# Through the eyes of the mannequins: How do we see us?

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The National museum has been a construction of the hegemonic powers that pretend to legitimize and position its vision of reality as the reality of the peripheries, writes cultural critic Terry Eagleton (2000). During its history, the museum has presented, through a catalogue of the plundered artifacts, peripheral groups as extravagant and exotic, as well as confirming the technological, artistic, and intellectual superiority of the hegemonic groups.

In addition to the above, the museum used to have a symbolic function of triumph over the alien other that in the manner of a trophy was inserted in an exclusive space to be studied (Jiménez-Blanco, 2014). These other spaces of representation had a mission and rules of their own that differed from those spaces dedicated to the artistic and cultural production of the hegemonic West.

This way of understanding the other went from giving symbolic weight to the objects themselves by their representations linked to their origins and their demonstration of territorial, economic and symbolic power exerted over the exotic others (Bourdieu, 2012), to prioritizing the knowledge that was deposited by their communities and the appreciation of the objects of a collection or exhibition from their aesthetical values on the same level as the Western ones.

This text will analyse the manner in which the museum has changed the ways of comprehending, [re]presenting and establishing a dialogue with the Mexican original cultures and, therefore, with ourselves, from an analysis of the mannequins in the ethnographic rooms of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

## The heritage of colonial museums

We can trace the history of the modern museum from the collection and the accumulation of objects (such as war trophies and church treasures) preserved in the *studiolos* and chambers of wonders of the sixteenth century as its direct predecessor. Yet it is only in the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, linked to encyclopedism and the preponderance of reason, that first the public museums (to be consolidated in the nineteenth century) appeared, together with libraries, archives, and universities, to respond to the democratization ideals in Western societies (Jiménez-Blanco, 2014).

The word museum is rooted in such a way that it automatically refers to imaginaries in which different populations sought to replicate the museum model, and for a long time its relevance in different contexts was not questioned; so, following the trail of museums in Mexico, the first modern museums that arrived in 1825 can be recognized as a legacy (Avila et al., 2018) of illustrated modernity.

This illustrated museum was accompanied by two *cuasi perse* elements: its space, understood as a container, and its collection, which is tacitly contemplated as permanent, immutable and sacred (Ávila et Padilla., 2016). It is in this way of understanding the museum that the institution gave a symbolic weight to the objects by what it used to represent about their origin that demonstrated the power that the hegemonic groups exert over the dominated territorial, economic and cultural indigenous groups (Bourdieu, 2012).

Mexican museums were born in this context and were used to demonstrate the superiority of the hegemonic groups by showing the natives as exotic, primitive and needy social groups to be saved from their own savagery. The museum became a religious sanctuary to the structured way of thinking of Western societies that preserved the ideological values that constructed the imaginary of superiority.

Through generations these knowledge temples, controlled by conservative groups (Bourdieu, 2012), tried to maintain the museum as above, but they did not realize that this statism that they watched no longer existed because the museum is a living entity which adapts its needs to the present in a cultural, economic, social, educational and technological context (Spiridon & Sandu, 2016), but it happens so slowly that is almost imperceptible.

## How we see them

As mentioned above, the National Museum of Anthropology (MNA) continued the tradition of making museums under the illustrated scientistic ideal of the need to save the past, study the other and explain the world from a hegemonic institutionalized point of view.

Heir to the National Museum, located in Moneda Street 13 in the center of Mexico City, the MNA, along with other non-less important museums such as the National Museum of History and the Museum of Modern Art, was part of the modernizing imaginary of that time, committed to showing the world how Mexican society was starting a process of modernization. Thus its construction is the political decision to show the progress of the modern world over the "savage" world of the communities that traditionally used to be and still are considered exotic.

The lack of great renowned artists such as Michelangelo, El Greco, Velázquez, Van Gogh, etc., was the reason that it was decided to glorify the Mexican past by representing the dead, that is, the pre-Hispanic civilizations, becoming the temple by which the glorious past would approve the identity of the Mexican heirs as inheritors of the "cosmic race" of which Vasconcelos famously wrote.

However, it was still pending to represent the direct heirs, those who were considered the ballast of modern society, and that is why, during the construction works of the MNA, the architect Mario Vázquez set out to work with delegations of the ethnic groups that would be represented in that space (Vela y Vela, 2015). Despite all the reflection around museums, he maintained the nineteenth century tradition of making museums, and the ethnographic halls on the top floor of the museum became a kind of cabinet of curiosities of the twentieth century. The MNA was created, then, as an ode to the past and a showcase of the exotic other.

This leads me to analyse what happens to the curatorial and museographic displays of the ethnographic halls in the MNA. To do that I will draw on the devices used to represent the living indigenous groups that inhabit the regions where the great native peoples once were. The analysis of the mannequins and the reading that can be given to them speak to the relationship that the Mexican State has with the true indigenous groups that still live apart from the nonverbal communication tenet made by Knapp, Hall & Horgan (2014).

The deep layer of Mexican culture constitutes a mysterious and complex Mexico (Tardieu, 2015); however, as recorded in numerous academic documents, reports of international organizations and press releases, the Mexican State maintains a complicated relationship with traditional peoples. For some sectors indigenous communities result in a drag on the developmentist plans of industrialized economies, which claim that indigenous people do not bring wealth and so, to them, a total integration of indigenous people into the dynamics of the developed world is the preferable solution.

Thus, Mexico continues a positivist view of Vasconelo's cosmic race ideology at the State level. This view is manifested in the ethnographic halls of the MNA, in which indigenous integration sought to leave behind the witness of its exotic, alien, premodern symbols with a system of codes, values and symbolic constellations to somehow give rise to the program of factual development.

Yet, as Vasconcelos himself mentioned, the heritage of the great cultures was not going to save the current Indians from the end of their cycle; they had instead to leave their "savagery" behind to be modern men, women and children. All that would be the record of their passage through these lands.

Regardless of whether these peoples would disappear or not, the Mexican state decided to take advantage of the curiosity generated by ancient civilizations and their legacy in the modern Western world, so that exoticism of the indigenous and the original cultures turned out to be the perfect showcase for the world to turn its sight to Mexico. Although this display was intended to position Mexico as a developed country, the exported product was not Mexican industry but its colorful and mysterious roots.

In the history of Mexican exhibitions and those in which Mexico has a presence since the late nineteenth century, and especially from the middle of the last century, the "Mexican" is the colorful, the exotic and the old, as we can witnes in

the pavilions of Mexico in the Universal Exhibitions of Paris in 1889, Montreal in 1967, San Antonio in 1968 and Osaka in 1970 (Garza, 2019), as well as the international exhibitions *Aztecs* and *Mayans: Endless Time*, among others that continued presenting an exotic Mexico.

Thus, in this period of Mexican museum history, the montages were intended to be colorful, showing the exotic; in the end, museum institutions were not interested in showing modern Mexico or a dialogue between modernity and the past. Their main purpose was to show the deep Mexico of Bonfil Batalla, the monolithic figures of the ancient gods, the restaurant clicking on an almost performative staging of the flyers of Papantla. The presentation of traditional artisanal processes conflicted with the industrial processes of the developed countries. But above all, the musealizing fetish led to containing the "other" inside a glass case, almost caged, as in a kind of static human zoo that has become a constant of ethnographic museums whose history is entwined in processes of violence and unequal relations of power (Rozental and Rufer, 2016).

The arrangement of devices to bring to presence the subjects spoken of in the curatorial discourse of the ethnographic halls of the MNA present an indigenous archetype; that is, a group of people in submissive presence with the direction of their eyes to the ground, in a clear posture of inferiority, in which they are presented doing their daily activities in their "habitats", in contrast to the superiority it evokes in those who can observe the scene mounted in the museum.

Despite having included the representatives of traditional peoples, the vision of the working group under which work was produced was that of the Western present, in which the contemplation of the other was promoted in a remote space or time, which resulted in comparisons that somehow served to justify the superiority of the person who narrated the story, whose voice is often hidden so as not to interfere with the fictions that unfold in the viewer (Jiménez-Blanco, 2014), even rendering invisible others who might be equally uncomfortable, as is the case of Afro-descendants in Mexico, who in the narratives of museum spaces are rarely represented.

## Conclusion

Social changes have influenced new ways of seeing, understanding and relating to the world, so there has been a shift in the conditions of [re]presentation of the binomial "the same and the other" which seeks to produce it on an equal footing, breaking the almost religious conviction of the culturally appropriate from a European-Western ethnocentrism, the product of an awareness by excluded groups that have taken a critical perspective (Jiménez-Blanco,2014).

For several years since its opening, the MNA continued presenting a universal encyclopedic point of view, but according to the new spirit of the modern times, it has changed the manner of [re]presenting indigenous groups, dignifying them and not presenting them as inferior to urbanized groups.

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