The Tension of Mexican Identity Through the Art of the Mexican Revolution

Sebastian de Kansky

California Polytechnic University

Anthropology & Geography Senior Project

Dr. Keese

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Introduction

From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution through the rise of the Modern Age, societies have undergone immense cultural, economic, and technological changes. As I dove into my preliminary research for this project, I became interested in how my Mexican identity was a consequence of this rapid evolution and subsequent class tension. While researching the etymology of the word identity, I found the Latin root idem, meaning "the same" and Medieval Latin *identitatem*, meaning sameness, to provide more questions than answers (Online Etymology Dictionary). Sameness in relation to what? Sameness in relation to others? Or, perhaps, the sameness in relation to a person's, or culture's, image of themselves. If identity is the sameness in relation to self-image, then portraits and murals act as the axes of discovery through which we demonstrate what we desire to show.

Themes and Multimedia Format

This project aims to define the development of Mexican national identity as socioeconomic divisions attempting to reconcile, set in the context of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. This era was the most formative in constructing Mexico's national identity because it saw this tension break out into a violent revolution that launched the entry of peasants and workers into local and regional politics and, therefore, national imagination (Benjamin, 2000). We examine art depicting colonial racial hierarchies in New Spain, the art of the Mexican Revolution, and contemporary Mexican art to trace a general evolution of Mexican national identity. This is a multimedia project with two components: an interactive gallery website that displays artwork and analysis, and this analytic research paper containing a historical account of

Mexican history leading up to the revolution with relevant artistic works representing the evolution of Mexican identity.

Why Art Analysis is a Valuable Tool to Explore Mexican History

The complexity of Mexican history stems from its diverse indigenous cultures predating European colonization and requires varied approaches to comprehend fully. The advent of Spanish colonization disrupted pre-existing social structures in pursuit of regional control and resource extraction. This tumultuous period, compounded by the devastating impact of diseases on indigenous populations and the subsequent emergence of mixed-race *castas*, engendered a profound discord in the fabric of national identity. Post-colonial Mexico would witness recurring cycles of conflict as it grappled with the legacy of deep inequalities. These conflicts extend far beyond the Mexican Revolution of the twentieth century and present many competing narratives and academic perspectives. By examining artistic expressions such as paintings and murals, nuanced interpretations emerge that enrich our understanding of Mexican history by portraying the lived experiences of its people.

Methodologies

The project utilized basic HTML, CSS, and Javascript for foundational website development. GitHub Copilot assisted with specific Javascript tasks like the functionality of the main image gallery, as well as the mouse position parallax movement on the homepage. Adobe Firefly was used to generate AI assets for background images, later edited in Adobe Photoshop to resemble 19th-century daguerreotype photographs and engravings. The assets were edited to conform to a sepia color palette, which manifests a sense of history and highlights the vibrancy of the artworks. The website was hosted on GitHub Pages for easy accessibility and sharing.

Overall, the methodologies blended traditional coding practices, AI-generated assets, and image editing software to create a visually compelling and historically evocative website.

Historical and Artistic Analysis

The Hierarchy of New Spain

To understand the causes of the Mexican Revolution in the 20th century, one must understand the underlying ethnic tension rooted in Mexico's colonial past. Colonial hierarchies permanently marked the evolution of Mexico's national identity by drastically reorganizing the pre-existing social structures of the indigenous groups and subsequent settlers. New Spain's social structure was based on the ideology of the Spanish *liempeza de sangre*, or purity of blood (Currie, 2024). Predating the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, liempeza de sangre was a Christian-inspired concept used to determine lineage to Old Christian nobility while giving Spaniards the right to dominate Jews, Black Africans, and other marginalized groups. In New Spain, conquistadores used this Old World system to claim nobility and land rights for themselves in the New World, subsequently dividing the social order into four primary groups: Spaniards, *criollos* (Spaniards born in Mexico), indigenous, and Africans brought over as slaves (Burkholder, 2000). As New Spain grew in population, other classes, such as the *casta* class, or people of mixed racial ancestry, emerged. This *casta* system enforced social rules upon the different classes, privileging the Spaniards and criollos. The *hacienda system* saw criollos and Spaniards becoming the majority of the landholding elite while grouping all indigenous peoples into one peasant class (Patch, 2000). The socioeconomic disparities within the Mexican state, which instigated the plebeian revolt during the Mexican Revolution, are direct repercussions of these colonial systems.

Casta Paintings and the Nuances of the Casta System

The New Spanish government meticulously monitored and categorized racial hierarchies. This institution served to maintain social order and preserve power amongst the Spanish elite. This hierarchy began to be depicted in 18th-century New Spain in a genre known as the *casta paintings*. Carrera's (1998) article illuminates the nuance of the casta system:

> For example, a person of half-Spanish and half-African ancestry was designated as mulatto; a person of mulatto and Indian ancestry, *zambo*; and so on. Further mixing was duly classified and labeled. As used in reference to castas, the term *español* indicated someone whose blood had returned to the state of being Spanish-that is, a person having one-eighth or less Indian ancestry. This system also proscribed the physical and social mobility of castas. Castas were not allowed to live in the Indian neighborhoods; certain official posts were denied to mestizos; and sumptuary legislation denied specific types of clothing and jewelry to certain castas. (p. 38)

The complexity of the casta system points to a culture of division within early Mexican society. While institutions of racial classification were banned after the creation of an independent Mexican state, its legacy permeated the country's subsequent civil wars and conflicts.

Miguel Cabrera's Painting *From Spaniard and India, Mestiza* Depicts A Domestic Scene of White Male Domination. Cabrera depicts a white Spaniard with his back turned from view, raising his hand as if to lecture or educate his indigenous wife and mixed child. This gesture represents a culture of domestic control common in New Spain, wherein the Spanish father seeks to educate his "newly civilized" indigenous wife. His wife and child receive his lecture passively and earnestly. Furthermore, this painting illustrates a common motif amongst

the casta paintings — ethnic sexualization. Men are depicted as white, while women are nearly always mixed, indigenous, or black. Frequently women serve as the focal point of the action within these compositions, wearing nice clothes and presenting them as obedient objects of value.

From Spaniard and Black, a Mullata is Born **Depicts a Racial Stereotype of New Spain.** In this painting by an unknown author, we see a chaotic kitchen scene. A white Spaniard fends off his black wife, who grabs his hair and angles a wooden spoon above his head as if to strike. Their mixed child attempts to separate them. Other onlookers within the kitchen, both mixed and black, watch in surprise. This painting depicts a racist stereotype that black women are aggressive, which serves to amuse the white male gaze. Meanwhile, as is common with casta paintings, the mixed child acts as a mediator of conflict. This type of scenario was quite popular amongst the genre.

The Legacy of Colonial Hierarchies in National Identity

The old colonial social order created a lasting tension in Mexican self-perception. Given the benefits of familial proximity to the white European elite, mestizos were historically incentivized to deny their indigenous heritage. The formation of Mexican national identity, especially in the context of the Reform Revolution and the Mexican Revolution of the 20th century, meant finding unity within these two ethnic polarities. Hoy (1984), in his review of the Mexican poet Octavio Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude,* summarized Paz's view on the subject:

> Mexican history is the expression of a collective inferiority complex stemming from the results of the Spanish conquest, racial mixture, and disadvantageous geographical position… Mexicans have renounced their origins. The modern Mexican does not want to

> be either Indian or Spaniard, nor does he wish to be descended from them. He denies them and he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction; he is a man. "He becomes the son of nothingness. His beginnings are in his own." (p. 371, 372)

While personal identity is subject to individual expression, Paz's psychosocial observations in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution reflect the weary attitude of Mexican citizens who had never experienced a prolonged period without regime change, political strife, and gross inequities.

Historical Timeline of the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, socioeconomic class tensions would remain a problem despite Mexico's rapid maturation as a sovereign state. Throughout the nineteenth century, Mexico would:

- Lose territory as a result of the Mexican-American War.
- Fight *La Reforma* civil war.
- Draft a new liberal constitution under indigenous President Benito Juarez.
- Fight and eventually repel a French invasion.
- Begin industrialization.

These events, such as territorial insecurity and economic/civil restructuring, were done in haste to make the Mexican state competitive on a global stage. However, the promise of *La Reforma* seemed the most idealistic.

The Impact of La Reforma

La Reforma, or the Reform War, set Mexico on a path toward a free democracy that contradicted the socioeconomic inequities of industrialization. It began in 1852 and was fought

between two broad liberal and conservative factions. Liberals wanted to secularize, stimulate capitalism, protect human rights and property, guarantee equality under the law, and unite the nation. In contrast, the conservatives wanted to move slower and preserve the *fueras* (special privileges given to the Church) (Vanderwood, 2000). Meanwhile, agrarian peasants began to take over hacienda estates all over Mexico, driven by a desire for the promised popular representative government and state sovereignty (federalism). The liberals, under the leadership of President Benito Juarez, a Zapotec Indian from Oaxaca and former Supreme Court judge, eventually subsumed power and would draft a new constitution and other reforms over the next two decades. Juarez's legacy includes bolstering the central Mexican government, guaranteeing religious freedom, nationalizing education with secular schools, creating a federal police force, infrastructure projects, and more (Vanderwood, 2000). However, there remained a peasant need for further liberal reforms, and as such, the legacy of La Reforma is disputed by critics. According to Hoy's (2004) review of Octavio Paz's reflection on La Reforma:

> It was the project of a small minority against a traditional morality, imposing its will upon the rest of the people. It was built upon the abstract postulates of European liberalism - freedom and equality - without relationship to the actual circumstances of the Mexican people. It failed to bring about the birth of a strong bourgeoisie. The sale of church properties and indigenous communal landholdings accentuated agricultural feudalism and encouraged the growth of a new land-owning class. The republic found itself without a social basis; power gravitated to those who could grasp it, paving the way for the dictatorship of General Diaz that perpetuated the special privileges of the landowning class and opened the doors to Anglo-American economic penetration. (p. 373)

Abuse of the plebeian class engenders the Mexican engine of progress. This abuse manifested in labor power for haciendas and foreign-owned farms, factories, railways, and military service. Despite abandoning the casta system of New Spain, the rules and conditions of competing in modernity still necessitated extracting labor, land, and agency from an underclass of peasants. This is the underlying tension lying at the heart of Mexican identity that would come to a boiling point in Porfirio Diaz's regime.

Art of the Post-Independence and the Reform Period

Art created during these periods both rejected Mexico's colonial past and embraced European styles. Artists began to portray more indigenous subjects, seen as traditionally Mexican, while embracing the Neoclassical and Romantic movements of Europe (Radonic, 2011). Artists in Mexico's premier art school, the Academy of San Carlos, were encouraged to depict simple portraits of indigenous life and epic scenes of the Spanish conquest. The latter often highlighted the brutality of indigenous suffering, reflecting a growing desire for national unity by way of confronting the country's violent origins.

Felix Parra's Chobala *Massacre* Portrays the Cruelty of Conquest. Completed in 1877, this painting depicts the aftermath of Hernán Cortez's attack on Chobala, where he and his conquistadores six thousand people whilst on the march to Tenochtitlan. The composition situates Cortez in the center, standing triumphantly in sword and armor as his soldiers loot the city's treasures. Beneath him, a deceased indigenous man lay at Cortez's feet in a pool of blood. In some interpretations, Parra painted the slain native in resemblance to Christ's crucifixion on the cross, symbolizing the irony of Spain's cruel pursuit of evangelization (Widdifield, 1990). The slain man's wife watches in horror as she holds their presumably deceased child, perhaps

representing the permanent alteration of Mexico's future. Three surviving natives sit next to their scattered possessions in despair.

Gabriel Guerra's *Cuauhtemoc's Torture* Depicts Conquistador Brutality for the Public. This panel was created in 1886 to adorn the larger *Monument of Cuauhtémoc* in Mexico City. this sculpture depicts Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, bound and tortured by Spanish conquistadors. His body contorts in agony as he resists his European captors, symbolizing the collective trauma inflicted upon indigenous peoples during the colonial era. Placed prominently in a public space, the monument serves as a potent reminder of the resilience of Mexico's indigenous heritage in the face of colonial aggression. Guerra uses the act of publicly displaying a violent historical event to confront viewers with the brutal realities of conquest and colonization, while also honoring the legacy of resistance that continues to shape Mexico's national identity to this day.

Porfirio Diaz's Failed Promise of Modernity

Following a successful coup d'etat and ascendance to the presidency in 1876, Diaz promised policies that would promote law and order and propel Mexico into modernity. According to Buffington and French (2000), such policies can be characterized as earnest attempts to industrialize and strengthen the economy, as well as ambiguous political theater to attract foreign investment. While these policies brought great economic prosperity for wealthy Mexicans and some of the middle class, they drastically reduced the economic well-being of poor rural citizens:

> As land became a commodity to be bought and sold, villagers who had managed to hold on to their lands through three hundred years of colonial rule and fifty years of

> independence now lost them to hacendados (large landowners), speculators, wealthier members of their communities, and survey companies spurred on by a new law passed in 1883. From all corners of the country, rural residents petitioned local, state, and national officials, pleading that they were "under invasion" and on the verge of being thrown out of their homes… Overall, the wave of commercialization that the railroads helped usher in concentrated landholdings into fewer and fewer hands, leaving the great majority landless. By 1910, nearly half the rural population in Mexico lived within the boundaries of a hacienda. (p. 969)

Furthermore, this land redistribution would go on to increase agricultural export and population growth, thereby decreasing the value of labor and wages, which forced the working class "to work in what critics described as a 'slave mode of production'" (p. 971). Diaz's industrialization, bolstered by voter fraud and political abuses of power, would lead to the creation of workers' rights organizations and revolutionary groups that would call for his dismissal.

A Historical Overview of the Mexican Revolution

The First Phase of the Revolution

The Mexican Revolution, catalyzed by the deposition of President Porfirio Díaz, unfolded amidst a societal reckoning with inequality and labor rights. It was initially spearheaded by wealthy businessman and presidential candidate Fransisco Madero, who sought to depose Díaz following a fraudulent loss in the 1910 election (Hart, 2000). Madero took power in 1911 with support from militant *campesino* movements led by Pascual Orozco, Emiliano Zapata, and Pancho Villa. He failed to deliver on his promises of democratization and land reform, prompting rebellions from the united campesinos and a coup d'état supported by the United States that

ended in his execution. Madero's former general Emiliano Huerta then assumed office as an anti-election authoritarian. What followed was another violent conflict between Huerta, the campesinos, and a new liberal, pro-Democracy faction calling themselves *los Constitucionalistas*, or the Constitutionalists.

The Second Phase of the Revolution

The U.S.-backed Constitutionalists overthrew Huerta in 1913 and installed Venustanio Carranza as the new president, who continued to battle with the Zapatistas and Villa's *Division del Norte* until their eventual defeats (Hart, 2000). Carranza and his chosen successor would later be ousted by fellow Constitutionalist Álvaro Obregón in 1918, whose presidency was a moment of relative stability and civil significance, as he enforced a constitution drafted a year prior that laid the groundwork for a more democratic and inclusive political system. This transformative period not only reshaped the political landscape but further integrated the working class, indigenous, and agrarian identities into the nation's collective consciousness.

The Art Depicting the Mexican Revolution

Art produced in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution reflected a unification of previously polarized Mexican identities. Mexican artists sought to develop a visual language that was inclusive, pluralistic, and distinctly Mexican. Artists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and Frida Kahlo depicted scenes of everyday life, labor struggles, and revolutionary fervor, often highlighting the contributions of indigenous peoples and marginalized communities to Mexico's national identity. The emergence of murals as a medium to be displayed in schools and public buildings effectively democratized art, making it accessible to all strata of society.

José Clemente Orozco's *The Epic of American Civilization* Critiques Mexico's Complicated Past. The mural was completed in 1932 for Dartmouth College and is divided into two sections that tell a story of conquest, conflict, and violent transformation of the modern man in the context of industrialization. The first section, *The Coming and Parting of Quetzalcoatl,* visualizes the story of indigenous people in Mesoamerica, from ancient human migration to a religious prophecy anticipating the conquistadors. One notable panel depicts indigenous leaders who sacrifice a human heart as an offering to the gods in exchange for prosperity, which is referenced again in the second section, *Cortez and Modern America.* This section tells the story of Cortez's first conquest and the evolution of Mexican society, which includes references to industrialization, machines, and Anglo-American influence, and even depicts a heroic portrayal of Zapata and his popular rebellion. In contrast to the human sacrifice in the first section, Orozco includes another sacrifice — that of a soldier who sacrifices himself for his nation. This recurring theme critiques the violent sacrifice made by individuals to preserve the stability of the modern industrial society, which Orozco considers a new religion. Symbols in other panels, such as machine totems and skeleton gods of modernity, reinforce this critique of Mexico's oppressive system. This epic work serves as an ageless monument to the ongoing struggle for justice and equality in Mexican society.

Diego Rivera's *Zapatista Landscape* captures the Abstract Essence of the Mexican Revolution. The 1915 painting depicts Emiliano Zapata, a revered figure of the revolution, leading a group of armed peasants. The composition uses abstract, cubist shapes to develop the visual language of an emerging Mexican nationalism that embraced indigenous, campesino, and

revolutionary elements. Such symbols include a rifle in the center, indigenous *serape* textiles, and shapes resembling sombreros affixed in front of the Mexican Valley landscape.

Alfredo Ramos Martinez's *Zapatistas* Offers a Contemplative Depiction of the Popular Masses. The composition features a group of armed campesinos who are presumably indigenous and mestizaje. They are huddled close as they seem to fight for space within the composition, ready to burst out of the frame. Martinez seeks to comment on the ethnic makeup and sheer number of the peasant class who now seek liberation from a wealthy minority of elites. Martinez also employs a subdued color palette and soft, flowing lines to convey a sense of solemnity and introspection.

Diego Rivera's *Mexico Today and Tomorrow* Offers a Sweeping Panorama of Mexican Society in the Aftermath of the Revolution. The composition is teeming with life and activity, depicting workers, peasants, and intellectuals engaged in the revolution. Bold colors imbue the mural with a sense of energy barely contained within a framework of industrial pipes and machinery. Atop the mural is Karl Marx, who guides workers now in search of liberation. Elements such as the hammer and sickle, the gears of industry, and popular conflict with government officers serve to underscore the revolutionary fervor that permeated Mexican society during this period. Additionally, Rivera includes references to Mexico's indigenous heritage, such as the depiction of ancient pyramids and traditional attire, highlighting the cultural diversity and resilience of the Mexican people. Through "Mexico Today and Tomorrow," Rivera offers a vision of a vibrant and egalitarian society, shaped by the ideals of the revolution and the ongoing struggle for social justice.

Frida Kahlo's *My Nurse and I* Explores the Personal within National Mexican Identity. The painting, created in 1937, is a deeply personal exploration of the artist's own identity and experiences, yet it also resonates with broader themes of revolution and resistance in Mexican society. The composition features Kahlo as a child, cradled in the arms of her indigenous nursemaid, who is depicted with strength and dignity. The contrast between Kahlo's fragile, porcelain-like appearance and the nurse's sturdy, earthy presence highlights the power dynamics at play and the bond of affection between the two figures. In some interpretations, this piece reflects Kahlo's pain at the loss of her mother, yet we can also extrapolate the greater metaphor at play — the mestizaje acknowledgment of indigenous origin. The wet nurse covers her face with a pre-Colombian mask as if to suggest that she is not singular, but a complete representative of Mexico's indigenous past.

***The Two Fridas* by Frida Kahlo Contemplates the Polarity of Mexican Identity.** The composition features two versions of Kahlo seated side by side, each holding hands and connected by a vein that merges into a stormy sky. The figures are rendered with detail and emotional intensity, reflecting Kahlo's mastery of self-expression and introspection. The Frida on the right wears a traditional *Tehuana* costume, representing Kahlo's Mexican heritage and cultural roots, while the Frida on the left wears a European-style dress, symbolizing her European ancestry and connection to modernity. The contrast between the two Fridas highlights the unification between Kahlo's conflicting identities and reveals the emerging nationalistic sentiment regarding this dualism in Mexico after the revolution.

Diego Rivera's *The Flower Carrier* Depicts the Weight of Labor. This 1935 composition centers around a laborer burdened with a heavy load of flowers, stooped under the

weight of his cargo. Rivera captures the working class's physical strain and emotional resilience, symbolizing their efforts to sustain themselves amidst economic hardship. The laborer carries a weary expression that highlights the toll of manual labor on the human spirit. Behind him, a woman supports his burden, embodying the collaborative efforts of men and women in the struggle for survival. Symbolically, the flowers represent both the beauty and fragility of life, implying the human, natural cost of social inequality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of Mexican identity has been deeply influenced by the intersection of colonial history, the casta system, industrialization, and indigenous identity. The legacy of Spanish colonization left a lasting impact on Mexican society, shaping its cultural, social, and racial dynamics. The hierarchical casta system further reinforced divisions along racial and ethnic lines, contributing to a fragmented sense of national identity. Rapid industrialization saw government policies that developed economic disparities, diminished the power of the Catholic Church in state affairs, and reduced indigenous agency. However, the Mexican Revolution of the early 20th century marked a pivotal moment in the nation's history, as it sought to challenge entrenched power structures and redefine notions of citizenship and belonging. Through art, particularly murals and paintings produced during this period, we gain invaluable insights into the struggles, aspirations, and triumphs of the Mexican people in their quest for self-determination and cultural affirmation. Artists such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and José Clemente Orozco used their creative talents to reflect the spirit of revolution and the complexities of Mexican identity, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the nation's rich and diverse heritage.

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