

Copyright

by

Maria Luisa Minjares

May 2018

IDOLS BEHIND ALTARS – REVISITED: EXAMINING THE CONSTRUCTION OF
THE MEXICAN ARTISTIC IDENTITY THROUGH VISUAL CULTURE AND FOLK
ART IN THE UNITED STATES

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Art

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art in Art History

by

Maria Luisa Minjares

May 2018

IDOLS BEHIND ALTARS – REVISITED: EXAMINING THE CONSTRUCTION OF
THE MEXICAN ARTISTIC IDENTITY THROUGH VISUAL CULTURE AND FOLK
ART IN THE UNITED STATES

Maria Luisa Minjares

APPROVED:

Rex Koontz, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Sandra Zalman, Ph.D.

Roberto Tejada, Ph.D.

Andrew Davis, Ph.D.
Dean, Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

IDOLS BEHIND ALTARS – REVISITED: EXAMINING THE CONSTRUCTION OF
THE MEXICAN ARTISTIC IDENTITY THROUGH VISUAL CULTURE AND FOLK
ART IN THE UNITED STATES

An Abstract of a Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Art

Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art in Art History

by

Maria Luisa Minjares

May 2018

Abstract

This thesis examines the post-revolutionary creation of Mexican visual identity in the U.S. Focusing on the role of *Idols Behind Altars* by Anita Brenner, and her use of photography and text that attempt to frame the visual idea of Mexico for audiences of the early 20th century. Brenner places a specific emphasis on folk art as a way of understanding the prevalence of Mexican culture and identity, which I examine in three major exhibitions of the early 20th century. Brenner is seen as an intellectual of this movement, especially as critical translator of Mexican cultural ideals. She served as anthropologist, journalist, art historian, art critic, and worked as an advocate for Mexican culture and arts – especially for its representation in the United States. In constructing an understanding of the author and the inception of the book gives way for interpreting how folk art is part of the Mexican identity.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my advisor and mentor Professor Rex Koontz for his unyielding support, motivation, and constructive critiques of my work on this thesis, as well as on my work these past two years at the University of Houston. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Sandra Zalman and Roberto Tejada who have taken time to serve as second readers, and I am thankful for their guidance and valuable comments in constructing this thesis. Professor Zalman's course on Surrealism helped me in developing an interest in early 20th century exhibitions and the role they play when discussing art and its understanding. I would also like to point out Professor Tejada's class on Latin American Photobooks, which initially piqued my interest in the work of Anita Brenner with the text *The Wind That Swept Mexico*. My work would also not have been possible without the financial support of the University of Houston, and the Guenther Award Travel Grant, the foremost provided funding for my tuition and the latter for research material and information for my thesis in Los Angeles and Austin. I would also like to acknowledge the presence of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, specifically the ICAA and the Latin American Art department, throughout my graduate career. Beatriz Olivetti, Maria Gaztambide, Rachel Mohl, Bonnie van Zooest, and Mari Carmen Ramirez have not only provided exceptional learning experiences but also unparalleled mentorship and influence in my work.

Lastly, I would like to give my absolute and most indebted gratitude to my mother. It was her unwavering constant emotional, spiritual, and financial support, which made this opportunity come to life and this would not have been possible without her.

Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Acknowledgements	vi
List of Figures	viii
Dedication	ix
Epigraph	x
Section 1: Anita Brenner & Idols Behind Altars	1
La Vida de Anita	3
Idols Behind Altars	15
Section 2: Idols Behind Altars - Contemporary Reception, Scholarship, & Folk Art.....	26
Contemporary Reviews	28
Idols Behind Altars and Scholarship	40
Photography & the Representation of Folk Art in IBA	48
Section 3: Mexican Art & Folk Art in the US in the Early 20 th Century	64
Exhibition at the Art Center 1928	69
Mexican Arts 1930	75
Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art 1940	81
Bibliography	87

List of Figures

1. Figure 1.1: Tina Modotti, <i>Anita Brenner</i> , c.1926, gelatin silver print, 9.9 x 7.5 cm	3
2. Figure 1.2: Jean Charlot, Original dust jacket illustration for Mexican Renaissance, oil on canvas, 1926.....	15
3. Figure 1.3: Edward Weston, <i>Our Lord of the Tree</i> , Michoacán, c. 1926, gelatin silver print	16
4. Figure 1.4: Edward Weston, <i>Ritual Dancer from Oaxaca</i> , 1926, gelatin silver print, 8 11/16 x 6 in.	19
5. Figure 2.1: Contemporary Review by R.L. Duffus for The New York Times, 1929. Includes reproduction of Francisco Goitia's <i>Portrait</i> , Jean Charlot's <i>Workman</i> , and Carlos Merida's <i>Women of Metepec</i>	28
6. Figure 2.2: Francisco Goitia, <i>Sad Indian</i> , oil on canvas, c.1925	32
7. Figure 2.3: Edward Weston, <i>Maguey Cactus, Mexico</i> , 1926; gelatin silver print; 7 3/8 x 9 5/16 inches	51
8. Figure 2.3: Weston, <i>Interior of Native House in Xochimilco</i> , 1926	55
9. Figure 2.5: Edward Weston, <i>Ex-voto/retablo of Ramona Valle</i> , 1926, gelatin silver print 7 5/16 x 8 3/8 in.....	59
10. Figure 2.6: Edward Weston, <i>Pulqueria, Mexico D.F.</i> , 1926, gelatin silver print, 7 3/8 x 9 3/8 in.	61
11. Figure 3.1: Installation view of the <i>Mexican Arts</i> exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1930.	74
12. Figure 3.2: Retablo section, Installation View of <i>Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art</i> , The Museum of Modern Art, 1940.	81

Dedication

Para Rosa Margarita

“Por muy larga que sea la tormenta, el sol siempre vuelve a brillar entre las nubes.”
K.G.

Epigraph

“Mexico, so long camouflaged in bandits, oil, and revolution, emerges with an art which is not only a significant expression of itself, but a rebirth of genuine American art, representative ultimately, not only of the purple-mountained home of artists south of the Rio Grande, but of the entire Western Continent. [...] long before the Christian Era, nowhere as in Mexico is art so intimately linked with daily life. To paint, to carve to make something of color and form - this is a Mexican need. Thinking and feeling in color and form, it is only through the things that Mexico makes that she can be clearly seen.”

Anita Brenner, “Mexican Renaissance,” *New York World*, 1928.

Section 1: Anita Brenner & Idols Behind Altars

Anita Brenner's work throughout her life was a sustained and important attempt to frame Mexican art and culture for US audiences. Her first book publication, the 1929 book *Idols Behind Altars*, functioned as one of the first post-revolutionary sources of interpretation of Mexico for the United States audience through the analysis of visual culture and literature, accompanied by a carefully curated series of photographs. Brenner creates awareness throughout the book with her intent emphasis and advocacy for folk art, which she argues is not only inherently part of the Mexican culture and identity, but also how it (the Mexican culture) has prevailed.

This thesis argues that the book must be understood as multidisciplinary as well as multifaceted, with Brenner's extensive experience in Mexican culture and history brought to bear for the purpose of creating a Mexican visual identity for American audiences. Brenner takes on the dense role of cultural activist and ambassador – a step that would influence her career. Her devotion in wanting to fully depict and understand a culture, down to its roots and origins, through myths and legends that make up this country, is reinforced and supported through art, specifically through her carefully looking at folk art. By analyzing what has led to modern art in Mexico at the time in which Brenner was writing her book, she also establishes a certain understanding of Mexico with her writings and use of images to a public that otherwise did not have visual access. *Idols Behind Altars* opened a specific transnational conversation of understanding culture through art in Brenner's writing about art and the photographs she chose to include within the work.

This thesis delves into researching the photography utilized, although it is mostly concerned with the presence and the emphasis that Brenner places on folk art, and its role in the artistic Mexican identity. One key strategy that Brenner employed to accomplish the goal of describing the Mexican culture to a foreign audience was the recruitment of important photographers (Edward Weston and Tina Modotti) who made key images for the book. The use of photography in the larger narrative of a Mexican art in the book is a key element in Brenner's argument and narrative strategy, and will be later briefly examined in this thesis.

In order to comprehend the place of *Idols Behind Altars* in Brenner's life and work, this section provides a succinct biography of Anita Brenner. The thesis argues that her role of both outsider and insider, as well as translator, that Brenner took on early in her life is important to the way *Idols* emerged. Following this section there is an overview of *Idols Behind Altars*. The summary of the book will provide context for the reader throughout the rest of the thesis as it progresses in identifying the culmination of Mexican identity through visual culture and folk art as seen through not only *Idols*, but also in three exhibitions of the early 20th century held in the United States.

This information helps support my argument, which is that Brenner's focus on folk art and photography in *Idols Behind Altars* functions as a main source of promotion, interpretation, and visual access to Mexican culture, and that she also greatly contributed to the construction of the early Mexican artistic identity in a foreign setting (here, the US). It is in the last section of this thesis that I have chosen to discuss three exhibitions of Mexican Art in the United States because they were some of the earliest examples of Mexican art being displayed in the US. The exhibitions are the 1928 show held at the Art

Center in New York, the Mexican Arts show in 1930, and Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art from 1940. These exhibitions support my (and Brenner's) argument of the importance of folk art in Mexican culture, specifically discussing their role in each exhibition, and the exhibitions also depict the construction of the Mexican artistic identity in the United States.

Figure 1.1: Tina Modotti, *Anita Brenner*, c. 1926, gelatin silver print, 9.9 x 7.5 cm



La Vida de Anita

Anita Brenner was born in Aguascalientes in 1905, where she lived until the age of eleven. Her family chose to leave Mexico due to the repercussions and tensions created by the Mexican revolution, in fact the family moved from Aguascalientes to Texas three times, and this moving back and forth between two countries had an effect on Brenner's

life, work, and way of thinking. It created a certain sense of geographical mobility and biculturalism in Brenner. The family finally settled in San Antonio, where they arrived with almost nothing after leaving Aguascalientes for the last time. Her daughter and biographer, Susannah Joel Glusker, remembers her mother's deep attachment to Mexico and to the revolutionary struggle of the 1910's: "Throughout her life she identified with the struggle of the Mexican people during the revolution. Born shortly before the revolution began, she witnessed the armed struggle, the dead and the wounded, as well as efforts to reconcile differences. She had firsthand experience as a refugee and displaced person."¹ Here, Glusker describes the closeness that Brenner felt to the Mexican peoples and culture, including her traumatic experience as a child in seeing the aftermath of war, as well as her feelings of displacement after the move to San Antonio.

Glusker is probably correct when she argues that her mother's identification with Mexico went to the heart of her childhood experience. Anita Brenner grew up listening to the stories that her nanny, Nana Serapia, would tell her - stories that were deeply embedded with Mexican folklore and myth that stemmed from ancient Mexican cultures. A short anecdote of this, for example, was when Halley's Comet appeared in 1910, Nana Serapia told Anita that terrible things would happen, and they did - the Mexican revolution broke out shortly after.² In fact, Brenner discusses the appearance of Halley's comet as a warning sign in her writing for *The Wind That Swept Mexico*, a later publication of hers in which she collaborated with George R. Leighton for Harper's Magazine. Brenner writes of this: "In the year of the Centennial an omen appeared in the

¹Susannah Joel Glusker. *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998), 12.

² Ibid., 20.

heavens. People who could read learned that it was Halley's Comet and that there was nothing to fear. The scientists understood it, everything was under control. But in the villages, where the glare destroyed the peace of the night and made even the cattle uneasy, it was an announcement. The young were told by the old that it meant war, death, famine, plague."³ This statement made by Brenner does not only provide insight into the beliefs of Mexican culture, but also supports her own argument of the way Mexican natives viewed the world. As we will later see, Brenner argues ardently for the traditional beliefs that make up the native, or Indian beliefs, and *Idols* is a testament to the attempt of understanding this inherent cultural perspective through legends and supported by photography.

In wanting to understand the history and background of Brenner, such as why she chose to write so extensively about Mexico, I have done some research into her biographical history to create an understanding of her as an individual. Susannah Glusker has worked as a biographer on the subject of her mother, and she also put together Brenner's personal journals. In her biographical work of Brenner, Glusker dedicates the first chapter of her mother's biography to Nana Serapia, the nanny which took care of her. Glusker writes about the importance that this relationship had in the development of Brenner, saying that "Anita got firsthand information from Nana Serapia [...] Anita bonded with Serapia, her loving nanny and a major influence on her life."⁴ This part of her life was when Brenner was a young child, growing up in Mexico, and her closeness to Nana Serapia was one of admiration and friendship. Brenner grew up Jewish, and always

³ Anita Brenner, *The Wind That Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1942*. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1996), 624.

⁴ Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 27.

knew that she was different from the children she went to school with in Mexico, specifically because of her religion. When she moved to San Antonio, she continued to feel out of place, even at the synagogue, Brenner felt just as foreign as to the children in her new public school. In her college years Brenner first attended Our Lady of the Lake in San Antonio, however quickly left to attend the University of Texas at Austin to pursue her interest in writing. It was only after one year of attending UT that Brenner packed up and decided to move to Mexico⁵.

Brenner returned to Mexico in 1923 at age eighteen, where she remained until 1927, and it was then that her interest in writing about Mexican culture first began to develop. She found herself in Mexico at a time of cultural reconstruction and at the golden age of Mexican muralism, where she befriended people that would influence the trajectory of her career. Brenner was first introduced to the circle of intellectuals, a group of people, which she would later endearingly refer to as '*La Familia*'⁶, in Mexico through a letter of introduction. This letter was written for her at the request of her father, by her local Rabbi Frisch and given to Dr. J. L. Weinberger, who headed the B'nai B'rith office in Mexico City and was married to Frances Toor⁷, a member of this aforementioned group. Brenner worked to support herself at this time, and it was also during this period that she published her first article in the U.S. discussing Mexico. "The Jew in Mexico," was published in *The National* in 1924 and was meant to be "a response to US criticism

⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁶ *La Familia* was the name that Brenner gave to her extended family, which she made while living in Mexico city. The names of the people in Anita's extended family read like a biographical dictionary of intellectuals and artists active in Mexico in the twenties. They were friends who helped one another, clashed occasionally over politics or relationships, collaborated and competed while struggling to survive economically. Ibid., 44.

⁷ Ibid., 33.

of Mexico as an inappropriate place for Jews to settle.”⁸ She argued that Mexico was an appropriate place for Jewish immigrants to settle, despite a tension that was perceived in the U.S. & Jewish communities from the perils of the revolution. Brenner and her advocacy for Mexico in the Jewish community is a vast project that could be developed into a thesis topic of its own, however here, her early foray into journalism is mentioned to address Brenner’s initial interest in Mexico and the role that she executed throughout the twenties: that of translator of the Mexican situation to US audiences.

In everything she wrote, Brenner presented Mexico enthusiastically, describing the lifestyle of European Jews and the community’s social and cultural events and economic activities, effectively countering the bad press and image that had been created of Mexico in the United States⁹. Mexico had received bad publicity and reputation from the bloody revolution that was circulated by the news media, as Indyck-Lopez writes. In supporting the argument of this negative idea that was created of Mexico because of the revolution, Indyck-Lopez states how “other forms of imagery focused specifically on bloody battles and violence from US war photographers that were on assignment from newspapers, [...] Images of fighting found their way into popular picture postcards representing apparently arbitrary violence in Mexico. These blatantly propagandistic

⁸ Ibid., 34-35.

⁹ “During the entire period of the armed struggle, Mexico’s northern border remained open. Maintaining good relations between Mexico and the United States remained a pragmatic concern for both countries: the revolutionaries depended economically on exports to the United States, and U.S. business interests feared a nationalized Mexican economy. Reacting to the upheaval of the Revolution, U.S. officials and private interests attempted to shape the course of the civil war throughout the decade. With contradictory reports from the south and stories of banditos and savage violence, the predominant image of Mexico during the second decade of the twentieth century was of a ‘backward’ nation, a land without laws.” Anna Indyck-Lopez, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros in the United States 1927 – 1940*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 14.

images, meant to justify the United States' increasingly militaristic stance toward Mexico, fueled nationalism north of the border and perpetuated the stereotype of Mexicans as violent bandits.”¹⁰ These images were taken in a form to sway public opinion in the US and to justify the military action that the United States was taking, especially because of the economic interest that inhabited Mexican borders. It was for this reason that Brenner constantly strived to portray Mexico in a positive light within the US audience, and chose to do so through art.

During this period while Brenner lived in Mexico, she developed her writing style and voice as a journalist, focused on working, and developed her professional and social life. In her professional life, she was working as translator, writing articles for American newspapers, such as *The Nation* and *The Menorah Journal*, and was investigating and putting research together for Ernest Gruening – who had hired her for his latest book on Mexico. Parallel to her professional development came her social life, which consisted of an intellectual and bohemian environment in the mid to late 1920s Mexico. Brenner's personal journals have been recently published by the efforts of her daughter, Susannah Glusker, which not only contain her writings but also reproduced images of her personal collection of art works and photographs. Her personal journals are a clear testament and insight to her thoughts that create access to the way in which she interpreted the world, and Glusker writes of how the content in the journals matures and evolves alongside Brenner.

She had become known as a journalist in the United States for the aforementioned representation of Mexico in a positive light, and also because of her transcultural status,

¹⁰ Ibid., 34.

she was capable to stress a Mexican point of view that appealed to a US audience.

Brenner was bilingual and binational, key features that gave her the capacity to understand the United States and Mexico, both linguistically and culturally. She was one of two journalists who consistently depicted Mexico positively in the New York Times (the other being Paul Kennedy)¹¹. Her position was that of an independent liberal that defended workers, the disenfranchised, or those who were treated unjustly, in ways that were clearly in line with the rhetoric of the Mexican revolutionary ideals. This position is mostly seen in her writings about Mexico, Mexican arts, as well as when she wrote about the Jewish peoples.

Brenner was not alone in her belief in the ideals for the Mexican Revolution among foreign intellectuals describing the Mexican scene. There are multiple figures that influence the work and writings of Anita Brenner, especially during her time in Mexico, which was from 1923 to 1927. Two important role models were Carleton Beals and Ernest Gruening - Beals helped her in publishing and Gruening became her mentor while she worked for him as a research assistant in Mexico.¹² For Gruening, Brenner “did the legwork for him in Mexico... She clipped newspapers, read, scouted political information from records at the Department of Interior, took him to meet key figures in the artistic world, etc...”¹³ Doctor Ernest Gruening was an American writer and journalist, and a frequent contributor to *The Nation* in New York, where Brenner also later become a contributor, and the research and investigations that Anita Brenner did for him ended up in his book *Mexico and its Heritage* (1926).

¹¹ Glusker. *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 13. (Sergio Aguayo’s dissertation on *New York Times* reporting on Mexico mentions Brenner and Paul Kennedy)

¹² Ibid., 40.

¹³ Ibid.

Brenner was closely allied to key Mexican cultural figures, especially Manuel Gamio, one of Mexico's founding anthropologists. Brenner would in fact endearingly refer to Gamio as "el padre de la antropología Mexicana,"¹⁴ and Gamio's ideals contributed to her research interest and influences through his work at the archaeological site of Teotihuacan and elsewhere in the environs of Mexico City. Anita Brenner was eventually to do archaeological work under his aegis, while also translating and editing for him. Gamio was also concerned with the *indigenista*¹⁵ effort, in which the role of the indigenous person in Mexican society had great prominence. His influence is crucial to the writing developments of Brenner because Gamio's idea of the survival of indigenous art throughout time and its purity in essence to describe Mexican culture is central to *Idols Behind Altars*, which will be addressed in the section that reviews the book. It could also be argued that at this time of the formation of a cultural nationalism in Mexico, Mexican anthropology was utilized as a form of advocacy for the indigenous presence in the Mexican peoples.

However, *Idols*' inception could arguably be tracked to a catalogue of Mexican art that was commissioned by Alfonso Pruneda, the director of Mexico's University,

¹⁴ Alicia Azuela, *Anita Brenner: Vision of an Age/Vision de Una Epoca*, ed. Nadia Ugalde Gomez (Mexico City: Editorial RM Mexico, 2007), 76.

¹⁵ "Three characteristics distinguish modern Mexican *indigenismo*... First, *indigenismo* became a central pillar of state policy and was considered an instrument to achieve massive transformations in Mexican society: the socioeconomic modernization of Mexico and the construction of a unified national identity. Mexican *indigenismo* was therefore a state-sponsored, integrationist, assimilationist, and developmentalist endeavor. Second, anthropology took the leading role in these undertakings. Third, for the first half of the 20th century Mexican *indigenismo* was guided by, indeed subservient to, the ideology of *mestizaje*, which oriented all *indigenista* action." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, s.v. "Indigenismo," accessed May 10, 2018, 7.
<http://latinamericanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-68>

which will be discussed further later. It is Brenner's journals that give more personal insight into the struggle that Brenner went through to create and give fruition to *Idols Behind Altars*, such as how it was originally a project of two separate books: one dedicated to the arts of Mexico (as the catalogue mentioned above) and the other to transcribing the Mexican Renaissance. It was also these beginning stages of the two books that refer to a Mexican cultural space that Brenner navigated and was exposed to while she worked for Gruening and while she searched for content for the Mexican Arts catalogue. Alicia Azuela writes about this experience that Brenner had while working for Gruening saying: "Iba de conventos y centros artesanales en Michoacan, a ruinas y fabricas en la Ciudad de Mexico. Esta serie de experiencias de trabajo, aunada a su convivencia con el medio artistico, la animo a escribir un libro sobre arte mexicano,"¹⁶ ("She went from convents and artisanal markets in Michocacan, to ruins and factories in Mexico City. This series of experiences as part of her job contributed to her exposure with the artistic environment of Mexico, and inspired her to write a book on Mexican art.") It is then thanks to her journals that there is an exposure to her need and want to create this fundamental text on Mexican art and cultural space. Glusker dedicates a chapter that summarizes these struggles.

Anita Brenner was twenty-four when she published *Idols*, and although it was an ultimate struggle for her to combine the original concept of the two texts into one, (*Mexican Decorative Arts* and *The Mexican Renaissance*) it was a non- traditional success in academic writing. Mexican Decorative Arts was the catalogue that Alfonso Pruneda had idealized and commissioned Brenner to work on, while the Mexican Renaissance

¹⁶ Azuela, *Anita Brenner: Vision de una epoca*, 67.

book was the text that Brenner came up with while researching the catalogue and working for Gruening. *Idols Behind Altars* was conceived and executed with the help and direction of both Mexican and American intelligentsia. Brenner was commissioned to write this original catalogue with the support of UNAM, The National University of Mexico, under the supervision of Dr. Alfonso Pruneda. Pruneda was named director of UNAM in 1924 by Presidente Calles¹⁷ and as such worked to promote nationalism and culture in Mexico during his time as director. While negotiating funds for photographs and writing drafts for the books - one which was a catalogue of Mexican decorative arts and the second the story of the Mexican Renaissance, she realized the expenses of the books. The original decorative arts manuscript included four hundred Weston and Modotti images, which was too expensive to publish, and then decided on combining both books into one with fewer photographs. It was published three year later as *Idols Behind Altars*.¹⁸

This original idea of two books became too complex and too expensive - books on Mexico were not considered commercial and Brenner originally wanted to utilize four hundred prints by Weston and Modotti. Glusker notes these struggles and writes that “the

¹⁷ “El Presidente Calles, apenas llegado al poder en 1924, y con una política de acercamiento a los obreros y campesinos, nombra a Alfonso Pruneda rector de la universidad Nacional para el periodo del 30 de diciembre de 1924 al 30 de noviembre de 1928. Una de sus principales acciones en este cargo fue cohesionar las escuelas nacionales que conformaron la Universidad mediante un primer intento de regulación general de diversos aspectos académico-administrativos, pues diversas circunstancias habían hecho que funcionaran de manera un tanto dispersa e independiente.” “Alfonso Pruneda Garcia,” Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, last modified 2001, accessed May 10, 2018, <https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/1/254/48.pdf>

¹⁸ Anita Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art & Artists in Mexico: Anita Brenner's Journals of the Roaring Twenties*, ed. Susannah Joel Glusker. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2010), 35.

hypothesis of the book (or rather the thesis) was woven into the text without identifying any methodology. The book was a product of her journalistic activity, as opposed to her concurrent academic world of anthropology.”¹⁹ This statement is meant to illustrate the lack of traditional scholarly training with which Brenner wrote *Idols*, while acknowledging her background.

Glusker, usually an enthusiastic supporter of her mother’s life and work, acknowledges the lack of academic rigor in the presentation of the book, such as the lack of a introductory thesis as well as the missing footnotes. Later in the thesis I will be examining the contemporary criticism more closely, but for now it is important to point out that the hybrid quality of the document – a journalistic exercise in a deep reading of visual culture, is apparent at the time. To counter the lack of scholarly seriousness, Glusker argues for its multidisciplinary treatment of the Mexican culture, something perhaps easier for a journalist to do. Glusker also argues that *Idols Behind Altars* is a book about the Mexican Revolution, although that might not be the first impression. It is important to note, in accordance with Glusker, that “the focus of *Idols* is the Mexican Revolution [...] Anita identified with artists and intellectuals in the twenties for whom art was a part of the revolution. Once the armed conflict was over, intellectuals went to work helping to rebuild the country.”²⁰ This idea is especially important in understanding the nationalist identity that was being constructed after the revolution in Mexico, alongside its politics, government and intellectuals.

The content of the book, which will be examined later in this thesis, is the artistic trajectory of the Mexican peoples and how the effects of the revolution contributed

¹⁹ Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

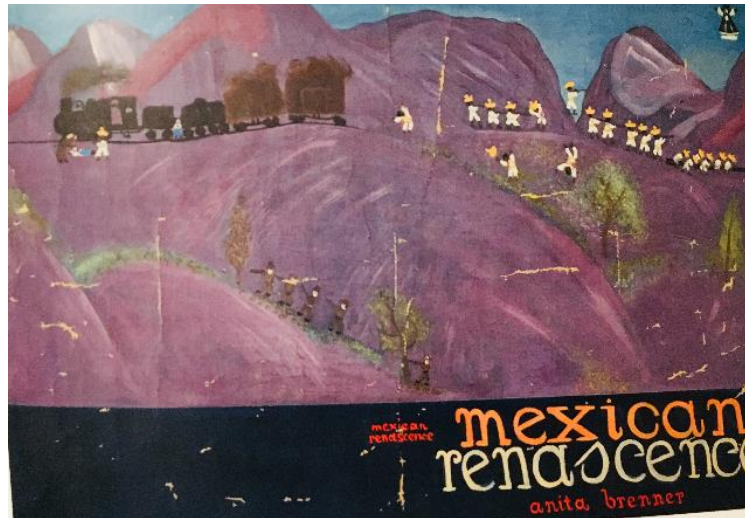
greatly to this artistic development and rebirth. However, one aspect of the book is clear - it was written for foreign readers, for the US audience. She presents everything that makes up Mexico, its customs, traditions, peoples, and politics, with a personal touch, combining anecdotes with quotations from historical sources and ballads to get her message across.²¹ With this book, Brenner wanted to accomplish a transnational cultural conversation that established Mexico within the narrative of the Eurocentric tradition of the art world. This book is important because of its role in describing the Mexican culture to a foreign audience. It was a successful book in the United States, as we will later see with the contemporary reviews, where around one hundred and twenty copies were printed from October 1929 to 1930.²² Scholars have acknowledged the book's success due to the subject, the richness of information, and the easily enjoyable accessibility of its style with photograph and text,²³ and especially because of its never before seen content published in a foreign setting.

²¹ Ibid., 99.

²² Azuela, *Anita Brenner: Vision de una Epoca*, 87.

²³ “Muchos de sus criticos valoraro que explicara por primera vez el movimiento artistico mas importante en el arte occidental de la epoca. Pero sobre todo, que deformando los hechos presentara al Renacimiento Mexicano como algo vivo, cuando el despotico regimen callista habia terminado con el.” Ibid., 87.

Figure 1.2: Jean Charlot, Original dust jacket illustration for *Mexican Renaissance*, c. 1928, oil on canvas



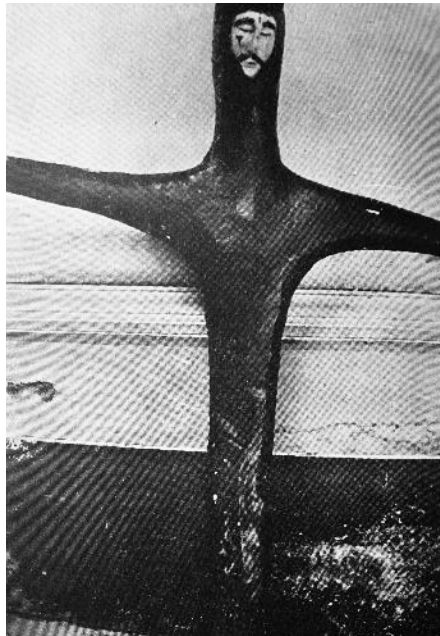
Idols Behind Altars

Idols Behind Altars was one of the first post-revolutionary books on the subject of Mexican culture published in the United States. Aside from *The Plumed Serpent*, written by D. H. Lawrence and published in 1926, the United States audience's real cultural knowledge of the country came from the journalistic media and the reports made on the revolution, which most of the time depicted Mexico as an underdeveloped, dangerous, and violent country²⁴. *Idols Behind Altars* is a modernist text about the Mexican culture and beliefs from a teleological perspective, where Brenner intertwines the history of art with the folklore of ancient Mexico, alongside its development as a country – from its inception, to the conquest, to the revolution and to modern times, and parallels these efforts to art in the nation. She refers to these developments in three separate cycles in the artistic development of the Mexican people, the pre-colonial, the colonial, and the

²⁴ Previously addressed in this thesis, page 7 / Indyck-Lopez, *Muralism without Walls*, 34.

contemporary.

Figure 1.3: Edward Weston, *Our Lord of the Tree*, Michoacan, c. 1926, gelatin silver print



Brenner chose to document and narrate the way in which intellectuals of the country aided in rebuilding and constructing this era of the Mexican Renaissance, while also attempting to describe an artistic culture and its roots in history. *Idols* is dedicated to the understanding of this period of Mexican rebirth of culture through its artistic production, myths and folklore, popular and modern art. Above all else, and as previously mentioned, it must be understood that this book was published for a foreign audience. This is vital to its understanding as a text because it was arguably the first book that attempted to describe the Mexican culture, and this moment of the Mexican

Renaissance, both artistically and non artistically, to the United States. It is considered a central text that serves in understanding Mexican art alongside the sensibilities and ideals of an era.

The title of the book, *Idols Behind Altars* refers to the literal idols from the indigenous culture that were built upon or added on to after the conquest occurred. The basic thesis of the book may be found in the title, where we find that the “idols” are the elements of Pre-Columbian symbolism and belief, while the “altars” are the overlay of European Christian-derived art. The spatial relation, the idols are behind the altars, suggests that the pre-Columbian worldview serves as the deep structure for Mexican creativity and their structural identity. This can also be interpreted as a certain grafting of pre-reformation Catholicism on to the indigenous beliefs that already existed. Susannah Glusker writes about the book: “the Mexican people did not replace their religious and social concepts; they simply added the new onto the old. They modified rituals and practices in the presence of Spaniards.”²⁵ This quote exemplifies the idea of the title, that the Mexican people and culture is a mixture of beliefs that came with the conquest and of those that remained despite the conquest. In fact, the title of the book can actually be traced to Manuel Gamio’s text *La poblacion del Valle de Teotihacan* (1922) where he refers to this indigenous cultural survival within social oppressive circumstances that provoked and created an overlapping of culture, which Gamio synthesized and labeled this process as “idolos tras los altares.”²⁶ Brenner then throughout her text cultivates the idea of a true cultural mestizaje by interpreting and analyzing popular and folk art, because it is there where the originality and artistic traditions of the indigenous is

²⁵ Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 99.

²⁶ Azuela, *Anita Brenner: Vision de Una Epoca*, 77.

conserved and visible.

This merging of two cultures is what Brenner argues creates the modern Mexican, and in *Idols*, art is the conductive thread that links and explains this series of elements of this cultural development that make up the life and the *ser* (being) of the Mexican. In figure 1.3, for example, we are presented with a photograph that speaks to this merging of beliefs in a simple, handmade cross. The black and white photograph is a Christ figure's face delicately carved on to a wooden surface, and this wooden surface is shaped into a cross. The darkness of the wood creates a deep contrast with the white of the face utilized for the Christ, and there are grooves that can be seen in the photograph that emerge from the woodwork, retaining some of its origin. The dark wooded anthropomorphic cross is delicately propped up against a white wall, which three quarters of the way down is painted a dark color, very similar to the color of the wooden Christ. Brenner writes about this piece stating that this figure was well known as a miraculous object because it emerged unscathed from a fire, which consumed the church in which it was enshrined. Brenner also writes that there is a "striking primary resemblance in the geometric construction to be found also in pre- Spanish works,"²⁷ directly addressing the merging of these two belief systems. Although this object serves a religious purpose, it is still viewed as folk art in terms of production.

²⁷ Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, 340.

Figure 1.4: Edward Weston, *Ritual Dancer from Oaxaca*, 1926, gelatin silver print, 8 11/16 x 6 in.



The merging of these two cultures is the modern Mexican that exists today. Brenner writes about this merging when the Spanish missionaries came to New Spain initiated this process of transforming Mexico with Catholicism, which they believed to be a civilizing technique, and would place churches on sites where pyramids and temples stood. Another popular example of this fusion (figure 1.4) that can still be seen in today's Mexican culture, which is La Virgen de Guadalupe, sometimes known as *La Virgen Morena*, or "dark madonna." Brenner dedicates a section of *Idols Behind Altars* to "The Dark Madonna," in which she discusses the importance of religion within the Mexican culture, discussing its roots and the role of the church, after the conquest, in Mexico. In

addressing this merging of the two belief systems, Susannah Glusker writes that “the Shrine to Guadalupe is on the site where Our Mother Tonantzin was worshiped. Guadalupe is honored on December 12th, close to the date when indigenous people of Mexico paid homage to Our Mother.”²⁸ This statement is meant to establish the proximity and closeness shared by the two belief systems that was the result of them merging into one, as well as how the ancient native indigenous cultures dealt with having to adapt to the effects of the conquest. Brenner states in this chapter how even owning an idol after the conquest made a native liable to severe punishment, or even to exile to Inquisition prisons in Spain and because of this “[they] hid the gods in habitual private places,”²⁹ such as trees, underneath floorboards, and sometimes in plain sight – behind altars where idols were adapted and molded to resemble those of the New World’s religion.

In accordance with Brenner, it is for this reason, the merging of two cultures and two belief systems, that art is such a vital part of the Mexican culture, especially in reference to folk art. Art has been present since pre-conquest era, and is documented through murals and codices as part of the Aztec culture, and throughout the book, there is an emphasis and a link in art as being central to the lives of ancient and current Mexicans – as it serves as one of the main vehicles of education and communication.

In supporting this argument, an example is in an article that Brenner wrote for *L’Art Vivant* in 1926, where she describes the process by which indigenous Mexicans produced Christian images. She argues that this work was done with the same dedication that they devoted to their idols. It did not interfere with the production of idols, which were placed discreetly on altars built by Christian conquerors at the sites of pyramids.

²⁸ Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 101.

²⁹ Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, 136.

Brenner, in addressing this process, states: “the idols, though melted back from priestly plastic formulae into the elasticity of the primitive, are the passive resistance of an old faith.”³⁰ In other words, the belief structure that remains from indigenous times, that resisted the colonizing technique of the new religion, prevails through the adaptation of idols. The indigenous religious beliefs have been embedded into the cultural beliefs through a manner of passive resistance, or a type of compromise.

The narrative of *Idols Behind Altars* is divided into three parts, each based on a critical theme through which Brenner analyzes Mexican art production and culture. Brenner places a personal touch to her writing throughout the book, one that combines anecdotes and quotations from historical sources as well as Mexican ballads. An important aspect of the narrative technique is Brenner’s prose and rhetoric, her writing style is avidly different and persuasive, which in turn envelops the reader into a constructed interpretation of Mexico. It is also important to point out that although the book is organized in a chronological manner, there is a certain flirtation that Brenner creates with the past and present, where she interplays between both (her present being 1926). This can be viewed as important because it interlinks the past and present in a way that gives a clear interpretation of the both times, and is referring to the art production without the limit of time and space.

Part one is dedicated to the myths and legends that make up pre-colonial era of Mexico’s native peoples and their civilizations. The early chapters deal with pre-Spanish cultures and focus on three major themes: land, art and religion, where she describes the understanding of Mexican culture that the indigenous peoples of Mexico were part of the

³⁰ Anita Brenner, “The Living Art of the Mexican Primitives,” *L’Art Vivant*, 1926.

land.³¹ She opens up with an in-depth description of indigenous Mexican cultures, such as Maya and Aztec, in which she sets up this return to Mexican roots. Part one is divided into four chapters: *Mexican Messiah*, which basically addresses the artist as the Messiah of Mexico because he(she) is the infinite artist and creator. Brenner writes about this artistic Geist, stating that “Mexico has a messiah who dies, yet always lives; who has so many names and forms that he is never graspable in one; who has humility and strength, who kills and heals, blasts and kindles, suffers and rejoices.”³² This ever-present zeitgeist the Brenner is referring to is the presence and existence of the artist in Mexico, one which has existed throughout the ages and will continue to produce and interpret its culture through the production of art. Chapter two: *The Pyramid Planters* tells of pre-Spanish traditions and customs, culture and the civilization, the importance of the temple in the society, as well as beliefs. About this time period, Brenner writes: “All things were constantly reborn, a viewpoint that was at the core of the Aztec beliefs, and the main desire to live, to make life was closely bound up with the crops.”³³ This statement is meant to highlight the indigenous beliefs, which might be seen later on in the book when she discusses the modern Indian. Chapter three: *The White Redeemers*, includes the colonial system in the guise of the ‘white redeemers,’ and by this term Brenner means to label the Spanish colonial forces during the conquest. This reader found this specific chapter difficult to get through with the tales of the conquest and pain inflicted on the Indians of Mexico, however understand the necessity to tell the violent story to gain the native perspective. Chapter four: *Churrigueresque* is dedicated to telling the story of New

³¹ Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 99.

³² Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

Spain and its repercussions, its artistic development as well as architectural influences that developed with this merging of Spanish and Indian cultures. For example, Brenner addresses this beginning of merging of cultures and the lifestyle in New Spain by mentioning how “instead of soldiers, there now came merchants and adventurers...”³⁴ as a way of describing how New Spain was being transformed and viewed as a land of conquest to a land of opportunity for Europeans.

Part two of *Idols Behind Altars* analyzes this fusion of indigenous and Spanish art, and follows the previously mentioned themes of land, art, and religion. Brenner identifies key elements of pre-Spanish culture found in street murals and retables, specifically as an analysis of the presence of folk art. She then analyzes the blending of Christian and pre-Spanish art, using examples such as the styles of crosses, crucifixes and saints.³⁵ This section discusses the interpretation of the native and how their culture prevailed despite white colonial influences and enforcements. Folk art is the perfect example for Brenner in which the embodiment of the indigenous is prevalent. The resistance that Brenner argues for, which was previously mentioned in her *L'art Vivant* article from 1926, is key to the thesis of the entire book, the pre-colonial Mexican heritage is kept alive through this process. Throughout the whole book the reader is presented with the tale and folklore of the natives of Mexico, the Aztecs and Mayans that have been able to prevail and to keep traditions alive, despite hardships, and most especially through art.

Brenner's intent research, focus, and presentation on folk and modern art creates the notion and argument that it is because of the Mexican craft, and folk art, that the

³⁴ Ibid., 82.

³⁵ Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 101.

Mexican culture has prevailed. The importance that Brenner places on folk art is paramount and will be looked at more closely later in this thesis. She is able to create a whole new understanding for the creation and interpretation of Mexican art, just by her accompanying text for the US audience. When discussing the resistance of European culture during the colonial period, there is a special focus on folk art, and the art produced by all types of artists in rural areas of Mexico.

There is a need for visual expression in the Mexican culture that was born out of Mexico's historical development, (i.e., the making of art appears to be a form in which the Mexican native managed to cope with its history) and it is expressed artistically everyday in Mexico - whether it be through pottery, street murals, masks, or toys. Following the discussion of folk art, Brenner continues to investigate the resistance to European domination by looking at the influence of religion in the Colonial period. Brenner then dedicates a chapter to Posada, and his influential work, which helped inspire a national artwork that focused on the access to art to all peoples, and here Posada becomes a linchpin artistic figure.

The third part of the book is introduced with an overview of Mexican artists and their philosophical positions, focusing specifically on the Mexican Revolution and its effects on art production in Mexico. The Revolutionary section is introduced with a chapter called inventory, one that briefly discusses the revolution and its effect on specific artists as well as on the production of art as a whole in a nation that responded to the revolution with art. The next section of the revolutionary introduces and discusses the syndicate of painters and sculptors, and the following chapters are each dedicated to one specific artist, who Brenner believes are driving this cultural movement through art. The

final section, Revolution and renaissance, is meant to summarize and claim this movement as one of major importance in Mexico, and not only in art, but to be viewed as a sociopolitical movement that was to be felt throughout the world. The movement embodied a radical cultural transformation through politics and was supported through nationalistic art. There was an attempt to erase the old concept of government, one that was bourgeoisie and attempted to mimic a Eurocentric lifestyle, and in its place a promotion of an independent and national identity emerged. This national identity was one which embraced and supported the indigenous roots and cultures, and was also a political move by the new government to create an inclusion of all the people of Mexico, not just the elite. The use of art during this time was highly politicized and supported by the government in aiding to create this national identity.

Section 2: Idols Behind Altars - Contemporary Reception, Scholarship, & Folk Art

This section of the thesis focuses on building an understanding of the way in which *Idols Behind Altars* was received in the United States around the time of its publication. By surveying the contemporary reviews, and in creating a collective interpretation, we approach the way *Idols* was received by the contemporary art and literary worlds, especially in the U.S. Critics agree that *Idols* provided a very unique insight to Mexican culture by addressing the mythology that is embedded in the culture as well as providing photographic references as a narrative tool. Not only is this visible in the written content of the book, but also because of the photographs that were utilized to support the narrative. These photographs provide a wholesome and interpretive analysis that accompanies the text, as well as a direct visual understanding of the art that Brenner included in her book, specifically looking at folk art.

I have placed together various book reviews that were published throughout the United States in an attempt to understand the reception of the book. Most all of the reviews are in agreement when reviewing *Idols Behind Altars* as groundbreaking, interesting, and informative both in terms of textual and visual content. In producing a brief historiography on the scholarship that surrounds *Idols Behinds Altars*, I address its importance as a multidisciplinary text. Utilizing the work of previous scholars, such as Delpar, Tenorio-Trillo, Oles, and Indyck-Lopez, the latter is referred more to in Chapter 3, aids in addressing this relationship of the imagery in *Idols* to the emerging visual construction of post-revolutionary Mexico for a US audience.

Since the inception of *Idols*, when it was originally two separate books, Brenner

was clear about one thing, the photography that was to be used would make the book. It was crucial to include photography alongside the text of Mexican culture in order to create a visual connection with her prose. Brenner strongly believed that the success of the book was in the use of photography with text, especially with the photographs taken by the two photographers that she so admired as artists. Because she knew Weston socially, and admired him deeply as an artist, Brenner was able to hire him and Tina Modotti on commission as photographers for her project. Brenner felt that the involvement of Weston as photographer was crucial to the success of the book “because it would be the images of Mexican Art that would make the catalogue of Mexican decorative arts.”³⁶ It is for this purpose that some of the photographs from *Idols* are analyzed in this thesis, to support my argument that these images create a specific kind of direct access to the visual culture of Mexico. These photographs aided in constructing the Mexican artistic identity in the early 20th century. The importance of the photographs can be analyzed in Brenner’s personal journals, specifically on an entry from August 27th 1926, Brenner writes down a comment from Frances Toor: “Edward [Weston] brought some marvelous photographs – You’ll have a wonderful book, no matter what the text is.”³⁷ This statement exemplifies Brenner’s belief about the photographs necessity as part of the book. Brenner knew that they were excellent photographs, however they were mostly important because of the content they displayed. Brenner was very keen on being the first on publishing these images of Mexico and its arts and culture in the United States.

³⁶ Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 89.

³⁷ Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art & Artists in Mexico: Anita Brenner’s Journals of the Roaring Twenties*, 229.

Figure 2.1: Contemporary Review by R.L. Duffus for *The New York Times*, 1929. Includes reproduction of Francisco Goitia's *Portrait*, Jean Charlot's *Workman*, and Carlos Merida's *Women of Metepec*.



Contemporary Reviews

In creating the argument about the importance of this work by Brenner within the United States as a form of visual access to a country that had been labeled as dangerous, I have placed together various book reviews that were published throughout the United States in an attempt to understand the reception of the book. The previous media reviews that were mentioned during the revolution referred negatively to Mexico, however there was also an exotic perspective that had been created, a sense of other(ness) and foreign(ness).

In one of the earliest reviews from January 12, 1930 from the Knoxville, Tennessee Journal, G.B. Winton writes praises about the content of the book. Winton begins by stating how “this book is, in one respect, of a kind of which there should be

others, and will be, I trust - many.”³⁸ This statement alone references the lack of information that there had been in regards to the understanding of the culture in Mexico, and Winton later continues about how Brenner successfully interprets Mexican culture through art. Winton continues: “Even better is the author’s study of the Mexican human being, more penetrating and more revealing than can elsewhere be found. The reader feels his way, a bit haltingly, it may be, into the brooding, vital, enduring, understanding, silent quality of this potent race. The sturdy brown man, so close to the brown earth, of which he is as conscious as if it were a part of himself, so content with his own ways, so docile and yet so unyielding, so vital yet utterly careless of death, so sad but ever cheerful, so stolid yet so near to wild furies of laughter and blood, has it seems to me, in no other writing made so real, so credible.”³⁹ Winton stresses that Brenner treats Mexican culture as whole, and identifies that whole with “sturdy brown man” – the indigenous or mestizo (mixed-race) farmer. Further, Winton points out two stereotypical characterizations of these people that Brenner does little to deflect: docility accompanied by a fearlessness and violence. Winton’s “wild furies” brings this home. Thus in some ways Brenner’s book does little to change the preconception of Mexico as a wild and violent place. On other hand, as we will see, the deep history of the Mexican being is being unearthed and valued, and that will inflect the stereotyped primitivist leanings already present in the US.

A New York Times review by R.L. Duffus praises *Idols* as a book that gives insight into what makes up the culture and thoughts of a Mexican everyman, but also

³⁸ G.B. Winton, “The Rebirth of Mexican Art Under the Modern Regime,” *Knoxville, Tennessee Journal*, January 12, 1930, Book review section.

³⁹ Ibid.

points to Brenner's historical thesis on the everpresent pre-Columbian past. Directly addressing the title and thesis of the book, Duffus writes: "The substance of her conclusion is that the Mexican, under his superimposed European culture – and usually not very far under it – remains Aztec. The idol is always behind the altar."⁴⁰ This clipping is significantly important because of its inclusion of photography from the book itself. In figure 2.1 two photographs are reproduced front and center, first is Francisco Goitia's *Untitled Portrait* in Oil, accompanied on the upper right corner by Jean Charlot's workman from Chichen-Itza (not pictured is also a painting of Carlos Merida, *Women of Metepec*, in the lower left corner). The reproduction of these images and the access they had due to newspapers circulation also contributed to the construction of the Mexican artistic identity, simply with being reproduced.

Another review, written by Wilbur Needham on April 5 1930, does what other art historians had begun to do as well - which was the comparison of the great Mexican civilization with that of the euro-centric tradition. In this way, Needham realizes that Brenner's thesis on the presence of the pre-Columbian may be applied to specific works of art, whether it be folk or other. Needham mentions that this book created an understanding for the public about how art is so deeply fused with everyday Mexican activity, however to understand this, it must be traced back to the very first civilizations that inhabited the region. "Archaic Mexican sculpture dates back 2000 years; the first Maya empire was flourishing contemporary with Christ. Also, it was an empire that embodied a civilization. It was self-sufficient, based on agriculture, and was progressive in the arts, sciences and philosophy. Their calendar was accurate, while in the same

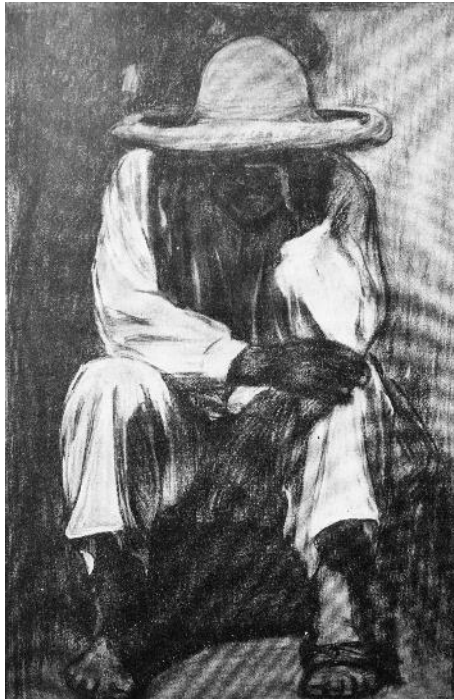
⁴⁰ R.L. Duffus, "Mexico's Art Explains the Mexicans," *New York Times*, October, 1929, Book review section.

period, the one in the old world was not. The fusion with the spirited Aztecs gave the Maya culture fresh impulse. Every man had a trade, all working collectively for progress. A great artist's work might be acclaimed, but the artist himself was anonymous. Where else, outside of Plato's State and Royce's Community has such a culture existed?"⁴¹ This quote exemplifies the way in which the book was received, it opened a perspective on the Mexican ancient indigenous cultures that were overlooked, especially when compared to the Eurocentric narrative. This contributes to this thesis in the construction of the Mexican identity, especially in the way the U.S. audience was interpreting this culture through art.

The rest of the review written by Needham also praises *Idols Behind Altars*, discussing the importance of the art in the life of the Mexican peoples and the lack of validity and recognition that it has seen within the United States, as well as the authenticity that can be felt through the writing of Anita Brenner and her personal experience with Mexico. However, the aforementioned specific passage stands out in the sense that this reviewer is directly linking the great indigenous civilizations of Mexico to those that have been the groundwork for the understanding of art in 1930.

⁴¹ Wilbur Needham, "Books," *Saturday Night*, April 5, 1930, Book review section.

Figure 2.2: Francisco Goitia, *Sad Indian*, oil on canvas, c.1925



In another review, *The Woodstock Bulletin*, for example, written by Wilson O. Clough, focuses mostly on the illustrations utilized by Brenner within her book. The short review is entitled “Ancient Aztec in Modern Art,” and focuses largely of the indigenous art that has prevailed through the years and its presence is visible within the contemporary art work. O. Clough writes: “Miss Brenner’s thesis is that under Mexico’s turbulent history is the stubborn loyalty of the masses to native impulses, imperfectly envisioned and clumsily affirmed, confused and primitive, but undeniably present. And it is these currents which will determine the future of the country, a future patterned neither

after old world Spain nor the colossus to the north.”⁴² This short passage is filled with a certain perception of what Mexico and its peoples were perceived as, and the author’s lexicon speaks to this (*i.a., clumsily, confused, primitive*) - although possibly not meant negatively, simply the manner in which it was understood by the author. He also writes “all through their work appear the faces of the natives, faces foreign to European or American painting, faces Aztec, brown, sullen, patient under oppression... In many of these paintings is the fact of the enduring Indian, subdued, resigned, but undefeated and perhaps destined to mould his country’s ultimate history.”⁴³ This passage is unusual in that the author points out a specific image to accompany his writing. Here specifically, he is referencing Francisco Goitia’s *Sad Indian*, which appears in *Idols Behind Altars*, and can be seen in figure 2.2. This painting by Goitia depicts a man, sitting in a crouched position, his knees bent towards his body with his right hand resting on his left knee, and his head hanging low, with his left hand covering it, blocking access to his facial expression. He wears white garments and what resembles a straw hat, maybe hinting at the subject’s livelihood, and he also appears to be barefoot. The figure consists of shading with a bright contrast in the whiteness of the clothing, and this darkness alludes to the emotional state of the figure – one that is sullen and gloomy.

It is exactly this interpretation, although it is but one amongst many, to which this thesis means to support and display. However, the question that comes into play is this: How much do the images that Brenner provides affirm a certain cultural construct that the United States had previously placed on their perception of Mexico, and how much do

⁴² Wilson O. Clough, “Ancient Aztec in Modern Art,” *The Woodstock Bulletin*, August 11, 1930, Book review section.

⁴³ Ibid.

these images create a whole different perception else altogether? In either case, Brenner undeniably aided in constructing the visual imaginary of Mexico in the mind of the US audience.

There are certain similarities within much of what is written in the collected book reviews of *Idols Behind Altars*; some mentioning the fact she was a woman, the fact that Miss Brenner was born in Mexico and it was because of this place of origin that gave her full understanding of the culture and the people. Although these might seem imprudent comments to be made in this day and age, they were seen as something that contributed to someone's personal achievements at the time and seem to be worth mentioning.

There are other reviews, for example, that focus on vastly different content of the book. *The Christian Century*, from Chicago Illinois, for example explores the theme of religion (both within and without the book). Mrs. Alva W. Taylor writes that "for over half a century, Protestants from the United States have labored earnestly to convert to their form of Christianity various groups of Mexicans. A small but significant new social group is the result. But they have been, in the main, unaware of the age-long forms of religious expression which they were trying to supplant. These often took art forms... whatever may be the future place of Protestant American missionaries and social workers in Mexico, this book can be of great service to those who are working there now by shedding still further light upon the background of their task."⁴⁴[quote needs analysis] Taylor refers here to the age-old reason for the study of pre-Columbian religious

⁴⁴ Alva W. Taylor, "The Art of Mexico," *Christian Century*, August 27, 1930, Book review section.

practices: extirpation of the idols. This is one among several uses for this book outside of the art, anthropological, writing and cultural realms.

The Latin American Bookshelf: Brief Reviews of Books Valuable to all Interested in Hispanic America, published a concise, yet informative review of the book and its purposes. It begins with crediting Anita Brenner as being a writer and student of anthropology and folklore, as well as a resident of Mexico, however also mentions how this work fixates on the culture and the people of Mexico. "If you want to know what the Mexican peasant thinks, what his beliefs are, how his pagan-Catholic religion has developed and influenced him, what vestiges of Aztec days still dominate him, what his aspirations, his songs, his tales, his prayers are, you will find it here."⁴⁵ It continues to also discuss the current and modern art that is taking place in Mexico, along with the artists mentioned in the book, however there is a certain focus on the importance of the myths and histories of the Mexican culture that lead up to modern art.

Another important review that has been discussed is the one written by Katherine Anne Porter, which was later published in a collection of her book reviews in the early 1990's. In *American Literature*, James T.F. Tanner states the importance that Katherine Anne Porter had as a literary presence, and of the special connection that she had with Mexico. He writes that she had a vast and lengthy journalistic career and wrote book reviews for such publications as *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, and *New Masses*, amongst many others. Porter was seen as an expert on all things mexican and was often asked to review books on Mexican subjects, and Tanner writes that whether or not she was a Mexican expert, many readers

⁴⁵ "Brief Reviews of Books Valuable to all Interested in Hispanic America," *The Latin-American Bookshelf*, January, 1930.

always found her comments engaging. This is important because of the influence she had on the larger interpretation of Mexico.

The review that Katherine Anne Porter wrote for the Herald Tribune was published on September 29th, 1929 and is entitled “Old Gods and New Messiahs.” Porter beautifully summarizes *Idols Behind Altars* while addressing Brenner’s bold writing style. She discusses the importance of the revolution and its effects on the artistic creation that ensued. “Art occupied no ivory tower, but rolled in the dust of conflicts with local politics, religion and the agrarian question, and came out victorious, for the walls are there, covered with the simple and irrefutable testimony that once, for a short time, a group of extraordinary artists collaborated in producing works of art.”⁴⁶ This statement supports the belief that art was being transformed into something that was being made accessible to everyone in the country, and served as an explanation of why art was so important in this period of the Mexican Renaissance. Interestingly enough, Porter also briefly compares the artists in this period after the Mexican revolution to the Russian revolution, stating how artists at the time were working in obscurity. This statement holds a certain interest in it because of the manner in which muralism flourished in Mexico and the similarities between this style of art and with the social realism art form that developed in Russia around the same time period.

There is a highly important section that Porter writes about in her review, one that Brenner was also trying to emphasize in her writing. She [porter] discusses the important role of the artist in Mexico, how as revolutionists in a socio-political setting they gave a great importance to the art of the Indian in Mexico:

⁴⁶ Katherine Anne Porter, “Old Gods and New Messiah,” *The Herald Tribune*, September 1929, Books section.

The Indian was the only real artist in America, they said, and they proved it by pointing to his serapes, his jugs, his ex-votos, his pulqueria decorations, and his way of living. They discarded awareness for the darker, profounder current of instinct, which when follows faithfully, did not, they believed, betray. They rejected the mechanistic devices for keeping the surfaces of life in motion and plunged boldly to the depths of the “unconscious”... The great renaissance of Indian art was a movement of mestizos and foreigners who found in Mexico, simultaneously, a direction they could take toward extended boundaries. They respected the fruitful silence of the Indian and they shouted for this silence at the top of their lungs.⁴⁷

By they, Porter is referring to those who took part of this cultural renaissance in art, (i.e., Rivera, Siqueiros, Charlot, Vasconcelos, Dr. Atl, Merida, Adolfo Best-Maugard) who were all of mixed blood, some European, some Indian, some Jewish, etc.. Porter concludes the review by mentioning the ineffective way of choosing the contemporary artists that Brenner writes about toward the end of the book, however, stating that overall it is fantastic book about Mexico that should be read, and that it is told by a contemporary eyewitness of this vital period in the history of American art.

There is another interesting and informative review written by Carleton Beals for The Saturday Review of Literature, December 7th 1929. In praising her work and writing, Beals make a direct link with the term “vacilada” that Brenner provides in the book (chapter 8) a term that can be translated into “flirtatious inconsistency”. She defines “vacilada” as “caricature without a moral, a boiling down of cosmic frustration, and a goat’s head on a martyr” - the latter being the title that Beals gives to his review of the book. Beals relates the narrative telling style of Brenner to the way in which D.H. Lawrence writes about the Indian’s thinking curves: “As D.H. Lawrence pointed out in his book of essays on Mexico, the white man hews out his thinking in straight lines

⁴⁷ Ibid.

against the will of the world; the Indian's thinking curves itself to the more complex spirals of nature."⁴⁸ In other words, the Indian's way of viewing the world was more advanced in a way, it was able to adapt and to mold certain viewpoints into one that made sense, when compared to the "white man" that Beals is referring to (possibly the US audience.)

It is unclear from which newspaper this article is from, however the title reads "Mexico Visto de Lejos" and was published on June 2nd, 1930, although it does appear to be an interpreted review by Louis Baudin for a magazine called *Revue de l'Amerique Latine*. The author writes the following about *Idols Behind Altars*, "Louis Baudin en el ultimo número de la "*Revue de l'Amerique Latine*" expresa temores de que el Mexico descrito por Anita Brenner en su libro "*Idols Behind Altars*" no sea el que ella pinta, pudiendo ser que lo haya idealizado y teme que haya alguna exageración en la descripción que va al final de la obra sobre "este país generoso y pobre que resiste al torrente industrializador de los Estados Unidos porque la naturaleza mística de sus habitantes siente más necesidad de belleza que de oro y placeres."⁴⁹ ("This generous but poor country that resists the industrializing torrent of the United States thanks to its mystical thinking of its inhabitants who feel more need for beauty than for gold and pleasures") The author clearly sees danger in the primitivized ideal that Brenner had created in her constructed narrative of the myths and culture of Mexico. This primitivized ideal created by Brenner in her narration could be explored further in a separate thesis subject.

⁴⁸ Carleton Beals, "Goats Head on a Martyr," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, December 7, 1929.

⁴⁹ Rafael Heliodoro Valle, "Mexico visto de lejos," *Revue de l'amerique latine*, June 2, 1930.

In an article published by *El Grafico*, there is a three-page piece written by German Arciniegas. “Una Interpretacion de Mexico” includes three images utilized in *Idols Behind Altars*, all pertaining to the pre-hispanic temple. Arciniegas begins by discussing the history of Mexico by writing about the foundational metaphor that is the prehispanic culture in Mexico: “La colonia española levantó el templo más maravilloso de todas las colonias en la plaza de la ciudad de México, pero abajo la lámpara votiva - llama del amor cristiano que temblaba en medio de la fábrica católica - el antiguo espíritu de los aztecas se expresaba en sus plegarias como en los tiempos de Netzahualcoyotl. La bandera de la independencia exaltó los viejos símbolos, y la serpiente y el nopal y el águila quedaron estampados como un tributo de sinceridad histórica.”⁵⁰ [*The Spanish colony erected the most magnificent temple of all the colonies in the plaza of the city of Mexico, but below remained the votive lamp, whose flame of Christianity trembled in fear of the catholic factory. The ancient spirit of the Aztecs expressed its prayers like in the times of Netzahualcoyotl. The independence flag exhalted the old symbols, and the serpent, the cactus, and the eagle remained as a tribute to its honest history.*] This review is more concerned with the representation of the indigenous and with the way in which Brenner has successfully analyzed the idol beneath the altar, relating it even to the current Mexican flag. This short introduction to the review of the book references the stance and perspective from which the writer is taking part on Brenner’s book, one that supports the indigenous origin and legends. Although Arciniegas supports the book, mostly for the representation of the indigenous, he also mentions an interesting comment towards his conclusion, stating that Brenner’s interpretation on the renaissance is missing perspective.

⁵⁰ German Arciniegas, “Una Interpretacion Plastica de Mexico,” *El Grafico*, 1930, 1699.

“Anita Brenner dice que México vive en continuo renacimiento, pero le faltó agregar que esto ocurre porque continuamente se destruye, porque periódicamente mata a sus héroes, porque sus más bellos ideales han encontrado traidores que los sacrifiquen en los mismos que han querido exaltarlos, porque la muerte anda al acecho de los grandes hombres.”⁵¹[*Anita Brenner says that Mexico lives in a continuous renaissance, however she fails to mention that this continuous renaissance happens because it (Mexico) also continuously destroys itself and kills its heroes, because even its most beautiful ideals have found traitors within those that once exalted them, and because death is ambushing its greatest men.*] This perspective that Arciniegas supplies is one that he believes Brenner is missing in her argument, and he believes that the understanding of why Mexico constantly destroys itself is essential to the Mexican Identity.

Idols Behind Altars & Scholarship

Helen Delpar was one of the first scholars to delve into the general study of the Mexican cosmopolitan season, utilizing Brenner as a main source in her research. Although Helen Delpar references Brenner throughout her book, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (1992), in the fourth chapter Delpar investigates the artistic invasion of Mexican art in the United States, with a specific reference to *Idols Behind Altars*. She begins the chapter with the statement written by Anita Brenner that “nowhere as in Mexico has art been so organically a part of life, at one with the national ends and the national longings, fully the possession of each human unit, always the prime channel for

⁵¹ Ibid., 1700.

the nation and the unit”⁵² This aids in supporting the argument that creates an understanding of why art is so inherently part of the Mexican culture, always present throughout history. Delpar addresses the importance of all forms of Mexican artistic production, however argues that it was the phenomena of muralism that sparked a general interest in the United States.

Delpar utilizes *Idols Behind Altars* as one of the many sources of material for her writing on the specific characteristics of the Mexican art world and art history. She provides a statement written by Jose Juan Tablada, who was another Mexican intellectual and cultural promoter in the early 20th century, who believed that Mexican artists painted without regard to local demand. “A result of the economic pressure felt in Mexico and of the spontaneous appreciation accorded her artists in the United States has been the migration of many of these painters over the border and the creation of their exotic art upon [American] soil.”⁵³ The lack of financial prospects in Mexico seems to have been a large push factor for these artists to look and in some instances even move north. Tablada, whose importance will be explored briefly later in this work, was vital in the reception of Mexican art in the United States, because he also functioned as a major facilitator and promoter of Mexican art and culture.

Delpar also includes a theory by Francis O’Connor in support of her argument as to why the artistic environment in the United States was so receptive to Mexican artists in the early 20th century. O’Connor states that “Mexicans filled a cultural and ideological vacuum (in the US) at a time when there were few recognized artists of stature on the

⁵² Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, 32.

⁵³ Jose Juan Tablada, “Recent Activities in Mexican Art,” *Parnassus*, 1930, 6.

scene.”⁵⁴ That is to say, some of the artists and critics of the United States modern art scene at the time believed that the artwork that was being produced in the US did not contain as much value or significance as when compared to Mexico. Specifically, some US art critics and scholars believed the modernism movement to be a disappointment due to its ties linked with European origins and cosmopolitanism, as well as its seeming superficiality, and thus sought something that originated on American ideals, beliefs, and soil; they sought to create an American art that would depict native subjects with native styles and techniques.⁵⁵ It was for this reason that many scholars, artists, and intellectuals looked to Mexico for inspiration because it offered an example of national art that drew upon indigenous sources for inspiration for themes and forms and was somehow untainted by this modernism. Although this is a very complex situation, academically speaking, attempting to situate why this search for legitimacy through art was so important in both the US and Mexico, it is referenced here briefly to create a brief understanding of the environs. Both the United States and Mexico were in search of, and in the process also creating, a national identity, separate from one that related to the Eurocentric narrative. This could be further investigated in a different thesis paper.

Another scholar, Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, wrote an article for the Latin American Research Review in which he reviews multiple books and sources that encompass The Cosmopolitan Mexican Summer from the years 1920 – 1949, referring to the prevailing

⁵⁴ Francis O’Connor, “The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States During the 1930s and After” in *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, ed. Detroit Institute of Art (New York: Founders Society, Detroit Institute of the Arts with Norton, 1986), 159.

⁵⁵ Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920 – 1935*. (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 127.

style of art. Tenorio Trillo is addressing the origin of this fascination that the United States developed with Mexico, during our period, going over some of the same ground found in Delpar, Tenorio Trillo argues that Mexico in the interwar period was a space that provided a modernist ‘summer’ for a generation of world intellectuals, activists, and artists.⁵⁶ Tenorio Trillo provides a brief yet informative scholarly background to what has previously been written about this subject matter of the Mexican summer,⁵⁷ however argues that the historians in the United States disregard the Mexican perspective in their writings. The author notes that the themes these expatriates pursued with their Mexican colleagues during these years: social revolution, the cultural exhaustion of the West and the rise of primitivism, and the rural population and revolution. Many of these themes are treated from a specific art vantage point in Brenner’s *Idols Behind Altars*, although tracing the impact of that book is not one of Tenorio Trillo’s goals.

In this same review article Tenorio Trillo traces the later scholarly fascination with this period. The author points out that in *Anglia*, a pioneer Mexican journal of US studies, John Brown launched the study of Yankee infatuation with Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s (Brown, 1968). In the field of US intellectual history and American studies, scholars like Richard Pells (1973), Warren Susman (1984) and Thomas Bender (1992) began to offer clues about these outsiders views of Mexico within the larger context of

⁵⁶ Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, “The Cosmopolitan Mexican Summer, 1920-1949,” *Latin American Research Review* 32, no. 3 (1997): 224.

⁵⁷ “This season of examination and experimentation bequeathed an array of views and understandings. In *Anglia*, a pioneer Mexican journal of U.S. studies, John Brown launched the study of Yankee infatuation with Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s (Brown 1968). In the field of U.S. intellectual history and American studies, scholars like Richard Pells (1973), Warren Susman (1984), and Thomas Bender (1992) began to offer clues about these outsiders views of Mexico within the larger context of U.S. cultural history.” *Ibid.*, 230.

US cultural history. This is included in this thesis as a reference point to the scholarly work that has emerged from this period. However, Tenorio Trillo provides the examples of works like Elena Poniatowska's *Tinisima* (1993), and the outbreak of "Fridamania," argues Tenorio Trillo, that this phenomena has recently acquired relevance as a chapter in Mexican history - although according to this same author, information is still lacking in regards to politics, art, social ideas, as well as the international dimension of the phenomena.

Tenorio Trillo mentions Brenner's visible influence in some of the works that he is reviewing. For example in John Britton's *Revolution and Ideology: Images of the Mexican Revolution in the United States* (1995), Tenorio Trillo writes about his delight in learning about the way that Frank Tannenbaum (an American scholar who contributed to Mexican modern history) was perceived by Anita Brenner because Britton had access to Brenner's personal journals - which have since been published (2010) and made accessible to the public.

A suitable manner in which to analyze cultural interaction as globally contested cultural construction, argues Tenorio Trillo, is through the arts. As an example, Tenorio Trillo provides an in depth analysis on *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914 - 1947*, which was an exhibition that took place in New Haven, Connecticut in 1993. The first section, or the introductory essay, in this catalogue is written by Karen Cordero and focuses on summarizing the complex Mexican search after 1910 for an art that was both cosmopolitan and uniquely Mexican. She focuses on two main characters that dedicated their attentions to the interactions between Mexican and U.S. artists, those being Adolfo Best-Maugard and Anita Brenner. This is mentioned

because it highlights Brenner's role as cultural diplomat, and how it is viewed. Tenorio Trillo reviews Cordero's essay, and says that Anita Brenner was "the bridge between the booming Mexican art market and U.S. cultural preoccupations."⁵⁸ It is because of her book, *Idols Behind Altars*, that Brenner invites further research on cultural interaction between the United States and Mexico in the arts, politics, the history of anthropology, and archaeology in Mexico, and the search for national identity in Mexico and the United States.⁵⁹

However, it is in the more competent art historical approach written by James Oles in *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914 - 1947*, that the audience is provided an indispensable description for understanding the artistic dimensions of this cultural exchange:

Representations of Mexico by foreigners seem to be a perfect metaphor for the idea of the West looking at "the Other." The natural tendency is to look for distortions, misinterpretations, and overall false views of the Other, as demonstrated in Britton's *Revolution and Ideology*.⁶⁰

Here, Oles shows readers all of this in different artists, diverse forms, and various moments of Mexican history. Yet the finding of so many "fake images" confirms the presumption of the existence of a real image of Mexico that was never adequately captured by U.S. aficionados. Oles also consistently refers to a historical Mexican reality as a criteria for interpreting the views from *South of the Border*.⁶¹ Like Delpar's larger argument for the *Vogue for all Things Mexican*, Ole's argument is vital in understanding

⁵⁸ "This connection has been clearly shown by Delpar (1992), Woods (1990), and Glusker(1995) to a certain extent, and especially by Azuela(n.d.)" Ibid., 235.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 235.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 235.

⁶¹ Ibid., 236.

the fascination and idealization with Mexico and Mexican art during the period in question, one which attracted U.S. artists who were drawn to this concept of the other, and were also motivated by revolutionary hope. At the same time, Tenorio Trillo deftly implies that any critic who identifies “fake” representations of Mexico must assume that there is amore real, authentic representation that has not yet been captured. Authenticity becomes the chief problem for these critics, and it was a problem that came to the fore with Brenner and her attempt to get at the deep structure, or the absolute foundations of Mexican art and culture.

Oles, like Brenner before him, stresses Mexican folk art as one of the key constituents of Mexican art and identity. James Oles dedicates a section to the depiction and representation of folk art, “The Pursuit of Folk Art.” Here, he traces back this interest and fascination with Mexican folk art to the 19th century when tourists would purchase examples of traditional ceramics or textiles and display them in “curio cabinets” in their Victorian homes. However, he claims that it was due to efforts enacted by artists such as Adolfo Best-Maugard⁶², who was a Mexican (of French descent) painter, director, writer, screenwriter and cultural promoter. Best-Maugard was an early avid promoter for the folk art of Mexico and helped establish, alongside the 1921 exhibit of Mexican popular arts, the tradition as fine art. The 1921 exhibit was the first of its

⁶² “The Best Maugard method was fundamental to modernist aesthetic in Mexico. His style and method was a proposal for defining mexicanidad (Mexicanness). His approach to explaining universalism in drawing is based on the principles of formal abstraction and fusion; which then creates an alternative to the rhetorical, didactic, and figurative art that is later known as the “Mexican School”. His method introduced a visual vocabulary and grammar for the foundation of Mexican art by drawing on elements extracted from pre-Hispanic art, which he argued determined the characteristics of Mexican popular art in combination with elements from Europe and Asia.” Karen Cordero-Reiman, “The Best Maugard drawing method: a common ground for modern Mexicanist aesthetics,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 26, (2010): 45.

kind in Mexico and was sponsored by the Mexican government⁶³, specifically by General Alvaro Obregon – the president of Mexico in 1921.

Oles mentions the interest that Edward Weston had with folk art, discussing his and Tina Modotti's work in *Idols Behind Altars*, although arguing that it was not just because of the commission that Weston was interested in representing folk art. "More than any artist, Mexican or American, Edward Weston worked to make Mexico's folk art the subject of his own work - not only because it delighted him and because he and Tina Modotti had been hired to provide the illustrations for *Idols Behind Altars*, but because it served his aim of rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh."⁶⁴ It was through a pure photographic interest and pursuit that Weston looked through the lens of his camera, in search of representing the epitome of the thing itself, which made his images so successful. This is mentioned because of his technique in photographing the content for *Idols Behind Altars*, that even though it was not his typical subject, he successfully portrayed folk art.

Oles writes about why folk art was such an enticing art to foreigners, specifically for American artists. "For visiting American artists, Mexican folk art represented an alternative to the standards of mass production that typified life in much of the United

⁶³ "The seminal exhibition to which Pomar refers was "Las Artes Populares en Mexico." The brainchild of engineer Alberto Pani, then secretary of Exterior relations for the post-revolutionary government of Alvaro Obregon, this groundbreaking showcase of Mexican folk arts and crafts was created specifically to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Mexican independence from Spain and the victorious entry of Mexico's conquering army into the capital on September 27, 1821." Kathleen Vanesian, "Las Artes Populares en Mexico: Mexico's First Folk Art Exhibition," *ladap.org*, last modified February 15, 2012, <http://www.ladap.org/las-artes-populares-en-mexico-mexicos-folk-art-exhibition/>

⁶⁴ James Oles and Karen Cordero, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914 - 1947*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993, 112.

States. Where we had repetitive billboards and Coca-Cola advertisements, Mexico possessed the idiosyncratic murals on pulquerias and the naive religious paintings known as ex-votos or retablos.”⁶⁵ As will be explored in the next section, the importance of folk art emphasized by Brenner in *Idols Behind Altars* is visible in the chapters and the photographs that she dedicates to the painting of pulquerias and to ex-votos, both mentioned here by Oles.

Photography and the Representation of Folk Art in *Idols Behind Altars*

The use of photographic imagery in Brenner’s *Idols Behind Altars* is absolutely central to Brenner’s project. Further, the photographs used are intimately related to the visual culture of the time. This thesis is especially interested in the relationship of the imagery to the emerging visual construction of post- revolutionary Mexico for a US audience. Other scholars have treated the imagery found in this fundamental text; the presence of Modotti and Weston are enough to drive scholarly and critical interest. While *Idols Behind Altars* established Anita Brenner as an anthropologist, cultural activist, as well as a writer, Brenner believed that the photographs were critical to the success of her project.

The photographs were commissioned by Brenner and taken by Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, as they traveled throughout Mexico looking for what Anita Brenner had requested. These images are also an essential part of this book because they are what support the writing of Brenner, and together they create a complete narrative. Brenner chose to write this book under the guidance and instruction of Dr. Alfonso Pruneda from

⁶⁵ Ibid., 119.

the National University of Mexico, who commissioned for the University an investigation of Mexican art, and placed Anita Brenner in charge, and did so after working as a translator for Manuel Gamio in Mexico for several years, where much of his indigenismo values can be viewed in influencing her writing of the early Mexican culture as well as the appreciation for folk art.

This thesis synthesizes the work of the authors below and focuses on the question of the American imaginary and the Mexican revolution in 1929 and immediately after. In providing the contemporary reviews, the use of *Idols Behind Altars* in recent scholarship, and by analyzing the photography use in the book, this section hopes to define what exactly consisted of the visual culture that helped shaped an identity in a foreign setting.

There is no single photographic image type that dominates *Idols Behind Altars*. The imagery of the book, taken as a whole, is an amalgam of different photographic types. Photographs includes images of spaces and places, as well as of objects, of paintings, sculptures, folk art, ex-votos, prints, lithographs, and even includes written poems and ballads. While all of these types are woven together into a whole, this thesis will focus mainly on the photographic space presented in photographs, some of those reproduced or mentioned in some of the aforementioned contemporary reviews, and some that represent the folk art of Mexico. In discussing these types of photographs in the book, the argument will be in support of the definition of the Mexican identity and culture.

Brenner then chose and commissioned the photographers Edward Weston and Tina Modotti to aid with her project, and to travel throughout Mexico in search of certain visual aspects that supported her writings and arguments. Brenner was able to involve

both Weston and Modotti in this project due to the intellectual circles that they all belonged to, not to mention that Brenner even posed for Weston a few times. Susannah Glusker writes that “the Brenner journals parallel those of the Californian photographer Edward Weston. Brenner and Weston mention each other, complement and confirm facts, but their approach to life, people, and events is very different. She mentions who was at the party, and he records the menu. They both mention events documented by historians in a casual tone, if at all.”⁶⁶ This statement is provided in order to not only address the social closeness in which Brenner and Weston cohabited, but also their different perspectives as artists and intellectuals.

⁶⁶ Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 3.

Figure 2.3: Edward Weston, *Maguey Cactus*, Mexico, 1926; gelatin silver print; 7 3/8 x 9 5/16 inches



One of the first images that a reader is confronted with when reading *Idols Behind Altars* is Edward Weston's *Maguey Cactus* from 1926 (figure 2.3). In fact, it is but the second image included in the book, the first being Amado Galvan's hand holding a piece of pottery. Weston's *Maguey* is a visually striking image, one that initially grasps the attention of the reader. The mature maguey cactus is photographed in a way that takes up the whole frame of the photograph itself, barely leaving space between its spiked limbs and the two upper corners of the photograph. The photograph is in black and white, and the background appears to be a clear and cloudless sky, depicted as a light gray, upon which the maguey violently rests –its protruding cactus spikes a deep velvety black. The only exception is one of these spikes in the right-hand foreground, which is folded toward the viewer, cut off by the photograph, which intriguingly appears to lure the viewer in to undress the rest of the maguey as not one dark figure, but rather as one made up of different shades of this darkness upon closer inspection.

The importance of this image is not only in the photograph but in the content and symbolism behind its representation. The maguey is the plant from which *pulque* derives, and when not tended to create this liquor, grows a monumental flowering stalk. The maguey has “spikes like claws on its gray-green fibrous muscles,” writes Anita Brenner, “and is representative of the drama of Mexican life - hardy and strong, even aggressive, yet ultimately powerless. More than just a subject of picturesque or agricultural interest, the maguey was a symbol of Mexico itself.”⁶⁷ As previously mentioned, the photograph is presented at almost the beginning of Brenner’s book, however if the maguey is meant to symbolize Mexico, it is then interesting to note the pairing of images done by Brenner.

Idols Behind Altars contains multiple images and illustrations, which Brenner carefully chose and curated - placing them in specific places to tell a visual story to the reader. For example, Weston’s *Maguey* discussed above is placed curiously above a *mise-en-scene* type setting of lead toy soldiers fighting against native peoples. This image is smaller in size and runs lengthwise across the page and displays lead soldiers holding guns, that were made in Guadalajara, fighting against Indians who attempt to fight back with bows and arrows. If analyzed together, it could be argued that Brenner here is addressing the struggle of the Mexican people, the representation of the Maguey with tough spines and inherently part of Mexican culture, against the struggle of the revolution, the lead toy soldiers. The juxtaposition of these two images then creates a visual narrative for the reader, in a sense foreshadowing the history of Mexico and the tale that is about to unfold.

In the “notes on illustration” section of the book, Brenner specifically mentions

⁶⁷ Oles and Cordero, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination*, 149.

that the majority of the illustrations included in *Idols Behind Altars* were published for the first time in this book:

[They] were selected from material collected by the author, the photographers, and collaborating artists, in many months of careful and loving research. Most of the photographs were taken in villages and buildings not usually included even in artist's itineraries. Photographs and other illustrations were chosen in all cases for their artistic value, bearing in mind the typical, and the best expression of Mexican art. The pleasant amazement which no doubt they will cause to artists and collectors will be amazement only because the ancient and modern art of this continent, as strong and as unique as that of any people in the history of humanity, has been so little examined.⁶⁸

The most important point from above for our purposes is Brenner's desire to instantiate "the best expression of Mexican art" through the choice of photographs and their sequencing in the book. *Idols Behind Altars* uses a somewhat different, even inspiring approach, in her use of photographs and illustrations in the book. Some scholars have referred to it as being influenced by muralism⁶⁹ itself, while others refer to how this visual representation influenced other artists.

The photographs are not arranged in a chronological manner in the text but rather they are utilized as a narrative tool. Brenner also does not provide much information aside from a title that Brenner assigned and location, at times not even mentioning the artist (although there is more information provided for the reader in the notes on illustration section). The arrangement of the photographs and illustrations, however, do contribute to Brenner's writing style and to the story that she is attempting to tell her

⁶⁸ Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, 333.

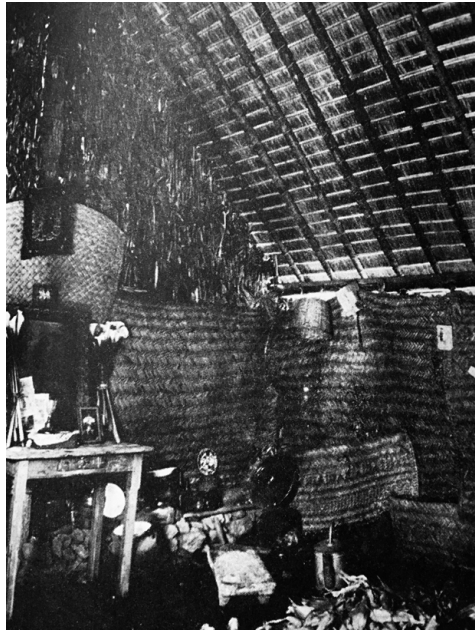
⁶⁹ Doris Berger, et al., "Moving Frescoes: The Kindred Spirits of Sergei Eisenstein and Anita Brenner," *Another Promised Land: Anita Brenner's Mexico*, ed. Karen Cordero Reiman, (Mexico: The Getty Foundation, 2017), 116.

reader, that of the cultural foundation, myths, legends, and history that make up Modern Art in Mexico. It might, then, be safe to state that there is a certain theory, or even thesis that Brenner is creating with her use of images and photographs without directly addressing it, and although it is something that she does not maybe fully consciously do in *Idols Behind Altars*, it is clearly visible in her later work, *The Wind that Swept Mexico*.

The manner of layout of these images in this book is not only unique, but also serves as a precursor for her later work, *The Wind That Swept Mexico*. At this point, it may be helpful to briefly explore the relationship of text with photographic images. In *Wind*, Brenner tells the story of the Mexican Revolution with the aid of several journalistic and news sources, as well as with the help of George Leighton, to accompany her writing. There is much to be said about the presentation of images and the visual access they provide, and Brenner realized this with *Idols Behind Altars*, later applying the same (even better) technique in which she laid out the photographs. Roberto Tejada hints at this photographic environmental space that Brenner creates with her writing and use of photography by stating that “In an energetic, modernist style that blurs the boundaries of personal testimony, journalism, and eyewitness history, *The Wind That Swept Mexico* demonstrates how photography with journalistic intentions and photography with aspirations are intertwined in an encounter over the exercise of the public arena and over how the social space is represented.”⁷⁰ Although Tejada is specifically referring to Brenner’s later work, *The Wind That Swept Mexico*, it is arguable and slightly evident that Brenner was thinking of this while putting together *Idols Behind Altars*.

⁷⁰ Roberto Tejada, *National Camera: Photography and Mexico’s Image Environment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 98.

Figure 2.4: Edward Weston, *Interior of Native House in Xochimilco*, 1926



The representation of a social space, of a visual culture, and the exercise of the public arena, all of this is accessible through the photographs and illustrations that Brenner utilizes in *Idols Behind Altars*, although telling a somewhat different story than that of the revolution of Mexico like in her later work. Brenner has chosen to use these specific photographs and illustrations to compellingly aid her in articulating and transmitting her interpretation of Mexico in a somewhat modernist form. One of the best examples of this shared image space that Brenner is creating, and that is previously mentioned, is in figure 2.4 from *Idols Behind Altars*. This photograph is titled “Interior of native house,” in the book, and the included notes on the images comments on how this

photograph serves as a perfect example of the versatile *petate*.⁷¹ This can also be analyzed as a reference to folk art in terms of the material, which was utilized in popular art and objects made out of *petate* are common.

The photograph is included in the chapter “Earth, Straw, and Flesh,” which mainly focuses on the Mexican native tradition that persists in the culture despite the conquest, and in this specific section Brenner is discussing the use of an everyday object and its meaning in the lives of Mexican natives. Although she is specifically addressing this material, Brenner is also creating this visual access to this seemingly foreign space that the Mexican natives inhabit for her foreign audience. The image depicts a small room made up of this material, in fact almost everything within this room is made from this material. The slanting roof appears to maybe also be made up of *petate*, and the sun sneaks its way through the cracks, creating more light in the space. The black and white photograph consists of a gray scale that makes up the whole, with a certain bright light appearing to shine directly from the perspective of the viewer, as if we were intruding in this sacred private space that is rarely seen by the common eye. Weston probably took this photograph from the door entrance, which creates this effect of light shining straight onto certain objects.

There are multiple images in *Idols Behind Altars* that can be representative of this social space and visual culture, however the previously mentioned are some of the

⁷¹ “Petate is the cheapest, most common, and oldest house-hold possession. It is pictured in Aztec codices used exactly as it is today, as a throne, a seat of honour, and as a humble object of versatile and universal service. A reed mat, of coarse weave pleasant to the bare sole, of a sincere yellow color agreeable to the eye; materially irreplaceable, spiritually an essential Mexican symbol.” Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, 123-124.

strongest visual aids that support this argument. In an essay written by Linde B. Lehtinen entitled *Anita Brenner and Photography: Constructing Mexico in Idols Behind Altars*(1929) and *The Wind That Swept Mexico*(1943), there is some exploration and investigation done into the function that Brenner places on photography. Lehtinen writes about Brenner and her relationship to photography stating that “her connections to the photography community in both the United States and Mexico informed her understanding of how this medium could intersect with the politics of representation, history, and cultural identity.”⁷² In other words, Brenner was actively aware of the effects that photography had on a foreign audience, especially because she knew of how the US interpreted Mexico from the images that were reproduced in newspapers, and wanted to utilize this effect of image reproduction in her book.

Above all else, Brenner was attempting to create a specific cultural representation of Mexico with these images, and inadvertently also created an identity for Mexican culture. In support of this argument, I provide Lehtinen’s argument for the conscious choices that Brenner was making in the use of photographs, in which she provides an example of a letter exchange between Modotti and Brenner about how some specific photographs of Orozco’s frescoes in the National Preparatory School could be taken in a different perspective.⁷³ Lehtinen is against the previous scholarship that Brenner did not acknowledge the artistic value of the photographs by providing an anecdote in a letter written by Tina Modotti. She writes:

However there are instances where Brenner directly dictated not only what Weston and Modotti photographed, but even the way they photographed it. For Example, in April 1927, Modotti discussed photographing four of

⁷² Linde B. Lehtinen, et al., *Another Promised Land: Anita Brenner’s Mexico*, 140.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 143.

Jose Clemente Orozco's frescoes in the National Preparatory School for Brenner: the original images were "all good but Anita felt they could be taken from a better angle so as to give a better idea of the relation with architecture."⁷⁴

This exchange between Brenner and Modotti is meant to exemplify Brenner's active involvement of the production of the images as well as her knowledge on photographic perspective. Brenner seems to have been very attentive to some aesthetic considerations raised by photography in the context of her narrative, most probably because of the visual effect that it would have on her audience.

Throughout the whole book the reader is presented with the tale of the natives of Mexico, the Indians who have prevailed despite hardship. Brenner's intense research, focus, and presentation on art creates the notion and argument that it is through Mexican craft, through folk art, that the Mexican culture has prevailed. It is for this reason that Brenner dedicates whole chapters to focusing on the creation and origin of folk art. In chapter seven, for example, "Painted Miracles" - Brenner writes about the importance of these small paintings made by the everyday Mexican in regards to miracles. The result are the infamous ex-votos, or sometimes known as retablos, which are typically still, to this day, present in the Mexican household. (see figure 2.5)

⁷⁴ Ibid., 144.

Figure 2.5: Edward Weston, *Ex-voto/retablo of Ramona Valle*, 1926, gelatin silver print 7 5/16 x 8 3/8 in.



Brenner writes about its history, discussing the merging of two religious institutions - the one that the Spaniards brought and the supernatural that was present in native religions. It was for this reason that the miracle concept was easily accepted into the native culture. Brenner writes about the merging of both religions saying “from Spanish to Indian the traverse is clear in Juan Diego’s encounters with Guadalupe... It was difficult in any case to say where native sorcery and religious habit ended and divine intervention that could be endorsed by the Church, began.”⁷⁵ This is meant to address the mixture of both belief systems, how the native people of Mexico created a belief system of their own. After giving enough background information on miracles - their happenings, the commonality and accessibility to every class, the second section of the chapter then discusses the creation of the object itself. In describing this type of folk art, Brenner writes the following:

⁷⁵ Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, 162.

So in Mexico nowadays the word miracle means the happening, and also the small paintings which records it, in the shrine of the Christ, saint or madonna with whom the event is associated... The very important documents are generally painted on ten-cent metal, usually tin. Canvas being more expensive, is for very special miracles, or for particularly prosperous people. Sometimes water-colour and crayon is used on a sheet of wrapping paper or shoe-box cardboard. There are also occasional photographs of the person who received the boon, either incorporated to the painting, or as extra testimony. Hair, a bit of garment, or a beloved rosary, may be supplied as further illustration. There are sculptured ex-votos too, replicas of the stricken and saved members of the body, family, or herd. But most people prefer paintings. They seem to satisfy better than other vehicles necessary of expressing kind thanks for the answer to a desperate answer.⁷⁶

This quote from Brenner in *Idols Behind Altars* is meant to address the importance that Brenner is placing on the creation of everyday art by the everyday person. The creation of art in Mexico is done in the common environment by people untrained in the traditional sense. The traditional sense would be attending a school or art or having a teacher, however in this situation Brenner is referring to art being produced by those who had no access to prior training. Not only is this type of art being produced constantly, but it also speaks directly to the merging of the two cultures, Spanish and Indigenous, and how the Mexican identity persists and exists despite the conquest. This quote also serves as evidence to my argument of the importance that Brenner places on the content and production of folk art.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 164.

Figure 2.6: Edward Weston, *Pulqueria, Mexico D.F.*, 1926, gelatin silver print, 7 3/8 × 9 3/8 in.



Another example of how Brenner places a special emphasis on folk art is in the chapter entitled “The Reform of Providence.” In this section, Brenner gives a comprehensive explanation to the history of pulque, and *pulquerias*. Pulque is a fermented drink, considered sacred in Aztec culture, made from the fermented sap of a maguey. The beginning of the chapter includes a small illustration of a worker pulling the maguey leaves, however to get a better understanding of the maguey plant, please see figure 2.3 in reference⁷⁷. There is a key importance in the artistic representation of pulquerias⁷⁸, completely enveloped in a decorated and painted manner. “Outside and in, the walls are broken into scenic panels and doors framed in scarlet, indigo, sulphur, cubes and spirals and blocks and scrolls which make the surfaces advance, retreat, bow; dance

⁷⁷ This image is included at the beginning of *Idols Behind Altars*, page 17, where Brenner is discussing the Mexican Messiah.

⁷⁸ Brenner defines pulqueria as “a plebeian drinking shop where only pulque is consumed.” *Idols Behind Altars*, 171.

under lettered fantasy. The doors are curtained by tissue-paper fringes, chains, rosettes, little flags. The ceilings are hung so solidly in moving decoration, are further so broken and multiplied by mirrors and tinsel balls that they are limitless.”⁷⁹ Pulquerías were popular places; there was nothing elite or European about them. Brenner takes the reader on a tour, via prose, of the most working-class and/or indigenous aspects of the visual culture of the pulquería: the strong color sense, the disorienting geometric decoration, and the seeming infinite amount of humble paper decoration.

Although no two spaces were the same, Brenner is creating a general understanding of how these environments were experienced and felt. The value and significance that is placed in these spaces that had not been before studied, or even appreciated, is directly speaking to the admiration of folk, everyday art that Brenner is emphasizing. The murals in pulquerías were painted in cheap oils that quickly faded and peeled, and were always changing. These paintings were (or one can argue, are) “always the national landscape in the present, which includes the beloved and amusing things of the past. The panels are stratified sometimes like temple murals... and in pulquería art painter and owner collaborate with their public to produce a national property,”⁸⁰ argues Brenner. This is referring to the way in which art prevails in the Mexican culture, an art that encompasses the trying history of Mexico’s past and is exemplified in the common spaces of the city.

The importance that Brenner places on folk art is substantial, and creates a new understanding for the creation and interpretation of Mexican art. Brenner’s emphasis on folk art in *Idols Behind Altars* is unique, and although to establish a connection between

⁷⁹ Ibid., 171.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 174-75.

her book and the three exhibitions analyzed in this thesis might seem futile, [they] (and their sections on folk art, serve to argue for this Mexican artistic identity that was being created in the US. The following reviews of the exhibitions held within the United States that are provided are meant to create the understanding of how Mexican art and culture were being interpreted and represented in the United States. The exhibitions examined here occurred in the context of cultural and economic exchange between the US and Mexico. Only the *Mexican Arts* exhibition traveled throughout the United States, while Brenner and Paine's 1928 exhibition was only open for a few months, and the Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art ran from May to September of 1940. All of these exhibitions were housed and supported by well known cultural institutions, which aided in establishing Mexican art not only in the US but in the art historical context as well. Each exhibition had a certain motive driving it, yet all served as exposure and access to the visual culture of Mexico in one way or another, and included multiple types of artworks.

Section 3: Mexican Art & Folk Art in the US in the Early 20th Century

This chapter examines three major exhibitions of Mexican art in the US in the 1930s, situating them in the developing idea of Mexico and Mexican culture in the US at that time. This critical approach posits that exhibitions that attempt to present other cultures, here Mexico, should be analyzed in light of their intended audience, here, the US art world, as well as the relevant contemporary curatorial culture.⁸¹ Thus, in order to understand the development of a curated idea and identity of Mexican as presented by these exhibitions, I review three fundamental exhibitions of Mexican art at major New York institutions. The three exhibitions are *Mexican Art*, curated by Frances Paine and Anita Brenner in 1928 at the Art Center in New York, the traveling show *Mexican Arts*, curated by Rene d'Harnoncourt and opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1930, and *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* from 1940, which as co-curated by museum professionals at MoMA and by specialized scholars in the fields of each section (pre-Spanish, colonial art, popular/folk art, and modern art). Each exhibition includes folk art, and I overview its inclusion and its role within the exhibit.

These three exhibitions in the early 20th century are fundamental in the construction of Mexican art in the US during this period, especially for in their inclusion of folk art, which aided in constructing the Mexican artistic identity. Because they all utilized folk art in one way or another, they contributed to the understanding of Mexican culture and art and gave folk art a central role in this understanding. In the progression of

⁸¹ Preziosi goes further, arguing that all museum exhibitions create “essential historicist fictions” of the type that surrounds the creation of “Mexican art” for a US audience. See Preziosi, Donald. “Collecting/Museums.” Nelson & Shiff, *Critical Terms for Art History*, 407–18.

this section, it must be important to understand what is referred to when discussing Mexican art. Here I am referring to art materials, culture, and body of work produced by Mexican artists, by artists in Mexico, and especially in this specific period in time (early 20th century) – the art work has a certain mexicanness, or *mexicanidad* to it. *Mexicanidad* can be understood as the resurgence of the Indian in popular mexican nationalism in the early 20th century, and as an effect of the revolution,⁸² and although not a driving topic in this thesis, it is nonetheless important to the understanding of the artwork.

The larger thesis is focused on the role of Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars* in the construction of Mexico in the visual imaginary of the US in the 1930's; this chapter thus attempts to situate and locate the ties and influences that the three exhibitions had with Anita Brenner and *Idols Behind Altars*, if any. I alluded above and will argue below that the historical framing of Mexican art in Brenner's book, *Idols Behind Altars* (1929) privileges a certain type of traditional and folk art of Mexico. Much the same idea of Mexican traditional and folk art, along with the same emphasis appears in the 1940 MOMA exhibition in New York, *Twenty Centuries of Mexican art*. It is unlikely that the importance and framing of this art in the 1940 exhibition, curated by both American and Mexican participants, did not share roots with Brenner's thinking in 1929, although it is difficult and perhaps futile to attempt to argue for a direct connection between the two.

In order to better ascertain this early artistic and intellectual milieu and understanding Mexican art that made up the 1940 exhibition, I examine two earlier U.S. exhibitions of Mexican art. The first is the exhibition from 1928, *Mexican Art*, held at the Art Center in New York, and was curated by Frances Paine and Anita Brenner. The

⁸² Susana Rostas, "Mexicanidad: The Resurgence of the Indian in Popular Mexican Nationalism," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2002): 20.

second exhibition that I examine is *Mexican Arts (1930-31)*, which was curated by Rene d'Harnoncourt, funded by the American Federation of Arts, and travelled throughout the US to major institutions. These exhibitions are examples of the way in which Mexican art was circulated and exhibited in the United States.

Prior to discussing the exhibitions, and the decade in which these exhibitions that played such a key role, it may be helpful to look at other aspects of cultural exchange between these two countries around this time. Interest in Mexico and the artistic culture emerging out of the Mexican Revolution of the 1910's did not begin in 1929; American artists and writers had already been visiting Mexico in significant numbers by the 1920's.⁸³ A central previous discussion of the two earlier exhibitions and their larger context in the US and its vision of Mexico may be found in Helen Delpar's book *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*. (1992) Delpar attempts to relate the art, exhibitions, and cultural exchanges - while also providing valuable information on the socio-political and economic situations that led to the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. Scholars agree that this work by Helen Delpar can be considered the first general study of what may be thought of as the Mexican cosmopolitan era in Mexico,⁸⁴ which is of course a more recent contribution to the examining of Mexican art.⁸⁵

The first two decades of the twentieth century were a time in which cultural

⁸³ Oles and Cordero, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination*, 112.

⁸⁴ Tenorio Trillo, "The Cosmopolitan Mexican Summer 1929 – 1940," 226.

⁸⁵ Delpar argues that the histories of Mexico and the United States have been tightly intertwined since the beginning of their existence as independent nations, and that once certain diplomatic links were formed, so followed the economic links - which were strengthened during the regime of Porfirio Diaz, also known as the Porfiriato (1876 - 1911). By providing this type of historical background, Delpar gives access and insight to readers about how the flow of visual, and non-visual, culture became accessible between the two countries, stating that both influenced and affected the other in a sense. Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, 2-3.

relations between the United States and Mexico were limited, and Delpar states that “intellectuals in Mexico as elsewhere in Latin America usually regarded Americans as vulgar materialists who were interested only in amassing wealth and lacked both the desire and the ability to distinguish themselves in artistic creation or appreciation,”⁸⁶ although there were several important Mexican intellectuals, such as Justo Sierra and Manuel Gamio, that did not agree with this sentiment. The way in which these two countries began to create an interchange of culture, ideals, and business was through the economy.⁸⁷

There were certain cultural effects that came with the newfound economic power of the United States and its subsequent emergence as a world power, and this can be interpreted in the arts through exhibitions, and an exchange of art, as a form of cultural diplomacy. In this section of her book, however, Delpar is paying attention to Spanish-speaking countries after the Spanish-American war of 1898, where the US again gained territories that had long been Spanish-speaking. Delpar writes about an increase in international awareness and a growth of interest in all of Latin America after 1900, which she documents by researching the “explosive growth of enrollment in Spanish-language courses in secondary schools.”⁸⁸ Delpar also mentions other sources that document this process, such as the establishment of the first major historical journal devoted to Latin America, *The Hispanic American Historical Review* (1918), the purchase of the private library of Mexican historian Genaro Garcia by the University of Texas at around this time, as well as a rising sense of cultural nationalism that was simultaneously occurring

⁸⁶ Ibid., 3-4.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 8.

both in the United States and in Mexico.

Delpar argues that between 1920-1927, American intellectuals, journalists, and artists were drawn to Mexico by their interest in the revolution's impact on society and the arts and their desire to defend Mexico from attack in the United States,⁸⁹ people she refers to as "political pilgrims". This was the period before the first wave of exhibitions in the US. Utilizing Delpar as a support to this thesis, her argument claims that the value given to the artistic and cultural heritage that existed in Latin America, and specifically to Mexico because of its proximity to the U.S., was that of its ancient monuments and artifacts. In other words, the United States placed more importance on the cultural heritage of, for example, Mexico and the Aztecs because of the cultural legacy it established. By having access to Mexico and to its rich ancient cultural heritage, the U.S. could acquire an ancient tradition that was only then being recognized as one on par with the other great ancient civilizations of the world, and gave the US a certain validity that was desired by contemporary nation states, even if there was a lack of great ancient monuments north of the border when compared to the south. It was not only recent scholars such as Delpar who utilized Mexican modern art and the popular arts exhibitions in the US as a means to interpreting Mexican culture in the US, but so have scholars such as Indyck-Lopez, and Oles.

As previously mentioned, *Idols Behind Altars* narrates the culture of Mexico through myth and images and it all accumulates to the telling of Modern Art at the time in which Brenner was writing this book, the Mexican Renaissance. One of the main driving forces behind the Mexican Renaissance, which usually refers to the time period

⁸⁹ Ibid., 15.

between 1920 and 1950, was the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and ended in 1920. In the topic of the revolution⁹⁰ in *Idols Behind Altars*, Brenner first mentions [it] in chapter nine, which is entitled “Posada the Prophet.” Although the chapter is dedicated to Guadalupe Posada, the revolution plays a key part in the narrative.

The most important thing to understand from Brenner’s section on the Revolution is the effect that the Revolution had on the people of Mexico and what it meant to the people. It was a period of sociopolitical transformation through the means of the Mexican culture as well as with the support of the government, with an emphasis on political, social, and economic reformation. She creates the understanding for this nationalistic art that was so inherently Mexican, and only Mexican, and went hand in hand with the revolution. Brenner also mentions how the artistic expression of the aforementioned feeling in Mexico with the revolution happened before, after, and simultaneously alongside the armed expression (the Revolution itself.)⁹¹

Exhibition at the Art Center in 1928

The 1928 exhibition was born out of the efforts of Frances Flynn Paine, along with the aid of Anita Brenner. Paine was a U.S. art dealer that was attempting to situate Mexican art within the New York art scene, and managed a fund of 15,000 dollars of Rockefeller money which was meant to sponsor Mexican artists,⁹² the efforts included theater productions and art exhibits. When Paine embarked on this mission in New York, she first attempted to hire Brenner, who declined to work for her and instead chose to

⁹⁰ For more information on the Revolution written by Anita Brenner, please see *The Wind that Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution 1910 – 1942*.

⁹¹ Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, 186.

⁹² Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*, 81.

collaborate with Paine. The involvement of Brenner in this project meant that Paine did not have to travel to Mexico to contact artists, and that Brenner did not have to further search for spaces to promote Mexican art⁹³ (one of her goals when she first moved to NY). A recent scholarly contribution to the field by Darcy Rendon⁹⁴ from UT Austin, writes about this exhibition and the vital role that Brenner played in it. If it weren't for Brenner and her reputation with Mexican art, it would have been almost impossible to secure certain artists and the works being sent to the United States. Brenner's reputation and involvement was also crucial for getting official recognition from the Mexican government.⁹⁵

The exhibition opened on January 1928, was held with the Rockefeller funds and with collaboration of Alon Bement, showed at the Art Center, a gallery on the Upper West Side in New York.⁹⁶ In the biography of Anita Brenner's life written by her daughter, Susannah Glusker, she briefly mentions this exhibition and refers to it as mostly being Brenner's selection of artists that were represented.⁹⁷ The show included modern art by artists such as Siqueiros, Covarrubias, Tamayo, and Goitia, which were all shown in unison with the inclusion of ex-votos (mentioned in section 2). The inclusion of

⁹³ Ibid., 81.

⁹⁴ Rendon focuses on two major art exhibitions in the United States as a means of cultural diplomacy. In this report, Rendon is focusing on investigating the first standalone exhibitions of Mexican modern and popular arts in the US. She argues that it was Brenner and Paine's art exhibit from 1928 and the American Federation of Arts exhibit from 1930 that were the first exhibitions to secure government and corporate sponsorship for diplomatic purposes. Although this thesis is dedicated to the artistic Mexican identity, this section builds on the research done by Rendon in adding the Twenty Centuries of Mexican art exhibit from 1940.

⁹⁵ Rendon, "Mexican Art Exhibitions in New York as Cultural Diplomacy, 1928 – 1932" (Masters Report, The University of Texas at Austin, 2016), 13.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁹⁷ Glusker, *A Mind of Her Own*, 81.

folk art in her exhibit exemplifies Brenner's interest as well as advocacy of folk art.

The show was the vision that Brenner had of a post-revolutionary Mexican artistic identity that this New York space was exposed to. The exhibition was not as successful as Brenner had hoped it would be, and Brenner writes in her journals that it might have been more successful in a place like Texas, "where its longstanding Mexican American roots might provide greater resonance."⁹⁸ Most of the reviews from the exhibition were negative and the exhibition was not received well in the public sphere. Taken from the journals of Anita Brenner is the following excerpt, which addresses the situation: "The show opened. Me on hand all the time interviewing reports and "explaining" Mexican art. The violent dislike, almost anger, even to frothing of the mouth, of the people coming is to me an unusually encouraging sign... The show seems rather good to me"⁹⁹ It is important to note that this might be the first time that most of the people who attended this exhibition were exposed to the art of Mexico. Brenner mentions how she has to explain it to the public, probably referencing the lack of understanding of the content. The importance of this is placed into *Idols Behind Altars*, where she goes deep into cultural mythology and folklore. Above all else, the importance of this exhibition is placed on the cultural mediator efforts of Brenner, "who helped to introduce Mexican modern and popular arts into an established system of museums and galleries in New York as worthwhile pieces and objects for cultural consumption even if they did not garner critical acclaim,"¹⁰⁰ argues Rendon in her research. In agreement with this statement, it goes to support the way in which Brenner was constantly an advocate for

⁹⁸ Rendon, "Mexican art as Cultural Diplomacy," 22.

⁹⁹ Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art & Artists in Mexico: Anita Brenner's Journals of the Roaring Twenties*, 574.

¹⁰⁰ Rendon, "Mexican Art as Cultural Diplomacy," 26.

Mexican arts and culture. Although not much documentation can be found from the exhibit, for example the lack of photographs, the inclusion of folk art has been written and mentioned. One can assume that the placement of folk art between the modern artists was meant to create a comparison between both, and in a sense giving the same value to the production of folk as to modern art.

The concept of Mexican nationalism was attempted to be established by Jose Juan Tablada in the United States, who was also an advocate for the arts and culture, and peoples of Mexico. Both Delpar and Anna Indych-Lopez, two scholars that have contributed greatly to the subject, and have been examined throughout this thesis, mention the importance of the poet Jose-Juan Tablada, who lived in New York from 1920 to 1936, and was a fierce nationalist advocate for his home country. Tablada is also considered the first person to write art historically about the art of Mexico,¹⁰¹ which is why he is important to the historiography of this thesis. Although his work is separate from Brenner's efforts, they were both aware of each other as they were active in the same time period – and even got to know each other once Brenner moved to New York¹⁰². Brenner actually writes about reading *La Historia del Arte en Mexico*, specifically saying that it was “badly done, [contained] bad photos, and [had] awful cliches.”¹⁰³ Tablada and Brenner, although not socially close, were both advocating for similar aspects of the Mexican culture.

Jose Juan Tablada first published *Historia de arte en Mexico*, in 1927, although the book was written in 1923. In this book, Tablada attempts to create the idea of a

¹⁰¹ For more information, see Jose-Juan Tablada's *Historia del arte en México*, 1927.

¹⁰² Brenner, *Avant-Garde Art & Artists in Mexico: Anita Brenner's Journals of the Roaring Twenties*, 552.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 328.

country [Mexico] that has an uninterrupted calling for art and beauty.¹⁰⁴ Tablada attempts to establish this lineage of cultural artistic creation that lies within the history of Mexican peoples, very much like Anita Brenner also attempts to establish this connection in *Idols Behind Altars*, refining and supporting Tablada's argument while utilizing folklore and folk art. Another scholar in the field, Rita Eder, writes in her book, *El Arte en México: Autores, Temas, Problemas* (2001)- a chapter to the construction of the historiography of the national Mexican culture, utilizing Tablada as a main source in constructing a historiography. "Modernismo, modernidad, modernización: piezas para armar una historiografía del nacionalismo cultural mexicano," focuses on the writings and claims made by Tablada in helping create this early nationalism. In 1927 Tablada is attempting to construct a nationalist art history. He points out that of all the American nations, only Mexico has great artistic traditions in the ancient, colonial, and modern periods. The complete sweep of Mexican art, connected even across the fatal historical lines of the Conquest, will be given reality in the 1940 *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*. I argue that what holds this nationalist history together is folk art, constantly and ever present in the life and history of Mexico. Tablada is also making the vital claim to the uniqueness of Mexico in its artistic creation and history, claiming that it is through art that its successes can be measured - if not by anything else.

In providing a brief overview of the contemporary literature that discuss the artistic identity of Mexican art and the cultural narrative at the time, it is then possible to better understand the exhibitions in the United States. Although there were other

¹⁰⁴ Rita Eder, "Modernismo, modernidad, modernización: piezas para armar una historiografía del nacionalismo cultural mexicano," in *El Arte en México: Autores, Temas, Problemas*, ed. Rita Eder (Mexico City: Fondo Cultural Económico, Conaculta, 2001), 342.

previous attempts to document the Mexican cultural narrative within the United States discourse, Brenner and Paine's 1928 exhibition is arguably the first exhibition held within the United States to display Mexican artworks with a carefully curated and unified nationalist message.

Figure 3.1: Installation view of the *Mexican Arts* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1930.



Mexican Arts 1930

The *Mexican Arts* exhibition held from 1930-32 travelled throughout the United States and first opened in mid-October at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The 1930 exhibit was funded by The American Federation of Arts, and traveled for a little over a year throughout the United States. It was developed by Ambassador Morrow and the American Federation of the Arts, and had the support of the Department of Education, the

Mexican Consulate, and the Carnegie Foundation.¹⁰⁵ It was a rather large show, and the exhibition included colonial decorative art, folk art, and modern art, and was divided into early and contemporary. This exhibition of Mexican art was referred to as “the first authentic and vivid representation of Mexican art to be shown abroad,”¹⁰⁶ in a review of the exhibition, which in turn emphasizes its effect on the US audience. The exhibit was, however, not well organized in terms of presentation, and managed to lose the presence of the modern art. As is visible in figure 3.1, the arrangement of the exhibition by Rene d’Harnoncourt appeared more like a Mexican Mercado or European curiosity cabinet¹⁰⁷ with its display of works. The inclusion of folk art in this exhibition is central to its interpretation and was also the most successful part of the show. D’Harnoncourt filed away 400 pages of newspaper clippings of this travelling show, and found that it was folk art that captured the US public imagination. The applied arts might have been more appealing than the fine arts to the US audience because they were more understandable. The folk arts were viewed as the truer form of self expression of the Mexican people.¹⁰⁸

A review from *The Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* describes the exhibition in 1930 as being unique in two ways: “First, it is the national expression of a whole people; second it is the first time that technical skill and materials have been subordinated to the content of the idea, the interpretation of a single culture.”¹⁰⁹ This exhibition was well received by the US audience, however aside from it being a way to visually access the

¹⁰⁵ Rendon, “Mexican Art as Cultural Diplomacy,” 2.

¹⁰⁶ Guillermo Rivas, “Notes of the Carnegie Exhibit” *Mexican Life*, August, 1930, 23.

¹⁰⁷ Indyck-Lopez, *Muralism Without Walls*, 117.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹⁰⁹ A.W.K., “Exhibition of Mexican Art: November 25 to December 14 1930,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 28, no. 170 (December, 1930): 113, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4170274>

Mexican culture, this exhibition also functioned as a means of cultural diplomacy between the two nations,¹¹⁰ mainly visible in the way both governments were involved in its production.

As previously mentioned, the Mexican Arts exhibit was organized by the American Federation of Arts. Indyck-Lopez writes about the exhibition stating that it traveled to fourteen U.S. cities between 1930 and 1932, although the catalogue only has eight cities in its original exhibition trajectory. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin writes a review of the exhibition on October 1930 and states the following:

The exhibition, chiefly modern although both fine and applied arts dating from as early as the sixteenth century are included, is due to the initiative of Dwight W. Morrow, Ambassador from the United States to Mexico, and to Frederick P. Keppel, President of the Carnegie Corporation, the institution which has financed the exhibition. [It] was assembled by Homer Saint-Gaudens, Director of Fine Arts, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, assisted by Count Rene d'Harnoncourt.¹¹¹

This statement is included in order to provide support of how the exhibition was set up, as well as addressing its contributors. Note that the original impetus came from a member of the US State Department, Ambassador Morrow, and that other main figures include giants of American philanthropy (Saint-Gaudens of the Carnegie) and an interesting entrepreneur in the arts (d'Harnoncourt). It is likely that the whole was conceived in part as an exercise in cultural diplomacy and awareness, as the recently stabilized Mexican republic to the south was garnering significant interest in the US as described by Delpar and others (see section 2 above).

Without delving too deeply into the motivations of the organizers and funders, it

¹¹⁰ Rendon, "Mexican Art as Cultural Diplomacy," 26.

¹¹¹ Rene d'Harnoncourt, "The Loan Exhibition of Mexican Art," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 25, no. 10 (October 1930): 210, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3255929>

is clear that the exhibit had some impact on the profile of Mexican art in the US art scene. Anna Indych-Lopez references the exhibition as one of the main reasons for which Mexican art and muralism gained popularity throughout the United States. The exhibition was curated and put together by Rene d'Harnoncourt, whose goal was not only to display but also trace "authentic" Mexican culture through the simultaneous display of colonial, folk, and modern art. Rene d'Harnoncourt belonged to the wave of political pilgrims, which is discussed earlier and a term coined by Delpar. He settled in Mexico in the early 1920s and dedicated his time there to expanding the market for Mexican antiques and the popular arts.¹¹² The success of this exhibition can also be attributed to the committee which was involved with the *Mexican Arts* exhibition. On the committee sat Rivera, Chavez, Saenz, Beals, Frans Blom, Dr. Charles Hackett, and Anita Brenner.¹¹³

Indych-Lopez writes that the success of this exhibition can be mainly attributed to the inclusion of early and contemporary folk art and how "the three muralists' paintings, with such subjects as workers, soldiers, and heroes of the Revolution, proved to be an ill-fitting conclusion to the exhibition and received unfavorable reviews."¹¹⁴ The fact that this exhibition included work from Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros speaks volumes to the impact that these artists and the muralist movement were creating during this time period of the Mexican Renaissance, and was the first attempt to explain this in an institutional setting to a foreign audience.

In the introduction, d'Harnoncourt writes that "the first manifestation of true Mexican art appeared in the Indian villages, under the brush of Indian painters hired by

¹¹² Indych-Lopez, *Muralism without Walls*, 100.

¹¹³ Rene D'Harnoncourt papers, reel #3830. Microfilm Collection, quoted in Darcy Rendon "Mexican Art as Cultural Diplomacy," 29.

¹¹⁴ Indych-Lopez, *Muralism without Walls*, 9.

parishes too poor to acquire the work of more pretentious artists with European training.”¹¹⁵ Because of the way in which untrained Indian painters produced artwork in villages, these artists were influenced by the arts that were being commissioned at the time prior to 1910. The popular arts which were entirely in the service of Church and nobility, and the painters that were representatives of the Old World in New Spain, “to whom Mexican products were acceptable only in the degree in which they approximated European work.”¹¹⁶ The early paintings are paired into separate sections: Colonial/Primitives, Genre Paintings, Portraits, and Retablos and Other Small Popular Paintings, while the contemporary paintings are simply grouped together and list the artists in the catalogue.

The exhibition was divided into two separate sections, Applied Arts and Fine Arts (both early and contemporary), which, according to d’Harnoncourt, are meant to represent an attempt to organize the achievements of the struggle of the development of the Mexican civilization. The way in which d’Harnoncourt writes the introduction to the catalogue of this exhibition is extremely reminiscent of the way in which Brenner discusses the development and history of Mexican culture in *Idols Behind Altars*, however d’Harnoncourt presents Brenner’s thesis in a more compact and simplified version. Both intellectuals are discussing the importance of the role that Spain played in the creation of the Mexican identity, as well as in the development of the artistic identity. It is important to note the relative dates of both *Idols Behind Altars*, and the Mexican Arts exhibition - the first was published in 1929 and the latter started its circulation in 1930. Brenner is the one to so eloquently describe the importance, however, to the ever

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 41-42.

present connection of the Mexican and art:

Therefore, it is that nowhere as in Mexico has art been so organically a part of life, at one with the national ends and the national longings, fully the possession of each human unit, always the prime channel for the nation and for the unit... Mexico goes ever through the creative travail. If the stench of its discards hangs in the air, only people who are all nose sense nothing but the stench. It is a land that has lain naked and bleeding, a people that has lived in pain. But it is a strong, live body, so alive that it can go to the extremes of beauty and horror with the same zest. And it is a land that moves, a people not dead, nor now in resurrection, but constantly reborn.¹¹⁷

In the applied arts section of the Mexican Arts exhibition, there is a certain affinity for the folk art created in Mexico, much like the emphasis that Brenner places on folk art in *Idols Behind Altars*. Although D'Harnoncourt is most likely not working from the *Idols* text, he does have Brenner on his committee. This means that most of the ideas that we see in *Idols* could be considered as translated into this exhibition. In the exhibition catalogue, the objects are divided into separate categories, each with a short paragraph or introduction that discusses the importance of these pieces. Some of the categories include, early featherwork, early ivory, bone, stone and wood carvings, early pottery, early straw work, early and contemporary masks, presented with other contemporary works of basketry and rush decorations, copper, tin, steel, and silver work, glassware, pottery, and even toys and marquettes - to name a few. In the introduction to the applied arts section, d'Harnoncourt writes how the "applied arts are the truest form of self-expression of the Mexican people... Every aspect of native life is reflected in the work of the artisan, and such new elements as have been introduced have been absorbed, merged, and given out again in new and often surprising forms. These many articles of personal

¹¹⁷ Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, 32.

use remain the Mexican Indian's unique contribution to the civilization of his country.”¹¹⁸

This statement made in the catalogue by d'Harnoncourt is extremely reminiscent of the argument that Brenner is creating with *Idols Behind Altars*. The true artistic expression that is inherent in the Mexican culture is one which will always be present in the artistic identity of Mexico.

His inclusion of these objects as a demonstration of the development of the Mexican identity are meant to illustrate the unique art that was produced unique to Mexico. One of the reviewers of the exhibition, for example, writes about the impact that the pottery section made on the United States audience: “Pottery is without doubt the most outstanding artistic product of the modern applied arts of Mexico, and the contemporary examples in this exhibition show such a range of traditions, techniques, and forms that they appear to be products of different centuries.”¹¹⁹ This exemplifies the argument that it was the folk art that most interested the US audience.

The fine arts section of this exhibition is meant to not only illustrate the current contemporary art that was being produced in Mexico, but to also display the talent of Indian painters prior to 1910, which according to d'Harnoncourt was when the fine arts of Mexico as an expression of the Mexican painter's determination to be himself began.¹²⁰ By displaying early painting and early sculpture alongside contemporary painting and sculpture, d'Harnoncourt attempted to create a whole and complete understanding of the current movement of Mexican muralism and the Mexican Renaissance, mostly as a response to this newly found freedom as an individual artist in a

¹¹⁸ d'Harnoncourt, *Mexican Arts: Catalogue*, 3.

¹¹⁹ d'Harnoncourt, “The Loan Exhibition of Mexican Art,” 216.

¹²⁰ d'Harnoncourt, *Mexican Arts: Catalogue*, xii.

country with such a stifling history.

Figure 3.2: Retablo section, Installation View of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, 1940.



Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art 1940

The third exhibition is the 1940 exhibit entitled *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, first presented at MoMA, which was put together by both scholars and curators from American and Mexican institutions, thus forming a more complete and effective narrative when attempting to describe modern Mexican art by creating a trajectory of its history and displaying objects from each specific time period, alongside the contemporary. This exhibition was also the result of political and social forces, similar to the *Mexican Arts* exhibition, and, as Indyck-Lopez argues, “this exhibition came at a time when US interest in Mexican culture had reached its apogee and was just before socially engaged

modernism was supplanted by international abstraction.”¹²¹ *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* opened at the Museum of Modern Art in 1940, and when compared to the 1928 exhibit at the Art Center, and with the 1930 travelling exhibit of *Mexican Arts*, *Twenty Centuries* is, simply put, the more complete and successful version, probably because this exhibition rejected the structure of d’Harnoncourt’s *Mexican Arts* show. In the MoMA show, modern art was placed next and in reference to the archaic monuments of its ancient civilizations, as opposed to how d’Harnoncourt attempted to do the same but with the rural folk art.

The exhibit of *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* is divided into four sections, Pre-Spanish Art, Colonial Art, Folk Art (arte popular), and Modern Art. The objects and artworks are presented in a traditional linear timeline, which create a sense of understanding of the development of the Mexican culture, leading up to Modern Art. In a certain aspect, this can be related to the work of Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, which also functioned as a source for the *Twenty Centuries* exhibition, but only cited in the section dedicated to Modern Art. This was probably asked of her because of her expertise in the field, seeing as how in the 1940s, Brenner was already well known as a scholar.

This thesis chooses to focus solely on the section of folk art, which was curated and had the catalogue section written by Roberto Montenegro. In this section, Montenegro discusses the importance of folk art that has been present since the Spanish conquest, and how the conqueror was amazed by the objects created by the indigenous. Interestingly, a reference that Montenegro makes in folk art in relation to the Spanish

¹²¹ Indych-Lopez, *Muralism without Walls*, 158.

conquerors is: “The influence of the Spaniards naturally became apparent in these numerous and diverse objects of popular art, but the authentic stamp of the native Mexican craftsman remained dominant and is to this day in whatever he makes or decorates.”¹²² Here, Montenegro is referencing this mixture of culture in a very casual and common way, as if it is common knowledge that these two cultures merged and now the modern Mexican produces a certain type of artwork. This section of the catalogue is very brief and should have been more informed and researched. The folk art section of the is then divided into five subsections, those being pottery, weaving, lacquer, masks, and popular painting. In reference to the exhibition itself, and taken mainly from the photographs from the installation views on MoMA’s website, the folk art sections were not the central part of the exhibition and rather aided in creating a trajectory of Mexican art for the US audience. In figure 3.2, for example, there is a wall dedicated to multiple retablos as a means to exemplify popular and votive painting.

One of the main goals of the exhibition was to properly depict and represent the artistic identity, which has evolved over twenty centuries in Mexico. It also functioned as a means to establish Mexico and Mexican civilization and culture within the art historical narrative, however also served as a window to the United States public to view the rich culture and history of Mexico. Indyck-Lopez cites the *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* exhibition and how it was much more successful than the 1930 exhibit because of its incorporation of murals alongside other types of art from Mexico, instead of the drawings and paintings used in *Mexican Arts*. She writes, “*Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* offered a more historically grounded explanation of muralism than did *Mexican Arts*. The

¹²² Roberto Montenegro, “Folk Art,” in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art Catalogue*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1940), 109.

public perception of Mexican muralism in the United States had matured sufficiently by the end of the 1930s to reconcile the political interpretations and the specific formal concerns of public mural painting.”¹²³ Here, Indyk-Lopez is arguing how the foreign audience which was first exposed to Mexican art in 1928 and in 1930 had evolved their perspective from their euro-centric mode of viewing the artwork, and how *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* was more successful in creating an independent existence in an art historical context.

The 1940 *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* exhibition was not only a summation of the decade’s earlier Mexican art exhibitions, but a huge influential presentation of Mexican art that was to be a touchstone for the presentation of Mexican art and its history for much of the rest of the twentieth century. This idea of Mexican art that the exhibition presented was one that argued for its inclusion within the art historical narrative and to avoid comparison from the euro-centric narrative, as well as its presentation within the museum setting. The establishment of the centrality of folk art in the definition of Mexican art history accomplished by this show directly relates to Brenner’s program for the definition of Mexican art described a decade earlier, in *Idols Behind Altars*. This information can be measured in multiple perspectives. First of all, its inclusion of both Mexican and US curators coming together, and experts from different fields are able to dedicate their expertise where necessary. Secondly, there are more positive contemporary reviews to this exhibition as well.

All three of these exhibitions have been analyzed in an attempt to situate the creation of the Mexican artistic identity in the United States. The efforts by Anita

¹²³ Indyk-Lopez, *Muralism without Walls*, 11.

Brenner to establish Mexico and its cultural and artistic production help ground certain all three of these exhibitions in a search for a more authentic Mexican art history that does not ignore the indigenous. In all three exhibitions, folk art plays an important role and is framed as an authentic expression of Mexican visual culture, which was one of Brenner's key theses both in her text and in the photography she featured in *Idols Behind Altars*.

In this thesis, there has been a search for the constructed identity, the Mexican identity in the United States, specifically in its construction and formation through the interpretation and understanding of art and folk art in a foreign setting. The way in which Brenner participated in contributing to this formation of the Mexican artistic identity is largely in part due to her advocacy for Mexican culture, her biculturalism, and her passion for Mexican art. Her own vision of interpreting art through the popular, artisanal, and indigenous is a fundamental factor in understanding Mexican art in this country. She presented this artwork with a different perspective, and she represents the ideals and the sensibilities of an era that marks a rebirth in Mexican art. Today, we can acknowledge Brenner as a pioneer because of her advocacy and passion for Mexican art and culture, and especially for creating this transnational cultural conversation between the two countries.

Bibliography

Archival Sources

Anita Brenner Boxes, Harry Ransom Center

Arciniegas, German. "Una Interpretacion Plastica de Mexico," *El Grafico*, 1930.

Beals, Carleton. "Goats Head on a Martyr." *The Saturday Review of Literature*, December 7, 1929.

Brenner, Anita. "Mexican Renaissance." *New York World*, 1928.

Brenner, Anita "The Living Art of the Mexican Primitives." *L'art Vivant*, 1926.

Duffus, R.L. "Mexico's Art Explains the Mexicans." *New York Times*, October 1929.

Heliodoro Valle, Rafael. "Mexico visto de lejos." *Revue de L'amerique Latine*, June 2, 1930.

The Latin American Bookshelf. "Brief Reviews of Books Valuable to all Interested in Hispanic America." January, 1930.

Needham, Wilbur. "Books." *Saturday Night*, April 5, 1930.

O. Clough, Wilson. "Ancient Aztec in Modern Art." *The Woodstock Bulletin*, August 11, 1930.

Porter, Katherine Anne. "Old Gods and New Messiahs." *The Herald Tribune*, September, 1929.

Taylor, Alva W. "The Art of Mexico." *Christian Century*, August 27, 1930.

Winton, G.B. "The Rebirth of Mexican Art Under the Modern Regime." *Knoxville, Tennessee Journal*, January 12, 1930.

Primary Sources

A.W.K., "Exhibition of Mexican Art: November 25 to December 14 1930." *The Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 28, no. 170 (December, 1930): 113-116.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4170274>

- Azuela, Alicia, Anna Indych-Lopez, Susannah Joel Glusker, Carol Miller, Carlos Monsivais, and Nadia Ugalde Gomez. *Anita Brenner: Vision of an Age/Vision de Una Epoca*. Edited by Nadia Ugalde Gomez. Mexico City: Editorial RM Mexico, 2007.
- Brenner, Anita. *Idols Behind Altars: Modern Mexican Art and Its Cultural Roots*. New York: Payson & Clarke, 1929.
- Brenner, Anita. *The Wind That Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution, 1910 – 1942*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1996.
- Brenner, Anita. *Avant-Garde Art & Artists in Mexico: Anita Brenner's Journals of the Roaring Twenties*. Edited by Susannah Joel Glusker. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2010.
- Cordero Reiman, Karen. "The Best Maugard Drawing Method: A Common Ground for Modern Mexicanist Aesthetics". *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 26, (2010): 44–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41432953>.
- Cordero Reiman, Karen, Laura Mart, Doris Berger, Tatiana Flores, Linde B. Lehtinen, and Ilan Stavans. *Another Promised Land: Anita Brenner's Mexico*. Edited by Karen Cordero Reiman. Los Angeles: The Skirball Cultural Center, 2017.
- Delpar, Helen. *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920 – 1935*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992.
- Eder, Rita. "Modernismo, modernidad, modernizacion: piezas para armar una historiografia del nacionalismo cultural mexicano," in *El Arte en Mexico: Autores, Temas, Problemas*, edited by Rita Eder 341 – 371. Mexico City: Fondo Cultural Economica, Conaculta, 2001.
- Glusker, Susannah Joel. *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998.
- d'Harnoncourt, Rene. "The Loan Exhibition of Mexican Arts." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 25, no. 10 (October 1930): 210 – 217. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3255929>
- d'Harnoncourt, Rene. *Mexican Arts: Catalogue of an Exhibition Organized for and Circulated by The American Federation of Arts*. Printed in the United States, 1930.
- Indych-Lopez, Anna. *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros in the United States 1927 – 1940*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.

- Montenegro, Roberto, Antonio Castro, Alfonso Caso, Manuel Toussaint, Miguel Covarrubias. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art Catalogue*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1940.
- O'Connor, Francis. "The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States During the 1930s and After." In *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, edited by Detroit Institute of Art, 215 – 234. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.
- Oles, James, and Karen Cordero. *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914 - 1947*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.
- Preziosi, Donald. "Collecting/Museums." In *Critical Terms for Art History*, edited by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 407–18. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Rendon, Darcy. "Mexican Art Exhibitions in New York as Cultural Diplomacy, 1928 – 1932." master's report, The University of Texas at Austin, 2016. Accessed May 10, 2018. <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/43754>
- Rivas, Guillermo. "Notes of the Carnegie Exhibit." *Mexican Life* 6, no. 7 (August 1930): 23 – 27.
- Rostas, Susana. "Mexicanidad: The Resurgence of the Indian in Popular Mexican Nationalism." *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (2002): 20-38..
- Tarica, Estelle. "Indigenismo." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History. 10 May. 2018.
<http://latinamericanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-68>
- Tablada, Jose Juan. "Recent Activities in Mexican Art." *Parnassus* 2, No. 4 (1930): 16 – 48. doi:10.2307/797781.
- Tejada, Roberto. *National Camera: Photography and Mexico's Image Environment*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Tenorio-Trillo, Mauricio. "The Cosmpolitan Mexican Summer, 1920-1949." *Latin American Research Review* 32, no. 3 (1997): 224-242..
- Universidad Autonoma de Mexico. "Alfonso Pruneda Garcia" Accessed May 10, 2018. Last modified 2001.
<https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/1/254/48.pdf>

Vanesian, Kathleen. "Las Artes Populares en Mexico: Mexico's First Folk Art Exhibition." Accessed May 7th.
<http://www.ladap.org/las-artes-populares-en-mexico-mexicos-folk-art-exhibition/>