Habilidad Manual and Art as Education

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In November of 1910, just months after the great centennial celebration of Mexican independence, revolution broke out. The increasing domain of foreign economic control, the narrowing of wealth and power in the upper Mexican elite, and the oppression of rural peoples, laborers, and the indigenous began a civil war which ended the reign of Don Porfirio Díaz and began decades of power struggle. In the years following, Mexico struggled to define itself as a united country as new regimes and administrations rose and fell and remained divided among its rural and urban inhabitants. In a state of nation-building, the country became a backdrop for ripening cultural and intellectual ideologies, both foreign and domestic. Searching for a unified identity which acknowledged its cultural, historical, and economic progress was necessary in the wake of remaining socio-political instabilities unanswered by the revolution: land rights, unequal access to urban centers, and the struggle to recognize and incorporate Mexico's large indigenous population in the vision of a new, progressive and modern state. It is through art that these conflicts converged into the creation of a national aesthetic which was funded by the government, produced by artists, and consumed by foreigners.

Amidst the Obregon administration, Secretary of Public Education, José Vasconcelos led the renewal of the Mexican identity through the creation of an educational movement aimed at deconstructing racial boundaries and western prejudices of Latin America. His ideal, which brought forth the muralist movement and spread of indigenous art, not only aimed to strengthen the culture of Mexico, but ultimately tried to "fulfill the mission of bringing together all the races of the earth" and give Latin-America political "strength and

vision."[1] Addressing "the race problem," the issue of supporting and integrating indigenous peoples into a modern, multi-ethnic Mexican state, Vasconcelos argued their apparent primitivism was not at odds with modernity, and rather could help define it.

> "We ought to open our eyes to the fact that the Indian five thousand years ago, was building monuments that the mentality of the white is using this very day as an inspiration for its new wonder cities of Chicago and New York."[2]

For Vasconcelos, indigeneity provided part of Mexico's racial hybridity, *la raza cósmica* that combined with the "commercial aptitude" and heritage of the European colonizer would provide the future model for a productive Mexican society. Potential forms of Mexico's new modernity were thus tied to an authentic past, and the possibility for progress, symbolized by urban development, already realized in its traditional indigenous heritage.

Vasconcelos applied his political philosophies to develop and support the notion that Mexican citizens, with proper artistic education, could produce a cultural re-centering and revitalization. His conception of the industrious indigenous producer combined with growing interest in folk art and rural landscape, contributed to the growth of a greater racial narrative centered in the artistic renaissance. With encouragement from his policies, Mexican artists redefined art as a tenet of the Revolution for providing a visual medium in which issues of land and race could be realized. Visualized in public displays of art, traditional Mexican culture—rejected under the reign of Porfirio Diaz—could be accepted, valued, and glorified.

The focus on an Indigenous Mexican identity arising from the land resulted in a new educational philosophy that was applied to young children's education in the hopes they would form a new generation of revolutionary artists who combined the authentic experience of the countryside with the spirit of this new artistic renaissance. In the countryside, the physical separation from perceived centers of modernity, like Mexico City, created an expectation that children could cultivate a singular perspective that was untouched by the

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[1] "The Race Problem" in: Manuel Gamio, José Vasconcelos, *Aspects of Mexican Civilization (Lectures on the Harris Foundation, 1926)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926, 93.
[2] *Ibid*., 96.

corruption of industry. The natural landscape also called to revolutionaries, not only because of existing struggles for land reform, but also to re-appropriate the Mexican landscape from its colonial past, where its goods and resources were sown for European consumption. The Mexican landscape was therefore both innocent, a symbol of the untouched lifestyle in a world hurtling towards modernization, and a tool for revolution.

Exemplifying the new revolutionary spirit of art and action was the nationalist painter Gerardo Murillo. Drawing on his interest in landscape and folk art, Murillo contributed to the artistic renaissance through his teachings at the Academy of San Carlos and emphasis on the local, indigenous traditions of Mexican art in contrast to neoclassical, European forms.[3] Obtaining a grant from Porfirio Diaz, Murillo travelled to Europe in 1897 to study Impressionism, a journey that would be paralleled by Diego Rivera a decade later. In Paris, he worked with *Action d'Art*, a group centered on the intersection of the avant-garde and anarchism, and took the name Dr. Atl, the Náhuatl word for water, as commitment to his own self-revival of identity.[4] Influenced by the beginnings of modernist art movements and the works of artists like Gaugin, whose art visualized indigenous cultures through a lens of formalistic primitivism, Atl developed his interest in Mexican folk art and non-traditional art media like print-making, wood-cuts, and engravings. Pushing for the reformation of art to become a facet of the Revolution, he heralded Mexican indigenous culture as the origins of an authentic and revolutionary spirit from which art could trace its identity to.

> "This [artistic] renaissance…is a rebirth of the ancient virtues of the indigenous races which appear to have traversed the dark layers of Spanish domination and the Republican bureaucracy, to vigorously demonstrate social struggles….and [affirm] the knowledge of their own national value, that which made the human spirit and the faithful light which in human history has raised the spirit, Art."[5]

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[3] John Lear, *Picturing the Proletariat: Artists and Labor in Revolutionary Mexico, 1908–1940*. University of Texas Press, 2017, 48.
[4] Mark Antliff, "Cubism, Futurism, Anarchism: The 'Aestheticism' of the "Action D'art" Group, 1906- 1920," *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (1998): 110.
[5] "Colaboración artística: ¿Renacimiento artístico?" *El Universal* (Mexico City), July 13, 1923. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Consequently, he returned to Mexico in 1906 and issued a manifesto critiquing art under the Díaz administration for its conservative and regressive nature, emphasizing the role of the government in helping Mexican artists celebrate indigenous cultures as part of a necessary artistic and intellectual renaissance.

In his autobiography, José Clemente Orozco remembers Dr. Atl as the precursor of the Muralist movement for bringing his European accounts of impressive Italian frescos and murals to the students at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City, and positioning the Mexican landscape as the primary motif in his artwork.

> "As we listened to that fervent voice of that agitator Dr. Atl, we began to suspect that the whole colonial situation was nothing but a swindle…. We too had character, which was quite the equal of any other…. Now for the first time the painters took stock of the country they lived in…On every canvas there began to appear, bit by bit, like a dawn, the Mexican landscape, and familiar forms and the colors."[6]

In combination with his study of volcanos, Atl heavily featured Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl, two volcanos south of Mexico City of which he proclaimed the heart of Anáhuac, the former center of Mexico's pre-Hispanic civilization, and thus the signified, indigenous nature of Mexico.

> "As jewels on the Crown of América erected between two oceans—as the Planet's effervesce—jewels welded by primitive fire…. united, they are engraved in the imaginations of generations."[7]

The primordial source of Mexico, pure and immeasurable, was the physical land which held a spirit of authenticity. United with a recognition of the indigenous past and memory, it pointed towards the true nature of the Mexican people.

In an opportunity to put together his political and artistic ideologies, in 1910, Atl was invited to design a multicolored glass curtain to be installed by Tiffany's of New York in the Palacio de Bellas Artes and in which he chose to feature Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl.[8] As

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[6] José Clemente Orozco, *José Clemente Orozco: An Autobiography* (University of Texas Press, 2014), 19.
[7] Dr. Atl, *Las sinfonías del Popocatépetl,* (Mexico City, 1921), 23.
[8] Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera* (University of California Press, 1998), 78.

the Palacio was yet unfinished, Atl's work was shadowed by a $35,000 "Exhibition of Spanish Art" commissioned by Porfirio Diaz as the central display for the 1910 Centenario de Independencia.[9] Writing to then director of the Academy of San Carlos, Antonio Rivas Mercado, Atl garnered support for a separate "Exhibition of National Artwork" organized by the Society of Mexican Painters and Sculptors, and eventually received a comparably paltry sum of $3,000 from the Diaz administration.[10] Yet this exhibition represented an important early attempt at celebrating the Mexican identity in contrast to a European ideal. Atl's influence in focusing on organic and indigenous motifs demonstrated the growing spectacle of authenticity.

With the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, in 1911, a student-led strike at the Academy ousted director Mercado for allegedly sympathizing with Diaz's faction of technocrats and briefly established Atl as its head. Following the students' wishes for "Liberty and the Constitution", Atl promised to reform the school into an institution akin "to that of a workshop, where workers will be able to do three things: bathe, work, and make money."[11] In his use of "work" to represent "art," Atl attempted to redefine the traditionally elite, urban artisan into the campesino's fellow laborer. He positions art as a product and impetus for Revolution defined by its origins in the indigenous spirit of Mexico and its authentic nature unaffected by the Revolution's antagonists—greedy landowners and anti-Mexican elite. Hence the academy, long embodying the European tradition, would become a factory of laborers, whose proletarian condition and efforts embodied the struggles of the Revolution, and whose artwork would in turn become a product through which the Revolution could be visualized through.

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[9] Boletin de Instrucción Publica, v.15 (Órgano de la secretaria del ramo, 1910), 711. 35,000 in MXN currency unadjusted for historical inflation.

[10] *Ibid*., 711. The Society was composed of students at the Academy, including Orozco. See also: Jean Charlot, "Orozco and Siqueiros at the Academy of San Carlos," College Art Journal 10, no. 4 (1951), 355-369

[11] Jean Charlot, "Orozco and Siqueiros at the Academy of San Carlos," *College Art Journal* 10, no. 4 (1951), 358.

If the artist was to be the worker, then the subject would be land and Mexico's indigenous character. In 1913, following his appointment as director of the Academy, Atl embarked on a self-described "revolutionary publicity campaign" in Paris to promote this perceived coming artistic renaissance, believing that publicizing the Revolution through the correct propaganda—art—would bring international sympathy and help achieve the social goals of the Revolution. Labelling the press, a necessary "condition of modern life," and publicity an imperative political tool for the Mexican Revolution, Atl thus combined his belief in this visible materialism with the use of art as a facet of the revolution with his publication of *Artes Populares de México.*[12]

Printed in 1921, the monograph was dedicated to exhibiting the various works of Mexico which he felt were most authentic and industrial—indigenous art.[13] Indigenous works, he argued, were of an extraordinary hand-made quality, produced with the strength of the industrial mechanic but with the dexterity of the surgeon, and illustrated an autochthonous intellect that reflected Mexico's cultural identity.[14] Not restricted to the physical crafts like ceramics or textiles, works like the indigenous Mexican theatre, *corridos* or folk songs, and even slang, "el arte de decir," held a human spirit and quality which could not be found beyond Mexico, and which displayed an authentic expression of human sentiment and character.[15] It was thus the importance of preserving these works, and utilizing their character, that would allow art to flourish through this apparent true form of human production.

For Atl, recognizing these works was an effort to repurpose art for the cultivation of an authenticity that would guide the future expression and morality of the Mexican nation, and eventually spread across the world through the Revolution. Indigenous art was a counter

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[12] Atl, *The Mexican Revolution and the Nationalization of the Land; the Foreign Interests and Reaction* (New York: Mexican Bureau of Information, 1915), 10.
[13] Gerardo Murillo, *Las artes populares en Mexico,* Mexico: Editorial "Cultura," 1922, 7.
[14] *Ibid*., 15.
[15] *Ibid.*, 59.

to mechanical industry, celebrating the careful skill of the crafter while the factory exploited man and sought to replace him with machines. As Atl writes, the national importance of exhibiting these works and incorporating them into the present and future was to "[collect] the memories of things that were and the things that are ceasing to be."[16] The indigenous craft was a foil to the machine, and rather than dismiss landscape, nature, and man's organic experience, indigenous works of art drew directly from them.

Here, it is important to recognize first how Atl deconstructs art as high-culture, what Nestor García Canclini labels a rupture to the traditional and institutionalized cult of art. Access to modern high culture, such as art, usually requires access to higher education. Further, to have a developed culture of art and literature there must be a mobilized and learned audience who has both the luxury of literacy and leisure time to appreciate the arts and consume this culture.[17] Elites control an audience's cultural consumption and spiritualize cultural production under the guise of the arts by concentrating culture in high-culture centers like museums. Opening art to the public and displaying it in the public sphere is thus an attempt to democratize art and to lessen the distance between the artist and the spectator.

> "With respect to the autonomy and aristocratism of the artistic field, [to] promote *workshops of popular creativity* [is] a question of 'returning action to the people,' not of popularizing only the product but rather the means of production."[18]

Atl strongly emphasizes the *habilidad manual*, the hand-crafted nature of indigenous works, by attributing to the producer, the indigenous artisan, the ability to reproduce authenticity, and exposing the conditions by which the indigenous artisan works, in the open-air of the Mexican countryside. If artists were to learn from this authentic process, then art could become a tool of the masses, and the way to truly express and visualize an aesthetic.

Yet, Atl also sets up folk art and its producers as workers who exist to create crafts to

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[16] *Ibid.*, 136.
[17] Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 42
[18] *Ibid*., 91.

be sold and displayed away from their places of origin, which was perceived to exist only in the natural environment of rural pueblos. In *Artes Populares*, Atl included the architecture of small towns like Tlaxcala, praising the structure of wicker walls and roofs for being of a primitive technology, but comparable to the quality found in Chinese imperial buildings.[19] His emphasis on the apparent self-contained technology of rural indigenous communities suggested that development and industrial knowledge, represented by indigenous architecture, was in fact cultivated in these untouched pockets of development. Like Vasconcelos proclaiming indigenous forms of design to be stunningly modern, Atl places modernity's origins in indigeneity, simultaneously raising up their perceived primitivism and objectifying indigenous culture by geographically separating from urbanity.

Indeed, indigenous emigration to Mexico City and other non-rural areas had increased following the beginning of the revolution.[20] This perception of their existence only being rural, in the *campo* landscape, highlights a paradox in both Atl and Vasconcelos' philosophies. While images of indigenous peoples splashed the walls of the National Preparatory School in Mexico City and their art appeared in the exhibitions like the 1921 Centenario celebration, in their modern existence, indigenous peoples were yet marginalized and did not share the same visibility nor recognition as their pre-Columbian images. While important for the visibility of indigenous culture, the centralization of culture 'making' through the artistic renaissance ultimately served to reduce the image of indigenous peoples, conflating indigeneity and primitivism with an innocent simplicity and an imaginary authenticity.[21]

Under Vasconcelos, Atl directed an "Open-air" school, so named for the way in

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[19] Gerardo Murillo, *Catalogo de las Ilustraciones de la Monografía Sobre las Artes Populares en Mexico*, Mexico: Editorial "Cultura," 1922, 3.
[20] Ageeth Sluis, *Deco Body, Deco City: Female Spectacle and Modernity in Mexico City, 1900-1939*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016, 85.
[21] Elena Jackson Albarran, *Seen and Heard in Mexico: Children and Revolutionary Cultural Nationalism*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015, 81.

which the schools were built with few walls and with exposure to the natural air in the countryside.[22] As part of his education policies, Vasconcelos attempted to bring more accessible artistic education to middle-class students and encourage rural campesinos and the indigenous to become artists, opening eight new schools during his tenure. Contributing to the growth of a perceived indigenous and rural authenticity, these schools highlighted the potential future for young artists to paint the Revolution and make visible Mexico's identity. Transnational exhibitions of children's artwork emphasized the organic processes of open-air painting, the *habilidad manual* enticing foreign patronage and interest that would influence foreign travel to the Mexican countryside in search of this natural spirit.

Prior to Vasconcelos' appointment as Secretary of Public Education, the first open-air school opened in 1914 under then director of the National Academy, Alfredo Ramos Martínez. The school's premier class contained only ten boys, including the artist David Alfaro Siqueiros.[23] In a later interview, Martínez's teaching method was described as having an "emotional approach" which supported student development and freed them from outdated artistic pedagogy, as he reportedly lectured to "stay away from the museum but observe nature." Martínez began exhibiting the children's work across Europe and in the U.S., their artworks drawing attention for "the cogent honesty and naïve talent of young primitives."[24]

Beyond Martínez's tenure as director, other exported exhibitions of the children's work also enjoyed prominence and acclaim. A note on one exhibit at the 1923 Society of Independents called the school children "truly naïve" for their use of "the Mexican idea of the figure [which] is in some inscrutable way related to the climate of the *tierras calientes*

[22] John Lear, *Picturing the Proletariat: Artists and Labor in Revolutionary Mexico, 1908–1940*. University of Texas Press, 2017, 132.
[23] "Martínez and Mexico's Renaissance," *The North American Review (Boston)*, December 1935.
[24] *Ibid*.

and makes for abnormality…nothing could be more insular than to not wish to see them."[25] Another exhibit brought by the Chief of Art Instruction for Mexican government, Juan L. Olaguibel, at Columbia University in 1932 also highlighted the self-expression and freedom incorporated into the new teaching methods at all Mexican schools. In an interview, he described the precocious nature of the children.

> "In our primary schools, which include the first six grades, the children illustrate through art forms their lessons in different school subjects. Every Mexican child loves to draw and paint. The 4-year-old during his first school week begins to draw what he sees in the schoolroom…by the time he passes to the third and fourth grades, he is painting scenes suggested through his history…in sixth grade, he portrays episodes in the life of our national heroes…. the Mexican child is very observing—as his pictures reveal, he misses few details."[26]

The revolutionary schools encouraged the development of Mexican youth who were both historically learned and artistically gifted, and fostered their authentic naiveté in the surrounding rural countryside. As Olaguibel's comments suggest, the precocious children learned to see by using their art, developing a perspective that could visualize the Revolution and the values of the landscape. In this image of a gifted and young Mexican artist, both Vasconcelos' hope for a morally artistic renaissance and Atl's emphasis on *habilidad manual* could be realized. If Mexican children learned to be artists in nature, depicting indigenous elements and thereby casting off the foreign and elite art traditions of old, then society would be cultivated through the paintbrush.

Because of these increasing exhibitions, Mexican art arrived in waves to the American public and media. By 1924, the narrative that young Mexican children in the post-revolutionary society were of an unusually artistic nature, was established. As one Mexican writer described,

> "In every corner the younger painters, some of them little more than boys, are at work painting—painting with a verve unknown elsewhere—working all of them as craftsmen for day wages, and glorying in their opportunity…In color, in composition, in rhythm and harmony of line and tone, they display a genius which more

[25] "Art: The Independent, Mexican and Other Exhibitions," *New York Times*, February 25, 1923.
[26] "Art Helps Teacher in Mexican School," *New York Times*, April 3, 1932.

> graphically than any other single fact reveals the story of Mexico."[27]

One American couple, Stefan Hirsch and Elsa Rogo, contributed to this phenomenon of exporting art by building an art school for children outside of their home in Taxco, Mexico. Hirsch, who was well known in the U.S. as a painter and muralist who combined social realism with Precisionism, also held a deep interest and appreciation for the Mexican government's cultivation of art. Precisionism as an art style drew largely from cubism and attempted to deconstruct objects into clean, geometric lines, and rejecting a focus on the human figure.[28] Like later surrealists, Hirsch was interested in Mexican art because of its deconstruction of form, and accordingly was drawn to the indigenous motif in Mexican art. His work as secretary of the Salons of America, an avant-garde circle centered in New York, also led him to meet Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros.[29] Hirsch placed a heavy emphasis on living in Mexico as a non-Mexican, and lambasted art viewers and collectors who imported Mexican works but who did not experience the environments in which they were produced. However, recognizing the importance of international acclaim for broadening viewership of Mexican art, he also sought to contribute to its exportation because Mexican art, as he believed, held a unique expression of human value.

> "I cannot agree with the moralists who say the support of good art is what matters most. There are a number of frescoes [here in Mexico City] below the standard of good painting—even by Rivera and Orozco, as well as by the others. But it is the bulk of the output that matters…and give us some feeling of the spiritual wealth of [the] period."[30]

While Hirsch helped to build their school, Elsa Rogo was to be the main instructor. Inspired by the open-air schools, and after meeting David Alfaro Siqueiros, Rogo was convinced of the purity of indigenous Mexican art and the necessity to educate young Mexican children to

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[27] "The Mexican Art Invasion," *Current Opinion,* March 1, 1924.
[28] Ilene Susan Fort. "Precisionism." Oxford University Press, 1996.
[29] "Stefan Hirsch 1899-1964." *Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (1964): 158.
For more on Stefan Hirsch, see: Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, "The Patron, the Painter, and the Public Beginning at Aiken, South Carolina", Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, 28-80.
For more on Salons of America, see: Clark Malor, *The Salons of America, 1922-1936,* Madison: Sound View Press, 1991.
[30] "What is American Art?" *New York Times,* January 17, 1932.

develop their potential artistic nature. She described the value of the outdoor painting schools as based on their cultivation of debate and self-expression, and their cultivation of an appreciation for indigenous cultures.[31]

> "The beauty of the Indian culture—a handicraft culture that expressed itself chiefly in vessels for household use of the most beautiful sculptural form, in skillfully woven and embroidered garments, in all the brilliantly gay appurtenances of a local fiesta."[32]

In 1931, the couple built the school and enrolled their first class of 43 students.[33] These students would later be described in a 1942 interview as "illiterate, but [yet] know how to work with their hands [having] grown up amid the visual excitement of sun bright red roofs, shapely pots, [and] sculptured cakes."[34] The image of students who could not read yet could paint the sprawling rural landscapes was an enticing lure, and the works of these 'artistic geniuses' were successfully exhibited across the U.S. Although Rogo left Taxco in 1932, she convinced the Mexican government to adopt the school, and as alleged by one newspaper article, incorporate the school's curriculum and model into future schools.[35] Her impact was such that the Ministry of Education in Mexico City chose to display the children's works for their quality, and the open-air school of Taxco would survive another decade under the direction of Japanese artist, Tamiji Kitagawa.[36]

In following the translation of Vasconcelos and Atl's aesthetic to the foreign perspective, I have attributed the glorification of young Mexican children and their perceived innocence and gifted artistry to the persistence of cultural objectification. The success of well-known artists like Rivera introduced foreigners like Hirsch and Rogo to early Mexican cultural formation, and as many of these images were idealized depictions of Mexican peoples and land, foreign interpretations remained surrounded by myth as they did not hold

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[31] Elsa Rogo, "David Alfaro Siqueiros," *Parnassus* 6, no. 4 (1934), 5.
[32] *Ibid*., 6.
[33] "Mexico v. Vermont," *Time,* May 11, 1942.
[34] *Ibid*.
[35] "Openings of the Week" *New York Times,* April 6, 1941.
[36] Tamiji Kitagawa, "Open Air School of Paintings at Taxco, Mexico," *Design* 37 no. 10, (1936): 25.

the same cultural memories as Mexican did. This prompts us to ask, however, why myths associated with a collective imagining of the Revolution and the Mexican race, were successfully proliferated outside of Mexico. Following Sociologist Asun García,

> "Myth permits, according to Gadamer, the shaping of different elements of nature and society into an unconscious aesthetic model…myth stops certain questions being asked because it has already supplied the answers."[37]

The myth of the Mexican indigenous artist persists because it follows a greater history of cultural exoticization, and remaining cultural prejudices. Viewing Mexico as a haven of intellectual and artistic virtue simplifies the complexity of the Revolution, and indeed subverts the real political and social challenges remaining between 1920 and 1940 in favor of seeing a land of rejuvenation and re-moralization. For Mexican artists like Atl, this glorification signaled a new possibility of making identity, refashioning one's self into a part of the Revolution by attributing indigeneity as the future and past of all Mexicans. But in looking at Mexico as an object, the foreigner's own assumptions of its identity and what the foreigner notices replaces true understanding of culture with an unconscious aesthetic model, fashioned by the foreigner's self, that is perceived as the true reality. This mythic Mexico offers to each person it materializes for a self-fashioned imaginary that reflects more about the viewer than it does the object.

[37] Pierre Rossel, *Tourism: Manufacturing the Exotic*, Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 1988, 107.

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