

The Entry of U.S. Troops into Mexico City

The Vision of Carl Nebel

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Illustration 1. Carl Nebel's *General Scott's Entrance into Mexico* (1851).

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Memory left us an image and, now, from the image springs what happened 150 years ago: Tuesday, September 14, 1847, between 7 and 9 in the morning, the U.S. army under General Winfield Scott took over Mexico's capital. This was the military and diplomatic defeat of the invaded country, the end of a stage of clashes

and combat, and the forced relaunching of peace negotiations, that is, for the conditions of final surrender.

General Scott's Entrance into Mexico, Carl Nebel's lithograph for the album *The War between the United States and Mexico Illustrated*, drawn at the request of George Wilkins Kendall, portrays the moment.¹ Its main theme is the successful entry of the U.S. troops, affirmed and reinforced by the U.S. flag waving over Mexico's National Palace. The idea that comes to mind when the viewer looks at it is that of a vanquished capital city, reinforced by the figures that, each

in his/her own way are witnesses to the scene from the windows, balconies, rooftops or the plaza itself (see illustration 1).

When Nebel did the illustration, he was already familiar with Mexico City's main plaza, or Zócalo; in fact, the architectural elements he uses are the same as those used for his *Picturesque and Archeological Trip to the Most Interesting Part of Mexico* only a few years before (see illustration 2).² Also, by 1851, when *The War between the United States and Mexico Illustrated* went on sale, Nebel had already had the opportunity of seeing other images of it done almost im-

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Illustration 2. *Grand Plaza* by Carl Nebel.

We should not forget the discussion about whether Nebel was present at the battles that he illustrated or he heard accounts of them by eyewitnesses.

mediately after the occupation, which means that it would not be surprising if he had used some of them in his own work (see illustration 3).³ In addition, the similarities between the two lithographs are so great that one might think that the first had been the basis for the second.

We should also not forget the discussion about whether Nebel was present at the battles that he illustrated for the album. If he was not present, probably he heard accounts of them by eyewitnesses and participants.⁴ In any case, the fact that the book's lithographs were com-

missioned implies a particular arrangement of events, geography and the characters who appear. That is, it has a clear aim: to show the triumph of U.S. expansionism. This is why the author opted to disseminate the victory of General Scott in Mexico City's Zócalo, with the Stars and Stripes waving over the most important building of the invaded capital. The uniforms, arms, buildings and witnesses all contribute to this. As Kendall mentions in the accompanying text, the work was an homage to those who participated in the war, marking the character of both illustrations and text.⁵

Nebel's image shows the decisive moment: the moment when, very early in the morning, General Scott entered the capital's Zócalo. However, it also shows rejection and expectation among the Mexican population. The presence of different kinds of Mexicans and the still defensive attitude of the invaders are clear.

We see a ceremony of war: the cannon, the arms, the military formation, the uniforms and the observers tell us so. It is also clear that it is part of an invasion: what is being celebrated is the arrival at an objective, in this case, Mex-



Illustration 3. *The Occupation of Mexico's Capital by the U.S. Army in 1847* by P. S. Daval and Shussele (1848).

Nebel's image shows the decisive moment when General Scott conquered the capital's Zócalo. However, it also shows rejection and expectation among the Mexican population.

ico City's most important plaza. Clearly the army's efforts have been successful; the entrance of the commanding general is evidence of the army's prolonged efforts.

Now, should we suppose that things happened exactly as shown? What can be said about the elements in the picture? At the same time, what can be said about what does not appear but that we know happened? What can be explained about the beginning of the famous "uprising of the wretched"? Had it already begun, or was it just about to start?

To make a complete analysis of the lithograph, we have to take into account

both the elements present and those absent, those that we know happened, but that the artist did not include. If we contrast the written accounts with the lithograph, we will see that the story presented in the latter does not coincide with the former.

Among the facts not included in the illustration are the large groups of poor people who staged an uprising against the arrival of the U.S. troops at the Zócalo; the prisoners that Antonio López de Santa Anna had let free before fleeing the city; the bodies and blood of the injured in the clashes between the Mexican populace and U.S. troops; the destruction of the streets and build-

ings themselves; the white flags demanding a cease fire; and the multicolored flags indicating the different nationalities present.

In the illustration, the Mexicans' attitudes, shown in the album for the first time clearly defined and illuminated, are varied. The clouds of dust, the shadows, the darkness and the battles have ended, so the vanquished can be represented. In fact, each figure has its own value, a specific weight to emphasize U.S. interests.

On Plateros Street (today Francisco I. Madero Avenue), a lone poor person stands next to the "*vinotería*" preparing to launch a stone against the invading



Illustration 4. *General Scott's Entrance into Mexico*, as reproduced in Mexico's official history books.

Among the facts not included in Nebel's illustration are the large groups of poor people who staged an uprising against U.S. troops at the Zócalo.

army. Why is there only one, if the fact was that a mass of the poor rose up to attack the recent arrivals? The first answer is that we might suppose that a large group would have diminished the importance of General Scott's triumphal entrance into the city. The whole idea of the lithograph, we must remember, is an awards ceremony: the victors were imposing their triumph. However, the silhouettes of the sharpshooters on the roof of a building on the same street are supporting the tattered figure with the rock preparing to attack. The doubt persists: why was nothing more included? Had the uprising not yet begun? Perhaps the idea was to show that these

attacks never posed a real threat to the troops or the wretched state of the Mexicans vis-à-vis U.S. power.

There were also other kinds of Mexicans, wealthy Mexicans, like those to one side of the cathedral, who are observing the ceremony, threatened by the cannon, and seem to collaborate and even be accomplices—are they forced?—in this dramatic event in Mexican history. Here the differences among the city's populace, but above all the lack of national unity, showed through.⁶

The shadows of the scene indicate that it is early morning, just as the chronicles say. The majesty of the colonial constructions that the Americans hoped

to find on their arrival is also depicted. It was the city that William Prescott had told them about: the one that was strategically besieged, the city of the ancient Aztec empire, where the Spaniards, headed by Hernán Cortés, wept on that long-ago "Sad Night" of 1520.

This is the image that Nebel showed the U.S. public in 1851. The efforts and sacrifices of their army had had their reward: the conquest of the Mexican capital, a capital great because of its past, of which the Americans already formed a part. The Stars and Stripes waving on the National Palace represented barely a part of the triumph of territorial expansionism.

The moment proposed by Nebel had a concrete objective, which was not to disseminate the events just as they happened that day. *General Scott's Entrance into Mexico* represented a particular vision because it was done for a society that needed to see the development and victories of the war. What had happened for more than two years in Mexican territory? How did the stories that the soldiers told when they went home actually unfold? What were the “Palaces of Moctezuma”?⁷ And, of course, what lands were those that had been recently acquired thanks to the consummation of Manifest Destiny? To answer these concerns, the witnesses had to publish pamphlets and books in which they related their own feats and taught that the conflict had been very vast, so vast that a hero was created in every battle, in every event of daily life or every time the sacrifices made in the name of American freedom were remembered.

One of the reasons the lithograph was well received among Americans seems obvious: it represented victory after more than a year of fighting and showed the Stars and Stripes waving outside the country. The angle Nebel chose presented an ordered, clean and, to a certain degree, peaceful event; it displayed a vision that not only does not jibe with the rest of the eyewitness accounts from both nationalities who speak of the taking of Mexico City, but even contradicts them. Because on that morning there was no discipline; the volunteers were not wearing their grey or blue uniforms; much less did they have on clean clothes, as is depicted in the illustration. The American standard was smaller and only later was it changed for a larger one. The shops were all closed against the fear of the invaders. Thus, there would have been no people

in the wine shop (not to mention the fact that the lithograph depicts a very early hour for drinking).

And then we should ask ourselves, what makes an image accepted by a society for which it was not intended? Why has Nebel's lithograph been disseminated in Mexico? Has its message been carefully examined? Is it pleasing to Mexicans? Is Mexican patriotism represented in this view of the taking of the capital? And, directly, why is this illustration used to talk about national defense? Is it mere chance that when people talk of “Mexican resistance to [U.S.] invasion” they allude to the scene of the Stars and Stripes waving above the National Palace a few scant hours before the anniversary of Mexican independence? Is it a simple coincidence that official history books say, “despite the resistance, Mexico lost the war,” and that next to this is an image of Nebel's lithograph, cropped to eliminate the “*vinotería*” and the U.S. flag over the National Palace (see illustration 4)?⁸

Most of the lithographs in this album are on display at the National Museum of Interventions in Churubusco and the Caracol Museum in Chapultepec. I would like to insist on the question: why are these images so widely disseminated in our country even though they are unfavorable to Mexico?

Although they should not be hidden, probably the most sensible road would be rather to situate them in the context of the period in which they were done, explain their original objectives and what they attempted to do. At the same time, one could argue that in Mexico there are very few lithographs about the war and due to this, we use Nebel's. This, however, would make us ask why, when there are very few images to use, the ones utilized coincide very little with

the discourse that accompanies them and how it is that their content and messages are not specifically situated. Of course, this is a problem that leads to other realms like nationalism, education and national loyalty. In this case, one could take the position that clearly recognizes the value of *General Scott's Entrance into Mexico* in the history of both countries, in order to identify the intentions and proposals that Nebel wanted to disseminate among Americans and what Mexico City—for a short time in the hands of the invaders—was like. ■■■

NOTES

¹ George Wilkins Kendall, *The War between the United States and Mexico Illustrated* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1994). Kendall was a war correspondent and editor of the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* during the hostilities.

² The Spanish edition was published in 1840.

³ In the year of the U.S. occupation, the Italian Pedro Gualdi did an oil painting depicting the U.S. flag flying over the National Palace. P.S. Daval and Christian Shussele also did a lithograph, *The Occupation of Mexico's Capital by the U.S. Army in 1847*, which shows three U.S. flags.

⁴ Ronnie Tyler, *The Mexican War: A Lithographic Record* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1973), p. 18; and Martha Sandweiss et al., *Eyewitness to War: Prints and Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum-Smithsonian Institution, 1989), p. 32.

⁵ Kendall, op. cit., pp. III-IV.

⁶ *Décimo calendario de Abraham López para el año bisiesto de 1848* (Mexico City: Imprenta de Abraham López, 1848), p. 56.

⁷ Army recruiting posters of the time cried, “Ho, for the halls of the Montezumas!” which is how Mexico City was known from then on. David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation. Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1973), p. 390.

⁸ Secretaría de Educación Pública, *Mi libro de historia de México, Educación Primaria* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1992), p. 50.