Perceptions on Mexican art & culture in the 1990s

Culture, while difficult to define, may be considered as the essence of values, thoughts and concepts which distinguish one nation from another. Art is but the physical expression of these values and concepts. While culture is a national, social, political and general concept, art has a specific meaning both at the individual and socio-economic levels.

In other words, culture can become an obscure study in anthropology rather than a part of daily life, while art is frequently transformed into an object of private activity far from public interest.

Post-Cold War and postmodern times have led universal values to be shared among the nations in a new period of cultural homogeneity. This period is characterized by the adoption of general aesthetic values by national culture, within the overall framework of new consumer cultures molded by the international private sector.

The new North American free market has strengthened cultural change within U.S.-Mexican relations, through the homogenization of individual perception by the mass media and consumer markets.

Splendors of thirty centuries: a new way of perceiving culture

The first event that has reflected this new way of perceiving culture between the U.S. and Mexico is the "Mexico: splendors of thirty centuries" exhibition. This exhibition, presented in New York, San Antonio and Los Angeles during 1990 and 1991, consisted of over 400 pieces of Mexican art, covering the period from 1000 B.C. up to the first half of the twentieth century.

The exhibition was one of the most complete overviews ever of Mexican art. The concept behind it was first proposed in 1987 by Emilio Azcárraga, the main shareholder of Televisa and the then director of "Friends of the Mexican Arts," a private foundation.

Mexican TV has been practically monopolized by the Televisa company, strongly influencing Mexican and Latin American cultural perception.

"Splendors" cost two million dollars: $100,000 was donated by the Rockefeller Foundation, $750,000 by the Federal Council for Arts and Humanities along with the Tinker, William, Flora Hewlett and Mex-Am Cultural Foundations, while the remainder was financed by the Mexican private sector.

Spokesmen for San Antonio, Texas, stated that that city's Museum of Arts earned around 100,000 dollars from the exhibition. Tourism, which was spurred by the exhibition, contributes some $2.4 million dollars to Texas annually; and most of the tourists are Mexicans, Latin Americans and Hispanics in general.

The success achieved by the exhibition modified U.S. perceptions of Mexico, since bilateral relations have traditionally been heavily influenced by the specters of drugs, corruption and, more recently, human rights violations. *Time* magazine reported that this monumental exhibition of Mexican art would help solve Mexico's national "image problem."

To a certain extent, Mexico displayed a new image in October 1990 in New York. The intention was to "conquer" the United States from within its own financial core, generating an improved image among entrepreneurs and bringing new foreign investors to Mexico (*El Economista*, March 15, 1992).

Conferences, documentaries and feature film series on pre-Columbian art were offered by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, in conjunction with the exhibition. Other events related to Mexican art and culture were also presented throughout the city during 1990 (see table).

The exhibition was sponsored by the U.S.-Mexican financial elite, which was essentially concerned with obtaining support for the North American Free Trade Agreement. A "first-world" image was promoted by organizers in New York:

"For dinner, the Dendur temple was illuminated with 2,000

This article presents a viewpoint on cultural changes within Mexico-U.S. relations, particularly with regard to cultural homogeneity, during 1990-1992.

candles surrounding the pool, to give a sunset effect. Tables were covered in burgundy and gold chintz, with hydrangea, lily and rose centerpieces. Guests dined on scampi, veal medallions with mushrooms and a triple sherbet melange. French wines were served" (*New York Times*, October 2, 1990).

The rise of private art

In order to celebrate the 67th birthday of Octavio Paz, in the spring of 1990, the Mexico City Contemporary Arts Cultural Center —which is owned by Televisa— staged an exhibition called "Octavio Paz: the privilege of sight," offering exhibits ranging from pre-Columbian artifacts to modern painting.

Critics commented on Paz's ties to the establishment, as well as his close relations with Emilio Azcárraga.

During the 1970s, Paz stated that it was a mistake to consider Mexican muralism as an expression of popular art. In the 1990s, the notion that art must necessarily be private in order to be valuable has been strongly promoted by "neo-liberal" thinkers. Likewise, just as history and ideology are supposed to be pragmatic, art and culture are supposed to be privatized, in order to permit their full appreciation.

It should be noted that the main principle of private art is the fact that very few people are able to own it, which is the reason why easel paintings by Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo have higher market prices; they are not easily available.

Although there are stringent legal restrictions regarding the illicit exportation of cultural property considered to be part of the "Mexican heritage," painters can nevertheless sell their work to the highest bidder, aiding the development of private collections throughout the world.

Mexican muralism is another story. During the 1920s, the role of art was to serve revolutionary ideals by emphasizing the triumph of the corporatist state. However, times have changed. In Mexico, murals by Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco —once seen as national treasures due to their ideological defence of Mexican identity— are now considered a little passé.

Unfortunately, such perceptions have fuelled the indifference of private groups regarding the conservation of a number of important yet abandoned murals, such as those gracing the Siqueiros Cultural Polyforum in Mexico City. The Mexican government does not currently have sufficient resources to finance the kind of restoration work that is required.

Another feature of Mexican cultural policy is the fact that, despite its international importance, muralism was not included in "Mexico: splendors of thirty centuries" except when the exhibition was shown in Mexico City itself.

Mexican philosopher Agustín Basave Fernández del Valle explains some of the essential features of Mexico's new cultural policy: "Painting of substance is generally submerged in dogma, while expressive restlessness is replaced by mediocrity."[1]

Rufino Tamayo was another well-known Mexican opponent of the muralists and their school of painting, as well as one of the first supporters of private art: "Let the tourists paint the Mexican Revolution.... The government cannot do it alone. Private enterprise is beginning to realize that its participation is not only beneficial but essential" (*Epoca*, July 1, 1991, p. 25).

Art critics have considered Tamayo's work as universal, since he imbued Mexican tradition with artistic diversity, where form acquires greater importance than the idea itself.

Table

Exhibitions & other events	Date
Mexican painting: 1950-1980 (IBM Gallery of Science and Art)	Oct. 2 - Nov. 24
Mexico: splendors of thirty centuries	Oct. 10 - Jan. 13
Symposium on pre-Columbian art	Oct. 26
Lecture, documentary and feature film series	Oct. - Dec.
Aspects of contemporary Mexican painting	Sep. 13 - Dec.31
Women in Mexico	Sep. 28 - Dec. 2
Mexico through its masks	Sep. 25 - Nov. 25
Eight women in Mexico	Oct. 30 - Nov. 17
Along the path of echoes: contemporary art in Mexico	Nov. 1 - Dec. 16
Retrospective of Francisco Toledo	Nov. 4
María Teresa Gutiérrez, pianist, performing works by Carlos Chávez	Nov. 5
Recital of the Mexican cellist Carlos Prieto	Nov. 14
Pre-Hispanic Mexican food	Nov. 16 - Jan. 13
Mexican muralism and prints	Nov. 17 - Dic. 15
Sarapes of Saltillo: influences and progress	Jan. 7 (1991)

Source: *New York Times*, October 21, 1990.

[1] Basave, Agustín, "Vocación y estilo de México: fundamentos de la mexicanidad." LIMUSA, 1991, p. 956.

However, what does the current universal appeal of Mexican culture actually mean? It essentially implies a transformation of traditional values, supported by popular art, into global and postmodern fetishes created by a private culture industry.

During the 1990s, ideology has ceased to function as a competitive feature of Mexican painting. Expressive innovations have renewed the stereotypes of traditional (indigenous) art, to provide Mexico's best competitive commodity on the international art market. Meanwhile, the abstract trends of Mexican painting and sculpture have not received due appreciation.

The "social realism" advocated by the muralists has now been largely discredited. A new muralism, essentially based on social themes related to individual social concerns, has tacitly excluded the possibility of including social and political themes in art, since political and public art has lost its value on the consumer market.

The "boom" of Mexican art in the United States

Since the 1987 financial crash, Mexico and the U.S. have experienced a private art "boom." Speculation and the appearance of galleries in the most important Mexican cities have transformed Mexican art into a lucrative product on the commodity market.

More than ever before, Mexican elites and private banks are showing considerable interest in funding the arts. As the Mexican economy continues to open up, giving way to increased privatization, Mexican art is becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of a select few. The 1991 foundation of the MARCO (Contemporary Art Museum of Monterrey, Mexico), by a group of private collectors based in the city of Monterrey, is a good example of this situation.

In his excellent essay on Monterrey art during the 1980s, Kurt Hollander explains why we should consider this northern Mexican city (home to three of the four most important national industrial groups) as the core of a new North American cultural homogeneity: "Social status, rather than speculation, seems to be the driving force of the Monterrey art market, while the MARCO exhibition is the art collector's attempt at exhibiting local talent, side by side with the big names.... The museum is also a space for works that no longer fit on the crowded walls of the patio mansions.... The private sector is making all the decisions."[2]

"Mexico: splendors of thirty centuries" was shown in Monterrey and Mexico City. Although other Mexican cities with important vestiges of the pre-Columbian past would have been pleased to stage the exhibition, the MARCO was the first Mexican venue to receive this honor.

This might be a sign of a gradual cultural decentralization away from Mexico City. Meanwhile, the privatization of Mexican banks and the progress made by telecommunications have facilitated the concentration of finance and power in northern Mexico, due to the proximity of the U.S. market.

For example, in the 1990-1991 New York market price list, Frida Kahlo's 1947 "Self-portrait with flowing hair" fetched a record price of 1.65 million dollars at Christie's. The buyer was identified as Mauricio Fernández from Monterrey, whose mother, Margarita Garza Sada, is an art collector (*New York Times*, May 7, 1991).

Garza Sada is a very prestigious family name within the Monterrey elite. This family manages the Alfa corporation, which together with the National Bank of Mexico (Banamex) is the most important Mexican art purchaser.

The privatization of Mexican banks also included their art collections. Most of these new financial groups have strong financial links with U.S. enterprise, meaning that a cultural interdependence between Mexico and the United States, based on economic factors, is now a reality.

Since the 1987 financial crash, the U.S. art market has also experienced a "boom" period. Selling paintings by renowned Latin Americans like Botero, Kahlo and Rivera has become a profitable business. Art investors have also purchased paintings from "unknown" Latin American artists, considering their works truly innovative.

The creation of myths in Mexican-American cultural relations

Since 1990, new images and myths have been created by the publicity industry as a means of improving the international perception of Mexican-American relations. One example of these fetishes is the use of Frida Kahlo's image by Mexican-American publishers, as a cosmopolitan depiction of a new cultural syncretism, known as Fridamania.

Raquel Tibol, one of Kahlo's biographers, says that when an artist becomes a myth, his or her image and work sell well on the art market. For Tibol, the myth surrounding Kahlo's image has reached such scandalous proportions that her personality and art as such have paled into relative insignificance.

Another Kahlo biographer, Hayden Herrera, tells us that "during her lifetime, Frida had only two solo gallery shows, and her work was bought mostly by friends. In 1978, 25 years later, she started to be honored with exhibitions around the world. Her extraordinary popularity in the last decade is closely linked to the

[2] Hollander, Kurt, "Art of the '80s in Monterrey," *Report from Mexico* 1. Art in America, 1991, p. 49.

Angela Caparroso.

Fridamania in the United States.

feminist movement" (*New York Times*, October 10, 1990).

What Kahlo's painting offers to the public goes beyond the artistic values embodied in her work. Women in the United States and Mexico share a common feeling when they compare Frida's suffering with the real situation of women throughout the world. She is "the perfect woman for our time," a "political heroine," a "muse," a "victim," the "Mater Dolorosa" or a "martyred saint."

U.S. singer Madonna has a genuine obsession with Frida. Her long-standing dream to film Kahlo's life will probably come true. Madonna has signed a 60-million-dollar contract with Time Warner which includes this film project.

Another example of Fridamania is *Frida*, a musical performance sponsored by the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia during 1991.

As a response to Fridamania in the U.S., Mexico has organized a number of successful exhibitions of Kahlo's work. The most important was "Passion for Frida," staged at the Diego Rivera Museum in Mexico City, although the organizers refused to consider it part of international Fridamania.

In accordance with the principles of postmodernism, the myth surrounding Frida Kahlo should be inscribed within the new consumer art culture. Like all consumer goods, Fridamania is not national; it is neither Mexican nor American. It is simply a part of a new North American identity.

Conclusions

Mexican-American cultural perceptions have rested on images and myths created specially by multinational companies, with the aim of homogenizing national identities. Is the cultural uniformity of both countries really a possibility? No, the new cultural world order is just a transitory period of post-Cold War history.

Speculation has been always a way of increasing the value of art on the market. Cultural speculation implies commercializing national identity: "It is a risky business in which Mexico could lose its soul," says Mexican novelist Fernando del Paso.

On seeing Kahlo's painting represented by the American flag at a Mexican-American exhibition at Printemps in Paris, some intellectuals began to wonder if Mexican culture is also on the Free Trade negotiation table. They warned of the dangers stemming from Mexican cultural privatization: "Latin America celebrates its Quincentennial in 1992 by erasing its memory of the past and looking to U.S. culture" (*Excélsior*, March 21, 1992).

Perceptions of art and culture paradoxically form part of the influence of the cultural industry operating between Mexico and the United States. Will the Mexican artistic soul be transformed by trade negotiations? Indeed, we are already living through a process involving the "privatization" of ideology and identity. Cultural industries —such as radio, TV and cable, movies, publishing and some art industries— have frequently shown us a change of perception regarding Mexican culture.

The problem is how ideological monopolization will control cultural and political perceptions of society. The Mexican-American cultural model is based on market theories and free trade paradigms. Under the terms of this model, art is seen as a quantitative good, indirectly contributing to the increasing social chasm between those who have intellectual and/or monetary access to art and those who are denied such access.

Privatization of Mexican cultural policy is possible thanks to the economic recovery undertaken by new financial groups. U.S. perceptions on art are likely to be transformed by this model of cultural homogenization.

The current growth in cultural interdependence between the U.S. and Mexico might be a guarantee of improved cultural and democratic equality, which in the long run, may once again imbue popular art, as the root of each North American culture, with renewed validity

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