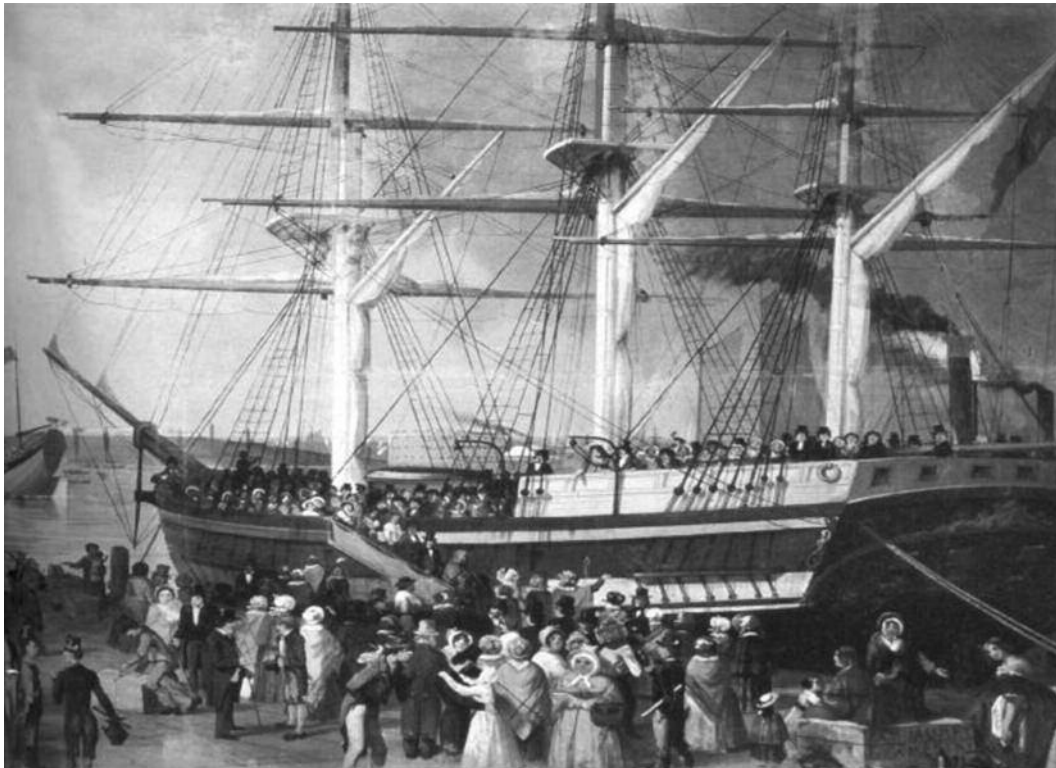


Visions of the Imperial City

Mexicans in New York (1834-1882)

Vicente Quirarte*



Taken from Burns, Ric and Sanders, *New York an Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

Samuel Bay Waugh, *The Bay and Harbor of New York* (1855).

From the outbreak of the French Revolution until the first years of the twentieth century, Paris was, in the words of Walter Benjamin, the capital of the nineteenth century. New York, for its part, gradually became not only the most important commercial emporium of the United States, a

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place where the achievements and splendors of material civilization were concentrated, but also, as its visitors had to admit little by little, where culture was drawn.

Both its own inhabitants and outsiders began to call New York the imperial city, and, by extension, its state became the Empire State. Although by the nineteenth century, this name was



Home for the Friendless, 29th Street and Madison Ave.

Taken from Burns, Rice and Sanders, *New York on Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

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in common use, it was not until 1931 that the Empire State Building renamed the city again.

The list of Mexicans who in the nineteenth century left written testimony or other marks of their passage through New York is short but illustrious. Their names are familiar, and their reasons for passing through New York are almost always due to hap- penstance, not pleasure. Politician Guillermo Prieto's expression "travels of a supreme order", also the title of one of his books, gives voice to the forced nomadic existence of the Mexicans of his time.

A pioneer among our explorers is Father José María Guzmán, who, on the way to the holy city of Jerusalem in 1834 stopped over in New York, a city of commerce. His observations are succinct, but show the admiration that order and discipline awakened in the foreigner's imagination.¹ However, the urban scene that he witnessed would be radically changed a year later. On the evening of December 17, 1835, a fire destroyed 600 buildings. The fact that there were only two fatalities reinforced New York's fame as an essentially commercial center, since almost all the ruined buildings were commercial.

The city recovered with the speed that characterized it even then and was rebuilt with constructions modeled after the Greek and Roman temples of antiquity. The most conservative asked themselves whether "the imposing Merchants' Exchange and the vast Customs House on Wall Street [did not] mark the loss of Republican virtue, and the arrival of an Imperial culture of excess and power which would threaten the survival of democracy itself."²

In 1841, the journal *El Mosaico Mexicano* (The Mexican Mosaic) published a descriptive article about the prosperity of the eastern United States, particularly New York.³ The Texas war was already over, but the giant of the North had not yet openly displayed the magnitude of its territorial ambitions vis-à-vis Mexico.

In 1848, politician Luis de la Rosa and writer Manuel Payno each journeyed to New York for different reasons shortly after the signing of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty whereby Mexico lost more than half its territory. Curiously, neither of them talked about the city. Payno arrived in mid-August and decided to make an excursion to Connecticut. However, he left a brief written impression about the New York summer that —then as now— drives its inhabitants to more temperate climes.⁴

Luis de la Rosa was one of the most able architects of the Querétaro provisional government, as minister of internal and foreign relations, and one of those who most intelligently obtained for Mexico the least shameful conditions possible under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Despite this, De la Rosa was not motivated by resentment, but by a need to get to know the victor, and to live, as José Martí

would later say, in the belly of the beast. He does not describe New York either, but what he says about an increasingly unnatural and artificial scenery is decisive for understanding the ontological feeling of Mexican outsiders abroad.

Luis de la Rosa writes, “Although I later visited Baltimore, Philadelphia and ultimately New York, and although in all those places I found things worth describing, it has not been the beautiful and the picturesque that has most caught my attention, but the useful.”⁵ Like later travelers, when he speaks of the material virtues of the United States, De la Rosa compares them to Mexico’s. Further along, he writes, “In the long way from Washington to New York, the population is so numerous and compact, so active and industrious, that nature appears silent and unmoving before the view of a society so mobile, so agitated and bustling. One’s attention is drawn involuntarily to society, to its industry, its arts and commerce, and one forgets nature.”⁶

During the French intervention in Mexico, several liberals went to live in New York, where they formed a group called the Mexican Club of New York, formally founded October 16, 1864. José Rivera y Río, one of its members, emphasized the virtues of a city that, while it had received all manner of scoundrels, “in revenge, New York has seen its streets and its theaters filled with the illustrious banished from all the world’s peoples: it pompously received Lafayette in 1824; it took Kossuth and the Hungarian patriots to its breast in ’51; the Spaniards in 1830; Garibaldi and many of his comrades; the Mexican deportees or emigrés in 1864; the Polish a few months later. In sum, all the men whom the



Broadway and Duane Street, ca. 1859.

Taken from: Mary Black, *Old New York in Early Photographs 1853-1901* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976).

Guillermo Prieto lived in New York from May 8 to July 27, 1877. He used his whole body, inventiveness and intelligence in his New York explorations.

revolutionary tempest has swept away to await better days on the banks of the Hudson, whose melancholic mists have brought forth our best canticles.”⁷

Rivera y Río was a novelist whose book titles denoted his eminently social concerns. During his stay in New York he wrote *Los dramas de Nueva York* (The Dramas of New York), published for the first time in 1869, in which he included lithographs that naively but freshly illustrate both the city’s public and private life.

There was an additional geopolitical consideration: Benito Juárez wanted his supporters to stay as close as pos-

sible to the Union administration to diplomatically prevent the U.S. government from throwing its support to Maximilian after the death of Abraham Lincoln.

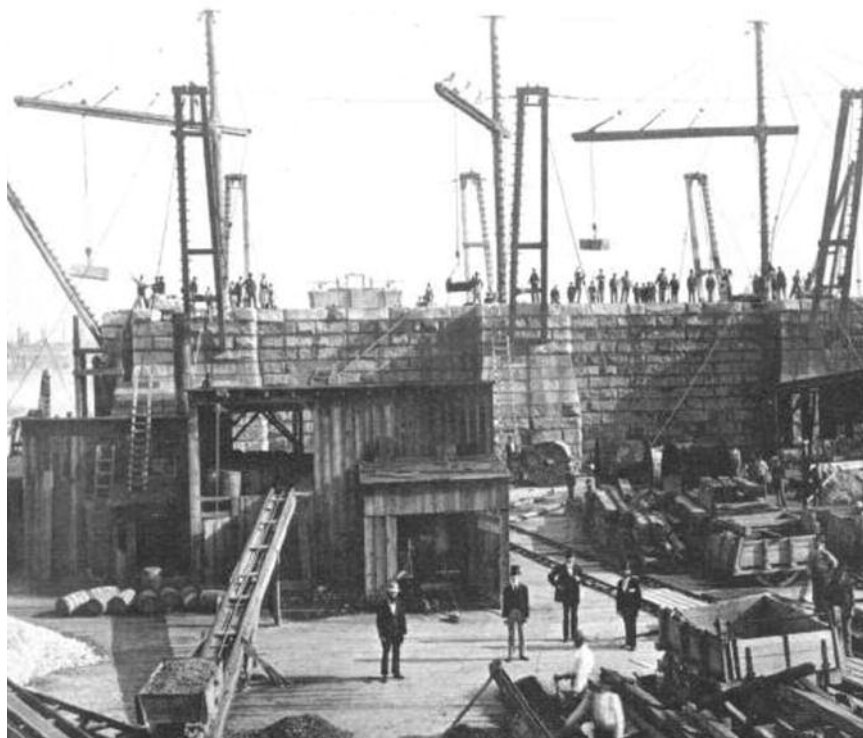
The most noteworthy of the Mexican exiles was Margarita Maza de Juárez, who initially lived where 208 East 13th Street is now located. The building no longer exists but at that address there is a bilingual plaque marking the spot where Benito Juárez’s wife lived between 1864 and 1866.

The neighborhood where the Juárez family lived was warm and full of people, populated mainly by Irish im-

migrants fleeing famine. The Mexicans who lived there felt at home, particularly if they remembered the shining solidarity displayed by the Saint Patrick's Battalion in the war against the United States. Later on, the Juárezes moved to 31st Street, where their son Pepe died of pneumonia in December 1865. Their correspondence about the boy's death reveals a moving stoicism on the part of Juárez and Margarita, also seen in the very Mexican necrophilia—and particularly from the state of Oaxaca—that led the family to embalm the body until it could be buried in Mexico.

Margarita's neighbor in her first New York home was the untiring Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, "el Zarco," who lived at 39 East 15th Street. It is interesting that despite being one of his generation's best writers about customs, he decided to not speak of the wealth of traditions New York provided and dedicated his writing entirely to defending the Republican cause, and making it known to the whole world.

In May 1866, Antonio López de Santa Anna arrived in New York. With an ambiguous, enticing discourse, he said that he would place himself at the disposal of Juárez, his old antagonist and former prisoner, and fight against the French intervention. With both cynicism and dangerous naivete, he made statements to U.S. authorities, recounted here by Matías Romero, who said, "I am told that Santa Anna says that he cannot spend anything of his own and that if the United States is willing to send him to Mexico and pay all the expenses of the expedition, he will be pleased to go. They also tell me that his plan has been to procure the 50 million pesos that it is said that the U.S. government is going to loan or



Brooklyn Bridge in construction (1877).

Taken from Burns, Ric and Sanders, *New York on Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

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guarantee us."⁸ The Mexican Club of New York reacted energetically and published a manifesto that concluded, "Mexico's Republicans will never commit the irreparable mistake of dishonoring their number by admitting the man who was always an enemy of liberty and [who], abusing his power, sought for Mexico the ominous foreign yoke."⁹ The signatures on this document tell us which members of the club were still in New York: Juan José Baz, Pantaleón Tovar, Felipe Berriozábal, Jesús González Ortega, Rafael de Zayas and Epitacio Huerta.

Guillermo Prieto, a veteran of a thousand journeys and other battles, lived in New York from May 8 to July 27, 1877. His forced exile was due to having supported José María Iglesias for

president against the rising star of Porfirio Díaz. Prieto used his whole body, inventiveness and intelligence in his New York explorations. Although his notes are those of an enlightened liberal who wishes to study institutions, their structures and statistics, which take up several pages, he manages to pen descriptions full of color, critiques and admiration.¹⁰ He visited civic and religious buildings, cemeteries and markets, or simply described the vast street scene, the ideal place to follow the lead of his muse. His exploration of the customs building and the attention he gives to the administrative structure of that operational center of the commercial city are interesting.¹¹ Rivera y Ríos erroneously wrote that, "In music and literature, despite the

amount that is sung and written in the United States, the backwardness is noteworthy.”

In 1880, the Larráinzar sisters' five-volume work *Viaje a varias partes de Europa* (Journey to Several Parts of Europe) was put out by the Filomeno Mata publishing house.¹² The Larráinzar sisters must have gone through New York at the same time as Guillermo Prieto, since his book also came out in 1880. However, the differences are noteworthy, since, while Prieto stayed in a modest hotel due to the weakened state of the Republic's finances, the Larráinzar sisters stayed in the luxurious Hotel Clarendon on Union Square.

The sisters follow the common model of nineteenth-century books: they recount their impressions, including descriptions and guided tours. However, it is very interesting that, from their high social and cultural position, they observed that New York's refinement began to be similar to that of Paris and sometimes superior, particularly with regard to hygiene.

We will conclude this review of travelers' experiences with that of Jesús E. Valenzuela, poet and patron of *Revista Moderna* (Modern Review). The most interesting thing that happened to him was his meeting with Oscar Wilde, who was in the city as part of a triumphal lecture tour through the United States. Valenzuela writes, "In the saloon I frequented, Hoffman House...I met Oscar Wilde, wrapped in a large fur coat. 'Who is that?' I asked, upon seeing that sympathetic, long-haired man who had asked for a glass of plain water in which he put a tropical flower that he had been wearing in his buttonhole, and that he looked at for a long time."¹³ Wilde's appear-

ance, with the fur coat Valenzuela saw him in, can be reconstructed thanks to the 1882 photographs of Wilde taken at Napoleon Sarony's studio.

Between Father José María Guzmán's trip in 1834 and Valenzuela's in 1882, New York had changed dramatically. The ancient isle of the Manhattan tribe could be reached by steam boats and engines, and the 28 days that the pilgrim priest had taken to go there had been considerably reduced. Valenzuela saw the arm of the Statue of Liberty and considerable progress in the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, the triumph of steel over other materials. The powerful magnet of U.S. life centered in New York would reach its pinnacle with poet José Juan Tablada, the turn-of-the-century author who in the 1920s would settle there and write, "We come from Paris's Trianon and go toward the Yankee orchard; no more boats to the isle of Cythera, but aboard express trains of hurried, automatic tourism."¹⁴ **MM**

NOTES

¹ José María Guzmán, *Breve y sencilla narración del viaje que hizo a visitar los Santos Lugares de Jerusalén* (Mexico City: Office of Luis Abadiano y Valdés, 1837).

² Erik Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), p. 72.

³ Ignacio Cumplido, "Prosperidad de los estados del Norte en general y particularmente del estado de Nueva-York," *El Mosaico Mexicano, Colección de amenidades curiosas e instructivas* VI (Mexico City) 1841, p. 5-16.

⁴ Manuel Payno, "Fragmentos de un viaje a los Estados Unidos," *Crónicas de viaje*, Borins Rosen Jélomer, comp., volume one of complete works (Mexico City: Conaculta, 1996).

⁵ Luis de la Rosa, "Viaje de México a Washington," *Impresiones de un viaje de México a Washington*

en octubre y noviembre de 1848, Emmanuel Carballo, ed. (Toluca: Biblioteca Enciclopédica del Estado de México, 2002), p. 85.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ José Rivera y Río, *Los dramas de Nueva York*, 3rd. edition (Mexico City: Imprenta Litográfica y Tipográfica de J. Rivera, Hijo y Comp., 1873), p. 10.

⁸ Benito Juárez, *Documentos, discursos y correspondencia*, v. 10, Jorge L. Tamayo, comp. (Mexico City: Secretaría del Patrimonio Nacional, 1966), p. 912.

⁹ Ibid., p. 914.

¹⁰ Guillermo Prieto, *Viaje a los Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: Imprenta del Comercio de Dublán y Chávez, 1878).

¹¹ It is ironic that in the customs building Prieto visited a man named Herman Melville worked, a man who 25 years earlier had written *Moby Dick*, the most important novel of his time that only posterity would recognize. Like his character, Bartleby, the writer Melville manipulated unheroic figures and words, while through the windows he could watch the sails of the ships that had carried away the years of his youth.

¹² Enriqueta and Ernestina Larráinzar, *Viaje a varias partes de Europa. Con un apéndice sobre Italia, Suiza y los bordes del Rhin por su hermana Elena L. de Gálvez* (Mexico City: Tipografía Literaria de Filomena Mata, 1880).

¹³ Jesús E. Valenzuela, *Mis recuerdos. Manoj de rimas*, Vicente Quirarte, ed., *Memorias Mexicanas Collection* (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2001), p. 93.

¹⁴ José Juan Tablada, *Las sombras largas*, Third Series 52 (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993), pp. 295-296.

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