

Museums and the Narrative Representation of the Nation: *Mexico's Museo Nacional de Arte*

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This paper examines Mexico City's new Museo Nacional de Arte [National Museum of Art], addressing the implications of establishing a national museum, a form closely associated with nineteenth-century nation-building processes, in a global era in which the role of nation-states is said to be reduced. This study, which forms part of my wider research on Mexican visual culture in relation to state discourses, argues that the establishment of this new museum should be viewed in the context of the economic and political changes that began to take place during the 1980s as a result of International Monetary Fund restructuring policies. Focusing on the internal organization of this museum as a form of narrative, I approach it as a contemporary repositioning of the nation which constitutes a departure from the model of national identity developed during the seventy-year period of Partido Revolucionario Institucional [Institutional Revolutionary Party] rule. I propose that unlike the Museo Nacional de Antropología [National Museum of Anthropology], which embodied official identity constructions by emphasizing the pre-Hispanic origins of Mexican culture, MUNAL emphasizes its modern European foundations, attempting to inscribe it into a 'universal' narrative of Western civilization.

Until 1982 Mexico had no national art museum: a surprising fact given the strength of cultural nationalism throughout the twentieth century and its role in the legitimization of the authoritarian *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, which ruled continuously throughout much of the twentieth century until their election defeat in 2000), and the instrumental role the visual arts have played in the construction of nationalist iconography.¹ This paper will examine the establishment of this new museum in the context of the political circumstances from which it emerged, and analyse its narrative organization in relation to Mexican nationalist discourses of the twentieth century. Museology has been a growing field of enquiry since the 1980s, but has tended to focus on the Museum's

¹ Roger Bartra, *Blood, Ink and Culture: Miseries and Splendours of the Post-Mexican Condition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 8-10. On the development of nationalist imagery in painting see Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963). For a broader discussion of the image/nation relationship see Andrea Noble, *Mexican National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 11. Unless stated otherwise, all translations in this essay are by the author.

European development.² Studies of the Museum in Mexico have taken place within analyses of nationalist discourses rather than within the field of museology; the Museum has been acknowledged as a crucial site for the institutionalization of official ideology. However, the impact of Neoliberalism upon the state museum infrastructure has not been sufficiently investigated.³ Moreover, the implications of establishing a national museum in a ‘postnational’ era have not been addressed.⁴ I argue that the opening of Mexico’s *Museo Nacional de Arte* [National Museum of Art] (MUNAL) represents a significant step in the resignification of the nation and its symbolic repositioning within the global system.

While art museums differ in some ways from other kinds of museum, my approach is based upon their shared histories and modes of display.⁵ Before analysing MUNAL’s narrative structure, I will outline the historical role of the Museum in Mexican nationalist discourses. Many authors have noted the instrumental role of the Museum in forging a sense of national unity in newly independent nations.⁶ However, the ideological function of the Museum depends upon its conscious manipulation of symbols, and its effectiveness as an ideological tool depends upon a clear definition of the nation. Mexico’s first national museum, the *Museo Nacional* [National Museum], was established soon after Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821. Unlike the museums which emerged in Europe based around a clear idea of national identity, it was reported to be chaotic and inconsistent, lacking in any clear conceptual direction.⁷ The confused and inconsistent representation of pre-Columbian artefacts reflected a lack of consensus about the definition of national identity, and in particular about the symbolic role indigenous groups would play in it.⁸

² For a particularly exhaustive account of the Museum’s genesis in Europe see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995). For the sake of clarity, I will distinguish between ‘the Museum’ as a concept, and the museum discussed in this essay, which I will refer to as MUNAL.

³ Mary Coffey’s study examines the proliferation of local community museums under Neoliberalism, but MUNAL’s opening has not been addressed (‘From Nation to Community: Museums and the Reconfiguration of Mexican Society under Neoliberalism’, in *Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality*, ed. by Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer and Cameron McCarthy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 207-42).

⁴ Jürgen Habermas has used the term ‘postnational constellation’ to describe the reorganization of global political/economic spheres (*The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, ed. and trans. by Max Pensky (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 51-65).

⁵ While many museums select objects for their typicality as representative specimens, art museums emphasize the singularity of the objects they display (Bennett, p. 20).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁷ Sophia C. Vackimes, ‘Indians in Formaldehyde – Nation of Progress: The *Museo Nacional* of Mexico and the Construction of National Identity’, *Museum Anthropology*, 25.1 (2001), 20-30 (p. 26).

⁸ Due to such inconsistencies and uncertainties Vackimes has argued that nineteenth-century Mexican museums cannot be viewed in the same way as those established in Europe, which were based upon a clear idea of national identity and cultural unity (p. 26).

After the revolution of 1910 indigenous culture came to occupy a privileged position as the basis for a homogenous identity: the concept of *mestizaje* answered calls for a unifying identity based upon mixed racial and cultural origins.⁹ The post-revolutionary government promoted *mestizaje* not only as a means of unifying a diverse and fragmented population, but also as a way of expanding the workforce and accelerating industrialization through the assimilation of indigenous groups. The *Museo Nacional de Antropología* [National Museum of Anthropology], which opened in 1963, was the first clear museological manifestation of a coherent policy regarding the representation of national identity, and helped to construct a sense of historical cultural unity.¹⁰ The centralization of the museum network within Mexico City and the all-encompassing approach of the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* drew the representation of all regions and ethnicities into the centre, allowing specific cultural and historical symbols to transcend local contexts and become national culture.¹¹ This museum aimed also to establish pre-Columbian civilizations as an alternative to European classical cultures, thus providing an alternative foundation for Mexican cultural production that marked it out as discrete from European forms.¹²

The *Museo Nacional de Antropología* constitutes a celebration of *mestizaje*, an attempt to forge a homogenous national identity based upon a common indigenous heritage, while for the most part encouraging the assimilation of indigenous groups by portraying their cultures as archaeological relics. Anthony Alan Shelton's essay brings out the contradictions in Mexican official discourse developed during the twentieth century: attempts to narrow the gulf between representations of an idealized pre-Columbian past and approaches towards contemporary indigenous populations by establishing a sense of cultural continuity which portrays present-day indigenous people as descendants of the pre-Colonial past were only partly achieved, as demonstrated by the curatorial separation between archaeology and ethnology in the *Museo Nacional de Antropología*.¹³ However, this museum shows the importance placed upon indigenous culture in the ideology of revolutionary nationalism, and was an important part of the structure of the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*

⁹ The term *mestizaje* literally refers to racial mixing, although it can also refer to mixed cultural origins, specifically mixed Indigenous and Hispanic heritage. As a means of conceptualizing postcolonial identities in Latin America it has come to define national identity in many countries.

¹⁰ Vackimes, p. 30.

¹¹ Néstor García Canclini, 'Las cuatro ciudades de México', in *Cultura y comunicación en la Ciudad de México*, ed. by Néstor García Canclini (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1998), pp. 19-39 (p. 21).

¹² Anthony Alan Shelton, 'Dispossessed Histories: Mexican Museums and the Institutionalization of the Past', *Cultural Dynamics*, 7.1 (1995), 69-100 (p. 91).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[National Institute of Anthropology and History] (INAH), one of the means by which the ruling party constructed and reproduced ideas about Mexican national identity.

The Museum is implicated in the representation and reproduction of narratives: both constructing historical narratives of the nation through chronological modes of display, and reproducing the ‘Grand Narratives’ of modernity that have validated and underpinned Western knowledge.¹⁴ The Museum emerged as a product of modernity and Enlightenment thinking and has been linked to the consolidation of the modern nation.¹⁵ It subsumes objects into an evolutionary narrative of progress and the development of civilization, using narrative representation to construct continuity and establish a sense of order, thus ironing out any incongruities.¹⁶ Thus the Museum unites two mutually reinforcing understandings of narrative: the Museum’s temporal representation and the ‘Grand Narratives’ of modernity that it reinforces, both of which are underscored by its spatial articulation and forward-moving itinerary, which represent the evolution of man and culminate in the present.¹⁷ The role of space in the production of museum narratives is emphasized by Giuliana Bruno’s evocation of Quintilian’s method of remembering discourse by mentally furnishing a space with objects, which serves as an apt metaphor for the Museum’s interlinking of space and temporality in the production of historical memory.¹⁸

While the Museum’s floorspace reinforces its temporal narrative, the Museum also represents national space, symbolizing the abstract space of the state that frames social relations between individuals and institutions.¹⁹ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill proposes an understanding of the parallel functions of museology and cartography by suggesting that both fulfil similar functions of delineating territories and power relations.²⁰ The Museum inscribes a historical narrative onto a national space, interlinking time and space in the production of the nation. State collections not only play a part in the construction of historical narratives and

¹⁴ Jean-François Lyotard has theorized ‘Grand Narratives’ as performing a legitimizing function, providing the fundamental assumptions upon which Western knowledge is based (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 23-26).

¹⁵ Bennett, p. 76. See also Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 16-17.

¹⁶ Taxonomy and cartography also emerged from the Enlightenment as a means of conceptualizing the world and establishing a sense of order. However, an analysis of this topic does not fall within the scope of this essay.

¹⁷ Bennett, pp. 178-79.

¹⁸ Quintilian’s method for memorizing text and discourse involved placing objects, each associated with a component of the discourse, in a sequence, so that in order to recall the narrative, one must mentally walk through the space (Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 220).

¹⁹ Claudio Lomnitz-Adler has reframed national culture as ‘culture within the national space’ (*Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in the Mexican National Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 3).

²⁰ Hooper-Greenhill, p. 17.

canons, but also in defining a museum's national public, bringing together legal and cultural definitions of the nation by marking out a heritage which belongs to all within its borders.

Mexico's national collection of art was brought together for the first time in 1982, when the *Museo Nacional de Pintura* [National Museum of Painting] assembled the collection of the *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes* [National Institute of Fine Arts] (INBA), previously distributed among several art museums. The new museum was founded in a decisive year in Mexico's recent history, coinciding with a deep economic crisis linked to the fall of global oil prices, leading to loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which came with demands that Mexico's economy be restructured to meet the demands of globalization and free trade.²¹ This involved a reduction in social spending and the restructuring of financial institutions to allow a greater level of foreign investment. However, it has been noted that while social spending decreased, funding for culture did not, signalling the importance of culture as legitimization for government action.²²

This new museum was established in a portion of the *Palacio de Comunicaciones* [Palace of Communications] in the historic centre of Mexico City. However, the partial occupation of the building made it difficult to establish a continuous route through the collection, and after gaining full occupation of the building this museum closed for reconstruction in 1997. After a complete museological overhaul, as well as architectural changes to adapt the building to its new museological purpose, it reopened in 2000 as MUNAL.²³ The reopening coincided with the 2000 presidential elections, and was therefore a means of promotion for the PRI as they attempted to cling to power and redefine the party: incidentally, they lost to the centre-right *Partido de Acción Nacional* [National Action Party] (PAN), marking the end of seventy years of authoritarian rule.

MUNAL's permanent collection forms the *recorrido historico-artístico* [art-historical route].²⁴ Changes made to the building before its reopening allow a more coherent navigation through the collection, beginning at the earliest point and finally arriving at the end of its narrative, although a coherent navigation is impeded at times, as the spectator is often forced to backtrack.²⁵ The collection is divided into three temporally defined sections, marking out

²¹ For a concise and comprehensive outline of Mexico's transition to democracy, see Alexander S. Dawson, *First World Dreams: Mexico after 1989*, Global History of the Present (London: Zed, 2006).

²² George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in a Global Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 276.

²³ Gabriela Fong and Carmén León de la Barra, *Memoria del Munal* (Mexico: Conaculta-Inba, 2001), pp. 33-34.

²⁴ MUNAL's space is divided between the *recorrido historico-artístico*, which houses its permanent collection and constitutes its narrative, and the *recorrido alterno*, which includes temporary exhibition spaces and interactive spaces which propose different ways of approaching the objects on display.

²⁵ These observations are based upon visits made to MUNAL during May 2008.

Mexican history into three epochs beginning with the Spanish conquest. The first section, '*Assimilación de Occidente 1550-1821*' [Western Assimilation 1550-1821], covers the colonial period, charting the development of art in New Spain from a European base, without any acknowledgement of the indigenous cultural heritage later reclaimed by Mexican modernist painters. Paintings that appear towards the end of this section register the development of a *Criollo* identity separate from that of the *Peninsulares* (those born in Spain), as religious iconography is adapted towards a proto-nationalist imaginary, most notably with the development of *Guadalupismo*.²⁶

The second section, '*Construcción de una nación 1810-1910*' [Nation-Building 1810-1910], defines the second historical epoch as the period between independence and revolution. The emphasis is on the tensions between idealized representation (myth, allegory) and the quotidian (popular types, rural life) in the construction of an independent national identity. Indigenous subjects begin to appear for the first time in MUNAL's narrative in paintings depicting historical scenes from the Aztec codices, displaying a desire to construct an authentic and original national history in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. One of the largest spaces is divided between landscape paintings and portraits, visualizing national space and the national subject, with much space being devoted to Jose María Velasco's landscape paintings. The third and final section, '*Estrategias plásticas para un México moderno 1900-1954*' [Strategies for a Modern Mexico 1900-1954], seems less thorough than the preceding one, perhaps due to the dominance of public mural painting, not given to museological display, during this period. It follows a similar structure to the previous section and elaborates some of the same themes: a series of modernist landscapes and portraits shows the reconstruction of the nation after the revolution through a reimagining of national space and citizenship. Velasco's nineteenth-century landscapes are mirrored by the dramatic landscapes of 'Dr Atl' (Gerardo Murillo) characteristic of the post-revolutionary aesthetic and the attempts to redefine national culture as distinctly Mexican.

By representing the two post-independence periods in this way, mirroring one another with their constructions of national territory and national subjects, the cyclical processes of symbolic national construction are emphasized: the making and remaking of the nation within periods delimited by historical ruptures. The events that mark these periods are not directly addressed but made visible only as ruptures that divide the collection, and taken for granted as

²⁶ According to traditional accounts, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to an indigenous man named Juan Diego in 1531, becoming Mexico's most popular religious and cultural image. Since independence it has come to symbolize the nation.

already-narrated events. This is particularly true of the revolution, an event now closely associated with PRI nationalism and by extension authoritarian politics, which is conspicuously absent from MUNAL's narrative. Even the tensions that preceded it are given very little space: one small room contains paintings which to a certain extent celebrate modernization, such as Velasco's depictions of industrialization within the rural landscape, while two display boards of Jose Guadalupe Posada's popular satirical prints present an alternative view. However, these two displays are separated, so that any explicit relation between them is softened. The development of notions of cultural continuity and *mestizaje* are visualized and narrativized within MUNAL, which acts not only as a monument to and institutionalization of the past and its representation in images, but also charts a history of intellectual constructions of national culture. Homi K. Bhabha argues that the nation is narrativized in two ways: the accumulative teleology of progress (embodied by the Museum), and the performative retelling of the nation in the present.²⁷ MUNAL visualizes the continual retelling of the nation, and is in itself an example of the reformulation of the national past.

While the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* served a specific nation-building purpose, the demands of the late twentieth century were somewhat different. The notion of culture as resource, used by Tony Bennett to describe the nineteenth-century shift in governmental approaches to culture, has been taken up by George Yúdice as a means of approaching the instrumentalization of culture in the global era, less as a means of civilizing and instructing than at the service of global capital. Museums now play a decisive role in urban development and tourism, as well as creating a favourable impression of a city in order to attract foreign investment.²⁸ As Carol Duncan has argued, 'Western-style museums are now deployed as a means of signalling to the West that one is a reliable political ally, imbued with proper respect for and adherence to Western symbols and values'.²⁹ Mexico's transition posed challenges to the dominant conceptions of national identity, which had previously been defined in opposition to the US. The symbolic realignment of Mexican culture with its Western counterparts has disrupted models of national identity that had not only defined the nation as *mestizo*, but also symbolically anti-Western and anti-capitalist.

While serving a strategic purpose with regard to economic restructuring and attracting foreign investment, the creation of a new national museum can be read as an attempt to reduce

²⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-322 (p. 297).

²⁸ Yúdice, pp. 9-11.

²⁹ Carol Duncan, 'Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship', in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. by Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 279-286 (p. 279).

fears about the loss of cultural identity often thought to accompany globalization, even while it paradoxically denaturalizes national identity by visualizing the intellectual processes of its construction. These processes are systematized through MUNAL's narrative structure and emphasized by display boards that contextualize the images on display in terms of the cultural discourses of their time.³⁰ Diverse cultural agents influence museum display, sometimes with conflicting agendas. MUNAL balances the state's strategic uses of the Museum with the curatorial team's aim towards an academically legitimate exhibition that questions received narratives. MUNAL's seemingly contradictory position embodies the ambivalence of the contemporary state, which finds itself in the position of needing to express a defence of the nation while creating distance from the post-revolutionary nationalist discourses that have become so closely associated with authoritarianism.

MUNAL traces the development in Mexico of a liberal tradition, a genealogy that links Mexican modernism, through the religious art of New Spain, to European 'high' culture. The role of indigenous culture in artistic genealogies is downplayed, if not completely denied, as the concept of art upon which the Museum is based is in itself a historical European construction founded upon a system of value which excludes indigenous cultural products as archaeology, ethnographic objects or handicrafts. MUNAL portrays a national cultural tradition founded on European liberal values, as opposed to the *Museo Nacional de Antropología*, which despite being constituted through disciplinary knowledges and systems of classification proceeding from the Enlightenment, has 'third world' associations. MUNAL's representation of elite culture exposes the subordination of the cultural production of subaltern groups within hierarchies of value, which is at odds with nationalist discourses that have traditionally elevated indigenous culture. However, it reproduces rather than confronts such hierarchies.

The absence of a national museum of art in Mexico throughout much of the twentieth century requires some explanation: a genealogy of the development of this particular concept of art in Mexico not only works against the indigenist basis of the PRI's nationalist project, but also cannot be extended beyond its colonial origins, and therefore does not support the concept of the nation as a timeless entity which the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* achieves through its extension of national history into an indefinite past. It is perhaps for this reason that MUNAL breaks with officially sanctioned museological divisions of Mexican history. The museum network in Mexico divides national history into three periods, each covered by a

³⁰ MUNAL operates a multi-level system of contextualization which gives prominence to key themes. Extra levels of theoretical detail are provided, but do not interrupt the basic narrative.

different museum: pre-Columbian heritage in the *Museo Nacional de Antropología*, the colonial period covered by the *Museo Verreinato*, and post-independence represented by the *Museo Nacional de Historia* [National Museum of History].³¹ A similar tripartite division is used at MUNAL, but here national history begins with colonization, and independent Mexico is divided into two periods separated by the revolution.

As noted by Bennett, the division of national museum networks according to separate disciplines presents each period as a chapter in a universal narrative of human development. Beginning with the evolution of life on earth (natural history), through the development of ‘primitive’ man (anthropology), this narrative culminates in Western civilization (art).³² In Mexico colonial rule disrupts such narratives, and the museological division between not only different time periods but also elite and popular cultural forms makes plain the historical and cultural ruptures that post-revolutionary indigenist discourses had attempted to conceal. The contradictions Shelton notes between idealized representations of pre-Colonial history and representations of present-day indigenous cultures as cut off from their past and incongruous with the present are also made obvious by the founding of MUNAL. The attempts made by the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* to establish pre-Columbian culture as an alternative classical cultural foundation for Mexican modernism are negated by MUNAL’s narrative of artistic production which traces its genealogy exclusively to Europe. These museological divisions expose the contradictions in an official culture that attempted to establish a sense of historical continuity, and signals the incompleteness of the now-abandoned attempts to construct a homogenous culture.

³¹ Shelton, p. 69.

³² Bennett, p. 181.