Exposición Mexicana de Pintura y Estampa Contemporáneas. Mexican Art in the Eastern Front 1955: Poland and Bulgaria

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Cover Page Footnote
Much of the archival documentation that sustains this study comes from Professor Guillermina Guadarrama's archives of the Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas, held in CENIDIAP. These documents had not been catalogued at the time of my research and will be referenced as CENIDIAP, Fondo, FNAP. I am deeply grateful for Professor Guadarrama's generosity and kindness making these files available to me. I would also like to thank my mother whose help was invaluable in finding and recording the archival documents that made this study possible.

This article is available in Artl@'s Bulletin: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol11/iss1/3
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Abstract

The subject of this paper is a travelling exhibition organized by the National Front of Plastic Arts which toured various cities in the Eastern Bloc between 1955 and 1956. Its objective was to introduce the public to Mexican art, and to promote the socially committed art of the Mexican School and its enduring revolutionary spirit. Attention will be given to two of its venues: Poland and Bulgaria. It is hoped that this focused analysis will provide a deeper understanding of its artistic and political objectives, whilst highlighting the activism of the Mexican School in the context of the Cultural Cold War.

Resumen

Este artículo examina una exposición itinerante organizada por el Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas que recorrió varias ciudades de Europa del Este entre 1955 y 1956. Su objetivo era acercar al público al arte mexicano y promover el arte socialmente comprometido de los muralistas, así como su espíritu revolucionario. Nuestro estudio se concentrará en dos de sus sedes: Polonia y Bulgaria. A través de estos casos de estudio se analizarán los objetivos artísticos y políticos de la exposición, y se pondrá en evidencia el activismo de la Escuela Mexicana en el contexto de la Guerra Fría Cultural.

Fabiola Received her PhD from Camberwell College of Arts in 2005. She has been awarded academic grants by the Terra Foundation for American Art and has been a fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Her current research centers on the politics of Mexican art during the early Cold War. Since 2007 Fabiola is the director of the Art History program at SLU Madrid.
The subject of this study is an exhibition organized by the Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas (National Front of Plastic Arts, henceforth FNAP) which toured various cities in the Eastern Bloc between 1955 and 1956, finishing in China in the summer of that year. Its objective was to introduce the public to Mexican art from a broad historical perspective, but especially to promote the socially committed art of the Mexican School and its enduring revolutionary spirit. The examination of this touring exhibition presents many challenges. Firstly, there is a problem of sources, as very little information exists, nothing of substance has been published, and the archival documentation I have been able to find is fragmentary. These documents, however, (mainly in the form of correspondence, exhibition catalogues, reviews, and reports given by the organizers) present enough evidence to warrant the need to examine this logistical tour de force undertaken by FNAP.

The second challenge that this study presents is understanding it within the complex and volatile political and cultural context of the Eastern Bloc during the Thaw. While this is a key moment that will determine the future of countries under Soviet control, or aligned with international communism, the following study will focus on the brief period between 1953 and 1956. That is between the death of Stalin, on March 5, 1953, and the Hungarian Revolution that challenged the grip of Moscow in October/November 1956.

While conceptualized as a 'bloc', the history of Eastern Europe (or Eastern Central Europe) is far from homogenous or harmonious. Instead, it is a deeply fractured, diverse, and politically and culturally complex mosaic of ethnicities, languages and nations, each with their own contested histories of imperialism and colonialism (first under the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish empires, and later under Soviet control). Because of this, and in view of available documentation, the study of this exhibition will concentrate on two of its venues: Poland and Bulgaria. It is hoped that this focused analysis will provide a deeper understanding of its artistic and political objectives, whilst highlighting the activism of the Mexican School as it strove to keep alive the spirit of the Revolution.

As will be shown, some key members of FNAP saw this as an opportunity to advance international communism by turning the exhibition into a partisan space that would activate the visual arsenal of the Revolution. This militant approach came from the muralists and the Taller de Gráfica Popular, though not all of them were members of the PCM (Mexican Communist Party). Those who were, like Rivera and Siqueiros, directed their efforts at aligning the political activism of the Mexican School with Soviet interests; but others understood the partisan struggle as an international fight against oppression—which in the context of the Thaw included Stalinist Russia. All of this points to the heterogenous space of partisanship, during the early Cold War, when conceptions of freedom, resistance and defense varied across the communist and non-communist left, and would manifest differently depending on each country’s history of colonialism and oppression. In the case of Mexico, the partisan fight was in defense of its independence and the socialist reforms of the Revolution; and artists from the Mexican School saw it as their calling to lead the struggle against US imperialism and capitalist exploitation.

The Mexican Context

The Mexican School emerged from the social, economic and agrarian reforms of the Revolution (1910 to 1920), giving visual form to the progressive ideals that spearheaded the revolt against the dictatorship.
of Porfirio Díaz. Since its inception, artists aligned with the plight of the exploited placing their lives and aspirations at the center of their public works. While diverse in terms of mediums and forms of expression (though always within the idiom of figuration), the Mexican School was led by the work of los tres grandes: Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros. From their murals would emerge the iconography of the revolution and the blueprint of the modern mestizo nation envisioned by post-revolutionary regimes.4

The 1950s is therefore an important and interesting period in the history of the Mexican School, as it tried to reassert its revolutionary agency through national and international exhibitions. At the same time, muralism was becoming institutionalized through the cultural policies of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional),5 and while many of these artists depended on State patronage, some of its key members became increasingly critical of the government believing that their work was the only lasting hope of the Revolution. The complex dynamics between the Mexican School and the government need to be understood in the context of the early Cold War—dominated by McCarthyism and increasingly aggressive US foreign policies. In her book Mexico’s Cold War Renata Keller explains how the political situation in the country was marked by the intersection between foreign and domestic affairs.6 This situation meant that Mexico was far from a peaceful haven, but rather “an active battleground where multiple groups debated, spied, schemed, and struggled for influence.”7 The stakes were high for these competing voices since the future of the political right and political left depended on their allegiances with the US or the USSR.

This context is important to understand the creation of the Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas (FNAP) in 1952—a platform that would be used by the Mexican School to channel and promote its political activism. Unfortunately, no comprehensive study of this organization exists, and documentation is scattered, but thanks to Guillermina Guadarrama’s work we know that FNAP was created with the hopes of uniting artists across a broad range of aesthetic and ideological positions.8 All of these, however, would converge to advance the primary goal of the organization: to serve the Mexican people, hence its motto “Por un arte al servicio del pueblo.” In other words, FNAP endorsed the socially committed art that emerged from the Revolution, and in this way, helped to promote the core values of the Mexican School. This was made clear in the Resolutions that came out of the First National Assembly in May 1952, when the organization was founded.9 FNAP was steered by a Comité Nacional Directivo (National Committee) comprised of leading figures associated with the Mexican School. Francisco Goitia was appointed president, and his second in command was Rosendo Soto Álvarez, who acted as Secretary General. Other important positions were given to Miguel Salas Anzuñes, José Chávez Morado, Ignacio Marquéz Rodiles, Xavier Guerrero, Fransisco Dosamantes, Carlos Sandoval, Celia Calderón and Ignacio Agüerre.10 For reasons that remain unclear, in 1962 the organization ceased to function. Guadarrama believes this could be attributed to a lack of interest and commitment from the part of its members.11

As with regards to the Exposición Mexicana de Pintura y Estampa Contemporáneas, FNAP, with the support of INBA (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes), was largely responsible for setting the aesthetic and ideological objectives of the exhibition; as well as the driving force behind Mexico’s Primera Bienal Interamericana de Pintura y Grabado in 1958.12 Both were used by the Mexican School to rekindle the spirit of the Revolution and subvert US imperialism in Mexico and abroad. Their activism had two primary mediums: murals (including portable murals), and prints.
which were given pride of place in FNAP’s exhibitions. This was important to highlight the connection between the socially committed work produced by the Taller de Gráfica Popular (henceforth TGP) and the Mexican muralists. Since its foundation, in 1937, the TGP had maintained a close relationship with the Mexican Communist Party and other left-wing organizations.13 Like the muralists, their work was known internationally and celebrated for their solidarity with social movements on both sides of the Atlantic; and like murals, their prints were conceived as weapons against capitalist exploitation, inequality and injustice. The TGP, however, had a greater advantage in that prints could be easily reproduced and circulated, having a much wider outreach. Through their artistic activism, both the muralists and the TGP connected the political struggles of the 1920s and 1930s with the cultural battles of the Cold War. In their hands, the iconography of the Mexican Revolution became part of a grammar for World Revolution; and what began as a partisan revolt against the reactionary forces of Porfirio Díaz, became a partisan defense of the socialist reforms of the Revolution.

During its ten years of existence, FNAP provided an independent platform for the promotion of Mexican art in the country and abroad, working hard to present a unified front of artists intent on keeping alive the national and revolutionary spirit of the Mexican School. The time frame of its short existence is central to understand the aesthetic and political agendas of FNAP. This was a period of heightened tensions in Latin America’s long struggle against US imperialism, and a time marked by violence and military interventions—starting with Guatemala in 1954.

The Eastern European Context

The fraught history of Soviet hegemony in the Eastern Bloc begins in the early post-war with the formation of People’s Democracies across the region. These governments, now ‘under the shadow of Yalta’,14 attempted to reconcile national self-determination with Soviet communism. The tightening of Stalinist rule came after it became clear in Moscow that full-fledged communist governments would not be established through democratic elections. Hence “By 1949, every state in the region seemed to be a miniature USSR, with the same sort of ruling Communist Party, five-year plan, economy based on heavy industry, collectivized agriculture, and social realism.”15

These regimes created a political elite with economic and political privileges, and curtailed dissent through covert and overt tactics that side-lined political opponents, and silenced opposition—often through terror. Many, however, saw the benefits of a communist system which, for all its shortcomings, had managed to bring about “the destruction of the premodern caste that had kept the region backward for centuries.”16

Marxian determinism, socialist reform, opportunism, dogma and fear seem to define the zeitgeist of Eastern Europe under Stalinist rule. There was, however, an alternative to this, as Tito’s Yugoslavia showed. Under his leadership, and in the hands of Yugoslav Party officials, communism was taken out of its straightjacket and allowed to coexist with liberal economic policies that yielded important financial rewards.17 Tito’s split from Stalin in 1948 made it possible to imagine alternative forms of communist statecraft—a divergent communism which was open to the world rather than hermetically closed behind the Iron Curtain. On the cultural front this also translated into greater artistic freedom. Hence, in Yugoslavia art was not constrained by socialist realism and in fact developed out of a dialogue with international Modernism and abstractionist trends.18

In the eyes of Stalin, however, internationalism came to represent the hated cosmopolitan—an infiltrator and agent of Western Imperialism, and

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16 Connelly, From Peoples, 520.
17 Connelly, From Peoples, 564-65.
18 See Piotrowski, In the Shadow of Yalta, 106-7.
most often a Jew. All of this points to a significant growth of national consciousness and pride after the war, not unlike the rise of nationalist rhetoric in Mexico after the Revolution. In both cases the nation was conceived as an ethnically homogenous space where minorities were either repressed or expelled (Eastern Europe), or diluted and absorbed into the mestizo nation (Mexico).

In this way the Iron Curtain also brought about a division “between the new internationalism of the West and nationalism in the East, frozen beneath the power of the Soviet hegemon, which began imposing its own order on the people’s democracies from late 1947.” The political agendas of Stalinist Russia became a point of contention in the nationalist projects of the Eastern Bloc, bringing back memories of colonial domination, thereby encouraging local Communist cadres to follow the example of Yugoslavia’s ‘national communism’. This, however, only exacerbated Stalin’s attempts to control the Party through terror, and many nationalists were hunted down, intimidated, killed or persecuted. Consequently, show trials became one of the most grueling signs of imperialist rule in history, leading Tito to speak of Poland, Romania and Hungary as colonies. Long rooted anxieties about colonial domination were in fact the single unifying factor in this region, according to John Connelly who describes Eastern Europe as: “an anti-imperialist space of small peoples. In the corners of its political nightmares dwells this indistinct fear of being absorbed into larger powers.” Once again, a parallel can be found with the Mexican context where the United States had become the imperialist hegemon. Its aggressive military and economic interventions in Latin America going back to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 which established its fiefdom in the continent. From this point colonialism in Latin America came in the shape of The Stars and Stripes, and US imperial ambitions threatened the hard-won independence of nations south of Rio Bravo.

Nationalism therefore became a battle cry against US domination, and the anti-colonial iconography and narratives of the Mexican School would have resonated with the nationalist agendas of their Eastern European hosts.

The Hungarian Revolution of November 1, 1956, revealed the limits of de-Stalinization, but a move towards national communism was underway. This reckoning was spearheaded by Khrushchev whom, after taking control of the Central Party, re-established relations with Tito in the summer of 1955. When Khrushchev denounced Stalin the following year, however, many Hungarian and Polish communists decided to follow the example of Yugoslavia with dire consequences for the Hungarian nationalists. The conjunctural milieu of de-Stalinization, tensions over Soviet control and between Party led communism and national self-determination, helps to understand the cultural and political terrain on which Mexico’s touring exhibition landed.

Exposición Mexicana de Pintura y Estampa Contemporáneas

The story of this itinerant exhibition begins in April 1954 when Boleslaw Jelen, on behalf of the Polish Committee for Cultural Relations, sent a letter to FNAP. Through this channel the Polish People’s Republic requested that an exhibition of Mexican art be sent so that “the Polish public could see the works of Mexican painters and graphic artists who are greatly admired in Poland.”

Jelen’s letter is important as requests of this nature were usually sent to INBA (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes), the official organ in charge of international exhibitions. It is therefore significant that in this case the invitation was sent directly to FNAP, ensuring no governmental censorship and hence the possibility of sending explicitly political works that may otherwise had been excluded.

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20 Connelly, From Peoples, 541.
21 Connelly, From Peoples, 25.
22 Connelly, From Peoples, 541.
23 With the exception of the French invasion of Mexico under Napoleon III in 1862.
Partisan Genealogies

Martínez Rodríguez – Mexican art in the Eastern Front 1955

Such is the case of Diego Rivera’s *Gloriosa Victoria*, painted precisely for the opening of the exhibition in Poland.25 This damning critique of the recent US military intervention in Guatemala, was Rivera’s revenge for the government’s refusal to send his *Pesadilla de guerra sueño de paz* to Paris two years earlier.26 These works reflect Rivera’s commitment to the communist cause and his militant activism through the medium of large portable murals; as well as his desire to be re-admitted into the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) after years of ostracizing due to his support of Trotsky in the 1930s.27 Rivera’s ongoing denunciation of capitalist exploitation and his often provocative speeches and publications, in Mexico and abroad, finally convinced the PCM of his allegiance to Moscow and Rivera was welcomed back on September 26, 1954. Earlier that year, Rivera and Frida Kahlo had been active in public demonstrations against the Guatemala Coup d’état which, with US military aid, replaced Jacobo Árbenz with Castillo Armas—a pawn that would ensure US economic interests in the country. Kahlo died a few weeks after the demonstrations and, on July 13, her casket was placed in the foyer of Bellas Artes and covered with the Communist flag—a daring act which would cost Andrés Iduarte his job as director of INBA. This high-profile public event left no doubt as to the unwavering communist sympathies of the Mexican muralists.

The day after Rivera was re-admitted to the PCM, he wrote: “My re-entry into the Communist Party is of great satisfaction for me as it represents the highest honor I could ever receive (. . .) I am deeply sorry that my dear and loving companion Frida Kahlo was not able to share this with me, as I know it would have filled her with joy.”28 On the day of his readmission, Rivera started work on his *Gloriosa Victoria* with the precise intention of sending this work to Poland and spreading its message on the other side of the Iron Curtain. It was completed and signed on November 7, in time to be shipped for the opening in Warsaw.29

In an article written for *Revista Impacto* (January 20, 1955), Rivera explained that its title was taken from the triumphant words delivered by John F. Dulles, the US Secretary of State, after the military success in Guatemala. With graphic realism, Rivera hoped to dispel any misinformation on the event and reveal the atrocities and motives behind the Coup. This would be the first of many overt and covert US military operations in Latin America during the Cold War, setting a trend for violent interventions to come. With the intention to document and denounce, Rivera used photographs of the event and made careful portraits of the perpetrators.30 In a meeting with art critic Antonio Rodríguez, he expressed his delight at having avoided any symbolism or allegorical content (unlike his *Pesadilla de guerra sueño de paz*).31 This statement and Rivera’s detailed description of the painting’s iconography makes evident his desire to create a work that was legible and truthful—a kind of visual reportage circumscribed by its time and geography, unlike the open specificity of a work like Picasso’s *Guernica*. The composition is balanced and anchored by the central figures who tower above the dead bodies of men, women and children. As if posing for a photograph, John F. Dulles shakes the hand of a subservient Castillo Armas, who is dressed in civilian clothes. Dulles’ other hand is resting on a bomb engraved with the face of Eisenhower, and his brother Allen Dulles is seen whispering in his ear. Hanged from his shoulder is a sack filled with money representing the exploits of the

26 For an excellent study of this exhibition see Francisco Reyes Palma, “México en Paris, 1954”, *Artl@s Bulletin* (January 20, 1955): 9-20. See also his “*Tras terrados, migrantes y Guerra Fría en la disolución de una escuela nacional de pintura*,” *in Hacia otra historia del arte en México. Disoluciones* (1960-2000), ed. Isa Ra Ma. Bentzon Dueda, (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2001), 183-215. Both of these provide an insightful analysis to understand the polemics of the Mexican School in relation to the cultural politics of the Cold War, with particular attention to the tensions between Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo.
27 The whereabouts of both of these portable murals was unknown until Blanca Garduño found *Gloriosa Victoria* buried in the collections of the Pushkin Museum. In 2000 Professor Garduño, then director of the Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, travelled to Moscow hoping to find both but was only able to locate his *Gloriosa Victoria*. She wrote an extensive report on the history of these murals and their possible whereabouts. This document can be found in CENIDIAP archive Diego Rivera. I am very grateful for her generosity sharing this information with me.
28 “Mi reingreso al Partido Comunista es motivo para mí de una gran satisfacción, pues constituye el mayor honor que podría yo recibir en mi vida . . . Siento profundamente que la muerte de mi compañera adorada Frida Kahlo le haya impedido conocer esta noticia, pues hubiera sido motivo de gran contento para ella.” See “Gloriosa Victoria”, CENIDIAP. Archivo Diego Rivera, CNAP-FR-DR-C13-E15. All the translations from Spanish to English are by the author unless otherwise stated.
29 “Gloriosa Victoria”, CENIDIAP.
31 “Gloriosa Victoria”, CENIDIAP.
Martinez Rodriguez – Mexican art in the Eastern Front 1955

United Fruit Company, of which he had been president prior to the Coup. Next to them is Mr Peurifoy, the US Ambassador in Guatemala, and three Guatemalan co-conspirators who were involved in the uprising: Coronel Dubois, Coronel Mendoza, and Elfego Monzón, all holding money. To their right, and with the Cathedral behind him, we see monsignor Verolino, whom Rivera depicted considerably taller than the rest. The green building next to the Cathedral is the Mexican Embassy in Guatemala, symbolizing the diplomatic aid that Árbenz and his close associates received from Mexico. Behind bars, however, are all those unable to escape, presumed communists whom Castillo Armas swiftly imprisoned.32 Still fighting, two campesinos wave machetes, and a woman, in a bright red blouse, holds a machine gun. This is a portrait of Rina Lazo, a Guatemalan born artist who helped Rivera complete the mural, and who was in Guatemala at the time of the Coup.33 These figures represent the ongoing resistance of workers, artists and intellectuals against the imperial forces of the US.

The close analysis of this painting and its inception is important as it reveals Rivera’s intentions, and the role he believed Mexican art should have in the Cultural Cold War. As the undisputable leader of the Mexican School, together with Siqueiros, Rivera knew that FNAP needed the artistic and international capital of his work to ensure the success of the exhibition. His views on what the objectives of this exhibition should be, however, did not always align with those of FNAP. Having just re-joined the Communist Party, for Rivera it was clear that this was an opportunity to show partisan solidarity through a partisan aesthetic (that is a militant social realism with clear communist intent), and this he believed was the essence, or should be the essence of the Mexican School. FNAP, on the other hand, had other intentions. Structured and conceived as a National Front, this organization hoped to represent different political and aesthetic positions, with the only caveat that they contribute to the well-being of the Mexican people.

For the Polish exhibition, FNAP’s Chairing Committee hoped to provide a broad perspective of Mexican art, as was clear in the guidelines sent for participation:

- Participating artists will be free to determine the size, procedure and subject of their paintings or prints (…) The works, therefore, may be of different themes and motives (…) as long as they express in some ways the character of Mexico, the Mexican people, their problems, desires, types, customs, traditions and industries.34

Its closing directive reinforces the ethos of the Mexican School, and we may infer from this that any socialist messages would come through its iconography: peasants and workers in revolt, the impunity and decadence of the elites and clergy, celebrations of indigenous and folk traditions, education and literacy campaigns, solidarity between the workers, and celebrations of rural Mexico. Whether willingly or not, by promoting these themes FNAP was putting together an exhibition of partisan art, if by this we understand a rural and proletarian aesthetic that advances and defends the interests of el pueblo.

As can be seen FNAP hoped to present a united front and include artists who did not necessarily align with the political agendas of the Mexican School. Absent from the exhibition, however, were non-figurative and abstract works, as well as those by exiled artists living in Mexico, reinforcing the nationalist agendas of the exhibition. Another notable absence was Rufino Tamayo, then promoted as the ‘Fourth Great Muralist’ by the Mexican government, in an attempt to present a more apolitical version of Mexicanidad.

The opening of the exhibition in Warsaw was planned to coincide with the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, on November 20, 1954, but it had to be

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32 A detailed account of its iconography can be found Rivera’s article published in IMPACTO, and another one written by Antonio Rodríguez, both in the same file: CENIDIAP, Archivo Diego Rivera, CNAP-FR-DR-C13-E15.
34 “Los artistas participantes estarán en libertad para determinar el tamaño, procedimiento y asunto de sus cuadros o estampas (…) Las obras, por consiguiente, podrán ser de temas y motivos diversos (…) en tanto expresen en alguna forma el carácter y sentido de México y de su pueblo, en sus problemas, anhelos, tipos, costumbres e industrias. See “Exposición Mexicana de pintura y estampa contemporáneas, bases generales, instructivo y convocatoria”, CENIDIAP, Archivo Diego Rivera, CNAP-FR-DR-C18-E2.
delayed until February the following year. Directing these efforts were Rosendo Soto Álvarez and Ignacio Márquez Rodiles, who were in Europe for 10 months travelling with the exhibition.35 Besides being responsible for all logistical aspects, they organized talks, round tables, press releases and conferences.

The exhibition consisted of about 100 paintings, 400 prints, large photographic reproductions of murals, as well as films and publications on Mexican art. And while landscapes, genre paintings and surrealist works were shown, most of the paintings and prints were by the Mexican School and the TGP. The painting section was dedicated to modern works (from the mid XIX), but the prints were arranged chronologically starting with the XVI century and giving a prominent role to José Guadalupe Posada and the TGP.36 In this way, the organizers hoped to present a broad historical perspective of Mexican art and culture, whilst reserving a prominent role to the art and artists of the Revolution. This would have appeased Rivera and Siqueiros, whose support was needed, though it is clear from a letter that Rivera sent to Boleslaw Jelen that he was angry with the way things were unfolding. In this document, dated January 24, 1955, Rivera states that the exhibition should be led by members of the PCM and he complains that Márquez Rodiles had tried to stop Gloriosa Victoria from leaving Mexico. He also claims that the organizers encouraged participants to send apolitical works, and that, with the support of INBA, they were planning on taking the exhibition to countries in Western Europe “under the influence of Anglo-Saxon imperialism or who form part of the anti-socialist European bloc.”37 We do not know if these claims are true, but it is clear that for Rivera this was a partisan exhibition and that no effort should be spared to ensure Mexican art served the interest of the Communist Party. Whatever their disagreements, Rivera and Siqueiros contributed to the exhibition, both with their works and presence; and the public speeches given by Rosendo Soto and Márquez Rodiles in Bulgaria attest to their belief in the revolutionary agency of the Mexican School.

The Exhibition in Poland (February–March 1955)

When the exhibition finally opened in Warsaw on February 19, the Polish People’s Republic was undergoing the effects of the Thaw. As in most of the Eastern Bloc, the Communist Party was having to reckon with Stalin’s purges and fascist tactics for containing dissent. Not long after Stalin’s death, the Politburo began to relax its economic burdens on local economies, and the authorities announced an amnesty and revision of the Soviet criminal code. “The belief grew that people might willingly help build socialism, less as a utopia for the unspecified future than as a better life in the present. International class struggle would continue, but it need not involve all-out war.”38 De-Stalinization led to increasing calls for self-determination which involved liberalization and, in some cases, ‘westernization’ preoccupying the leadership in Moscow.

To understand the context of Poland, it is worth remembering that when Khrushchev delivered his damning critique of Stalin, on February 25, 1956, his ‘Secret Speech’ was leaked by Polish Communists. The role that Poles played in spreading Khrushchev’s message is telling of this country’s ongoing resistance of Soviet control. As Connelly explains, since the beginning of Communist rule “Hungary and Poland became known for frequent and sometimes spectacular resistance to Soviet rule, thanks in part to their deep histories of national self-assertion and the anti-Russian sentiments that pervaded much of their populations.”39 In his analysis of the Hungarian Revolution, Connelly describes

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35 Rosendo Soto Álvarez (1912-1994) was a painter and muralist considered part of the second generation of artists who continued the work of the Mexican School. He studied at the Academia de San Carlos under Diego Rivera and Rufino Tamayo. Márquez Rodiles (1910-) also began his career as an artist but he mainly developed a professional career in education, he held many important governmental positions and published extensively on Mexican art, education and history.

36 For a detailed account of the organization see “Exposición Mexicana de artes plásticas contemporáneas” (Pintura y Estampa) Colaboración Cultural México-Polaca, 20 de Noviembre de 1954, CENIDIAP, Fondo FNAP.


38 Connelly, From Peoples, 562.

39 Connelly, From Peoples, 657.
how the return of the Polish ‘national communist’ Władysław Gomułka on October 18, 1956 led to the Hungarian uprising. He also identifies three key incidents that led to the ‘Polish October’: the defection of a Polish Lieutenant to the West in 1953; the publication in 1955 of a poem recounting the Lieutenant’s revelations; and finally the death of Stalinist Bolesław Bierut in February 1956.⁴⁰

Of these three, the first helps us to understand the political climate in Poland at the time of the exhibition. On December 7, 1953 Lieutenant Józef Świątło, who worked for the secret police and feared being purged as a Jew, defected to West Berlin. After requesting protection from American officials he was flown to the US, and from the autumn of 1954 broadcasted reports from Radio Free Europe, “telling of the luxurious lifestyles of the working class avant garde, of the corruption and the power of secret police agents, even over top party leaders, whom they humiliated and often tortured.”⁴¹ As a result, on December 7, 1954, the Polish government introduced new measures to appease anger by relaxing economic burdens and releasing prisoners. This backfired, however, leading to more unrest as those now freed recounted the brutal conditions of their imprisonment.

These events coincided with the letter of invitation sent by the Polish government to FNAP in April 1954, and with the opening of the exhibition in February 1955. We could infer that the exhibition may have served to counteract the negative press of the Polish Lieutenant—being broadcasted across the Soviet Bloc through a CIA funded organization—by showing works of the Mexican School that exposed the hypocrisy of the US government and its imperialist ambitions. The most blatant example of this being, of course, Rivera’s Gloriosa Victoria. On the other hand, the nationalist iconography that pervaded the exhibition, and which celebrated the social gains and progressive reforms of the Revolution, may have been read as ‘national communism’—along the lines of Tito and Gomułka.

The venue for the exhibition in Warsaw was the Zacheta Palace (now National Gallery of Art). The organizing committee was formed by Jan Karol Wende (General Secretary of the Committee for Cultural Relations Abroad); Julius Starsynski (Director of Fine Arts); and the artist Roman Artykowski who curated the exhibition.⁴² According to Márquez Rodiles, the inauguration was attended by diplomatic and government officials, artists, teachers and ‘el pueblo’—with so many attending that many were left outside.⁴³ A catalogue accompanied the exhibition with texts by Jan Karol Wende, Julius Starzynski, and Márquez Rodiles.⁴⁴ After Warsaw, the exhibition travelled to Cracow (on view at the Palace of Fine Arts) and Wroclaw; and was complemented by a full program of events: film screenings, press conferences, interviews, round tables and meetings with artists and intellectuals. Most significantly, however, would have been Siqueiros’ presence in Poland. According to one report, the renowned muralist gave a series of conferences to a group of Polish, French and Dutch artists, and he was commissioned to paint a mural for the Stadion Dziesięciolecia. This would be a collective work involving painters and sculptors from Poland, China, Czechoslovakia and the USSR, and would be influenced by “el movimiento pictórico mexicano” (the Mexican pictorial school).⁴⁵ Had it been completed, the mural would have been a significant ‘triumph’ for the Mexican School, but for reasons that remain unclear the project was never carried through. Siqueiros’ visit coincided with his trip to Moscow, in the Fall of 1955, where he met with Rivera. This was a significant encounter between the two most prominent representatives of the Mexican School, and whose relationship had been marked by acrimonious disagreements regarding the form and content of revolutionary art. Whilst in Moscow, Siqueiros gave a conference to the Union of Soviet

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⁴⁰ Connelly, From Peoples, 572.
⁴¹ Connelly, From Peoples, 572.
⁴² Marco Arturo Montero, ‘Pintura mexicana por las rutas de Europa’, February 23, 1955, CENIDIAP, Fondo FNAP.
⁴³ Márquez Rodiles, ‘Mis primeras impresiones de Polonia’, CENIDIAP, Fondo FNAP.
⁴⁴ Catalogue of the Exhibition, CENIDIAP, Fondo FNAP.
⁴⁵ “See “Poderoso impacto de la plástica mexicana”, October 17, 1955. CENIDIAP, Fondo FNAP.
Painters in the Academy of Arts, titled: “Open letter to Soviet painters, sculptors and printers.” In this talk Siqueiros criticized socialist realism as academic and decadent, lacking cultural specificity and devoid of formal experimentation. According to William Richardson, his talk was not well received, and the director of the Academy refused to publish it. He remained, however, an esteemed artist in Russia due to his unremitting support for the Soviets. The presence of Rivera and Siqueiros in the Eastern Bloc at the time of FNAP’s exhibition is important, I believe, as it ensured that the partisan aims they envisioned for this event remained on track. Siqueiros presence in Poland, and Rivera’s trip to Czechoslovakia for the opening of the exhibition the following year, are therefore significant parts of this story.

Neither Siqueiros nor Rivera, however, seem to have left a strong impression on Poland. The mural project never materialized, and Rivera’s Gloria Victoria received no mentions in reviews of the exhibition. Antonio Rodríguez, then a leading critic and supporter of the Mexican School, noticed this absence, which he blamed on the late arrival of the mural to Poland. In his assessment of the Polish reviews, Rodríguez also mentions that some of the most popular works were Goitia’s Tata Jesus-cristo (1925-27); Siqueiro’s Nuestra imagen actual (1947); and Orozco’s Las soldaderas (1926).

It is important to note that Poland was more open to modernist and abstractionist trends compared to Mexico. In fact, the curator of the exhibition Roman Artymsowski was an abstract painter. In his study of Polish art in the 1950s, Piotr Piotrowski explains that the political and artistic Thaw went hand in hand, leading “the Polish regime to embrace Modernist art in its efforts to define its political identity on the international arena.” This, he says, was quite unique in Eastern Europe because nowhere else in the Soviet Bloc was Modernist art and Art Informel part of the official culture. He warns, however, that whilst being in the sphere of official art “it was never considered official art in the literal sense of the term.” Hence, at least at government level, FNAP’s exhibition would have aligned with the realist styles promoted in the Eastern Bloc.

While Artymsowski is absent from the catalogue and reviews of the exhibition consulted for this study, other Polish critics praised the work of the Mexican School for its nationalism, allegiance with progressive ideas, and solidarity with workers and peasants. In a lengthy review by Jerzy Olkiewicz, the artist notes that Mexican art was the opposite of ‘pure art’ and that: “Like all new revolutionary art, its subject is important, it fights for its ideals, and it is aggressive because it has a reason to fight.” Olkiewicz’ observation is significant as it highlights the militant intent behind most the work produced by artists of the Mexican School and the TGP. Two other reviews make a similar assertion.

In “A Combative Art”, published by Przyjazn (organ of the Polish-Soviet Friendship society), the author explains that contemporary Mexican art had achieved international fame due to the leadership of progressive artists such as Siqueiros, Rivera, Orozco and Xavier Guerrero. These artists departed from formalist trends, prevalent in Europe and the US, turning instead to their cultural heritage, while remaining committed to the “unremitting fight of that proud and untamed nation.” In a similar vein, Piotr Kraak commends their solidarity with el pueblo and states that “each work of a Mexican artist is an active intervention in the life of his people, a sharing of their pains and joys.” Kraak finishes by praising the political role of Mexican prints stating: “Mexican engravings not only support the
lambertur struggles of the Mexican people, but also participate fully in them, awakening a national conscience, and encouraging them to fight for their freedom and independence.65

The agency and political militancy assigned to Mexican art and prints, by these critics, is a statement of their legibility or readability in the Eastern European context. The iconography of resistance in prints like Leopoldo Méndez’ *Fusilamiento* (1950), may had been appealing to Polish viewers, as well as the populist nationalism of the Mexican School, with representative works like Goitia’s *Tata Jesús* and Orozco’s *Las Soldaderas.* Absent from reviews of the exhibition, however, is a clear indication of US imperialism, as was evident in Rivera’s *Gloriosa Victoria,* and in many other works in the exhibition. Conversely, in Bulgaria Rivera’s painting and the anti-US messages of the Mexican School would become center stage.

**Exhibition in Bulgaria (May – June 1955)**56

As in the rest of the Eastern Bloc, the People’s Republic of Bulgaria cemented its communist regime through coercion and Stalinist purges. After 1953, however, socio-political reforms were introduced that led to a relative liberalization and de-Stalinization, along the lines of Khrushchev’s directives. For most of its communist history, Bulgaria was led by Todor Zhivkov—a member of the wartime resistance movement—who served as General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party from 1954 to 1983.57 Bulgaria’s relaxation of policies under the Thaw, however, did not lead to nationalist revolts—as was the case in Hungary or Poland. In fact, “Zhivkov was more proud of the intimate ties to Moscow than any other European Communist leader; he said that the two countries ‘breathe with the same lungs, and the same blood flows in our veins’ (. . ).”58 This allegiance and symbiotic relation with Moscow explains the appeal of anti-capitalist and anti-US messages hanging in the walls of the exhibition.

Directly after Poland, the contents of FNAP’s exhibition were taken to Bulgaria, where they were put on display at the University of Sofia. On May 21, 1955 Nikola Mirchev, General Secretary of the Union of Bulgarian Painters, gave the inaugural address to a crowd of government officials, artists, writers and the general public. In his speech, Mirchev celebrated the patriotism and revolutionary spirit of the Mexican School, giving special attention to prints. Comparing them with Chinese graphic art, Mirchev praised their ability to awaken revolutionary consciousness: “Mexican prints have always been a powerful weapon in the hands of Mexican revolutionaries, in their struggle against the Spanish conquerors, and today they continue to inspire the popular masses in their struggle for the defense of national independence against US imperialism.”59

His words no doubt refer to the TGP and their political activism through posters and prints—their images most clearly articulating the precepts of the Mexican School in both form, medium and content. Most of the reviews similarly noted the unique national character of the works highlighting themes of exploitation, and the Mexican people’s struggles for political and economic independence. Reviewers also noted that many of the works had clear anti-US messages giving as examples Rivera’s *Gloriosa Victoria,* Siqueiros’ *El buen vecino* (1951), Chávez Morado’s *Cruz de horcas* (1943), García Bustos’ *Made in USA,* Gustavo Montoya’s *Patio de vecindad,* and Alberto Beltrán’s *Intervención* (ca. 1940s). Other notable works in reviews of the exhibition were Leopoldo Méndez’ *Fusilamiento,* and Siqueiros’ *Nuestra imagen actual.* The latter was described by one reviewer as: “This work shows with great dramatic force how capitalists imagine workers—a body with strong

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55 “El grabado mexicano no solamente acompaña las luchas libertadoras del pueblo mexicano, sino que participa plenamente en ellas, despertando su conciencia nacional, animándolo en la lucha por su libertad e independencia.” See “Legación de Polonia”, CENIDIAP, Fondo FNAP, p. 5.
56 I would like to thank Julia Karadachka, chief librarian at the Bulgarian National Library, for helping me find documentation regarding this exhibition.
57 Connelly, *From Peoples,* 615.
58 “La gráfica Mexicana siempre ha sido un arma poderosa en manos de los revolucionarios mexicanos en su lucha contra los conquistadores españoles y hoy sigue siendo inspirador de las amplias masas populares en su lucha por la defensa de la independencia nacional y del imperialismo americano.” See “Discurso pronunciado por Nikola Mirchev, secretario general de la Unión de Pintores de Bulgaria en el acto solemne de inauguración de la exposición de arte mexicano”, CENIDIAP, Fondo FNAP, p. 2.
hands that can be used for the benefit of foreign interests, and a head, which must not reason.” This reading clearly identifies the symbolic impetus of Siqueiros’ anonymous worker whose predicaments represented the plight of the international proletariat. Méndez’ print, on the other hand, intersects class with race giving a clear mestizo identity to his defiant peasant, and serves as a counter narrative by offering a language of resistance and revolt.

Both Rosendo Soto, Márquez Rodiles and his wife Naya Márquez gave speeches during the course of the exhibition (Fig. 1).

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60 “En el, con una gran fuerza dramática, está demostrado cómo los capitalistas se imaginan a los hombres sin manos (—un hombre de manos fuertes, que pueden ser aprovechadas para intereses extranjeros, y una cabeza, que no debe razonar. See “Anoche fue inaugurada la exposición de pintores mexicanos,” periódico Frente de la Patria, May 22, 1955. CENIDHAP, Fondo PNAP.

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Figure 1. Photograph of Rosendo Soto Álvarez, Ignacio Márquez Rodiles and his wife Naya Márquez with Rivera’s Gloriosa Victoria in the background. Source: “The opening of the Mexican art exhibition,” Narodna mladež, № 122, 22 May 1955, p. 2.
One of their conferences was published in the *Otechestven Front*, the central organ of the Bulgarian Fatherland Front. In this speech the organizers spoke of the influence of pre-Hispanic art in the work of the muralists and their connection with the Mexican Revolution. They also noted the presence of international communism through the iconography of Marx, Lenin, and Giorgi Dimitrov (a Bulgarian communist who led the Comintern from 1934–1943). And finished by stating that all artists, regardless of their stylistic tendencies, were united behind FNAP in its fight against the imperialism of Wall Street.61

In a similar vein, Rosendo Soto’s inaugural speech highlighted the Mexican School’s commitment to the ideals of the Revolution. Their murals and prints, he said, were made to serve the masses by depicting the plight of the working classes helping to further the ideals of international socialism: “a world without capitalist exploitation, fraternity amongst all nations, peace and progress.” 62 This is why, he added:

> [W]e reject abstract art which is purely formal lacking meaning or purpose for the people, and hence selfish and without moral responsibility towards humanity; but we also oppose an art of simple superficial propaganda which forgets the teachings of tradition, of sound plastic expression, which despises fantasy and the capacity of the masses to interpret, in order to provide works that are pretty and aggregable.63

This last comment is important as it makes clear that their work was an art of denunciation not of propaganda, in other words not socialist realism. Mexican art he stated, is realist due to its sincerity, and for its national character rooted in popular art. Also clear from his speech is that the exhibition was touring around the Eastern Bloc in order to foster “artistic solidarity in the fight for the freedom of our people.” Other reviewers similarly noted its role in promoting liberty, world peace and solidarity amongst nations. By endorsing peace, the exhibition was seen to follow Soviet Party lines, a significant point considering that the TGP had been awarded a prize during the World Peace Congress in Vienna in 1952.

Another important aspect to consider, one that relates to the address given by Rosendo Soto, is the way in which the works of the exhibition were received at the level of form.

In fact, while most Bulgarian reviewers and critics praised the political and ideological undertones of the exhibition, and seemed unanimous in their appraisals of prints, many criticized the perceived formal weakness of the paintings, which in their view departed from the academic rigors of socialist realism. In other words, they had been corrupted by the formal experimentation predicated in the West. In his assessment of the impact and legacy of FNAP’s exhibition, written in 1994, Dimitar Avramov provides a thorough account of the event, and the debates that ensued amongst Bulgarian artists, critics and intellectuals. Avramov’s account is perhaps the most objective review of the exhibition, since it was written after the end of the Cold War. Praising the curatorial narrative of the exhibition, which in his view presented a coherent ideological and aesthetic character, Avramov writes:

> The first thing, that made a strong irresistible impression, was the social and political commitment of those artists—passionate, dedicated, implacable. It had nothing in common with the formal propaganda declarations and poses of our socialist realistic art: pretended, pompous and fake. The Mexicans’ commitment was exciting as it was sincere. It was a position of deep feelings, gained in severe fights and with a lot of risks.66

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61 “El arte plástico mexicano ante el publico búlgaro”, May 21, 1955. CENIDIAP, Fondo FNAP.
63 “Por esta razón rechazamos un arte abstracto, puramente formal, que no lleva ningún mensaje al pueblo y que es por lo mismo egoísta y faltó de responsabilidad humana; pero también nos oponemos a una expresión de simple propaganda, superficial y que olvida las enseñanzas de la tradición y de la buena plástica, que desprecia la fantasía y la capacidad interpretativa de las masas para darle una obra supuestamente agradable y bonita.” See Soto, “Discurso”, p. 3.
66 Avramov, *Chronicle of a Dramatic Decade*, 68
Later in the text Avramov recounts a heated debate that occurred in the rooms of the exhibition itself, on June 11, 1955, after Márquez Rodiles delivered an impromptu speech outlining the characteristics of Mexican art, and in which he praised the formal freedom of the Mexican School. Avramov provides a detailed account of the debate regretting the aggressive tone of Bulgarian Party members who attacked the frankness of Márquez Rodiles’ words. One of them, Evtim Tomov (a tutor of graphic art at the Nikolay Pavlovich High Institute of Arts), claimed that he was wrong at asserting that Mexican paintings and prints were of equal quality stating that, in his view, many paintings in the exhibition were so lacking in academic technique that he could not even categorize them as art. And in a quasi-Stalinist Show Trial tone he added: "I would ask comrade Prof. Rodiles to give me an answer: Is he familiar with the contemporary Soviet Art and does he believe that this art has its way and accomplishments, because in the statements of the comrade professor, which we heard, he just—I am certain—denies the Soviet art."67

Conclusions

The differing responses to the exhibition in Poland and Bulgaria, shed light on the complex arena of Cold War politics in the Eastern Bloc during the first years of the Thaw. This context presents challenges for assessing its success as a partisan exhibition since opinions diverged as to who the enemy was or what was being defended. In the case of the Mexican School and the TGP, it is clear that the intent was to denounce US imperialism and defend the social and progressive reforms of the Revolution—seen under attack and threatened. FNAP, on the other hand, hoped to present a united front and promote a national aesthetic tolerant of differing political positions. This reflects the difficulties of bringing together the interests of a National Front organization with those of partisan groups that have clear political and ideological agendas.

With regards to Poland, we may argue that the partisan iconography of the Mexican School and the TGP, may have aligned with Poland’s recent history of occupation and growing calls for national self-determination. Its fiercely anti-colonial and anti-imperialist messages becoming alive in the context of national communism amidst the Thaw; in other words, freedom from the Soviet hegemon. This openness was also reflected in their artistic production which did not always follow the directives of socialist realism.

Conversely, in Bulgaria this imagery took on a more explicit Party line—as Rivera intended; but critics objected to the form in which this partisan iconography was conveyed. Here issues of style and technique became a point of contention reflecting the lack of aesthetic and political freedoms in countries tightly controlled by Moscow. It is also evident that for artists of the Mexican School and the TGP (whether members of the PCM or not) the struggle continued, whilst Bulgarian communists believed that their socialist utopia had arrived. Hence why one of the critics wrote that Mexico’s future was Bulgaria’s present.68 This helps to explain an important difference between socialist realism and the realism of the Mexican School, and why the latter continues to have a revolutionary potential that the former lacks. Both Siqueiros’ anonymous worker and Mendez’s defiant peasant make evident that the partisan struggle goes on and that we cannot lower the guard.

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67 Avramov, Chronicle of a Dramatic Decade, 70