

The Pattern of Artistic Nationalism: Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in the Fifties
Amelia Chávez Santiago

Abstract

Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale first exhibited in 1950, followed by another in 1952 and a final iteration in 1958. These three national pavilions showcased the canon of modern Mexican art, emphasising Figuration and Realism through painting and engraving. These artistic trends were strongly supported and promoted by the Mexican government, which sought to officially represent the nation through the most prominent artists of the Post-revolutionary Artistic Movement.

This text also discusses the Biennale's relaunch in 1948, the exhibition's goals, and the significance of the invitation extended to Mexico by the Biennale Organising Committee. The active collaboration between Mexico's cultural representatives and Italian organisers was crucial in realising Mexico's initial exhibitions. From the outset of Mexico's first participation, there was close collaboration between Fernando Gamboa, the commissioner responsible for Mexico's Pavilion, and Rodolfo Pallucchini, the General Secretary of Biennale. Noteworthy, the role of these cultural agents was crucial in ensuring the success of Mexico's initial exhibitions at the Venice Biennale. Gamboa played a key role in the selection and exhibition of the Mexican works; while Pallucchini, as part of the Organising Committee, was instrumental in driving the Biennale's structural and conceptual renewal in the post-War period.

Keywords

Pavilion of Mexico, Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement (*Movimiento Artístico Posrevolucionario*), Modern Mexican Art, Fernando Gamboa, Rodolfo Pallucchini

The Pattern of Artistic Nationalism: Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in the Fifties

Amelia Chávez Santiago

Introduction. The modernising of Mexico's cultural apparatus

The National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, hereafter INBAL) was founded on December 1, 1946, to oversee the administration of Fine Arts.¹ Just like INBAL's direction, positions in its various Departments were held by figures that represented the intellectual and artistic vanguard of Mexican cultural life. Following the sudden death of painter Julio Castellanos, museographer Fernando Gamboa² was appointed head of the Department of Plastic Arts (Departamento de Artes Plásticas, hereafter DAP), the office that among its functions organised national and international exhibitions. Gamboa, who already had a substantial career in the field of museums, was promoted to two other positions in INBAL. In 1947 he was named director of the recently founded National Museum of Plastic Arts (Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, hereafter MNAP), and in 1950 he started as INBAL's Institute's Deputy Director.

The MNAP was inaugurated on September 15, 1947, as the first museum in the country equipped with state-of-the-art museography to exhibit national collections that were scattered between the National Museum and the Academia de San Carlos. Gamboa's main selection and exhibition criterion was grounded in quality and cultural significance. Thus, Fernando Gamboa based MNAP's museography discourse on highlighting Mexico's cultural greatness

1

The project for restructuring the cultural apparatus consisted in the rescue of arts and its strengthening based on education, creation and dissemination. Mexico's authorities were the main Maecenas and promotor of national artistic production, backing, promoting and fostering music, dance, theatre, literature, architecture and the plastic arts. To learn more about the matter see: Miguel Alemán Valdés, *Legado Cultural. La creación del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1948-1952* (México: Fundación Miguel Alemán A.C., 2017); *Revista México en el Arte del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1948-1952* (México: Fundación Miguel Alemán A.C., 2020).

2

Fernando Gamboa (Mexico City, 1909-1990). His legacy bears a high cultural value, since, by establishing the parameters for exhibiting Mexican art, he is often considered the founder of Mexico's museography. He was founder and director of museums and responsible for selection of artistic pieces at a national level. He was also primarily responsible for organising panoramic Mexican exhibitions abroad, such as the presentation of Mexico's Pavilion at World Fairs from 1965 to 1970. From 1972 to 1981 he was director of the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City. From 1983 to 1990 he was director of *Fomento Cultural Banamex*. For more information see his archive website: promotorafernandogamboa.org/index.html, last accessed April 2024.

from Pre-Hispanic times to the modern era through a continuous art historical narrative. By emphasising the importance of rescuing significant artistic values from oblivion, Gamboa was reaffirming the stature of major figures, and supporting the emerging generation of Mexican artists who would be part of future exhibitions.³

Clearly, Mexico's cultural policy favored the main exponents of the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement,⁴ by selecting their works for national collections and exhibitions, such as those at the Venice Biennale. From 1947 to 1949, the epicentre of artistic appreciation, MNAP's were dedicated to temporary exhibitions and homages to José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991), who were the artists officially "instituted"⁵ at the beginning of Miguel Alemán's government. As the commissioner of exhibitions, Gamboa played a vital role in circulating Mexico's identity through the arts. His diplomatic ability as a cultural agent and commissioner of exhibitions was fundamental for initiating international exchanges through exhibition projects that facilitated political agreements, established commercial ties, and increased tourism. Initially focused on Latin-American countries, these efforts later extended to Europe. Since 1948, several European capitals had expressed a strong interest in hosting exhibitions of Mexican Art, which would imply adequate planning and considerable investment from the Mexican government. The project began to take shape with the involvement of INBAL's director, orchestra director Carlos Chávez, at UNESCO's Fourth Meeting carried out in Paris in 1949.⁶

Reinstatement of the art exhibitions after the war

After the fall of fascism, Italy's Committee of National Liberation assumed governance and began a process of reorganisation. In the cultural sphere, Extraordinary Commissioners were assigned for administering Autonomous Entities which cut out fascist policies and proclaimed the new "Fundamental Principles of Republic of Italy's Constitution".

As an autonomous entity, the Venice Biennale operated for years without financial support from the state. Therefore, in 1947, in response to the urgent need for funding to organise the first artistic gathering of the post-war period, a request for resources was submitted to the Ministry of Public Tasks.⁷ Some

3

"The exalting of our great artistic values – Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros and Tamayo –, the consolidating of immediate values – O'Gorman, Orozco Romero, Zalce, Anguiano, Guerrero Galván and others – and the birth of new values – Nishizawa, Nicolás Moreno, Carlos Sánchez, Castro Pacheco and others – incorporated to the group that Mexico's School of Plastic Arts represented, the revelation of Mexican values of the past – Bustos, Manila, Icaza and others –". Fernando Gamboa, "Memorias del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes: presencia de las Artes Plásticas: 1952", in *México en el Arte*, no. 12 (1952): 75.

4

Nowadays to think of a "Mexican School of Painting" or "Mexican Muralism" as a valid and descriptive concept of plastic activity in the first half of 20th century is now obsolete. A more precise definition for the ensemble of arts emerging after Mexico's revolution would be "Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement", based on the following reflection: "to overcome these reductive ideas or myths it's important to consider that during the twenties and the thirties there were different pictorial languages that made up, more than a school, a heterogenous movement characterized by the search for distinct languages, linked to artistic modernity", Ana Torres Arroyo, "¿Ruptura?", *Revista Discurso Visual*, (July-September 2004), <https://discursovisual.net/dvweb01/agora/agotorres.htm>, last accessed January 2022. Translation by the author.

5

José Teixeira Coelho, *Diccionario crítico de política cultural: cultura e imaginario*, (España: Gedisa, 2009), 56.

6

"La Delegación de México ante la UNESCO, lista", *El Nacional*, August 16, 1949. "Sale a Europa el maestro Carlos Chávez", *El Universal*, August 29, 1949. "Exposición mexicana para la UNESCO", *Excélsior*, August 16, 1949.

7

Giandomenico Romanelli, "Biennale 1895: the Birth, Infancy and First Acts of a Creature of Genius", in *Venice and the Biennale. Itineraries of Taste: Catalog of an exhibition in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Biennale*, (Milan: Fabbri Editori, 1995), 36.

pavilions⁸ showed signs of deterioration due to neglect and their temporary use as storage facilities, but only minimal restoration work was required. The Venice Biennale, then, was revived under the supervision of architect, designer, and politician Giovanni Ponti,⁹ who served as President and Special Commissioner, and under the direction of art historian Rodolfo Pallucchini,¹⁰ who was appointed General Secretary. Pallucchini skillfully facilitated cultural exchange between institutions, commissioners and artists when supervising the first art encounters after the war, leaving a deep mark on international art history.

The Subcommittee of Plastic Arts was essential to establish educational and cultural goals at the Venice Biennale. It was formed by five modern artists – Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), Felice Casorati (1881-1966), Marino Marini (1924-1997), Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), and Pio Semeghini (1878-1964) – and four intellectuals with significant contributions to art criticism and teaching: Nino Barbantini (1884-1952), Roberto Longhi (1890-1970), Carlos Ludovico Ragghianti (1910-1987), and Lionello Venturi (1885-1961). The plurality of visions proved foundational for the first post-War Biennale, showcasing different pictorial currents and art criteria.¹¹ This approach marked a departure from totalitarian aesthetic principles, distancing the event from Fascist ideology and re-establishing the Venice Biennale as a truly international platform for art [fig. 1].

Rodolfo Pallucchini articulated that the first post-war exhibition would be a ‘new ambience of liberty’, that consisted in going back to the basic principles upon which the Biennale was founded: the attraction of a European audience, and the presence of international exhibitions with educational and informative objectives for young Italian artists. These aimed not to enclose art into schools, tendencies or representative works of a historic or social moment, but rather to see them as productions coming from the artists individual decisions and mutual influences.¹² Pallucchini recognised art based on the analysis of the pure

8

Before 1907, the Palazzo dell' Esposizione or Italy Palace and latter Central Pavilion, was the only place to exhibit the work of foreign and Italian artists. Due to the building's limits of space were suggested building national pavilions. National pavilions situated in the Giardini are historic samples of the epoch's architecture and represent the national image, although many of them have been sold, rebuilt and modified. To see the nationalistic identity that each nation has given to its pavilion and approach to geopolitical relations that also correspond to power prerogatives in the Venetian space, see Joel Robinson, "Folkloric Modernism: Venice Giardini della Biennale and the Geopolitics of the Architecture", *Open Arts Journal*, no. 2 (Winter 2013-2014), https://openartsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/oaj_issue2_robinson_final_v2.pdf, last accessed March 2024. Anita Orzes, "La Bienal de Venecia y sus ciudades", *Revistas Científicas Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Anales de Historia del Arte* 24 (2014).

9

Giovanni Ponti (Milan, 1891-1979). Architect, industrial designer, artist and advertising agent. He was teacher at Milan Polytechnic, instigator of Italian design in the post-War period, founder and director of *Domus* and *Style* magazines. He actively participated in Italy's resistance against fascism. After the war, he backed Christian Democratic Party in Veneto region and was elected deputy of Chamber of Rome and Receiver of Venice in the first democratic elections.

10

Rodolfo Pallucchini (Milan, 1908-Venice, 1989). Art historian, academic and public officer. He was General Secretary of the Venice Biennale from 1948 to 1957. From 1958 to 1973 he was Presidency of Centro Internazionale Studi Architettura Andrea Palladio. In 1968 he entered as National Member of Accademia dei Lincei. In 1972 he chaired the Institute of Art History of Fondazione Giorgio Cini, the institution which now houses his personal archive. See Bruce Boucher, "Rodolfo Pallucchini, obituary", *The Burlington Magazine* 131, no. 1039 (October 1989), 708, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/883995>, last accessed March 2024.

11

See Irene Parentini, "The decade of 1940 till the postwar: from Mariani's latest Biennales to Rodolfo Pallucchini's first ones", in *Artisti lucchesi alla Biennale di Venezia* (MA diss.: Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2022), <https://unitesi.unive.it/retrieve/863e4870-b80c-4d42-a38d-cfd31c6f60f/883095-1263544.pdf>, last accessed May 2024.

12

Maria Vittoria Martini, "La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978. La Rivoluzione Incompiuta" (PhD diss.: Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2011), <https://iris.unive.it/handle/10579/1125>, last accessed November 2024. Giandomenico Romanelli, "Biennale 1895: the Birth, Infancy and First Acts of a Creature of Genius", in *Venice and the Biennale. Itineraries of taste*. (Italy: Fabbri Editori, 1995). See also, Lawrence Alloway, "The Venice Biennale, 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl" (New York: Graphic Society, 1968), 120-145.

fig. 1

The Subcommittee of Plastic Arts in Palazzo Giustiniani, ca. 1947. From left to right: Pio Semeghini, Felice Casorati, Nino Barbantini, Antonio Gnan (standing), Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Carlo Carrà, Domenico Varagnolo, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Lionello Venturi, Giorgio Morandi, Roberto Longhi and Marino Marini. Photo taken from the web: Accademia degli Incerti. Fototeca italiana del secolo breve.



form, rating works from a formalist perspective, that is, appreciating the pieces for the means adopted: the use of colour, strokes, technique, and any information contained within the piece itself.¹³ Another approach upon which the Biennale's revival depended was the open call to retrospective exhibitions and to artistic tendencies yet unknown. This inclusive approach led to significant success in the early postwar iterations, enabling the Venice Biennale to regain its position as a leader in the international art world. The first of these opened on May 1, 1948, with the participation of fourteen nations.¹⁴ The Giardini became a neutral space in the world's political cartography, allowing it "to become a means to strengthen modern art's historical-artistic canon".¹⁵

Winter 1947, the Venice Biennale sends an invitation to Mexico

The Biennale Organising Committee was highly invested in including the Mexican Post-Revolutionary Artistic Movement in the first post-war Biennale. Its interest was nurtured through exchanges of ideas with artists, art critics, and diplomatic representatives who had experienced Mexican art during their visits in the 1940s—years marked by cultural effervescence and significant artistic exchange between

13

Pallucchini, specialist in Renaissance Venetian art, renewed his analytical tools from the first postwar Biennale, when placing in his personal library modern books on Aesthetics, Ethic, Modern Art History and international exhibitions, see Alessandro del Puppo, "La biblioteca del novecentista", in *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte* 35 (2011): 168, www.jstor.org/stable/43140568?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents.html, last accessed May 2024.

14

At the Italia Palace individual exhibitions of Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee and Oscar Kokoschka, the Austrian artist scorned by the Nazi regime as a producer of "degenerate art", were held. Pieces were also exhibited by Vincent van Gogh, Carlos Carrà, De Chirico and Morandi. Another exhibition the Biennale's Secretary paid attention to, was around one hundred pieces of French Impressionism which were placed at the German Pavilion. A great protagonist of the 1948 Biennale was American gallerist and collector Peggy Guggenheim, patron and friend of European and American artists from the first half of 20th century. Collezione Peggy Guggenheim was shown at the Greece pavilion owing to that country's absence during its civil war. There were pieces in the fields of Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism and Action painting.

15

Stefano Collicelli Cagol and Vittoria Martini, "The Venice Biennale at Its Turning Points. 1948 and the Aftermath of 1968", in Noemi de Haro García, Patricia Mayayo, and Jesús Carrillo (eds.), *Making Art History in Europe After 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 87.

Mexican and foreign artists. The first rapprochement between the Biennale Organising Committee and Mexico's government representatives occurred on December 8, 1947, through a letter by Ponti to Mexico's ambassador in Italy, Mariano Armendariz del Castillo:

It would be very welcome if this Presidency could present Mexican art, which is rich in elements of exceptional interest, by little known artists, and exhibitions of Aztec art, which, although somewhat reduced because of a lack space, could be sufficiently explainable. In reference to contemporary art, we've already asked Valentine Gallery, of New York, for the loan of a dozen of Tamayo's paintings. None the less, we'd like very much to present the work of other Mexican artists of today, especially Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Miguel Covarrubias, who in our opinion, could represent the Mexican art of today with dignity. All said, two halls could be set aside for Mexico: one for exhibiting Aztec art and other for showing contemporary artists. I sincerely hope this participation is but the first step towards a regular and richer participation in Venice Biennales of Figurative Arts.¹⁶

In response, Armendariz del Castillo committed to sending the request to Mexico's government, although only smaller archaeological pieces could be sent, owing to the fact that "It's impossible to move sculptures from the ages before Cortes".¹⁷ In a subsequent letter dated December 29, Ponti made a specific request for works by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and Rufino Tamayo.¹⁸

Ten days before the Venice Biennale's opening, Alfonso Guerra sent a letter to Manuel Gual Vidal, a senior official at the Secretariat of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, hereafter SEP) and immediate superior to INBAL's director. In this letter, Guerra emphasised the Biennale's significance in Europe's cultural landscape and how "Mexico's plastic arts have awoken in Italy great interest. This is why we're inclined to believe our contribution shall be well received [...] I beg you let us be aware of the agreement taken regarding the invitation in question as soon possible".¹⁹ Ultimately, on June 7, INBAL's director replied to Guerra, acknowledging the international relevance of the Venice Biennale. However, he added that "the plan of Plastic Arts activities of this Institute for the current year is totally finished, it being impossible to consider the participation of Mexico at the Venice Biennale".²⁰

1950. Mexico attends the Venice Biennale

In December 1949, Giovanni Ponti and Rodolfo Pallucchini extended a new invitation to INBAL Director Carlos Chávez and Subdirector Fernando Gamboa through Benedetto d'Acunzo, the chargé d'affaires at the Italian Embassy in Mexico. The Organising Committee sought the inclusion of Mexican visual arts in the

16

Letter from Giovanni Ponti to Mariano Armendáriz del Castillo, December 8, 1947. La Biennale di Venezia: Archivio Storico Arti Contemporanee, Serie Paesi, 40. Messico -1947-1958. XXIV-Messico. Hereafter: ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40. XXIV Messico. Translation by the author.

17

Letter from Mariano Armendáriz del Castillo a Giovanni Ponti, December 26, 1947. ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40. XXIV Messico.

18

Letter from Giovanni Ponti to Mariano Armendáriz del Castillo, December 29, 1947. ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40. Messico -1947-1958, folder: XXIV-Messico.

19

Communication of Alfonso Guerra, Major Officer of SRE to Manuel Gual Vidal, Secretariat of Public Education. Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México. III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9. Hereafter: AHGE-SRE.

20

Communication of Carlos Chávez to Alfonso Guerra, February 27, 1948. AHGE-SRE- III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9.

second post-war Biennale, scheduled for 1950. They requested a pictorial sample that would bring together the production of four artists with decades of experience: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, plus Rufino Tamayo, known for his semifigurative plastic language, both modern and international. In exchange, Benedetto d'Acunzo offered support to facilitate transportation, exhibition, and return of the artworks, promising two halls at the Palazzo d'Italia and covering the costs of the catalogue publication and all related expenses.²¹

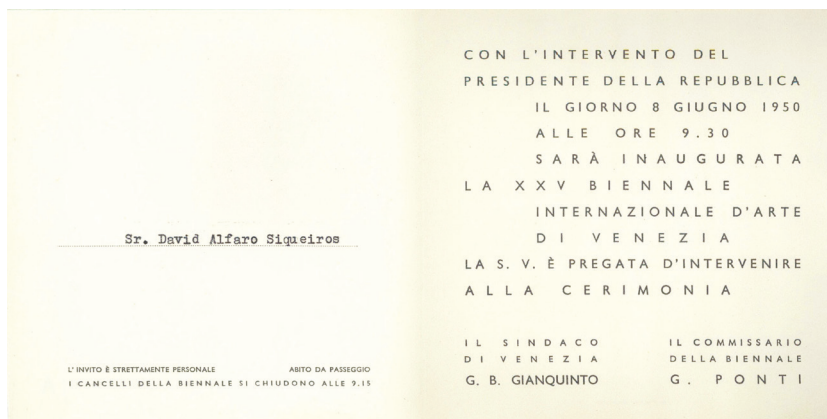
In order to enjoy a closer interaction, the Organising Committee relied on the support of painter Guido Caprotti Pacchetti,²² who was residing in Mexico and had attended Diego Rivera's National Exhibition: Fifty Years of his Artistic Work (*Cincuenta años de labor artística*) at the Palace of Fine Arts in 1949. Caprotti, alongside Arnaldo Cosco, the Italian Embassy's cultural attaché in Mexico, had a first meeting with Fernando Gamboa with favourable results.²³ In addition, Benedetto d'Acunzo sent the invitation to Manuel Tello Baurraud, Mexico's Foreign Relations secretary, to ensure that the relevant official institutions were informed of the open invitation to participate in this cultural event.

For Caprotti, Mexican muralism was a revelation, as he described it as having "A very interesting profound local character".²⁴ He wasn't the only one for whom the Mexican plastic arts generated interest, since due to the scarcity of cultural exchange between the two continents, the plastic arts of the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement were practically unknown.

Given the logistical support offered and the existing interest of the Mexican government in presenting its art in Europe, the invitation was accepted. Fernando Gamboa, INBAL's Deputy Director and head of the DAP, was appointed commissioner with works by Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco and Tamayo, and set aside the original plan to include a pre-Columbian art collection [fig. 2 and fig. 3]. Mexico was originally assigned a hall within the Palazzo d'Italia, a site for exhibitions shared by various groups of Italian artists and those nations attending for first time. On their behalf, Romania and Czechoslovakia, each with its pavilion in the Giardini, declined to participate in the Biennale. Both nations, having recently joined the Eastern Bloc, were now aligned with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Biennale Organising Committee consequently offered the

fig. 2
Cover of Venice Biennale
invitation sent to David Alfaro
Siqueiros, 1950
© Centro de Investigación y
Documentación Siqueiros-
INBAL.

fig. 3
Inside of Venice Biennale
invitation sent to David Alfaro
Siqueiros, 1950
© Centro de Investigación y
Documentación Siqueiros-
INBAL.



21

Communication of Fernando Gamboa sent to Alfonso Guerra, February 27, 1950. AHGE-SRE-III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9.

22

Guido Caprotti (1887-1966) was a painter of Costumbrista scenes and landscapes; Mexico's government named him Member of the Atheneum of Science and Arts and he was given a Cross and Badge "General Ignacio Comonfort", Mexico's Civil Order and Great Cross of Aztec Eagle.

23

ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40, folder: XXIV-Messico.

24

Manuscript letter of Guido Caprotti to Romolo Bazzoni, September 14, 1949. ASAC: Serie Paesi, 40. Messico -1947-1958, folder: XXIV-Messico.

Romanian Pavilion²⁵ to Mexico for its exhibition, providing a dedicated space for each artist's planned display. This loan turned out to be a great opportunity for Mexico as it allowed a national debut in a national pavilion and placed that country at the exhibition's epicentre, at the same level as nations that had participated for decades.

Gamboa brought together a total of sixty works: thirteen by Orozco, seventeen by Rivera, fourteen by Siqueiros, and sixteen by Tamayo.²⁶ He secured loans from the MNAP collection, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Mexican and American private collectors, and American galleries.²⁷ In general, the willingness of collectors and institutions to lend these works reflected the solid networks of institutional exchange and the strong social and cultural ties that Fernando Gamboa had established as a high-level cultural agent representing the Mexican government.

On June 8, 1950, Mexico's Pavilion was officially inaugurated by Guido Gonella, Italy's Minister of Public Institutions. The event was marked by Gonella, Gamboa, and Pallucchini discussing Orozco's paintings *Skin in Blue* and *The Dismembered Man*, both created in 1948 as part of the series *Los Teúles*. [fig. 4]. Mexico's exhibition started in Romania's pavilion lobby. This was indicated in Gamboa's instructions as a "small Introductory Hall" housing one work by each artist: *Ethnography* (1939) by Siqueiros, *Animals* (1941) by Tamayo, *The Dead* (1943) by Orozco and *Flower Carrier* (1935) by Rivera. The Romanian Pavilion's architectonic elements – high walls and three wide salons that allowed for the free flow of visitors – helped to better exhibit pieces on a grand scale. They also evidence an element referring directly to exhibition characteristics in Fernando Gamboa's museographies: pieces were placed without chronological ordering, introductory texts or documents displaying titles, dates, or techniques.²⁸ At the 1950 Mexico Pavilion the spectator's aesthetic experience commenced from their own observations, encouraging each viewer to relate the iconographic content to their own socio-cultural context.

The Mexican Pavilion set a lineal narrative of the nation's history, which iconographically revealed the proposed foundations for constructing a nationalist identity through key events like the Conquest, the Revolution and the Modern Age. This narrative was conveyed through the position of the artworks.²⁹ The museographer displayed Tamayo's pieces in the left hall, Rivera's and Orozco's in the central hall and Siqueiros's in the right hall. By placing Orozco and Rivera in the entrance Gamboa proposed an introductory pathway towards the nationalist plastic arts, highlighting the works of two muralists with already consolidated careers.

25

Designed by Italian architect Brenno del Giudice and built in 1932, it serves as an example of nationalist architecture of the Fascist period. It was conceived as an "art salon" with three halls on a rectangular base. The most important central hall was flanked by two smaller ones. In 1962, the walls that divided the three halls were demolished, leaving a larger exhibition space.

26

"Messico", *Catalogo Generale XXV Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Alfieri Editore, 1950), 342-353.

27

From MoMA, Gamboa requested three works by Siqueiros – *Ethnography* (1939), *Echo of a Scream* (1937), and *The Sob* (1939) – as well as Orozco's *Zapatistas* (1931) and Tamayo's *Animals* (1941). Additionally, he obtained Rivera's *Flower Day* (1925) from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

28

Ana Garduño, "El curador de la Guerra Fría", in Carmen Gaitán Rojo (ed.), *Fernando Gamboa el arte del riesgo* (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes-Museo Mural Diego Rivera, 2009), 19-21.

29

For Dr. Molina Posadas, Gamboa's museography corresponds to a "historic scheme that explained Mexico as a continuity. The other way of concentration and exhibiting objects in a museum has a narrative rationality, that is, it tells a tale. This is what may be seen in exhibition "Mexican Art: from Pre-Colombian Times to the Present Day" (1952-1953). What came first was the process of separating objects from their specific historic contexts so as to resituate them as part of an absolute of atemporal and universal art. Historical particularities were left out and all objects were consolidated into a tripartite concrete narrative. Thus, all parts refer to this metatext and in so far as belonging to it, Mexico was thus explained, with meaning attributed to birth, resistance, consolidation, and giving as a result the notion of nationality". Carlos A. Molina, "Espacios de la mexicanidad", in *Revista Especialidades* 2, no. 1 (January-June 2012): 115, 124, and 135, http://especialidades.cua.uam.mx/legal2_1_6molina/, last accessed May 2024. Translation by the author.

fig. 4
Mexico's Pavilion, 1950. From left to right in the foreground: the museographer Fernando Gamboa, Guido Gonella Minister of Public Education of the Italian Republic and Rodolfo Pallucchini, Venice Biennale's General Secretary
© Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamboa.



Instead, those pieces by Rivera that were chosen reflected a naïve and folkloric vision of Mexican life, including portraits, festivals, and children: *Dance in Tehuantepec* (1928), *Nocturnal Landscape* (1947), *Indian Girl with Coral Necklace* (1926), *Portrait of Ignacio Sánchez* (1927); and works that refer distinguished people of Mexican political and social life: *Portrait of Benito Juárez* (1948), *Portrait of Enriqueta Dávila* (1949) and *Portrait of Columba Domínguez* (1950), [fig. 5]. Finally, works referring to markets and the sale of flowers like *Flower Carrier* (1935) were placed in the foyer and labelled “Opere caratteristiche di Rivera” (Characteristic Works of Rivera).

The paintings by Siqueiros and Tamayo were placed in opposing halls, with the intention to underline their distinct relevance: of Siqueiros Gamboa intended to emphasise the three-dimensional paintings, the Masonite frames, and his experimentations with materials such as Pyroxyline [fig. 6]. In the case

fig. 5
Hall with paintings of Diego Rivera. From left to right in the foreground: *Dancer Resting* (1939), *Portrait of Lupe Marin* (1938), *Portrait of Columba Domínguez* (1950), *Pre-Columbian America* (1950) and *Portrait Enriqueta Dávila* (1949)
© Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamboa.



of Tamayo, the semi-figurative paintings made with a mastery of colour whose contents reflected the uncertainty of man before the global devastation and spiritual desolation of the post-War period. It is noteworthy that most of the work that Tamayo presented in the Mexican pavilion was available for sale, aligning with the Venice Biennale's guidelines on promoting the circulation and consumption of art. The director of Rome's National Gallery of Modern Art, Palma Bucarelli, purchased Tamayo's *The Scream* (1947)³⁰ for one million lire – a significant sum, as only a few paintings at the 1950 international exhibition matched or exceeded this price among the 576 works sold, which generally went for between 100,000 and 500,000 lire.³¹

Raymond Cogniat, Inspector of Fine Arts and President of the French Artistic Press Association, stated that:

Mexican art is the greatest revelation of the Biennale. We find ourselves before a totally original creation, which has been developed on the fringes of European influences and which has imposed itself with such vehemence that it is impossible to resist.³²

fig. 6
Hall with paintings by David Alfaro Siqueiros. From left to right: *Three Pumpkins* (1946), *The Devil in Church* (1947), *Self Portrait (El Coronelazo)* (1945), *Rock with Figures* (1947) and *Portrait of Angelica* (1947)
© Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamboa.



30

Communication of Venice Biennale to Fernando Gamboa, October 7, 1950. Archive Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamboa, folder-B. Venecia.

31

Palma Bucarelli acquired five paintings in total, with the others being: *Cavallo, cavaliere e caseggiato* by Umberto Boccioni; *Ritratto* by Roberto Melli; *Amalassunta* by Osvaldo Licini; *Coppa chimerica* by Jean Arp and *El Grito* by Tamayo, in Giorgia Cicalini, "Palma Bucarelli e la Biennale di Venezia (1948-1968)", *Storie dell' arte contemporanea* 4, no. 1 (Venice: Edizioni Ca'Foscari, 2019): 129, www.edizionicafoscari.unive.it/media/pdf/books/978-88-6969-367-0/978-88-6969-367-0-ch-08_d3TK8kV.pdf.html, last accessed April 2024. See also Clarissa Ricci & Marie Tavinor (2021), "Art, market and agency at the Venice Biennale, 1895-1993", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 26, no. 4 (2021): 372-374.

32

Jorge J. Crespo, "La exposición Bienal de Venecia y el arte de México", *Cuadernos Americanos* 53, no. 5 (September-October 1950): 295, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/758440#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299, last accessed September 2024. Translation by the author.

These remarks validated the notoriety that Mexican art had gained in Venice. Additional comments from the public included: “Their experiments with what’s new in art interest even the profane”, “The three halls occupied by Mexicans are always full of people”, “Monumental painting, about which much has been said, though few have seen it, now it’s presented for first time before a European public”, “Its dramatism puts you on your knees”, “Let’s return to Mexico, one can hear it everywhere in the exhibition, which undoubtedly is the best praise when it has to do with exposing over 3000 pieces”.³³ The Mexican pavilion, then, was undoubtedly a pleasant surprise for the European public that attended and visited the exhibition.

In addition to official prizes, monetary awards were provided to extend the grants funded by donors and private organisations from industrial, commercial, and cultural sectors, amounting to approximately seven million lire. Among these awards were prizes donated by Count Giuseppe Volpi and the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art. On June 8 and 9, 1950, an official selection of winning artists was made by an international jury composed by the commissioners of national pavilions and, among them was also Fernando Gamboa. The Prize Presidency of the Council of Ministers for a Foreign Painter was given to Henri Matisse. The deliberations then turned to the Second Prize for Foreign Painter, which was also awarded by São Paulo Museum of Modern Art. Due to a tie, another round of voting was made. Unanimously this time, the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros was chosen, winning 500.000 lire.³⁴ When asked why he believed the jury selected him over the two European artists, Siqueiros attributed his win to:

The singularity of Mexican art production, with its human content, with man at the centre of the aesthetic movement, when the basis for a new humanism is sought for, when it’s been battered by two past wars and with another in view.³⁵

The third path of art and new realism

The works displayed in Mexico’s Pavilion became a revelation, highlighting Siqueiros’s innovative techniques, Orozco’s dramatism, Rivera’s Costumbrista portraits and scenes, and Tamayo’s subtlety and vibrant colours. The Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement was distinguished as an original creation charting a unique course between the ideological poles of Social realism and Abstract expressionism. At the same while, European art criticism justified its interest and approval when trying to establish cultural relations between European and Mexican art. They were identifying a ‘common inheritance’ that would integrate Modern Mexican art with the history of international art. The Biennale Organising Committee’s intent with the exhibition of the four Mexican artists was explained by Rodolfo Pallucchini: “We’re interested above all in these painters because they set in doubt the problem of art’s content, a problem that is on the table, precisely amongst Italian painters at the Biennale”.³⁶

33

Fragments taken from art criticisms sent to Secretariat of Foreign Relations by Mexico’s ambassador in Sweden, Gilberto Bosques Saldivar, between June and July, 1950. AHGE-SRE- III/825(45) /24. III-1189-9.

34

The 500,000 lire reward in reality came down to a symbolic prize worth, at the time, six thousand Mexican pesos, half of which Rome’s Gallery of Modern Art paid to Tamayo for his work *The Scream* (1947). One must recall the lire was going through constant inflation due to the circumstances of the post-War period.

35

Jorge J. Crespo de la Serna, “México triunfa en Venecia”, *Tiempo: Semanario de la vida y la verdad* 17, no. 426 (June, 1950): 24, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/759059#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.html, last accessed June 2024. Translation by the author.

36

Jorge J. Crespo, “La exposición Bienal de Venecia y el arte de México”, 295, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/758440#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.html, last accessed June 2024. Translation by the author.

Swedish art critic Gotthard Johansson held that Mexican plastic art represented 'The Third Path of Art'.³⁷ At the 1950 Biennale, a dilemma emerged between artists whose works aligned with new art movements and those who wished to continue engaging with political and social Realism. Although it seemed like a matter of aesthetic preference, the clash between Abstract expressionism and Social realism came to permeate various spheres, including politics.³⁸ Fernando Gamboa surely considered the polarisation established between Western and Eastern Europe, so he planned a selection of works for his exhibition that would prevent the Mexican pavilion from appearing on the Socialist side.³⁹ On a personal level, Gamboa advocated for an art that held human form and content, a stance aligned with the propositions of realism. Shortly after his participation as a curator in Europe, he explained that Mexican art should be considered as a *Neorealismo* (New Realism).⁴⁰ He thought of developing a series of articles about the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement's debut in Europe, leaving a written record of the form and contents of the entire selection displayed in Mexico's Pavilion:

What is new Mexican realism? Ingredients that make it up: nationality, the theme, tradition, national temperament and idiosyncrasy. Colour, the individual and his people. Our age's sensitivity. Form's movement. New materials, traditional techniques and new techniques. Originality [...] Not imitation.⁴¹

Thirty engravers. Mexico's Pavilion in 1952

Mexico confirmed its attendance at beginning of 1952 with Fernando Gamboa as commissioner. Rodolfo Pallucchini confirmed Romania's Pavilion would, once again, house Mexican art,⁴² with the novelty it would share one showroom with six Guatemalan painters.⁴³

37

Gotthard Johansson, "El Tercer Camino del Arte", *Svenska Dagbladet* (July 6, 1950), 2. AHGE-SRE-III/825(45)/24. III-1189-9. In his article, Johansson explains that Mexican painting could bestow a renewed vision to international painting. From his point of view, Mexican art was both primitive and refined, national and modern, elements that would influence European art.

38

Abstract expressionism was a language that worked from the first years of the cultural cold war as an interlocutor for Western European countries to achieve economic and political agreements with both their European peers and the United States. See Nancy Jachec, "Anticommunism at home, Europeanism abroad: Italian Cultural Policy at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1958", in *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 2 (May 2005), <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777305002316>, last accessed September 2024. See also Giulia Quaggio, "El poder suave de las artes: la Bienal de Venecia y la diplomacia cultural entre Italia y España, 1948-1958", *Historia del Presente*, no. 21 (2013), <https://historiadelpresente.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Giulia-Quaggio-3.pdf>, accessed September 2024. See also Frances Stonor Saunders, "Yanqui Doodles", in *Who Paid the Piper?: CIA and Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 2000).

39

Adriana Ortega Orozco, "La primera victoria del arte mexicano en Europa: La XXV Bienal de Venecia en 1950", pp. 157-172, in Dafne Cruz, Claudia Garay (eds.), *Recuperación de la memoria histórica de exposiciones de arte mexicano (1930-1950)* (México City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Posgrado en Historia del Arte, 2016), 164.

40

"Declaraciones del Sr. Fernando Gamboa, subdirector del INBA sobre su reciente viaje a Europa y el proyecto de exposición de arte mexicano", 1951, www.icaa.mfah.org/s/en/item/779886#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.html, last accessed May 2024.

41

Archive Promotora Cultural Fernando Gamba, folder FB.B.Venecia. II/86. Translation by the author.

42

Russia, Romania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia did not accept the invitation to participate in the 1952 Venice Biennale. Rodolfo Pallucchini, "Introduzione", *Catalogo Generale XXVI Biennale di Venezia*, XII.

43

Carlos Mérida, Arturo Martínez, Miguel Alzamora Méndez, Dagoberto Vázquez Castañeda, Roberto Ossaye and Juan Jacobo Rodríguez Padilla.

fig. 7
Mexico's Pavilion, Central
Hall, 1952
© Promotora Cultural Fernando
Gamboa.



Mexico's Pavilion exhibited 134 engravings by thirty artists, fulfilling the objective to make Mexican engraving known in Europe and continuing the historical survey of its postrevolutionary visual arts [fig. 7]. It also meant minimum expenses, as the engravings correspond to works that were easy to transport, care for, and exhibit. Fernando Gamboa did not travel to Venice for the mounting and inauguration, maintaining correspondence with Pallucchini only. His attention focused on organising the major panoramic exhibition *Mexican Art: from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present Day* (*Arte mexicano: desde tiempos precolombinos a nuestros días*), scheduled to start in the summer of 1952,⁴⁴ and to be hosted in Paris, Stockholm, and London.

Carlos Chávez, Director of INBAL, brought the engravings to Venice, as he and other high-ranking officials were traveling to Europe for the opening of Mexico's primary exhibition in Paris. The engravings came from the MNAP in Mexico City and from private Mexican collectors like Margarita Valladares – widow of José Clemente Orozco – as well as Fernando Gamboa, Marte R. Gómez and Alvar Carrillo Gil.⁴⁵

The works spanned from the end of 19th to the first half 20th century: Manuel Manilla, José Guadalupe Posada, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and twenty-five members of the Popular Graphic Workshop (*Taller de Gráfica Popular*, hereafter TGP).⁴⁶ Fernando Gamboa gave continuity to retrospective exhibitions of national visual arts, honouring the artists who laid

44

The exhibition began on May 20, 1952, in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, while the general inauguration of XXVI Venice Biennale was on June 14, 1952.

45

Rodolfo Pallucchini was somewhat concerned that the Mexican display of engravings would closely resemble the grand exhibition planned for Paris, since this would jeopardise the uniqueness of the Mexico Pavilion in Venice. It was found that several engravings were presented at both exhibitions, some of Manilla, Posada, Méndez, Andrea Flores, amongst others. However, in Paris, works by other engravers were also exhibited: Dolores Cueto, Jean Charlot, Óscar Frías, Mariano Paredes, Antonio Pujol, Ramón Sosa Montes. See *Catalogue Art Mexicain: du précolombien a nos jours*, vol. II (1952).

46

The members of the TGP were Andrea Gómez, Ángel Bracho, Ignacio Aguirre, Carlos Lang Alvarado, Luis Arenal, Ávila Abelardo, Arturo García Bustos, Alberto Beltrán, Abelardo Ávila, Alfredo Zalce Torres, Carlos Alvarado Lang, Everardo Ramírez, Francisco Dosamantes, Fernando Castro Pacheco, Franco Lázaro Gómez, Francisco Mora, Federico Cantú, Ignacio Aguirre, Isidoro Ocampo, Jesús Escobedo, José Chávez Morado, Leopoldo Méndez, Luis Arenal, and Pablo O'Higgins.

the groundwork for the development of Mexico's modern engraving. It is evident that his decision reflected his wide knowledge of Modern Mexican art and his understanding of what both the public and art critics would expect from the Venice Pavilion.

The TGP works included woodcuts and linoleum prints in black ink on paper, with only a few lithographs, most created during the 1930s and 1940s. Themes included realistic compositions, ethnographic portraits, popular festivals, and national landscapes.⁴⁷ Some of the works were originally made to support social and trade union causes, for example the repudiation of the Second World War and rejection of Nazism and Fascism. As such, they were often reproduced in flyers and distributed in international congresses, thus forming part of the history of the political and social struggles of the time, such as the World Movement for Peace.

Mexico was looking for another international prize

As mentioned above, David Alfaro Siqueiros won "Second Prize for Foreign Painter" at the 1950 Biennale, so the Mexican museographer focused on engraving in hopes that Mexico's Pavilion would obtain the "Biennale Presidency Prize Reserved for a Foreign Engraver". In his first communication with Pallucchini confirming Mexico's presence at the 1952 Biennale, Gamboa expressed his ambition that another Mexican artist attain acknowledgment:

Quite frankly I yearn for great success for the Venice Biennale that you and other such good friends in the city direct and organize so magnificently. And on my behalf, I don't hide from you that I wish to attain First International Prize for my country's art engraving.⁴⁸

Since the prize was only awarded to living artists, Gamboa's gamble was based on two engravers: Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969) and Alfredo Zalce (1908-2003), founders of the TPG in 1937. Gamboa had known both artists for years; he had attended the National School of Plastic Arts with Zalce, and he and Méndez has worked together in the early 1930s on SEP's "Cultural Missions" as teachers of Plastic arts in elementary schools. The exhibition included twenty-three pieces by Méndez and ten by Zalce.

Among Alfredo Zalce's displayed printings was *Mexico Turns into a Great City* (1947). The engraving is a depiction of unemployment, hunger, misery, and begging. In the centre of the print it is possible to see numerous piled up constructions, from among which emerge figures of different sizes, a naked and malnourished child, as well as shoeless men and a woman in tattered clothing. Facing the buildings that form the composition's centre, a man with a troubled expression searches for a rubbish sack in front of a skinny dog. It is a scene the engraver actually saw firsthand while walking home, the piece criticised the social inequalities brought about by the accelerated urbanisation of Mexico City in the mid-1940s [fig. 8]. Unfortunately, it wasn't a Mexican artist that won the "Biennale Presidency Prize Reserved for a Foreign Engraver", which went instead to Emil Nolde, German engraver and painter, in recognition of his contributions to German expressionism.⁴⁹

47

La Biennale di Venezia: Archivio Storico Arti Contemporanee, "Partecipazione nazionali: Messico". www.asac.labiennale.org/attivita/arti-visive/annali?anno=1952, last accessed April 2024.

48

Letter of Fernando Gamboa to Rodolfo Pallucchini, January 26, 1952. ASAC, 1952: Paesi – Messico. Translation by the author.

49

Emil Nolde, (1867-1956). Was another artist put on trial during the nazi regime. Several of his works were part of the exhibition "Degenerate Art" of 1937. See Germán Padinger, "Arte Degenerado: a 80 años de la más degradante exposición organizada por los nazis en Múnich", www.infobae.com/america/cultura-america/2017/07/19/arte-degenerado-a-80-anos-de-la-mas-degradante-exposicion-organizada-por-los-nazis-en-munich/html, last accessed June 2024.

fig. 8
Alfredo Zalce, *Mexico Turns into a Great City* (1947). Mexico's Pavilion, 1952. Image was taken from the Web: <https://www.arquine.com/mexico-se-convierte-en-una-gran-ciudad-notas-a-partir-de-un-grabado/>.



Certainly, Mexico's second pavilion didn't enjoy the same success as the previous one. That display was seen by critics and the public as an "exhibition in white and black", a metaphor signalling that it did not meet the nuanced expectations set by previous displays.⁵⁰

Mexico's pavilion in 1958. "The unfortunate selection of mexican painting"

It is worth mentioning that Mexico didn't attend at the Venice Biennale of 1954 and 1956, mainly due to the change of public officials and the limited resources destined for cultural dissemination during Adolfo Ruiz Cortines's 6-year term (1952-1958), but in the last year of government, the invitation to attend the Venice Biennale was resumed.⁵¹

50

Adriana Ortiz Castañares, "Historia del pabellón mexicano en la Bienal de Venecia", in Erika Galicia, Fernando Quiles, Zara Ruiz (eds.), *Acervo Mexicano. Legado de Culturas* (Sevilla: Universidad Pablo de Olavide-Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2017), 419, <https://rio.upo.es/rest/api/core/bitstreams/ec982b4b-21b2-465e-b6b1-65fbb390b203/content>, last accessed January 2024.

51

Nevertheless, it must also be remembered that in 1958 Mexico tried to establish itself as seat of a continental art reunion upon organising the *First Interamerican Biennial of Painting and Engraving* in Mexico City. Although the project only made it as far as a second iteration in 1960, it demonstrated the interest to foment more exhibition venues in Latin America. One example of this was the foundation of the São Paulo Biennial in 1951. This was a cultural event that acquired continental importance, and which persists to the present day. See *Memorias de Labores: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes: 1954-1958* (México: INBA, 1958). Miguel Álvarez Acosta, "Discurso pronunciado por el señor licenciado Don Miguel Álvarez Acosta: con motivo de la Primera Bienal Interamericana de Pintura y Grabado, en el Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas el 6 de junio de 1958", www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/823576#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1116%2C0%2C3930%2C2199.html, last accessed May 2024.

fig. 9
Catalogue's cover of Mexico's Pavilion, 1958. *XXIX Bienal de Venecia, Italia, 1958. Pintura Mexicana Contemporánea*, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. Photo: Amelia Chávez Santiago.



The head of DAP, Miguel Salas Anzures,⁵² would be the national pavilion's commissioner. Owing to the constant increase in participating countries and the lack of pavilions at the Giardini, Mexico's exhibition was placed in the central building. Mexico's commissioner did not travel to Venice; instead he sent a collective sampling of Figurative and Semifigurative painters, second generation artists from the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement: Carlos Orozco Romero (1896-1984), Jorge González Camarena (1908-1980), Raúl Anguiano (1915-2006), Manuel Rodríguez Lozano (1896-1971), Guillermo Meza Álvarez (1917-1997), and Ricardo Martínez de Hoyos (1918-2009). Three paintings per artist were selected, for a total of eighteen works. Eleven were lent by the artists themselves, five came from private collections, and one, *La Espina* (The Thorne, 1952) by Raúl Anguiano, was from the MNAP collection.

Most of the pieces were painted in the 1950s, except for the three works by Manuel Rodríguez Lozano that were created in the first half of the 1940s. Although there is no photographic record of Mexico's 1958 Pavilion, INBAL published the catalogue of Mexico's participation, titled *XXIX Venice Biennale, Italy. Contemporary Mexican Painting* [fig. 9].

During the five previous biennials, from 1948 to 1956, a wide review of international currents in the artworld had been made. These began in the 20th century with well-deserved recognition of the main figures in modern art. From there on, the Biennale Organising Committee began contemporary art's diffusion, shaping curatorial concepts around the vision set by the Biennale's main curator.⁵³

52

Miguel Salas Anzures (Mexico, 1911-1966) graduated from School of Teachers in 1932, where he had functioned as director, inspector or supervisor in different Republic of Mexico states. In the '40s he undertook exchanges with the painters Fernando Gamboa and Rosendo Soto. On January 16, 1950, he began work as DAP's secretary. With the beginning of the Adolfo Ruiz Cortines's government (1952-1958), the position as head of DAP was taken by Víctor M. Reyes, with Miguel Salas Anzures as Secretary. Reyes renounced his position at end of 1957, and for that reason it was occupied by Salas Anzures. He resigned from INBAL fully in March, 1961.

53

Alan Bowness, "The 1958 Biennale", in *The Burlington Magazine* 100, no. 669 (December, 1958), 435-436. [jstor.org/stable/872598.html](https://www.jstor.org/stable/872598.html), last accessed May 2024.

Contrary to the call for younger artists exhibiting works in Informalism, present in various national pavilions at the Venice Biennale 1958,⁵⁴ the six painters that exhibited in Mexico's Pavilion represented the Post-revolutionary Artistic Movement's first and second generations. These artists, known for their figurative works, were all between forty and sixty years of age. None represented the "local young artist"⁵⁵ Biennale President Giovanni Ponti requested in a letter to Mario Garza Ramos, consul at the Mexican embassy in Italy. What Mexico instead sent to the 1958 Biennale only signalled the continuity of support to a visual arts production which wished to perpetuate itself in spite of having arisen three decades back. INBAL's administrations, then, continued to consider a wide group of figurative artists of different ages as makers of "young art".⁵⁶

Mexican art critic José Miguel García Ascot, sharply criticised the pavilion's content, describing it as "the most deplorable collection of used formulae, of grandiloquent pictoric phrases filled with conventionalism, pomposity and with exhaustion".⁵⁷ For García Ascot, the young artists that had to present themselves at the Biennale corresponded to the group known as the *Generación de la Ruptura* (Generation of the Rupture) or more aptly, *Los Independientes* (The Independents) - a group of young artists that emerged in the 1950s. The group included Juan Soriano (1920-2006), José Luis Cuevas (1931-2017), Lilia Carrillo (1930-1974), Pedro Coronel (1922-1985), Fernando García Ponce (1933-1987), Manuel Felguérez (1928-2020), Kiyoshi Takashashi (1925-1996), Alberto Gironella (1929-1999), Jorge Dubón (1938-2004), and Vlady (1920-2005), among others. *Los Independientes* not only had heterogeneous ways of expressing plastic arts, techniques, subjects and forms, they also distanced themselves from the cultural policies set by the Mexican government, refusing state sponsorship, which often favoured only a select few.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The 1950 pavilion had the task of promoting Modern Mexican art, generating high expectations and thus leaving Europe's public eager for more. However, from this promising beginning, the history of Mexico's Pavilion began to falter, culminating in the less successful 1958 presentation. This, however, did not deter Mexico from renouncing to exhibitions in Europe and other continents. Since 1952 Mexico's cultural policies were focused towards considering international panoramic exhibitions as diplomatic means, arenas for presenting business cards and bridges of interchange with the world. Exhibitions were also the ideal medium for the promotion of tourism and establishing economic links.

54

Nancy Jachec, "Anticommunism at home, Europeanism abroad: Italian Cultural Policy at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1958".

55

The letter read: "Nevertheless, I believe it isn't useless to point out that from now on, Italy and other participating countries at the Biennale shall present works of young artists with special breadth. Therefore, we would be grateful if the commissioner holds it convenient, to show at Mexico's hall some local young artist". Letter of Giovanni Ponti to Mario Garza Ramos, March 27, 1958. ASAC, 1958: Paesi - Messico.

56

On June 6, 1958, INBAL's director, Miguel Álvarez Acosta, indicated Mexico's active international participation: "Mexico has just participated with its juvenile art in the Bordeaux exhibition and is represented at the Venice Biennale". Miguel Álvarez Acosta, "Discurso pronunciado por el señor licenciado Don Miguel Álvarez Acosta: con motivo de la Primera Bienal Interamericana de Pintura y Grabado, en el Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas el 6 de junio de 1958" (1958), 11, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/823576#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1116%2C0%2C3930%2C2199.html, last accessed June 2024.

57

José Miguel García Ascot, "El INBA y la Bienal de Venecia ante un fracaso", *México en la Cultura*, (1958). Translation by the author, www.icaadocs.mfah.org/s/es/item/786688#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299.html, last accessed May 2024.

58

Manuel Felguérez, *La Ruptura 1935-1955*, (1988), www.icaa.mfah.org/s/es/item/788048#c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-118%2C1164%2C2947%2C1649.html, last accessed April 2024.

Following Mexico's initial participation, the Biennale's Organising Committee was optimistic that it could retain Mexico's constant participation, as had been facilitated through Fernando Gamboa's effective communication. Among these was Rodolfo Pallucchini, with whom he had a more cordial rapprochement during the organisation of the first two pavilions. It was also hoped that Mexico would perceive the enthusiasm that their national plastic arts had generated in the international reunion. The Organising Committee even offered Mexico a plot of land in the Giardini situated between Switzerland and the Union of Soviet Social Republics, in order to build its pavilion and thus ensure the presentation of future artistic generations. However, Mexico's government neither purchased the plot nor initiated pavilion construction, resulting in Venezuela's acquisition of the land in 1956. This missed opportunity reflected the lack of a long term cultural policy on behalf of Mexico's government, and definitively lost the opportunity to establish a constant and well situated place at the Giardini.

Mexico's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1958 reflects the intention on behalf of the country's cultural administration to perpetuate, at both national and international levels, artists and their works representative of the Postrevolutionary Artistic Movement. Mexico's last participation at the Biennale showed the crisis of the Mexican cultural administration, as it was a watershed between nationalist discourse and non-Figurative painters that began their career in the 1950s. Mexico's selection of works appeared anachronistic, standing apart from the more contemporary artistic proposals on display. As a result, it struggled to capture the attention of audiences and critics, distancing itself also from recognition given by prize and distinctions to the artists, and in turn to their countries. From 1958 onward, the Mexican government made no sustained commitment to participating with a national pavilion. Nevertheless, in 1968, Rufino Tamayo was honoured with a retrospective exhibition at the Biennale's Central Pavilion, celebrating his 50-year career in a display curated by Fernando Gamboa.

Author's Biography

Amelia Chávez Santiago holds a PhD in Cultural History from the Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City. Her research focuses on Modern Mexican art, Mexico's cultural policies in the 20th century, as well as Mexico's pavilions at the Venice Biennale. She has worked

in cultural journalism and cultural management with the International Association of Art Critics (AICA-México). Her latest book is *Agentes culturales, maquinaria de ideales: el Pabellón de México en la Bienal de Venecia*, Prohistoria Ediciones, 2024.