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**Mexican Art Exhibitions in New York as Cultural Diplomacy, 1928-
1932**

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1932**

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Report

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Dedication

For art enthusiasts, young and old.

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Abstract

Mexican Art Exhibitions in New York as Cultural Diplomacy, 1928-1932

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Matthew J. Butler

In the aftermath of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, the postrevolutionary state launched an innovative campaign that exported the country's emerging art and culture, which glorified its indigenous roots. The strategy of expanding its nation-building project abroad helped remake its image and radically improved U.S.-Mexican relations. This project investigates the first standalone exhibitions of Mexican modern and popular arts in the U.S.—the Art Center's 1928 Exhibition of Mexican Art and the American Federation of Arts' 1930-32 "Mexican Arts"—as cultural diplomatic efforts. Using empirical evidence, this project reveals the confluence of wealthy patrons, corporate sponsors, government officials, local artists, and museums and galleries in Mexico and the U.S. that made these exhibitions, both debuting in New York, possible. It argues that the success of the exhibitions, measured in public and critical reception, relied on the vision of Mexico curators offered and the access organizers had to established museum circulation networks.

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Mexican Art Exhibitions in New York as Cultural Diplomacy, 1928-1932

How does a country reinvent its national image after an internecine civil war? Following the 1910-1920 Mexican Revolution, U.S. journalists reduced the struggle to a series of anarchic outbursts. Cartoonists regularly portrayed Uncle Sam as a schoolteacher disciplining bandits in a bid for U.S. armed intervention in the region. Mexico's leaders understood that a failure to gain recognition in U.S. eyes carried dire consequences for the incipient regime. Their response was an innovative campaign that exported the nation's emerging art and culture, which glorified the country's indigenous roots. The strategy vindicated the revolution as a noble endeavor and radically improved U.S.-Mexican relations. The success of this strategy gave rise to a network of artists, intellectuals, government officials, corporate sponsors, and cultural institutions that undergirded an unprecedented cultural effervesce that shaped both national cultures.

My study investigates a critical facet of cultural diplomacy by tracing the development of Mexican art exhibitions in New York from 1928 to 1932. Scholars such as Helen Delpar, Rick López, and Anna Indych-López have argued that Mexican modern and popular arts show in the U.S. shared a vital role in transforming U.S.-Mexican relations. Yet no study to date has explored the way art flowed through transnational networks comprised of local artists, corporations, wealthy patrons, and politicians to promote a nationalist vision of Mexico on U.S. soil. An analysis of the first two major exhibitions of Mexican art—The 1928 Exhibition of Mexican Art and the 1930-32 American Federation of Arts “Mexican Arts” show—demonstrates the links between art, diplomacy, and Mexican cultural politics to fully understand the processes that allowed for renewed cultural and diplomatic understanding between U.S.-and Mexico.

The importance of these two exhibitions lies in the fact that they were the first to secure government and corporate sponsorship for diplomatic purposes. During the 1920s, there were a few lone galleries in New York City that offered Mexican modern paintings for sale. However, the 1928 Exhibition of Mexican Art was the first comprehensive show of Mexican fine and applied arts in the U.S. and the first to receive support from the Calles presidential administration, the National University, the Department of Education, the Mexican Consulate, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Ambassador to Mexico Dwight W. Morrow (1927-1930). The mammoth “Mexican Arts Exhibit” was developed by Ambassador Morrow and the federal American Federation of Arts, and garnered the support of the Department of Education, the Mexican Consulate, and the Carnegie Foundation. My analysis shows that the small 1928 exhibition, while not as successful in terms of public and critical art reception, solidified a network of patrons that made the 1930-32 “Mexican Arts Exhibit” a blockbuster traveling show that reached 500,000 museum-goers in the U.S.

My study reconstructs the role of the exhibition curators who crafted the vision of Mexican national culture presented for U.S. consumption: Anita Brenner and Austrian Count René d’Harnoncourt. Anita Brenner was a well-connected Mexican journalist of Jewish descent who published extensively in Mexico and the U.S. on what she coined “the Mexican Renaissance.”¹ The 1928 exhibition marked her first incursion in the world of gallery exhibitions and she would go on to serve on an advisory committee for the 1930-32 “Mexican Arts” show. Like Brenner, d’Harnoncourt was an expert in the emerging movement of Mexican arts

¹ Yolanda Padilla Rangel, *México y la revolución mexicana bajo la mirada de Anita Brenner* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes, Plaza y Valdes Editores, 2010), 14-15.

and was lauded for expanding the market for Mexican antiques and handicrafts in Mexico and the U.S.² This study analyzes how their personal take on the Mexican Renaissance—Brenner was an expert in modern painting while d’Harnoncourt favored folk art—influenced their curatorial choices. It uses public and critical art reception to evaluate how successful each exhibition was in promoting U.S.-Mexican diplomacy and changing an entrenched view of Mexican culture as primitive and barbaric.

HISTORICAL AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATES

This study bridges three historiographies that scholars have traditionally treated separately: Mexico’s cultural politics, international relations, and art modernism. This study contributes to a growing body of literature on cultural politics and the emergence of a hegemonic national identity in postrevolutionary Mexico. It furthers the work of Rick López’s seminal *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* by demonstrating how *mexicanidad* was “born out of the manner in which diverse cultural projects intersected with economic and political development, and more importantly, because of the ways the endeavor transform the political, economic, and cultural terrain on the local level.”³ Looking at the curatorial roles Brenner and d’Harnoncourt crafted for themselves in New York reveals that nation-building was the result of ongoing negotiations between U.S. and Mexican funders, politicians, and local actors. A study of cultural mediation illustrates the haphazard, unplanned nature of the postrevolutionary Mexican state’s bid to export their nation-building project abroad.

Researchers have, to a large extent, identified the political, economic, and intellectual forces in the U.S. and Mexico that created fertile conditions for cultural

² Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 111-112.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

diffusion between 1920 and 1935. Helen Delpar's 1992 *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* serves as the foundational text on which later studies drew on theoretically and methodologically. She employed a traditional understanding of cultural relations, which describes them as "a process of interaction between individuals and private institutions from Mexico and the U.S. at a time when neither government had as yet formally entered the field." She focuses her attention on the endeavors that constitute the *practice* of culture, such as "art, literature, music, the performing arts, scholarship, and journalism."⁴ The fruits of this practice flowed through carefully woven transnational networks that brought fine and popular arts to U.S. galleries and museums.

One of Delpar's major contributions is sketching the transnational networks—comprised of well-connected individuals, private foundations, and governmental bodies—that undergirded cultural exchange. From one geographic node, U.S. intellectuals with leftist leanings alienated by the politics and modernization of the Roaring Twenties went in search of the "authentic" in Mexico, which they saw as flourishing under the auspices of a socialist revolutionary government. The Obregón and Calles presidential administrations actively sought out these "political pilgrims" and provided them with funds and access to high-ranking officials. Thus, artists, journalists, and photographers such as Edward Weston, Ernest Gruening, Frances Toor, Frank Tannenbaum, Carlton Beals, Bertram D. Wolf, Katherine Anne Porter, Alma Reed, and René d'Harnoncourt were the first to interpret the aesthetic and political dimension of revolutionary Mexico for foreign audiences.⁵ From a second node, Mexican artists and intellectuals joined the exodus that brought 1.5 million immigrants to the U.S. during the

⁴ Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1992), vii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

early twentieth century and spearheaded the “Mexican Art Invasion” in New York. They promoted modernist and indigenous folk art in newspapers, art magazines, gallery shows, and exhibitions at the Weyhe Gallery, the Whitney Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Modern Museum of Art.⁶ Taken as a whole, their art, writing, and curatorial work repackaged Mexico as the birthplace of a deeply cultural and political renaissance that captured the American national imagination.

This study builds on López’s work on the intimate transnational interactions that shaped a new image of Mexican national culture abroad. López adds U.S.-trained Manuel Gamio, Miguel Othón de Mendizábal, Jean Charlot, Pablo O’Higgins, and Tina Modotti to the foreign cast of actors who promoted popular and indigenous folk arts. He argues that the efforts of “political pilgrims” were erased in the early 1930s as the Mexican elite became increasingly wary of U.S. political and economic power. Mexican artists, intellectuals, and state officials, many who had once advocated for collaboration, scrubbed transnational actors from the narrative of the nation’s past. Recovering the cultural mediation behind art shows helps dismantle the “selective amnesia” that erased the foreign contribution to *mexicanidad* and the cultural renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s.⁷

This study highlights a cultural mediator involved in organizing both the 1928 Exhibition of Mexican Art and the 1930-32 “Mexican Arts” show: prolific Mexican writer and art promoter Anita Brenner. Recent scholarship on Mexican modernism and cultural politics has elevated her to a more prominent location in the shifting artistic and diplomatic networks that facilitated cultural relations in this period. Both Alan Knight

⁶ Ibid, 27-53, 126-164.

⁷ López, *Crafting Mexico*, 97.

and Mauricio Tenorio gave a nod to her work in their keynote addresses at the 2014 Reunión Internacional de Historiadores de México. And Marcela López Arellano's dissertation, which analyzed Brenner's Jewish identity, received the 2015 Premio Goldberg for its contribution to Mexican Jewish history.⁸

Recent works have explored her diverse cultures and identities, while unearthing her formal and informal brokering. In 2010, Yolanda Padilla Rangel took a biographical approach in the first academic book length study of Brenner's life. She uses Brenner's archives, diaries, and personal correspondence to examine her "multiple gaze" and the way it influenced her representation of postrevolutionary Mexican art, politics, and culture.⁹ She concludes that Brenner's writings presented an image that was "extremely positive of the revolution and the country, which is quite consistent with [the view] offered to tourists in the forties."¹⁰ Moreover, Padilla Rangel traces Brenner's particular vision of an atemporal Mexico with "prehispanic indigeneity" at the heart back to Gamio, her Ph.D. professor at Columbia University, and Gruening, whom she conducted research for in Mexico City in the mid-1920s.

Another avenue of research examines Brenner's Jewish identity. Brenner began to fully engage with her Jewish heritage under the tutelage of Rabbi Steven Weiss in New York, where she moved in the fall of 1927. Marcela López Arellano's "*Análisis de narrativas de Anita Brenner (1905-1974)*," written under the direction of Padilla Rangel, analyzes Brenner's writings in U.S. Jewish newspapers such as *The Nation*, *The Jewish*

⁸ Mauricio Tenorio and Alan Knight, "Segunda sesión plenaria," (Keynote speeches presented at the XIV Reunión Internacional de Historiadores de México, Chicago, Illinois, September 18-21, 2014).; Enlace Judío México, "Premio Rabino Jacobo Goldberg 2015," *Enlace Judío*, February 3, 2015, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www.enlacejudio.com/2015/02/03/premio-rabino-jacobo-goldberg-2015/>.

⁹ Padilla Rangel, *México y la revolución mexicana bajo la mirada de Anita Brenner*, 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 34.

Daily Forward, *The Menorah Journal*, *The Jewish Morning Journal*, and *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency* during the 1920s and 1930s. López Arellano concludes that Brenner's identification as a Jewish immigrant in Aguascalientes, where she was born in 1905 and lived until 1916, colored her understanding of the Mexican Revolution in a powerful way, as she began to identify with marginalized indigenous populations.¹¹ Rick López also concluded that Brenner's dedication to improving Mexico's reputation resembled her commitment to vindicating the Jewish population. The anti-Semitic discrimination she experienced personally, as well as her knowledge of Mexican history and its erasure of the Jewish presence among Mexico's populace, prompted her to create a space for Judaism within the national discourse.

This study's intervention traces Brenner's active participation in the art world as a curator in the late 1920s and 1930s. Padilla Rangel has noted that Brenner played a crucial role in connecting not only each other, but also to U.S. art patrons and buyers.¹² However, a major critique of works on Brenner is that they rely mostly on her writings. This narrow focus sidesteps the concrete negotiations she handled with *la mexicanidad* (as she fondly referred to the Mexicans artists and intellectuals living in New York), Mexican state officials, and U.S. politicians, art dealers, and patrons in her cultural diplomatic work. Looking at Brenner's curatorial role in two art exhibitions shows how her cultural mediation and brokering operated on the ground. This approach conclusively

¹¹ Marcela López Arellano, "Género y escritura autobiográfica: Análisis de la primera narrativa autobiográfica publicada de Anita Brenner como escritora judía" (paper presented at the VI Coloquio Internacional "Historia de Género y de las Mujeres de México," Mexico City, Mexico, March 13-15, 2013). Also see, López Arellano, "*Análisis de narrativas de Anita Brenner (1905-1974)*" (PhD diss., Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2014).

¹² *Ibid*, 145.

shows the specific ways in which Brenner helped artists succeed by linking them to the U.S. art market and museum world.

In addition to focusing on Brenner, this report also sheds light on another figure well-known for cultural diplomacy and involved in both exhibitions: Ambassador Morrow. Much has also been written about Ambassador Morrow and his promotion of Mexican art and culture during his three-year appointment. Richard Melzer's 1979 dissertation, along with a subsequent book chapter published in 1987, reveals that Morrow relied on "soft" cultural diplomacy as much as he did on more formal channels to resolve international conflict.¹³ His term as ambassador, which began in September 1927, marked a critical turning point in U.S.-Mexican relations and led to the resolution of contentious issues, including the questions of oil and agrarian reform. Unlike his predecessor James Sheffield (1924-1927), Morrow was respectful of the Calles administration and advocated for Mexican sovereignty, even as he pushed for agreements that advanced U.S. interests. Moreover, he showed a heartfelt interest in the bubbling cultural effervesce that swept Mexico, and ingratiated himself with the Mexican population by decorating his summer home in Cuernavaca, Morelos, which the press dubbed Casa Mañana, with lacquered trays, pottery, *serapes*, and embroidered bedcovers. López notes that this type of foreign recognition for the *indigenista* rhetoric of the postrevolutionary era proved crucial for the consolidation of an official national and cultural identity.¹⁴

¹³ Richard Melzer, "The Ambassador *Simpatico*: Dwight Morrow in Mexico 1927-1930" in *Ambassadors in Foreign Policy: The Influence of Individuals on US-Latin American Policy*, edited by C. Neale Ronning and Albert P. Vannucci. New York: Praeger, 1987).; _____, "Dwight Morrow's Role in the Mexican Revolution: Good Neighbor or Meddling Yankee?" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1979).

¹⁴ López, "The Morrows in Mexico: Nationalist Politics, Foreign Patronage, and the Promotion of Mexican Popular Arts" in *Casa Mañana: The Morrow Collection of Mexican Popular Arts*, edited by Susan Danly (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 53.

María del Carmen Collado explores the full extent of Morrow's cultural diplomacy in his private life and official ventures. Her analysis shows that Morrow and his family were genuinely taken by their new surroundings in Mexico. He understood the value of propaganda and invited Charles Lindberg to fly to Mexico in 1927 as a sign of international goodwill. In the U.S., he sponsored the 1928 Exhibition of Mexican Art and later helped Frances Flynn Paine, a co-organizer with Brenner, an art promoter and dealer tied to the Rockefellers, set up the Mexican Arts Corporation, a business that transported and sold folk handicrafts. He also partnered with the Department of Education (SEP), the Carnegie Foundation, and the American Federation of Arts to back the mammoth "Mexican Arts" exhibit, a traveling exhibition that showcased 3,200 pieces of popular and folk art in 10 U.S. cities from 1930 through 1932.¹⁵

Lastly, this project expands on art modernism debates that examine the effect of U.S. taste on Mexican art and cultural movements during the first half of the twentieth century. It illustrates how U.S. museum and gallery circulation networks, institutional display conventions, and the public's expectations about Mexico affected Mexican aesthetic developments. 1920s intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic buttressed a primitivism movement that extolled African, Asian, Mesoamerican, and Native American arts. This research addresses persistent questions in art historical literature regarding the effect of the market and museum exhibition and acquisition on the circulation of Latin American culture. Indyck-López's *Muralism Without Walls* reveals that there was "coherence in the expectations for a particular notion of Mexicanness from various U.S. publics" that understood Mexican national culture as "primitive, rural, and

¹⁵ Ibid, 85.

picturesque.”¹⁶ Along with these entrenched ideas, cultural intermediaries Brenner and d’Harnoncourt had to contend with the height of museum building, including the founding of the Museum of Modern Art (1929) and the Whitney Museum of Art (1930).¹⁷ These institutions exalted a Eurocentric canon and created best practices for installation that influenced U.S. reception to the 1928 and 1930-32 exhibitions on Mexican modern and popular arts.

THE ART CENTER’S “EXHIBITION OF MEXICAN ART,” 1928

In early 1927, Frances Flynn Paine, a U.S. art dealer and enthusiast embarked on a venture to display the emerging wave of Mexican art in order to provide inspiration for U.S. artists and designers, and, more importantly, to improve cultural relations between the two countries. She explained that the increasing hostilities between the U.S. and Mexico had alarmed her, and she felt that “the arts, fine and applied, offer possibilities of lessening the feeling of antipathy Mexicans feel for us.”¹⁸ Subsequently, she secured a \$5,000 grant from the General Education Board, a Rockefeller Foundation subsidiary, to collect, transport, and display works from Mexico. The 1928 Exhibition of Mexican Art was born from these funds in collaboration with Alon Bement of the Art Center, a gallery on the Upper West Side in New York.

Brenner joined the exhibition as an equal partner in September of 1927.¹⁹ Upon her arrival in New York, she immersed herself in the vibrant community of Mexican

¹⁶ Anna Indych-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2009), 8, 126.

¹⁷ Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

¹⁸ Quoted in Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 137.

¹⁹ Yolanda Padilla Rangel, *México y la revolución mexicana bajo la mirada de Anita Brenner* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes, Plaza y Valdez Editores, 2010), 63.

artists and intellectuals that had taken refuge in the metropolis. Painter and poet Rufino Tamayo encouraged Brenner to contact Paine as rumors abounded about “a monster exhibit of Mexican stuff, general and complete” that she was organizing. Brenner was taken with Paine when they met, but was noticeably wary about a possible collaboration. On Paine, she writes, “She is a little woman, very simpática [charming] and says, Tamayo, “muy fiero” [very fierce]. She is going to work on this in several fields. Carlos Chávez’s ballet, art, industry, folklore whatnot.”²⁰ Brenner decided to join the exhibition project as a collaborator and not as a paid consultant as Paine had suggested in order to have more control over curatorial choices.²¹ They planned to hold two exhibits in early 1928: one of fine art in January and one of crafts in March. Afterward, they would arrange for the exhibits to tour the country for a year, as their Rockefeller grant stipulated.²²

Brenner’s expertise on the exhibition subject and extensive network of Mexican artists made her an invaluable asset to the project. In Brenner’s biography, her daughter Susannah Glusker relates, “The names of the people in Anita’s extended family read like a biographical dictionary of intellectuals and artists active in Mexico in the twenties.”²³ In New York alone she rubbed elbows with José Juan Tablada, José Vasconcelos, Chávez, and Orozco. Artists on both sides of the border had entrusted her with their art, including Charlot, Orozco, Francisco Goitia, and Máximo Pacheco.²⁴ She had many of their works in her possession, which she could readily display and sell in the exhibition.

²⁰ Brenner, 521.

²¹ Susannah Joel Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998), 81.

²² Bement to Brenner, September 1927, Anita Brenner Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Box 11, Folder 7.

²³ Glusker, *Anita Brenner*, 44.

²⁴ Brenner Papers, HRC, Box 11, Folder 7.

Brenner also leveraged her contacts with high-ranking officials in Mexico and in the Mexican Consulate in New York to facilitate the exhibition. Paine and Bement had approached the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs Luis Montes de Oca in order to gain the official support of the Callista administration. While they received an encouraging reply, they were not so lucky with the Department of Education, which failed to reply at all. Brenner took it upon herself once she joined the project to send letters of support to two officials with whom she had established relationships in Mexico City: Dr. Alfonso Pruneda, head of the National University, and Moisés Sáenz, the undersecretary of the Department of Education. In her letter to Pruneda, she stated, “It is recognized that knowledge of this material will be of great value to the cultured public as well as the artists and intellectuals and the entire people of Mexico. There is great enthusiasm for the collaboration and help of both governments, choosing this particular psychological moment.”²⁵ She argued that the support of both the National University and the Department of Education would serve to foster knowledge on Mexican art in the U.S. public imaginary and mitigate longstanding hostilities between U.S. and Mexico at this “psychological” moment. After all, President Coolidge had sent messenger of peace Morrow to turn the tide of ill will in Mexico. Brenner hoped these government officials would do the same by supporting her project.

In fact, support from the Calles presidential administration rested exclusively on Brenner’s shoulders. She sent a long missive to José Manuel Puig Casauranc, the Secretary of the Department of Education, to introduce Paine and ask him to offer his assistance with anything her college might need.²⁶ He replied, “This secretary and

²⁵ Brenner to Pruneda, October 25, 1927, Brenner Papers, HRC, Box 11, Folder 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

National University have welcomed with great enthusiasm the exhibition of paintings to be held soon in the United States and we are already preparing the corresponding [art] shipment.”²⁷ Toward the end of November, with two months until the opening, Mexican government sponsors had second thoughts about the show and wanted to talk it over with Brenner. She wrote in her diary, “[I]t comes down to me vouching for it... What a strange world.”²⁸ Thus, Brenner’s reputation was crucial for securing official recognition from the Mexican government, along with a large shipment of paintings and sculptures.

Sources also indicate that Brenner had the final say about which artists to showcase in the exhibition. Brenner and Paine may have worked together for months, meeting several times a week, however, Paine eventually left for the Mexican countryside in late November in search of pottery, hand-blown glass, and lacquer trays for the March exhibit. Glusker explains, in her reconstruction of the show, that Paine left curatorial tasks to Brenner while she focused on gathering popular crafts in Mexico.²⁹ As a result, it was Brenner’s vision of revolutionary Mexico that the “cultured” U.S. public consumed.

Brenner’s curatorial choices were largely based on her long list of friends and acquaintances in the new wave of Mexican modern art. The official pamphlet for the exhibition notes that she loaned several works of Jean Charlot, José Clemente Orozco, Máximo Pacheco, Chicago-born Lowell Houser, and Guatemala-born Carlos Mérida.³⁰ The National University in Mexico collected and supplied the rest of the works, save for a Rivera loaned by José Juan Tablada.³¹

²⁷ Puig Casauranc to Brenner, December 3, 1927, HRC, Box 11, Folder 7.

²⁸ Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art and Artists in Mexico*, 551.

²⁹ Glusker, *Anita Brenner*, 81.

³⁰ “The Art Center Announces an Exhibition of Mexican Art,” The Art Center, January 1928, Anita Brenner Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Box 11, Folder 7.

³⁰ Glusker, *Anita Brenner*, 81.

³¹ Bement to Elias, September 20, 1927, Brenner Papers, HRC, Box 11, Folder 7.

In addition to fostering important relationships at the state level, Brenner also utilized these resources for curatorial gain in order to promote celebrated members of her art network. She carved a prominent role for Francisco Goitia and tapped into her networks at the National University and Department of Education to acquire his pieces. In a letter Alfonso Pruneda, she wrote, “[W]e have thought that it would be of great importance to give Goitia... the place [he] deserve[s].” Her subsequent letters to Pruneda, Puig Casauranc, and Sáenz had similar appeals to Goitia’s greatness. She inquired about two of his works in Germany, which the Department of Education had loaned for an exhibit, as it was rumored that their next stop was New York. She hoped they would release the paintings to the Art Center so they could form part of its collection. As a result of her efforts, the Art Center was able to display two of Goitia’s paintings in the January exhibition.³²

Besides curating the exhibit, Brenner also dealt with the mundane, though equally important, task of importing the chosen artwork into the United States. She relied on her connections in the Mexican Consulate to ensure that the artwork and crafts arrived in New York unharmed. Brenner had become acquainted with Arturo Elías Calles, the Mexican Consul and the Mexican President’s brother, as well as labor leader Charles Edwin when they helped her recover crates of art that had gone missing in transit during her move to New York City.³³ She now mobilized them to facilitate the lengthy process. Additionally, she advised the director of the Art Center to contact the Mexican Consul General in Mexico City and not only request that he help expedite the shipment, but also that it be sent directly to the gallery for inspection by U.S. custom officials.³⁴

³² January 18, 1928, Brenner Papers, HRC, Box 11, Folder 7.

³³ Glusker, *Anita Brenner*, 81.

³⁴ Bement to Elias, September 20, 1927, Brenner Papers, HRC, Box 11, Folder 7.

The Calles administration displayed the works at the School of Fine Arts before shipping them abroad. The influential few invited guests included Ambassador Morrow, French Minister of Finance Jean Perier, Japanese Minister Arata Aoki, Minister of Chile Rocouant, and Baroness de Weealmont, wife of the Minister of Belgium. This private event introduced influential foreign diplomats to, in the words of the press, “a new manifestation of Mexico’s artistic movement,” and emphasized the Mexican government’s renewed cooperation with the U.S.³⁵ In all, the National University transported close to a hundred sketches and paintings. Officials sent the works of 24 artists from Mexico City, those of 2 in Monterrey, and those of 5 artists from Europe. Records show that the National University, the Department of Education, and the Mexican Consulate stationed in New York expended a considerable amount of effort to accommodate Brenner’s request in two short months.

The exhibition opened on January 19, 1928 in the Art Center on the Upper West Side under the sponsorship of Ambassador Morrow and the Calles presidential administration. The catalogue featured *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield’s saccharine interpretation of recent U.S.-Mexican cultural exchanges. “First of all there was Mr. Morrow (*‘ami intime’* of Mr. Coolidge) who, acting the role of evangelist, is now so diplomatically spreading good-will among the unregenerate Mexicans. Then there was Lindbergh, our flying Ambassador, whose task it was to strew, from the Mexican skies, fresh seeds of harmony.”³⁶ In his eyes, the display served as the Mexican

³⁵ “Altas Personalidades Diplomáticas Vistieron Ayer la Exposición Privada del Contingente que los Pintores Mexicanos Envarán al Gran Concurso de Nueva York,” Anita Brenner Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC), Box 11, Folder 7.

³⁶ “The Art Center Announces an exhibition of Mexican Art Shown under the auspices of the Mexican Government,” Brenner Papers, HRC, Box 11, Folder 7.

government's gracious recompense and the "shining band of painters" represented as artistic emissaries.

A variety of works produced by heavyweight muralists and anonymous artists alike lined the walls of the small gallery. The show exhibited the paintings, sketches, and sculptures of the following artists: David Alfaro Siqueiros (1), Abraham Angel (1), Ben-Hur Baz (2), Julio Castellanos (2), Jean Charlot (18), Miguel Covarrubias (8), Fidas Elizondo (3), Gabriel Fernández Ledezma (1), Carmen Fonserrada (1), Francisco Goitia (1), Paul O'Higgins (1), Lowell Houser (3), Ricardo Jiménez (1), Fermín Martínez (1), Carlos Mérida (1), Enrique Meyran (2), Roberto Montenegro (2), José Clemente Orozco (9), Máximo Pacheco (3), Fermín Revuelta Sánchez (1), Diego Rivera (7), Lozano M. Rodríguez (4), Jesus Rojas (1), Antonio Ruíz (4), Guillermo Ruíz (1), Matias Santoyo (1), Rufino Tamayo (2), and Victor Tesorero (3).³⁷ It also featured the sculptures of Luis Albarran y Pliego (1) and Armadillo (1). Additionally, *ex-votos*, small devotional paintings on tin and canvas hung throughout the space. A hybrid of Spanish colonial art and indigenous tradition, they exemplified the transculturation in Mexico that occurred during conquest and colonization.

The popular press reacted favorably to the goals of the exhibition. Brenner's review in *The New York World* and Fredic J. Haskin's version in *The Washington Post*, which many newspapers across the country reprinted, echoed the sentiments presented in the catalogue. Both highlight the key players—Ambassador Morrow, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Univeristy, and the Department of Education—that made the show possible. Both highlighted the key players that made not only the show, but also smoother diplomatic relations possible. Brenner was more explicit about Mexico's bid to

³⁷ Ibid.

restore it's international reputation by sending "north the best of ambassadors... the cream of achievement" in a land "so long camouflaged in bandits, oil, and revolution."³⁸ Haskin anticipated the show's success and predicted that it would spark a series of annual "exchange exhibitions, enabling the people of both countries to keep in touch with the progress... being made on both sides of the Rio Grande."³⁹ He envisaged the establishment of permanent collections in Washington D.C. and Mexico City to house each other's national art.

Additionally, both reviewers portrayed the Mexican Art Renaissance as Mexico's return to a national character predicated on its indigenous roots. They explained that the 1910-17 revolution had cast off the last vestiges of Spanish and *criollo* artistic and cultural domination. Brenner wrote, "For the first time in four hundred years, Mexico has a national consciousness, and artists who study in Europe must turn home to native things."⁴⁰ The newest wave of artists drew on a dormant "tradition just as pure, an image just as clear, ability just as great, as the exponents of European culture, which so unsuccessfully has again and again been transplanted."⁴¹ The exhibition's goal of placing the emerging Mexican aesthetic on par with European canon, however, was unsuccessful in the public eye.

The public and critical reception ranged from vehement animosity to moderate intrigue. On opening night, Brenner commented, "The violent dislike, almost anger, even to frothings of the mouth of the people coming is to me an unusually discouraging

³⁸ Anita Brenner, "The Mexican Renaissance."

³⁹ Frederic J. Haskin, "Mexican Art Exhibit," Feb 1, 1928.

⁴⁰ Anita Brenner, "The Mexican Renaissance."

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

sign.”⁴² Orozco, who had relocated to New York in mid-December, recalled similar accounts. In letters to Charlot he wrote, “The comments that were heard in the hall were enough to make one blush and the people laughed and howled.”⁴³ Artist and critic Walter Pach, one of Orozco’s idols and a close friend of Brenner’s, refused to offer his professional opinion to a journalist while visiting the gallery, citing that he had not seen the exhibition. Public reception did not grow more favorable over the course of the exhibition as “people continue[d] to be more or less violently affected.”⁴⁴

The exhibition did not sit well with artists of the *mexicanidad* either. Tamayo, painter Samuel Barerra, and Orozco found fault with the method in which it was put together, the works it displayed, and the fact that all the artworks were for sale.⁴⁵ Orozco argued that the bad reception was well deserved. “Our show—a total, absolute, and definitive failure: FACT: the gallery is bad, just amateurs and beginners, and the dark, the director an imbecile, complete chaos, after one week there wasn’t even a catalog.”⁴⁶ Indeed, there were some merits in his criticisms. Brenner often complained of Bement’s ineptitude—he had given her 24 hours notice about the opening—and his *jijismos*, or dirty/backstabbing antics. Her diary reveals that she commiserated with Paine over Bement’s lack of professionalism and was forced to work around his incompetence.⁴⁷

Orozco’s ideological grievances with the Mexican Art Renaissance are well known and infused his critique of the show.⁴⁸ This exhibition transferred the fault lines

⁴² Anita Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art and Artists in Mexico: Anita Brenner’s Journals of the Roaring Twenties*, ed Susannah Joel Glusker, Volume 2 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 573.

⁴³ Orozco, *The Artist in New York*, 33.

⁴⁴ Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art and Artists in Mexico*, Vol 2, 577.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 574.

⁴⁶ Orozco, *The Artist in New York*, 33.

⁴⁷ Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art and Artists in Mexico*, 547.

⁴⁸ See Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 13.; Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros* (London: Chronicle Books, 1993).

surrounding the folkloric *indigenismo* of state-sponsored art onto U.S. soil. He placed Brenner in the camp that promoted the political mythologizing of revolutionary struggle and the indigenous population. He took umbrage with her decision to include Pacheco and Ruiz, whom he considered unworthy, in a display marketed as a comprehensive view of the emerging art movement. Lastly, he asserted that her review in *The New York World* “could easily have been signed by Diego Rivera.”⁴⁹ He confided in Charlot that he subsequently adopted “an attitude that was perhaps less than gallant but very vigorous and necessary” and temporarily cut ties with her despite the fact that she had proven instrumental in his move to New York.⁵⁰

The most positive review appeared in *New York Times*, though it still offered a lopsided view of Mexican art. Elisabeth Luther Cary, the newspaper’s first full-time art critic, reported that the collection was “so full and strong in flavor at its best, so insipid and drenched with sentimentality and futile humor at it's worst, so crude one artist, so strangely sophisticated with another, so moving what emotion can force its way through the barriers always existing between one race and another.”⁵¹ The mixed reviews she gave of the artworks were tempered with a single, if underwhelming, positive attribute: that it introduced the U.S. public to a revolutionary panorama completely foreign to them. Her article implied that the exhibition left “a deep mark upon the consciousness” solely because the subjects it depicted, from the rolling hills of Mexico’s landscape to the gore of revolution, were new to anyone north of the Rio Grande.⁵²

⁴⁹ Orozco, *The Artist in New York*, 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ “Cary, Elisabeth Luther,” in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary, Volume 2*, eds. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, Paul Boyer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Elisabeth L. Cary, “Works of August John: Mexican Paintings Range from Rebellious to Tractable—Terra Cotta Sculpture,” *New York Times* Jan 22, 1928.

⁵² Cary, “Works of August John.”

Cary cast the works against the backdrop of European artistic standards. For example, the way Orozco wove the agonies of death and armed struggle in “The March of Revolutionaries” reminded her of Francisco Goya, the late nineteenth-century Spanish court painter. She remarked that while “the bitter spirit of Goya hover[ed]” over Orozco’s work, it lacked “the humor, the flexibility, the brilliance of workmanship” for which Goya was lauded.⁵³ Unbeknownst to Cary, perhaps, was that many of Orozco’s contemporaries had christened him “The Mexican Goya.” Later that year, in 1928, Orozco would etch a collection of lithographs that he titled, at Brenner’s suggestion, “The Horrors of Revolution” to draw a parallel to Goya’s “The Disasters of War” series.⁵⁴ As Orozco garnered international attention, his contemporaries came to see “The Horrors” as his best work.

Cary’s review of the artists undermined the goal of the exhibition by comparing their works to those of European artists. For example, she juxtaposed Pacheco’s “Huéfanos” and Montenegro’s portraits to the masterpieces of celebrated European painters like she had with Orozco; however, in their pieces she found specters of European artistic sensibility. She commended Pacheco’s large painting, which she considered “less alien to European work in method and arrangement,” for its originality, design, and color.⁵⁵ In closing, she notes that the only portraiture of Montenegro’s that she managed to catch appeared as salient and free “from subtle suggestion” as the Spanish works displayed across town at the Carnegie International.⁵⁶ In effect, she encouraged others to judge the value of Mexican artwork by how well it measured

⁵³ Cary, “Works of August John.”

⁵⁴ José Clemente Orozco, *The Artist in New York: Letters to Jean Charlot and Unpublished Writings, 1925-1929* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1974), 75.

⁵⁵ Cary, “Works of August John.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

against European standards of the old. This was the opposite of Brenner's intentions for how the exhibition should be viewed.

Though Brenner believed the exhibition was well curated, she agreed with Orozco that it was a failure on the business end.⁵⁷ All the artworks were for sale; however, only two had sold by the show's end. Both of these—a painting and a watercolor—belonged to Charlot.⁵⁸ Brenner despondently wrote, "I am very tired of putting my foot into it with art, as I seem to be doing. I like the stuff and of course think it is good, but the actual handling of it in this system I am not capable of."⁵⁹ Orozco, however, placed the onus of blame on Paine. He believed her for-profit venture focused on selling trinkets and "Mexican folk art" to the masses instead of collecting the works of Mexico's most talented artists. He saw her as "a kind of Dr. Atl in skirts, involved in a thousand different schemes, all half-baked and very different from one another; and there is no denying that she deceived everyone in Mexico."⁶⁰ The exhibition proved unsuccessful on financial and curatorial fronts in the 1920s art world according to business records and art critics despite Brenner and Paine's tireless promotion.

The show's inability to garner positive critical press, when it received any at all, can be attributed to the early introduction of Mexican art in formal settings, such as galleries and museums, in New York. Major journals did not cover the exhibition and the minor newspapers that did, according to Orozco, "only joked and made fun of it."⁶¹ Brenner's job on opening night, much to her chagrin, consisted of explaining the art to

⁵⁷ Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art and Artists in Mexico*, 582.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 576.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 582.

⁶⁰ Orozco, *The Artist in New York*, 38.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

reporter after reporter. In early January, she had been forced to do the same with an editor from *Art Digest*, “a salacious dumbbell who had to be told about Mexican art and given pictures.”⁶² She concluded that Mexican art was too “exotic in N.Y.” and mused about the possibility of organizing an artistic venture in Texas, where it’s longstanding Mexican and Mexican-American roots might provide greater resonance.⁶³ Thus, factors such as timing and geographic location contributed to lukewarm public and critical responses to the first standalone exhibition of Mexican art in the U.S.

Finally, art critics and gallery owners were hostile to claims that Mexican art possessed an aesthetic that was independent but just as valid as the Eurocentric canon. Brenner had found it incredibly difficult to introduce the works of *la mexicanidad* into individual galleries upon her arrival in New York. At the Neumann Gallery, the owner informed her that Clemente’s sketches were “not pure art, and [were] ‘insulting’ to lovers of pure art.” Without skipping a beat, Brenner replied that she “had no doubt about what they were.”⁶⁴ Similarly, another art critic was facetious and dismissive when he encountered Clemente’s works privately. Brenner recalled, “I played the Diego game and went him one better on every vacilada and no matter how far he went... though I think he is like most critics, who don’t really see values but merely repeat other people’s statements.”⁶⁵ A large part of Brenner’s role as cultural mediator involved carving a space for Mexican art in an elitist circulation network that upheld a Eurocentric canon.

Brenner’s formative experience curating the 1928 exhibition transformed her into an outspoken critic of the New York art world. From 1928 to 1934, *The Nation* carried

⁶² Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art and Artists in Mexico*, 567.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 573.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 538.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 647.

her commentary on the business of art, in which she excoriated the pronounced ties between U.S. capital, museums, and nationalist ideology. For example, in the wake of the infamous Rockefeller-Rivera fiasco, she wrote, “For no one expects high art to be sponsored as a piece of business; there’s no profit in it. And we are all familiar with the fact that when art joins with business in shotgun wedding, the offspring is usually crippled, such, or monstrous.”⁶⁶ She targeted the Rockefellers, or “the House of Rockefeller” as she put it, throughout her tenure at *The Nation*, and routinely castigated them for using culture as “a luxury trade” that increased the family’s standing (and wealth) in polite society.⁶⁷ After years in the art world, Brenner rallied against a “system” that tied wealthy patrons, corporations, and museums and cultural institutions to the art world.

She also called attention to the U.S.-centric artistic narratives promoted in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), and the Whitney Museum of American Art. In a 1933 review, she argued that MOMA overlooked the influence of Mexican “monumentalism” in a show on contemporary art. She critiqued the curatorial department’s narrow view of what constituted “American” by asking, “If beet sugar produced in Michigan almost entirely by Mexican labor is an American product, is a picture of a factory in Detroit painted by a Mexican to be classed as ‘foreign’?”⁶⁸ Indeed, in another article, she compared MOMA’s whitewashing of contemporary art to Hitler’s bid to rid Europe of the Jewish population. A similar public condemnation led the staff at the Whitney to threaten a lawsuit against *The Nation* unless

⁶⁶ Brenner, “The Rockefeller Coffin,” *The Nation*, May 1933.

⁶⁷ Brenner, “Field Day for Frankenstein,” *The Nation*, March 1934.

⁶⁸ Brenner, “The Tail Wags the Dog,” *The Nation*, June 1933.

it stopped printing her “libelous statements.”⁶⁹ Brenner’s critiques, however provocative, evinced a deeper knowledge of the interdependent relationship between U.S. and Mexican modern art, as well as the patronage and circulation networks that continually erased that bond.

Though it failed to make the curatorial mark that Brenner had hoped, the 1928 exhibition marked a turning point for its organizers and some of the artists. Brenner displayed the unsold works in her apartment and invited her large group of friends, acquaintances, and colleagues (from Columbia University) to purchase them. She introduced Orozco to journalist Alma Reed, known for her tragic courtship with Felipe Carrillo Puerto, and they soon cultivated a professional relationship that skyrocketed the muralist to international fame. Reed promoted Orozco’s work, organized his one-man show at Delphic Studios, the gallery that she owned, and published four books on his compositions.⁷⁰ According to Brenner, this recognition gave him “illusions of grandeur” and he refused to associate with members of *la mexicanidad*.⁷¹

With the help of Ambassador Morrow, Paine used the exhibit to secure a total of \$25,000 from John D. Rockefeller II from 1928 through 1931. She formed the Paine Arts Corporation, purchased part of the applied arts exhibit, and showcased it in a permanent gallery at the Art Center. In 1930, she turned her corporation into a non-profit venture, which she titled the Mexican Arts Association, in order “to create closer cultural contact between the [two] countries and to give the people of Mexico a market and outlet for their arts and to give the people of this country for practical use the motifs and designs

⁶⁹ Brenner Papers, HRC, Box 13, Folder 12.

⁷⁰ Orozco, *The Artist in New York*, 66.

⁷¹ Quoted in Padilla Rangel, *México y la revolución mexicana bajo la mirada de Anita Brenner*, 85.

used by the Mexicans in their Applied and Fine Arts.”⁷² Furthermore, her ties to the Rockefellers—she became their art buyer—facilitated Rivera’s stardom in the U.S. Brenner and Paine, and the exhibition as a whole, served as a starting point for now famous artists of the Mexican Renaissance.

In conclusion, the 1928 Mexican Art Exhibition at the Art Center may have had limited artistic and commercial success; however, as the first foray of Mexican art into the U.S., it set the precedent for more grandiose displays such as The American Federation of Arts’ 1930-32 exhibition. It introduced the Mexican Art Renaissance to gallery and museum lovers in dozens of American cities, Canada, Denmark, and Sweden.⁷³ The 1930-32 “Mexican Arts” display, which debuted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, adopted this circulation strategy, as well.

The legacy of the 1928 exhibition on future Mexican art shows in the U.S. is evident in three tangible ways. Firstly, it solidified a network that included Mexican government officials and diplomats at the Mexican Consulate, which curators could tap into in order to organize exhibitions. Secondly, it garnered the support of wealthy, influential New Yorkers, who served as “honorary patrons,” including Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Robert de Forest (President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, John L. Merrill (banker), Edward H. Harriman (railroad executive), P. E. Goddard (academic), George Byrd Grinnell (writer), Ripley Hitchcock (editor), and Henry Goddard Leach (author).⁷⁴ This notable group not only had the financial resources to add Mexican art to their personal collections, especially during the Great Depression, but also had the ability

⁷² Quoted in Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, 138.

⁷³ Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, 137.

⁷⁴ “The Art Center Announces an exhibition of Mexican Art Shown under the auspices of the Mexican Government,” Brenner Papers, HRC, Box 11, Folder 7.

to distribute information on the movement through magazines and newspapers. Lastly, and more importantly for mediators like Brenner, it introduced Mexican modern and applied arts into an established system of museums and galleries in New York as worthwhile pieces and objects for cultural consumption even if they did not garner critical acclaim.

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS' "MEXICAN ARTS," 1930-1931

The American Federation of Arts exhibition was a resounding success in terms of cultural diplomacy. Newspapers across the U.S. claimed that it opened “the New York Season” and hailed it as “one of the most interesting revelations of racial taste and aptitude presented in New York.”⁷⁵ This positive public reception raises the question: why did the “Mexican Arts” exhibition succeed in gaining nation-wide attention despite having many of the same artists and securing the support of U.S. and Mexican government officials as Brenner and Paine’s 1928 exhibition? An analysis of the creation of “Mexican Arts” shows that its fame can be attributed to a confluence of powerful corporate, governmental, and museum patronage networks in the U.S. and Mexico. Of great importance was its positioning in established museum and cultural institutions circuits in which Brenner and Paine had little standing. However, much like the 1928 show, it failed to budge the U.S. public perception on the validity of Mexican modern art.

The impetus for the “Mexican Arts” exhibit was Ambassador Morrow’s use of art and culture as a means to, in the words of James Oles, “grease the wheels of diplomacy.”⁷⁶ He enlisted the support of the Carnegie Corporation, which had a large economic stake in Mexican mines, to finance the endeavor and provide the contacts and

⁷⁵ “Museum Planning Mexican Art Show,” *New York Evening Post*, September 1929.; Royal Cortissoz, “An Absorbing Show at the Metropolitan,” October 12, 1930.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 124.

resources available to the Carnegie Institute's Art Museum. From its inception, the exhibition was organized as a purely non-commercial venture, though it allowed artists to sell their works after the exhibition ended. The exhibition would visit 10 museums and cultural institutions across the country.⁷⁷ Homer Saint-Gaudens, the Director of the Art Museum at the Carnegie Institute, began to conduct preliminary work in November of 1929 in Mexico, where he attended a conference on art in Mexico City and lodged with Ambassador Morrow in Morelos.⁷⁸ His original plan called for an expansive overview of Mexican fine and applied arts and honed in on a need for "a section of colonial Mexican painting, another of contemporary Mexican painting, a section of antiquated handicrafts, and a similar section of contemporary handicrafts."⁷⁹ It also envisioned a robust exhibition catalogue that would show off and describe the collection, though such a book never materialized.

The collaboration of Mexico's Department of Education was crucial to the success of the exhibition on multiple levels. Administrators at the Carnegie Foundation contacted the Department in December 1929 with a request for support that outlined Saint-Gauden's curatorial vision for a three to four month traveling exhibition to debut at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in October 1930. They assured that the Carnegie Foundation would take care of the logistical and financial aspects of organizing the exhibition. The solicitation reads, "The Carnegie Foundation will sponsor this exhibition and will take full responsibility for the entirety of the project, in regard to compiling the collection in Mexico, the transport of the collection to the United States, it's circulation

⁷⁷ Rene D'Harnoncourt Papers, 1924-1983. Reel #3830. Microfilm Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁷⁸ Dwight W. Morrow Papers, 1988-1954. Reel #5, Microfilm Collection, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

⁷⁹ D'Harnoncourt Papers, Reel #3830. Microfilm Collection.

throughout the country and its return to Mexico City.”⁸⁰ Organizers, however, requested the “moral support” of the Department and explicitly stated that such official recognition would lend the legitimacy of the Mexican government as a whole. In doing so, it asked that the Department host the exhibition in Mexico City, much like they did for Brenner and Paine’s show. While organizers asked for legitimacy from the Mexican government, it brought the Department of Education on board after major decisions regarding the exhibition’s vision and logistics had been made.

The Department of Education also facilitated the loaning of art works from several cultural institutions in Mexico and, even more importantly, the export permits for pieces to enter the U.S. Obtaining export permits was a contentious issue for the cultured elite who traveled to Mexico to build their collections of primitivism and modern art. Brenner experienced great difficulty receiving clearance for her crates of art after her 1927 move to New York. Her diaries document multiple trips to the Mexican Consulate to address this customs issue and have staff advocate on her behalf.⁸¹ Robert de Forest, an avid collector of Mexican art and an “honorary patron” of the 1928 show, faced similar hurdles in transporting his voluminous collection into the U.S. and personally appealed to Ambassador Morrow.⁸² In fact, he tried to loan some of his pieces to the “Mexican Arts” exhibition, but was, again, unable to secure the proper export permits. As Idynch-López notes, “The question of export permits highlights the extent to which state cooperation is essential in transnational exhibitions of any kind, particularly in the case of Mexico-U.S. relations. The same diplomacy and networks that ensure commercial links (related to oil, for example) are consistently exploited to stimulate other connections (such as art

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art and Artists in Mexico*, 544.

⁸² Dwight W. Morrow Papers, 1988-1954. Reel #2, Microfilm Collection.

exhibitions).”⁸³ In the case of Mexican art exhibitions in New York, these connections created a network of government officials, corporate backers, local artists, and consulate staff readily available to support cultural diplomatic efforts.

Saint-Gaudens and Fred Keppel, President of the Carnegie Corporation, selected René d’Harnoncourt to curate “Mexican Arts” a month after their request to the Department of Education, which had assured Mexican officials that they would select a Mexican artist. D’Harnoncourt belonged to the wave of political pilgrims who settled in Mexico during the 1920s and joined Frederick Davis at his curio shop where they expanded the market for Mexican antiques and popular arts.⁸⁴ His expertise in artisanal crafts and connections to dealers allowed him to collect 3,200 pieces for the show. However, as Carl Zigrosser, director of the Weyhe Gallery, remarked, “But collecting the modern paintings was a more difficult matter. It required all his tact and diplomacy to persuade the artists to join one single exhibition... But René’s mediation prevailed, and for the first time in history all the painters showed under one roof.”⁸⁵

Though Zigrosser’s statement was incorrect—Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros had been on display at the 1928 show—d’Harnoncourt’s curatorial success might be attributed to his advisory board. On the committee sat Rivera, Chávez, Saenz, Beals, Frans Blom, Dr. Charles Hackett, and Brenner.⁸⁶ By 1929, Brenner, the only woman on the board, had become an “authority” on Mexico due to the recent publication of *Idols Behind Altars*, the interviews and speaking engagements surrounding the book’s promotion, and her doctoral focus on the country in the field anthropology. Only a record

⁸³ Idynch-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 100.

⁸⁴ López, *Crafting Mexico*, 111-112.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Idynch-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 104.

⁸⁶ D’Harnoncourt Papers. Reel #3830. Microfilm Collection.

of the members of the advisory board remains. However, curatorial decisions made in the show, especially its focus on popular arts, reveal that the board probably had little input in its overall organization.

“Mexican Arts” opened in mid-October, following the original plans, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Whereas the 1928 exhibition held separate shows for fine and popular arts, “Mexican Arts” featured both in a single, massive hall reserved for temporary shows. The mammoth show presented a comprehensive look at folk art and material culture, including toys, indigenous outfits, hand-woven blankets, *nacimientos*, and olinala boxes famed for their lacquered appliqué. As per the proposal sent by the Carnegie Corporation, the Department of Education sponsored a private 10-day viewing party for the artworks leaving Mexico during the summer of 1930.⁸⁷ In New York, the show featured the following artists: Dr. Atl (1), Ernesto García Cabral (1), Jean Charlot (3), Miguel Covarrubias (4), Paul Higgins (2), Augustín Lazo (3), Carlos Mérida (3), Roberto Montenegro (2), Carlos Orozco (2), José Clemente Orozco (1), Máximo Pacheco (1), Fermin Revueltas (3), Diego Rivera (8), Alvaro Siqueiros (3), Rufino Tamayo (5), Rafael Archundía (3), Luis Hidalgo (6), Fernando León (1), Mardonio Magaña (3), Eucario Olvera (3), Elíseo de la Rosa (1), Guillermo Ruiz (4).⁸⁸ The artists included in 1930 represented only a small faction and sampling of Mexican modern art displayed in Brenner and Paine’s 1928 show.

An analysis of the exhibition arrangement reveals that d’Harnoncourt circumvented emerging standards for displaying in museums and galleries in the U.S. His detailed drawings show that he divided the large hall into three equal sections containing

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Morrow Papers, 1988-1954. Reel #4. Microfilm Collection.

popular arts, colonial decorative arts, and modern painting and sculpture. He drew inspiration from a wide array of institutional display conventions that merged the “ethnographical/anthropological, salon/museum, and trade fair/market/department store.”⁸⁹ He moved away from standard lighting practice by using a large skylight to mirror the natural light found in an open-air marketplace. The *New York Tribute* used this attribute to attract the art-loving public to the museum as they could experience a “gay hint of two puestos... right in New York.”⁹⁰ However, d’Harnoncourt’s mixture of display conventions resulted in, according to Indyck-López, “a cross between a European curiosity cabinet and a Mexican mercado.”⁹¹

In terms of the contemporary section, d’Harnoncourt relied heavily on the works of Rivera and Orozco. Both had risen to fame as leaders of the muralism movement, much to Orozco’s chagrin, thanks to their long-term residences in New York beginning in 1927 and the constant promotion they received in the press. The prominence of Rivera and Orozco in “Mexican Arts” fueled the animosity between them and led Rivera to rehang his paintings the night before the preview show in Mexico City so that they covered the entire main wall.⁹² At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, d’Harnoncourt granted each their own wall and gave them a commanding view of the space by displaying large works that rivaled their murals in Mexico.

Rivera’s *Baile de Tehuantepec*, an easel painting that depicts indigenous couples engaged in a traditional folk dance, measures 6 ½ feet by 5 ¼ feet. Similarly, Orozco’s oil painting of Zapata reached nearly 6 feet in height.⁹³ Thus, d’Harnoncourt’s curatorial choices

⁸⁹ Indyck-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 117.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Indyck-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 118.

⁹¹ Indyck-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 117.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 107, 113.

attempted to convey the monumentalism of muralism, but did little else to highlight other relevant features and artists of the Mexican Art Renaissance.

The public reception for exhibition was deafeningly positive. Originally, the exhibition was to travel throughout the U.S. for three to four months. However, the American Federation of Arts received requests to host the exhibition from museums, galleries, and cultural centers located in 48 different cities. In response, the Carnegie Foundation agreed to fund the costs for another year of travel and, in February 1931, Morrow, by then a U.S. Senator for New Jersey, obtained permission from the Mexican government to circulate fine and popular arts for a second year. Organizers for the exhibition, however, consulted with Morrow on which venues were “the best... from the standpoint of a better understanding of Mexico.”⁹⁴ After careful selection, the exhibition traveled to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, a gallery in Brownsville Texas, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburg, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Milwaukee Art Institute, the J.B. Speed Memorial Museum in Louisville, and the Pan American Roundtable in San Antonio. The exhibition topped attendance records in each venue and tallied a total of 500,000 visitors over the course of its two-year run.

The press coverage of the exhibition was unprecedented—D’Harnoncourt filed away 400 pages of clippings—and revealed it was folk art, not modern paintings, that captured the U.S. public imagination. Reviewers offered perfunctory mentions of the most recognizable artists—Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros—without giving commentary on Mexican modern art in general. Newspaper articles reveal that the public was drawn to the “artisanal, rural and traditional values” of the popular art on display.⁹⁵ Indeed, an

⁹⁴ Quoted in Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 124.

⁹⁵ Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 125.

article in the *Houston Chronicle* claimed, “[T]he applied arts appeal more directly than the fine arts because they are more understandable. They also are the truer form of self-expression of the Mexican people as a whole.”⁹⁶ As a result, the blockbuster exhibition highlighted the importance of popular arts to the detriment of modern paintings.

Similarly, art critics centered on the importance of popular art as evidence of a “true” Mexican identity. Helen Appleton Read, a well-known critic in New York, wrote, “The popular arts, therefore, serve as a more authentic guide to Mexican taste and traditional than the fine arts, which have alternately been submerged by Spanish and French standards.” According to her, art enthusiasts were still unsure about how to interpret modern and folk art even after the 1928 show at the Art Center, which she attended. D’Harnoncourt’s take on the enormous vogue of things Mexican, however, cleared up “all ambiguities.”⁹⁷ Edward Alden Jewell from the *New York Times* conceived of Mexican modern artists and the regional artists who crafted folk art as interchangeable. “Inescapable as one passes from water jars to religious symbols, from children’s toys to the work of great artists like Rivera and Orozco, is the sovereign spirit of anonymity.”⁹⁸

Some reviewers took issue with d’Harnoncourt’s display strategies. One commenter noted, “It was a veritable confusion of Mexican arts, like a country fair in its arrangement, but without any of the local colour which enlivens a real country fair. Fine Diego Riveras, all too few, were skied; fine pottery jars were on the floor. It gave one the intimate feeling of having been allowed in the gallery before the curators had started to arrange it, before the judges had eliminated the mass of insignificant clutter.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Quoted in Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 125.

⁹⁷ Helen Appleton Read, “Mexico Interpreted,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 12, 1930.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 122.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 118.

D'Harnoncourt's overcrowded installation "inadvertently reinforced assumptions, perceptions, and expectations of folk art production" that museums and galleries in the U.S. were moving away, and further undercut the visual effect of works in the modern section.¹⁰⁰ In this respect, D'Harnoncourt, Brenner, and Paine shared a common mistake: arranging high-art next to material culture in a way that diverged from emerging museum and gallery practice.

The success of the blockbuster "Mexican Arts" exhibit can be attributed to D'Harnoncourt's razor-sharp focus on popular arts and crafts. His writings echoed his belief that folk art was the epitome of a rural and ahistorical Mexican spirit and that the modern artists who gained prominence during and after the 1910 Mexican Revolution served to highlight anonymous regional artisans. Museum-going audiences in the U.S. were drawn to the folkloric narrative of Mexico's national culture. Indeed, at both the 1928 and 1930-32 exhibitions, visitors, reporters, and critics reacted adversely to the introduction of Mexican modern paintings and sculptures into high-culture spaces offered in museums and galleries. Thus, the 1930-32 exhibition, seen by 500,000 people, merely reinforced the pervasive idea of a "primitivist" Mexico.

CONCLUSION

The exhibitions of Mexican art that debuted in New York and traveled the country were, to varying degrees, successful in promoting cultural diplomacy. The positive press coverage they generated, particularly surrounding the 1930-32 "Mexican Arts" show, proved beneficial for advancing the cultural and political interests of Morrow, corporate sponsors, and U.S. and Mexican government officials. The levels of success differed for its curators, Anita Brenner and René d'Harnoncourt. Brenner noted in 1928 that she had a

¹⁰⁰ Indych-López, *Muralism Without Walls*, 121.

hard time navigating the established “system” of museums, galleries, wealthy patrons, and governmental red tape. Moreover, the U.S. gallery-going public was resistant to her vision that the Mexican Renaissance had produced a distinctive body of modern art that was original in design, method, and subject. Art critics and enthusiasts alike were drawn to René d’Harnoncourt’s stance that Mexican folk arts and the anonymous regional artisans who crafted them epitomized Mexico’s national culture. Thus, while the exhibitions helped repackage Mexico as the birthplace of a contemporary renaissance, it reinforced a rural and primitive image of the country.

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