



**South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947**

James Oles

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During the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, hundreds of artists from the United States carried their brushes, pencils and canvases across the border to Mexico. Drawn by visions of a simple, rural life close to the earth, the excitement of the muralism movement, and an art relying on indigenous sources, they came to Mexico, gathered images, and almost uniformly returned home. The view they carried back to the United States both reflected and shaped Americans' impressions of their neighbor to the south.

*South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination* gathers images of Mexico created by foreign artists, mainly Americans, who visited Mexico during the first half of this century, essentially beginning in the

1920s when Mexico attracted the attention of the world with its "mural renaissance," and ending after World War II, when the focus of the art world turned to Abstract Expressionism.

The book is the first comprehensive study of this diverse group of American artists working in Mexico during these years, and is particularly welcome since it provides the context for their work in Mexico. It is truly a "treasure trove" for collectors, art historians, museum curators and art dealers who are interested in the individual artists and the significance of their work in Mexico. It is also an important source for those studying the influence of Mexican art in the U.S., or the genesis of stereotypes regarding Mexico and Mexicans.

The art reproduced and discussed in the book is as varied as its creators: Milton Avery's tranquil painting of a woman praying, Pablo O'Higgins' mural of capitalists with their war machine, perfectly arranged Oaxacan jars photographed by

Edward Weston, a *New Yorker* cartoon of a society woman talking about Mexico and ringworm. Text explains the social, economic, and political conditions that drew American artists to Mexico, the bases for their choices of images to depict in their art, and how those choices shaped Americans' vision of Mexico.

The unifying metaphor in the text is the 1939 song *South of the Border*, about an American man who falls in love with a Mexican woman, proposes to her, then jilts her at the altar. To Oles, this reflects America's sincere passion for Mexico, as well as its "broken vows and condescension."

Like the man in the song, many American artists saw in Mexico what they wanted to see and took from Mexico images that reinforced their dreams of what Mexico ought to be (for America's gratification and convenience), but ignored the country's reality. The images they carried back to the States —of "[p]leasants and burros, small villages, fields of corn or maguey, local fiestas and communal markets"— are in part responsible for the stereotypes that Mexicans and Mexican Americans still suffer from today.

Travel brochures from as early as 1889 depicted Mexico as an exotic paradise "ripe for American investment, even colonization." One of the common images used is that of the voluptuous young maiden graciously offering the abundant fruits of Mexico (and implicitly herself) to Americans. To Oles, she personifies Mexico and its susceptibility to dominance "by the artistic or economic forces of the North."

The images of Mexico as a rural, communal country became even more seductive to Americans during the 1930s depression, as people lost faith in the U.S. emphasis on individuality

over community, as well as the increasing mechanization of life. Oles concludes that Americans saw in Mexico a more desirable, "organic" life, and viewed the Mexican Indian as firmly connected to "his ancient past, an anchor of stability in an era of otherwise rapid and frightening change."

To their credit, American artists captured a lovely aesthetic quality in their scenes of an outwardly tranquil Mexican life. The soft folds of a campesina's *rebozo*, the harsh spikes of the maguey cactus, the shiny curves of a Oaxacan jug, are all worthy of the artist's attention.

But at the same time, those who judge aesthetics often fail to see beyond color, line and texture. The campesina in the beautiful *rebozo* may be starving, *pulque* from the maguey may be intoxicating the men and preventing them from supporting their families, and heavy water jugs may cripple the spine. A quotation from writer Carleton Beals is a disturbing indictment of visiting artists' tendency to value form over reality. Beals laments:

*[M]uch that is lovely in the native handicrafts will go by the boards. Kewpie dolls will probably crowd out the delightful terra cotta figurines and straw-woven horsemen. Five gallon oil cans, rather than beautifully molded native jars, in many places, already grace the swaying shoulders of the local Rebeccas.*

Never mind that carrying water numerous times a day up steep hills was a backbreaking chore. To Beals it was a lovely dance. Surely, had he been the water bearer and had the incline been the stairs of his sixth-floor Manhattan walk-up, he would not have been so delighted by the aesthetics of it all.

Oles observes that the tendency of American artists to idealize Mexico also caused them to transform individuals, usually Mexican Indians, into an abstract "faceless symbol of a timeless world...." He acknowledges that Mexican artists, most notably Diego Rivera, were guilty of this as well:

*[T]he vast majority of the figures who parade through [Rivera's] murals and easel paintings are anonymous peasants.... American artists, in their representations of the Mexican Indian, would also depersonalize their subjects, converting them into the symbolic denizens of a dreamlike rural Mexico.*

Oles points out that the failure of American artists to let Mexican reality intrude into their canvases stemmed not from any malevolence, but from a wish that Mexico be as lovely, simple, and pure as it can appear to be.

Mexico is not a country, nor are Mexicans a people, who wash their dirty laundry in public. The artists who visited Mexico were probably received graciously, treated with respect and hospitality, and shown the country's most beautiful sights. Many were not fluent in Spanish, which further limited their ability to gather information about the nation independently.

The Mexican government assisted in presenting only the country's "best face" to the U.S. art-viewing public. According to one artist who visited in 1936, at the border the government confiscated all artwork "indicative of poverty or squalor," thereby ensuring that only innocuous images of Mexico entered the U.S.

As always, there are exceptions. A few of the artists who came during these years depicted an "ugly" side of Mexico —poverty, drunkenness,

violence, social inequities. Those who did, most notably Pablo O'Higgins and Elizabeth Catlett, were deeply committed to the Mexican workers' and campesinos' struggle for social and political justice. O'Higgins, an assistant to Diego Rivera and later co-founder of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphics Workshop), painted murals condemning U.S. capitalists' exploitation of Mexico, child labor, and other social evils. Catlett and O'Higgins produced extensive graphic works through the Taller, and both eventually became Mexican citizens.

James' lively and concisely written text is preceded by the essay "Constructing a Modern Mexican Art, 1910-1940," by art history professor Karen Cordero Reiman. Those who cannot easily manage the following sentence are advised to skip the essay, or to attempt it after reading the text, by which time they will have developed a voracious appetite for more information on this period in Mexican art history. Reiman writes:

*In the work of Julio Castellanos and Agustín Lazo... subtle perspectival distortions and the contrast between the massivity and volumetric modeling of the figures and the flattening of pictorial space in other respects instill a disquieting spirit, akin to Italian metaphysical painting, that suggests a veiled critique or ironic stance in relation to the quotidian scenes they represent.*

Reiman's essay presents the hard facts of Mexican art history, but without the *joie d'art* that distinguishes Oles' writing ❧

Susan Vogel.