



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools[®]

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2005 Volume II: Art and Identity in Mexico, from Olmec Times to the Present

Introduction

by Mary E. Miller, Sterling Professor of History of Art and Dean of Yale College

How do we go about teaching Mexico, the most important neighbor of the United States? Where do we begin to come to grips with the second most populous country of North America, the most important trading partner of the United States, and the one of the most important countries of origin for the U.S. population? We share critical history-after all, about one-third of the U.S. belonged to Mexico; if we turn back deeper in time, about one-half of the U.S. was part of the larger entity of New Spain-a history that can illuminate both our past and present.

Following initial work at a long weekend seminar in May, nine teachers from the public schools of New Haven, Connecticut; Houston, Texas; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Duvall County, Florida; and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina met for two intensive weeks in New Haven, Connecticut, at Yale University, for a Yale National Initiative seminar, "to strengthen teaching in public schools." We met on a daily basis for two hours every morning; at a minimum, I met with fellows for half to three-quarters of an hour in May, during the first two days of the July seminar, and during the last two days of the seminar. Fellows prepared a prospectus for research, and then completed a first draft by the end of the July session. They submitted a second draft on August 1 and a final draft on August 15. All members completed every aspect of the seminar.

To look at Mexico, this seminar used the prolific and complex art of the country-from its earliest days to the present-as a lens. Whether we know it or not, the art of Mexico pervades modern North American society, with a cultural impact that transcends national boundaries. A California hubcab may sport an Aztec Calendar Stone motif; the Virgin of Guadalupe jumps off a jacket in New Haven. In both instances, these older images take on a modern identity. Yet during the 16th century the Aztec Calendar Stone described a specific political identity, as did the Virgin of Guadalupe's image during the 18th

century. In both the remote past and in recent times, the art of Mexico has both described and accommodated political and social identities. Together, the seminar members and the seminar leader determined how to develop units that would engage with the visual culture and use it as a springboard to other questions and other materials.

We began by reading both indigenous and Spanish texts (all in translation)from the era of the Spanish invasion of Mexico, beginning in 1519. These documents-the most complete and informative set in existence for the European encounter with the indigenous Americas-open a window onto both the deeper past and what would become the future-the colonial and modern periods. We looked at the nature of cultural formation: what leads to the rise of civilization, and how does art signal from the deep past to modern times? We considered major monuments of Mexican art, from Olmec heads to Diego Rivera murals, with particular attention to the

identity with which these works of art have been imbued—and the way these works of art have informed subsequent identities, throughout the history of Mexico. The manipulation of the past took on new energy following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821. Renewed by immigration from Mexico, the United States has seen a resurgence of Mexican art forms, not only in the one-third of the nation that was formerly part of Mexico but also throughout the country.

During the seminar, participants explored resources at the Yale University Art Gallery and the Peabody Museum. We looked for WPA murals inspired by the Mexican muralists; we took advantage of the temporary exhibition at the Knights of Columbus Museum in New Haven, "Images of Faith and Art from Mexico," a rare opportunity to see a large number of colonial works together in the United States. Topics considered include the "Columbian" exchange of foods, peoples, animals, and diseases initiated by the arrival of the Spanish in the Caribbean; the concept of urban life, with particular attention to Teotihuacan and Mexico City; religious belief structure prior to 1519 and a consideration of the meaning of sacrifice; the role of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican Independence from Spain; the meaning of Mexico's early 20th century Revolution in art and politics; Frida Kahlo and the quest for a personal vision, biography, and the relationship between sports and civil rights at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

Teachers in the seminar represented many disciplines: science, history, art, computers, social studies, costume, Spanish, and reading. They developed units for their students that would develop skills to meet local and state standards, and they developed their own skills of narrative and discursive writing as well.

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