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Modern Museum Practice in Nineteenth-Century Mexico: The Academy of San Carlos and *la antigua escuela mexicana*

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Abstract:

In 1855, José Bernardo Couto, director of the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City, responded to a request by the president, Antonio López de Santa Anna for the creation of a gallery of national art by collecting works, which he regarded as representing the Old Mexican School of Painting. Early museum practice in Mexico, exemplified here by the public display of this formative collection, was shaped by the peculiarities of the nineteenth-century political and cultural landscape in Mexico City, which was primarily defined by the ideological tensions between Liberals and Conservatives.

Modern Museum Practice in Nineteenth-Century Mexico: The Academy of San Carlos and *la antigua escuela mexicana*

by Ray Hernández-Durán

Once we question our Enlightenment assumptions about the sharp separation between religious and secular experience—that the one is rooted in belief while the other is based in lucid and objective rationality—we may begin to glimpse the hidden—perhaps the better word is disguised—ritual content of secular ceremonies.

—Carol Duncan.[\[1\]](#)

One of the most insistent problems that museums face is precisely the idea that artifacts can be, and should be, divorced from their original context of ownership and use, and redisplayed in a different context of meaning, which is regarded as having a superior authority.

—Charles Saumarez Smith.[\[2\]](#)

Introduction

A cursory review of the pertinent literature reveals that studies of museum history and museum theory are predominantly focused on the developed nations of the so-called "First World," specifically, North-Western Europe and the United States. In a discussion of the emergence of the museum and its diffusion worldwide as a result of colonialism and imperialism, Martin Prösler noted, "the 'Third World' has to be taken thoroughly into account if one is to gain a truly global perspective, but it is here that the conceptual limitations...are most in evidence."[\[3\]](#) Prösler's statement alerts us to what continues to be the general absence, from the scholarly literature on museum history and museum practice, of museums in cities such as those found in Latin American countries. More importantly, it underscores the increasingly apparent need for approaches that take into account the unique, localized histories of museums outside Europe and the United States.

As has long been recognized, the emergence of the modern museum in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the simultaneous development of art history as an academic discipline, are indissolubly linked to the rise of the nation-state in Western Europe. The collecting, study, and display of art objects represented the cultural aspects of nationalism, and were thought to positively reflect on a nation's development and, to a certain degree, its modernity. Institutions such as universities and museums, particularly those located in national capitals, guided and legitimized such practices.

But what happened in countries where cultural production developed in social and political conditions that differed from those in the Western nations where museums originally had developed, that is, in environments that lacked the requisite infrastructures and mechanisms of validation? An examination of Ibero-American colonial art historiography—associated with nations that were once Spanish colonial territories and have been viewed as historically dogged by repeated failures at modernization—begins to answer this question. Art historical awareness and practice in Mexico, although following precedents set in countries such as France and Germany, materialized as a function of political practices and cultural values that deviated in many ways from those considered as critical to modern national development in

Europe and the United States. To understand the related developments of art history and the art museum in Latin American countries, such as Mexico, one must ask what historical events contributed to their formation, what ideologies were at work, and how were they rendered instrumental.

In "Art in Colonial Latin America: A Brief Critical Review," Joseph J. Rishel notes that the manner in which artistic heritage was treated in Latin America in the nineteenth century was tied to "political and social considerations on a scale and authority rare in any parallel European system."^[4] His observation is especially relevant to a critical consideration of the history of the study and display of art in Mexico. As it transitioned from Spanish viceroyalty to independent republic, during the first half of the nineteenth-century, the territory that was to become the modern Mexican state experienced a significant political, economic, and social upheaval. But beginning in the late 1840s and through the 1850s, a cultural renaissance occurred in Mexico City, in spite of continuing economic and political crises. During that period, a new manner of experiencing and thinking about colonial images was introduced through the strategic display of select religious paintings in a museological setting that was part of a non-religious, state-controlled, educational institution, namely, the Academy of San Carlos. The resulting shift in the perception of the meaning of at least a part of Novohispanic material culture occurred in response to a growing recognition of the value—highly contested at the time—of the viceregal past as a foundation for a national history.

While the development of a national art historical narrative concomitant with the formation of a national consciousness in Mexico paralleled similar developments in Europe and the United States, it was also quite distinct. Mexico's early national experience was shaped by several local factors including, among others, repeatedly failed political and economic policies, a racially and culturally diverse population, a deeply embedded viceregal socio-cultural matrix, and the continuing influence of the Catholic Church in Mexican society, culture, and politics. A study that takes such variables into account begins to elucidate the factors and processes informing the local manifestations of museum practice in Mexico.

With this in mind, I will examine the principal events and the cultural politics surrounding the creation of the first gallery of colonial paintings in Mexico City, a seminal curatorial enterprise that also led to the first Mexican art historical text and paved the way for the later development of Art History in Mexico.

The Political Context in Mexico City

Although there were at least three political parties in Mexico by mid-century, (Liberal, Moderate Liberal, and Conservative), the more prominent political debates in Mexico City occurred between the polarized Liberals and Conservatives. The Liberals' perspective was defined by their anti-Church, anti-Spanish, and anti-colonial sentiments. Liberals tended to view the colonial, or viceregal, period in Mexico—approximately 1521 to 1821—as a time of Mexican oppression at the hands of the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church.^[5] As a consequence, they perceived the viceregal period as the source of independent Mexico's arrested development and weakened economic state, and they admired and looked to foreign nations, France in particular, as models of high culture, progress, and modernity.

Conservatives, on the other hand, believed in preserving the traditions inherited from Novohispanic society, that is, the cultural practices of the people who lived in the viceroyalty of New Spain, as Mexico was known during the colonial period. As fervent Catholics, they respected religious institutions, religious culture, and religious art. Unlike their Liberal counterparts, the Conservatives did not support the separation of Church and State; rather, they believed that the Church should be directly involved in political affairs as a mechanism that would maintain the traditional social hierarchy and preserve traditional Mexican values. [6] Consequently, they were highly critical of the Liberal tendency to look outside of Mexico for direction, and considered foreign cultural influences as alien to Mexico and to its people's fundamental nature.[7]

Following contemporary European practice, Mexican historians structured the national history on a tripartite model whereby the period of Aztec imperial domination was presented as analogous to the ancient classical worlds of Greece and Rome, the viceregal period was equated with medieval Europe, while the early Mexican Republic was equated with the modern period; what distinguished the Liberal historians from their Conservative counterparts was the different emphases they placed on the first two periods. The Liberal version of Mexican history began with the Aztecs and downplayed the colonial period, resuming with an extended discussion of the post-independence nation. Lorenzo de Zavala succinctly articulated the dominant Liberal devaluation of the viceregal period in his historical text of 1831 when he wrote: "Since the period before the events of 1808 [i.e., the colonial period up to the beginning of the Mexican independence movement] is one of silence, sleep, and monotony, Mexico's interesting history does not truly begin until that memorable year." [8]

Conservatives, in contrast, perceived the indigenous, pre-contact cultures as irrelevant to the European-Spanish cultural foundation upon which, they believed, modern Mexico rested. According to their perspective, Mexican history began with the events surrounding the Conquest and not with the preceding period of Aztec imperial rule. The viceregal period represented for them the primal matrix for modern Mexico's political, cultural, and social gestation, which they considered as having been directed by the Creoles, i.e., the American-born Hispanic forebears of the modern nation's elite. This interpretation effectively erased any historical or political presence representing contemporary Mexicans of mixed and indigenous descent, anchoring socio-political agency to the white upper class, and, specifically, to the elites living in the capital city.[9]

How did such cultural politics come to play a role in the development of museum practice in Mexico? For the answer, we must direct our attention to the principal art institution located in the national capital, the Academy of San Carlos.

The Academy of San Carlos and the Presidential Petition

The first gallery of colonial paintings in Mexico City was located in the Academy of San Carlos, an institution of viceregal origin that had been sponsored in the late colonial period by Carlos III, the Bourbon monarch in Spain. The Academy of San Carlos was founded in 1785 following Viceroy Martín de Mayorga's approval of Gerónimo Antonio Gil's request for the creation of an art institution in the viceregal American capital. In 1778, Gil had been appointed by the Spanish king to serve as the director and head engraver of the Royal Mint in Mexico City. It was during his tenure in this capacity that Gil recognized the need for an academy in the

viceregal capital, following the precedent set by the Academy of San Fernando in Madrid. The first academy classes were held in the Royal Mint until a separate academy facility was built and opened in 1791. For approximately 35 years, the academy flourished but eventually succumbed to the political and economic instability caused by the civil war that was incited during the independence movement. After 1821, following Mexico's official declaration of independence from Spain, the country experienced severe financial setbacks. The dire fiscal circumstances led to the Academy of San Carlos' loss of funds and other kinds of support, thus impeding the hiring of faculty and even the maintenance of the school building itself. By the late 1820s, the Academy's functions had gradually diminished until the institution was forced to close. Consequently, from the late 1820s through the 1830s, the Academy building fell into alarming disrepair and its collections were left in disarray.^[10]

In 1836, the Englishman Charles Joseph Latrobe published in London the record of his travels to Mexico. During a trip to the Mexican capital in 1834, he visited the Academy and wrote of its condition:

The academy of arts...at the time of our visit [was] in a state of general neglect shameful to the government and to the people...rare and unique works illustrative of the history of the country...[were] in the most appalling disorder...[suggesting that] the same insane and bigoted spirit of wanton destruction, which the Spanish historians note influenced the conquerors and caused the annihilation of much that was curious and valuable, seems to have influenced their descendants to a very late epoch, if not the present day.
^[11]

Latrobe's description and those of other Europeans and Americans from the United States who visited the Academy during this time capture their dismay at the deteriorated state of an institution that they considered to be an index of cultural achievement and central to the nation's building process. Indeed, the disrepair of the Academy seemed to confirm widely held prejudices among Northern Europeans and North Americans regarding the corruption and degradation of the Catholic Indo-Hispanic Americas.^[12]

The Academy's fortune began to change in 1843, when López de Santa Anna, serving as the provisional Mexican president, decreed that given the significance of the arts to any nation the academy be renovated.^[13] Valentín Canalizo, who succeeded López, awarded the national lottery, then in a state of near bankruptcy, to the Academy as a possible source of revenue. As a result of the Academy administration's brilliant management of the lottery, the Academy accumulated so much capital that it began granting loans to the Mexican government! With this renewed financial security, the Academy recovered and reopened, experiencing an unprecedented renaissance beginning in the mid 1840s.^[14]

In April 1849, the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City inaugurated its first annual art competition and public exhibition since its reopening.^[15] The exhibit, which consisted primarily of original works and copies of European paintings, immediately elicited critiques from patriotic segments of the local population regarding the absence of works by distinguished Mexican painters. Later in the spring of that year, during one of López de Santa Anna's brief but numerous terms as president, the Minister of Justice and Ecclesiastic Affairs

submitted a formal request to the Regular Prelates of the Republic (high ranking officials affiliated with the religious orders) stating:

The president, [don Antonio López de Santa Anna] wishes to establish a conservatory in the academy of the best paintings, originals and copies of classic works, most of which are found in religious convents where lack of attention and ignorance have allowed them to deteriorate. Consequently, the prelates are asked to circulate this request among the convents under their jurisdiction so that the latter may offer some paintings for said conservatory.[16]

Given the timing and nature of López's request, it seems highly probable that it was motivated, at least in part, by the criticisms directed at the Academy following the opening of the 1849 exhibition, and the subsequent desire by academy officials to address the dearth of Mexican artists in the academy galleries. Although López de Santa Anna's directive regarding the creation of a gallery of national masters reached the designated prelates, nothing came of it, undoubtedly due to his forced retreat from the Mexican capital not long after the request was made.[17] However, six years later, in 1855, when López de Santa Anna, displaying increasingly eccentric behavior[18], was briefly reinstalled by his political supporters as Mexico's self-titled sovereign (1855–56), he submitted a second order to the Minister of Relations, that contained the following,

The supreme government has decided to approve and pursue the formation of a collection of Mexican paintings in the Academy of San Carlos...[since in order] to form a gallery that will present the history of art among us, it would be convenient to acquire... works by national artists.[19]

Although, as we shall see below, one of his objectives may have been to garner support from the local leadership, in particular the political conservatives, another must have been to improve Mexico's damaged image by emulating the practices of what he considered to be more advanced nations. Many leading social and political figures in Mexico City at the time appear to have been troubled by the manner in which Mexico was perceived abroad. Indeed, López de Santa Anna's contemporary, historian Lucas Alamán, wrote his multivolume *Historia de México* (1849–52) with the intent of undoing the damage done to the perception of the Spanish legacy in his country by the idea that independence represented a necessary rupture with that heritage and its traditions.[20]

Unlike López de Santa Anna's earlier petition, which was disregarded, the later one landed in the hands of José Bernardo Couto, the president of the Academy, who was also a distinguished lawyer and conservative politician.[21] Significantly, during this period, all cultural institutions in the national capital, including the Academy of San Carlos, were bastions of conservatism in the predominantly liberal political landscape of the capital city. As director of Mexico's national art academy, Couto was ideally suited to respond to López de Santa Anna's demands. He did so in a manner that, perhaps, was the only way open to him, but that also corresponded to his deeply held conservative views of Mexican history and Mexican culture.

Collecting and Displaying Mexican Art

In March 1855, after receiving López de Santa Anna's petition, Couto began contacting various churches and religious orders to inquire about specific paintings with which he was familiar,

and any other works that might be potentially of interest. Almost immediately, he began receiving positive responses.[22] Not all donations were given as altruistic acts in support of the national interest. Very few donations were offered without some type of stipulation.[23] In many cases, some type of compensation was expected. For example, certain canvases were offered in exchange for faithful reproductions of the donated works, for works with similar themes as those gifted, for financial compensation, and/or for promises of future assistance. In other instances, where identified works were of continuing cult importance—paintings and sculptures that could not be removed from their original sites of display due to the sacred and/or ritual significance to faithful followers, e.g., the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Basilica—requests were denied.[24]

Responding to the president's petition, and in concert with Couto's activities, Secretary of State Melchor Ocampo, in a letter dated March 8, 1855 to the Provincial fathers of the capital, the heads of the Jesuit Order, requested that an inventory of all of the canvases in their possession be drawn up and submitted to the Academy in order to facilitate the collecting process. The letter asked that each painting's artist and subject be identified so that a selection committee from the Academy would be able to evaluate the works and acquire those they deemed acceptable. Of special interest in this letter is the specification that the "best paintings" be identified and included in the list presented for the academy representatives' consideration. The relevant excerpt states:

The religious orders possess the best works in that class, just as they were the first to introduce and cultivate civil and religious enlightenment in the primitive churches following the conquest of these nations...not having rejected that spirit today, they will be the ones who will voluntarily contribute to the realization of said project...and submit to this Secretary a notice of the best paintings, which exist and belong to the convents of that province, specifying their class, content, and author, after which a committee of academics yet to be named will go and identify their quality and value.[25]

From 1856 through 1863, representatives of the Academy who were working with Couto visited several stores of colonial paintings that had been confiscated at various times by different government officials from the art collections of suppressed religious orders, including the Jesuits and the Bethlehemites, and warehoused at former convents, such as La Encarnación.[26]

It was from this assortment of works that Couto drew representative pieces for the display of what he termed *la antigua escuela mexicana*, the Old Mexican School. Couto and his academic contemporaries regarded the Old School of Mexican Painting as both the predecessor of, and the counterpoint to, the Modern School of Painting, which was seen as consisting of art works produced by current Academy faculty members and students. Works of the Old School were to serve not only a didactic purpose, as instructional models for Academy students, but also, through their display in publicly accessible galleries, as a source of national pride for Mexican citizens.[27]

The gallery of seventeenth- through early nineteenth-century painting was first installed in 1855. In 1861–62, after Couto himself had visited the convent warehouses and taken notes of those he felt were of sufficient quality for the Academy collection,[28] ninety-five paintings, from the approximately 3,000 that were warehoused, were integrated into the Academy

holdings and hung in remodeled galleries.[29] The Academy displayed approximately half of these canvases in the public galleries at any given time, based on the availability of space.[30]

Although the painting galleries were periodically expanded in order to accommodate the growing collection, the works could never be exhibited all at once. Some paintings were left in storage while others were placed in other Academy spaces, such as in the directors' conference room. Given the varying dimensions of the selected paintings and the spatial limitations of the exhibition space, it is doubtful that the paintings in Couto's gallery were arranged in chronological order, thematically, or grouped by artist, but were probably arranged salon-style, following current European practice. This would have differed from the display in painting galleries described in *Diálogo sobre la historia de la pintura en México* (Dialogue about the History of Painting in Mexico), the historical text about Mexican painting that Couto wrote in 1861–62.[31]

The Academy exhibition, therefore, presented an extremely edited version of Mexican colonial painting that was informed not only by spatial constraints, but also by the unique way in which the collection was formed. Many of the "best" paintings, according to Couto, were outside the Academy's reach in 1855, yielding an Old School gallery with huge representative lacunae.[32] Only in his *Diálogo* was Couto able to construct the ideal collection of colonial "masterpieces." [33]

Couto's collection of paintings together with their qualification in his historical text came to form the core of a canon of colonial art in Mexico, in spite of the collection's lacunae, as the *Diálogo* filled in the gaps.[34] Although moved to various locations over time, it was kept intact and today is part of the collection of the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City, where it is on display in the museum's colonial galleries. Later art historical research has shown that Couto and his contemporaries made a number of misattributions, such as the identification of paintings by Andrés de la Concha as works by Baltasar de Echave Orio. Similarly, paintings by Echave Orio's son, Baltasar Echave de Ibía, were mistakenly included in the body of works attributed to his father.[35] These errors illustrate the state of knowledge about colonial painting in the mid-nineteenth century, based as it was on conclusions drawn by lawyers, businessmen, and politicians in an age when art history was decades away from being professionalized in Mexico.

Religious Subject Matter in Mexican Painting

In 1861, after the Old School gallery had been reinstalled to include recently acquired works, three main subject categories were represented in its paintings: depictions of the lives of saints, mainly visions, miracles, and martyrdom; scenes from the Life of the Virgin Mary, such as the Betrothal, Annunciation, and Assumption; and episodes from the Life of Christ, such as Nativity scenes and episodes from the Passion (fig. 1). Less common religious subjects included devotional images of the Virgin, such as the seated Madonna with or without Child, and the Virgin of the Apocalypse. Exceptional subjects included one architectural interior, two self-portraits, and one portrait, that of the viceroy Duke of Linares by the early eighteenth-century painter Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1711–1716; fig. 2).

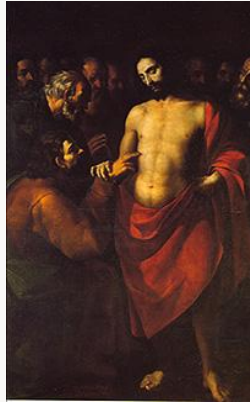


Fig. 1, Sebastián López de Arteaga. *The Doubting St. Thomas*. c. 1650. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Arte/INBA, Mexico City. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Juan Rodríguez Juárez. *Portrait of the Viceroy, Duke of Linares*, 1711–1716. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Arte/INBA, Mexico City. [\[larger image\]](#)

Juana Gutiérrez Haces of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas in Mexico City examined the criteria that Couto may have used as he made his selection of paintings to be hung in the gallery.^[36] Based on her analysis of Couto's *Diálogo*, she suggested that the Academy president looked for "classical" qualities in the viceregal paintings he was reviewing, namely naturalism, decorum, "correct" drawing, chiaroscuro, perspective, and anatomical accuracy—formal characteristics that implied a commensurability with the older material and the rules propagated by the Academy of San Carlos in the mid-nineteenth-century. If this were indeed the case, what types of works could have been left out? The presentation of a body of predominantly religious works of art calls attention to the absence of other pictorial genres. Although Couto, as we have seen, included some non-religious paintings in the gallery, the exhibited body of works displayed a dominant tendency toward sacred themes, which presented an incomplete image of colonial art production.

Art patronage in the viceroyalty of New Spain had not only been the domain of ecclesiastic institutions, but also of a rotating viceregal court, including Creole (American born Hispanics), peninsular (Spanish born Hispanics), and in some cases, indigenous patrons.[37] As the Church had been the principal catalyst for artistic production beginning in the sixteenth century, a major part of the colonial artistic corpus had been religious. However, Novohispanic artists also produced large quantities of non-religious artworks. Secular genres played a prominent role in Mexico City's society, in particular after the creation of the viceroyalty in 1535. Non-religious genres of import included portraits, history paintings, genre scenes, and allegorical images, subjects missing not only from the gallery display but even, quite curiously, from Couto's text, which focused primarily on religious painting.

Other objects that Couto and his peers did not recognize as fine art, such as *biombos* (Japanese-inspired, free-standing, multi-paneled screens), were absent, as were *pinturas de casta* or caste paintings (an eighteenth-century genre of painting that references miscegenation, professional trades, and social hierarchy in New Spain). *Enconchados* (Asian-inspired shell-inlay paintings) and works possessing salient indigenous or hybrid qualities were similarly disregarded, as was sculpture.[38]

The absence of non-religious painting from the collection may be explained not only by the fact that some of these genres were not considered works of fine art, but also by their rarity in religious institutions. Such art objects were primarily found in private collections, which did not fall within the bureaucratic reach of the government, and would be bequeathed by owners to children and other family members over the course of generations. In certain instances, works were located outside of Mexico, as was the case with caste paintings, most of which were taken to Spain.[39] These types of objects were, thus, inaccessible to Couto as he was assembling his collection. In light of the government's fiscal circumstances, no funds could be diverted to the purchase of works representing subjects missing from the confiscated and/or nationalized painting collections, even if such works may have been available. Given that Couto obtained the majority, if not all, of the paintings installed in the Academy from religious institutions, the selected works inevitably were predominantly religious in content. Since Couto's book on the history of Mexican painting was based on the Academy collection, it gave the impression that colonial painting was primarily religious in nature. This interpretation was to influence the general view of colonial visual culture that developed in Mexico and the United States through the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

The continuing presence of religious subject matter in Mexican art in the early nineteenth century was critiqued by some in Mexico City who preferred more historical verism in the paintings they saw. In 1810, an anonymous individual in Mexico City critically evaluated religious paintings he had seen displayed in various churches throughout the Mexican capital. In the article, he expressed disdain for what he considered to be images based on emotion and fantasy, rather than on exactitude or good taste, in other words, the kind of art that had been produced in New Spain since the sixteenth century, in particular Baroque painting and religious images. His perspective manifested an evident academic bias tied to a criterion that seemed to be absent when the works were produced. He wrote:

I am a misanthrope, who perhaps only enters churches to critique the paintings by those practitioners of this fine art, who generally seem inclined to measure things with

their thoughts and feelings . . . don't expect that I will ponder the beauties of the style and brushstroke of the artist; in my opinion, all of it is fantasy if I don't encounter exactitude or good historical taste, which, in this type of painting, is the only thing that teaches the people sacred history.[40]

The opinions that circulated in Mexico City concerning the value of earlier colonial works of art were not unanimous, but represented conflicting, or at the very least, multi-vocal perspectives positioned along increasingly political lines. The critical postures, which seem to have been directed primarily at the particular brand of Baroque art that developed in New Spain were based on the troubled reception of the earlier material's formal and stylistic elements, as well as its dominant religious content. Specific criticisms included the deficiency in drawing demonstrated by the colonial painter due to his isolation from European influences and from rigorous academic training;[41] the colonial artist's dependence on emotion and fantasy as a source of inspiration, instead of good taste, naturalism, or historic exactitude; and the artist's dominant interest in religious themes at the expense of other representational genres, such as landscape or still life.

At mid-century, Pesado, one of the discussants in Couto's dialogue, continued to lament that artists from Mexico's Old School solely concentrated on religious painting: "What has truly surprised me about our old school is that it should have limited itself completely to religious subjects and not included others when there would have been no lack of [either] opportunities or sources of inspiration." [42] Couto himself adds that he does not understand how colonial painters were not inspired to paint the landscape, in light of Mexico's varied and rich environment. Referring to Mexico's natural beauty, he stated: "It is incomprehensible how such a spectacular sight did not excite the imagination of the painters nor motivate them to reproduce it on their canvases." [43]

An index of both the continuing presence of religious art in Mexico well into the nineteenth century and of foreign critiques of that art are the published comments by Mary Elizabeth Blake, a young woman from Boston who, in 1888, traveled through Mexico and remarked on what to her seemed to be an absence of landscape painting. Given Blake's recognition of the country's artistic talent and its spectacular natural beauty, she derided the presence of religious painting in the Academy, exclaiming in exasperation, "when will a Fortuny or Gérôme emerge in Mexico?" [44]

Yet religious paintings could not be entirely disavowed by critics as the old school collection was being formed since religious subjects could be conceptually and semantically configured as a link between the Modern and the Old Schools, thus suggesting a seamless cultural transition between New Spain, a Spanish viceroyalty, and Mexico, an independent nation, in spite of evident political changes. Indeed, Juana Gutiérrez Haces observed that Couto and his conservative peers viewed religion as a common denominator of the Old and the Modern painting traditions in Mexico, implying the existence of one national school of painting. In other words, the dominant religious character of the old school gallery was not regarded as deficient or problematic from a conservative point of view. Rather, religion could be a common reference point with which to demonstrate to the Mexican population its common historical experience and shared cultural values, which were rooted in the country's colonial past.

Conservatives like Couto believed that Mexican identity was indelibly tied to Catholicism. Although the collection of religious paintings was a direct result of limited finances and the availability of works, the subject matter happened to cohere with a central element of conservative ideology. The gallery thus became a strategic tool in a politically conservative definition of a national history and cultural identity. Couto had found a way of ironing out the political wrinkles in the disjunctive narrative of Mexican history through the suggestion of a coherent, linear development in Mexican art. The implication that religious subject matter was a shared theme across time countered any perceived cultural disruption in the transition of Mexico from an imperial viceroyalty to an independent republic. Couto proposed as much in his *Diálogo sobre la historia de la pintura en México* which, written in 1861–62 and posthumously published in 1872, was based on the gallery he helped create.

The Reception of the Old School Gallery

The installation of viceregal painting at the Academy of San Carlos, the first display of its kind in the nation's capital, was a formative step in the development of a cultural practice and historical consciousness that would come to represent modern Mexican nationalism. The public recognition of the selected works' historical and cultural significance became partly apparent in the gallery reviews published in Mexico City newspapers. In a review published in 1857 in *El Monitor Republicano*, an anonymous writer described Couto's installation in the following manner:

Several canvases by our past painters have been conveniently gathered in one of the galleries of the Academy of Noble Arts of San Carlos, which begins to create a favorable impression of the old Mexican school, which surely deserves to be remembered, as much for belonging to us, as for the true merit those masters possessed, such as Arteaga, Echave, Luis and José Juárez, etc.[45]

Of special import, in this review, is the sense of national ownership the writer expressed.. This not only suggests an emerging sense of national identity (defined by Benedict Anderson as an imagined community held together by a common experience),[46] but it also points to the role that these and other art works would play in defining such an awareness and disseminating it to a broader public. Although these and similar paintings had long been present in churches, convents, and private homes, and were familiar elements of Mexican visual culture, the response to the exhibition underlines how the relocation of the selected works not only stimulated a renewed interest in them, but how it redefined them, legitimizing and conveying their new value within the modern national context.

The translation of works from church or monastic spaces to the Academy transformed, but did not erase, the manner in which those colonial images had earlier been perceived. The paintings, many of which had been legible components of altarpieces, had been traditionally understood in relation to other paintings, sculpture, architectural forms, rituals, and sermons.[47] These works were now extracted from their original sites of display and inserted into a new dialogic framework.[48] In the secular environment of the Academy, the paintings were re-contextualized and formed a heterotopic collection of fragments as a result of this dislocation. However, instead of producing a free-floating concatenation of images, the spatial reframing of the selected paintings in the Academy galleries allowed for new kinds of reinscriptions.[49]

The perception of those works was now informed by a set of criteria that focused on quality and style as historical and cultural markers, a re-inscription that can be best described as a, "museal transubstantiation, translating previously religious semiophors into pure cultural historical materiality."[\[50\]](#) In their new setting, the paintings functioned to create a communal memory anchored to a narrative of national development, of a local experience and political identification. This change expanded the spectator's regard beyond the image's subject matter to include a mundane, geo-political significance. In spite of longstanding regional and class-based identifications in New Spain, this particular type of national awareness, tied to works of art produced within the geopolitical limits of Mexico, was tentative. Yet it successfully enabled the recognition of an archaic, temporal quality in the paintings, facilitating their legibility as signifiers of an earlier phase of Mexican cultural development, what was read in this instance as a national past.

In his history of painting in Mexico, Couto follows an ancient didactic tradition by presenting a dialogue in which three characters—Couto himself, his cousin, José Joaquín Pesado, and the Catalan instructor of painting at the Academy, Pelegrín Clavé—discuss the works they see as they wander through the gallery. In the text, Couto quotes a comment made by the Italian traveler, J. C. Beltrami, who had stated thirty years earlier that the founding of the Academy in the late colonial period signaled the end of Mexican painting.[\[51\]](#) By referencing this particular statement, Couto meant to say that the presence of the Academy in Mexico City had displaced both the longstanding workshop traditions and the Baroque style of earlier Novohispanic art by forcefully introducing *buen gusto*, or good taste, i.e., the Neo-Classical idiom. This response stressed the commensurability between certain Conservative and Liberal viewpoints, and their shared interest in edifying Mexican history and local culture, in spite of differences of opinion regarding the content and placement of the colonial period in the narrative of the nation. Based on the reviews in local publications, the gallery representing *la antigua escuela mexicana* appears to have been favorably evaluated by critics. The positive reception of the Old School gallery in the mid-nineteenth century signaled the recognition by Mexican elites of its paintings not only as religious images, but also as locally produced works of art and as historical documents that mapped Mexico's evolution into modern nationhood.

Conclusion

Reconsidering the Old Mexican School painting gallery through the lens of nineteenth-century cultural politics, we are able to identify Couto's project as a manifestation of a modern approach to interpreting aspects of local material culture in Mexico, and the Conservatives' role in directing this process. In contrast to the prevalent anti-religious, increasingly secular sentiments informing cultural attitudes in other countries, the Church continued to occupy a central role in Mexican identity and daily life. Religious painting retained a central role in academic art production through the end of the nineteenth century, in contradistinction to dominant trends in places like the United States.

Most importantly, given the Liberal value placed on certain Novohispanic cultural forms, in spite of general disdain for what was then perceived as oppressive colonial politics, the old school painting gallery, defined as such by religious paintings, could serve as an avenue, historically, through which certain aspects of colonial material culture could be officially integrated into the emerging national discourse as works by national masters, rather than by Spanish or colonial artists.

It was hoped that the Academy gallery would not only contribute to Mexican national development, but that it would prove to the rest of the civilized world that Mexico, too, had a high culture and a history whose richness and scope equaled Europe's. In spite of numerous challenges and misinterpretations, it was a Conservative vision of Mexican history that guided the early re-evaluation and public display of locally produced works of art, including Antonio López de Santa Anna's interest in the creation of a national gallery and José Bernardo Couto's historical discussion of colonial painting. In spite of the collection's misrepresentative or incomplete character, which seems evident to us given our current understanding of Novohispanic society and expanded definitions of what constitutes Art and Visual Culture, the presentation of the selected works as examples of an earlier phase of Mexican cultural development initiated a new awareness of an imagined community with a distinguished history among the elite classes in Mexico City. Most importantly, it set in motion a set of practices that would in time develop into the academic study of Mexican Art and, specifically, what is generally understood today as colonial Latin American or Spanish colonial art history. Filtered through the particularities of the political terrain in Mexico City, the historical-geographic system undergirding the concept of nation rendered all cultural objects analogous and thus potentially integral parts of the emerging narratives of nationalism. In Mexico, this phenomenon yielded a distinct American variation of nationalism.^[52] Central to this process was modern museology exemplified, in this instance, by José Bernardo Couto's formulation of *la antigua escuela mexicana* and the Old School gallery in the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City.

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Notes

- [1] Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 8.
- [2] Charles Saumarez Smith, "Museums, Artefacts, and Meanings," in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd., 1989), 9.
- [3] Martin Prösl, "Museums and Globalization," in *Theorizing Museums*, ed. Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 23.
- [4] From the introductory essay in the catalogue for the 2006 exhibition, *The Arts in Latin America 1492–1820*, presented at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso in Mexico City. Joseph J. Rishel, "Art in Colonial Latin America: A Brief Critical Review," *The Arts in Latin America 1492–1821*, exh. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 1.

- [5] See Justo Sierra, *Historia Patria* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1925), 35–66, and Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, *Nacionalismo y educación en México*, 2d ed. (Mexico City: el Colegio de México, 2000), 24, 44–45, and 71.
- [6] For an extended explanation of Conservative politics, see Donald Stevens, "Temerose la ira del cielo: Los conservadores y la religiosidad popular en los tiempos del cólera," in *El conservadurismo mexicano en el siglo XIX*, ed. William Fowler and Humberto Morales Moreno (Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1999), 87–101.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Here, de Zavala is referring to the period before the commencement of the independence movement. Independence was not officially declared until 1821.
- [9] This position was explicitly articulated by the Moderate Liberal historian, José María Luis Mora. See Mora, *México y sus revoluciones* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1950), 1:65.
- [10] See Jean Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos, 1785–1915* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1962).
- [11] Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in Mexico* (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1834), 167–68, and 170.
- [12] See Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxons* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- [13] For a more detailed discussion of the events of this period, see Juana Gutiérrez Haces, introduction to the reprint of *Diálogo sobre la historia de la pintura en México*, by José Bernardo Couto (1872; repr., Mexico City: Conaculta, 1995), 9–64. All citations are to the reprint edition.
- [14] See Charlot, *Mexican Art*; and Eloísa Uribe, "1843–1860," in *Y todo...por una nación: Historia social de la producción plástica de la Ciudad de México, 1781–1910*, ed. Eloísa Uribe, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, 1987), 67–111.
- [15] Uribe, "1843–1860," 67–111.
- [16] This excerpt is from the longer memo (Document 5470) located in the Antiguo Archivo de la Academia de San Carlos, Biblioteca Lino Picaseño, Escuela de Arquitectura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City hereafter cited as AAASC. Eduardo Báez Macías catalogued the Academy archives, which were then published as two volumes, one in 1972 and the other in 1976. AAASC, Documents 5470–5472. See Eduardo Báez Macías, *Guía del Archivo de la Antigua Academia de San Carlos, 1844–1867* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1972).
- [17] For biographical information on Antonio López de Santa Anna, see Ruth R. Olivera and Liliane Crete, *Life in Mexico under Santa Anna, 1822–1855* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); and Will Fowler, *Santa Anna of Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).
- [18] As he grew older, López de Santa Anna's behavior became more eccentric and erratic; for example, he not only asked that the people around him refer to him by an ostentatious honorific title during his final return to Mexico City, he also held a formal burial for his amputated leg with the requisite pomp and circumstance reserved for the funerals of heads of state. See Fowler, *Santa Anna*, 265, and Robert L. Scheina, *Santa Anna: A Curse upon Mexico* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, Inc., 2002), 78–79.
- [19] President don Antonio López de Santa Anna to the Minister of Relations, March 27, 1855. AAASC, Document 5630.
- [20] Charles A. Hale, *El liberalismo Mexicano en la época de Mora, 1821–1853*, 6th ed. (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editors, S.A. de C.V., 1985), 19.
- [21] One of Couto's most important roles in Mexican history was as a member of the delegation that represented Mexico in 1848 at the conference with United States representatives at which the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was drawn up, resulting in the loss of almost half of Mexico's northern territory to its neighbor.
- [22] Even before Couto started his effort to collect viceregal paintings from various religious institutions in Mexico, the painting collection of Francisco Pablo Vázquez, Bishop of Puebla, had been offered for sale to the Academy of San Carlos in April 1851 following the prelate's death. An inventory of the paintings in the collection indicates that it included a large group of European canvases and prints by such artists as the Carracci, Raphael, Correggio, Guercino, Titian, Peter Paul Rubens, Rodríguez Alconedo, Murillo, Zurbarán, Velásquez, Pacheco, and Zendejas. But the bishop's collection also included works by local Novohispanic painters, including the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century luminaries Sebastián López de Arteaga and Miguel Cabrera, artists whose works would have been of interest to the Academy officials. The purchase of selected works was funded by the money generated from the sale of the reprint of a sixteenth-century manuscript written by the friar, Diego Durán, which was located in the

National Library of Madrid in Spain. See Uribe, "1843–1860," 99, and 131; and Manuel G. Revilla, "El pintor Pelegrin Clavé," in *El Tiempo Ilustrado*, January 5, 1904, 11.

[23] Gutiérrez Haces, Introduction to *Diálogo*, 9–64.

[24] *Ibid.*, 36.

[25] AAASC, Documents 5634, 5635, 5636, 5637, 5638, 5639, and 5642; Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel, *Las galerías de San Carlos* (Mexico City: Ediciones Mexicanas, 1950), 12–13.

[26] For a more detailed recounting of the movement of the warehoused paintings, see AAASC, Documents 6016, 6078, 6394, and 6649, which are also catalogued in Báez Macías, *Guía del Archivo*.

[27] Gutiérrez Haces, Introduction to *Diálogo*, 29.

[28] Couto may have based his choices, in part, on an inventory of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings, which he had obtained from Dr. Rafael Lucio, a physician and collector who had compiled a list of colonial paintings. The inventory was later published in 1863 in the *Bulletin of the Mexican Geographic and Statistical Society*. See Rafael Lucio, *Reseña histórica de la pintura mexicana en los siglos XVII y XVIII* (Mexico City: n.p., 1864).

[29] Carrillo y Gariel *Las galerías de San Carlos*, 15.

[30] A careful review of the Academy archives—letters, memos, inventories, and photographs—reveals a lack of documentation regarding the contents of the Academy collection from 1857 through 1862. Contributing to the lacuna, the earliest gallery photographs found in the archive are dated 1898, some 35 years after Couto's text was written. The other known sets of gallery shots appear to be from 1912 and the 1920–1930s. Consequently, I have been unable, at this time, to determine with any certainty the makeup of the Academy collection between 1857 and 1862 or of the contents and spatial arrangement of the colonial painting galleries. My only sources for reconstructing the content and arrangement of the Old School gallery have been Couto's text and the 1898 photographs.

[31] Couto, *Diálogo*, 67–130.

[32] An inventory dated 1862, the year in which Couto wrote his dialogue, suggests a total of approximately 200 paintings in the Academy collection. AAASC, Document 6541.

[33] Based on later gallery photographs, it is clear that Couto's text served as a guide for the acquisition of art works by later Academy directors. Paintings noted as not belonging to the Academy in 1861 but which were later added include the following works: *Los santos niños Justo y Pastor* (José Juárez), *San Alejo* (José Juárez), *La incredulidad de Santo Tomás* (Sebastián López de Arteaga), and *La oración en el huerto* (Luis Juárez). These paintings, interestingly, are works that turn up on the 1865 inventory of missing items from the warehoused collections of confiscated properties. Based on the gallery photographs from 1898, we note that these canvases have been added to the Academy galleries. AAASC, Document 6541.

[34] The virtual gallery Couto described consisted of paintings by what he believed were seventeenth- and eighteenth-century artists—although the earliest of them, Andrés de la Concha, was working in New Spain in the late sixteenth-century—as well as works by some early nineteenth-century artists. While he included in the latter group seven Academy painters, he identified none of their works except those of Rafael Ximeno y Planes, who was a professor at the Academy. See Couto, *Diálogo*, 120–122.

[35] *Ibid.*, 85–88.

[36] Juana Gutiérrez Haces examined the manner in which the idea of "style" was used in the early literature to describe viceregal painting. See Juana Gutiérrez Haces, "Algunas consideraciones sobre el término 'estilo' en la historiografía del arte virreinal mexicano," in *El arte en México: Autores, temas, problemas*, ed. Rita Eder (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las artes, 2001), 90–193.

[37] Surveys of colonial Latin American art note a shift in art production following the implementation of the viceregal system in the Americas by the Spanish monarchy, c. 1535. See Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art of Colonial Latin America* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005).

[38] Even though Couto recognized the eighteenth-century painter, Miguel Cabrera, and his famous publication, *Maravilla Americana* (1756)—in which Cabrera in collaboration with other Novohispanic painters wrote what was, essentially, a condition report of the painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe in order to confirm its divine status—Couto did not refer to that painting in the same manner in which he discussed or described other colonial works of art. It seems apparent that he intentionally did not place the allegedly acheiropoeitic image within the same context as those paintings, addressed in his dialogue, which were recognized as man-made artifice. Couto's omission of the Guadalupe icon in his text could be an expression of his faith

and/or his interest in avoiding contradicting the narrative that recounted the image's miraculous origin and divine character. See Couto, *Diálogo*, 114.

[39] The largest number of documented caste paintings is located in the collection of the Museo de América in Madrid, Spain. Since this particular genre appears to have been primarily patronized by peninsulars who returned to Spain, many *pinturas de casta* were taken out of New Spain and later gathered in this museum.

[40] See "Pinturas de Buen Gusto Histórico," *Diario de México*, February 23, 1810; and Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *Crítica del arte en el siglo diecinueve* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1997), 163.

[41] A newspaper article published in 1854 stated, "In the period in question [i.e. the viceregal period, pre-1781, before the Academy of San Carlos was founded] there did not exist in Mexico an academy where those who were dedicated to painting could receive a thorough and complete training." See Anonymous, "Academia de bellas artes de San Carlos," *La Ilustración Mexicana*, February 3, 1854.

[42] Couto, *Diálogo*, 127.

[43] Ibid.

[44] See Mary Elizabeth Blake, *Mexico—Picturesque, Political, and Progressive* (Boston: Lee and Shepherd, 1888).

[45] The entire review reads: "Several canvases by our past painters have been conveniently gathered in one of the galleries of the Academy of Noble Arts of San Carlos, which begins to create a favorable impression of the Old Mexican School, which surely deserves to be remembered, as much for belonging to us, as for the true merit that those masters possessed, such as Arteaga, Echave, Luis and José Juárez, Cabrera, Juan Rodríguez Juárez, etc. This most important development is due to the commitment and great interest of the Academy, with whose president, Mr. Bernardo Couto, supported by the supreme government, took under its wing this man's suggestion. As such, we will see written in monumental pages the history of Mexican painting, old and modern, along with the indicated works and others, which they will acquire in time, along with those selected by the committee each year and those produced by students in the Academy, which already form a beautiful collection, dating from the time of the renovation of this establishment, and admired so by those who visit it." "La Pintura Mexicana," *El Monitor*, February 1, 1857, 4.

[46] Anderson proposes the idea of simultaneity as an element that facilitates the recognition of such an abstract corporate consciousness as nationalism. According to Anderson, individuals imagine a group who share a common experience, across or in spite of diversity, as they move through time in unison. This kind of idea allows a sense of ownership of cultural expressions that may in actuality be alien to an individual but shared as part of a group. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991).

[47] A colonial reference to altarpieces using the term, *cuerpo y alma* (body and soul) suggests the integrated perception of the forms and materials constituting this kind of construction. The manner in which the body serves as a physical frame or vehicle for the soul, which, in turn, animates the former, imbuing it with purpose and meaning, suggests the degree of correspondence between altarpiece paintings and the other elements comprising such installations. This reception included the architectural spaces of which they were a central part and the rituals through which they were normally engaged.

[48] For more information regarding Novohispanic altarpieces and church interiors, see Clara Bargellini, "'Monte de oro' y 'Nuevo cielo': Composición y significado de los retablos novohispanos," in *Estudios sobre arte: Sesenta años del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, ed. Martha Fernández and Louise Noelle (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/ Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1998), 127–135; and Manuel González Galván, "El espacio en la arquitectura religiosa virreinal de México," in Fernández and Noelle *Estudios sobre arte*, 203–228.

[49] For a more thorough discussion of heterotopia, see Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 17–22. Regarding the idea of utopic reinscriptions, see Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath (London: Macmillan, 1984); and Kevin Hetherington, "The Utopics of Social Ordering—Stonehenge as a Museum without Walls," in *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World*, ed. Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/The Sociological Review, 1998), 153–176.

[50] Wolfgang Ernst, "Archi(ve)textures of Museology," in *Museums and Memory*, ed. Susan A. Crane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 24.

[51] Couto makes this comment in his dialogue on the history of Mexican painting, in which he identifies the colonial painter, José de Alcázar, as the last representative of the Old Mexican

School of Painting; that is, what we recognize as the pre-Academy colonial tradition. See Charlot, *Mexican Art*, 110; and Couto, *Diálogo*, 119.

[52] Ernst, "Archi(ve)textures of Museology," 29.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Sebastián López de Arteaga. *The Doubting St. Thomas*. c. 1650. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Arte/INBA, Mexico City. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Juan Rodríguez Juárez. *Portrait of the Viceroy, Duke of Linares*, 1711–1716. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Arte/INBA, Mexico City. [\[return to text\]](#)