



THE MEXICAN COLLECTIONS IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM AS THE WITNESSES OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT: The first part of this article deals with the collection of ancient pre-Columbian objects and with the modern Mexican collection, stored in the National Museum – Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures. It also describes the creative process in putting the collections together. Later it examines the relationship between modern ethnographic artefacts and Mexican history of the 19th and 20th century. The focus is on popular handicrafts produced in the countryside and small towns (usually pottery and other crafts). These were elevated to the category of Popular Art by intellectuals and artists after the Mexican revolution and thus became representational of Mexican national culture. As such they were supported and used in the creation of a national identity.

KEY WORDS: National Museum – Náprstek Museum – Mexican culture – Mexican national identity – pre-Columbian collections – popular art – ethnographic collections.

Pre-Columbian Archaeological Collections

The Mexican collections stored in the Náprstek Museum consist primarily of those documenting pre-Columbian civilization, and also examples of popular art and craft from the turn of the 19th and 20th century (Klápřtová 2000). It is quite an extensive collection, consisting of several dozens, and even, in two cases, thousands of pieces. The ancient or pre-Columbian collections reached our lands before the introduction of the legal ban of archaeological exports from Mexico.² The donors, or sellers were various amateur archaeologists and collectors who, with the exception of August Genin, travelled to the Americas from Bohemia. The oldest amongst these was the missionary Jakub Beer, Grand Master of the Order of the Cross with the Red Star. In 1856 he donated a number of valuable ceramic and stone sculptures and instruments not only from Mexico but also from other parts of Maya Mesoamerica to the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia (today the National Museum). That collection was later moved to the Náprstek Museum.

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² The law concerning National Heritage, part of it the ban on exports of archaeological artefacts, was issued by the Mexican Federation in 1972.

Much later, in the 1970s, the museum bought some zoomorphic and anthropomorphic vessels of the ancient Colima culture and other artefacts of pre-Columbian civilizations from a of private hands which had acquired them before 1970. The highest credit goes to Milan Calábek. Another collection of more than two hundred fragments of ceramic sculptures originating from pre-Columbian Mexico was transferred in the 1970s from the County Museum in Olomouc.

The Náprstek Museum received one truly exceptional collection, about 3000 pieces from ancient Mexico, in 1940 from August Genin (1862–1931). He was a scholar and also a businessman of French-Mexican origin. In the 1880s he was authorized by the French government to carry out archaeological and ethnographic explorations of the Mexican regions during his private and commercial visits. As he wasn't educated in these fields, being mainly self-taught, the result of his research was a number of studies about Mexican history and Teotihuacan and Aztec poetry that he later delivered to the Musée de l'Homme (Trocadero). He also collected a few thousand Mexican archaeological and ethnographic artefacts, which for the most part found a home in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. However some of his numerous collections also made their way to Czechoslovakia, and probably to Poland and Belgium.³

The former State Archeological Institute in Prague received more than 3000 pieces of ceramic vessels, ceramic and stone figures, stone and obsidian instruments. Today these objects form an important part of the Mexican collections in the Náprstek Museum.⁴ Thanks to August Genin's collection of small artefacts we are also able to describe ancient Mexican cultures from pre-classical to post-classical periods, including the Aztec civilization.⁵

Ethnographic Collections from the end of the 19th and 20th Centuries

The period from the 16th century to Mexico's independence is very poorly represented in the Náprstek Museum. There are only a few engravings mainly representing the Mexican conquest from the standpoint of European engravers.⁶

The oldest museum collection of modern handicrafts, small but historically quite valuable originates from the end of the 19th century, when Mexico had already been independent for several decades. It consists of a number of ceramic vessels from Guadalajara, resp. Tonalá

³ The Polish and Belgian collection were mentioned by the trustee of the Branly Museum in Paris, but nobody knows where these collections ended up.

⁴ The State Archaeological Institute in Prague received the collection probably with the help of Lubor Niederle, its director at that time. As he kept in touch with his French colleagues, he may have known A. Genin. In 1930 the collections were transferred from this Institute into the National Museum in Prague and in 1940 to the Náprstek Museum. Unfortunately they came without the appropriate documentation.

⁵ Throughout his life August Genin was interested in the culture and history of Mexico, therefore he could not miss the opportunity to document memorable historical events. He took numerous photographs. In about 1914 he published an album of photographic postcards, whose authors were various famous Mexican dignitaries. The pictures documented celebrations of 100 years of Mexican independence and the motives relating to the Mexican revolution. (Genin, sine).

⁶ The collections in the Czech Republic, related to Mexican colonial history (i.e. object not only of Mexican but also of European provenance) were presented to the general public as part of the exhibition "Mexican Art in the Czech collections", Náprstek Museum 1999. (Authors Kateřina Klápšřová and Pavel Štěpánek.) This exhibition presented art collections from the pre-Hispanic period up to the present time. The exhibitors were Náprstek Museum, National Museum, National Gallery, National Library, Moravian Gallery, also some state castles, there was also a collection belonging to the Lobkowitz family, etc. (Klápšřová – Štěpánek, 1999).

from the Mexican state of Jalisco. Vojta Náprstek, the founder of the Museum bearing his name, received them from his friend Eduard Klaboch.⁷

This collection has a symbolic value. It is a valuable example of pottery manufacture which was awarded the highest honour for representing Mexican national tradition following the Mexican revolution. Ceramic urns from Klaboch's collection are decorated with gold and silver and carry a symbol of independent Mexico: an eagle sitting on nopal with a snake in its beak.⁸ (Fig. 1)

In the 20th century Mexico and Czechoslovakia formed political and cultural ties. An important factor was the respect Lázaro Cárdenas, then the Mexican president (1934–1940) had towards the Czech president Tomas G. Masaryk.⁹ These bonds were reflected in the quantity of popular artefacts donated to Czechoslovakia by Mexican institutions and the government. In 1938 the Náprstek Museum was given a collection from the Mexican schools, the Czechoslovak Red Cross was among the mediators. It consists of small ceramic statuettes, baskets and toys. Thirty years later the Museum received another present from the Mexican government, a larger collection of about 150 items. They were examples of popular art, various garments, ceramic vessels, statuettes representing the Nativity, varnished gourds, ceramic and metal candlesticks and paper cut-outs. (Fig. 2)

At the end of the 20th century, in the seventies and eighties the Museum received further objects, but the collections were more specialized, directed towards particular branches of handicrafts and also Mexican culture as a whole. In contrast with the archaeological collections which arrived at the Náprstek museum sporadically and at random, the collections of popular art and craft were created with considerable more input from the museum curators.

In the second half of the 20th century Mexico there were many opportunities to buy popular art at local markets and in Mexico City. However the Náprstek Museum was never able to provide their experts with the necessary funds to enable them to travel and buy objects in situ. The curators therefore attempted to instruct potential collectors who were not ethnographers but were travelling there on business. The result was that at least some examples of the current Mexican popular culture were acquired by the museum. For example in the seventies Václav Šolc (1919–1995), ethnographer and then the director of the Náprstek Museum, instructed Josef Rutta (1921–2010) the Czech ambassador in Mexico on what he should look for and collect for the museum. Rutta brought home a few Mexican masks, amates and also an extensive typologically assembled collection of contemporary Mexican pottery from all the famous ceramic workshops in the various Mexican states.¹⁰ (Fig. 2, 3)

In the eighties, after consultations with the museum curators, notably with the head of the Ethnographic Department Josef Kandert, Milan Calábek brought a valuable collection

⁷ Eduard Klaboch (1852–1915) cooperated with his uncle Benedikt Roedel, who traded in orchids. As he travelled all over Central America, including Mexico, he managed to assemble the afore mentioned collection.

⁸ The ornate Hawk-eagle (*Spizaetus ornatus*) sitting on nopal with a snake in its beak represents the main heraldic sign on the Mexican banner. It was created in 1823 at the beginning of the Mexican independence. It pictures an apparition in which after Aztec myth the gods indicated the best location to found Tenochtitlan, the centre of future Aztec empire, where later on was built México City.

⁹ In June 1936 an important and luxurious avenue in México City has been named Avenida Presidente Masaryk.

¹⁰ Among others: Tonalá, Tlaquepaque, Santa Cruz, state of Jalisco, Guanajuato, the state Guanajuato, Patamban, Huánsinto, Tzintzuntzan, Ocumicho, the state Michoacán, Ameyaltepec, the state Guerrero, Acatlán, the state Puebla, Coyotepec, the state Oaxaca, Amatenango del Valle, the state Chiapas, Metepec, Tecomitepec, Texcoco, the state Mexico.

of Mexican popular masks and costumes to Czechoslovakia. Artefacts from that collection now in the Náprstek Museum demonstrate new manufacturing trends. They tend to cater to the taste of customers not only in Mexico but also visitors from abroad.

In 1982 the Museum received a generous gift of two thousand artefacts of popular production from the Mexican government. This collection originated from a touring exhibition called "Popular Art of Mexico" representing a cross section of popular artefacts sold on the markets. At the end of its tour the collection was permanently stored in Prague with the cooperation of the Náprstek Museum. It is a rich collection containing pottery and ceramic figures, wooden containers and instruments, garments, weaver's looms, object made of varnished gourds, many toys, pictures made from cotton thread, artefacts for the Day of the Dead, musical instruments, and others. The Náprstek Museum received this collection as a gift in return for Czechoslovak popular art objects given to the Mexico.¹¹ Unfortunately this collection lacked detailed documentation, it was lost during the tour around Europe and there was not even a catalogue left.¹² Fortunately the provenance of all the objects was established satisfactorily with the help of expert literature and comparative material, particularly from Rutta's collection. (Fig. 2, 4, 5)

The last addition to the Mexican section in the museum came from Čestmír Krátký in 2005 who put together his collection during the many years he spent in Mexico. It consists of sixteen pictures with ceremonial themes, created by West-Mexican Huicholes by fixing coloured yarn to the background with beeswax. These pictures, originally made by Huichol shamans for their own community, were bought by the collector when they began to be produced for commercial purposes by the Huicholes in the 1950s.

These collections, both from the Mexican government and Czech collectors, are today a valuable source of information about the nature of popular art and craft, revitalised and strongly supported after the Mexican revolution.

Popular Art and Craft as Representation of Mexico as an Independent State

Handmade goods produced in workshops and households of small town and villages were rich and varied throughout Mexico but underwent a severe crisis in the 1850s and the beginning of the 20th century. Unique crafts like pottery, vessels made from wood and gourds, basket weaving, home spun textiles etc. started to disappear because these local and ethnically diverse products began to be replaced by mass produced goods. Manual production disappeared almost completely during Porfirio Díaz y Mori's dictatorship (between 1876–1911) when imported goods became fashionable and home made products were considered of little value. This was also exacerbated by the prolonged armed conflicts during the Mexican revolution (1910–1920).

The most significant feature of handmade goods produced by the poorest members of the community, and this included the indigenous population, was that they were intended for their own use. Even though many of the products were often modified according to outside influences there were many that remained firmly wedded to their traditional pre-Hispanic roots such as Indian female garments, masks connected with the secret spirit world, baskets

¹¹ The Czechoslovak donation is in the Museum del Palacio de Bellas Artes in Ciudad de México.

¹² On the exhibition was only part of the collection, mainly with general description.

and varnished products, etc. At the same time many of the production areas underwent a series of technological innovations, in the patterns and colours used which were influenced by Spain and other parts of the Old world. A significant development occurred in the production of ceramics when the potter's wheel was introduced in the 17th century (this was unknown in the pre-Columbian era) and a whole new range of products began to emerge (eg jugs, plates) as well as new decorative methods (paintings of flowers, birds) and glazing.

In the first few decades after the Mexican revolution changes affected all areas of life throughout the land including the material culture of small towns and villages which entered into a new stage of development. At a time of prolonged political and social post revolutionary unrest a huge wave of national feeling swept through Mexico encouraged by left wing intellectuals and educated artists seeking to create a foundation on which to build a new Mexican national identity. In the Mexican countryside these intellectuals discovered the uniqueness, beauty and originality of the material culture being produced by the "ladinos" (mestizos), considered to be in the lower strata of society and also by the lowest – the indigenous population. Their objective was to create a completely new Mexican national consciousness. This circle of intellectuals and artists in 1910–1930 included outstanding personalities like the painter and writer Dr. Atl (proper name was Gerardo Murillo, 1875–1957)¹³, the painter and founder of mural art Diego Rivera (1886–1957), Manuel Gambio, (1883–1960), anthropologist and archaeologist, representative of indigenism, the writer, philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos (1882–1959), painter and film director Adolpho Best Maugard (1891–1964), the painter and collector of popular art, Roberto Montenegro (1887–1968), and many others. When they travelled to Europe they established contacts with artists and cultural theoreticians with whom they could compare and test their ideas. As part of their intent to systematically create a Mexican national culture they elevated hand made objects produced by small rural and provincial craftspeople to the category of popular art. They did not discriminate it ethnically or socially, the main criteria was that it had to be hand made production – previously known as manual or ethnic industry. The next task this avant-garde took upon itself was the reawakening of popular creativity which, to a certain extent they adapted to their own preconceived ideas. Thus they tended to gentrify it in order to make it more acceptable to the higher classes. They made a point of travelling into the countryside to meet the craftsmen and women and to study their work, praising their originality and the aesthetic quality of the products. Many of them began to collect the handmade products and their choices in turn influenced the producers.

Every move these intellectuals made had one aim – to support the political and social unification of Mexico and this artificially created concept of national culture played an important role. With this vision in mind in 1920 José Vasconcelos, drew up a project on the basis of which popular art was to be included in national art. According to him – with the agreement of the rest of the avant-garde, national art as a whole should be made up of a combination of academic creative art with the "newly discovered" popular art. This new entity would acquire an autochthonic base and originality.

The whole process grew in intensity when Alvaro Obregon (1921–1924) became president.

¹³ Atl in Aztecs language meant water. Gerardo Murillo got his nickname Doctor Atl in Italy and accepted it as his artistic pseudonym.

During his presidency the concept of including popular art in national art became a frequent topic when discussing patriotism and eventually the uniting of popular art with the so called essence of Mexican-ism (in other words the Mexican national ethos) was absorbed into the general consciousness of the population (Cordero Reiman, 1999).

With the contrivance of the avant-garde the unification of popular art with national art became a state programme. Artists began to include elements of material popular culture into their own art. This was to demonstrate how deeply they were rooted in their home environment and united the "genuine Mexicanism". This can be seen in the pictures of Frida Kahlo, or Diego Rivera's murals. Many muralists also included in their wall paintings pre-Hispanic decorations, popular costumes, ceramics, stone mills etc. as authentic attributes of Mexico. In 1921 Dr. Atl organized a Popular Art Exhibition in Mexico City, under the patronage of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Work. A catalogue was issued in two volumes with pictures of ceramics, masks, textile and other arts forms. In it Dr. Atl outlined his definition of popular art and its direct connection with hand made crafts. He also underlined the importance of popular art and craft in the consolidation of national culture and stressed that "...after the enthusiasm for revolution, popular art and craft became the most important aspect of Mexico." (Atl, 1980).

The intellectuals also promoted popular from a practical point of view. The development programme included plans for its commercialisation, selling to collectors and tourists not just from Mexico but throughout the world. This would bring in profit not only for the various workshops but the area as a whole. Support for tourism would also be beneficial not just from an economic point of view but also an ideological one for it would show Mexico to be a modern stable nation following the years of revolutionary chaos. It was this approach that basically changed the status of popular art (Cordero Reiman, 1999).

Collecting art and craft actually became so popular that it became a very fashionable pastime in Mexico. Following in the steps of the more notable members of the avant-garde the leading Mexican families, generally connected with the government, began to create special "Mexican rooms" in their haciendas, decorated in national popular art style.

The searching out and buying of popular art gradually extended beyond the borders of Mexico. This was helped by the efforts of world renowned collectors such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo as well as Miguel and Rosa Covarrubias,¹⁴ who between 1920 – 1940 brought popular art to international attention. Through their influence Nelson Rockefeller, for example, became very interested in Mexican art and craft. He visited Mexico in 1933, and at once began to create his enormous collection of popular art. When the Panamerican Highway between Mexico and the United States was built, trade in popular art increased considerably. Growing demand in the USA for Mexican popular art brought increasing numbers of American tourists into the country. The promotion of popular art therefore became politically important since it played a role in the economic prosperity of the state. The Mexican government organized teams of researchers and artists and sent them out into the countryside. They were instructed to find a range of artefacts for the state museum shops and for private souvenir shops. Businessmen started to support certain artisans, advising them on the best marketable products. Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla, archaeologist and

¹⁴The painter José Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957) was well versed in history and art of the native people of America. With his wife he built an extensive collection of pre-Hispanic and popular art of Mexico.

anthropologist, one of the first Mexican museologists, also participated in this effort. With his colleagues he established regional museums in small town and villages where popular art and craft flourished the most. He supplied markets with their products, supervised the quality and paid a fair price to the producers. In the fifties the Mexican president Adolfo López Mates founded an institution called FONART (Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías). It facilitated bank loans to the artisans whose work could be sold by FONART. This programme contributed considerably to the development of Mexican popular art and craft (Mulryan, 2003).

Conclusion

The fascination with Mexico among Czech people of various professions was reflected in their enthusiasm for collecting and it increased even more during the 20th century. Various gifts from that time prove how cordial political and cultural relations were between the two countries on an official level.

The archaeological and ethnographic collections in the Museum reveal chapters of the cultural history of that country which with only a little exaggeration we could term ethno-history.

The common link between these collections are handmade crafts. From objects created by ancient civilizations in the pre-classical period to the beginning of the colonial era, then there is a gap of a few centuries. The story recommences with modern day samples.

At the beginning of the 20th century after the revolution and the ensuing social changes, Mexican intellectuals and artists turned their attention to artisan production in their endeavour to bring about a renaissance of national consciousness and to rebuild Mexican identity. The material culture of small towns and villages, previously termed manual or ethnic industry, began to be re-interpreted as popular art by the avant-garde. Their aim was to create a comprehensive national culture that would also include popular art. Later they started to incorporate a popular art imagery into their own works of art, in the belief that they were demonstrating a real Mexican spirit. Famous great works by Mexican muralists clearly show the mutual influence of both currents, their wall compositions include ancient ornamentations, folk costumes, ceramics, stone mills and other typical objects. On the other hand the artists themselves tried to influence the handicraft production in some workshops, insisting that the products should be more refined in order to be more appealing to the middle classes and for the country's representation abroad. They also supported the growth of tourist art which would bring much needed revenue for the manufacturers and for the state. (Fig. 6)

A typical example of this is the ceramic production in Tonalá, state Jalisco, which started not only with a renewal of the old traditions but also incorporated new technologies imported from Europe and Asia. They even accepted artists of non-Mexican provenance like Jorge Wilmont who became respected by local masters and famous among pottery connoisseurs.

The active distribution of Mexican art and craft abroad paid off. From middle of the last century tourists flocked into Mexico, mainly from the United States. The Mexican government started to build museum and souvenir shops, where selected artefacts from well known artists were sold. The artists were carefully selected in their workshops by experts who encouraged them, giving them advice and guidance. The state programme FONART funded by the banks was established in 1955 in support of popular artists.

Inevitably the aforementioned efforts to encourage popular art also had negative side

effects, which didn't fully emerge until the end of the 20th century. An increase in the volume of production and adaptation to customer taste led to uniformity. Artistic creativity and product quality were compromised. Furthermore agents interested only in profits had a negative effect on the artists' creativity by refusing to respect individual flair and artistry. Popular art destined for sale in the cities is no longer rooted in its place of origin but has become boring decorative kitsch. Yet financing popular artists has not found satisfactory solution. With few exceptions most artists are not good at the business side of things, they tend to undervalue their hand made products and so are unable to raise their living standards. These issues are still waiting to be resolved. If popular art is to continue, it needs very sensitive handling. Nevertheless the Mexican art and craft movement depends mainly on the source of imagination and that is still far from drying up.

The significance of popular art as a representative art form of Mexico was demonstrated quite recently. In the 1970s Mexican politicians used popular ceramic figures representing the Tree of Life (candlesticks of symbolic significance combining pre-Hispanic cosmology with ritualistic biblical themes) and presented it as a new symbol of Mexico. 55 of these artefacts were sent to Mexican embassies all over the world. They are meant to be lit when celebrating the anniversary of Mexican independence. (Fig. 7)

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Fig. 1: Urn with lid and two handles, burnished ceramic with metallic paints (gold and silver) carry a symbol of independent Mexico: an eagle sitting on nopal with a snake in its beak. Tonalá, Jalisco, ca. late 19th century. Donated by Eduard Klaboch, 1886. Inv. No. 44 234, high = 56,5 cm.



Fig. 2: Pitcher and bottle, burnished ceramic with polychrome painting. Tonalá, Jalisco.
Pitcher, collected by Josef Rutta before 1979. Inv. No.58 401, high 26,5 cm. **Bottle** (with woman head) signed Galván. ca. 1960s. Donated by Mexican government, 1967. Inv. No. A 5052, high = 27, 3 cm.



Fig. 3: „Amate” – painting on inner bark, composition of village agricultural life. Guerrero.
 Collected by Josef Rutta before 1979. Inv. No 56 525, 61,5 cm x 41,5 cm.



Fig. 4: Gourd, polychrome lacquerwork. Olinalá, Guerrero. Donated by Mexican government, 1982. Inv. No. 56 673 a,b, high = 31 cm.



Fig. 5: Cat, burnished ceramic with polychrome painting. Tonalá, Jalisco. ca. 1970–1980s. Donated by Mexican government 1982. Inv. No. 62.217, high = 21,5 cm length = 26 cm.



Fig. 6: Tree of life with angel – candelabra, ceramic with polychrome painting. Izúcar de Matamoros, Mexico. ca. 1920–1930, Inv. No. A 8 335, high= 56,5 cm.



Fig. 7: Tree of life with Noah's Ark – candelabra, ceramic with polychrome painting. Metepec, Mexico. Donated by Ignacio Pichard Pagas, governor of Mexico, 1992. Inv. No. 62 061, high – 34,5 cm.