

José María Velasco and the Chicago International Exhibition



*The bridge at Metlac
(oil on canvas, 1881).*

*María Elena Altamirano Piolle **

In 1893, together with several colleagues, the renowned Mexican painter José María Velasco organized Mexico's participation in the famous Chicago International Exhibition. Velasco's reputation as an artist, based on the extraordinary quality of his landscape paintings, earned him the honor of an appointment from the Ministry of Development as the head of the Fine Arts group. He had previously held the same office during the Universal Exhibition in Paris.

Chicago's International Exhibition was an event of great importance for its host, the United States, inasmuch as it signalled the nation's place among the most developed in the world. The exhibition represented an opportunity to display the United States' rapid industrial progress, as well as the quality of its artists' work. The event was of such importance that Velasco stated that the host country had awakened in the field of the fine arts.

José María Velasco showed some of his best works at the exhibition, which featured 110 Mexican paintings. On display were Velasco canvases including *The Valley of Mexico from the Atzacotalco hill*, *The*

Orizaba volcano as seen from Córdoba, *The Iztaccíhuatl volcano and Popocatepetl*, *Oaxaca valley*, *The valley of Mexico from Santa Isabel*

hill, and one of his master works, *View from the hacienda of Chimalpa*.

These works greatly impressed and pleasantly surprised the



Self-portrait (oil on canvas).

* Institute for Aesthetic Research, UNAM.
Author of the volume *José María Velasco: landscapes of light, horizons of modernism*.

To José María Velasco (excerpt)

I have the word to tell myself: be quiet.
And I can place myself in your brushes
to tell you: erase with your finger
everything I have written. I lost

the battle at the beginning. Faced with
your stature, nature seems an imitation
of what you paint.

Carlos Pellicer

demanding jury of fine arts critics at the Chicago exhibition. They were widely praised for the noteworthy technique and colors distinguishing them from the pictorial work of the other participant nations, displayed in the principal halls and secondary galleries at the exhibition.

Velasco's singular pictorial and scientific vision was shown in these canvases in the form of landscapes executed with the descriptive rigor of botanical and geological field guides. These pictures also testified to an artistic talent for capturing the extraordinary light, depth and colors of nature, in addition to their use of an innovative color scheme.

Long afterwards, Diego Rivera, the famous muralist and one of Velasco's most outstanding disciples at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico, explained this color scheme in great detail. He praised his teacher for his creativity in inventing a geometry of color and space, an innovation placing Velasco among the geniuses of the world of painting, past and present.

His monumental panoramic views of the Valley of Mexico proved very attractive to the academic jury, which praised his technique, as was also the case at the Paris Exhibition. His

paintings depicting the Valley of Mexico won admiration for their atmospheric transparency, as well as the extraordinary colorfulness of the panoramas, each painted with layers of oils no thicker than a sheet of paper. This transparency allows the viewer to see the Guadalupe hills to the north of the capital, the broad expanse of the

Texcoco lake and Mexico City. The cupolas and bell towers of the city's numerous and imposing colonial churches and convents are outlined against the Ajusco mountain and the impressive snow-covered volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl.

All of these elements were compositionally related in Velasco's paintings by a series of foreshortened curves whose vanishing points were placed with amazing precision. Velasco integrated the foreshortening into the general composition scheme, lending harmony, unity and balance to a scene composed of various pictorial planes. Unlike traditional landscape painting as taught by Italian landscape painter Eugenio Landesio, in which Romantic painters employed eight chromatic degrees of successively graying tonalities, in Velasco's works, each plane has the same luminosity and richness of color.

Velasco's paintings received the highest distinction for artistic merit, and were awarded a medal and diploma by the World Columbian



Oaxaca cathedral (oil on canvas, 1887).



Citlaltépetl (oil on canvas, 1897).

Commission. This prize confirmed the international reputation his work had earned years earlier at the Paris Universal Exhibition, where Velasco was made a member of the Legion of Honor by a jury composed of artists of the highest international standing, including master painter Meissonier.

During his stay in Chicago, Velasco set aside time to become familiar with the main exhibits, such as the Agriculture, Industry and Mining pavilions, which in total occupied 278 hectares. He was fascinated by his visit to a group of buildings known as the Court of Honor. This was a large expanse of neo-classical and eclectic architecture based on plaster, wood and a metallic structure, illustrating the nation's desire to give birth to a renaissance of European culture in the Americas.

The Machine pavilion was also a revelation for Velasco, who was an enthusiastic follower of technological innovations. The pavilion housed electrically-powered machines, an enormous elevator manufactured by the Otis company, and an advanced telephone system used for communication within the exhibition

itself. The pavilion also housed a large, 25-meter metallic structure: this was Edison's Tower of Light, decorated with innumerable multi-colored light bulbs.

He was excited to witness the technological advances in public transportation, including the elevated train connecting the international pavilions in the north of the city with

the anthropological zone in the south. This train stopped at the main points of the exhibition, as well as at the principal pavilions. Velasco was equally interested in the automatic walkway which transported the exhibition's numerous spectators at a speed of eight kilometers per hour, on a track parallel to another walkway moving at twice the speed.

Velasco toured the city of Chicago, especially on Sundays when the exhibition was closed. The Illinois state congress had declared Sunday a day of worship and it was consequently not considered a time for entertainment or work.

The artist wandered the main streets of the city lined with public buildings, as well as the residential sections with their wooden houses, discovering the rhythms of daily life. Aside from the food and dress he observed in Chicago, these rhythms led Velasco to make an endless number of comparisons between his native Mexico and its northern neighbor in letters written to his wife, Maria de la Luz Sánchez Armas Galindo. In one of these letters, Velasco commented:

Chicago lies on the banks of Lake Michigan, running from North to



The Valley of Mexico from Guadalupe Hill (oil on canvas, 1905).



The Noche Triste tree (oil on canvas, 1863).

South... although the hotels and large houses are only located in the city center. Some of these buildings have up to thirty floors, but farther out, there are only one-storey wooden houses, often separated by alleys less than a yard wide, or a little more in some cases. Other homes are surrounded by lawns planted with grass.... There are a few streets reminiscent of London neighborhoods, which are outstandingly beautiful.

In a later epistle, the artist described Lincoln Park:

...it's an extensive park, covered with grass and leafless trees.... On the street this morning, we saw quite a few people riding bicycles: I think they must have



The Valley of Mexico from the hills of Tacubaya (oil on canvas, 1894).

been clerks who travel a good distance to work, because they carried their lunches in little boxes.... It's quite an odd sight to see them approach in groups of three, four, six, pumping their legs quickly up and down, and sometimes one can also see a young woman riding along.

Velasco rode in a small boat along Lake Michigan in order to view the exhibition buildings from a different perspective. There was a complex system of canals and ornamental lagoons, often toured by the public in small electric boats. Seen from the lake, the exhibition offered a delightful view, crowned by a



The hacienda of Chimalpa (oil on canvas, 1893).

there were ceremonies and balls in his honor, as well as re-enactments of his historic discovery.

Three months after arriving in Chicago, Velasco received a letter from the Ministry of Development requesting him to return to his



The Valley of Mexico (oil on canvas, 1877).

powerful beam of light projected from a General Electric company reflector located near the Agriculture Pavilion.

Replicas of Columbus' ships were another of the exhibition's attractions. These were ships loaned by the Spanish government to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America, the central theme of the Chicago Exhibition. Columbus was the main figure of the entire event, and

professional position in Mexico, including his activities as a teacher at the Academy of San Carlos and as a draftsman and photographer at the National Museum.

He arrived in Mexico City on June 29, 1893, full of pride and satisfaction at having successfully directed the Fine Arts Group, and having once again won high honors for Mexican painting **M**