



María Jiménez / Archivo Fotográfico Agustín Jiménez

Agustín Jiménez Espinosa, *Reclining Female Nude with Sphere*, ca. 1920 (silver on gelatin).

# SUN AND SHADOWS IN MODERN MEXICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Manuel Álvarez Bravo,  
Agustín Jiménez, and Luis Márquez

Ernesto Peñaloza Méndez\*

The exhibition “Sun and Shadows in Modern Mexican Photography. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Agustín Jiménez, and Luis Márquez” at the Old San Ildefonso College sought to construct a visual discourse that would

prompt reflection about the meaning of our photographic avant garde and, in a way, bring two outstanding photographers who were world-renowned Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s contemporaries out of his shadow.

Álvarez Bravo was undoubtedly the sun of a generation of photographers who radically renewed creative work. His quality, consistency, and particular style brought him great prestige nationally and internationally while most of his contemporaries were gradually left in the shadows of oblivion.

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Photos by Manuel Álvarez Bravo courtesy of the Manuel Álvarez Bravo Archives, photos by Agustín Jiménez Espinosa courtesy of the Agustín Jiménez Archives, and photos by Luis Márquez Romay courtesy of the UNAM’s Institute for Aesthetics Research.



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Luis Márquez Romay, *Nude with Skull*, 1932 (silver on gelatin).

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Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Good Reputation Sleeping*, 1938-1939 (silver on gelatin).



Agustín Jiménez Espinosa, untitled, from the "Tolteca" series, 1931 (silver on gelatin).



Luis Márquez Romay, *Stairway, Monument to the Revolution*, 1936 (silver on gelatin).

In the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican photography changed, as did other art forms like painting, sculpture, theater, cinema, music, and literature, and was renewed by figures like Manuel and Lola Álvarez Bravo, Emilio Amero, Raúl Estrada Discua, Arturo González Ruiseco, Agustín Jiménez, Eugenia Aurora Latapí, Luis Márquez, and Jesús Torres Palomar. They used as a starting point a tradition, and the subsequent break, and then were nourished and influenced by, as well as influencing the work of colleagues like Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Sergei Eisenstein, Paul Strand, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and so many other foreign photographers who came through Mexico at that time, attracted by the landscape and a propitious, renovating environment astride an ancestral, indigenous culture and the avant garde impetus of the art so in vogue in Europe and the United States.

This period, when what we now call the "historic avant garde of Mexican photography" developed, is characterized by the incorporation of elements and objects into the visual universe that had not interested artists before, or by the reinterpretation of traditional genres in photography, like portraiture, landscapes, architecture, popular phenotypes, social struggles, and daily life. Abstract compositions, defamiliarization, interest in pure textures, reflections, shadows, and highlights, as well as the use of diagonals, distortions, repetitions, and vanishing points were also incorporated into their discourse. This made many of the images elevate Mexican photography to the international plane.

Manuel Álvarez Bravo was the one who mainly conferred artistic prestige on our photography. But, in addition to him, as mentioned above, an entire generation contributed to the



Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Triptych Cement 2 (La Tolteca)*, ca. 1931 (silver on gelatin).

## MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO



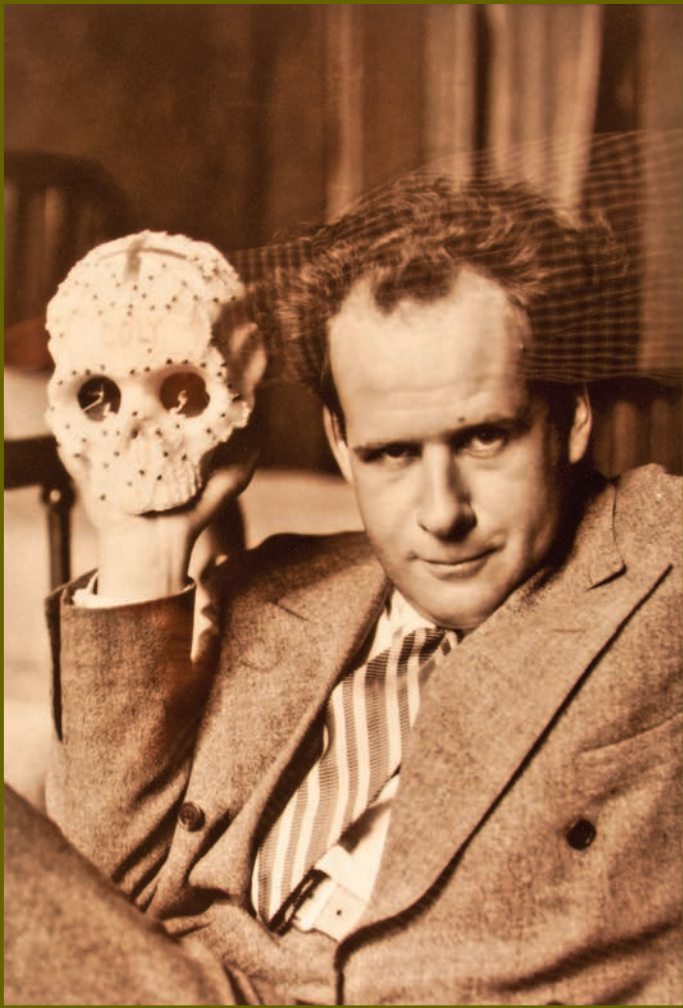
The “historic avant garde of Mexican photography” is characterized by the incorporation of elements and objects into the visual universe that had not interested artists before, or by the reinterpretation of traditional genres in photography.

“modernization” of Mexico’s art of the lens, though most of its members are not very well known except to specialists.

Something else that should be taken into consideration is that this renovating movement had noteworthy precedents among certain photographers who worked in Mexico in the early twentieth century, the authors of “experimental” images that prematurely ventured into the sphere of the new photography. I am referring here, for example, to “Studies of Flowers” by C.B. Waite in 1907, and “Studies of Violin” by Jesús Avitia in the same year. Isolated shots by the photographers of the Revolution, like Agustín Casasola, and some images from photographic studios identified with the pictorialist current, like Librado García Smarth or Antonio Garduño himself, could also be included on this list. In addition to this “pre-avant-garde” precedent, even without a systematic

study, we would have to add the work of amateur photographers like Juan Crisóstomo Méndez and his representations of the fragmented body, or the work of artists not identified as photographers, but who worked fleetingly with a camera with frankly modern results, like Roberto Turnbull, A. Toussaint, or Frida Kahlo herself. Recently, some of the photographs by Lola Álvarez Bravo’s first students, like Guillermina Álvarez, Diva O. Foscade, Raúl Abarca, and Raúl Conde —this last a true revelation— have been brought to light that would also be included in the line of modern photography.

A great deal remains to be discovered about our avant garde photography. In that sense, “Sun and Shadows in Modern Mexican Photography. Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Agustín Jiménez, and Luis Márquez” proposes a different approach to these kinds of images.



Agustín Jiménez Espinosa, *Eisenstein with Sugar Skull*, 1931 (silver on gelatin).

“The domain of photography as an art is no different from that of poetry: the untouchable and the imaginary. But revealed, and, in a phrase, filtered by what is seen.” Octavio Paz



Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *The Day of the Dead*, ca. 1930 (silver on gelatin).

All three photographers can be appreciated from two standpoints: one, from a figurative point of view, that would analyze the themes that concerned the painters and artists of the time who were seeking representations of everything national and the national identity. In this sense, 11 brief thematic nuclei can be identified: thorns (with photographs of maguey plants), indigenous fiestas, crafts, religiosity, still lifes (compositions with jicamas by Álvarez Bravo and prickly pears by Jiménez), a carousel, death, feminine nudes, fishes, children, and work. The second, more experimental and abstract standpoint is made up of other nuclei: tools, stairways, brewery fermentation tanks, reflections, the La Tolteca factory (a centerpiece in the show), and, lastly, exercises in shadows, curves, and diagonal lines.

The museography can be termed sober and effective, with the walls in light tones and a few counterpoints in green. The illumination was designed to be soft so as not to dam-

age the old prints, although, of course, visibility is good. The exhibition begins with a phrase from the Spanish writer of the Golden Age, Baltasar Gracián, that Álvarez Bravo used in his 1945 exhibition at the Association of Modern Art, organized by Fernando Gamboa: "When the eyes see what they had never seen, the heart feels what it had never felt."<sup>1</sup> Another phrase, this time by Octavio Paz, is also writ large: "The domain of photography as an art is no different from that of poetry: the untouchable and the imaginary. But revealed, and, in a phrase, filtered, by what is seen."<sup>2</sup>

One interesting detail in this exhibition is that it includes two shots from an important photo contest held by the bi-monthly magazine *Tolteca* in its August 20, 1931, issue, co-sponsored by the daily newspaper *Excelsior*. Manuel Álvarez Bravo won first place, and Agustín Jiménez took home six prizes. The winning photos were exhibited for 10 days in the

## LUIS MÁRQUEZ ROMAY



Luis Márquez Romay, *Masks of the Dead*, 1931 (silver on gelatin).



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Civic Museum of the Fine Arts Palace, from December 5 to 15 of that year.

José Antonio Rodríguez explains the great importance of this for the history of Mexican photography:

The images with which these members of the avant-garde took the country by storm were incomprehensible for the majority of photographers of the time. To a great extent, because they were made up of other reasonings. Among them are glimpses and traces of avant-garde currents like Russian constructivism, cubism, or the new objectivity, all intertwined; a form of aesthetic assimilation into the industrial age made possible by the

spaces of the La Tolteca factory, which the other makers of bucolic images who had exercised their craft better in studio portraits or in nationalistic prints were very far from understanding. ...For that reason, the result of the *Tolteca* [magazine] exhibition was the consequence and manifesto of modern times. ...In the end, with them, photography would pave new ways forward.<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, the exhibition managed to establish a visual dialogue among the images of these three artists that show the treatment of common themes and coinciding forms as the aesthetic singularities that made them stand out in



## AGUSTÍN JIMÉNEZ ESPINOSA



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Agustín Jiménez Espinosa, *Heart of a Maguay*, 1934 (silver on gelatin).

Foreign photographers came through Mexico at that time, attracted by the landscape and a propitious, renovating environment astride an ancestral, indigenous culture and the avant garde impetus of the art so in vogue in Europe and the United States.



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Manuel Álvarez Bravo, untitled, *Magueys* series, n.d. (silver on gelatin).

Mexico's post-revolutionary culture. A first rendition of the exhibit was hosted by the Mexico Institute in Paris as part of the 2010 Month of Photography. In Mexico, the number of images was increased, bringing the final total to 75 photographs, 25 per artist, attempting to ensure the majority were vintage prints from the period.

The works come from the following collections: the Museum of Modern Art-National Fine Arts Institute, the UNAM Institute for Aesthetic Research, the Agustín Jiménez Archive, the Manuel Álvarez Bravo Association, the Windsor Gallery, and the Carlos Córdova and González Rendón family private collections. **MM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One of Cratylus's lines in "El crítico: primera parte," by Baltasar Gracián, 1651. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> "Prologue," *Instante y revelación* (poems by Octavio Paz and photographs by Manuel Álvarez Bravo) (Mexico City: Fonapas, 1982), p. 212. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>3</sup> José Antonio Rodríguez's article, "Una moderna dialéctica. La vanguardia fotográfica mexicana, 1930-1950," appeared in the *Huesca-Imagen 2004* catalogue, published for the annual photography festival formerly held in Huesca, Spain, and which in 2004 centered on Mexico.



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Luis Márquez Romay, *La Valentina*, 1935 (silver on gelatin).