

## ***La Grandeza de México***

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City

Curated by Karina Romero Blanco, Baltazar Brito Guadarrama, et al.

September 2021–August 2022

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An expansive definition of the Midwest tickled at the edges of the concept of a Greater Mexico in an extraordinary year-long exhibition primarily at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City (September 2021–August 2022). Installed in honor of the two hundredth anniversary of Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, *La Grandeza de México* (Mexican Grandeur) was an artistic celebration of the nation's cultural history, from its pre-Classical indigenous roots to the florescence of modern nationalism in the twentieth century. An enormous display of a complicated history through more than 1500 artworks, the show extended into a secondary venue: The Salón Iberoamericano, the nave of a former Spanish colonial church that now forms part of the Ministry of Public Education in Mexico City's historic center.

Why is a review of an exhibition on Mexican art history included in a journal focused on art historians working in the Midwestern United States? Among the many answers to this question are two crucial ones. First, the Midwest has a significant history of social and artistic interaction with Mexico, including shared interests that make its concerns relevant to the US at large and to this particular region. A few specific works of art featured in the show materialize aspects of such exchanges, including a repatriated sculpture from a Midwest institution as well as works once featured at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago. Second, and more importantly, Mexican art is American art. An overdetermined border between the US and its southern neighbor does not negate the fact that Mexican visual culture transcends North American boundaries.

In the Midwest, this is most visible in neighborhoods like Chicago's Pilsen where street art publicizes some of that nation's most iconic imagery and where the National Museum of Mexican Art has highlighted the continuities between Mexican and Mexican-American artistic expression for 40 years. Beyond Illinois, which is home to the Midwest's largest Mexican population, a recent exhibition at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, *Box of Visions: Modern and Contemporary Art from Mexico in the Midwest* (September 2021–January 2022), demonstrated a broader regional transcultural reality of which every art historian should be aware.

The artworks gathered to create *La Grandeza de México* represented some of the finest examples from Mexican art history, particularly almost 400 pieces showcased at the National Museum of Anthropology. In this venue, about ten percent of the pieces were international loans, mostly from France, including objects from the Musée du quai Branly, the Bibliothèque nationale, and the Musée des Amériques in Auch. The show also featured a number of objects from US venues, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Tucson Museum of Art. Too extraordinary to sum up in anything less than several extended

essay-length reviews, I can only offer here the smallest taste of its range and significance.

Near the beginning of the show, four recently unearthed, large basalt sculptures from the ongoing archaeological excavations in the pre-Aztec city of Tehuacán, Puebla (established circa 1000 CE) were early showstoppers. Among them was a superbly wrought standing eagle warrior with a skeletal face that emerges from the gaping maw of a bird whose wings drape down the figure's back with intricately-carved feathers. Museum officials operated under the cover of darkness to bring these works to the capital city in order to avoid disruptive protests because locals in Tehuacán were rightfully skeptical of government intentions, concerned above all that the pieces would not be returned. Less controversial but similarly symbolic of the hybrid concepts and virtuosic artistry that characterizes ancient Mesoamerican visual culture was a dazzling sculpture of a coyote head completely covered in feathers, each carefully formed from mother of pearl. The animal's mouth opened to reveal the face of a man embellished with bone and seashells, whose general appearance is consistent with other objects from the post-Classic Toltec city of Tula.

Mexico's most dramatic transformation was registered when visitors moved from an imperial Aztec feather shield to several stunning feather mosaic paintings, the latter group a sacred union of a native artform that was later used to represent Christian subjects in the sixteenth century. One particularly foundational vehicle for this religious transformation was on display in the form of a painted banner carried by the Spaniard Hernán Cortés when he landed in the Gulf of Mexico and proceeded inland towards Tenochtitlan in 1519. This painting presented the conquerors' most promising weapon, the benevolent face of the Virgin Mary, a visual justification for their invasion and a deceptively gentle relic of the history-altering moment. This painting has its parallel in another immeasurably important standard that was featured in the exhibition, the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe under which Father Hidalgo marched as he called for Mexican independence from Spain in 1810. Between these two visual bookends was a stunning collection of paintings from the colonial era, all of them considered gems among the art of that period. They included a massive Asian-influenced *biombo* (folding screen) depicting the Conquest, as well as a large painting of Mexico City's main plaza bustling with

mercantile activities and other performances of social position—more evidence of the nation's central position within the early global economy. Other highlights included a *casta* painting codifying Mexico's racial hierarchy, and the well-known posthumous portrait of the rebellious intellectual nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, by the important eighteenth-century painter Miguel Cabrera.

The showcase of modern works was no less impressive, with paintings like David Alfaro Siqueiros' 1929 *Proletarian Mother* capturing on rough burlap that artist-activist's darkly expressive outlook on the social situation following the Revolution of 1910. Another astounding standout was the juxtaposition of the 1949 award-winning painted vista of Mexico City by Juan O'Gorman with the Uppsala Map, the only known sixteenth-century view of the early colonial city. In the foreground of his modern vista, O'Gorman painted an image of the Uppsala Map, but he clearly copied it from a facsimile since the original has resided in Sweden for at least several hundred years. With this loan from the Uppsala University Library, then, the large map by an unnamed native artist was temporarily back in its place of origin for the first time since it was made around 1540, a stunning detail in itself. In sum, in

gallery after gallery *La Grandeza de México* felt like a stroll through a three-dimensional textbook survey of Mexican art.

A significant subtext of this narrative was the demonstration of Mexican resiliency and self-determination despite the nation's tumultuous history, including its repeated violation by foreign entities. To this end, one component emphasized especially in the material presented in the Salón Iberoamericano was the repatriation of objects and thus an ethical restoration of cultural patrimony. Almost 900 of the nearly 1150 pieces on display in that venue were objects that had been repatriated from other countries in just the three previous years. One particularly relevant example came directly from the Midwest in the form of a painted urn, measuring one meter high, from Chiapas that had been in the collections of Albion College in Michigan for decades. Believed to be at least 500 years old, the polychrome ceramic urn originally came from the Maya site of Laguna Pethá, and its repatriation was facilitated by Mexico's consulate in Detroit. Together the college and the consulate signed an agreement in April 2021 that insured its ultimate return to San Cristóbal de las Casas, where it will be displayed alongside a twin urn from which it has been too long

separated. Its first stop, however, was the *La Grandeza de México* exhibition in Mexico City. A similar story of repatriation and artistic reunion comes out of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; that institution also just returned a carved stela from the ancient Maya city of La Mar. After its display in the Salón Iberoamericano, it will also rejoin two stone siblings on display in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. A list of the countries participating in this mass repatriation project provides something of a guide to the places implicated in the plunder of Mexico across time: the US, Italy, France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Other items on display reminded us of some more foundational (and ongoing) connections between Mexican art and the Midwest. One early but important site of convergence was at the 1893 World's Fair, when the renowned landscape painter José María Velasco arrived in Chicago to lead the Mexican delegation as a Commissioner for Fine Arts. Mexican artists provided 80 paintings for display in the fair's Palace of Fine Arts, including many works by Velasco himself. Some of these same works were on display in *La Grandeza de México*, but several had also been back in Chicago after 125 years for *Arte Diseño Xicágo: Mexican Inspiration from the World's Columbian*

*Exposition to the Civil Rights Era*, at the National Museum of Mexican Art (March–August 2018). As curator Cesáreo Moreno then explained, Mexico exhibited items in nearly all the great exhibition halls and won over a thousand awards at the Fair. At least one such award-winning item was on display in *La Grandeza de México*, a tabletop diorama featuring a group of musicians and dancers under a rambling nopal cactus by Cristino Ramirez of Guanajuato, whose 1893 prize is mentioned on an attached plaque.

By way of conclusion, I mention one final object that was in the show—a newly discovered pre-Hispanic sculpture of a native woman—whose story highlights the shared challenges of American history and the ways in which Mexico’s unique cultural heritage has been rallied to address them. As we are all well aware, protesters have toppled statues of Christopher Columbus across the United States or, as happened in Chicago, officials under the cover of darkness have preemptively (at least temporarily) removed such monuments. A similar situation unfolded in Mexico City in 2020, when Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum ordered the removal of the 1877 Monument to Columbus on a roundabout along the elegant Paseo de la Reforma, citing the

need to “decolonize” the prominent civic space. After some controversy over what might replace the statue atop its extant neoclassical plinth, the earth itself offered up a solution. In January of 2021, as farmers in the town of Hidalgo Amajac prepared their citrus field for tilling near the Tuxpan River in the state of Veracruz, a two-meter-tall standing limestone figure suddenly appeared from the ground. Perhaps carved even as Columbus gathered his resources in Europe for his trans-Atlantic voyage, the so-called *Young Woman of Amajac* (*La Joven de Amajac*) is adorned in Huastec style to suggest elite status and political engagement. Her inclusion in *La Grandeza de México* preceded the announcement, made on October 12, 2021, Mexico’s “Dia de la Raza” or “Day of the Race,” which replaced Columbus Day, that a six-meter-tall replica of this sculpture would assume the position once occupied by the Italian explorer.

Mayor Sheinbaum sees the replacement of a prominent public sculpture honoring a European man with the image of a much larger indigenous female figure as an act of social justice that honors especially the innumerable dispossessions suffered by native women in the conquest and colonization of Mexico. Native rights advocates see political opportunism in such

calls for decolonization since they are often unaccompanied by policies that might actually change the livelihoods of indigenous workers today. Nevertheless, it is exciting to think that a sculpture of a prominent woman from the past has surfaced in the present, not only to be shown as part of *La Grandeza de México*, but ultimately to occupy, in monumental scale, a very public position.

Mexico City is in the very same Central time zone as much of the Midwest, and in that sense, as well as in geographical and historical terms, it is no distant territory. *La Grandeza de México* offered us much to consider in terms of our midwestern connections, and it demonstrated an enormous effort by our Mexican colleagues to curate a truly monumental exhibition, even in the midst of a global pandemic. Above all, the agents behind the show rallied an incredible array of resources to display Mexican grandeur, its expansiveness, and its futurities.