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Academies and History Painting

THE ROYAL ACADEMY of San Carlos in Mexico City, founded in 1785, was the first academy of art in America, and the only one established under colonial rule. It was a great, if disconcerting, success, for the independence it acquired from its mother institution, the San Fernando Academy in Madrid, was regarded in Spain as a 'political error'.¹ Indeed, Humboldt's description of the vigorous and productive democracy in the Academy suggests that it was not insignificant in fostering ideas that led eventually to Mexico's political independence.

Humboldt's account was recalled under sadly different circumstances in the 1830s by Frances Calderón de la Barca:

He tells us that every night, in these spacious halls, well illuminated by Argand lamps, hundreds of young men were assembled, some sketching from plaster-casts, or from life, and others copying designs of furniture . . . and that here all classes, colours and races were mingled together; the Indian beside the white boy, and the son of the poorest mechanic beside that of the richest lord. Teaching was gratis, and not limited to landscape and figures, one of the principal objects being to propagate amongst the artists a general taste for elegance and beauty of form, and to enliven the national industry. Plaster-casts, to the amount of forty thousand dollars, were sent out by the king of Spain, and as they possess in the Academy various colossal statues of basalt and porphyry, it would have been curious, as the same learned traveller remarks, to have collected these monuments in the courtyard of the Academy, and compared the remains of Mexican sculpture, monuments of a semi-barbarous people, with the graceful creations of Greece and Rome.

. . . That the simple and noble taste which distinguishes the Mexican buildings, their perfection in the cutting and working of their stones . . . are owing to the progress they made in this very academy is no doubt the case. The remains of these beautiful but mutilated plaster-casts, the splendid engravings which still exist, would alone make it probable; but the present disorder, the abandoned state of the building, the non-existence of those excellent classes of sculpture and painting, and, above all, the low state of the fine arts in Mexico, at the present day, are amongst the sad proofs, if any were wanting, of the melancholy effects produced by civil war and unsettled government.²

The Academy was, like all others of its kind later established in

2.1 Detail of Pl. 2.14.

the New World, unquestioningly European in its aesthetic aims and practices, and Frances Calderón de la Barca's remarks about semi-barbaric Aztec sculptures point to a common prejudice – although there was already debate in this area in the context of Enlightenment thought. The Jesuit Pedro José Márquez published two studies at the beginning of the century which argued that notions of beauty are relative, and that the great monuments of the indigenous past should be studied on an equal footing with those of Greece and Rome.³ The critic José Bernardo Couto, by contrast, a firm supporter of one of the most influential directors of the San Carlos Academy after its restoration by Santa Anna in 1843, Peregrín Clavé, rejected any claim that might be made for the works of the old indigenous world, which was not, he said, theirs; artists should look instead to those of Spanish America.⁴

Academies were established usually as part of a programme of reform, to foster a newly independent country's intellectual and artistic life. In Brazil, the Academia Imperial de Belas Artes was founded in Rio de Janeiro, the capital of the newly independent Empire, in 1826, with the French painter J. B. Debret, who trained in David's studio, as director. The only other academy founded in the first flush of Independence, during the first half of the nineteenth century, was in Caracas, centre of Bolívar's Gran Colombia. Article 17 of the *Ley Orgánica de Educación Pública de Colombia la Grande* (18 March 1826) called for the establishment of special schools of drawing, theory and design of architecture, and of painting and sculpture. An Academy of Painting and Sculpture was finally opened in the mid-1830s. But many countries had to wait until the end of the century, or even the beginning of the twentieth, so that sometimes this most orthodox of art institutions coincided with the arrival of modern art. In Peru, the Academy was founded in 1919, the same year that José Sabogal returned from Europe with his new Fauvist-influenced indigenist style.

In Paraguay, which had been devastated by the war of the Triple Alliance (see, for instance, Juan Manuel Blanes' image of desolation, *Paraguay* [Pl. 2.2]) during the 1860s, the population of its capital Asunción reduced to 24,000, and artistic activity virtually ceased for decades. In 1895 the Instituto Paraguayo was founded, followed by the establishment of the Academia de Arte as a subsidiary, run by the newly arrived Italian artist Héctor Da Ponte.

Most of the directors and teachers in the academies were still imported from Europe, and even in countries where there was no official institution of this kind, and artists still trained in the large studios of established painters, Europe remained the Mecca, and the more fortunate received government grants to pursue their studies in Italy, Spain or France.

The founders of the academies of art in the new countries of America would have shared the ideas of the first president of the Royal Academy in London, Sir Joshua Reynolds, who argued that such institutions were intimately bound up with pragmatic commercial considerations (the general improvement of taste would

Juan Manuel Blanes, *Paraguay: Image of Your Desolate Country*, c. 1880, oil on canvas, 100×80 cm., Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Montevideo.





2.3 Juan Cordero, *The Bather*, n.d., oil on canvas, 150×115 cm., Collection Banco Nacional de México S.N.C., Mexico City.

2.6 (facing page bottom) Padre Pedro Patiño Ixtolinque, *America*, 1830, marble, 200×90 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

2.4 Felipe Gutierrez, *The Huntress of the Andes*, 1891, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).



benefit manufacture), and with national pride; they were appropriate for the dignity of 'a great, a learned, a polite, and a commercial nation'.⁵ They also shared Reynolds's ideas about the classical tradition, and thereby reinforced generations of artists in their dependence on Europe. As a teaching institution, the academy's aims and principles were clearly laid out by Reynolds in the annual discourses he delivered to the students of the Academy from 1769 to 1790. The proper formation of the student lay in the copying of great examples of past art (antique sculpture, and masters like Raphael), and in drawing from life; he should pursue an ideal of beauty based on general rather than particular features, and should strive for the effect of 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur'.⁶ History painting came top in the hierarchy of art, above landscape and portraiture, and its subject matter should elevate and be as far as possible of universal interest: 'the great events of Greek and Roman fable and history . . . the capital subjects of scripture history'.⁷ With their emphasis on tradition, and on copying, such ideas were likely to inhibit individual responses to an American reality. They implied, too, the familiarity of the audience with the works that provided the models – to recognize a judicious borrowing here or there from Poussin, or from Raphael, a nice adaptation of Hercules, or the Venus de Milo, was an accomplishment comparable to the ability to recognize a quotation from Virgil or Horace. But even in Europe when Reynolds was writing, such assumptions of a common culture rooted in antiquity and the Renaissance were already fading; how much more difficult, then, to transplant this tradition into a society where few had any familiarity with its sources. This basic inappropriateness was compounded by the fact that the artist-teachers imported to academies from Europe had themselves studied with neo-classical artists like Raphael Mengs, in whose work the 'great style' had already lapsed into routine and commonplace.⁸

Local conditions also proved problematic. The painting of the female nude, for instance, was in many places unacceptable. When Cordero's paintings of semi-draped nudes (*The Bather* [pl. 2.3], *The Death of Atala*), placed in tropical settings, were shown at a special exhibition in 1864, they shocked prudish Mexico. The Argentinian Pueyrredon's paintings of nudes were done in secret, and subsequently over-painted. In Venezuela, drawing from the nude female model was still forbidden in the Academy in 1904.

But there was one particular aspect of academic theory and practice that took deep root in the New World, and that was the painting of history. The energy in the treatment of the great subjects of both contemporary and ancient American history (the subjects were prolific), and in the use of traditional European themes to carry contemporary significance, combined with an increasingly unorthodox mixture of classicism and realism, give academic painting in the second half of the nineteenth century in Latin America an unusual interest [Pls 2.5,6].



2.5 Juan Manuel Blanes, *Review of Rio Negro by General Roca and his Army*, n.d., oil on canvas, 50.5×99.5 cm., Museo Municipal Juan Manuel Blanes, Montevideo.

While many academic painters continued to pick their themes from Europe – Santiago Rebull painted a version of the death of the French Revolutionary martyr Marat, famously commemorated by David, while the ‘Oath of Brutus’ with its clear republican message, and the ‘Death of Atala’ were also favourites – by the 1850s subjects drawn from American history started to appear. In 1850, Juan Cordero painted *Columbus Before the Catholic Monarchs* [Pl. 2.7], the first work with an American theme to be seen by the Mexican public, when it was shown at the Academy exhibition of 1851. Cordero noted that no one had ever painted this subject before; Columbus is depicted demonstrating some of his ‘finds’ from the New World – a group of Indians dressed in skins, in deep shadow in the left corner, one of whom is actually a self-portrait. The setting of *Columbus Before the Catholic Monarchs* is faintly reminiscent of the gaudy imperial manner of David’s *Coronation of Napoleon*, and the picture is considerably livelier than the stiff, awkward and stony classicism of the majority of Mexican academic painting of the 1850s. Other painters soon followed Cordero in choosing subjects from the ‘discovery’ of America, like Obregón’s *Inspiration of Christopher Columbus* [Pl. 2.8]. In Brazil, at the same period, Victor Meireles painted the scene of the *First Mass* to be celebrated in the New World.

It wasn’t unusual in Europe for history painting to have relevance in terms of contemporary ideologies; in Mexico during Maximilian’s brief reign patriotic subjects were favoured as a means of legitimating and attempting to root his Empire: Santiago Rebull was in charge of painting a series of portraits of the heroes of Independence, including Hidalgo, Morelos and Iturbide. Following



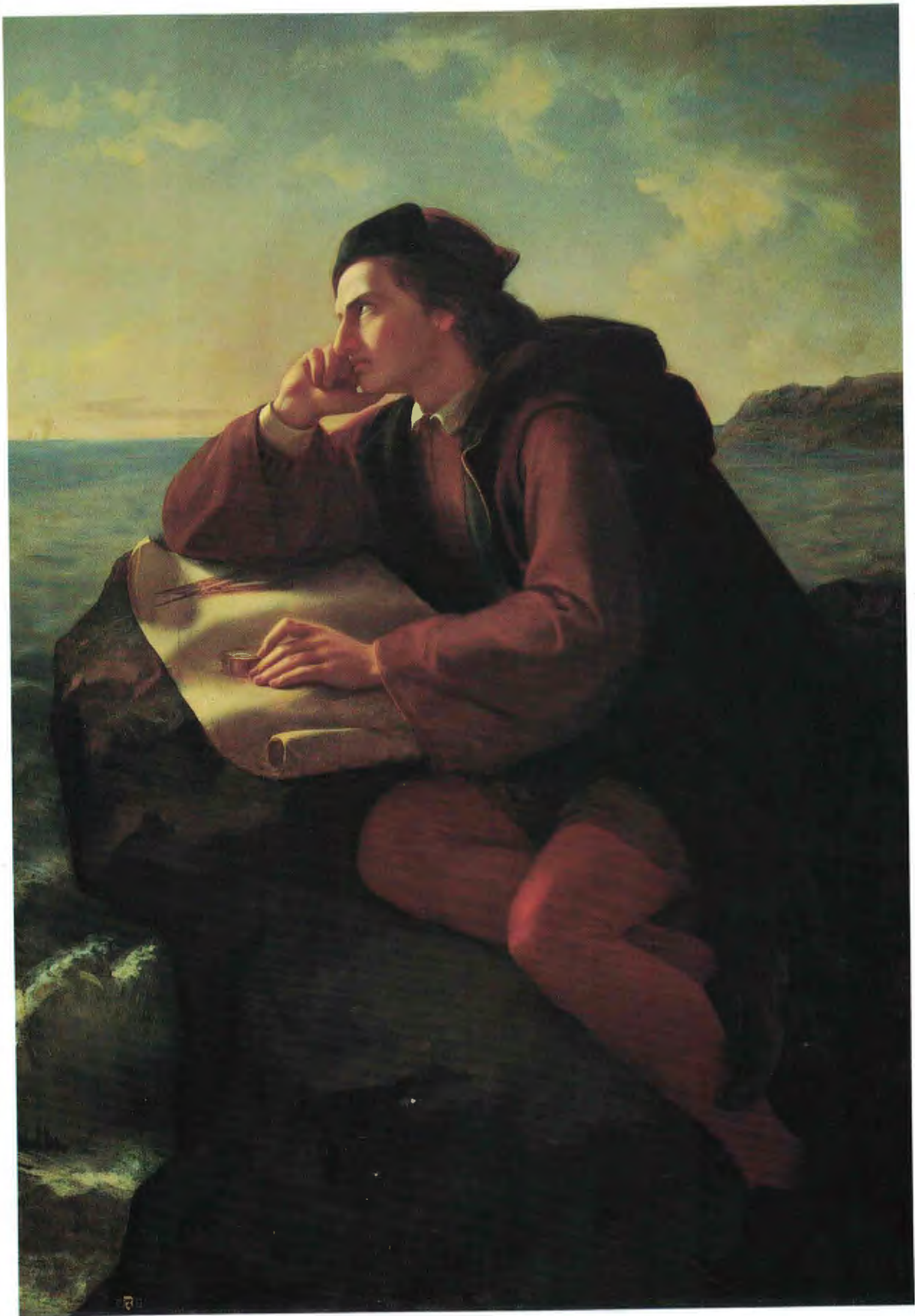


2.7 Juan Cordero, *Columbus Before the Catholic Monarchs*, 1850, oil on canvas, 173×244 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

2.8 José María Obregón, *The Inspiration of Christopher Columbus*, 1856, oil on canvas, 147×106 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

the restoration of the Republic in 1867, a number of large historical works portrayed events from the pre-Columbian past, like Rodrigo Gutiérrez' democratic *Tlaxcala Parliament* or Obregon's *Discovery of Pulque* [Pl. 2.9]. In the last quarter of the century, however, much more aggressive images from this history were chosen, which stressed the vicious and violent aspects of the Spanish Conquest and the three hundred years of colonial rule that followed, like Félix Parra's *Friar Bartolomé de las Casas* (1875) and *Episodes of the Conquest* (1877) [Pls 2.10,12]. National unity, a paramount concern, was increasingly seen as dependent upon a sense of identity, 'Mexicanidad', with strong historical roots. The years of colonial rule were regarded as a savage interruption of Mexican history, and a continuity with the pre-Conquest past was stressed.

So just as 'the Europeans revived Greece, the Middle Ages or the Germanic myths, the Mexican nationalists conjured Netzahualcoyotl, Moctezuma and Cuauhtémoc, asking them for inspiration and strength against [foreign] oppression'.⁹ Fear of further foreign intervention, after the war with the United States which resulted in 1848 in the annexation of Texas, and two French invasions, the



2.9 José María Obregón, *Discovery of Pulque*, n.d., oil on canvas, 76.5×102 cm., Collection Luis Felipe del Valle Prieto.



2.10 Félix Parra, *Episodes of the Conquest*, 1877, oil on canvas, 68.3×109.5 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).



2.11 Leandro Izaguirre, *Torture of Cuauhtémoc*, 1893, oil on canvas, 295×456 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).



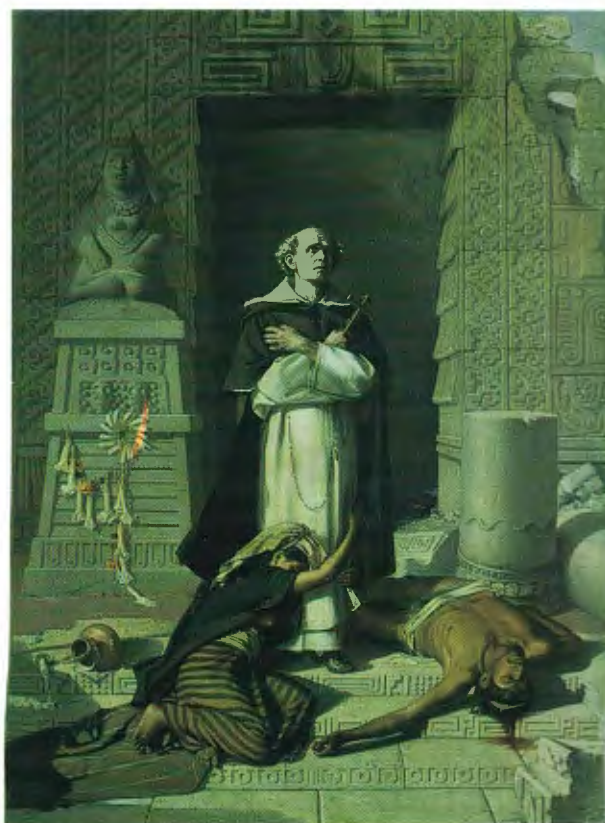
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second ending in the imposition of the Emperor Maximilian, was a major factor. A programme was initiated by the government of Porfirio Díaz to erect monuments in Mexico City of the nation's heroes; the most famous of those completed was the monument to Cuauhtémoc, finally unveiled in 1887, which had been realized by the sculptors Miguel Noreña, Gabriel Guerra and Epitacio Calvo, and the engineer Francisco Jiménez. Leandro Izaguirre's *Torture of Cuauhtémoc* [Pl. 2.11], a gigantic canvas, was painted for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893; the heroic figure of the last Aztec emperor, his clearly Indian profile confronting the harsh image of the Spanish invader, was the incarnation of national resistance. The fact that foreign capital was at this time busy exploiting Mexican natural resources probably exacerbated this spirit.

This politically significant 'historicist indigenism' coincided with the feeling, especially among liberals, for the need to 'rescue and preserve what was still left of the pre-Hispanic culture'.¹⁰ None of this had much to do with the actual plight of the Indians, many of whom were now living in worse conditions than ever before¹¹ and who were barely touched by the new Mexican pride, and the swift modernization of the country.

In countries where the manifest traces of the native civilizations were less evident than in Mexico, the heroes and events of Independence were kept in the forefront of public consciousness with a similar regard to the interests of national unity and identity. In Venezuela, the regime of Guzmán Blanco celebrated Bolívar's centenary in 1883 with a flood of paintings, sculpture, medals and books.¹² Arturo Michelena, who had worked in Paris in the mid '80s, and who favoured a light and realist style, painted *Miranda in La Carraca* (1896) [Pl. 2.13] and the *Assassination of Sucre*; Martín Tovar y Tovar covered the ceiling of the Salón Elíptico in the Palacio Federal in Caracas with a mural of the battle of Carabobo, as well as painting studies of the Act of Independence. In Peru, by contrast, subjects from Spanish history, the discovery of the New World, and episodes from the colonial period, like Ignacio Merino's *The Hand of Charles V*, *The Painter Friar and his Critics*, or *Columbus Before the Government in Salamanca*, were favoured. Víctor Meireles in Rio de Janeiro painted a vast canvas of the battle of Guarapanes, its subject taken from the Dutch invasions of Brazil in the seventeenth century.

The allegorical treatment both of ancient and recent history (as in Pedro Americo's *Concordia* or Blanes' *Paraguay*), and of philosophical and social ideas, was as popular as it was in Europe at the time. A notable instance of the latter was the mural Juan Cordero painted in 1874 in the staircase of the National Preparatory School in Mexico City; *The Triumph of Science and Work over Ignorance and Sloth* embodied the positivist philosophy of the School's director, Gabino Barrera, a student of Comte, whose Civic Oration of 1867 proposed that 'Mexico's regeneration could be achieved through the most prudent application of scientific knowledge . . . He ended his speech by coining a new slogan for the new Mexico: "Liberty, Order and Progress"'.¹³



2.12 Félix Parra, *Friar Bartolomé de las Casas*, 1875, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

2.13 Arturo Michelena, *Miranda in La Carraca*, 1896, oil on canvas, Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas.





2.14 José Ferraz de Almeida Júnior, *The Guitar Player*, 1899, oil on canvas, 141×172 cm, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo.

2.15 José María Jara, *The Wake*, 1889, oil on canvas, 178×134 cm., Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (INBA).

While the painting of history continued to dominate official art, genre scenes, influenced by the *costumbrismo*, which enjoyed a healthy life in popular art, also entered the repertoire of academic painters. José Correia de Lima was the first academic painter in Brazil, apart from Debret, to paint the black population (*Portrait of Simon the Sailor* [Pl. 2.17]). Almeida Júnior's *The Guitar Player* [Pl. 2.14] successfully turns his *costumbrista* subject into a realistic scene elsewhere, though, a different kind of indigenism from the historical 'indigenist nationalism' of the Cuauhtémoc theme began to emerge. José María Jara's *The Wake* [Pl. 2.15] was exhibited under the title 'Burial of an Indigene' at the Paris World's Fair of 1889 where it 'answered the expectation of European taste for picture that evoked the jealously preserved religious traditions among peasants, who could be imagined immune to the changes imposed





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2.16 Francisco Laso, *The Indian Potter (or Dweller in the Cordillera)*, 1855, oil on canvas, 135×86 cm., Municipalidad de Lima Metropolitana.



2.17 José Correia de Lima, *Portrait of Simon the Sailor*, c. 1855, oil on canvas, 92.8×72.5 cm., Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro.

by modernity'.¹⁴ This interpretation corresponds to other images like the Peruvian Francisco Laso's *The Indian Potter* [Pl. 2.16], (see Chapter 9), who is as though rooted and immobilized in his old traditions, not just untouched but untouchable by modern life and progress'.