WEAVING CONSUMPTION: MEXICAN POPULAR ART IN
TRANSITION (1980-2010)

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Para Delia Alcaraz, mi madre.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS


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This thesis analyzes the production, commercialization, and exhibition of Mexican popular art during the neoliberal transition of the Mexican state. The adoption and outcomes of Mexico’s neoliberal economic model that began in the early 1980s can most easily be observed in the country’s political and economic landscape. This study of Mexican popular art traces the effects that these socioeconomic changes have on this art practice. Popular art has played a significant role in Mexico’s political and cultural history. It was instrumental in creating a national identity during the nationalist period. Once again, as Mexico transitions into a state of affairs characterized by globalization, free trade, and a market ideology, popular art and culture play a significant role in the country’s global positioning.

Three different but interrelated sites are analyzed in this study of popular art and its relation to this economic and political change. The artist workshop is viewed as a space for entrepreneurial practice, the retail store as an informal educator on non-Western cultural practices, and the exhibition of Mexican popular art as a promoter of a neoliberal ideology. This thesis argues that these sites are interconnected and interdependent and make possible the construction of popular art, authenticity, and indigeneity. This study shows the intimate relationship that the market has not only on the production of popular art, but also on issues of identity and indigeneity.
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CHAPTER 1

POPULAR ART AND THE NATION-STATE

What is popular culture: a spontaneous creation by the people, their collective memory turned into a commodity, or the exotic representation of a state of backwardness that industry reduces to the condition of a curiosity for the sake of tourists?

-Néstor García Canclini
Transforming Modernity

INTRODUCTION

The work of Argentine scholar Néstor García Canclini is particularly useful to the study of contemporary Mexican popular art and its relation to late capitalism. In his book Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico, García Canclini explores the economic and symbolic aspects of popular culture in modern Mexico. The author begins by redefining popular culture and in doing so, makes the reader aware of the underlying assumptions informing how many of us understand and define popular culture. He urges the reader to forgo a notion of popular culture “that reduces crafts to a collection of objects and popular culture to a set of traditions, as well as the folkloric idealism that believes it is possible to explain popular creations as autonomous ‘expressions’ of a people’s genius.”¹ Instead, García Canclini proposes an approach to the study of culture “as a tool helpful for understanding, reproducing, and transforming the social system, and for making and constructing the hegemony of individual classes.”² My study of popular art from Oaxaca and its producers builds on García Canclini’s theorization of culture. I examine popular art from Mexico as a vehicle for a larger discussion on the commodification of art and culture and its relation to neoliberalism and the construction of a transnational elite class.

This thesis explores why at the turn of the twenty-first century the commodification of Mexican popular art came to be informed by a neoliberal ideology; the relation between

² Ibid., viii.
authenticity, popular art, and indigeneity; retail strategies employed to incentivize the purchase of popular art; and the role of cultural institutions in advancing the agenda of a transnational elite class. I examine three different sites within the production and circulation of Mexican popular art: the artist workshop, the retail store, and the museum. Each site is an integral link contributing to a greater or lesser degree to the commodification of art and culture. In the context of studying art and culture and their relation to neoliberalism, this socioeconomic order is understood as an internationally prevailing ideological paradigm that makes sense of the world order through the language of markets, efficiency, consumer choice, and individual autonomy.

In order to understand the commodification of Mexican popular art at the turn of the twenty-first century, it is necessary to understand the shifts that popular art, its production, and its role in society have undergone since the adoption of a neoliberal economic model in Mexico. To do so, I study the role popular art played in Mexico’s Nationalist Project. After the tumultuous experience of the Mexican Revolution, the state undertook a Nationalist Project that promoted a national identity based on an interpretation of Mexicanidad that relied on indigeneity as the essence of Mexican identity. This essentialist project promoted political, social, and cultural projects that facilitate the state’s ability to govern a fragmented Mexican society. In this environment, popular art and culture were at the core of the state sponsored cultural and educational policy. This new perspective on popular art and culture was a drastic change from its pre-Revolutionary era, during the Porfiriato (1876-1911) popular art was regarded as evidence of a state of cultural backwardness. During this period positivist notions supported a view on popular art as retrograde and undervalued its social significance as well as its aesthetic and technical contributions to the arts. During the fifty or so years that followed the Mexican Revolution, popular arts began to play an evermore important role in the country’s domestic cultural policy, foreign affairs, and evolution of modern art.

As Mexico transitioned to a neoliberal model, the relationship between the state and popular art changed. Among the factors restructuring this new relationship are the diminished role of the state in all sectors of the economy, the impetus of a market ideology in the country’s socioeconomic order, and the intensification of Mexico’s involvement in global structures of power. These changes have had a significant impact on how popular art is
articulated by both the public and private sectors, and by the artists themselves. My work investigates how popular art adapts itself in this new milieu. Consequently, this study does not view popular art as a pure, essentialist, and static practice. On the contrary, this thesis views popular art as a multilayered, complex phenomenon in dialogue with its time and place in history. It is not a romantic vision of pastoral artists that are corrupted by the advent of capitalism and neoliberalism. It takes into account the importance popular art played in the Nationalist Project and analyzes how in the state’s retraction from society popular art adjusts itself to this new social, economic landscape. Hence the importance that indigeneity plays in this new economic environment. Here, indigeniety is no longer used to homogenize a heterogenous Mexican society and legitimize the state but now its role hinges on its ability to authenticate the popular art in a market setting.  

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

To the extent that the focus of this study is the link between art and neoliberalism, the main objective is to contribute to the study on popular art from a new viewpoint. The study of popular art suffers from a social stigma that views popular art as less interesting, edgy or worthy of study than other contemporary art practices. Additionally popular art’s association with craft, tourist art, and kitsch, has also contributed to a gap in its scholarly research. With this work I hope to contribute to a growing body of research on popular art and various other art practices that have long suffered from cultural and aesthetic stigmas. Some scholars, including Bennetta Jules-Rosette have begun to regard tourist art as a significant and lasting record of cultural transformations. In a similar vein, the choice to study contemporary Mexican popular art during a period of profound economic change in the country will allow for an appreciation of its practice and aesthetics alongside a broader understanding of the cultural implications of changing world dynamics and social orders.

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3 The integration into a global market economy has brought economic gains to some. While others have not benefitted from this new economic environment. In the case of popular art in Oaxaca, some artists have successfully integrated themselves into the international popular art market while for other practitioners of this art form neoliberalism has uprooted their communities.

As with any study, in addition to its purpose, personal reasons compel the author to undertake this journey. For me, the study of the intersection of art and economics is in part the result of being bicultural and living most of my life along the U.S./Mexico border. Being a first-generation college graduate and a Chicana growing up and living on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border has been crucial to my understanding of identity, gender, class, art, and culture. When my family migrated from Mexico and settled in the Southern California border region, like many other Chicano-Latino families, we did not cut our ties with the ‘South.’ As an immigrant growing up alongside the U.S./Mexico border, I have experienced the social and political tensions that result from the uneasy coexistence of two very distinct cultural and economic environments. Growing up, I was not aware of how these cultural, political, and economic tensions were created, what caused these asymmetrical relations of power, or what the implications of such tensions and asymmetries on cultural processes might be. However, through my formal education I sought out to acquire the critical tools for understanding that this social reality exists not as a product of a “natural order” but as a result of very particular social, cultural and economic forces. The need to understand the cultural, social, and economic reality in which I live coupled with a strong interest in art led me to pursue the study of popular art as way to understand not only the forces shaping the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, but also my identity.

**Scope and Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis deals with the verbal, visual, and textual strategies used in the commodification of popular art and artists. I investigate how at the turn of the twenty-first century the strategies used to commodify Mexican popular art are informed by a neoliberal ideology that relies on affiliating indigeneity with art production to authenticate popular art, stimulate retail consumption as a form of aid, and the use of cultural institutions such as the museum to advance the agenda of a transnational elite class.

In order to address the main themes of work the scope of this project I have divided the study into three parts. The first chapter is a general introduction that provides background information on popular art, Mexico’s Nationalist Project (1920-1988) and neoliberal ideology (1988-present.) This first section also outlines the purpose of the study. In chapter two, I examine three different sites within the production and circulation of popular art: the
artist workshop, the retail store, and the museum. Each site is seen as an integral link contributing to a lesser or greater degree to the commodification of art and culture. Chapter three is devoted to a discussion on issues relating to popular art. I survey the literature on popular art and economics and other closely related topics to its study as a means of examining how art is implicated in the process of socioeconomic mediation that is taking place between the West and non-Western societies. By examining writings by Ronda Brulotte, Michael Chibnik, James Clifford, Mary K. Coffey, Shifra M. Goldman, Bennetta Jules-Rosette, and Mari Carmen Ramírez, I hope to acquaint the reader with the complex web of socioeconomic and cultural forces at play in the creation, exhibition, and sale of popular art.

**TERMINOLOGY: FOLK ARTVERSUS POPULAR ART**

The term *folk art* is problematic. Folk art suffers from an inferior, subalternt, and marginalized status vis à vis the creative production referred to as “fine” or “great” art. The consideration of folk art as a minor art is partially supported by positivist notions with regard to the gender, race, and geographic location of its creators. Positivist rhetoric presumes that the generators of folk art expressions are inferior to or less evolved than their counterparts producing fine art. The diminished valuation of folk art has also been influenced by hierarchical organizations of aesthetic valuation in the arts. Professor of political and cultural studies Eli Bartra defines folk art in the following manner:

> Folk art includes the visual and plastic arts and refers to the cultural production of the world’s poorest inhabitants. The poorest among the poor are most often women, and, not surprisingly, women are the most common practitioners of this art. Folk art, in general, relies on the use of traditional techniques and simple tools, and it is always handmade.

According to Bartra’s definition, the term folk art always encompasses two elements: the impoverished social condition of its creators and a handmade quality. With this in mind, a discussion on folk art, whether it be in a museum or retail environment will carry with it issues of social, economic, and technological disparity.

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6 Ibid., 2.
The definition of folk art by the anthropologist Nelson H.H. Graburn supplements the issue of class and craftsmanship with its status being outside of the art establishment. He states: “Today, the term ‘folk’ art is used for those remnants of local traditions that have broad appeal, that represent the continuing traditions of handmade things, and that are not officially part of the art establishment or the avant-garde.” In the case of folk art from non-Western countries, not being part of the “art establishment” reflects its power and labor relations with the West. The periphery-center relationship between Latin American, Asia, and Africa as periphery and Euro-America as center are evident in the division of labor, consumption patterns, and commercialization of folk art. Latin American, Asia, and Africa as laborers, artisans, and producers and Euro-America as market, artists, and consumer reflect a neocolonial relationship. Being aware of the problems embedded in the usage of the term folk art, I have decided to use the term popular art for two reasons, one, popular art is a literal translation of arte popular the term used in Spanish to refer to the hand-made works that will be discussed in this paper; and two, to avoid contributing to a legacy that diminishes the creative and aesthetic aptitude of the artists producing the works, casting them as “second rate” artists whose artistic expressions are inferior to other art forms.

**POPULAR ART IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO**

Mexico has a long and rich history. Approximately three millennia prior to the arrival of Spaniards on Mexican soil, complex Mesoamerican civilizations flourished in the region. Olmec, Maya, Teotihuacan, Toltec, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Aztec amongst other societies inhabited the region leaving behind a significant legacy on the country’s history, beliefs, languages, ethnic makeup, culture, and arts. Today, many of the customs and practices of Mexico’s indigenous people (which make up approximately 10% of the country’s population) continue to reflect this legacy. For example, much of Mexican popular art whether created for utilitarian or decorative purposes, private collection or exhibition in museums and galleries is rooted in Mesoamerican practices. Similarly, popular art’s technique, material and design exhibit a notable European influence and in some cases even a

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contemporary global pop aesthetic. It follows that the artistic practices of Mexico’s indigenous people have not remained static over the course of history, as it is oftentimes believed. Instead these practices embody a syncretism of influences as they engage with the socioeconomic challenges and aesthetic preoccupations of their time.

Globalization, free trade, private enterprise, migration, the diminishing role of the state, and an emphasis on the individual over the collective are all characteristics that define contemporary Mexican society. These characteristics are part and parcel of the country’s adoption and implementation of a neoliberal economic model. Neoliberalism as defined by the social theorist David Harvey is “a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.”8 As the Mexican state creates an institutional framework appropriate for neoliberalism through privatization, deregulation, and the weakening of collective structures, it also strives to position itself favorably within a global economy characterized by a neoliberal modus operandi. For a country that prides itself on its millenary history a special role is accorded to its history, art, and culture in this setting. Today's neoliberal rhetoric articulates the creator as an individual, popular art as collectible item, and the consumption of art and culture as a safeguard for the continuation of a cultural heritage. To understand the implications of neoliberal’s emphasis on the commodification of art and culture, it is helpful to review the relationship between the Mexican state and popular art before the country began implemented a neoliberal sociopolitical order. As we will see, for over two hundred years art and culture have been closely linked to Mexico’s political economy.

**THE AESTHETICS OF NATION FORMATION**

To understand how and why the appreciation for popular art is closely link to Mexico’s political economy we must situate its role within Mexico’s process of nation

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At the beginning of the nineteenth century, *Criollos* (American born descendants of Europeans) lead the rebellion against their colonial masters, the *Peninsulares*, or royalists. After a decade of war, Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1820. The path from colonial subject to sovereign nation began to be forged by the victorious creole elites who established themselves as the new governing class. In the process of reconfiguring social and economic relations within a recently independent country, the San Carlos Art Academy became a site where societal changes were stylistically rendered on canvas and stone.

The San Carlos Art Academy was established by the Bourbon monarchy of Spain in 1781. As the first art academy in the Americas, San Carlos was modeled after those in Europe. Students received training in painting, sculpture, and architecture based on copying the work of great European masters. The Academy’s adherence to the European art canon was furthered instilled on their students through the hire of European instructors and directors many whom had received training at prestigious academies in their home countries. As art historian Vernon Hyde Minor points out “By imposing control, through artistic ideology, from above, the academy attempts to establish for itself a secure position as defender and perpetuator of the status quo.”10 As a result, many of the works produced within the walls of art academies, often times the only place to receive formal training in the arts, were themselves striving to achieve mastery through imitation of a European model and not through the study of the country’s own visual and artistic practices. The academy’s adherence to Europe’s artistic conventions meant that colonial artistic practice was confined to a foreign aesthetic tradition. It also helped to secured Europe’s hegemony over the artistic and cultural realm of the colonial period. From the onset the Academy was linked to the old world order. Prior to being a space dedicated to art education, in 1778 San Carlos was established as the Spanish crown’s School of Engraving, where trained artists supplied currency designs for the Spanish monarch.11

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The San Carlos Art Academy also provided a space for social relationships to be forged and reinforced. Both liberals and conservatives alike saw art exhibitions and their accompanying catalogue as a space to communicate their social standing. As art historian Stacie G. Widdifield tells us in *The Embodiment of the National in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexican Painting*, the promotion of one’s social standing took many forms at San Carlos: from lending private works of art, to underwriting the cost of the Academy’s yearly exhibition and even through the subscription to its exhibition catalogue. All three forms of art patronage were important and their significance in “promoting social integration on the one hand and social exclusion on the other cannot be underestimated.”

The use of art and culture as a conduit for class formation and maintenance has to a lesser or greater degree continued to inform Mexico’s cultural, political, and economic policy until now.

The incoming post-independence governing class was familiar with the role San Carlos had played within previous structures of power. Widdifield explains that in the context of forming a Mexican nation-state, painting manifested the changing relationships between political power, race, and gender. The author states: “In 1823, however, the new national government recognized the importance of the Academy by including it among the institutions of public education that the state needed in its task of forming citizens out of royal subjects. From this moment on, it remained, in word if not deed, one of the state’s foremost educations institutions.”

The nation-state’s use of art exhibitions as an ideological tool has also been studied by Sandra Esslinger in “Performing Identity: The Museal Framing of Nazi Ideology.” Esslinger shows us that in Nazi Germany, The Temple of German Art was an ideological tool at the service of the regime. The museum functioned as a space framing the prescription and performance of the ideal *Volk* citizen. Within its walls, the tenets of Aryan spirituality, democracy and modernity were fused with early museological practices. Art exhibitions were an essential apparatus to accomplish the goal not only in the democratization of German art but more importantly, in the construction of an inclusive participatory frame that would also alienate other social groups. In Mexico, in its role as an art institution the San Carlos Art Academy was a site for the study, discussion, instruction,

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13 Ibid., 16.
training, protection, and in some cases the commercialization of art. As a bureaucratic institution, the work produced at San Carlos illustrated the governing class’ strategies for maintaining control of the newly formed nation. And as a public space for the exhibition of art, San Carlos functioned as a site for the construction and reaffirmation of an elite class.

In the years that followed Mexico’s Independence from Spain positivist ideas of progress, civilization, material order, and evolution began to shape the political agenda of those in power. Positivism also began to exercise influence in art production. Art began to be conceptualized within a framework that reflected the modernity and progress that liberal positivist intellectuals saw around them. In 1874, Ignacio M. Altamirano (a liberal political figure, poet, art critic, playwright, and journalist) stated “Why haven’t the young possessing a real set of artistic qualities not undertaken the business of creating a pictorial and sculptural school essentially national, modern, and in harmony with the undeniable progress of the nineteenth-century?”¹⁴ In just a few years time, art was being asked to address and serve as proof of the country’s modernization. Art was to convey in visual terms the positivist ideals of liberty, order, and progress as it manifested in Mexico during the second half of nineteenth-century. This new conceptualization of art produced work that sought inspiration from everyday life, local mannerism, and the taste of Mexico’s growing middle class. More so, it manifested itself by making Mesoamerica culture, particularly Aztec history, and the pre-Hispanic Indian the subject matter of many of the works. The figure of the Indian was rendered in various states of assimilation to European culture and physiology. Grand historical narratives and a celebration of antiquity inspired many of the scenes represented. While the image of the Mesoamerican Indian evoked ideas of authenticity and nationalism, living indigenous populations were often viewed as problematic and in need of assimilation into mainstream culture.

THE ROLE OF POPULAR ART IN MEXICO’S NATIONALIST PROJECT

Prior to the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) popular art was easily dismissed as “embarrassing evidence of backwardness.”\(^{15}\) This view was mostly held by upper and middle class Mexicans who ascribed to positivist notions of race superiority during the Porfiriato (1876-1911). Conservative liberals conflated positivist notions on science, society, and knowledge with racist undertones. This led to a view of indigenous people and their material culture and practices as backward and in need of improvement and assimilation to a European model. In *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution*, Rick A. López explains that the period following the Mexican Revolution marks a change in the attitudes of middle and upper class Mexicans towards popular art. As mentioned, for the greater part of the nineteenth century, there was a general dismissal for popular art. For many people, popular art did not reflect the modernization the nation was experiencing. Instead, there was a greater affinity towards European imports that signaled elegance, modernity, and refinement. After the Mexican Revolution there was a break with positivism, which in many ways informed the repudiation of popular art. Whereas before it was seen as retrograde it now began to be seen as an expression of Mexico’s Mesoamerican heritage that served as a foundation for the development of a unique national identity.

The post-Revolutionary period brought about an appreciation for Mexican popular culture and arts. The customs and artistic expressions of the country’s rural inhabitants began to form part of the Mexico’s official discourse on national identity and culture. For the Mexican state, the incorporation of popular culture into its nationalist discourse was also an effort to reach out to disenfranchised groups during a time of social fragmentation and change. As the literary critic and writer Max Parra explains, the nationalist project was an effort to legitimize the state and allow it to exercise power with the “consent of the masses; a strategy that fosters national unity for the purpose of preventing social practices antagonistic to the establishment. To this end, the mythification of certain social behaviors is a necessary and essential element.”\(^{16}\) Furthermore, its objective was to close the gap between the

\(^{15}\) López, *Crafting Mexico*, 2.

\(^{16}\) Max Parra, “José Revueltas y el Nacionalismo” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1992), 1.
country’s heterogeneous social reality and the vision of the country’s ruling class in power. The ruling class sought to legitimize itself and facilitate the governance of a fragmented society by glossing over the country’s regional, cultural, social, and economic differences in favor of an official collective national identity.

The aesthetic appreciation of popular arts was also an effort by political elites to economically integrate a very vulnerable sector of the society. One of the ways the state sought to economically integrate indigenous populations was through the development of a tourism economy. Tourism would channel funds to the under-developed regions where many indigenous populations resided. It would also help boost the economy by attracting foreign currency. To facilitate this, the Mexican state began to actively intervene in the forms of production and aesthetic choices of the artists. Through a series of state sponsored institutions such as the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenous Institute) artists were encouraged to mass produce products and use the colors and motifs preferred by tourists. According to art historian Karen Cordero Reiman, the state’s active involvement in the production of popular art (alongside its aesthetic valuation among artists) contributed to “the definitive transformation of the means of production of popular art, its role in rural and urban economy and also its visual and material characteristics.”

The role of popular art in society as a symbol of essentialist nationalism for the consumption of others continues to inform the discussion on popular art today. For instance, Oaxacan popular art continues to be defined through romantic notions of an essentialist spiritual reserve of Mexican people, the fantasy of manual production in remote communities untouched by capitalist development, and for some, even as a testimony of the superiority of one society over the other. This view often leads to a lack of criticism in the study of Oaxacan popular art of its formal elements, significance in the history of art, and/or the role it has and continues to play in the development of capitalism in the country and region.

José María Vasconcelos: Institutionalizing a Nationalist Aesthetic

As Minister of Education from 1921 to 1924 under President Álvaro Obregón, José María Vasconcelos played a seminal role in the use of visual arts as part of a state strategy to unify the nation. An as intellectual, writer, patron of the arts, politician, and advocate of indigenismo\textsuperscript{18} Vasconcelos was instrumental in the government’s break with positivism, the expansion of public education, and the promotion of the arts as a conduit for nation formation. Vasconcelos’ support of artists such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco was instrumental to development of the Mexican muralist movement. Their work, especially in the period that followed the Mexican revolution, often times incorporated the traditions, customs, iconographic elements, and formal design of the indigenous populations and popular arts. In doing so, they helped create a nationalist visual aesthetic that raises the stature of indigenous people to that of national hero.

Vasconcelos was also instrumental in the development of an arts program throughout Mexico’s public school system. To accomplish this, he appointed the artist Adolfo Best Maugard as director of the Department of Drawing and Manual Labor (1921-1924.) As director Best Maugard was given the task of creating and implementing an art program throughout the country’s public schools. Best Maugard was good fit for this task. He was familiar with Mesoamerican artifacts as a result of his experience illustrating artifacts for Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas; he was an artist; he had experience teaching painting at open-air schools in Mexico; and his artwork incorporated stylistic forms based on popular art. Best Maugard penned several works relating to art education and in 1923, developed the Método de dibujo. Tradición, resurgimiento y evolución del arte mexicano (Drawing method. Tradition, resurgence and evolution in Mexican art.) Known as the “Best Method,” it was a system of drawing based on the iconographic and formal elements, motifs, and designs found in Mesoamerican artifacts and popular art. The “Best Method” was implemented throughout Mexico’s public schools, shaping the art curricula of the country and the discourse of art history in Mexico. As a result, future generations of Mexicans would

\textsuperscript{18} Indigenismo is a term attributed to a philosophy and movement in Latin America that advocates for the political and social inclusion of indigenous people. In Mexico, indigenismo informed the nationalist project that influenced the cultural and political policy of the state following the Mexican Revolution.
become familiar with the stylistically vocabulary of popular art. The efforts of Vasconcelos and Best Maugard shaped Mexican cultural policy in a way that images of indigenous dress, local customs, popular crafts, and an idealized version of Mesoamerican cultures proliferated the walls of government buildings, primary school textbooks and the painting of many of the most successful Mexican artists.

**MEXICO AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Nearly a century after the Mexican Revolution, the usage of the popular arts by transnational corporations brings to mind that of Mexico’s post-revolutionary nationalist project. Namely, in its usage of art and culture as a means to legitimize itself during a time of rapid political and economic change, but also in the incorporation of an under-served community into its economic model and in the consolidation of the popular arts as a commodity for consumption. Although the usage of popular culture and art by transnational corporations echoes that of the post-revolutionary period, it is now consistent with the transnational realities of global political economies. Art historian Shifra M. Goldman proposes a methodology that examines the correlation between important moments in the bilateral relations between the U.S. and Mexico and the use of culture and art as a seemingly ‘neutral’ conduit for negotiating, courting, and advancing the agendas of the powers that be. Just like the appreciation of popular art was reflective of changes in Mexican society, today’s commodification of art and culture is interlinked to greater and broader changes on a global scale. In the case of Mexico, the commodification of art and culture is implicit in the structuring of the geopolitical relations throughout the twentieth century.

**Neoliberalism: History and Context**

The economic downturn sparked by the U.S. stock market clash of 1929 detonated a worldwide economic depression. Whether the economic conditions that lead to the depression were due to an inadequate demand and supply, speculation, or monetary policy might still be up for debate. Regardless, it is safe to say that the severity of the economic downturn endured by most industrialized countries did bring about a need to revise their prevailing economic model and their government’s ability to stabilize the economy. Keynesian economic theory rose to popularity as a solution to severe unemployment, deflation, collapse in world trade, and plunge in commodity prices. Keynesian economic
thought advocated for state intervention in economic matters. It argued for the central bank and government to actively use fiscal and monetary policies to stabilize business cycles. In other words, as a way to counteract the economic recession the government would support full employment (even if it meant running a deficit) while the Federal Reserve would stimulate economic growth by manipulating the interest rate to incentivize private investment. By the mid 1960s the economic stability that had characterized the post-war economic expansion began to breakdown and with it faith in the present blend of state, market, and democratic institutions. But it is not until the years 1978-1980 characterized by David Harvey as “a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history” that key players in world affairs would take neoliberalism from a minority position to hegemonic mode of discourse. Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Regan, and to a lesser extent Deng Xiaoping provided the necessary political will to make neoliberalism the new economic and political orthodoxy at a state level. The discourses and reforms set-forth by these three figures not only changed the status quo in their respective countries, but also more importantly began to reconfigure the social and economic order globally.

The origins of neoliberal thought can be traced to the Mont Pelerin Society. Founded in Switzerland in 1947, the small yet influential society was made up of historians, economist, philosophers, intellectuals, and business leaders. The international society included eight winners of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, including the American economist Milton Friedman. The society advocated for free market economics and strongly opposed the level of government intervention proposed by Keynesian and Marxist philosophies. They believed government intervention in the economy and the special interests it served threaten personal freedom and human dignity. Their founding statement clarifies this view: “The central values of civilization are in danger. Over large stretches of the Earth’s surface the essential conditions of human dignity and freedom have already disappeared. In others they are under constant menace from the development of current tendencies of policy. The position of the individual and the voluntary group are progressively undermined by extensions of arbitrary power.”

19 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 1.

world affairs continues on to indirectly blame socialism and communism as the cause of society’s ills:

The group holds that these developments have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards and by the growth of theories which question the desirability of the rule of law. It holds further that they have been fostered by a decline of belief in private property and the competitive market; for without the diffused power and initiative associated with these institutions it is difficult to imagine a society in which freedom may be effectively preserved.21

The statement explicitly affirms the members’ discontent with the "arbitrary power" presumably of politicians whose interventionist economic policies weaken the rule of law and do away with private property and the competitive market. In their view, it is only through private property and the competitive market that special interests can be diffused and a democratic and free state fostered and preserved. Freedom and democracy according to Pelerin members are byproducts of strong private property laws and a market driven economy. It would take over three decades for neoliberal thought to make its way from a small elite minority group to being the cornerstone of three of the most influential administrations of the twentieth century. Namely, the administrations of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Deng Xiaoping.

As previously mentioned, the administrations of Thatcher and Regan set in motion an international consensus for privatization, entrepreneurship, deregulation, free markets and trade, individual property rights, and the withdrawal of the state from areas of social provision. Today, proponents of neoliberal social and economic order occupy positions of power throughout the world. Working at think tanks, universities, governmental institutions, media outlets, and international organizations to name a few, neoliberal advocates further institutionalize their ideology. In this way, neoliberal discourse has become the underlining logic informing how in the West we understand and make sense of the world we live in.


21 Ibid.
The Impetus for Neoliberal Reform in Mexico

From the 1940s through the 1970s, Mexico experienced political stability and exceptional economic growth. In the 1950s and 1960s, import substitution industrialization (ISI) characterized Mexico’s economic policy. Import substitution industrialization is an inward looking theoretical rational that advocates for substituting a country’s imports with domestic production. Mexico’s ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institutional (PRI) which remained in power for over 70 years benefitted from ISI by creating state monopolies in various industries such as telecommunications, energy, public utilities, among others. As a member of the Organization of Oil Exporting Countries (OPEC) Mexico also profited when the prices of oil skyrocketed in 1973-1974. Backed by petrodollars the country accelerated its state-led modernization by investing and borrowing to further develop its infrastructure and industrialize.

In 1972 deep oil wells were discovered in the states of Chiapas and Campeche. In the following years, discoveries of huge reserves of petroleum continued. Mexico’s financial future looked prosperous and petroleum discoveries shaped the country’s economic and political policy. By 1975, the country’s oil output exceeded consumption. And by 1980, Mexico had become the world’s fourth largest oil producer. As an important oil producing country, the country’s earnings from petroleum sales increased from $500 million in 1976 to about $6 billion 1980.22 With it, came large sums of foreign investment and international prestige, which the Mexican government welcomed. Oil extraction is a particularly capital intensive industry, attracting large capital investments without an equivalent investment in human capital. As a result, unemployment and inflation were among the top concerns for Mexican president José López Portillo (1976-1982.) The influx of foreign capital allowed for government spending in subsidies, job creation, public works, and infrastructure.

In 1980 the price of oil peaked only to begin a fast decline and downward spiral throughout the decade. The collapse in oil prices benefitted oil-consuming countries, but for oil producing countries the low prices meant a serious loss in revenue. Not long after the drop in oil prices, the Mexican government found it increasingly difficult to run a balanced

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budget. Between 1972 and 1982 Mexico’s foreign debt rose almost nine-fold from $6.8 to $58 billion.\textsuperscript{23} But even with a growing deficit, foreign investors considered Mexico an attractive place to invest. The untapped potential of the country’s oil reserves made the country credit worthy.

As the country’s financial problems became increasingly evident, the country’s business class began to disinvest, exchange pesos for dollars, and deposit their funds abroad. By 1982, the Mexican peso had lost 50\% of its value. Confronted with high interest rates and low commodity prices it became clear that the country would soon default on loan commitments. Known as \textit{La década perdida} (The lost decade), the 1980s marked the worst financial crisis not only for Mexico but also for Latin America as a region. Stagnation, inflation, capital flight, currency devaluation, unemployment, inequality, and violent suppression describe much of the socioeconomic climate at the time. The financial crisis of the 1980s was the impetus for a reflection on current economic models, it also prove to be a suitable environment for an ideology that advocated for less government intervention in the economy and society and instead endorsed market efficiency.

**New Game, New Rules**

In 1984 and for the first time in history, the World Bank granted a loan to a country. This country was Mexico. The World Bank’s loan arrangements demanded a reorganization of the country’s economic model and the adoption of austerity measures. Among the loan conditions were that Mexico join the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT,) which would later become the World Trade Organization. By joining, the country’s domestic policy concerning price controls, government aid, and tariffs was now dictated by international standards. Soon after further demands followed, they demanded the government privatize many of its holding, renegotiated labor union contracts, and curb government aid to the most vulnerable sector of the population. These measured were justified as necessary structural changes to increase the government’s financial solvency. Yet the debt continued to increasae and it soon became evident that Mexico would not be able to pay its foreign debt even with the “help” of the loan. In 1989 the Brady Plan was signed granting the country

\textsuperscript{23} Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism}, 99.
partial debt forgiveness. Named after the U.S. Treasury Secretary Nicholas F. Brady, the debt-restructuring plan was tied to further economic reforms. Mexico was the first nation to begin to negotiate with commercial banks creditors and to restructure its banking sector under the Brady Plan. The loan restructuring furthered the privatization of the country’s banking sector. A few months prior to the signing of the Brady Plan, Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) was elected president of Mexico. Salinas de Gortari was a Harvard trained economist who adhered to a neoliberal ideology. During his term in office, additional neoliberal reforms began to be generated by the country’s political elite.

President Salinas accelerated Mexico’s transition to a neoliberal economic model by doing away with the government’s control over key sectors of the economy. By early 1992 over 85% of government owned companies had been privatize. The sale of companies continued on to many key sector of the economy. In the banking sector, Banco Nacional de México and Banco de Comercio were sold back to the private sector. In the telecommunications sector, the country’s only telephone company Teléfonos de México was privatized. Sugar refineries, hotels, steel mills, and mines were sold to private investors. Salinas also modified the Constitution to allow for the sale of ejido (communal lands.) Until then, the ejido system was a central component of post-revolutionary agrarian reform in the country. The privatization of ejidos lands mostly impacted the country’s rural population, which includes many indigenous groups. In 1994, during Salinas’s last year as president of Mexico, the United States’ Congress approved the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA.) The approval signaled the most significant free trade agreement between Canada, United States, and Mexico. Along came further privatization, structural reform, and the polarization of public opinion on the benefits and shortcomings of neoliberal reform.

In conclusion, within the social, political, and cultural environment that characterizes Mexican history over the past couple of centuries, overlapping and shifting ideas of biological essence, historical processes, cultural identity, and national subjectivity have been projected onto those handmade objects created by and found in indigenous people’s homes. The years following the Mexican Revolution marked a change in the way popular art was perceived, understood, and valued in Mexican society. The move away from positivism and

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towards an ideology that advocated for an appreciation of indigenous material culture, customs, and heritage as the underlying core of Mexican identity during a time of social fragmentation was crucial to this change. Artists, intellectuals, and political elites all had a hand in changing the perception of the popular arts from that of evidencing “backwardness” to embodying a deep sense of Mexicanness. As the twenty-first century neared, the country underwent a major shift in its socioeconomic and political order. The implementation of a neoliberal economic order also had repercussion on the country’s art and cultural production.

In line with the tenets of a neoliberal socioeconomic order, popular art is increasingly commodified and subject to market forces. Popular art creators are themselves market subjects who highlight their cultural legacy (indigeneity, social practices, traditions, etc.) as part of strategy to authenticate their cultural production in the marketplace and integrate themselves in a market economy.
CHAPTER 2
MANUFACTURING POPULAR ART

INTRODUCTION

Oaxaca is constructed as a site where indigenous cultural heritage is maintained and expressed through festivals, cuisine, dress, and material culture. Oaxaca is also a place where Oaxaqueños and tourists engage in processes of cultural and economic exchange. Here cultural tourism benefits from the association of economic activities (i.e. weavings, carvings, pottery, etc.) with ethno-racial identities. Indigenous dress, knowledge of a native language, diet, physiognomy, and ties to a community with Mesoamerican roots are perceived as markers of ethno-racial characteristics and indigeneity. These characteristics are oftentimes understood as folkways that maintain and secure a future for the continuation of the region’s Mesoamerican legacy. Understood as markers of indigeneity, ethnoracial characteristics bestow a sense of authenticity to local vernacular arts, folkloric performances, autochthonous cuisine, and other cultural programing consumed and or experienced by locals and national and international tourists alike. In this environment, the conflation of artisanry with indigeneity informs the commodification of popular art and popular art producing villages “constitute part of a Oaxacan ‘touristic borderzone’ (Bruner 1996; Little 2004), where transnational processes of cultural and economic exchange related to tourism entail a reworking of ethnoracial classifications.”

In this chapter, the artist workshop, the retail shop, and the museum exhibition will be examined as sites where artistic practices, prices, notions of identity, cultural continuity, and otherness are forged and negotiated. Through the study of local connections to global flows, I will study the relationship between neoliberalism and cultural production and consumption. In particular, I am interested in learning the effects of neoliberal thought, transnational

26 Ibid., 458.
corporate structures, and global business strategies on the commodification of popular art and the discourses enveloping their creators. In order to trace the connection between multiple local (Oaxaca-San Diego) and the transnational (exhibitions) phenomena, I will begin with a brief discussion of Oaxaca as part of Mesoamerica, its inception as a tourism destination, and its present day demographics. This discussion of Oaxaca is meant to serve as a point of departure to an understanding of the networks operating that allow for the commodification of art and culture on a local, regional, and global scale. I will then continue on to the three case studies.

THE ZAPOTEC AND MIXTEC OF MESOAMERICA

The state of Oaxaca is located in Southwestern Mexico bordering the states of Chiapas, Veracruz, Puebla, and Guerrero. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas, the region we now call Oaxaca was part of Mesoamerica, a cultural area that unified many pre-Columbian societies. The first wave of migration to the boundaries of Mesoamerica dates back to 10,000 B.C.E. Recent technological advances have linked the discovery of 10,000 year old squash seeds in Oaxaca to plant domestication in the region to approximately same time as in China and the Near East. By the Late Formative period (300 B.C.E. - 200 C.E.) complex cultures such as the Zapotec and Mixtec flourished in the state’s Central Valley region and continued to thrive until the early the sixteenth century. Oaxacan cultures, although less known to the general public than the Maya and Aztec “achieved pinnacles of sophistication too.” Like other Mesoamerican civilizations, the Zapotec and the Mixtec kept a ritual 260-day calendar, practiced the ball game for sport, as ritual, as cosmic metaphor, and to settle disputes, and depended on a diet based on corn, beans, chili and squash.

The Zapotec were among the earliest ethnic groups to thrive in the area. The Zapotec call themselves Be’ena’á, which means “The People.” Historian and genealogists John P.

29 Miller, The Art of Mesoamerica, 8.
Schmal suggests that the implication of calling themselves Be’ena’a is that “Zapotecs believe that they are ‘The True People’ or ‘The people of this place.’” The Zapotec settled around what is present day Oaxaca City and its surrounding Central Valley. As the Zapotec grew politically and militarily they began to control territories beyond Oaxaca’s Central Valleys. Their expansion reached its peak during the Monte Alban phase II (200 B.C. – 250 A.D.) This period also marks the inception of an outburst in the development of Zapotec architectural and artistic styles. The Zapotec claimed as their capital Monte Alban for over 1,500 years. The awe-inspiring acropolis overlooks three important valleys in the region and follows the natural formations of the surrounding mountainous landscape. In this important ceremonial center carved stelae speak to the power of the Zapotec, interior building paintings retell the evolution of a writing system and the history of a people, unearthed ceramics attest to the development of unique artistic styles, and jade pieces tell the story of the Zapotec as skillful lapidaries.

The Mixtec called themselves Ne’ivi davì, which translates to “People of the Rain.” They travelled southwest to Oaxaca’s Central Valley from what we presently know as the states of Guerrero and Puebla. These two states continue to have significant Mixtec populations. The Mixtec were never united as one power, but instead were controlled by several interrelated royal families. Tilantongo was an important ancient capital of the Mixtec but they also inhabited other sites like Mitla, Cuiliapna, Tlaxiaco, Tutupec, Zaachila, and even Monte Alban itself. Perhaps best known for their manuscripts, the Mixtec recorded their history and genealogy in beautiful hand painted codices. Through an amalgam of characters and pictures, these concertina style books made of deerskin recount significant historical events such as royal births, wars and battles, pilgrimages, the attributes of important rulers, and ultimately serve as a window on to the worldview and history of the Mixtec. Excavations also reveal their proficiency as jewelry makers, with an especial dexterity when working with gold. By the Late Post Classic period (1200-1519) the Mixtec had encroached into Zapotec

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31 Miller, The Art of Mesoamerica, 55.
territory but their prominence in Oaxaca was short lived because in the mid-fifteenth century the powerful Aztecs had crossed over to the Valley of Oaxaca.\textsuperscript{32}

Ancient manuscripts are a great resource for learning about ancient cultures, but these texts can also inform us of contemporary practices. An example of this is the \textit{Codex Mendoza}. Created in 1541 the \textit{Codex Mendoza} was originally created to relay information to King Charles V regarding his newly acquired American subjects. Even today, the \textit{Codex Mendoza} remains among the most comprehensive documents on the Aztecs offering an unparalleled insight into their civilization. From this unique manuscript we learn of the founding of Tenochtitlan, of imperial conquest, we are privileged to detailed accounts of the tribute obligations and to an ethnographic account of daily existence.

The \textit{Codex Mendoza} also gives us insight into the particularities of coexisting cultures at the time. From the codex we learn that under the watchful eye of the Aztecs, Huaxacac (Oaxaca) had a garrison of Aztec military might stationed and Coyolapan (Oaxaca City) and its surrounding valleys became a tributary province.\textsuperscript{33} The tribute collected annually from the Mixtec who inhabited Coyolapan and the Zapotec who lived in the surrounding areas included maize, beans, chia, gold, and cochineal. On a semiannual basis, 800 large white \textit{mantas} (cloaks) and 400 richly worked quilted \textit{mantas} were paid as tribute. The Spanish clerics who supervised the execution of the codex included their own commentary within the text. The related Spanish commentary describes the cloaks from Huaxacac as “mantas colchadas de Rica labor”\textsuperscript{34} (richly worked quilted cloaks.) Frances F. Berdina and Patricia Reiff Anawalt, two codex experts, point out that although the quilted cloaks resembled those of other provinces, “Coyolapan’s have multicolored rather than black and white borders, and its quilted design is more elaborated. Perhaps the people of Coyolapan province had their own traditional style of such \textit{mantas}, which the Aztecs then demanded in tribute.”\textsuperscript{35} The type of goods paid as tribute probably exemplify the natural resources available to that tributaries and a degree of specialization in the production of a particular object by that community. If

\textsuperscript{32} Schmal, “The Mixtecs And Zapotecs.”

\textsuperscript{33} Francis F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Nanawalt, \textit{The Essential Codex Mendoza} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 106.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., Coyolapan-Folio 43v1.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 108.
this is so, then from the Codex Mendoza we might deduce that tributaries from Coyolapan had access to a variety of natural dies and developed a certain degree of specialization in weaving leading to the cultivation of a unique weaving style. As we will see, today the marketing of textiles from Teotilán del Valley, a famous weaving community in Oaxaca’s Central Valley places a great emphasis on its ability to secure natural dies locally and on the uniqueness of its Mesoamerican designs.

In his study of artisanal practices in the village of Olinalá, Guerrero, Mexico Rick A. López shows us how the painted gourds paid as tribute by Olinaltecos (residents of Olinalá) to the Aztec corroborates the use of art as a means of mediating relationships of power between the state and market. Lopez explains that Olinalteco’s strategic use of hand-painted gourds as tribute exhibits “a long history of using their art to mediate their relationships to the state and markets. As such, their art unfolded not as a naïve expression but through local-imperial/national interactions and grounded power struggles.” Similarly, the tributary textiles paid to the Aztecs by the inhabitants of Oaxaca’s Central Valley region reflect an understanding of the social structure, aesthetic tastes, and the negotiation of power at a regional level. It is important to note that the Mixtecs who inhabited Teoçapotla (Zaachila) “staunchly reported its independence and autonomy from Aztec rule, claiming that its tribute payments to the garrison at Huaxacac were made ‘out of friendship’ (PNE 4: 194.)” So, these colorful mantas were actively and purposefully used to meditate between local and regional power structures. The Codex Mendoza is among the oldest surviving texts that identify Oaxaca as a textile-producing region with a unique stylistic output. As we will see, today’s discussion of Oaxacan popular art, including textiles, basketry, ceramics, and wooden figures continues to encompass issues of style, tradition, and uniqueness and matters relating to local, national, transnational, and global structures of power.

**OAXACA AS TOURISM DESTINATION**

Best known for its indigenous population, local customs, artisan communities, coastline, colonial architecture, and archeological sites, Oaxaca is among most popular and

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visited regions in Mexico. Oaxaca City and its surrounding Central Valley became a
destination of cultural tourism around the mid-twentieth century through the actions of a
series of actors (merchants, government officials, collectors, explorers, journalists, and
museum curators) who invested time and resources in developing a market for Oaxaca’s
popular art and cultural practices. In the eyes of many visiting travelers, Oaxaca is timeless
and exotic. Oaxaca is imagined as an almost mythical place where one can witness the
endurance of Mesoamerican traditions, customs, and practices. Tourism in the state is closely
tied to Mesoamerican archeological sites, festivals like the Guelagetza (Valley Zapotec term
for reciprocal exchange,) religious procession called calendas, popular arts (pottery,
tapestry, wood sculpture, etc.), traditional dishes (mole, chapulines, memelas, tlacuyas, pan
dulce, chocolate caliente,) and dance. Beautiful beaches, warm climate, lush landscapes, and
impressive mountain ranges also entice visitors. Oaxaca’s cultural and ecological offerings,
ethnic makeup and high level of poverty make visiting the state both appealing and
affordable. What once was a monumental acropolis (Monte Alban), an elegant palace
complex (Yagul and Mitla,) and a religious shrine (Dainzu) are now explored as impressive
archeological sites and world heritage centers. Reflecting our culture’s epochality (one
informed by western concepts, ideas, and beliefs) these archeological vestiges are sites for
the development of knowledge of Mesoamerican cultures but also serve as backdrop
informing contemporary modes of understanding Oaxaca, its people, culture, and history.

World War II marked a significant change in Mexico relations with the rest of the
world. Mexico began to become more fully integrated into the international community. And
on November 7, 1945 the country joined the United Nations and became one of its 51
founding states. To U.S. citizens, Mexico was no longer the unruly neighbor to the south, but
a strategic partner in world affairs. As diplomatic relations between both countries continued
to develop during and after the war, U.S. tourism in Mexico began to grow. A relationship
between diplomacy and tourism began to be forged this relationship, which depends on
political and economic ties between the countries continues to color U.S. and Mexican
affairs. In this geopolitical context, the “meaning of a vacation in Mexico now became tied to

38 Scott Cook and Martin Diskin, The Peasant Market Economy of the Valley of Oaxaca in Analysis and
a larger, almost spiritual purpose: to foster good relations and to spread democratic values.”

As time went by, restaurants, hotels, nightclubs, stores catering to foreigners, began to open. So did government spending in infrastructure in the form of roads and highways. Along with spending on infrastructure and services, a parallel effort to change Americans’ unflattering image of Mexico got on its way. Tourism developers and promoters embarked on a pro-Mexico crusade often times with the help of friends in the private sector and in academia whose Pan-Americanism view advocated for regional understanding and cooperation between nations. Even today, changing the perception of Mexico as a country plagued by drugs, corruption and violence is a principal motive of the tourism industry, but also as we will see of other cultural initiatives such as the exhibition of Mexican art in the U.S. Paula Cussi, one of the major patrons of the 1990 exhibition Splendor of Thirty Centuries, echoes this view. Cussi states: “We saw the country needed a face-lift internationally. We felt badly treated presswise all over the world . . . We have here a social life, a private enterprise, that was marvelous in sustaining life through all the difficult times. . . Art is a good way to remind people of other aspects of the country. We have had ups and downs, revolutions and all that, but there was always an exceptional art life-something coherent and traditional.”

Mexico: Splendor of Thirty Centuries opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with a cost of $4 million dollars, 50% of which was underwritten by Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, one of Mexico’s most influential businessmen and Paula Cussi’s husband.

In 1940 the Pan-America Highway was inaugurated. Although originally proposed as a railroad, the Pan-American Highway became a network of roads extending throughout the Western Hemisphere. In Oaxaca, the Pan-American Highway connected Oaxaca City, the Isthmus Tehuatepec, and the many archeological sites located throughout the Central Valley. Mitla, Yagul, and Monte Alban were now just a few kilometers from the highway. Visitors could now comfortably travel back and forth from Oaxaca City visiting the many “exotic”

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40 Ibid., 17.
41 Teresa Eckmann, NeoMexicanism: Mexican Figurative Painting and Patronage in the 1980s, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 54.
attractions of the region. To government officials and entrepreneurs, greater accessibility was an opportunity to commercially exploit Oaxaca and attract tourists and foreign capital to the economically depressed state. “By encouraging craft production in the countryside, Mexico’s leaders hoped to foster rural development, stem the tide of rural-urban migration, and attract tourism to regions where there are large indigenous populations.”42 From the onset, the drive to develop Oaxaca as a tourism destination was tied to economic policy and politics.

But even before the Pan-American Highway made traveling to Oaxaca City and surrounding archeological sites more accessible, cultural developers and art world gatekeepers began to cultivate a desire for Oaxacan popular art. Within certain affluent circles of society, the region began to build a reputation for its popular art production; this in turn spurred an interest in collecting Oaxacan popular art. Philanthropist, businessman, and public servant Nelson A. Rockefeller took this first trip to Oaxaca in 1933 and his last in 1978, shortly before his death. With the help of friends such as Mexican muralist, ethnographer, anthropologist, painter, writer, and curator Miguel Covarrubias, Rockefeller began to cultivate a taste for popular art and develop a collection that became one of the most comprehensive in the region. His interest in Latin American popular art was not purely motivated by aesthetic pleasure but also by political will. His daughter Ann R. Roberts explains, “Father’s interest was always in promoting the interrelationship between Mexico and America”43 and one can deduce that his travels through Latin America to collect art were part of this effort. In 1944, Rockefeller was named Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs making Latin America not just his area of expertise in the arts but also a focus of his career. Rockefeller collected over 3,000 popular art pieces. Many of which have found permanent homes at the San Antonio Museum of Art and the Mexican Museum in San Francisco.

Many Oaxacans sell their work in outdoor markets. As visitors walk through the many aisles they typically encounter rebozos (shawls,) alebrijes (brightly painted wooden figures,) huaraches (leather sandals,) leather work, filigree earrings, black pottery, green


glaze ware, wool rugs, hand embroidered *huipiles* (blouses,) and more. The design elements and subject matter of the works varies greatly, at times inspired by millenary Mesoamerican iconography, other times referencing modern art by taking inspiration from the oeuvre of artists like Frida Kahlo, Joan Miró, Picasso, M.C. Etcher, and others. Tourists and locals zigzag through the *mercado* perusing the merchandise and exchanging looks as buyers and sellers haggle over prices. The open-air markets have a long history in the region and have been a source of income, way of life, and a means for social interaction since before the Spanish landed in the Americas. Marketplaces have attracted the attention of observers since the early sixteenth century. Hernán Cortes gave an account of the Tlaxcala marketplace in his second letter to the crown. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, also a Spanish *conquistador* eyewitness accounts of the conquest of Mexico were recorded in his writings and included detailed accounts of Aztec marketplaces. Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan friar considered the first ethnographer of the New World goes into great detail describing craftsmen and potters in his writings.

In 1921, the first exhibition of popular art in Mexico took place. The Centennial Exhibition of Popular Art formed part of the country’s festivities commemorating one hundred years of independence from Spain. Its display of popular art channeled the look and feel of a marketplace or home interior. Room after room, objects were displayed on shelves, one next to another without descriptive labels, pedestals, or glass cases. Rugs were hung on the walls from ceiling to floor. In some of the rooms, the walls were painted with a tree motif, as if a shady tree were hovering over the objects. Today, many retail stores continue to display popular art in a manner that evokes open-air markets and/or home interiors. This intentional layout seems to stage “indianness” and bestow a sense of authenticity to the objects on display and the shopping experience by evoking pre-capitalist forms of economic exchange.

Today, much of Oaxaca’s cultural tourism continues to rely on its popular art producing communities. Among the most well known communities are the weavers from Teotitlán del Valle, the ceramists from Ocotlán de Morelos, Santa Maria de Atzompa and San Bartolo de Coyotepec, and the wood carvers of San Antonio Arrazola. The objects produced by these communities are among the most iconic of Mexican popular art and sought after by national and international tourists, art collectors, popular art enthusiast,
museum curators, and transnational corporations. In some cases, these works are representative of cultural traditions that have been in practice for centuries. Such as the ceramics from Santa Maria de Atzompa, whose ceramic production dates back almost 2,500 years. In others, they are relatively new developments. For example, the use of black clay by potters in San Bartolo de Coyotepec began in the 1950s. And the hand painted wood figures, known as alebrijes from San Antonio Arrazola were first produced in the late sixties.

Regardless of the antecedents of these arts, they are almost always marketed by both the state and private industry as indigenous material culture in Mexico and its manifestation in a present-day global economy.

**PRESENT DAY ETHNORACIAL AND CULTURAL COMPLEXITY**

Oaxaca is Mexico’s fifth largest state and has the highest concentration of indigenous language speakers in the country. The state has a population of almost 3.8 million and its capital Oaxaca de Juárez (Oaxaca City) has approximately 255,000 inhabitants. This is more than double the population of the state’s second largest city, San Juan Bautista Juxtepec with approximately 101,000 inhabitants. Although many imagine Oaxaca as a rural, idyllic and undisturbed natural landscape, roughly 78% of its population lives in urban areas. Migration to urban areas has been part of a phenomena experience nation-wide. The country’s industrialization efforts of the 1950s, 60s and 70s had a significant impact on a large part of the population. In particular, industrialization impacted the livelihood of those communities who practiced subsistence farming or cash crop-based agriculture. Realizing that they could not compete with agro-business, these communities left the countryside in search of greater opportunities in urban areas.

The Mexican Constitution grants the diverse ethnic groups that make up the country’s indigenous population the right to decide internal forms of social, economic, political and cultural organization; the right to apply their own normative systems of regulations as long as human rights and gender equality is respected; and the right to preserve and enrich their

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languages and cultures amongst other rights.\textsuperscript{45} New economic conditions and the diminishing role of government as a provider of social welfare has chipped away at the ability of indigenous people to exercise these rights. This has in part resulted in significant waves of migration from the state. In Oaxaca, Mixtec migration within the country has been persistent for many years. There are significant Mixtec communities in Veracruz, Puebla, Mexico City, Sinaloa, and Baja California. By the early 1980s, the United States has been a more popular destination of the Mixtec community. By the early 1990s there were an estimated 45,000 to 55,000 Mixtecs working in California. By 2010, the Mixtec community in “Oaxacalifornia” is estimated to compromise more than 20\% of the states indigenous migrant worker population.\textsuperscript{46}

Even though it is challenging to define indigeneity as a set of specific characteristic, Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography (\textit{Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática}) relies on native language retention as the leading criteria to identify indigenous populations.\textsuperscript{47} According to the Institute’s 2010 report, thirty four percent of the state’s population speaks an indigenous language, while fourteen out of every 100 people do not speak Spanish.\textsuperscript{48} The two largest ethnic groups in the state are the Zapotec with approximately 370,000 speakers and the Mixtec with 264,000.\textsuperscript{49}

Another avenue giving us insight onto the complexity of Oaxaca’s present day ethnoracial and cultural complexity is the practice of indigenous customary law. The state is divided into 571 municipalities out which nearly three quarters are governed by a system of indigenous customary law known as \textit{Usos y Costumbres} (customs and traditions.) \textit{Usos y Costumbres} is a subnational political, economic, and social form of self-governance based on

\textsuperscript{45} Secretaría de Gobernación, “Artículo 2-La Nación Mexicana es Única e Indivisible,” accessed May 1, 2013, \url{http://www.ordenjuridico.gob.mx/Constitucion/articulos/2.pdf}.

\textsuperscript{46} Lynn Eddy-Zambrano, “About,” Mixtec.org, accessed May 1, 2013, \url{http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~mixtec/about.html#migrations}.


\textsuperscript{48} Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, “Cuéntame.”

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
the customs and practices of indigenous communities. Other states in Mexico where *Usos y Costumbres* is officially recognized are Chiapas and Sonora. *Usos y Costumbres* affords indigenous communities degrees of independence, autonomy, and resilience in response to pressures to assimilate to the status quo. In Oaxaca, this sociopolitical organization has many uses. It is employed to resolve disputes, establish internal governance, and practice self-reliance. *Usos y Costumbres* helps indigenous communities to cope with present day challenges and adapt their cultural beliefs to contemporary needs, it can also be a generating force in establishing and identity founded on the customs and practices of the community. On the other hand, for those who are not versed on these practices, it can help generate stereotypes, *Other* indigenous communities and fetishize their social, spiritual and material practices.

**CASE STUDY I: ARTIST AS ENTREPRENEUR**

We in Oaxaca have inherited a millenary artistic sensibility, present in impressive archeological monuments such as Monte Albán, Yagul, Mitla, among many others. Oral history survives in our indian groups. Thus, one after another, every generation of Oaxacans recreates the cosmic origin of a world once enchanted, in which we all belong together, as a whole. This vital philosophy is the essence that rules our relation towards nature and guides endless process of change and creativity of our people. This is the fountainhead of our artists.

-Dióro Carrasco Altamirano

*Oaxaca’s Art and Soul*

Located approximately 31 kilometers from Oaxaca City and on the foothills of the Sierra Juaréz mountains, Teotitlán del Valle is a small town known for its wool rugs. With approximately 5,000 residents, Teotitlán del Valle mostly caters to tourists visiting Oaxaca City. Local attractions include an eighteenth century Spanish colonial church built on top of a destroyed Zapotec temple, a community museum dedicated to local archeology, and the many stores, stands, and family owned home workshops dedicated to the sale of wool rugs. As one enters the town, signs both in English and Spanish point to local textiles shops. These signs persuade tourists to visit a particular shop but also alert the visitors of the competitive nature of the textile industry in Teotitlán. Shop after shop line up one after the other on the main street, as visitors make their way to the church square. Mostly women work at these shops, patiently waiting for visitors to approach them and inquire about prices, local craftsmanship, materials, provenance, and significance of the chosen designs. Aside from the local shops and tents selling textiles on the main square, tourists can visit local homes where
textiles are being crafted. When one visits a home workshop, an elaborate demonstration explaining each step of the handcrafted wool rug is offered. In-depth explanations guide the naïve tourist along each step: from washing the raw wool, to carding it and then spinning it into yarn, winding the yarn into large bundles, securing local natural pigments, dying the wool, to the actual process of weaving the rug on a traditional foot-treadle floor loom. The hands-on demonstration allows for the tourists to partake in some of the processes, they can brush the wool and spin it into yarn, touch the various mineral, plants and insects used to make natural dyes, and even take part in helping to weave a rug on hand operated loom. The demonstration showcases the knowledge of the artist, affords visitors a hands-on experience, and entices the purchase of these unique, handmade products.

**The Bug in the Rug: Home as Showroom**

*The Bug in the Rug* is a successful home workshop in Teotilán del Valle. The father and son team, invite tourists to the inner courtyard of their home where they demonstrate how the textiles are handcrafted. Here they also invite guests to a showroom where hundreds of rugs for sale can be touched, examined, and purchased. As mentioned, the demonstration is meant to inform visitors of the various steps taken to create these beautiful rugs and also entice them to purchase. But as we will see, the demonstration is also a mechanism or strategy for a discussion on inspiration, signature, quality, uniqueness, prestige, and supply and demand. As both son and father communicate their knowledge and skill in handcrafting the rugs, the conversation on textiles is also a reflection on art, culture, indigeneity, and business practices in the twenty-first century.

The demonstration begins with an in-depth explanation concerning the procurement of high quality sheep wool. The son, Isaac Vásquez Gutiérrez, tells us that the best quality wool comes from the region known as La Mixteca Alta in the state of Oaxaca, and this is where they procure theirs. Once they have purchased the raw wool, they take it to a river to wash where they brush it against a basket with soap. The dry wool is then combed and spun on a *malacate*, a tool, which he explains, has been in used since before “the conquest.” As he speaks, a woman wearing an apron and sporting her hair in a long braid brushes the wool and spins it into yarn using the wooden *malacate*. The woman spinning wool on the wooden *malacate* makes for a picturesque sight. The guests bring out their cameras and begin taking
pictures. The woman, her dress, and the ancient tool grant the experience a sense of authenticity. Visitors are encouraged to join in and help manipulate the wool. As tourists strive to emulate the woman, they encounter difficulties as they attempt to manipulate the wool and begin to realize the amount of labor and strength needed to do so. As visitors try their hand at combing the wool and spinning it using the malacate, they also begin to get a better sense of the amount of work and dexterity that making these rugs entails.

Isaac Vásquez Gutiérrez then discusses the various natural dyes used. He explains that all of the dyes are procured in Oaxaca [Figure 1, all figures are in the Appendix.] For the dark black color huizache the seed of the mesquite tree is used, for yellow, zempazuchtl (marigold,) for blue, the indigofera tinctoria plant, and for red the grana cochinilla (cochineal insect.) These colors are also used in other products. He tells us that indigo was once used by the brand Levi Strauss to dye their jeans, and that the cochineal bug is used as a natural dye in cosmetics, candies, cakes, and to give the Italian liquor Campari its red hue. More importantly, he reveals that the cochineal has been in use since “pre-Hispanic times because in the ruins at Mitla and Monte Alban one can see the remains of cochineal dyes. And also it was uses to dye the cloaks of kings in pre-Hispanic times. This is why it is known as nochetli, which means ‘god’s blood’ or ‘cactus blood.’” He then mentions that local salt is used as an adhesive for the dye. The emphasis on the procurement of local materials gives the sense that the plethora of colors and varying shades created are unique to this region. The discussion is also used by Isaac Vásquez Gutiérrez as a strategy to communicate his knowledge of local history and culture, embedding in his discussion a sense of place, uniqueness, tradition, authenticity, and continuity between an ancient past and the present.

As he speaks, he passes around wicker baskets and ceramic bowls containing the natural dyestuff. The basket and ceramics are examples of other types of Oaxacan popular art. Here and there Isaac Vásquez Gutiérrez gives the visitors short lessons on Zapotec language, “to say good afternoon, we say Ta’chi, Ta’chi” and encourages the crowd to repeat after him. He then passes around magazine articles and books that discuss natural dye production in Oaxaca. These texts: Natural History magazine, Oaxaca Journal, Smithsonian

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50 Isaac Vásquez Gutiérrez, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.
magazine, and the book *Revelaciones del Arte Popular* (Popular Art Revelations), have articles on Oaxaca, its colors and popular art. As Isaac Vásquez Gutiérrez points to the photo in one of the magazines article, he smiles and exclaims: “Yes, he is my father. He worked with Rufino Tamayo for twenty-two years. This is a rug that is in a museum in the United States, in New York. At the Metropolitan Museum.” These texts further validate his presentation while serving as a transition from a discussion of the procurement of raw material, dyeing techniques, and the manipulation of the dyed wool to a conversation on how the rugs are woven, designs conceptualized, and the importance of an international validation for their work, this conversation is lead by Isaac Vásquez García. To do so, the son then invites us over to the loom where his father is waiting.

**Great Master of Color**

Isaac Vásquez García is an elderly man in his seventies. He is very charming and has a big, warm smile. Standing behind the wooden foot-treadle floor loom, he begins to thread the wool yarn from side to side, visitors watch enthusiastically [Figure 2 in the Appendix] As he weaves the rug, he states: “In this loom I am making a pre-Hispanic design. This design.” Isaac Vásquez García then points to the sketch featuring a prominent eagle inside a circle. “According to Mixtecs and Zapotecs the eagle symbolizes the sky.” This initial comment sets the tone for much of the conversation the father will share with the group as he demonstrates how the rugs are woven. He then continues:

We don’t sell our rugs in Oaxaca. Here in your home, or in galleries, or in museums in the United States, in Oaxaca no. Because of the quality and colors of the rugs. Because in Oaxaca you will see lots, lots of rugs. And everyone says they work with vegetable dyes, but it is not true. Here authentic colors. Here I was the first to begin working with natural, vegetable dyes for the master Rufino Tamayo. Tamayo was the first painter in the whole world who began making his paintings with natural dyes. He was the first. And then Toledo, Francisco Toledo another Oaxacan.

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51 Isaac Vásquez Gutiérrez, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.

52 Isaac Vásquez García, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.

53 Isaac Vásquez García, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.
Isaac Vásquez García makes it clear that their work differs from that on sale in Oaxaca City. In particular, the use of natural dyes is unique to his practice and lends a particular quality to the work. As he mentions this, the detailed account by his son on the natural elements used to make the dyes takes on more significance in the appreciation of the textiles. Later on we learn that the curvilinear design of the rug on the loom requires a high level of mastery. Assuring us that we will not find a circle design in any of the rugs sold in the city. In his work on Oaxaca woodcarvers, Chibnik mentions “The most successful carving families sell almost exclusively to dealers and may have only a few pieces available for the drop-in visitor. Wholesalers place orders for a number of pieces of a certain type at a fixed price.”

This seems to be the case for the Vásquez family whose business The Bug in the Rug has successfully garnered the attention and acceptance of art world gatekeepers. In doing so, they are able to directly sell their work abroad by passing local intermediaries. One can deduce that accessibility to markets with higher purchasing power allows them to garner substantially higher prices for their work than selling exclusively at a local level.

Isaac Vásquez García’s opening dialogue places a special emphasis on his unique color palette. So does the name of the workshop The Bug in the Rug, with its reference to the cochineal bug. The attention to color is consistent with that the views of many scholars, gallery owners, curators, and art historians who often talk about Oaxaca in terms of its colors. Some argue that the Oaxacan sun bestows a particular brilliance to its colors and this in turn is internalized by artists and reflected in their color palette. The significance of color has also been attributed to the work of Oaxaca’s most famous artist, Rufino Tamayo. Tamayo, is one of Mexico’s most well known artists of the twentieth century. Tamayo was born in Oaxaca in 1899 to parents of Zapotec descent. In 1911, after the death of his mother Tamayo moved to Mexico City to live under the care of an aunt. In Mexico City he briefly studied art at the San Carlos Fine Arts Academy, before leaving the school to become a self-taught artist. In 1921, shortly after the end of the Mexican Revolution Tamayo was appointed head designer of the department of ethnographic drawings in the National Museum of Archeology in Mexico.

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55 During the colonial period, the red dye derived from the cochineal bug was an important export commodity. Demand in Europe was such, that in many instances, it was the second most sought after natural product from New Spain. Gold being the most sought after commodity.
City. This experience allowed him to surround himself with pre-Columbian objects. His employment at the National Museum of Archeology was a formative one; he states “It opened my eyes…putting me in touch with both pre-Columbian and popular arts. I immediately discovered the sources of my work -- our tradition.” Tamayo was concerned with the formal qualities of painting, namely color and form. His work often reflected on universal themes such as the absolute, nature’s duality, and the sublime, while simultaneously drawing from popular art and Mesoamerican sculpture, history, myths, proportion and color.

In Oaxaca City, Rufino Tamayo and Francisco Toledo are household names with a significant presence in Oaxaca’s cultural landscape. The Taller Tamayo and the Museo de Arte Prehispánico Rufino Tamayo are two important institutions. One provides a space for art making and experimentation, the other showcases Tamayo’s own pre-Columbian art collection. The Museo de Arte Prehispánico Rufino Tamayo has been instrumental in reorienting an appreciation and understanding of pre-Columbian objects (effigies, dress, figurines, vessels, carved stones, jewelry, wall paintings, stelas, etc.) from cultural artifacts to aesthetic works of art. Francisco Toledo (b. 1940), who is also a Oaxaca native of Zapotec decent, is also one of Mexico’s best-known living artists. He is also a cultural powerhouse in the Oaxaca City. He has spearheaded the building of several cultural institutions meant to safeguard, preserve, nurture, and bestow a sense of pride in Oaxaca’s cultural and natural patrimony. Among the many projects he has been instrumental to are: the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca, a graphic arts museum and library; the Museo de Arte Contempóraneo, a contemporary art museum; La Fábrica de Papel de Etla, a museum and handmade paper factory; El Pochote, an art house cinema; and El Jardín Ethnobotánico de Oaxaca, a garden specializing in the preservation of the areas unique botanical diversity. So, when Isaac Vásquez García mentions that he prepared the natural pigments used by Tamayo he is making a conscious effort to align his practice with Mexico’s foremost colorist. And by mentioning Toledo (and sharing with the crowd that he is the godfather of one of Toledo’s children), he associates himself with Oaxaca’s most influential contemporary cultural figure.

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In the challenging environment of economic competition and commodification of culture, Isaac Vásquez García opening monologue serves multiple functions. It frames his practice in a way that attaches aesthetic, social, cultural, and economic value to it. This is particularly important, because many of the tourists visiting towns have a limited knowledge on textiles, the history of Teotitlán del Valle, and the cultural significance of the practice. His opening monologue also appeals to an audience of mostly U.S. born tourists by engaging them through a knowledge base that highlights Isaac Vásquez García familiarity with U.S. cultural institutions, value systems, and art markets. The father and son enterprise establishes a transnational discourse that is in-line with global structures of cultural capital and consumption. Their connection to transnational networks of knowledge, prestige, and commerce follows neoliberal thought in that it emphasizes a conception of the world as a global market. This is also particularly important for their work. As Benetta Jules-Rosette informs us, “Since art is not an essential commodity, the saturation of the market depends a great deal upon the stimulation of consumer interest and the expansion of the scope of the market beyond the local level.”

The Art Market: Inspiration, Authorship, and Indigeneity

As Isaac Vásquez García continues to demonstrate how to work the loom, he discusses his work in terms of his sources of inspirations, authorship, uniqueness, design, quality, intellectual property, marketplace, and purpose. The discussion is sophisticated and seamlessly interwoven into the physical demonstration of his practice. As mentioned earlier, in Oaxaca, identity and is tied to indigenous history, customs, and forms are often used as marketing strategies both by the state and private enterprise. Authenticity is an underlying current in many of these efforts. Oaxaca’s customs, demographics, and history are constructed as an authentic experience prompting tourists to feel they are experiencing the real Mexico when visiting Oaxaca. So, when Isaac Vásquez García is asked where does he seek inspiration from, he quickly responds, “in the codices, in the stelas, in the caves,” in those practices and locations that tie his inspiration to Oaxaca’s millenary history and bestow

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a sense of authenticity to his practice. He then points to his sketches and informs the visitors that he uses both pre-Hispanic and pre-historic designs. He tells us that these types of designs are his specialty: “Old Mexican designs. That is my specialty, because I want people to know the designs, the symbols of our ancestors. This is what interests me.”\(^{58}\) He then says “and also the demonstrations that we do, the interests is that people learn. The colors that we work with, the colors used by our ancestors. That is what interests us.”\(^{59}\) The interest to educate people on Oaxaca’s history and traditions is a noble one. It also serves to connect *The Bug in the Rug* and perhaps also the purchase of a rug to a more significant memory of the trip.

The work of cultural theorist Susan Stewart helps us to understand the implications of personal narrative structures dealing with nostalgia and longing and their corresponding objectification through a trip’s souvenirs. In the book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Stewart offers an insightful take on the relationship of narrative to origin and object as a way to explore the “social disease of nostalgia.”\(^{60}\) On a theoretical level, Stewart investigates narrative as a structure of desire that exposes the distance between the signifier and the signified. This is pertinent to the study the popular art because as we begin to analyze the discursive strategies used by the artists, the state, and private enterprise in its commodification, Stewart’s work helps us understand the relationship of language to experience within a post-modern and a neocolonial setting. The author theorizes the souvenir as an objectification of a desire that is partially triggered by dissatisfaction with the owner’s own lived experience and a longing for authenticity. According to Stewart the search for authentic experience and consequently the authentic object is constructed in relation to our present lived experiences. The souvenir, and in this case the wool rug, is imbedded with a personal narrative of the past and its continuation into the present that breaches its distance through intimacy. In breaching distance in space and time, the souvenir of the exotic is particularly meaningful. “Just as authenticity and

\(^{58}\) Isaac Vásquez García, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.

\(^{59}\) Isaac Vásquez García, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.

interiority are placed in the remote past, the exotic offers an authenticity of experience tied with notions of the primitive as child and the primitive as an earlier and purer stage of contemporary civilization.”

For many, this state of “purer stage of contemporary civilization” is much of the appeal of living and visiting Oaxaca, where for many, spending time in Oaxaca offers a more simple, holistic way of life. Additionally, according to Stewart the authenticity of the exotic object arises from the analogy between the primitive and exotic and the origin of the possessor. And these objects allow the tourist to “appropriate, consume, and thereby ‘tame’ the cultural other.” Additionally, the author tells us that “Removed from its context the exotic souvenir is a sign of survival—not its own survival, but the survival of the possessor outside his or her own context of familiarity. Its otherness speaks to the possessor’s capacity for otherness: it is the possessor, not the souvenir, which is ultimately the curiosity.”

Stewart’s work situates the consumption of the exotic objects (and for the purposes of this study the consumption of popular art as primitive, exotic, and authentic) as helping its owner cope with dissatisfactions of living in a post-modern consumer society. So, if tourists visiting Oaxaca seek authenticity in their experiences, then the role of the object in this context it to function as a sign of “premodern” tradition, which with their narrative on pre-Columbian traditions and customs, the rugs from Teotitlán del Valle do just that.

As Isaac Vásquez García continues to stand behind the loom weaving together the various colored wool, the conversation turns to topics relating to authorship, competition, and the market place. Isaac Vásquez García began signing his works in 1973 and has not stopped. This is not a common practice among weavers from Teotitlán del Valle. His initial “I”, “V”, and “G” are woven into to the all of the rugs he creates. He points out that when other “artisans” view his work, they begin to copy it. In fact, many of his designs have been copied. But while others might copy his designs, they cannot sign the work. He explains that he signs his work because his rugs are unique, due to their design and quality. Whereas in the past, much of the popular art created was anonymous and collectively made, Isaac Vásquez García’s work shows us that these practices have changed. The emphasis on authorship and

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 148.
signature is surely linked to Western practices of art making and provenance where an artist’s signature is used to authenticate and assign value to works of art. And in today’s globalized marketplace, signing the work permits Isaac Vásquez García to protect his designs; through this signature he is able to establish his designs as his intellectual property. There is clearly an emphasis on the individual over the collective here. Since Mexico began to adopt a neoliberal model, instituting a culture in favor of intellectual property has been a constant topic of political debate and an important component of international treaties such as NAFTA. Whether through constitutional processes, property and individual rights, activism, and or regulatory mechanism, Mexico’s political class has been working towards creating an environment to recognize these rights. According to the “2012 Report” by the International Property Rights Index, the “first international comparative study that measures the significance of both physical and intellectual property rights and their protection for economic well-being,” Mexico’s global rank is 76 of 130.

Isaac Vásquez García only weaves two rugs that are exactly the same, no more than that. He lets us know that the reason for this is that “two pieces is what museums purchase. For collectors, you cannot make more. Otherwise they will not be considered unique.” He also mentions that people from abroad know how to appreciate the colors and handmade work. He says that every year in June, he travels with family members to New Mexico to participate in the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market of the Museum of International Folk Art. As a result of the trips to museums his work “is already considered an art form. And because of this we do not sell in Oaxaca.” Clearly, museums and collector are among The Bug in the Rug’s most important clients, and Isaac Vásquez García has a keen awareness of the art market for his rugs and a business plan that allows him to succeed in this business.

Isaac Vásquez García learned to weave from his father, and his father learned from his father, and so on. “It’s a family inheritance. My children are next. The man is my son.

65 Isaac Vásquez García, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.
66 Isaac Vásquez García, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.
Everyone, we are a large family. We are all weavers. We all have an interest in conserving the old job. My wife is Zapotec. And my children are also Zapotec. I speak more Zapotec than Spanish. We all speak Zapotec, like I said, we don’t want to loose the mother tongue. All of the customs. This is one of them. Would you like to see the rugs that are already finished? Tradition, inheritance, language, customs, ethnicity, and identity are all implicated in the sale of rugs and the commodification of culture. Like Rhonda Brulotte tells us, “Racial and ethnic categories are constituted in relation to overlapping and ever-shifting ideas of biological essence, historical process, cultural identity, and national subjectivity.” And in the context of Oaxaca’s popular art market, all of these can be used to incentivize a purchase.

**Promoting Popular Art**

Isaac Vásquez García explained that he was taught to weave from his father, and his father learned from his father, and so on. It is not uncommon for the creators of popular art to learn the art practice from family members and or friends in an informal setting. It is unusual for practitioners of this art to receive formal training in an art school. An education in popular art is usually vernacular and local. As popular art becomes an increasingly commercial enterprise, competition and market pressures compel artists to adopt by free market practices such as quality controls, standardizing output levels, product and market diversification, and the formal establishment of pricing mechanism. In today’s global marketplace, the effort to coordinate the output, quality, and marketing of popular art at a local, regional, national, and international level is being led by both the state and private enterprise. The National Fund for the Promotion of the Crafts (state) and Fomento Cultural Banamex (private enterprise) are Mexico’s most significant organization addressing contemporary popular art. Both of these efforts are informed by neoliberalism. Under the premise of “helping artisans become economic generations of economic profitability” and “preservation of the craft” these efforts inculcate market values and practices among the artists they support.

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67 Isaac Vásquez García, conversation with the author, Teotitlán del Valley, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Translated by the author.

68 Brulotte, “‘Yo soy nativo de aquí,’” 476.
Established in 1974, The National Fund for the Promotion of the Crafts (Fonart) was created in response to “the need to promote artisanal activity in the country and thus contribute to the generation of a higher household income of artisans, through its human, social and economic development.” Since its inception, one of the main focuses of Fonart’s efforts has been to transform popular art practice into a viable income generator for its practitioners, thus stimulate the economic development in the region and the country. Fonart’s mission makes clear its commitment to aligning public policy, economic development, and artistic phenomena. It mission is “To be the leading institution leader in the generation of public policies of attention to the artisan sector by means of a model which generates sustainable, individual, regional and community development under criteria which defines artisans as generators of social, cultural and economic profitability for the country.”

This mission is carried out through a wide range of activities such as providing training and technical assistance to the artists, through a variety of workshops aimed to help the artist in the organization, administration, improvements of production processes, adoption of new technologies; supporting production, through the procurement of raw materials, tools, and expenses incurred in production; supporting marketing efforts and purchasing works; and organizing popular art contests. The aim of these activities is to clearly reshape popular art practice into a for profit enterprise, transform popular art into a commoditity that responds to market demands, and to foster an entrepreneurial spirit among artists.

Established in 1971, Fomento Cultural Banamex was created by the Banco Nacional de México with the objective of “encouraging cultural development in Mexico.” In 1996, five years after its privatization the bank began an initiative targeting popular art called Programa de Apoyo al Arte Popular (Program of Support for Folk Art) with the purpose of

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strengthening and promoting artisanal creations in Mexico. The *Programa de Apoyo al Arte Popular* “Achieves its objectives through financial rewards, the consolidation of an important collection, the specialty workshops, as well as exhibitions, book publishing, and the marketing of artisanal production.” More specifically, the program’s” fundamental objectives” are: One, “Avoiding extinction of ancient craft manifestations through workshops and training for masters and apprentices.” Two, “Strengthening cultural identity and pride of craftsmen through better knowledge and dignity.” Three, “Contributing to the ongoing development of rural and indigenous populations and their communities, through the creation of new jobs and productive activities.” And four, “Support the creation of alternatives for the commercialization of handicrafts.” Among Fomento Cultural Banamex’s most noted efforts has been the series of national and international exhibitions of popular art, robust publications detailing popular art production throughout the country, and popular art commercialization through a series out workshop and stores in Mexico and galleries in the U.S.

In the essay “Issues in Popular Art” included in the book *Beyond the Fantastic Issue in Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, Ticio Escobar exposes the discourses, ideologies, and relationships of power between the center and periphery that make possible a view of popular arts as an art form that is static, traditional, genuine, while high art is expected to change, evolve, and innovate. Escobar points out that the issue is not whether popular arts can or should change, but rather who determines the changes it undergoes. The state, private enterprise, and artists all have vested interests in popular art. Consequently, as stakeholders interested in the destiny of these cultural practices they each exercise power in shaping the course it takes. So, popular art practices adopt themselves to a social and economic milieu characterized by a neoliberal order, the structures of power rooted in the relationship between the West and non-Western cultures, the state and the citizen, and private enterprise and individuals are part and parcel of the ability for popular art to respond to these

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challenges from within. At stake in this state of affairs is the capacity to generate income for a household, who determines the cultural configurations across national boundaries, and perhaps more importantly, the ability of artists as active agents of change to decide the destiny of their cultural practices.

*The Bug in the Rug* shows us how a discussion on authenticity, indigeneity, and uniqueness can be used to incentivize the consumption of popular art, validate its quality, and differentiate it from other artwork. For artists, such as Isaac Vásquez García the authenticity of his artwork and the commodification of his practice are linked to his ability to properly communicate how his indigeneity informs his practice. To do this, ethnoracial markers such as knowledge of indigenous language, ties to an ethnic group, maintaining a long-standing familial practice and even geographical location are all part of a narrative that unfolds as the artist and his son educate the public on textile production. This narrative also expresses a sense of uniqueness, which in a global market place, where similar products can be produced just about anywhere, is key to the products competitiveness on a global scale. The efforts have an ethos of preserve popular art practices and educating the public on then, which when coupled with a keen eye for how the fine art markets also complement the entrepreneurial spirit of the artist.

**CASE STUDY II: MUSEUM PRACTICES IN RETAIL SPACE**

Throughout history, the evidence of objects has been central to the telling of cross-cultural encounters with distant worlds or remote Others. The materiality and physical presence of the object make it a uniquely persuasive witness to the existence of realities outside the compass of an individual’s or a community’s experience. The possession of an exotic object offers, too, an imagined access to a world of difference, often constituted as an enhancement of the new owner’s knowledge, power, or wealth.

-Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner

*Unpacking Culture*

Since the eighteenth-century, museums have played a seminal role in the West’s understanding of non-Western arts, customs, social institutions, and achievements. They have done so primarily through an interpretation of the material manifestations of those societies. The intellectual, educational, and cultural authority commanded by museums has served to legitimize their interpretation of the objects on display and by proxy, the cultures they
represent. The representation of non-Western cultures has also served a discursive function. Museums as “managers of consciousness”\(^\text{75}\) play an important role in the inculcation of social and political opinions and attitudes.\(^\text{76}\) Museums, exhibitions, and world fairs as apparatuses of representation have been implicated in the construction of colonial orders, have functioned as a tool for the formation of the identity of a nation-state subject, and have provided instruments for a state’s moral and cultural regulation of the working class.\(^\text{77}\) Museums as a modern apparatus of representation are part of a complex structure of power and knowledge that both sustains and advances the West’s hegemonic position in the world.

In today’s post-industrial, late-capitalist society, retail spaces can also act and function as museums. The marketplace is an active contributor to an understanding, appreciation, and ultimately consumption of non-Western culture. As the art historian Donald Preziozi states, “If virtually anything may serve as a museum content today, then in a complementary fashion virtually anything may come to serve museological functions, if only by designation.”\(^\text{78}\) This beckons me to study how in today’s global economy, retail spaces can serve “museological functions.” Even though retail environments differ from museums, most noticeably in their motivation to maximize profit, the discourses used to sell non-Western articles in the marketplace are similar to Euro-American museological narratives previously applied to non-Western societies. Past exhibitions and world fairs have characterized non-Western cultures as ahistorical, primitive, rural, underdeveloped, pre-industrial, traditional, and less evolved. In today’s retail space, a similar description can be observed. In order to study the exhibition of popular art and non-Western craft in retail space, I will investigate the exhibition of non-Western popular art at the Pangaea Outpost store in San Diego. I examine the visual, textual, and verbal strategies employed to commodify popular art. I also discuss the implications of these strategies on the customer’s perception of non-


\(^{76}\) Ibid., 406.


Western cultures and its potential for the formation of a “culturally aware” consumer identity. The writings of cultural theorists Jean Baudrillard and Susan Stewart provide a point of departure for a critical examination of retail spaces as educational resources for a greater understanding of objects, their contexts, and the cultures they represent.

In The System of Objects, the French social theorist and cultural critic Jean Baudrillard describes objects as signs communicating much more than their use and exchange value. Objects can satisfy needs beyond function. The author asserts that a range of object that includes folkloric, exotic, and antique objects “appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism.” Popular art can satisfy its owner’s demand for an emotional state. Baudrillard maintains that the bourgeois class makes use of the objects in their homes as part of a strategy to establish their own class distinctiveness. Objects are perceived as expressions of the financial and cultural capital of their owners/users and symbols of social status. Popular art can also be used as part of a strategy for class differentiation. The consumer of popular art will perceive in the object much more than a decorative piece. She/he will also desire it for its ability to stimulate an emotion or memory, maintain class hierarchies, and signal social status of a culturally knowledgeable and socially aware consumer.

As mentioned earlier, Susan Stewart’s work offers an insightful look at the relationship between souvenirs and collections and their recourse to time, use value, memory and context. Stewart describes souvenirs as serving a double function, that of “authenticating a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present.” She further elaborates by stating: “The nostalgia of the souvenir plays in the distance between the present and an imagined, prelapsarian experience, experience as it might be ‘directly lived.’ The location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and the exotic.” According to Stewart, a souvenir functions as a conduit of a longing for what is no longer present. Like souvenirs,

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80 Stewart, On Longing, 139.
81 Ibid., 139-140.
there is a temporal component to an appreciation of popular art. If popular art is believed to be representative of the continuation of a traditional art expressions or culture through time, then these characteristics can easily be attributed to its creators. If contact with the communities creating popular art is only established in the retail space, then the ahistorical, static condition attributed to the objects will both authenticate the object and discredit its creators and their communities in the present.

The production of commercial and tourist arts is motivated by their potential as a source of income. Typically, commercial and tourist arts are produced by one group it consumption by another. Anthropologist Nelson H.H. Graburn asserts those “arts made for an external, dominant world; these have often been despised by connoisseurs as unimportant, and are sometimes called ‘tourist’ or ‘airport’ arts. They are, however, important in presenting to the outside world an ethnic image that must be maintained and projected as a part of the all-important boundary-defining system.”82 As the author points out, the commercial motivation behind the creation of tourist arts have stigmatized the objects as “unimportant.” Far from being unimportant, commercial and tourist arts can and do exhibit significant artistic qualities. Tourist arts, as Graburn states are an important component in a country’s formulation of cultural image for export. This has two important consequences for both its consumers and producers: one, tourist arts must “satisfy the aesthetics of a foreign customer, as well as the producer, if possible; they have to project a clear image, either ethnically relevant or suitably exotic.”83 And two, tourist arts as material ambassadors for a country’s image abroad can have implications for the formulations of identities within the country. In conclusion, beyond the economic exchange prompted by commercial and tourist arts, these arts have important implications to the perception of cultures outside national boundaries and the formulation of identities from within.

Exhibitionary Practices: The Power to Display

The ways in which art, artifacts, and commodities are exhibited are key to the understanding, appreciation, and value associated with those items on display. Arrangement,
lighting, atmosphere, labels, music, etc., are information devices influencing the viewer’s emotional and intellectual interaction with the objects before him or her. As the architectural historian Victoria Newhouse states in her book *Art and the Power of Placement*:

> Where an artwork is seen - be it in a cave, a church, a palace, a museum, a commercial gallery, an outdoor space, or a private home - and where it is placed within that chosen space can confer a meaning that is religious, political, decorative, entertaining, moralizing, or educational. Placement can even affect aesthetic and commercial values, boosting or diminishing an artist’s reputation. It is key to the appreciation of art.  

Thus, the environment under which objects are viewed can enhance and or diminish their appreciation but more importantly, bestow meaning and value. In a museum, the display of objects is a tool to communicate information and insight about the objects, encourage personal contemplation, and foster for the visitor intellectual and emotional associations among the objects on view. In a retail setting, the display of merchandise is a crucial instrument in establishing a desire for the goods available for purchase. This motivation will encourage a display and way of talking about the objects that above all caters to the needs, wants, and expectations of the consumer.

**Pangaea Outpost: Cabinets of Curiosity in Retail Space**

The Pangaea Outpost store is located in San Diego’s Pacific Beach neighborhood. Pacific Beach is a popular area with young people, surfers, and college students. Its beaches, shops, bars, restaurants, boardwalk, and pier also make the area an important tourist destination. Tourism is San Diego’s third largest sector of the economy. Defense and manufacturing, are the city’s first two sources of income. Pangaea Outpost is located on the main commercial strip of the locality. The store is located on a corner building that in the early 1950s housed a J.C. Penney store.

The store’s name, Pangaea Outpost, is an important element in its construction of a commercial identity that evokes a sense of travel, exploration, appropriation, and of course, consumption. The name Pangaea Outpost simultaneously evokes two places, the Pangaea

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supercontinent and the remote outpost of country, empire, or military force. As a result, the store’s name symbolically unites the commercial exploration of the supercontinent with the military/colonial aspirations of a country. The store’s online description reinforces the ethos of a voyage to faraway lands. Their call to “Discover a Whole New World of Shopping!” is echoed in cyber space with the following statements on their website: “Inside our two locations you will find eclectic treasures from all areas of the globe...,” “...listen to the global music selection that fills the air as you start your journey around the store.,” “Come, shop explore!”

Similar to a cabinet of curiosity’s symbolic reduction of the newly colonized world into a micro-cosmos made up of samples of natural and artificial exotica or an Italian princely collection from the seventeenth century that can be “seen as an attempt to reappropriate and reassemble all reality in miniature, to constitute a place from the centre of which the prince could symbolically reclaim dominion over the entire natural and artificial world.”

Pangaea Outpost symbolically reduces the material manifestation of non-Western cultures to a selection of “eclectic treasures” available for personal consumption and home decor.

The store’s layout conjures up a bazaar-like shopping experience. Small stalls surround the store’s center space. Each section has a different theme and offers objects for sale reflecting that theme. Similar to the layout of the world fairs of the nineteenth century, as the customer moves from one stall to another, he/she visits different regions of the world. The store’s cash register is located in the center of the store. At Pangaea Outpost the exchange of money at is symbolically placed at the center of the supercontinent. Playing in the background is an auditive sample of international music genres. The store’s diorama-like atmosphere mimics the good’s “original” commercial environment. The store’s ambiance is comparable to the outdated museum’s practice of reconstructing the “authentic” context of the goods on display. The goal of this practice in a museum or a commercial setting is to re-contextualize the objects and bestow them with greater amounts of “authenticity.” In the

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book *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, Michael M. Ames states that museums of anthropology thought that the “idea of artificially contextualizing through the craft of an exhibit designer the data or specimens from other cultures is justified by the assumption that this is necessary if we are to see objects from the ‘native point of view,’ that is, how they were used in the original context.” In anthropology museums, this was an attempt by the staff to add to the understanding of other societies and to reveal anthropological concepts and insight. In a retail space, the contextualization of the objects from a “native point of view” is meant to enhance the shopping experience by giving the customer the sense that he is the “native” shopping. This gives the experience a sense of authenticity, validate the goods on display, and stimulate a desire for the goods on sale.

**The Levy Trading Co.: Collecting Handmade Treasures**

The Levy Trading Co. market stall at Pangaea Outpost specializes on the sale of “Hand Made Treasures from Around the World.” Under the “merchant” tab on Pangaea Outpost’s website The Levy Trading Co. is described in the following manner: “We travel the world and buy unique, hand-made items directly from the artisans in the villages of India, Asia, Latin America, Russia, Turkey, S. Africa, Tibet. We support many economically disadvantaged artisans including several women’s artisan cooperates.” From the onset, the description of The Levy Trading Co. connects the purchase of items with the possibility of aiding those in need. Pangaea Outpost’s intended bazaar-like shopping experience is also experienced at The Levy Trading Co. The display of the goods seems in the stall seems to be motivated by several factors including: maximizing the available space, arranging the items in a visually attractive manner, and demonstrating to the customers how to mix and match the merchandise [Figures 3 and 4 in the Appendix] It has an eclectic aesthetic. The merchandise for sale (handmade popular art, ceramics, dolls, jewelry and clothing) seems to lend itself to a

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mercado-style of shopping. This mercado-style of shopping evokes in the customer the iconographic of an open-air market in a non-Western country, lending a more “authentic” feel to the shopping experience.

The homogenizing bias towards the experience of being in a non-Western marketplace makes those countries interchangeable and their material expressions somewhat comparable on a formal level. A component of the merchant’s job is to educate the customer about the objects on display and their countries of origin. She begins by stating how she typically introduces the collection: “…this is a collection of hand-made pieces that I bring from artisans from around the world.”\(^91\) At The Levy Trading Co. the stall’s merchant acts as an informal educator. The merchant’s role as an educator serves two functions: that of being an arbiter of taste and quality of the goods on display and that of being a cultural interlocutor who mediates between those on display and its audiences. Both functions are similar to the current responsibilities of museum curators in the West. A museum curator is in charge of the safeguarding, analyzing, and presentation of culture and the acquisition of art. But given the changing demographics of the West (in part the result of a South to North migratory trend) museum curators are now also expected to respond to specific constituencies, and their role will have to “change from one of exclusive arbiters of taste and quality to one closer to that of ‘cultural brokers,’ whose function will be to mediate between the groups they exhibit and audiences unfamiliar with the cultural traditions represented.”\(^92\) The retail space not only serves as a provider of goods and services but also as a space for disciplining its subjects. The customer subjects receive an education about the objects on display and by proxy the cultures they represent. The subjects are disciplined in a way that makes them increasingly globally aware and culturally knowledgeable.

**Price Tags, Labels, Magazines, and Books: Narratives on Non-Western Cultures**

Similarly to the display of objects in museums, The Levy Trading Co. makes use of textual aids [Figure 3 and 4 in the Appendix] The descriptive aids offer information about the

\(^{91}\) Store clerk customer greeting, San Diego, CA, November 28, 2009. 

goods on display. Books, magazine cutouts, tags, and photos contextualize the objects. The objects are discussed in terms of fashion trends, the status of the artists, the socio-economic condition of its makers and the impact a purchase can have on the well-being of the artist and his/her community. Pricing labels include price, country of origin, and the purpose or significance of the piece. The informational aids influence the viewer’s emotional response to the objects before him or her. The aids stimulate demand for the goods by enticing the customer with exotic fantasies about the cultures and regions they represent and/or through a desire to help the social and economic condition the communities of its creators. As Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska point out of the convergence between culture and commerce experienced in the contemporary museum, the museum store has “reverted to the theatrical ‘exhibition’ style of its beginning, concentrating on displays of sequences of ‘lifestyle choices’ that dazzle with promise.” At Pangaea Outpost, the shopping experience and humanitarian promise of the purchase dazzles the customer lifestyle choices with a global sensitivity.

The Levy Trading Co.’s website is another important informational device making use of education as a marketing strategy. Since it is not uncommon for shoppers to carry with them technology devices (phones, ipads, tablets, and the like,) they can easily access the Internet as and visit the store’s website as they shop. This allowing allows customers to immediately consult online content and supplement their shopping experience with this information. The Levy Trading Co.’s online description explicitly asserts that “The collection of clothing, jewelry, toys, textiles, folk-art, wood carving and ceramics are unique, one of a kind, and represent ethnic cultures and people who hand create them.” It then legitimizes this claim by stating that the company “…buys directly from the artists in the villages so your purchase directly benefits the artists.” Under the category of “Folk Art/Toys/Dolls” the website focuses on Oaxaca. It states:

We travel to craft villages around the world to buy unique, one of a kind folk art items including ceramics, alebrijes (Oaxacan animals), masks, dolls, puppets, trees of life, retables, tin art and Day of the Dead handcrafts. We visit the villages

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of Oaxaca at least once a year to order and buy directly from world class carvers such as Armando Jimenez, Maria Jimenez Ojeda, Agustin Tinoco, Vicente Vasquez, Zeny Fuentes, and Jocobo Angeles. We have a close relationship with ceramics artist Josefina Aguilar and her family as well as Doloras Porras and Angelica Vasquez.95

The section on Oaxacan ceramist is the only section in the website that explicitly names artists and a working relationship with them. This seems to corroborate the extent to which some Oaxacan artists have been able to garner the attention of international merchants and have brokered merchandising agreements. Both the in-store textual aids and the website emphasis the geographical regions and cultures represented as rural, “underdeveloped,” ethnic, authentic, traditional, etc. The marketplace narrative is similar to the West’s nineteenth century construction of an Oriental other that is understood as a “product of unchanging racial and cultural essences; … which are the polar opposite of the West (passive rather than active, static rather than mobile, emotional rather than rational, chaotic rather than ordered)...”96 Timothy Mitchell continuous also notes that the construction of otherness in exhibitionary spaces such as world fairs have been an important element to the construction of a national identity and have also advanced imperial motives.97 In a contemporary retail space selling popular art and non-Western craft the emphasis put on the description of the producers and regions as having characteristic that are opposite to the West (rural/urban, handmade/industrial, “primitive”/modern, one of a kind/serially produced) is an effort to counter act the aura of “inauthenticity” that surrounds commercial and souvenir arts. This characterization also renders the creators of popular art as significantly different from the consumers of popular art in the U.S.

Disciplining a Culturally Aware Consumer

The consumption of and re-contextualization of art, artifacts, and foreign commodities within the domestic realm is not a contemporary phenomenon. Since the late


97 Ibid., 442.
nineteenth century, decorative fashions have encouraged women to include exotic imports as part of their home décor. A French drawing room or a Spanish music room in an American household would communicate extraordinary taste and wealth. Through their choice of décor the women of the house would “convey a cosmopolitan ethos-meaning a geographical expansive outlook that demonstrated a familiarity with the wider world.”

The decoration of cozy corners showcasing Japanese, Middle Eastern, or Latin American imports were a more financially viable option for those housewives who also wanted their homes to be in vogue. In their discussion on the demand for art commodities as home décor Philips and Steiner tell us that “…it is the private consumer rather than the museum or the scientific investigator who proves a market on a scale that motivates global production and circulations of these objects” no longer the museum or scientific researcher who on a global scale motivates the production and circulation of art commodities. But today what is radically different is the customer’s awareness of the relations of power behind his consumption. As Baudrillard states, for the bourgeois consumer the objects in their homes are part of a strategy to establish their own class distinctiveness.

The verbal, textual, and visual strategies used to commodify popular art shape the customer’s perception of non-Western cultures. The perception of non-Western artisans as economically disadvantaged, rural dwellers, making products by hand that reflect their identity, can encourage notions of social action through consumption. Such a belief is supported by product tags such as that of the company MonkeyBiz South Africa [Figure 5 and 6 in the Appendix] The MonkeyBiz product tag includes the following description: “I am a unique artwork created by disadvantaged people in the township of Cape Town. Thank you for choosing me. Make us welcome in your home.” Or by informational texts such as: “South Africa. These hand-beaded animals and figures are made in a women’s cooperative in South Africa. The money from their purchase goes to women with HIV in Africa.” In this regard, retail spaces as a pedagogical apparatus informing customers about their products and the

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effect of their consumption on society also have the potential to discipline a “culturally aware consumer.” Whereas in the past museums have served as spaces for the prescription and performance of the ideal citizen; in today’s global economy, retail spaces now serve as a space for the prescription of the ideal “global” customer. The ideal global customer is increasingly aware of the social and labor conditions behind the products he or she purchases and the potential effect that purchase will have on the world economically, socially, and environmentally.

Museums as managers of consciousness have shaped the ideas, beliefs, and identities of its viewing public. Museums form part of a complex structure of discursive formation that has been at the service of colonial powers and the nation-state. In today’s globalized world, the market economy is also an active agent in the shaping of identity. Retail spaces function as informal educators, educating its citizenry, the consumer, about the products and services offered. When the products are thought to be the material manifestations of a culture that is not one’s own, the retail space becomes a site for knowledge and power to be exercised. The store clerk as “cultural broker” will discipline its consumers to consume but will also shape his/her perception of the cultures and regions on display. Given that the motivation behind the education of the customer is driven by profit, disciplining of a globally aware and culturally sensitive consumer will more than likely obscure the potential of a colonial legacy to be inscribed in the retail space.

CASE STUDY III: EXHIBITIONS AS CONDUITS FOR NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY

Nothing does more to strengthen the bonds between peoples than the mutual understanding and appreciation of their spiritual values; and there is no clearer exponent of the human spirit than art in its diverse manifestations. Conscious of this, the Museum of Modern Art is carrying on an effective and invaluable labor of culture, friendship, and better international relations.

- Foreword to the exhibition catalogue of Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art, 1940.

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The 1940 exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* was a collaborative effort between the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Mexican government to showcase a comprehensive survey of Mexican art that spanned from the pre-Conquest period to the development of modern art. As the exhibition’s catalogue states, art appreciation can “strengthen the bonds between peoples” and encourage better international relations. The exhibition took place shortly before the U.S. entered WWII, during the “Good Neighbor” policy of U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* serves as an example of how art and art exhibitions can be used in an effort to advance a nation’s ideology and political agenda.

In today’s late capitalist economy, exhibitions not only encourage the mutual understanding and appreciation between people and nations, but may also be used in an effort to advance the agenda of the private sector. In this section, I explore how at the turn of the twenty-first century, the exhibition of Mexican art in the United States is no longer limited to advancing a country’s ideology and or political agenda but instead may be manipulated to further the regional expansion of transnational corporations. I have chosen to study the 2001 exhibition titled *Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art From the Collection of Fomento Cultural Banamex* in order to investigate how its treatment of Mexican popular art and its artists is indicative of the economic and political changes Mexico underwent during the course of the twentieth century and how its present rhetoric is in accordance with the ideology of consumer capitalism. I discuss the exhibition’s catalogue in light of how its rhetoric on Mexican artists serves a free-market ideology and strengthens the financial bonds between peoples. In *Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art* the discussion of artistry, popular art, and craftsmanship centers around issues of tradition, authenticity, and the challenge of adapting to the demands of modernity while preserving a country’s or people’s cultural heritage. The discussion however promotes the commodification of popular art by encouraging its consumption and collection as an endeavor to preserve the livelihood of a great master in today’s globally industrialized world. The commodification of popular art and marketing under the spirit of a consumer ethos encourages its consumption as a type of social aid and accords the private sector the role of facilitator in the integration of marginalized groups to the market economy.
Art as a Conduit for U.S./Mexico Diplomacy

Often times, the exhibition of Mexican art in the U.S. has coincided with important socio-economic and political events affecting both countries. Shifra M. Goldman offers a chronology of U.S. interest in Mexican art as it relates to the political, economic, and strategic alliances being forged between both countries. Goldman mentions that there are four periods (prior to the 1980s) during which a strong U.S. interest in Mexican art correlates to the economic and political concerns of the United States. According to Goldman, the first of these periods occurred during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the U.S. looked to the Mexican muralist model as an example of how the government could help ameliorate the widespread unemployment through the commission of public works.101 In May 1933, George Biddle wrote to Franklin D. Roosevelt stating:

There is a matter which I have long considered and which some day might interest your administration. The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregon allowed artists to work at plumber’s wages in order to express on walls of government building the social ideals of the Mexican Revolution.102

Biddle’s letter must have made an impression on President Roosevelt whose New Deal included the ambitious The Works Progress Administration (renamed the Works Project Administration.) As we know the WPA provided jobs for millions of unemployed Americans among them musicians, artists, writers, actors, and directors in large arts and literary projects. U.S. receptivity toward public art and esteem for the achievements of the Mexican muralist led to the creation of many public art works. This also opened the doors for the *tres grandes* (the big three) José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros to garner private commissions and create large-scale works in the United States between 1930-43.

The second wave of U.S. interest in Mexican coincided with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor” foreign policy.103 The policy’s main principal was that of non-intervention

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and non-interference in the domestic affairs of Latin America. It is during this period that the *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* exhibition was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. On February 20, 1940 Nelson A. Rockefeller, President of the Museum of Modern Art announced in a press release issued by the museum that in cooperation with the Mexican Government, *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* would be “the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of Mexican art ever assembled.”¹⁰⁴ The encyclopedic exhibition included examples of pre-Columbian sculpture, colonial paintings, and popular art, and modern art. Rockefeller noted: “To know the arts of Mexico is to know and understand Mexicans themselves, for the two are so inseparably interwoven. One cannot come to know and love the arts of this country without developing a great warmth and affection for the people themselves.”¹⁰⁵ He concluded with the following “The exhibition should contribute to a better understanding of the people and the cultural life of Mexico at this time when there is such widespread interests throughout this country in our Latin-American neighbors.”¹⁰⁶ Rockefeller’s remarks echo the “Good Neighbor’s” sense of Pan-Americanism, a push for regional unity in the wake of WWII. *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* was not only about the art on the walls and pedestals but also about securing Mexico as an ally during a time of escalating world tensions. By supporting the exhibition Rockefeller fulfilled part of his responsibilities as president of the museum, acted as a philanthropist with a personal stake in raising the prestige of popular art, and served strategic international relations the U.S. Let us remember that in addition to being engaged in oil, real estate, and philanthropy, Rockefeller would become a prominent U.S. politician. Beginning with his tenure as director of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, Rockefeller continued on to become Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, Special Assistant to the Governor in Foreign Affairs, Governor of New York, and Vice President for President Gerald R. Ford among other roles as a civil servant.


¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
Goldman points to the 1960s, after the wake of the Cuban Revolution and during the escalation of Cold War tensions as the third instance of U.S. interest in Mexican art as it relates to social, economic, and political motivations. The fourth instance taking place a decade later when two different phenomena put Mexican art in the forefront of U.S. political life. According to Goldman the first of these two situations was the Chicano movement that looked to Mexico for inspiration in their art. And the second was motivated by the need for the U.S. to ensure access to Mexico’s petroleum supply during a time when international disputes over oil demand, supply, and prices, challenged its financial hegemony. Goldman’s chronology underscores how the nation-state can advance its geopolitical agenda through the promotion of art and culture. Regardless of whether a country is concerned with exporting its ideology, boosting its financial interests, or strengthening its national security, the promotion of art and culture is used as a seemingly “neutral” conduit to reach national goals.

For the greater part of the twentieth century, an “awareness” of Mexican art and culture in the U.S. was informed by world politics and served primarily the interests of the government. As the end of the century approached, the Mexican government began its transition from having an active role in all sectors of the economy to that of being a neoliberal state, with a laissez-faire approach to the economy. As a result, the patronage of the arts began to be increasingly administered by the private sector. Today’s employment of Mexican art to facilitate diplomatic relations, ideological purposes, and strategic financial interests is no longer an initiative spearheaded solely by the state but an effort led by private enterprise. *Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art* serves an example of the leadership role the private sector has assumed in the dissemination and articulation of art and culture.

*Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art* was a traveling exhibition organized by the Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., a civil association once owned and funded by Banamex, a bank once owned Mexican state, and now the country’s second largest private bank. The exhibition not only served to strategically position the nation (both for the U.S. and Mexico) advantageously in the world order; but as Goldman points out today, artworks and exhibitions can facilitate the “global alignment of power elites from nations of the First and Third Worlds (and perhaps even the Second World) whose objectives is the control the

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resources and cultural configurations across national boundaries.”108 The exhibition Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art can facilitate the control of the “cultural configurations” by powerful elite groups by having a transnational financial institution assume the costs associated with mounting an exhibition while making use of a museum’s authority status in the art world to validate its popular art collection through its exhibition. In today’s global economy, the strategic positioning of the nation-state in the world economic and political order is now secondary to securing and advancing the hegemony of the transnational elite class. The contemporary exhibition of Mexican art in the U.S. is not limited to “strengthening the bonds between people” or between nations, instead it is now increasingly concerned with strengthening the financial bonds of a global elite citizenry who similarly to their capital, is ever less bounded to national territories.

**Latin American Art and the Neo-liberal State: Exhibitions and Financial Institutions**

By 2001, the year Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art opened, the neoliberal reforms that Mexico began to implement in 1980s were for the most part consolidated. Among the structural changes the country underwent were the deregulation of its financial sector, the elimination of barriers to trade, the reduction of social services, and the privatization of state-owned industries. Today’s neoliberal world economic order has opened up national culture to the dynamics of transnational global exchange. And this in turn has generated for the visual arts a “complex space for their production and distribution.”109 There are three interrelated factors characterizing this space. One, the transnational characteristic of this space; a space that is no longer circumscribed to national territories but instead is characterized by the transit of people, ideas, objects, and monies; Two, the control of this space by the interests of the neoliberal private sector; And three, the active role financial institutions in promoting Latin American art exhibitions and a market for it.110 The new space under which the visual


arts now operate follows the tenants of a new socioeconomic order. In particular, neoliberalism’s emphasis on the global flow of objects, people, and ideas, diminishing the intervention of the state in all aspects of the economy, and the growing influence and presence of the financial sector in society. With the growing presence of neoliberalism in the visual arts in mind, I now would like to turn our discussion to the role financial institutions played in the realization of Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art.

Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art showcased the philanthropic endeavors of Fomento Cultural Banamex, S.A. Its timing coincided with Citigroup’s buyout of Banamex, a merger made possible during Mexico’s privatization of its financial sector. The exhibition showcased Fomento’s popular art collection and made evident its mission to “boost investment in cultural development and to promote, preserve, and diffuse Mexican culture.”111 According to the art historian Mary K. Coffey, one of the purposes of the 2001 exhibition was to win the sympathy of Citigroup’s new customer base of people of Mexican decent living in the U.S. by “promoting the good corporate citizenship of Banamex, and by extension its new parent/partner, Citigroup.”112 As is the case with Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art, the exhibition of Mexican art in the U.S. was now controlled by the interests of the private sector under the leadership of transnational financial institutions. In order to inquire about Citigroup’s motivation in showcasing Fomento’s collection of Mexican popular art as it acquired Banamex, it is helpful to revisit the ideological usage of popular art by the Mexican state during the consolidation of its power and governance during the Post-revolution period.

After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920,) the country’s nationalist project brought about the re-valorization of Mexican popular culture and arts. Under the new nationalist project, popular culture and arts were esteemed as expressions of the country’s unique heritage. The customs and artistic expressions of the country’s rural inhabitants now formed part of the Mexico’s official discourse on national identity and culture. For the Mexican state, the incorporation of popular culture into its nationalist discourse was also an effort to reach


out to disenfranchised groups during a time of social fragmentation and change. As mentioned, the nationalist project was an effort to legitimize the state during a period of social discord. The Mexican state glossed over the country’s regional, cultural, social, and economic differences in favor of an official collective national identity that facilitated its governance.

The aesthetic appreciation of popular arts was also an effort to economically integrate this sector of the society at a time when these forms of production were being displaced by the state’s effort to industrialize and promote tourism both at home and abroad. This effort is lead in part to “the consolidation of the role of what had been utilitarian objects as decorative symbols of essentialist nationalism, for the consumption-primarily-by elites and tourism.”113 The neoliberal discourse informing the exhibition of Mexican popular art in Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art continues to encourage its consumption as utilitarian objects that are unique in their embodiment of the traditions of Mexico’s unique cultural heritage.

Nearly a century after the Mexican Revolution, the usage of the popular arts by transnational corporations brings to mind that of Mexico’s post-revolutionary nationalist project. Namely, in its usage to legitimize itself before its constituency during a time of rapid political and economic change; and the incorporation of an under-served community into its economic model; and lastly, the consolidation of the popular arts as a commodity for consumption. Although the usage of popular culture and arts by transnational corporations echoes that of the post-revolutionary period, it is now consistent with the transnational realities of global political economies. Today’s exhibitionary rhetoric emphasizes the creator as an individual, popular art as collectible item, and its consumption as a safeguard towards the continuation of a particular cultural heritage. To show how the exhibitionary rhetoric of Mexican popular art and artists in the U.S. is consistent with the transnational realities of global political economies and the neoliberal ideology that sustains them, I will contrast the exhibition Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art to Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art.

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Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art

As a starting point for a discussion on how neoliberalism is informing the rhetoric used in today’s U.S. exhibition of Mexican popular arts and artists, I begin by studying the format of the exhibition catalogue to Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art (1940) and Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art (2001.) The catalogue to Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art opens with a Map of Mexico and a Map of Pre-Spanish Cultures, by outlining the country’s physical territory. The art contained in the exhibition is divided into four different sections: Pre-Spanish Art, Colonial Art, Folk Art, and Modern Art. Out of the four sections, “Pre-Spanish Art,” “Colonial Art,” and “Modern Art” correspond to a significant change in Mexico's history, thus positing the section titled “Folk Art” as a conduit between Mexico’s past and its modern present. From the exhibition catalogue we gather that the works of modern art included in the exhibition were identified by the artist’s name, most colonial paintings are also identified with name of the artist but in contrast popular art is represented as an anonymous phenomena. In a sense, the exhibition posits Mexico’s history as a marker of its cultural and artistic evolution. In this evolutionary process, popular art best exemplifies a syncretism between pre-Columbian art and colonial art and serves as the basis for modern art in Mexico.

As previously mentioned, the catalogue’s foreword highlights the role of art in forging the mutual appreciation and understanding between people’s and better relations among nations. Its section dedicated to popular art begins by highlighting how upon their arrival in Tenochtitlán, the Spanish were in awe of the richness and variety of Mexican “folk art.” The author asserts that although the Spanish influence is apparent in popular art creations the “authentic stamp of the native Mexican craftsman remained dominant and is to this day in whatever he makes or decorates.”114 Its author, Roberto Montenegro cautions that at present an industrial modern civilization is the “mortal enemy of the primitive popular arts”115 and that “it should be noted that the objects which the Indian keeps for his own daily use are very different from the articles of commerce whose low quality turns a pure and

114 Roberto Montenegro, Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art (Mexico City: Museum of Modern Art and the Instituto de Antropología e Historia de México, 1940) 109.
115 Ibid.
exquisite art into tourist curios of no great importance. That is the reason why our folk art, in
every period, has served as a true symbol of the artistic instincts of the Mexican people.”¹¹⁶
In Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art, the discussion of Mexican popular arts and popular
artists is imbedded in Mexico’s history. It carries with it an ethnographic bias that both
racializes and homogenizes the artists as “Indian,” “native,” and “primitive,” calls the
reader’s attention to the threat of modernity in the continuation of these practice, and
cautions that its commodity status turns a “true symbol of the artistic instincts of the Mexican
people” into something of “no great importance.” Here, the commodification of popular art is
regarded in a negative light. It is proposed that its commodity status will diminish the ability
of popular art to embody the true essence of Mexico’s cultural past and present identity.

**Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art**

The catalogue to Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art opens with a double two-page
spread of an image of a vegetable fiber rug with a geometric pattern. Its pattern is
reminiscent of pre-Columbian geometric designs. As we will later find out, the woven mat
was produced by Felipa Zveek Naal, who along with her daughter María Olga Katum Tzee,
“are today the only practitioners of this ancient Mayan art.”¹¹⁷ The opening sentence of the
foreword sets the tone for the rest of the catalogue.

Folk art is one of the facets of Mexican culture that most serves to identify its
people, a source of pride for the majority of Mexicans and something which we
can be content to match against any good produced by other countries and
cultures in the world. Getting in contact with this theme implies touching one of
the most sensitive nerves of Meixcan idiosyncrasy. It is also, however, the basis
for a serious reflection on the significance of our cultural past and preent.
Encroaching Mexican folk art also requires an attitude of social responsibility and
of a willingness to support an activity that, for its creators, signifies not just a
sublime form of artistic expression but a way of life, in the broadest sense of the
phrase.¹¹⁸

The catalogue’s forward describes popular art as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Popular
art *embodies* the essence of the Mexican identity, serves as vehicle with which Mexico can

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¹¹⁶ Montenegro, Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art, 110.

¹¹⁷ Fomento Cultural Banamex, Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art. From the Collection of Fomento
Cultural Banamex (Spain: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., 1998), 175.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 13.
compete with the rest of the world, commands social responsibility, and is a vital financial resource for its practitioners. The emphasis on identity, the nation-state’s geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis other countries, and the importance of popular art as a source of income for its producers echoes the post-revolutionary discourse of the Mexican state regarding Mexican popular arts and culture. Its emphasis on popular art as a form of pride for the country recalls, the noble admiration for popular art expressed in Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art. Nevertheless, the discursive emphasis on global product competitiveness and (corporate) social responsibility, casts popular art in a different light. Furthermore, the foreword’s acknowledges the generosity of private institutions such as Cerveza Corona Extra, Tequila Herradura, and Aeroméxico in preserving and diffusing Mexican culture by helping to underwrite the exhibition traveling to the U.S. and Europe. Here too, the importance accorded to the private enterprise in preserving Mexican culture and its emphasis on popular art’s commodity status is a stark contrast from the negative associations accorded to popular art’s commercial status in Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art.

The exhibition catalogue organizes its homage to Mexico’s great masters of popular art by categorizing their work by material used. There are nine such categories: clay, wood, stone, textiles, metals, paper, leather, vegetable fibers, and various materials. Within each of these categories the pieces are organized by specialty, technique used, region of production, and type of product. Every state in the nation is included, with a total of 181 great masters represented. Each artist is presented with a narrative that reads like a professional curriculum vitae. It states the artist's name, area, specialty, state, and location. It also includes biographical information as it pertains to his or her work, the amount of pieces produced, any national or international awards received, if their work is being collected, and if they are taking special orders. The section also incorporates pictures of their works and includes information on the year it was created, its medium, and owner. The catalogue’s layout offers enough information for the reader to familiarize himself with the vast amount of popular art produced in Mexico, its techniques and materials, become acquainted with some of its best practitioners, locate them in Mexico should he or she desire to, and even make a knowledgeable decision during a potentially future purchase of popular art.

119 Fomento Cultural Banamex, Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art, 13.
In contrast to the treatment of popular art in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, popular art is no longer an anonymous phenomena. In *Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art* the individuality of each artist is asserted. In the catalogue each great master merits his or her own entry. The entry includes a picture of the artist at work, usually in very rustic workshops. Dirt floors, brick wall, posters attached to the walls, and materials and tools scattered throughout fill the space. At times the great master sits on the dirt floor or on a wood stool molding, weaving, painting, or cutting, his or her future work of art. In the picture, the great master’s working hands are emphasized. Supplementing the portrait of the great master are either one or two photographs showcasing his or her popular art creation. Museum quality lighting illuminates the piece. The object is photographed with a solid background in either white or black, emphasizing its aesthetic beauty. The ability of the artist/object to embody an ancient tradition and a modern reality is paralleled by the entry's layout. Or as the forward states a great master has “this capacity for living an intense duality of today and yesterday, in harmony with the desire of Mexicans to remain a nation solidly identified as much for its past as for the creative capacity of its present...”

**Great Master as Entrepreneur**

The catalogue’s “Introduction” by Cándida Fernández de Calderón, Director of Fomento Cultural Banamex, explicitly states how the core objectives of the “Program of Support for Folk Art” are being met. The Program fundamentally seeks to prevent the “extinction of the ancestral artistic manifestation” of the great Mexican master of popular art. Its objectives are (1) creating workshops and training masters and apprentices; (2) strengthen the artisan’s pride and cultural identity; (3) job creation for rural communities; and (4) encouraging and supporting the commercialization of folk art. In order to reach these four main goals, the program has created three channels of action. The first channel is the identification of popular art specialties and artists. The artists included in the exhibition are those artists that have been identified by the program since it originated. The second

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120 Fomento Cultural Banamex, *Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art*, 17.
121 Ibid., 20.
122 Ibid.
channel of action is three-fold, it organizes workshops, circulates and promotes products, and establishes a network for product commercialization. The third and last channel of action is the opening and strengthening of venues for the commercialization of popular art. This last channel is the most telling of the objectives of the program, exhibitionary rhetoric, and ideology informing the function of art in this context. The channels of action seek to convert the artist workshops into small-scale companies. In order to do so, the Program evaluates the workshops for their “potential with respect to productivity, profitability, and generation of employment.” 123 Those workshops with the highest scores, will garner the support of the Program in an effort to becoming a small-scale company, and with it the “formal establishment of commercialization agreements between artisans and department stores, wholesalers, importers and exporters, and other commercial outlets both in Mexico and abroad, by means of fairs, encounters and international fairs.” 124 In effect, the Program’s goal is to inculcate the artist into the market economy by giving him or her the training, know-how, financial encouragement, and network to become an entrepreneur. This will make them not only accountable for their financial well-being, undercut the need of the state to provide social aid, but more importantly make them market subjects and potentially future Banamex-Citigroup clients.

The conversion of artists into loan-seeking entrepreneurs is the fundamental link between the philanthropic activities of Fomento Cultural Banamex and the rent-seeking activities of Banamex-Citigroup. Here we see how corporate social responsibility is not solely a “charitable” endeavor in itself, but instead part and parcel of its business strategy. In the case of philanthropic activities being channeled through the institution of the museum calls our attention to their limited scope of a museum to function independently of the market. As Mari Carmen Ramirez points out “Curatorial function is, thus, inherently restricted by the interests of larger or more powerful groups and constituencies. To pretend that any type of alternative field of action exists outside the web of market or institutionally dominated interests is a fallacy.” 125

123 Fomento Cultural Banamex, Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art, 21.
124 Ibid., 21.
125 Ramirez, Brokering Identities, 22.
Guillermo Ríos Alcalá: A Great Master Success Story

The exhibition catalogue’s entry dedicated to the great master Guillermo Ríos Alcalá serves as an model example of how the “Program of Support for Folk Art” is successful in reaching its goal of converting artists into self-reliant, financially solvent, great master/entrepreneur. The entry begins with a picture of Ríos Alcalá addressing the viewer head-on. Next to him on the counter top sits his replica of a Pre-Hispanic-style dog. His hand stretches before him, reaching out towards the viewer, so close to camera that it is out of focus. Under his name is the title “Rediscovering Pre-Columbian Art.” He is one of only a handful of great masters not photographed while working on one of their creations. A personal narrative and examples of his work follow this opening image. His clay modeled “Pre-Hispanic Scene” (1997) is photographed with a black background. Its lighting and full-page dedication invite the viewer to revel in its aesthetic beauty. Its presentation is worthy of a museum display.

As the viewer reads the catalogue entry dedicated to Ríos Alcalá, the individual narrative of success reflects back on the success of the “Program of Support for Folk Art” in achieving its goals. The individual narrative tells of his humble, working class origins as a bricklayer, to that of becoming a great master. He is known as the “best potter in western Mexico.” According to the entry, his “innate natural skills” give him the ability to make replicas of pre-Columbian artifacts in which are said to be indistinguishable from the authentic work to the naked eye. His pieces are sought by private collectors both at home and abroad. He has been recognized in important exhibitions and fairs. Has been the recipient of prestigious awards. Not only is he the “best potter in western Mexico,” but also a dedicated teacher of his craft. His work teaching the elderly merits special recognition. During his participation at the “Congreso Nacional de Artesanos y Micro-industrias” (National Congress of Folk Artists and Micro-Industries), he received the prestigious “Lala” award for best in show. He is the recipient of important university grants and holds a post at the Museo

126 Fomento Cultural Banamex, Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art, 49.

127 Grupo Lala is a Mexican dairy company. Founded in 1950 in the state of Durango, it is the only dairy company with a presence nationwide in Mexico and the largest dairy group on Latin America.
Universitario de Arte Popular Teresa Pomar in his native city of Colima. His catalogue entry also includes information on his technique, materials, and processes.

The catalogue entry for great master Guillermo Ríos Alcalá privileges him as an individual. The focus and information included underscores his professional accomplishments and personal merit. Of secondary importance, is the discussion on the techniques and materials employed in his creation of great masterpieces. There is little to no information on the art object’s style, history, form, and aesthetic qualities. The art object has now subservient to the artisan. Neoliberal rhetoric privileges the individual as the single unit of action and change. In a similar manner in *Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art* it is the individual or great master who is the true focus of the exhibition. Whereas in the past, popular art was regarded as anonymous phenomena, now it is the folk “auteur” who garners the attention of the art world establishment. The focus on the artists also serves as a marker of the quality and uniqueness of the popular art piece. It serves to differentiate it from all other similar pieces being produced. The exhibition’s emphasis on the individual is not only indicative of the entrenchment of neoliberal ideology in both Mexico and the U.S. but also of a strategy to increase the financial value associated with Citigroup’s newly acquired collection of popular art.

In conclusion, art has the power to encourage the mutual understanding and appreciation among people. It can also service the state as a symbolic carrier of its ideology and political agenda. In today’s late capitalist society, the private sector and in particular multinational corporations play an important role in all aspects of economic, political, and social life. The growing presence of multinationals in the art world establishment, as patron of the arts, accords an additional role to art and culture, that of advancing the ideology of consumer capitalism. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the rhetoric of neoliberalism informs the exhibition of Mexican art in the United States. Its exhibitionary rhetoric not only facilitates regional economic integration but more importantly, inculcates its public into a neoliberal ideology that privileges the individual and art’s commodification.
CHAPTER 3
DISCUSSING POPULAR ART: AESTHETICS, CONSUMPTION, AND GEOPOLITICS

INTRODUCTION
This chapter deals with a series of topics relating to popular art and the commodification of art and culture. The discussion is divided into three thematic sections, the first section deals with the value and appraisal systems associated with the non-Western object as art; the second section deals with popular art as a vehicle of exchange (monetary and symbolic) between producers and consumers; and the third and last section deals with the support for Mexican popular art as it is interlinked to changing socioeconomic structures. Throughout these discussions, there are some reoccurring topics, namely issues relating to construction of authenticity, otherness, and capitalism as a subtext in the exhibition, collection, and valorization of art. This review of literature is used to contextualize within academia the study of popular art and its ability to reflect the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which it is produced, consumed, and exhibited.

FABRICATING AUTHENTICITY
Since the turn of the twentieth century, collected objects from non-Western sources have traditionally been classified in two major categories, as scientific cultural artifacts and as aesthetic works of art. In either category, cultural artifacts or aesthetic works of art, authenticity is an underlying concept informing which objects are considered worthy of classification. Art historians and anthropologist privilege those objects that function as “authentic” vessels of information about cultures, people, events, and histories. Yet, reading objects as “evidential in nature” or as conduits of fundamental truths or about their makers


can be problematic. We must keep in mind that the object serves a purpose beyond that of its immediate physical function through social constructs. Oil and pigment on canvas become a work of art only after there is a certain level of consensus that bestows meaning and historical significance to the object beyond its materiality. Changes in the classification of objects may coincide with the physical and symbolic movement of objects themselves from private cabinets of curiosities, to auction houses, to anthropology museums, to fine art museums. The object’s migration through its various homes is symptomatic of other societal changes taking place. As the objects travel from one locale to another, institutional framing and value systems inform how the objects are presented, viewed, and understood by the public. For example, in the Latin American context, pre-Columbian objects have traveled along these paths, where “In the mid-nineteenth century pre-Columbian or tribal objects were grotesque or antiquities. By 1920 they were cultural witnesses and aesthetic masterpieces.”

A similar story can be told in the case of “primitive art.” “The category ‘Primitive Art’ was invented at the turn of the 20th century and gained acceptance as ‘art,’ and, with it, monetary value, in the first half of the century - an inspiration to avant-garde artists, a pleasure to avant-guard collectors. By mid-century, it had begun to enter the mainstream of established art. It got its own museum in New York in 1954, when the Museum of Primitive Art was founded - funded by Nelson Rockefeller and containing largely his collection.” These binary boundaries (artifact vs. art) are fluid and constructed. They are informed by various disciplines including anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and art history; and function as frameworks that help us understand the deployment of popular art (as art, commodity, and artifact) in late-capitalist society. The work of James Clifford, Michael Chibnik, and Mari Carmen Ramírez is particularly useful to gain an understanding of how (art) objects “navigate” Western values systems. Their work is key to my own study of popular art because it shows us how the classification of objects as works of art, artifacts, and commodities point to the appraisal systems and social constructs that the art world tastemakers depend on to attache aesthetic and financial value to objects. As we have seen in

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130 Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, 228.

all three case studies, artists, middlemen, collectors, curators, and art brokers act as cultural gatekeepers that actively guide this process and manage its intercultural traffic and price.

In *The Predicament of Culture*, Clifford investigates the effect of Western discursive traditions and institutional systems on how non-Western objects are contextualized and assigned value (culturally, symbolically, financially, historically, and semantically.) Clifford illustrates the systematic valorization and classification of objects with the aid of a diagram titled “Art-Culture System: a Machine for Making Authenticity.” The diagram makes “visible” the ideological and institutional beliefs underpinning how art and culture are assigned value relative to each other. The system is divided in four semantic zones, namely:

1. Art: the zone of authentic masterpieces; 2. Culture: the zone of authentic artifact; 3. Non-art: the zone of inauthentic masterpieces; and 4. Non-culture: the zone of the inauthentic artifacts. As exotic objects circulate within these four zones, they are assigned relative value through the binary opposition of art (original, singular) and culture (traditional, collective.) A movement from the inauthentic to the authentic zone (from artifact to masterpiece) necessitates that the artifact be now considered as an object of “enduring worth or rarity, their value normally guaranteed by a ‘vanishing’ cultural status or by the selection and pricing mechanism of the art market.”

The “vanishing cultural status” is a strategy often used in the contemporary marketing of popular art, where for example, popular art is framed as a practice that can no longer be sustained in a capitalist economy. This in turn, has the effect of increasing the cultural significance of the object and consequently the monetary worth of the object, setting in motion the laws of supply and demand. Effectively moving the object into a higher value category and incentivizes its demand, which consequently then drives its price up. The movement from artifact (culture: traditional, collective) to masterpiece (art: original, singular) is then a function that depends on the object’s intrinsic qualities (both formal and use value) but is also subject to market mechanism and logic.

When dealing with popular art, authenticity plays a crucial role. For the “state’s ideological and economic goals in promoting popular arts are most compatible when crafts (however transformed by market demands) have a long history of used by ‘Indians.’”

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can be argued that this is also the case for the private sector. The object’s authenticity is constructed by emphasizing its history of use in the region and the traditions associated with its manufacture, those objects which are relatively new productions cannot claim this anchor to the past and are therefore much more difficult to reconcile as authentic popular art expressions.

Significant for my work is the study of the appraisal systems and social constructs that the art world tastemakers rely on to attached aesthetic and financial value to objects. For this reason, Michael Chibnik’s study of Oaxacan alebrijes is particularly useful in illustrating how contemporary Mexican popular art navigates through Western value systems. In Oaxacan Wood Carvings in the World of Fine Art: Aesthetic Judgments of a Tourist Craft, Chibnik examines the degree to which Oaxacan woodcarvers have succeeded in gaining the attention of the gatekeepers of the world of fine art (curators, collectors, art brokers, etc.) and how their ability to do so has implications on the value attached to the objects and the livelihood of its makers. The author points to three principal criteria used by gatekeepers in determining whether a work of art can be considered fine art: authenticity, individuality, and originality. Oaxacan woodcarvers must ascribe to this criterion for their woodcarvings to be considered “fine art.” The author cites the work of Nelson Graburn and tells us the emphasis on authenticity is attributed to two reasons: “First, authenticity has always been a central topic of interest for art historians working with museums curators attempting to determine if an art object is genuine or fake. Second, the transcultural arts under consideration are most often found in tourist context. As has been emphasized by Dean MacCannell in an influential book (1976), tourists seek out ‘authenticity’ in their experiences.”

With this in mind, authenticity is also implicated in the objectification of the experience of travel itself.

The woodcarvers that do not ascribe to these Western concepts are not as successful in gathering the attention of tastemakers and are considered artisans. Their practices differ from Western “fine” art criteria in the following ways: One, their work is oftentimes seen as inauthentic because it does not follow a long-standing ethnic aesthetic tradition; Two, their carvings are usually created collaboratively among several family members and cannot be attributed to a single individual; And three, the relative low standard of living of most

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woodcarvers makes it difficult to adopt a “art for art’s sake” philosophy that emphasizes experimentation.\textsuperscript{135} As we have seen, this is not the case for all of the popular art produced in Oaxaca. Some practices are able to conform to Western fine art criteria such as the case of \textit{The Bug in the Rug} that has successfully entered the art market by ascribing their practices to Western value systems. One can only assume that their annual participation in international art fairs, their travels to museums outside of Mexico, their mention in prestigious books and international publications is proof that they have garnered the attention of the fine art gatekeepers and that in return, curators, writers, collectors, and art broker are using these mechanism to mobilize and capitalize on international support for the artist’s work.

Examining the limits of engaging popular art through a discourse of “authenticity” is particularly important because of the homogenizing tendencies often evoked when using terms such as “Indian”, “indigenous,” and “ethnic.” Additionally, “authenticity” as a discursive strategy has implications on how tourists experience and come to understand other cultures. Consequently, one must ask, what are the implications of the aesthetic and ethnographic biases and homogenizing tendencies of authenticity as a framework for understanding non-Western art and their makers?

In “Beyond ‘The Fantastic’: Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art” Ramírez critically examines the representation of Latin American/Latino identity in U.S. exhibitions. The author focuses her critique on the choice of an inadequate conceptual framework of European/American modernism for understanding the “complex logic that gave rise to modern art in a continent recently described by Argentine cultural theorist Néstor García Canclini as the continent of the ‘semi,’ i.e., semi-modern, semi-developed, semi-European, semi-indigenous.”\textsuperscript{136} In the article the author examines the exhibition \textit{Images of Mexico: The Contribution of Mexico to Twentieth Century Art} for its display of the Surrealist and ethnographic biases imbedded in Euro-American modernism. In this exhibition, Ramírez asserts that “Mexico emerged as the unspoilt reservoir”\textsuperscript{137} and that for Erika Billeter, the exhibition’s curator, authenticity “implied the search for a primal Indian essence not too

\textsuperscript{135} Chibnik, “Oaxacan Wood Carvings in the World of Fine Art,” 492.

\textsuperscript{136} Ramírez, “Beyond ‘The Fantastic,’” 61.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 63.
muddled by the ‘programmatic’ (i.e. political) objectives of Mexican muralism.”\(^\text{138}\)

“Authenticity” also functioned as guiding principle for a selection of works depicting the “the primal spirit” of Mexican people. Ramírez claims that these biases had the effect of limiting the representation of the stylistic breadth of Mexican art and the potential for artists from the Latin America to “engage the manifestations of European art on equal terms.”\(^\text{139}\)

Therefore these biases are implicated in sustaining social hierarchies in which the “supremacy” of the West is maintained.

Mari Carmen Ramírez’s work is particularly important to the conceptualization of my thesis for three main reasons. One, her work examines the shortcomings of engaging art through a discourse of authenticity, a discourse often used when dealing in popular art. Two, it provides a framework that actively engages the artist and his/her art within the specificity of his/her sociopolitical, cultural, and historical context. And three, Ramírez’s call for a revision of the role of those working in the arts from arbitrators of taste (art world gatekeepers and tastemakers) to “cultural brokers” that is challenging yet imperative given the multicultural and multiethnic makeup of U.S. society and the privileged position of exhibitions as spaces (museums and retail shops) for the visual articulation of identity.

**NEGOTIATING POPULAR ART: PERFORMANCE, PRODUCTION, AND RECEPTION**

As we have seen, the conflation of rural craft production with indigeneity is a post-Revolution nationalist framework that continues to inform tourist discourses about Oaxacan artists. Oaxaca’s cultural tourism industry benefits from the association of economic activities (i.e. weavings, carvings, pottery, etc.) with ethnroracial identities. It does so, by associating the “authenticity” of the product or activity with easily identifiable markers of indigeneity. Indigenous dress, knowledge of a native language, ties to a community with accepted pre-Columbian roots, and social class are perceived as markers of ethnroracial identities and cultural continuity in the state. Consequently, these characteristics bestow a sense of authenticity to the artwork, performances and archeological sites to be consumed

\(^{138}\) Ramírez, “Beyond ‘The Fantastic,’” 63.

\(^{139}\) Ibid., 64.
and or experienced by tourists. This state of affairs influences Oaxaqueños to highlight or obscure aspects of their cultural heritage in response to market demands. Oaxaqueños can choose to perform for tourists/consumers recognizable ethnorracial characteristics through language, dress, and mannerism. They can also choose to obscure their experiences that do not fit the model of authenticity that is expected of them, for example living and working in New York or California, speaking fluent English, and having a broad knowledge of Western culture. On her work on Zaptoc textiles as texts, the anthropologist Sharon W. Tiffany points out that:

Stories of Zapotecos flipping burgers in fast-food outlets, bagging groceries, bending over tomatoes in the fields, and of living with a constant fear of the migra (immigration authorities) and police [Chavez 1992] are unsettling. Such narratives pose a disjuncture with Western inscriptions inspired by National Geographic images and texts of ‘traditional’ peoples living according to time-honored rules of customs in societies untouched by the outside world.¹⁴⁰

Confronting the reality that many of the Zapotec weavers are also immigrants working in the U.S. (many of them vilified in U.S. anti-immigrant rhetoric,) disturbs many of the romantic notions surrounding indigenous culture promoted by the state and private enterprise. This realization also reveals center-periphery relationships of power. Similar to the experience of Oaxacan woodcarvers whose ability to ascribe to Western fine art criteria can lead to acceptance into the fine art world, the performativity of indigeneity for tourists has the potential for greater profit margins.

The work of Ronda Brulotte’s is relevant my study of Mexican popular art because her work gives us further insight on how “authenticity” is constructed and how culture is consumed in connection to identity, indigeniety, ethnicity, tourism and otherness, material culture and commodification, and globalization. In the article “‘Yo soy nativo de aquí’: The Ambiguity of Race and Indigeneity in Oaxacan Craft Tourism” Brulotte argues that Oaxacan artists do not uniformly express an indigenous identity despite efforts by the Mexican state and private enterprise to racialize the artists as “Indian.” According to the author, the conflation of artisanry with indigeneity articulated in Oaxaca’s tourist industry “may prove a

generative force in artisans’ self-identifications and articulations with others.”

The author begins with the premise that Oaxaca City and its surrounding valleys constitute “contact zones” where transnational processes of cultural and economic exchange take place. Oaxaca is a site where indigenous cultural heritage materializes for tourist audience its through popular art producing villages, folkloric performances, archeological sites, food, and music. Consequently, these sites constitute an “Oaxacan ‘tourist borderzone’ (Bruner 1996; Little 2004), where translational processes of cultural and economic exchange related to tourism entail a reworking of ethnoracial classifications.” According to the author, in Oaxaca “racial and ethnic categories are constituted in relation to overlapping and ever-shifting ideas of biological essence, historical processes, cultural identity and national subjectivity.” In today’s capitalist society, racial and ethnic categories are also being reconstructed in the market place. Where the commodification of one’s culture can also be a generative force in the articulation and formulation of identity. As a “tourist borderzone,” places like The Bug in the Rug offer a space were ethnoracial classifications can be negotiate alongside rug prices.

Popular art is a cultural expression that reflects the ongoing relationship between non-Western societies and the West. These objects constitute an interface between local markets, lived experiences, value systems, and the world economy. In the market place, popular art producers and consumers negotiate a lot more than the prices, here subjectivities, Western value systems, and authenticity as a social construct are simultaneously being mediated. Therefore, we can understand popular art in a similar light to how cultural theorist Bennetta Jules-Rosette views tourist arts, as “vital symbols of change in transnational culture and societies.” Jules-Rosette cautions us that the relationship between production and reception is not fully explained through conventional notions of aesthetics but instead, proposes an understanding of aesthetics “which defines tourist art objects as media of communication between the new art producers and their audience.”

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141 Brulotte, “‘Yo soynative de aquí’” 457.
142 Ibid., 458.
143 Ibid., 476.
145 Ibid., 41.
communication perspective allows for a more complex analysis and understanding of how art objects circulate within societies and how their meanings, symbolic values, and aesthetic qualities are created by a plurality of stakeholders in the art market.

In “Aesthetics of Market Demand: The Structure of the Tourist Art Market in Three African Settings,” Bennetta Jules-Rosette presents an analysis of tourist art as a media of communication between producers and consumers. The author studies how the movement towards the mass production of tourist arts stimulates a communicative sequence between producers and consumers. Through an analysis of how the tourist art market operates in a variety of African settings, the author demonstrates how consumers indirectly shape the aesthetics of tourist arts. Artists, middlemen, and consumers form part of a system of communication that impacts the quantity of production, the standards of craftsmanship, and the aesthetic quality of the final work. The artist begins his/her production of the art object informed by tradition and his own craftsmanship. The middleperson then intervenes by attaching value to the object and tells the consumer how to respond. The consumer responds to the work and then conveys this to the middleman who then interprets this information back to the artists. Innovation, quality, and or an adherence to traditional forms are a function of consumer feedback. The consuming public actively contributes to the processes that define the aesthetic forms tourist art takes. As a result, artists seem to “self-consciously establish and modify explicit technical standards and aesthetics conventions” deriving from an interaction with his/her colleagues and the commercial milieu. The finished product reflects the “aesthetics of reception and consumption in tourist art.” Jules-Rosette’s work suggests that the tourist art market mediates the initial, intended meaning of the art object and the desires, expectations, and price points of its consumer. This is important to my own work because it shows us how art is implicated in the process of (neoliberal) socio-economic mediation that is taking place between the West and non-Western societies and can engender the social, cultural, political, and economic transitions taking place.

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147 Ibid., 48.
**Popular Art: The Politics of Exhibitions**

As we have seen, contemporary popular art practice is in dialogue with the socioeconomic milieu in which it is created. Similarly, interest in the art itself and support for its exhibition correlates with significant geopolitical happenings in the region. U.S. interest in Mexican art correlates with political and economic concerns among the countries. In this environment, the exhibition of Mexican popular art is a strategic instrument used by the political class of both countries to forge diplomatic ties, ameliorate social tensions, and advance a sociopolitical ideology and agenda. When we take a look at the history of U.S. interest in Mexican art against the backdrop of the geopolitical ties being forged between both countries we begin to understand how exhibitions serve purposes beyond those of providing aesthetic experiences.

Shifra M. Goldman’s chapter titled “Rewriting the History of Mexican Art: The Politics and Economics of Contemporary Culture” included in her book *Dimensions of the Americas* studies how the exhibition of Mexican art in the United States has been informed by diplomatic concerns among the countries. The author argues that due to the geographical proximity and economic inter-dependence of Mexico and the U.S. one should take into consideration the artistic realities themselves as well as the socio-political context under which these activities take place. This assertion premises Goldman’s exploration of the interplay between the private sector, government policies, transnational relations, and cultural diplomacy. Goldman argues that modern and contemporary Mexican art have been manipulated both at home and abroad in order to serve the financial and ideological interests of foreign investors with the assistance of the Mexican government and the ruling classes. This offers a view of U.S. interest in Mexican art as it relates not only to cultural exchanges between the two countries but also in relation to the economic and political events that were shaping the power relationships between both countries. And through a chronology of U.S. interest in Mexican art traces the political, economic, and strategic alliances being forged between the countries, the author shows us how both public taste and art history can be shaped by forces that lie outside the realm of artistic concerns.

Goldman proposes a methodology that examines the correlation between important moments in the bilateral relations between the U.S. and Mexico and the use of culture and art as a seemingly “neutral” conduit for negotiating, courting, and advancing the agenda’s of the
powers that be. This work is significant and seminal for my thesis because it specifically explores how the exhibition of art is implicit in the structuring of the geopolitical relations. Goldman’s approach to the study of Mexican visual arts provides a foundation for the study of exhibitions of Mexican art and their relationship to specific economic and political needs between the U.S. and Mexico.

In order to specifically address the exhibition of Mexican popular art in the context of the forging of geopolitical alliances between Mexico and the U.S. the work of Mary K. Coffey is particularly valuable. Coffey’s work shows us how the exhibition of popular art in the U.S. correlates to the privatization of Mexico’s banking sector and by a transnational’s desire to enter the remittances market. In the article “Banking on Folk Art: Banamex-Citigroup and Transnational Cultural Citizenship” Mary K. Coffey offers two critiques of the exhibition *The Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art*. The author’s first reading is a political economy critique that situates the exhibition within the liberalization of Mexico’s banking sector. The second reading is a material culture approach that investigates how the exhibit incentivizes the consumption of popular art as an expression of cosmopolitan citizenship. In both critiques, Coffey incorporates theories of citizenship as a technique for governance and regards material culture as the objectification of socioeconomic relationships between the United States and Mexico. The political economy approach begins by investigating the relationship of *The Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art* to privatization reform in Mexico. The author points out that the traveling exhibition’s timing coincided with Citigroup’s buyout of Banamex, Mexico’s largest bank. Furthermore, the exhibition was organized by Fomento Cultural Banamex A.C. Banamex’s philanthropic venture. Given these two facts, Coffey suggests that the timing and administration of the exhibition were motivated by Citigroup’s desire to enter the lucrative remittances market. It did so by appealing to Mexicans living in the U.S. through an emotive exhibition of *their* culture and history and by framing popular art consumption as a type of aid. Coffey’s political economy critique underscores how the

148 Remittances are the amounts of local or foreign currency sent from outside Mexico to local beneficiaries. Mexico is the third largest recipient of remittances worldwide, Mexico follows after China and India. In 2010, the country received approximately 2.2 billion dollars in remittances. A large percentage of these monies are sent by low wage earning immigrants living in the U.S. In terms of largest influx of yearly remittances per state, Oaxaca is in sixth place.
exhibition of popular art was used as means to align the financial integration between the U.S. and Mexico.

Coffey’s material culture critique argues that the show’s exhibitionary strategies incentivized the consumption of popular art as a “mode of cosmopolitan citizenship” that was made possible by the privatization of Mexico’s economy. According to the author, neoliberalism makes possible a reconceptualization of citizenship and national imaginaries. These new national imaginaries are no longer strictly bound by a country’s geographical territory, by a country’s physical borders, but instead conceive citizenship as global in scope. This new concept of citizenship and national imaginary is more attainable to those groups who can have the means to travel freely and therefore have greater exposure to a multitude of cultures, and lifestyles. Whereas, certain groups of people adhere to the history and culture of their immediate surroundings, (i.e. Oaxacan artists,) others take pride in feeling equally at home in Mexico City, New York, and Shanghai. Neoliberal values of individualism and self-support translate the consumption of popular art as a “mode of cosmopolitan citizenship.” It does so by situating the purchase of popular art as a type of “individualized economic stimulus” for the artists. And this may have some important consequences, as Coffey states, “while aesthetic cosmopolitanism is often cosmetic and even exploitative, the forms of subjectivity it creates and the social affinities it cultivates contain the potential for more radical forms of cultural identification and citizenship.” By appealing to consumers through a neoliberal moral imperative practiced through consumption of popular art, the visitor may feel “connected through and ethos of responsibility to the Fomento Folk Art Support Programs’s project to sustain Mexican folk art and artisans.” Thus, cosmopolitan citizenship allows one to align our emotions, patronage, and allegiance with people and causes outside the territorial limitations of one’s country of residence.

Coffey’s work situates the study of exhibition of Mexican popular art within the disciplines of political economy, anthropology, and museum and cultural studies. The author’s approach to the study of art, privatization, and transnational citizenship offers a

149 Coffey, “Banking on Folk Art,” 309.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
study of exhibitions as multifaceted nodes. Coffey’s research serves as a foundation for my work and has had a profound effect on the way I view and understand the contemporary exhibition of Mexican popular art in today’s late capitalist economy. She is one of a few authors who directly study the correlation between Mexico’s changing socioeconomic landscape to the exhibition of Mexican art and the commodification of culture.

**CONCLUSION**

The production of popular art as we have seen is intimately connected with international networks of consumption and display. It is safe to say that popular art is weaved into a web of niche markets where its “unique” production weighs heavy on how the pieces are valued. This thesis has analyzed this complex relationship and history between identity (indigeneity,) the state, museums, and collectors. This work has limited itself to the study of Mexican popular art and mainly, to the works produced in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. I understand that further study of the relationship between Mexican popular art and its socioeconomic environment would benefit from a more expansive research project that should include a larger sample of popular art producing centers in the country. In many ways, this thesis strives to understand global phenomena through its local manifestation as a way of understanding the relationship between economics, art, and culture through an approach that privileges its more intimate interactions. It is also an effort to contribute to an ongoing dialogue that challenges preconceived notions that underestimate the value, relevance, and complexity of popular art, tourist art, “ethnic” art, and craft vis-à-vis “fine art.” The case of Oaxaca is important because it helps to understand contemporary popular art production and its relationship with the global market, at the same time it allows us to examine the role that indigenerity and authenticity plays in this process. The case of Oaxaca also allows us to trace the role that popular art has played historically in Mexico’s social, political, and economic history.

During Mexico’s Nationalist Project, the country’s political class used art and culture to secure their power and facilitate the nation’s governance. In this context, popular art provided a platform that unified the country’s heterogenous population under one common ethos of *mexicanidad*, allowing for the cultivation of a Mexican identity rooted on its Mesoamerican heritage. Popular art was exalted as a unique expression of Mexico’s visual
culture and craftsmanship, created through a blending of pre-Columbian and European influences. Important figures in Mexican politics and culture contributed to the appreciation for the art form. At the turn the twenty-first century, Mexico has undergone significant social, political, and economic changes. These changes have in part been the outcome of the adoption of a neoliberal agenda and ideology by the state and the nation’s ruling elite. In this scenario, the production, circulation, and commodification of popular art reflect the social, cultural, political, and economic transitions taking place in the country and the world.

In this thesis, the artist workshop, the retail store, and the exhibition of Mexican popular art have been examined as constitutive and constituent of the socio-economic mediation taking place in Mexico and the world. In other words, they are made possible by this process and simultaneously they make this process possible. Within these spaces, indigeneity, identity, authenticity, and the global configurations of wealth and power weave the social milieu in which contemporary popular art is practiced, sold, and exhibited. Identity and indigeniety are two key factors in the production and commercialization of contemporary popular arts. Its marketability depends in part on its deep rootedness to tradition, a sense of uniqueness and place, and a handmade quality. Through the study of the artist workshop as a place for entrepreneurial practice, the retail store as an informal educator on non-Western cultural practices, and the exhibition of Mexican popular art as a promoter of socioeconomic ideology, what I have shown is the intimate correspondence between these networks, their effect on the commodification of art and culture, and the role of the private sector in mediating the production and consumption of popular art.

Now more than ever, popular art has ceased to be a practice for local consumption that serves a utilitarian purpose. Popular art can be found across the globe, in retail stores and on display at prestigious museums. Their transnational character and highly commercial status means that these objects function as symbolic carriers and representations for the culture that produces them. In this context, these products might contain in them a fixed interpretation of what indigenous is. If popular art is marketed and displayed through a narrative that privileges an artist’s indigenity, as an identity that is only rooted in tradition and location, and as a vestige of the past, then this method of underpinning the practice of popular and giving it value, could have a restricting effect on how contemporary indigenous cultures are understood by others or might limit the way they choose to represent themselves.
A restricted outlook on indigentiy not only shapes the exchange between producers and consumers in the marketplace but more importantly it also has the potential to shape social interactions and self-identifications outside the commercial domain.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

FIGURES
Figure 1. The Bug in the rug demonstration I, Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Source: Kelly, Daniela. Personal photograph.
Figure 2. The Bug in the rug demonstration II, Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, June 30, 2010. Source: Kelly, Daniela. Personal photograph.
Figure 3. The Levy Trading Co. display I, San Diego, November 28, 2009. Source: Kelly, Daniela. Personal photograph.
Figure 4. The Levy Trading Co. display II, San Diego, November 28, 2009. Source: Kelly, Daniela. Personal photograph.
Figure 5. The Levy Trading Co. display III, San Diego, November 28, 2009. Source: Kelly, Daniela. Personal photograph.
Figure 6. The Levy Trading Co. display IV, San Diego, November 28, 2009. Source: Kelly, Daniela. Personal photograph.