production. D'Harnoncourt readily admitted the intellectual debt he owed to

his Mexican colleagues, above all to Doctor Atl. It was they who taught him how to understand and appreciate Mexican popular arts and the "real" Mexico. And now, thanks to the patronage of Dwight Morrow, this nativist view of Mexico was being shared with audiences throughout Mexico and the United States.⁴¹

3

In the end, the contradictions of Dwight Morrow's formal diplomacy became the subject of public and diplomatic controversy. Although most scholars have simplistically dismissed the Morrows' cultural activities as inconsequential efforts to promote a diplomatic agenda, such a view misses

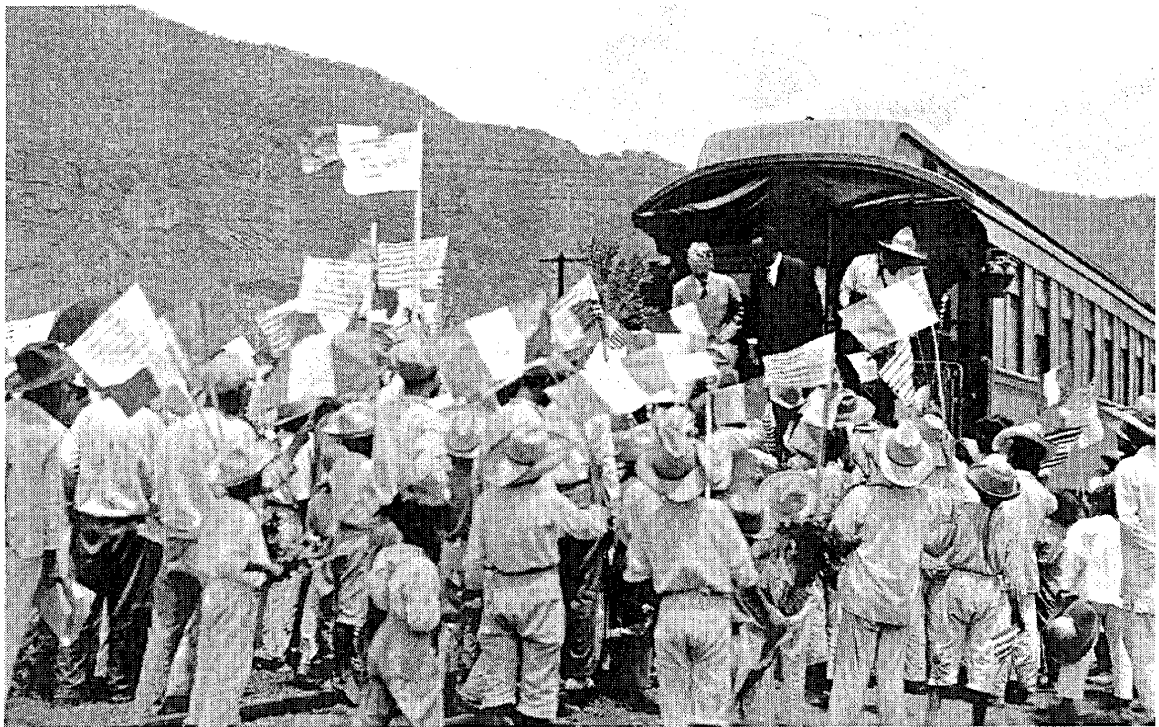


Fig. 16. *Dwight Morrow Welcomed to Oaxaca by Local Campesinos*, August 1929, gelatin silver print photograph. Amherst College, Archives and Special Collections. This photograph was taken on one of Morrow's official visits to the state of Oaxaca, where he was feted with Indian dances and visits to local craft shops.

the far deeper and lasting impact. The interpretation of Mexico patronized by the Morrors, the one “discovered” by postrevolutionary Mexican nationalists and foreign enthusiasts and promoted by foreign institutions, markets, and structures of knowledge, endures even today in government institutions, nationalist discourses, and the international imagination. And during the late 1930s, it was this vision of Indian Mexico that underlay much of President Lázaro Cárdenas’s domestic policy and bolstered Mexican resistance to U.S. economic imperialism. And it was this Mexico that Mexican intellectuals, artists, and politicians rediscovered in the 1960s and 1970s as a new wave of anti-imperialist nationalism swept across Mexico, accompanied by a growing tourist industry. Today nationalists persist in their invocations of this ethnicized Mexican identity. It even enters the language and strategies of the indigenous autonomy movements, most notably the EZLN in Chiapas.

In his recent biography on Diego Rivera, the popular writer Pete Hamill observed that Rivera gave “a nation an identity.”⁴² By blending his own talent, European experiences, and nativist nationalism, Rivera “made something that was not there before: a unifying, celebratory image of Mexico.”⁴³ In his art, Rivera unified a people long fractured by history, language, racism, religious and political schism and declared, “you are all Mexico.” By visually unifying Mexicans into a timeless *mestizaje* (racial and cultural mixture),

Rivera erases the complicated, and often contentious, history of the struggle to create an ethnicized national identity. The Morrors, like Mexican and foreign intellectuals, artists, and researchers, played a part in consolidating this view of Mexican national identity.

Recognition of the roles played by the Morrors and other foreigners in consolidating an ethnicized anti-imperial Mexican national identity forces us to question present-day views of nations as closed monoliths. It also prompts us to doubt the assumption that foreign involvement has always been at odds with “true” national identity and national interests. Yet, rather than discount the impact of imperialism, it is necessary to recognize that it has operated in more subtle and ambiguous ways than is often assumed. In the case of the forging of Mexico’s ethnicized nation identity, the particular ways Mexicans and foreigners interacted, and the ways ideas were debated, spread, and consolidated, were deeply shaped by the realities of inequality of economic and political power between Mexico and the United States, and by the persistent imperial threat posed by the “colossus of the north.” The very success of U.S. cultural imperialism in Mexico is a testament, in fact, to its subtlety. Like Dwight Morrow’s disarming diplomacy (fig. 16), foreign cultural influence (whether from the United States or Europe) has always been most successful when it entered through the back door. ❖

(Overleaf) Fish-shaped Gourds, Guerrero, early twentieth century, lacquered gourd, (1955.644–648 and .661).