

Guillermo Kahlo-Henry Greenwood Two Views of Monumental Architecture

Guillermo Tovar de Teresa*



Guillermo Kahlo, view of the belltower of the Santa Catarina Church, Puebla, Puebla, 1910. Ricardo Salinas Pliego/Fomento Cultural Grupo Salinas Collection.



Henry Greenwood Peabody, San Felipe Neri Church in ruins, Mexico City, 1898. Ricardo Salinas Pliego/Fomento Cultural Grupo Salinas Collection.

In the late-nineteenth-century, European neo-romantic experiences sparked enormous interest in the United States in looking at U.S. links with the Hispanic. The Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic worlds had always seen the New World as a kind of bone of contention. The Americans thought they had a manifest destiny, making their nation the guardian of the entire hemisphere. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the United States gradually imposed itself on the Americas and the effects of that vision were felt in Mexico before any other country in the hemisphere.

First there was the Texas War in 1835 and then the invasion that snatched away half our territory between 1846 and 1847. Both led the Americans to feel they had become a kind of new conquistadors of the region, emulating Hernán Cortés and other sixteenth-century warriors. In his *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), William Prescott painted Cortés as a “Latin lover,” among other

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Photos courtesy of the Old San Ildefonso College.

things. Prescott created an important trend of interest in things Hispanic among Boston’s elite, the center of a cultural milieu. One member of this group was a Spanish ambassador’s wife, Madame Calderón de la Barca, who, accompanying her husband during his assignment in Mexico in the 1840s, turned out to be a great correspondent. Her letters, with their description of daily life, the atmosphere and people, are a wonderful testimony to Mexican romanticism. Two other figures stand out in this period: a millionairess and a reporter. On the counsel of Edwin Barber, advisor to Philadelphia, New York and Boston’s main collectors of Mexican majolica ware (Puebla’s Talavera ceramics), millionairess collector and patron Isabel (Bella) Gardiner acquired part of the ceramic wall tiles of the cloister of an old Puebla convent. Reporter Sylvester Baxter, for his part, the author of several books related to the history of the U.S. Southwest, published a monumental monograph consisting of one volume of text and nine of photographs by Henry Greenwood Peabody called *Spanish-Colonial Architecture in Mexico* in 1901.¹ This



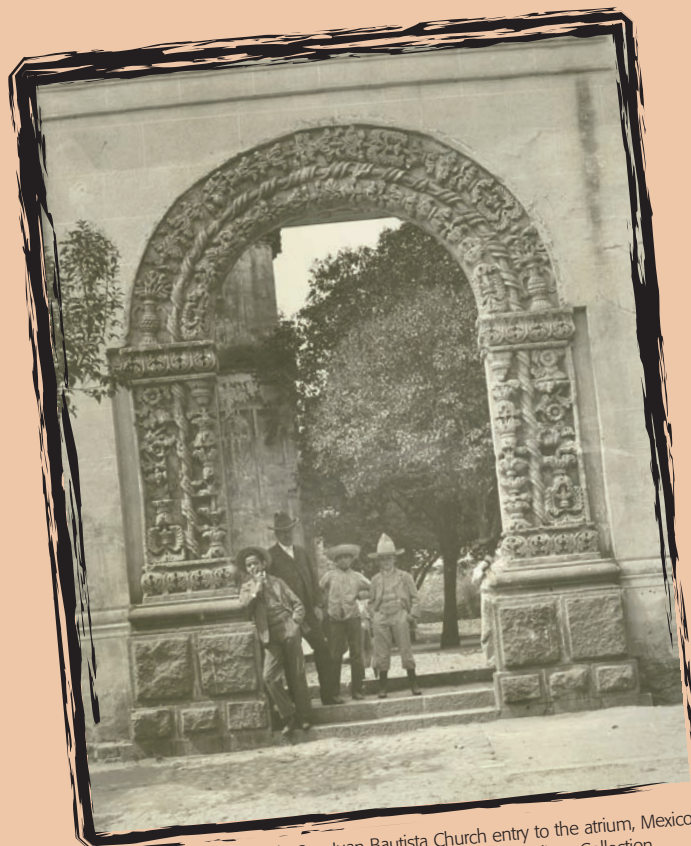
Guillermo Kahlo, Detail of the National Fine Arts Palace Theater cornice, Mexico City, 1911. Ricardo Salinas Pliego/Fomento Cultural Grupo Salinas.

important work revealed the wealth of Spain's heritage in Mexico, amazing cultured Americans of the time. The impact was such that the United States proceeded to reconsider its evaluation of New Spain architecture in twentieth-century Mexico. We should not forget that Baxter's work came out three years after the U.S. invasion of Cuba and the Philippines, the remains of the Spanish empire. This unleashed an enthusiasm for everything Hispanic in the United States, leading to the establishment of the Hispanic Society of New York and the creation of an atmosphere that culminated in Californian architecture into the 1920s, spurring many U.S. millionaires to erect veritable palaces in the Hispanic style.

At the same time, the exact opposite was occurring in Mexico, where culture was synonymous with cosmopolitanism and Europeanization. The monuments that Sylvester Baxter so admired were seen here as rancid vestiges of a world that had disappeared, the world of New Spain, which, according to liberal principles, had to disappear to give way to a modern, European-like country. During



Guillermo Kahlo, Tepozotlán Convent baptismal font, State of Mexico, 1920. Ricardo Salinas Pliego/Fomento Cultural Grupo Salinas Collection.



Henry Greenwood Peabody, San Juan Bautista Church entry to the atrium, Mexico City, 1898. Ricardo Salinas Pliego/Fomento Cultural Grupo Salinas Collection.

the second half of the nineteenth century in Mexico, very few appreciated the art of the colonial period. Among those who did were the jurist José Bernardo Couto, Catalan painter Pelegrín Clavé, poet Joaquín Pesado and literati Manuel Gustavo Revilla, all of whom were aficionados above all of sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cultural affairs. The ministers of the Porfirio Díaz government and Mexico's great families of the time deplored anything "colonial," with the exception of the Gargollos, the De la Arenas, the Mirandas and a few others. The official circles of the time dreamed of grand constructions and palaces in the Venetian and French style, while the economically and socially prominent filled their houses with European trinkets.

The arrival of Baxter's work in Mexico had an important impact on Porfirio Díaz, his ministers and Mexican high society. How was it possible that Boston society could find new value in Mexico's Spanish heritage? It made people appreciate the importance of what had been ignored or even belittled. From the Finance Ministry, José Yves Limantour proposed to Porfirio Díaz that a photographic



Henry Greenwood Peabody, House of the Counts of Santiago de Calimaya, Mexico City, 1898.
Ricardo Salinas Pliego/Fomento Cultural Grupo Salinas Collection.



Guillermo Kahlo, Arches of the Querétaro aqueduct, Querétaro, 1912. Ricardo Salinas Pliego/Fomento Cultural Grupo Salinas Collection.



Henry Greenwood Peabody, Panoramic view of the Querétaro aqueduct, Querétaro, 1898. Ricardo Salinas Pliego/Fomento Cultural Grupo Salinas Collection.

inventory of that enormous and monumental architectural heritage be made. Guillermo Kahlo, a German photographer residing in Mexico, was commissioned to photograph the country's most important churches, which from that time on began to be considered a national treasure. Kahlo undertook the titanic job of traveling all over the country for years in conditions that read like a novel. Unfortunately, he never saw his magnum opus published with the same quality as Baxter's.

A decade and a half passed before Alberto J. Pani, the minister of finance under the Obregón administration, published part of those materials in six volumes. In 1924, the books began to be published accompanied by texts by Gerardo Murillo ("Dr. Atl"), Manuel Toussaint and engineer José R. Benítez. Today, the complete collection of photographs, together with their glass-plate negatives, is stored in the National Institute of Anthropology and History's National Photography Archive.

Some of the series of photographs circulated among Dr. Atl, Toussaint and Benítez's friends. One of them is the collection currently on exhibit in the Old College of San Ildefonso. In 1934, Baxter's work was republished in Mexico, and its Mexican counterpart has been republished several times. However, a large part of Kahlo's work still remains unpublished. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Conceived by Baxter, the book was the product of a trip to Mexico taken by both author and photographer. It is fair to say that Baxter was not just a successful Boston journalist but, as the *Atlantic Monthly* review states, he also studied in Leipzig and Berlin from 1875 to 1877 where he became fluent in German and interested in German affairs. He was later involved with Charles Eliot as secretary of the preliminary Metropolitan Park Commission for Greater Boston in 1892 and 1893, and in 1907-1909 he served as secretary of the Metropolitan Improvements Committee. As such, he showed great admiration for the results of what Germany was doing in city planning (in his opinion it was the country with the most advanced approach to the solution of the urban problems of the time) and published various articles on the subject for several U.S. journals (*Atlantic Monthly* 104, July 1909, pp. 72-95).

The exhibition "Guillermo Kahlo/Henry Greenwood Peabody: Two Views of Monumental Architecture" will remain open until January 27, 2008. Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, Justo Sierra 16, Centro Histórico, México, D.F.

Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

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