

INTRODUCTION

The young revolutionary state had need of a sort of legitimization or cultural consecration, and what better consecration than mural painting? That was the way in which a mistake began which ended with the perversion of Mexican mural painting: on the one hand, it was a revolutionary art, or one that called itself revolutionary; on the other, it was an official art. OCTAVIO PAZ

Octavio Paz's observation about the oxymoronic status of Mexican mural painting pinpoints the central paradox at the heart of this book: how a revolutionary art—or at least one that intended to be revolutionary—became an official art that helped to legitimize an authoritarian state. For some, Paz's words may come as a surprise, as Mexican muralism represents, arguably, the most important example of art on the Left in the history of modern art.¹ Since 1921, when José Vasconcelos, Álvaro Obregón's minister of public education, first invited artists to paint monumental works on public walls, Mexican muralism has been admired by Marxist scholars and progressive intellectuals for its commitment to popular struggle, social justice, and radical politics. Commentators ranging from contemporary chroniclers like Jean Charlot, Anita Brenner, and Bertram Wolfe to subsequent historians like Laurence Hurlburt, Desmond Rochfort, and Raquel Tibol have credited the Mexican mural renaissance with converting the violent energies unleashed by the revolution into an ethical impulse to “socialize artistic expression”² and to place art in the service of building a new, more equitable society.³

And yet, as Paz's remarks reveal, a less heroic view exists. Penned in 1978, ten years after the state massacre of protesting students at Tlatelolco revealed the limits of democracy within the so-called institutionalized revolution, Paz's self-interview crystallized decades of his own—and others'—skepticism about the politics of mural art and its dominant idiom, social realism. From this post-1968 vantage, mural art is neither revolutionary nor populist but rather a cultural technique in the formation of the postrevolutionary state and its authoritarian ruling party (the Party of the Institutional Revolution, or Partido Revolucionario Institucional [PRI]). In the chapters that follow, I chronicle Paz's implication in the very thing he critiques. Nonetheless, his voice, while certainly not disinterested, is essential to the story of postrevolutionary national culture. For that reason, excerpts from his most famous critical essays provide guiding epigraphs for each chapter.

The critical perspective that Paz helped to crystallize first emerged in the 1930s when leftist artists attacked Diego Rivera for accepting commissions from capitalist patrons and a federal gov-

ernment they deemed counterrevolutionary. At the heart of this political debate were urgent questions about the relationship between radical art and official institutions. That is, could art painted in government ministries, federal museums, corporate hotels, and the like, politicize its viewer? Or would the ideological significations of the institution (political authoritarianism, bourgeois liberalism, anti-socialist capitalism, etc.) overdetermine the reception of said work of art?

This early critique also posed a set of related questions about the efficacy of Rivera's style of realism for communicating with the popular audiences mural artists hoped to reach. At the heart of this aesthetic debate were crucial questions regarding the relationship between formal means (media, composition, style, etc.) and the forms of consciousness and behavior the artist hoped to instill in and elicit from the viewer. That is, do certain visual idioms lend themselves to passive contemplation and thus to political conformity? Or can an artist, through innovative formal means, activate the viewing subject and thereby fulfill mural art's utopian claim to be a weapon for social change? Over the next three decades these aesthetic and political concerns would converge again and again in debates over how (or whether) murals engage the institutions they occupy.

In this book I explore the political and aesthetic questions raised by the institutionalization of Mexican muralism. To do so, I focus on a particular instance of institutionalization, the incorporation of murals into a burgeoning complex of state-funded and managed public museums. Through a sequence of case studies, I track the slow process by which murals entered the museum and the effects of this project—what I call the museum effect—on muralism. Likewise, I illuminate the influence of mural art, as a specific aesthetic practice, on the development of museum science in Mexico. I show how the visual

and spatial properties of mural art informed and intervened in the evolution of “didactic exhibition,” a distinctive variant of modern museology pioneered in Mexico but admired by practitioners throughout the Western world.

My focus on the museum as a privileged site of institutionalization is neither arbitrary nor absolute but rather motivated by historical and theoretical concerns. Chroniclers of the public museum have demonstrated that museums play a constitutive role in state formation and political projects to define citizenship as well as civil projects wherein consensus about community and culture is both created and contested.⁴ As in most Western democracies—with the United States being the major exception—the museum complex in postrevolutionary Mexico is federally funded and managed. Thus, conceived of as an apparatus of social governance, the museum provides an ideal locus for discerning the political logic of the state at any given moment in time. However, as other scholars have insisted, the museum can also be conceived of as an apparatus of civil society wherein different constituencies engage in the struggle over identity.⁵ While these scholars most often refer to the re-conceptualization of museums and their public(s) in the wake of civil rights movements, the federal defunding of the arts in the 1990s, and the economic pressures of global tourism, their insight into the inherently dynamic nature of museum work is helpful when one is considering the role of artists in what Neil Harris has described as the “authoritarian experimentalism” of museum science in the first half of the twentieth century.⁶

For Harris, authoritarian experimentalism marks the period roughly from the 1920s and 1930s through the 1960s when museum founders and curators attempted to innovate display strategies to improve the museum's pedagogic function and reach broader class constituencies. This essentially

paternalistic but nonetheless populist expansion of the museum's compass accounts for the founding of novel types of museums like the Museum of Modern Art (1929) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (1930). It also characterizes the innovative experiments in collecting, exhibition design, organization, and education undertaken at these institutions, among others. Consider, for example, the modern installation styles pioneered at MoMA or Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s role in shaping and codifying its collection.⁷ Or think of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's and Juliana Force's attempts to bring the principles of domestic interior design to bear on exhibition space to combat the intimidating austerity of institutions of high culture.⁸ Or, finally, we can recall John Cotton Dana's slightly earlier endeavors at the Newark Museum to bring blue-collar workers under the purview of museum education.⁹

The expansion of museums in postrevolutionary Mexico is therefore not unique but rather typical of this phase of museum building and exhibition planning in North America. What distinguishes Mexico, however, is the role of murals in the elaboration of a modern museum science. Only in Mexico did modern artists play such a sustained and vital role in the shaping of effective exhibition design. Avant-garde artists in the United States and Europe have historically critiqued prevailing exhibition norms and institutions through *Salons des Refusés* and anarchic group shows like the 1920 Dada exhibition in Cologne, Germany.¹⁰ Likewise, they have intervened in viewing environments, as Duchamp did in *Mile of String* (1942), and created innovative installations such as Frederick Kiesler's experiments in sound, lighting, and display at the Art of This Century Gallery. However, in each case the artistic intention was to critique prevailing values or to radicalize exhibition. In Mexico, mural artists engaged museum practice in order to expand the scope of a revo-

lutionary art and to participate in, and perhaps shape, the building of a new social and political order. That their practice inadvertently informed an overtly propagandistic style of exhibition—didactic exhibition—was part of the “mistake” to which Paz refers in the epigraph.

The dual implications of Harris's notion—the museum as an agent of authoritarianism *and* experimental practice—remind us that despite the museum's links to political power and class privilege, it is not a monolithic entity through which the singular voice of authority speaks. Rather it is a “contact zone” wherein various interests collide.¹¹ The job of the historian is to reconstitute the divergent voices, historical contingencies, and radical possibilities that are lost when exhibition planning solidifies into the authoritative statements that the public eventually encounters. My focus on the museum as a specific instance of institutionalization, with this dual conception of the museum in mind, allows for a consideration of the relative success or failure of mural art as a political and cultural project without lapsing into generalizing and normative claims about their role in state formation.

“¡Viva México! End of Story”: What Is Official Culture?

Before considering questions of success and failure, we need to clarify what is meant when critics argue that mural art's failure lies in its transformation from a revolutionary art to an “official art.” For Paz, “official art” is synonymous with state propaganda. The artists' desire for federal patronage was their fatal “mistake.”¹² Thus artistic collusion with what he calls a “philanthropic ogre” ultimately “petrified” mural art into a “rhetoric of revolutionary commonplaces.”¹³ For Shifra Goldman it is the bourgeois class interest of the ruling

elite that “discountenanced the militant and revolutionary aspects of muralism and retained only the superficial, sentimental, and nostalgic,” aided by a “growling torrent of tourists” in search of “local color.”¹⁴ According to her, it was not the artist’s aberrant desire for patronage but rather the patron’s deviant bid for foreign capital that led to what she calls a stylistic “monopoly” among the ranks of mural artists.

Paz’s and Goldman’s arguments reflect conventional assumptions about how power and capitalism distorted the popular nationalism inspired by the revolution. For Paz, postrevolutionary politicians transformed the artistic search for an authentic national expression—the “revolutionary” project undertaken by mural artists—into a consecrating ideology for a corrupt state. For Goldman, the national popular was depoliticized and commodified when the ruling elite abandoned social justice for capital accumulation. Both distinguish between a true nationalism, which emanates in Paz’s account from an immanent cultural will and in Goldman’s from a leftist politics, and a false nationalism, conceived as an instrument of the state or market. Neither can countenance that the popular nationalism they deem authentic might itself be implicated in the elaboration of an official culture. Moreover, Paz’s and Goldman’s descriptions of cultural becoming are too overdetermined and unidirectional to account for the multidimensional process through which certain cultural forms become official, on the one hand, or the ways people experience said culture, on the other.

I prefer Roger Bartra’s more nuanced account of what he calls *cultura oficial* (henceforth translated as “official culture”).¹⁵ Like Paz and Goldman, Bartra acknowledges that “official culture” refers to both the “ensemble of habits and values that mark the behavior of the Mexican political and bureaucratic class” and the art and literature to which “those very same government offices

issue a seal of approval . . . in order to restructure it according to established canons.”¹⁶ And like the authors cited previously, Bartra acknowledges that “cultural processes have a legitimating, homogenizing, and unifying effect.”¹⁷ However, he insists that this is “not because they are mere ‘instruments’ of the ruling class” or “simply an ideological formation created by the Mexican state to trick a dominated population.”¹⁸ For Bartra, official culture is first and foremost an effect of the “creation of an ensemble of myths about Mexican identity.”¹⁹ It is nationalism, he claims, “that establishes a structural relationship between the nature of culture and the peculiarities of the state.”²⁰ And for Bartra, nationalism is neither an authentic culture emanating from below nor an “invented tradition” orchestrated from above. Rather it is something in between, what he describes as cultural “sediment” that is socially sifted over time from many sources, high and low, and through everyday practices as well as official projects. That is, nationalism is as much a social phenomenon as a cultural or political one. He elaborates:

In our country the official expressions of nationalism tell us: If you are Mexican, you must vote for the institutionalized revolution. Those who do not either are traitors to their deepest essence or are not Mexican. Nationalism is, then, an ideology that disguises itself with culture to hide its intimate means of domination. But for this identification of politics with culture to be successful, a process of sedimentation must have taken place already, separating elements socially held to be national from those that are not specifically held to be so. This is a complex process that cannot be produced artificially. That is to say, neither the state nor the ruling class can direct this process from above. This is a global process shaped by the interplay of several factors, including the very formation of the national state.²¹

Bartra suggests that we distinguish between national identity, political culture, and official cultural policy rather than conflate the three and subsume this conflation under the sign of class domination or state control. “The relationship between these three,” he writes, “is a matter of the ties between the formation of a myth (identity), its insertion into institutional life (political culture), and the ideology that attempts to explain and direct the process (official culture).”²²

Bartra’s description of the social and political forces that shape official culture is difficult to grasp. To illustrate the “intimate means of domination” that Bartra ascribes to nationalism as the articulator of popular beliefs, institutional practices, and political ideologies, I turn to the artist José Luis Cuevas’s parable “The Cactus Curtain” (1959). In this seething satire of the “conformist rut” plaguing Mexican art, Cuevas follows the fate of Juan, a young artist who can find no support for his work until he begins to parrot the formal and iconographic clichés of mural art and demand “walls to decorate for the Mexican people!”²³ Juan’s professional epiphany takes place at the Palace of Fine Arts when an “abbot-like functionary” asks whether he “belongs to the Mexican School.”²⁴ Realizing that his professional success depends upon his confession of his allegiance, Juan renounces his “bourgeois” drawings and over time “retreat[s] once and for all behind the cactus curtain. *¡Viva México!* End of story.”²⁵

Juan’s acquiescence to political culture (the “abbot-like functionary” at the Palace of Fine Arts) is signaled by more than his aesthetic reversion to the “simplified forms” and “automatic method of drawing” (a reference to Adolfo Best Maugard’s *Method of Drawing* and its profound influence on the Mexican school) he had been taught at art school.²⁶ He must also perform his nationalism in café conversations and through bodily comportment. He begins to wear overalls and huaraches and has his wife dress as a Tehuana.

He grows a big mustache like Zapata, declares tequila “the best drink in the whole world,” and insists that “the universe ought to eat enchiladas.”²⁷

For Juan, becoming a purveyor of official culture is not simply a pragmatic decision; it also taps into deep affective structures of belonging. After all, Cuevas, like his proxy Juan, admits that he wants “to be appreciated in [his] own country.”²⁸ Juan’s nationalist performance may be cynical, but its repertoire derives from sources beyond the mere purview of the postrevolutionary state or ruling elite.

Cuevas makes explicit the ties between nationalism, political culture, and official culture. However, he also hints at the limits of official culture by noting that Juan’s working-class parents, relatives, and neighbors have never seen a mural: “or if they have, they have agreed with the janitor of the building that it is terrible.”²⁹ These “plumbers” and “bribe-takers” prefer posters of Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante (popular film stars during the golden age of Mexican cinema), artificial flowers, and the blonde pinups in Coca-Cola advertisements. “At home there was never any mention of the artists who are supposed to be the apostles of the people,” he writes. “The talk was about the latest amorous adventures of Maria Félix.”³⁰

These commercial products make up a compendium of the forms of popular culture deemed degraded, inauthentic, and foreign by proselytizers of official culture. However unrefined these tastes may be, they do not lack national affect. Rather they reflect what Bartra calls the amalgam of “‘true’ popular culture” and “transnationalizing . . . mass media” that characterizes Mexican modernity.³¹ By detailing the many forms of Mexican culture that Juan negotiates in his daily life, Cuevas limns a portrait of official culture that reveals not only its powerful effects but also its tensions, paradoxes, and limits.

Bartra and Cuevas therefore help us to better

grasp what it means to call mural art an “official art.” As a key site for channeling the energies and affects of popular sectors and struggles into a codified expression of Mexicanness, murals were essential to the “formation of a myth (identity)” even before they were systematically inserted into institutional life or consolidated through an official ideology. Social realism—or the Mexican school of painting—helped to articulate cultural sediment—Zapata’s agrarianism; enchiladas and tequila; indigenous, proletarian, and peasant modes of dress—to a leftist politics in the service of building a new postrevolutionary state and society.

With Bartra’s formulation of official culture as my guide, I turn now to a discussion of postrevolutionary *mestizaje* in order to illustrate both the convergence and divergence between state actors, mural artists, and their critics on this essential trope of national identity. In this way we can better understand what Bartra means when he argues that it is the “creation of an ensemble of myths about Mexican identity . . . that establishes a structural relationship between the nature of culture and the peculiarities of the state.”³²

Mestizaje: Mural Art and the “Formation of a Myth (Identity)”

As many scholars have demonstrated, postrevolutionary nationalism was predicated upon the racial trope of the mestizo. While ostensibly a positive reconfiguration of Mexico’s racial and cultural hybridity, *mestizaje*, as conceived by intellectuals, constitutes instead an idealized, essentially assimilative mixture of the Spanish/Creole, configured as white and European, and the indigenous, understood as its racial and civilizational antipode. José Vasconcelos’s *The Cosmic Race* (1925) is the emblematic text on postrevo-

lutionary *mestizaje*, for it makes self-evident the connection between the management of biological reproduction and the cultural elaboration of a new national imaginary.

In his treatise, Vasconcelos elevates racial miscegenation to a transcendent eugenic principle. He argues that a “mixture of races accomplished through the laws of social well-being, sympathy, and beauty” will lead to a cosmic race “infinitely superior to all that have previously existed.”³³ By changing racial impurity from a sign of shame into one of pride, Vasconcelos attacks the popular notion, promoted by social scientists, that miscegenated populations are biologically inferior to racially pure societies. Thus he concludes his tract with an emphatic and shocking—given the racial discourse of the period—prophecy: “We in America shall arrive, before any other part of the world, at the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of the previous ones.”³⁴

Yet despite his celebration of *mestizaje*, Vasconcelos laments the “race problem” in Mexico, stating, “Whether we like it or not the Mestizo is the dominant element of the Latin American continent.”³⁵ Vasconcelos reasons that Indian blood is to blame for the mestizo’s lack of “moral strength,” for as a “lower breed” that “reproduces madly,” the Indian languishes in a state of degradation.³⁶ As the natal “element” and *différence* around which a new mestizo identity could be elaborated, the living and breathing Indian remains recalcitrant, a perennial sign of Mexico’s lack. Thus Vasconcelos conceives of an “aesthetic eugenics” that might properly direct not only future miscegenation but also the integration of indigenous art into a new national culture, predicated on the mestizo ideal.

Just as education could redeem Mexico’s popular classes, a public art that combined classicism with folk motifs could redeem Mexico’s indigenous traditions and effect an “aesthetic eugenics” in its viewing public. Therefore, Vasconce-

los commissioned Mexican artists to paint large murals on public buildings, thus inaugurating the Mexican mural renaissance. To infuse these artists with a sense of their own cultural roots, Vasconcelos sent them on envoys to Mexico's pre-Columbian monuments and centers of regional craft production. Describing his intention, he writes, "I had recommended popular art as a basis from which to go on to the classics, without crossing over into mediocrity."³⁷ By this he meant that artists should take inspiration from indigenous art forms both past and present but trans-value their example in a new classicism rather than emulate them by becoming "neo-primitives."

For Vasconcelos, classical art remained the epitome of beautiful and sublime artistic expression. He envisioned murals based on literary themes with symbolic and allegorical representations of virtues and theorized that the mere presence of this material in public space would enlighten and thereby lift up the populace. This mestizo culture would solve the "Mexican problem." Just as artists would incorporate elements of "authentic" indigenous expression into neoclassical allegories of cultural enlightenment, so too would the government, through its educational initiatives—muralism included—assimilate indigenous peoples into an enlightened, modern, and mestizo body politic. As a normative figuration of the social, mestizaje promised to modernize its indigenous component while simultaneously authenticating its contemporaneity via a cultured lineage rooted in tradition and a deep past.

The artists charged with this task never embraced Vasconcelos's views on biological or aesthetic eugenics. And their murals should not be perceived as mere reflections of Vasconcelian mestizaje. In their art, Vasconcelos's emphasis on spiritual transcendence gave way to a more materialist concern for the political and economic

transformation of Mexican society. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the artists eschewed the governmental designs of their federal patrons, or that they rejected mestizaje as the ruling trope for a new postrevolutionary national identity. Rather, their radical *indigenismo* and elaboration of different conceptions of mestizaje represent a strategy for legitimating an alternative vision of modernizing nationalism and national modernism. Two iconic murals from the early years of the movement demonstrate this point.

Orozco's Ambivalent Mestizaje

In José Clemente Orozco's fresco *Hernan Cortés and "la Malinche"* (1926), from his cycle at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, he represents the foundational "romance" between the conquistador and Malintzin, a Tabascan woman sold to Cortés who subsequently became his common-law wife and whose services as a translator enabled the conquest (figure 1).³⁸ He depicts Cortés as an idealized male nude, his marble-white pallor linking the Spanish claim to racial whiteness with European civilization's appropriation of Greek and Roman antiquity. Conversely, Orozco paints Malinche as an ethnographic nude. Her body, while desirable, does not conform to conventional Western standards of beauty. Rather, she has a stout frame and rich brown skin. Her facial features are wide and flat, conjuring a composite type—the Mesoamerican Indian—rather than an ideal.

A slight, dark-skinned man lies face down, crushed beneath Cortés's foot. The conquest is thereby dramatized through a surprisingly bloodless exchange as Malinche is separated from her people by a dominant Cortés to become the figurative mother of the modern mestizo. In this fresco, Orozco represents mestizaje through the trope



1 José Clemente Orozco, *Hernan Cortés and "la Malinche,"* 1926

of heterosexual romance and patriarchal kinship relations. The conquest is presented as an asymmetrical masculine competition for control over the reproductive female body. Orozco's Cortés is a powerful, active visionary, as suggested by his monumental, sculpted body and stern, distanced gaze. His outstretched arm asserts possession of his conquest. Malinche, on the other hand, is soft, passive, and mysterious. Her eyes are closed, indicating an impassive temperament and inscrutable motivations. She is not only unknowable but, via Cortés's gesture, unreachable. Her ambiguous relationship to Cortés suggests a certain anxiety about the ability of postrevolutionary intellectuals to effectively access or manage indigeneity. Would the revaluation of the Indian ultimately trouble the gender/race hierarchy this form of allegorization attempts to stabilize? Orozco's ambivalent treatment of this foundational fiction suggests period anxieties over both miscegenation and the cultural politics of indigenismo.

Rivera's Social Mestizaje

If Orozco's image recapitulates the biological discourses underpinning postrevolutionary mestizaje, Diego Rivera explores its Janus face. In his cycle at the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP]), Rivera makes an elaborate argument for a social mestizaje in which class and culture are ethnicized. In his cycle social change is achieved through revolution and industrial production, not biological reproduction. Nonetheless, if Orozco uses gender hierarchy to assuage anxieties over miscegenation, Rivera mobilizes gender difference to assuage anxieties over social equality and modernization.

Take, for example, *Our Bread* (1928), located on the third floor of the Court of Fiestas (figure 2). Here a dark-skinned communist worker presides

over a humble meal of bread and fruit. Seated at the table are representatives of the young and old; light and dark; working, popular, and middle classes, demonstrating the social unity of the new political order. Rivera situates his frugal repast within a productive landscape of factories and grain silos. A Tehuana bearing a woven basket filled with indigenous fruits stands behind the worker, marking the location as Mexican. Behind her, peasants, laborers, and soldiers amass as participants and guardians in the new social order.

The Tehuana's pose echoes the industrial architecture in the distance. In this way Rivera suggests that industrial modernity will be grounded in the "authentic" values and culture that she represents. Like the Tehuana's traditional costume, indigenous culture will persevere. But social differences will cease to matter as an egalitarian political order and socially just economic system enables a hybrid society. Unlike Vasconcelos's espousal of a spiritually directed racial eugenics, for Rivera, mestizaje means a demographically mixed society, with culture as its unifying medium.

Even as Rivera constitutes the Tehuanas as powerful matriarchs and deploys them in his cycle to ensure that women are represented as essential members of postrevolutionary society, his social mestizaje is still configured through the gender hierarchy of the heteronormative family form. Thus, like Malinche in Orozco's fresco, Rivera's Tehuana functions as a boundary figure for the nation. Modernity is male and active, as evidenced here in the indigenized communist patriarch presiding over the meal or the numerous images of armed peasants and workers throughout this cycle; tradition is female, bountiful, and reproductive. In this way, Rivera recycles the gendered trope of Orozco's racial romance, but without his ambivalence.

As these examples reveal, even as postrevolutionary artists and intellectuals sought to revalue



2 Diego Rivera, *Our Bread*, 1928

the Indian in order to promote a mestizo ideal, they reconfigured the former as naturally subordinate by associating indigenous culture with the feminine. Adriana Zavala has written the most extensive analysis of the intersection of race, class, and gender in Mexico's modern visual culture.³⁹ She argues that again and again, the Indian and indigenous culture were feminized in order to reassert the racial order and patriarchal privilege of Mexico's bourgeois reformers after the chaos of the revolution. Here, the de facto subordination of women in Mexico's gender hierarchy served to naturalize the disciplining of indigenous cultures and peoples within the new order of mestizo nationalism. Moreover, she demonstrates that women were burdened with the task of performing their allegiance to the nation by embracing traditional (read: indigenous) dress and mores and renouncing styles and behaviors associated with internationalizing modernity. Thus, paradoxically, being a modern woman in postrevolutionary Mexico meant performing tradition.

Cuevas's Parodic Mestizaje

Cuevas's parable demonstrates Zavala's point. Juan's behavior clearly makes him a parody of Diego Rivera, one of the greatest self-conscious performers of Mexico's postrevolutionary "mestizo modernism."⁴⁰ Like Rivera, Juan begins his career as an avant-garde artist influenced by European modernism only to renounce this cosmopolitanism for a highly stylized nationalism that involves wearing overalls and huaraches and declaring tequila the greatest drink in the whole world. Juan/Rivera's machismo is indicated in his donning a mustache like Zapata and in his powers to transform his wife into an emblem of his nationalist performance by having her dress as a Tehuana.

In this detail, Cuevas refers to Frida Kahlo in particular and more generally to the bourgeois intellectual practice of "playing Indian" as a demonstration of radical nationalist sentiments during the heady 1920s and 1930s.⁴¹ While Cuevas effectively parodies this practice, he does not analyze it for what it reveals about the race and gender politics of postrevolutionary nationalism. That is, Juan/Rivera is clearly being lampooned for his class passing—his transformation from bourgeois artist to overall-wearing (read: worker) "revolutionary"—but the ethnic drag implicit in this transformation, as well as its instantiation through the performative body of his wife, remains unelaborated in Cuevas's exposé of the pernicious effects of the "cactus curtain." Not only is Cuevas incapable of imagining Juan's/Rivera's wife's performance as an intentional act of her own nationalism, but he also accepts without question the period link between the indigenous and the female body. Ultimately it is not Juan who figures postrevolutionary indigenismo but rather his wife. And while Juan's wife's performance is also inauthentic—a modern woman passing as a traditional Tehuana—it signals the gender aporias that structure postrevolutionary mestizaje.

By calling attention to the highly gendered nature of postrevolutionary mestizaje, I am not making the rather banal observation that mural artists were sexist. Rather, I am claiming that any analysis of postrevolutionary national culture—revolutionary or official—requires that we ask how gender differences are perpetuated or naturalized, and to what end. If Bartra is correct in arguing that nationalism is an "ideology that uses culture to hide its intimate means of domination," then surely the maintenance of normative gender identities is one of those means. Thus, throughout this text, my approach to postrevolutionary nationalism draws from the insights of feminist scholars. I seek to recharacterize national dis-

course from one heroically concerned with race and class equality to one anxiously invested in race and gender *inequality*.

If, as Bartra asserts, the muralists played a key part in the “creation of an ensemble of myths about Mexican identity” and *mestizaje* helped to “establish a structural relationship between the nature of culture and the particularities of the state,” how were these cultural techniques and discourses inserted into institutional life? In the next section I argue that the public museum articulated national identity to the political culture of the postrevolutionary state.

Museums: The Insertion of Mural Art into Institutional Life (Political Culture)

Most studies of Mexican muralism have celebrated the populist and indigenist iconography of the artists, their contributions to a purportedly more egalitarian national imaginary, and their heroic attempts to forge a social realism committed to the ideological values of Marxism.⁴² Scholars tend to focus on the first decade of the mural project (1924–34), or those murals executed in the United States during the 1930s, when for the most part state patronage had dried up.⁴³ For these scholars the resignation in 1924 of José Vasconcelos signals a turning point in the development of mural art as a revolutionary art form. During the Obregón administration (1921–24), federal commissions were doled out on an ad hoc basis. In the absence of any established tradition, artists experimented with technique and subject matter, which resulted in many “false starts”⁴⁴ but allowed them to avoid the “uniform ideological coloration” that characterizes muralism in the following decade.⁴⁵

The murals executed during Vasconcelos’s

tenure are ideologically and stylistically diverse; however, by 1924, under the influence of the Communist Party, a more politically radical mural art had emerged. In their 1923 manifesto, the newly unionized painters, sculptors, and technical workers repudiated bourgeois individualism and proclaimed their desire to make art of “ideological value to the people.” “The ideal goal of art,” they concluded, “should be one of beauty for all, of education and of battle.”⁴⁶ While middle-class audiences balked at the violent messages and communist insignia that began to crop up in federally patronized murals, cultural administrators would soon recognize the political utility of an avowedly socialist art.

Under Vasconcelos’s successor José Manuel Puig Casauranc, the SEP took a more radical turn; however, state patronage contracted as Rivera and artists working either for him or in his style—referred to disparagingly as “Diegitos”—dominated federal commissions. This period coinciding with the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles and his proxies (Emilio Portes Gil, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, and Abelardo Rodríguez [1924–34]), known as the Maximato, augurs the ascent of a centralized and authoritarian state. It was Calles, the *Jefe Máximo* (supreme leader), who created Mexico’s single-party rule, and under his direction, Mexico’s ten-year civil war became an institutionalized myth of national unity that foreclosed further rebellion while endlessly deferring the promise of reform.⁴⁷

Despite the Maximato, the leftward turn of the government during Lázaro Cárdenas’s presidency (1934–40) signals a brief return of revolutionary possibilities that, among these scholars, is retroactively attributed to mural art’s heroic first decade. For example, David Craven claims that the “semi-insurgent” period of the 1930s, and particularly the Cárdenas years, enabled greater autonomy for radical artists because the state was concerned with institution building at the na-

tional level.⁴⁸ Craven's argument about the 1930s depends heavily on the radicalism of the Cárdenas years, which he maintains redirected the state toward true popular representation in an attempt to undo the "rightward drift" of the Calles regime and counter-revolutionary Maximato that he installed.⁴⁹ However, other scholars have complicated this view of the Cárdenas presidency, arguing that he actually strengthened one-party rule by installing a semi-corporate system that granted popular sectors direct representation in the party. While this followed the obliteration of multiple parties under the Maximato and gave labor, peasant, and popular sectors direct representation, it expanded membership and cemented the ruling party (formerly the National Revolutionary Party, now the Party of the Mexican Revolution, and soon to be the PRI) as the base of presidential power thereafter.⁵⁰

James Oles has written the most extensive study of mural art during the 1930s.⁵¹ His more nuanced account supports Craven's general contention that the Cárdenas years enabled greater autonomy for mural artists; however, he complicates Craven's conclusions about the relationship between the state and radical art. Oles argues that toward the end of the Maximato, mural commissions proliferated, and artists who had been forced to work abroad or in provincial cities returned to the capital to resume their careers. "By the 1930s," he writes, muralism "was a heterogeneous force (rather than a defined 'movement') marked by competing and overlapping strategies played out by a wide range of participants."⁵² However, he points out that far from consolidating these strategies under renewed state patronage, Cárdenas's final break with Calles's control in 1936 resulted in a shift in cultural policy that brought about the withdrawal of federal support for mural art, and an investment instead in mass media such as radio, films, and posters.⁵³

Thus the spectacular projects that Craven attributes to Cárdenas's political radicalism—Orozco's masterpiece at the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara (1938–39) and David Alfaro Siqueiros's dynamic stairwell mural, *Portrait of the Bourgeoisie* (1939–40), painted at the headquarters of the Electricians' Syndicate, among others—were actually carried out under the auspices of municipal patrons, corporate entities, and leftist organizations, not the Cárdenas state. As Oles notes, Rivera and Orozco received only one federal commission between 1934 and 1940. Nonetheless, in the absence of robust state patronage, less well-known yet highly accomplished artists from Mexico and abroad painted murals throughout the countryside in socialist schools, in casinos and international hotels in regional tourist destinations, and even in a working-class market in Mexico City.⁵⁴

It was Cárdenas's succession by Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46) and the so-called businessman president Miguel Alemán (1946–52), therefore, that brought mural art back into the embrace of a self-promoting state. Shifra Goldman argues that this renewal of state patronage marks "the end of Mexico's revolutionary phase and the beginning of the development of a national industrial and bureaucratic bourgeoisie controlling the government."⁵⁵ While some would argue that a "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" always controlled the postrevolutionary government, Goldman's comment identifies a sea change in the rhetoric of state actors. Whereas before the 1940s, presidents and administrators were likely to invoke the "revolutionary" values of social justice or popular nationalism, after the 1940s they tended to espouse the virtues of capitalist development or a cosmopolitan internationalism.

This period of transition witnessed a decline in the quality of muralism, Goldman asserts, but an increase in the quantity of murals.⁵⁶ After 1940,

federal commissions proliferated while private and corporate patronage kept pace. Murals were integrated, as didactic supports and ornamentation, into a burgeoning governmental infrastructure of public museums, in addition to banks, hospitals, federal housing projects, schools, and ministry buildings. This boom reached a high point in 1958 then dropped off until 1964, when once again federal mural commissions rose dramatically as part of a program of cultural expansion by President Adolfo López Mateos (1958–64) in the run-up to the 1968 Olympics.⁵⁷ By 1969 this period of intense activity had come to a close as the federal government shifted its attention to neo-populist initiatives in an attempt to contain the political damage of the massacre at Tlatelolco. Muralism would remain a venerated national art form, but it would never again receive federal support at the levels it enjoyed between 1940 and 1968.

Thus despite the vitality and innovation of mural art in the 1920s and 1930s, it reached its apogee in the decades following World War II. This was the only time that muralism enjoyed steady federal support. Likewise, it was in the 1950s that muralism became a sacralized form of national art promoted at home and abroad by a state eager to stake a claim on modernity. This is why most scholars focus on the political context of the 1920s and early 1930s and relegate post-1940s muralism to the category of political compromise.

The history I present here takes the consolidation of the postrevolutionary ruling party during the Maximato as a point of departure rather than terminus. I map the relationship between mural art, cultural policy, and the development of official institutions for defining and delimiting national culture, history, and origins from 1934, when Orozco and Rivera were called back to Mexico to execute murals at the new Palace of Fine Arts, through the crisis of state authority in the 1960s. I reveal that the struggle over mural art's

role in the consolidation of state power was very much alive in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Thus the end of the Cárdenas *sexenio* (six-year term) marks not the end of mural art's revolutionary ambitions but rather a shift in the locus of this struggle from municipal, regional, and corporate locales back to the capital city and its burgeoning infrastructure of public museums.

By shifting our attention from the immediate postrevolutionary years to those surrounding World War II, I am writing against the implicit claims of the standard “heroic” and “statist” periodization of the mural movement. I am not suggesting that post-1940s mural art is politically “innocent,” but rather that insofar as mural art was complicit with the governmental agenda of the state, it was so from its very inception. What matters for me is not rescuing post-1940s muralism from accusations of political compromise by indicting the first phase as well. Rather, I am interested in how the governmental agenda motivating the state's cultural project was instrumentalized and made effective. This, I argue, requires that we explore the mural projects that took place after the 1930s, not because those that came before were any less implicated in state power, but rather because they were not yet very effective as techniques of that power.

The questions before us, therefore, are not ones of moral judgment (i.e., Was muralism innocent or complicit in the consolidation of the state?). Rather, they are historical questions about the political effects of institutionalization. Instead of making general claims about the movement as a whole, however, I focus on specific struggles within one axis of institutionalization that allow us to assess mural art in relation to the governmental agenda of an evolving state apparatus *and* according to the problems artists identified and the goals they set for their practice. Only in this sense can we retrospectively pronounce on the

success or failure of muralism as a political and cultural project.

Having argued that mural artists participated in the formation of a national myth and that the museum is a key locus for tracing, historically, the insertion of mural art into institutional life, I now turn to the ideology directing the process. How do murals address their audiences to achieve certain effects? And what role does the institution play in directing or redirecting that address? If museums are effective agents of social governance, how do they shape the public's interpretation of mural art in ways that serve the ideological interests of the state? Further, how do we measure or assess the museum effect where mural art is concerned? To broach these questions, we need to consider first how the relationship between mural art and government institutions is currently understood. Therefore, I turn now to the problem of theorizing institutionalization and its effects on the viewing subject.

Cultural Policy: “The Ideology that Attempts to Explain and Direct the Process”

I am not the first scholar to implicate the “heroic” phase of mural art in the hegemonic projects of a consolidating state, nor am I the first to draw attention to institutionalization as the agent of this process. The education historian Mary Kay Vaughan acknowledges the contradictions of the immediate postrevolutionary period, arguing that the muralists helped to affirm working-class and peasant participation in the revolution even as the populist ideology they articulated functioned as a mechanism of social control. “Rivera’s murals,” she writes, “in a sense provided the emerging Mexican state with illustrations of the kind of populism which flowed heavily from politicians’

rhetoric.” Overdetermined by their placement in official government buildings, Vaughan asserts, mural art inevitably reflected a “government ideology and in effect help[ed] to provide one.”⁵⁸

The art historian Leonard Folgarait concurs. He argues that the political compromises of the 1940s were determined from the outset by the “contradiction of a conservative and stabilizing post-Revolutionary society promoted as Revolutionary by its political elite.”⁵⁹ “As they were mostly found on the walls of official buildings and were accessible and very large,” he concludes, murals “operated within the semiotic social system of the day as symptomatic of the paternalizing generosity of the patron: the government.”⁶⁰ Folgarait, like Vaughan and Paz before him, argues that despite the revolutionary convictions of the artists, the location of their work in the ritual spaces of a consolidating political regime overdetermined their effect on audiences. “To look at the paintings,” he writes, “meant to look at, to pay heed to, the government itself.”⁶¹

While I agree with Vaughan and Folgarait that state patronage established mural art as a technique of governance from the outset, I find their characterization of institutionalization and its effects on the viewing subject under-theorized and lacking historical specificity. Folgarait states outright what most scholars imply, that “the murals helped to create a Revolutionary citizen as a *subject* of the post-Revolution.”⁶² Yet he acknowledges that in the 1920s and early 1930s there was no attempt on the part of the government to develop a public for mural art. While many people saw the murals, the state did not target particular populations for exposure, nor did cultural administrators attempt to put an official spin on their meaning. Vaughan also notes the lack of a “systematic effort to educate the public about mural art and its meaning from the perspective of the artists.”⁶³ For her, this is why the revolutionary

messages embedded in their iconography were so easily overdetermined by the governmental authority of their institutional supports.

While Folgarait and Vaughan differ over the degree of opposition between the ideology of the muralists and their federal patrons, both imply that the political effects of mural art—radical or hegemonic—were a function of the visual idiom (social realism) and iconographic programs (revolutionary and populist subject matter) of the murals working in concert with their placement in government buildings. When attempting to link the style and content of murals to the thought or behavior of actual viewers, they call upon “reception aesthetics” to posit an ideal viewing subject implicit within the visual strategies the artists employed to convey their meaning.⁶⁴ But this elision between the ideal subject posited within the aesthetic dimensions of the work and the actual viewing subjects of the work has been problematized by theorists, historians, ethnographers, and the like. To paraphrase Judith Butler, both Vaughan and Folgarait import a “sovereign performativity” to visual communication that we know from reception studies cannot be sustained.⁶⁵

In her critique of contemporary attempts to attribute a sovereign performativity to language, Butler reminds us that signification is inherently unstable. She writes, “Power cannot be easily or definitively traced to a single subject who is its ‘speaker,’ to a sovereign representative of the state.”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, the fact that “power is no longer constrained by the parameters of sovereignty . . . in no way precludes fantasizing or figuring power in precisely that way. . . . The historical loss of the sovereign organization of power appears to occasion the fantasy of its return.”⁶⁷ Visual language is perhaps more and less stable than written or spoken language. More, in that much of it traffics in a realism that is best naturalized in photography, but which also operates in those representations that have been positioned

as documents or representative objects within history museums, for example. Conversely, the visual is often less stable than spoken or written language when it is placed within the genre of art. Thus, deciphering the meaning of any cultural practice is not only contingent upon contextualization but also heavily dependent upon education, cultural competency, and the taste-culture of a particular *habitus*, as Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated.⁶⁸

In order to resist the elision of ideal and actual viewing subjects that sovereign notions of institutional and state power entail, I turn to Tony Bennett’s work on cultural policy. Given the essential openness of visual culture, Bennett eschews altogether the analysis of textual or visual signification when trying to assess what a cultural practice *means*. “The programmatic, institutional, and governmental conditions in which cultural practices are inscribed,” he writes, “have a substantive priority over the semiotic properties of such practices.” Accordingly, Bennett urges scholars to explore how and in what ways cultural practices are made useful for the purposes of social governance. “These conditions,” he contends, establish “the regions of person or citizen formation to which specific types of cultural practice are connected and the manner in which, as part of developed technologies, they function to achieve specific kinds of effects.”⁶⁹

Bennett’s formulation does not promise that through cultural policy we can better apprehend what actual viewers think or experience when looking at a work of art or a museum display. But by emphasizing the way displays attempt to make murals useful for the purposes of government, his approach does suggest a way to examine the particular effects on citizen-subjects that muralism was enlisted to achieve. Thus it enables a specificity lacking in more general claims about the effects of state apparatuses on reception that derive from reception aesthetics alone.

All the historians cited note that the location

of murals in government buildings made them, in effect, government propaganda. While most scholars address architectural concerns to the extent that they informed signification, formal choices, or the artist's political intentions, they do little to explicate how these institutional settings and the murals painted on their walls enacted state ideology. Short of simply representing radical messages that all historians agree were mostly inaccessible and probably illegible to broad popular audiences, how were these images made useful by the postrevolutionary state? If indeed they were powerful players in the governmental constitution of well-tempered citizen-subjects and a modern nation-state, what was the mechanism of their instrumentalization?

Following Bennett's model of cultural studies, I argue that the political effects of mural art should be sought not only in their representational strategies or through the ideal viewers their aesthetic arrangements posit but also, and just as significantly, in how they were inscribed within the programmatic, institutional, and governmental programs for postrevolutionary modernization, nationalism, and citizen formation. Since the 1930s, murals have been incrementally incorporated into a governmental program for the codification, protection, and dissemination of national culture. This has proceeded largely through the development of a federally subsidized and administered system of public museums dedicated to the fine arts, national and regional history, and the vast archeological and ethnographic wealth produced by ancient and living indigenous groups. This, I argue, has been a crucial mechanism for the instrumentalization of mural art.

While I subscribe to Bennett's basic call to tend to the governing protocols that make use of culture, I deviate from his hard stance on the priority of policy over semiotics. In this book, I marry Bennett's approach with conventional object analysis by bringing the art historian's sensi-

tivity to the formal and iconographic qualities of works of art to bear on both murals and (when possible) museum display. I do this not to establish museums and murals as necessarily oppositional practices but rather to lend nuance and specificity to my claims about the governmental dimensions of both. Careful visual analysis of the murals and the displays that frame them allow us to appreciate the specialized techniques devised by artists and state functionaries to "achieve specific kinds of effects" on "regions of person or citizen formation."⁷⁰ Moreover, I am compelled to integrate visual and object-based analysis back into Bennett's mode of cultural studies, given that style, iconography, composition, and the formal relationship the mural establishes with the viewing subject as well as its institutional frame were paramount concerns in the debate among artists over state patronage and the museum effect. To ignore completely the semiotic properties of these practices would obscure an essential dimension of the history of institutionalization and its designs on the citizen-subject.

Governance, Truth, Discourse: Reconceptualizing Power and Signification

As the foregoing references to "sovereign" and "governmental" power suggest, my approach is informed by Michel Foucault's late work on "governmentality" in which he sought to examine the intersections of power and subject formation through what he called "the production of truth." This Foucault is therefore not the Foucault of much literary and cultural studies that stem from his earlier works, somewhat reductively referred to as "genealogy" or the history of "discontinuities" or "rupture."⁷¹ Rather, it is the Foucault that emerges in the second volume of the *History of Sexuality* and is brought to the fore in his lectures

on “governance,” “techniques of the self,” and “biopower” at the end of his life.⁷²

In this new line of inquiry, communicated largely through a series of lectures and interviews, most of which were translated into English and published posthumously, the theorist revised his earlier work on disciplinarity and elaborated his critique of sovereignty as the privileged model for theorizing power and the subject. The account offered in Foucault’s late work is consistent with the more diffuse model of power and subjectification we find in Bartra’s description of official culture. Moreover, his eschewal of orthodox characterizations of state power and the interpolating processes of culture as ideology in favor of exploring what he called “governmentalities” provides an alternative and, I argue, more accurate way of describing the relationship between the postrevolutionary state and its cultural project, muralism included.

In his salutary essay on governmentality, Foucault traces the historical meditation on the exercise of power and characterizes the emergence of modern liberalism as a shift in the conception of sovereign power from one of absolute control to one concerned with ethical governance, that is, managing rather than dominating social life.⁷³ Foucault’s term “governmental” refers, in part, to the mechanisms of rule or governing.⁷⁴ But, as Nikolas Rose points out, it also signifies a mentality or way of thinking about the exercise of authority that seeks to “realize itself as a *practice*.”⁷⁵ Foucault’s coupling of the words “govern” and “mentality” was intended to indicate the importance of expertise or reflection by those endowed with the power to determine the truth of things in the regulation of individual and group conduct. This helps to clarify why governmental power is not simply a synonym for state power, for it is decentralized to the extent that it encompasses the labor of intellectuals and experts operating within state apparatuses but also in corporate and non-

governmental organizations as well.⁷⁶ It is through the production of knowledge that governmental power translates general political goals into effective and realizable practices.

Governmentalities, therefore, incorporate both thought and practice, the ways in which humans have reflected on their own conduct as well as that of others and realized those ideas by establishing governing protocols.⁷⁷ They encompass the myriad “authorities of truth” that affect the way in which we assess true and false accounts of who we are and what we should become.⁷⁸ Governmental initiatives link questions of being, personal conduct, and identity to questions of politics, authority, and citizenship.⁷⁹ Governmentality is therefore a political rationality that has a moral concern for what is proper, an epistemological concern for codifying and knowing the subjects it seeks to govern, and a style of reasoning. “Style” here denotes those generic practices or representational techniques that render the phenomenal world thinkable.⁸⁰

Foucault describes the technologies and practices that organize the individual’s relation to culture and power as the “production of truth.”⁸¹ By emphasizing the politics of truth, Foucault rejects the premise of ideology theory, which often describes people’s relationship to power as one of false consciousness, or what he calls an “economy of untruth.”⁸² In this respect, he anticipates Derek Sayer’s intervention into the other dominant Marxist account of how rulers secure popular consent: Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Sayer writes, “Rule is not centrally about either inculcating beliefs or securing consent”; rather it is about producing and reproducing material forms of sociality, those quotidian rituals that are affirmed through the often cynical, but usually knowing, *performances* of individuals.⁸³

Foucault’s and Sayer’s claims are confirmed by Cuevas’s account of Juan’s acquiescence to the dictates of official culture. Juan’s performance as

a nationalist artist is knowing, not naive. He engages in this cynical exercise neither at gunpoint nor because he is laboring under false consciousness but rather because of a complex desire to work *as* a Mexican. Foucault argues, therefore, that “the problem is not changing people’s consciousness—or what’s in their heads—but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth.”⁸⁴ In this sense, the project is to determine how the truth of Mexicanness gets produced. Accordingly, Toby Miller suggests that we approach the problem of *how* truth is produced through analyses of what he calls “telling technologies,” those cultural practices and spaces that “tell stories about who and how ‘we’ are.”⁸⁵

The museum is one such truth-telling technology wherein the forms of popular identification are articulated and social conduct is shaped to create citizen-subjects who act in the interests of the state. Within the museum, culture is produced, targeted, and instrumentalized through liberal political rationalities. However, as Miller argues, telling technologies are never completely overdetermining. Rather, they are laden with struggle and always potentially revisable. Even in the most solidified epistemological fields, popular sentiment must be routinely produced and secured. Miller describes the ways that officials try to capture popular support by claiming to have their allegiance or by asserting that they represent the people’s wishes or interests as the “pursuit of the popular.” He calls this a pursuit because the people can never entirely be dominated or represented through the rhetorical politics of governmental agencies or individuals that would like to secure their allegiance.⁸⁶

This is precisely what Bartra means when he argues that the “identification of politics with culture . . . cannot be produced artificially” by either the state or the ruling class.⁸⁷ By characterizing it as a “global process shaped by the interplay of several factors,”⁸⁸ Bartra, like Foucault, Bennett,

and Miller, seeks to move us away from repressive theories of power and toward an understanding of power as both “positive” in the sense of its productive capacity to constitute objects, subjects, truths, and the like, and “technical” in its links to social governance.⁸⁹

It is important to note here that it has been difficult for scholars to translate Foucault’s theoretical framework from the macropolitical considerations of institutional formations such as medical, penal, or educational systems to micropolitical acts such as the creation or viewing of a work of art, without reducing his discursive model to yet another theory of representation. In this book, I bring the object back into the analysis of institutional discursive formations by linking the formal and conceptual properties of works of art to the ideological or rhetorical properties of exhibition and display. This is the strength of my focus on the intersection of murals and the museum, for it allows us to consider, in tandem, the discursive forces seeking to constitute the objects and subjects of knowledge on display along with the actual objects that constitute said displays.

In this book I treat both murals and museum exhibition as techniques of governmental power. I show that artists, curators, politicians, and other state actors were engaged in the struggle over the “truths” regarding muralism as a radical art form, the meaning of the revolution in Mexican history, and the nature of Mexico’s mestizo identity. As a consequence, I quote extensively from the artists themselves, as well as the other interested parties involved in the postrevolutionary cultural project. However, I proffer the claims of artists not as disinterested expressions of intention but rather as statements within the play of statements that together formed the “discursive régime” of postrevolutionary nationalism.⁹⁰ In this respect I follow Foucault’s genealogical model, which he describes in interviews as “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowl-

edges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.”⁹¹ In his repeated calls for an emphasis on the *discursive* production of truth, Foucault critiques both the Marxist assumption that the truth exists outside ideology, and thus power, and the humanist presumption that individuals are the unfettered agents of history. However, his genealogy is not a history without actors, events, or unequal power relations but rather a call for “seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false.”⁹²

I take up Foucault’s claim by arguing that mural art and museum exhibition, while not inherently true or false, are discursive sites that produce truth effects. By focusing on the cultural production of truth rather than pronouncing on the inherent truth or falseness of these discursive practices, I assess the politics of public culture without resorting to moral judgments about the ideological virtue or mendacity of individual artists or unfounded claims about the impact of their murals on actual viewers. In what follows, I treat the visual polemics of individual murals as well as the claims made about them by the artists who created them as discursive statements to be evaluated alongside the statements uttered in the institutional voice of exhibition copy, the hortatory registers of politicians’ speeches, the rhetorical flourishes of public intellectuals and essayists, and the “scientific” claims of museum practitioners. At times these statements align in a kind of harmonic resonance creating powerful popular truths, while at others their cacophony reveals a genuine battle over an emergent truth claim.

My contention is that through the museum, mural art played an important role in postrevolutionary Mexico’s “political economy of truth.”⁹³

As Foucault notes, every society has its “regime of truth . . . the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true.”⁹⁴ Modern art is rarely granted a truth-telling role in these regimes. In postrevolutionary Mexico, through the institutional apparatus of the museum, mural art became a technique of didactic museology and, as such, a technique of exercising power. However, murals were hardly monolithic in either their aesthetic or conceptual arguments. The extent to which it appears today that they were suggests that a critical historical analysis of the public museum’s role in shaping the meaning and reception of muralism is necessary.

Muralism’s Museum Moment: The Politics of Didactic Exhibition

In Mexico (as in France), the birth of the museum coincided with the birth of the liberal nation-state. The National Museum was founded in 1825 by presidential decree. However, it was not until after the revolution of 1910 that museums began to proliferate.⁹⁵ Whereas in 1917 there were only two public museums in the country, by 1964 there were at least forty museums of various types in Mexico City alone.⁹⁶ Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the museum in Mexico evolved from a fairly crude storehouse of antiquities and pagan objects to a highly organized space of regulation, education, and citizenship.⁹⁷

Today museums are Mexico’s calling card within the international arena, and those in the capital city are renowned tourist destinations. Federal museums like the new Museo de Arte Popular (f. 2006) and municipally supported museums like Carlos Monsiváis’s Museo del Estanquillo (f. 2007) continue to proliferate alongside private initiatives like Carlos Slim’s Museo Soumaya (f. 1994) and the Colección Jumex (f. 2000).

But the museumification of Mexico extends well beyond the walls of actual museums to encompass the urban fabric of the capital city as well as the nation's many pre-Columbian heritage sites. As Quetzil Castañeda argues, even the nation's contemporary indigenous peoples are experienced by tourists, both foreign and domestic, as ethnographic displays.⁹⁸

Any visitor to Mexico City notices immediately the way the city's historical layers have been excavated and marked to reveal its pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern majesty. Streets are named after articles of the constitution, historical events and figures, and the values instantiated in the revolution such as "prosperity" and "progress." The vast subway system brings the commuter into constant contact with Mexican history, through both the naming of subway stations after the likes of Hidalgo or Cuatros Caminos and the endless museum-style displays of cultural artifacts and reproductions that associate each stop with some event in Mexico's past. Likewise, the *lugares para cultura* ("places for culture") located in the large subway hubs provide satellite exhibition spaces for the government's various cultural institutions and educational initiatives.

Cultural institutions have been indexed to education and national initiatives since Mexico won its independence from Spain; however, with the establishment of the SEP in 1921, an increasingly professionalized institutional infrastructure capable of reaching mass audiences was set in motion. Vasconcelos not only brought the National Museum under the umbrella of the SEP but also advocated the creation of new museums for the conservation, protection, and diffusion of Mexico's artistic and monumental patrimony.⁹⁹ The historian Augusto Urteaga Castro-Pozo asserts that with the creation of the SEP, museums were utilized as "cultural spaces through which the ideology of revolutionary nationalism, the prod-

uct of the popular movement of 1910–17, would be diffused."¹⁰⁰ It took several decades for Mexico's museum practitioners to figure out how to effectively diffuse the ideology of revolutionary nationalism to the public. Muralism was instrumental to this project. Mural artists not only articulated a postrevolutionary nationalism rooted specifically in the popular struggle of the revolution but also devised the didactic and exhibitionary techniques necessary for communicating this ideology to a broad and often illiterate citizenry.

The populist orientation and visual solutions pioneered by Diego Rivera, in particular, would inform the display strategies developed in museums over the decades to come. Through a sophisticated use of architectural space, Rivera turned mural art into a narrative form in which national history could be relayed visually to its viewing public as they moved through the building. In this respect, his mature frescos recall their origins in the liturgical and ritual use of decoration in Catholic churches. In both cases, artists exploited architecture for its processional and performative capacities when planning their iconographic programs. In his breakthrough cycle at the SEP, Rivera first elaborated a national narrative in which the recent revolution represented not the eternal recurrence of violence in Mexican history but rather the foundation of its political future.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, he characterized the revolution as an organized popular movement with indigenous origins and a progressive proletarian future. In this way, Rivera figured out what no one else had up to that point: how to make sense of Mexico's violent history and how to literally *envision* the nation and its people in a way that was ideologically useful and broadly legible. In short, Rivera was able to marry nationalist modernism with socialist politics in a public art that was not only populist but also, and more importantly, future oriented. Rather than wallowing in the miseries of the past or articu-

lating a cynical view of humanity, Rivera's murals celebrated popular agency, arguing that a dialectical process was under way that would help Mexico achieve social equality *and* modernity. Within this story, Mexico's violent history of conquest and social exploitation was but a prelude to an epic unfolding of national destiny.

Rivera was thus able to craft a national narrative that sewed together the past, present, and future. Moreover, his amalgamation of figuration with cubist space fashioned a distinctly Mexican and socialist idiom out of academic and avant-garde styles. It was for these reasons, as much as the artist's legendary skill at self-promotion, that Rivera was adopted as a quasi-official artist by the postrevolutionary government in the 1930s. While the state never explicitly nominated any artist as its mouthpiece, bureaucrats and institutions alike showed favor to particular artists at particular times and promoted their work through exhibitions while awarding them high-profile commissions. Rivera's visual and conceptual solutions to the "Mexican problem" left an indelible imprint on the official reconstruction of national culture and history in postrevolutionary museums, even after his death in 1957. His narrative style, realist aesthetic, populist iconography, and socialist politics established the coordinates for an official culture as well as the didactic use of architectural space that museologists would exploit in the decades to come. For these reasons, he remained a rhetorical foil for artists like Cuevas long after his political influence as an official artist had waned.

This book is as much about museums as it is about mural art, for the social function and political effects of one, I argue, cannot be adequately grasped if one does not understand its relationship to the other. Before 1934, access to mural art was largely restricted to middle-class students and government functionaries. While students' and workers' organizations in the countryside were

shown images of murals in reproduction, and artists worked with communities through the cultural missions to execute wall paintings in rural areas, the frescos intended for a broad public were actually limited to a mostly cosmopolitan urban audience. Federal museums not only placed this art form in an ostensibly greater public sphere but also explicated the often hermetic content of mural art via text panels, didactic displays, and exhibitionary strategies that proffered these grand wall paintings as truthful accounts of historical fact, not mere creative expressions or partisan political tracts. The murals located in museums, as opposed to those in government buildings, schools, and corporate lobbies, are surrounded by artifacts, historical documentation, and exegetical texts. They are integrated into exhibitionary narratives and displays that render specific interpretations of their meaning readily accessible to large numbers of foreign and domestic visitors.

While museums endeavor to explain and instrumentalize the political messages in mural art, they also constrain the radical potential of this art form by providing singular and authoritative interpretations of its iconographic and formal features that at times even contradict the artists' intentions. Furthermore, these institutional frames quite literally constituted mural art as heritage and a movement *per se*, thereby sacralizing and depoliticizing the aesthetic experiments enacted by its competing practitioners. But this story is not unidirectional, for if museums gave murals a coherence and publicity they lacked in 1920s Mexico, murals made museums increasingly legible and communicative to the public in which they sought to instill Mexican identity, modern subjectivity, and a civic consciousness.

Mural art provided Mexico's postrevolutionary institutions with a serviceable version of national history, an ideologically powerful vision of Mexican society, and they helped shape the

recent bloody and highly factionalized ten-year civil war into a meaningful and even necessary stage in the development of national autonomy and postcolonial self-realization. In a 1983 interview, Iker Larrauri, one of Mexico's internationally esteemed museum practitioners, locates the origins of Mexican museography in the muralists' "anthropological" approach to their plastic endeavors. From its example, he argues, Mexican museology derives its "intention to create historical consciousness, to consolidate national identity through didactic presentations of national culture . . . that show not only the products of this culture but also the processes that generated them."¹⁰²

Larrauri's claim about the link between muralism and museology should be viewed not as empirical fact but rather as a deliberate attempt to harness the ethical claims of mural artists to postrevolutionary museum practice. As a participant in the development of didactic exhibition, Larrauri is not an objective witness but rather a highly partisan player in the history of postrevolutionary museology. His claim, therefore, while interested, carries a certain explanatory weight when one is trying to assess the extent to which mural art informed this burgeoning science. Larrauri's perception of mural art as a visual technology capable of showcasing both the products of Mexican culture and the processes that generated them suggests that not only the iconographic but also the narrative and formal properties of this particular art form were primary resources for the development of effective display techniques.

While the ideological relationship between museums and murals is generally recognized in Mexico, the mutually constitutive nature of these two powerful technologies of national truth has yet to be seriously considered in the art historical scholarship on muralism or the developing critical discourse on museums in either Mexico or the Euro-American academy. Therefore, in this

book, I pursue this link by tracing the relationship between Mexican muralism and the nation's three most important public museums: the Palace of Fine Arts, the National History Museum, and the National Anthropology Museum. My focus on these three institutions is not arbitrary, nor is it unnecessarily reductive. Together, they tell the official story of Mexico: its culture, its history, and the origins of its national identity. Moreover, each museum represents a different genre of museum and thereby situates the murals within in different ways.

The Palace of Fine Arts is essentially a *Kunsthalle*. The murals are installed alone, without displays to contextualize them, and presented as fine art. At the National History Museum, murals are integral parts of the permanent installation. They are situated among other artifacts as part of an elaborate historical narrative. The murals at this museum are thus presented not as fine art but rather as didactic objects and historical artifacts in and of themselves. Finally, the murals at the National Anthropology Museum function as both didactic supports for the exhibitions and decorative objects meant to enhance the museum's spectacular architecture and displays. At this museum, murals are presented as emblems of Mexico's mestizo modernity and thus contemporary counterparts to the impressive artistic legacy of the nation's ethnographic cultures of origin.

Located in the two most trafficked public leisure zones in Mexico City—the Alameda, near the historic center, and Chapultepec Park—the Palace of Fine Arts, National History Museum, and National Anthropology Museum receive the lion's share of domestic and international visitors. These spectacular spaces form the backbone of the official cultural infrastructure responsible for the phenomenon registered but never fully explicated by the authors surveyed in this chapter. Thus it is no coincidence that the conversion of

Cuevas's protagonist takes place at the Palace of Fine Arts, for this institution initiated the process of restructuring mural art according to "established canons." Similarly, when Paz drafted his indictment of the massacre at Tlatelolco in *Post-data*, he concluded with the admonition that any "political, social, and moral critique" of the regime must include a critique of the National Anthropology Museum, which he argued was the "apotheosis" and "apocalypse" of the state's ideological use of postrevolutionary nationalism and, in particular, the revolutionary indigenismo the muralists helped to enshrine.¹⁰³ Only the National History Museum remains somewhat neglected in the critical literature on postrevolutionary cultural institutions. This omission is ironic, given that it was here that museologists first figured out how to channel the radical valence of muralism into a patriotic expression of national becoming.

Through these case studies I demonstrate that murals contributed to and agitated against the development of a governmental museum practice in postrevolutionary Mexico. As a consequence, the murals painted within museums are treated not as decontextualized images but rather as complex material practices that are deeply integrated into and affected by these museum contexts and the exhibitionary practices and architecture that frame them. It is in this sense, according to Francisco Reyes Palma, that "the mural device, understood as a vision and meaning machine, unfolded as part of the government's cultural activities in unison with the artists' private initiatives and acted as a part of the materiality of physical spaces, as well as a mental realm, modeling consciousness and sen-

sibilities."¹⁰⁴ Reyes Palma's "mural device" is an instance of Bartra's "political culture." But one has to wonder if, without the museum, the mural device could have become official culture at all.

These three museums have been more than just any site of governmental culture. As the places where Mexican culture has been codified, historical citizenship defined, and Mexicanness, as a mestizo identity, represented, they are exemplary institutions for the shaping of popular subjects and the restructuring of cultural practices "according to established canons." In these museums the myths of national identity are connected to official culture through political culture. Through these museums, a diverse, contentious, and experimental phenomenon was shaped into a coherent movement with a canon of greats and given a homogenized ideological inflection. Only once the idiosyncratic and often hermetic messages of individual murals were restructured according to the "official canons of national culture" could murals become politically effective instruments of the state.¹⁰⁵ Thus it was not institutionalization in and of itself but rather a particular kind of institutionalization—the public museum—that transformed mural art into an official culture capable of the hegemonic effects we attribute to it today. However, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, the political reconstruction of mural art according to the official canons of national culture proceeded through a paradoxical process that entailed not only muralists and museum practitioners but also the very artists and critics aligned against the cactus curtain.