

Behind the Scenes at Three Mexican Museums

At first glance, a museum is a place for art that seems to take on a life of its own, as though the objects there had come by themselves and decided to stay for years. And we don't always realize that behind that wealth is the work of a group of people. In this article, we've made a journey through exhibition rooms to see how three museum directors have put their own personal stamp on Mexico's artistic and cultural wealth. This is a conversation with Diana Magaloni, former director of the National Museum of Anthropology and History (MNAH); Graciela de la Torre, of the University Contemporary Art Museum (MUAC); and Miguel Fernández Félix of the National Art Museum (Munal). Although each has expressed his/her own personal style, the three agree that the most important thing for a museum is the public, and they target their efforts at familiarizing that public with the country's artistic resources.

National Museum of Anthropology And History Updating Our Yesterday



More than three years ago, Diana Magaloni became the head of Mexico's most important space for pre-Hispanic art, the National Museum of Anthropology and History.* A trained restorer with broad experience at home and abroad, she has studied pre-Hispanic art in detail, specializing in mural painting. Under her tutelage, the pieces have taken on new angles that don't just express the ancient past, but also acquire new voices that dialogue with the visiting public.

Voices of Mexico (VM): What has your work as director been like?

Diana Magaloni (DM): Coming from a very plural place, like the university, where the work is interdisciplinary, and also my own personal experience, have given me the opportunity to show the public the museum contents, mainly

Zoomorphic yoke, ▶
41.5 x 13.4 x 80 cm,
classical period
(AD100-850)
(green stone).



* As this issue was going to press, Antonio Saborit took over as director of the National Museum of Anthropology and History.

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▲ Rain god Tláloc from Coatlinchan, 676 x 412 x 393 cm, classical period (AD100-850) (basalt).



▲ Mosaic disk, 24 x 1.10 cm, early post-classical period (AD1000-1250) (wood, mother of pearl, turquoise).

archaeology and ethnography, in a different, more lively way. This means that anyone can understand, enjoy and ask new questions about the works on display.

VM: How do you link the collections of the past with the reality of today?

DM: Previously, the museum emphasized archaeology. That was all very well, but I think it's very important —and this is what we've been doing— to review the rooms, make exhibits, and develop an academic and outreach program for ethnographic events. The challenge in the future, in my opinion, is to make our museum the home of the indigenous peoples, because our identity as a nation is based on the culture of the first peoples of Mesoamerica, whose most direct exponents are the indigenous peoples. Any mixing of races brings its own problems, but we have not incorporated the indigenous peoples into our cultural reflection; we still owe them a cultural debt.

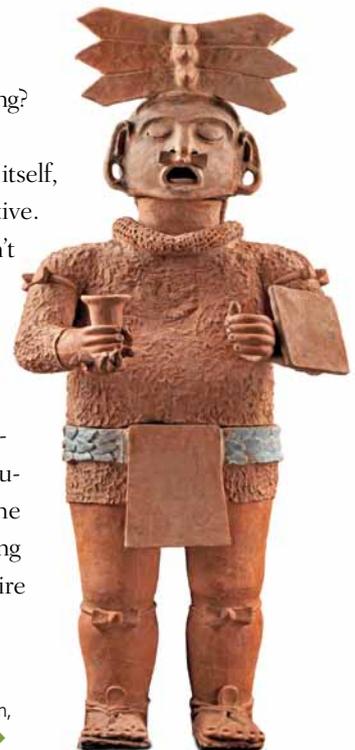
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VM: How does the museum dialogue with a changing, highly technical society?

DM: Like other outstanding world-class museums, we are part of the Google Art Project. Through the portal, you can make a virtual visit to our museum and access hyperlinks and extraordinary photos of the collections. This has meant that we have increasing numbers of visitors both in person and virtually. The other very important approach has been the big exhibits about civilizations, like the most recent ones about the samurai, Pompeii, or Persia.

VM: How do you make a museum exciting?

DM: This museum is exciting all by itself, but it still needs to be more interactive. And when I say “interactive” I don't mean machines. I think part of being interactive is imaginative capability, having certain didactic materials that propose imaginary journeys. To achieve that, it's very important to have interaction and collaboration among all the museum's areas: the museography, the curators, and the student services, among others, because this place is an entire universe unto itself.



The god Xipe Tótec, 110 x 51 x 63 cm, late classical period (AD750-900) (clay). ▶

UNIVERSITY CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM THE CONSCIENCE OF SOCIETY



Graciela de la Torre has a master's in art history and has been the head of the University Contemporary Art Museum for more than a year. At the same time, as director of visual art, she also coordinates other museums at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She has had a long career in the field of museums, and is an experienced cul-

Photos courtesy of the UNAM University Museum of Contemporary Art.

tural promoter. The University Contemporary Art Museum was inaugurated in 2008, and since then has opened its doors to the most diverse expressions of the contemporary art scene, as well as to reflection and discussion of what's happening in the world today.

(VM): How do you direct the MUAC?

Graciela de la Torre (GT): Museums contain the best of human beings: the fruit of their creativity, their sensibility, their memory, and the key to directing a museum is not to look at it as a mausoleum or a warehouse, but to activate it for its audiences. This is a task that naturally implies education. I work with an extraordinary team that deals not only with organizing exhibitions, but also academic outreach, generating knowledge, educational mediation, with all the tools of interpretation and communicational promotion, both internally and externally. We work very horizontally, and I'm very proud of the team.

VM: How do you link up the content of the museum with an increasingly demanding public?

GT: What we try to do is be facilitators for learning and aesthetic enjoyment. We do this in a rather unorthodox way compared to other museums. We use *in situ* mediation strategies, that is, we use the interests and needs of the public as our



▲ Edgardo Aragón. *Shadows*, 2009 (video-installation), from the "For the Love of Dissidence, Edgardo Aragón ¼" exhibit.



Exterior of the museum, designed by architect Teodoro González de León.

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starting point, more than those of the museum. More than instructing the public, what we do is to put people in learning situations, where the first experience is the space itself—a wonderful space—and secondly, how we handle virtual communities. The MUAC was created with the philosophy of conceiving the public as a traveler in the museum's space, a traveler who traverses it, a traveler who can get lost and find him or herself, who is free to make his/her own choices, his/her own roads, and we are there to help him or her.

VM: What challenges do you have ahead?

GT: Our intention is to always find the way to know how to meet up with the public. One of our great challenges is to increasingly consolidate our position as an authentic university museum. University art centers have an enormous advantage because the university gives us the opportunity of generating knowledge. At the MUAC, for example, we offer a master's program in curatorial studies, as well as several seminars. All our activities are gauged for these two poles: education and the generation of knowledge. Our museum is also a place for debate, criticism; we can be a center for display, of course, and we have flagship exhibits, but we never forget our role as a

place for the generation of thinking, debate, and criticism, and the great challenge is to maintain that profile.

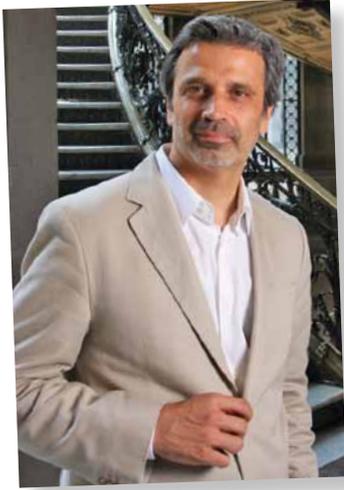
VM: Compared to your work directing other spaces, what has this museum taught you?

GT: Contemporary art has taught me a great deal. First off, I've learned that nothing is set in stone. Contact with the artistic community has motivated me enormously and has also stimulated my ability to find new educational models. At one time I installed the first educational services for art museums, but finding a new model for the contemporary art museum is a big challenge for me. At the same time, seeing the museum full of students has been enormously gratifying.



▲ Carlos Morales, *History of Pirated Music, Necropolis*, 2009 (installation with CDs vinyl paint and electronic sound equipment), from the "Foreignness" exhibit.

THE NATIONAL ART MUSEUM THE TREASURE CHEST



For Miguel Fernández Félix, if museums have not been his home, they have at least been an extension of it. That's why he has dedicated his entire professional life to his great passion: art. Today, he is the director of the National Art Museum, which boasts one of the country's most important collections, housing works from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.

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Miguel thinks that heading up this museum gives him a privileged opportunity to establish a dialogue with society.

(VM): What is the stamp you have put on this museum with the most important collection of Mexican art?

Miguel Fernández (MF): A very important trait for us is not just counting on the public that visits us, but on the public that makes a return visit. That is the result of having established a dialogue, communication, with the public. I would say that the public is our main asset; of course, the assets we have, that we are the guardians of, are the pieces of art. But that doesn't happen without the public because the works are there precisely to create a dialogue, to be visited. That's what a museum is all about: offering the elements that can bring people to that experience.

But for that, first, we need to establish communication internally. On the other hand, the issue of enjoyment is very present in a museum. Therefore, what interests me and what is a permanent challenge is for the Munal to generate an experience for the visitor. So, the crucial point for me is how we link up with Mexican art and with the museum's different publics: children, teens, the differently abled, researchers, a series of links with society that allow us to provide and

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▲ Façade of the National Art Museum, designed by architect Silvio Contri (1911).



▲ David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Self-portrait*, 100.3 x 121.9 cm, 1943 (pyroxylin).

offer different activities, from the dissemination of the permanent collection to temporary exhibitions, to the development of innovative academic programs.

VM: What is the central axis for this orientation?

MF: I would say there are two main axes based on communication: first, internally among all the areas of the museum. For that reason, I have concentrated my thinking on this area and anchored it in an operations and evaluation system, an intranet that deals with how we organize ourselves internally and what effect that organization has on the public. If we want to communicate something to the exterior, we have to be well communicated internally; allowing us to set up strategies or policies. For me, all the areas of a museum, from those who do protection, conservation, and research to those who disseminate the collections, must be on the same level of importance and responsibility.

And in the second place is communication with society. With this idea of communication with the public, we constantly establish links with different contemporary Mexican artists, like Roberto Cortázar or Roberto Parodi, and we also open up an international dialogue—for example we did some very interesting work with the Museum of Philadelphia about prints—including exchanges with artists and institutions like the surrealism exhibition that we did with Paris's Georges Pompidou Center, about the connections between surrealism in France and in Mexico.

VM: How do you motivate your employees?

MF: What I do to motivate people is to promote decentralization. This means the areas are autonomous and I'm the

central coordinator. Decentralization creates responsibility and fosters interdisciplinary work. Decentralization, autonomy, responsibility, and interdisciplinary work permeate the museum's two central axes: the areas (directors, technicians, clerical workers, and a very important board that has supported us for many years and is also our link to society) and the projects. The idea is that these two axes interlink and every area is strengthened. And, well, motivation also has to do with all of us being informed about what's going on in all the areas because this generates shared responsibility. Finally, my directorship is linked to an objective, which is the public, and all the areas work to link up the public's experience with the museum better. And I think we're on the right road.

VM: What has the museum given you?

MF: The museum has strengthened the vocation I've had since I was a very young man to foster that dialogue between culture and society. I think this is essential for the growth of human beings. Personally, it has allowed me to grow enormously; my directorship of the Munal has opened up the possibility of seeing life and transmitting it in another way, and this has made me much more receptive and respectful of the opinions of others. Just as a museum welcomes the public and is a space that has a collection it disseminates, on a personal level, I also see this as a metaphor: I receive an inspiration for living my daily life from a standpoint of appropriating, more than possessing. Appropriating affection and transmitting it is more important than anything else, and that is what the museum has given me at the end of the day. **VM**

Teresa Jiménez
Editor



▲ José María Velasco, *The Valley of Mexico from Santa Isabel Hill*, 77.7 x 57.2 cm, 1892 (oil on canvas).