



WITNESSING REVOLUTION, FORGING A NATION

ROBIN ADÈLE GREELEY

Carlos Fuentes once wrote that the Mexican Revolution was actually three competing revolutions whose chaotic events were only resolved into coherent narratives well after the fact.¹ This narrative chaos is evident not only from a political or military perspective, but also from an artistic perspective. How, for example, are we to make sense of such varied figures as Francisco Goitia (1882–1960), whose paintings condensed the turmoil of the revolution into Goya-like dramas of horror, versus Diego Rivera (1886–1957), who celebrated the revolution by conjoining political and aesthetic revolutions in his Cubist-inspired *Zapatista Landscape* (1915; see fig. 2.3)? Or Roberto Montenegro (1885–1968), who clung to a Symbolist style born of his rejection of the scientific positivism that prevailed under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911), versus David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), who called for a revolutionary “art of the future”?² Perhaps most perplexing of all, what do we make of Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo [1875–1964]), whose radical nationalist ideologies underwrote both the birth of Mexican muralism and an unambiguous allegiance to fascism? And how might we view these varied artists in light of institutional efforts aimed at fortifying a cultural project of nationhood, whether through struggles over the pedagogical practices of the Academy of San Carlos in the capital, or through the efforts of anthropologist Manuel Gamio to institutionalize *indigenismo* as the official face of Mexico’s cultural identity?

This essay investigates the intersection of four vectors—witnessing the revolution, defining the nation and modernity, constructing “Indianness,” and exploring the role of art institutions in the process of nation-formation—as they relate to

artistic production, circulation, and institutionalization during the fraught decade of 1910–20, when Mexico was engaged in the civil war that came to be known as the Mexican Revolution. This was a period of great flux, when tensions around such terms as “Mexico,” “modernity,” and what Gamio would call “forging a nation” were on display.

WITNESSING THE REVOLUTION

How did Mexican artists image the revolution itself? Was it possible to create narratives—especially narratives of nation-building and aesthetic innovation—from within a direct experience of the violence? Or was this only possible from afar? What effects did temporal and physical proximity to the fighting have on the types of pictorial narratives constructed? I begin by contrasting works produced by three artists: Goitia, who fought under Pancho Villa and pictured the revolution from that eyewitness vantage point; José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949), who years later would translate his noncombatant perceptions of the conflict’s savagery into a universal denunciation of war; and Rivera, whose iconic *Zapatista Landscape* was produced not in Mexico but in Paris, without direct experience of the fighting—a visual representation of the revolution mediated by the artist’s engagement with the European avant-garde and his at-best indirect knowledge of events in Mexico, among other factors.

These divergent experiences of proximity and distance led to competing visual narratives of the revolution that had long-term effects on the development of Mexican art. Unlike Rivera’s images, the pictorial witnessing of both Goitia and Orozco captured the fratricidal nature of the civil war, especially as it affected



Fig. 2.1. Francisco Goitia (Mexican, 1882–1960). *The Witch*, 1912–16. Oil on canvas, 15½ x 13 inches (39 x 33 cm). Museo Francisco Goitia, INBA, Zacatecas, Mexico



Fig. 2.2. José Clemente Orozco. *The Hanged Man*, 1926–28, from *The Horrors of the Revolution*. Ink on paper, 16½ x 12 inches (42 x 30.4 cm). Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, INBA, Mexico City

Fig. 2.3. Diego Rivera (Mexican, 1886–1957). *Zapatista Landscape*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 57 x 49¼ inches (144.7 x 125 cm). Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA, Mexico City

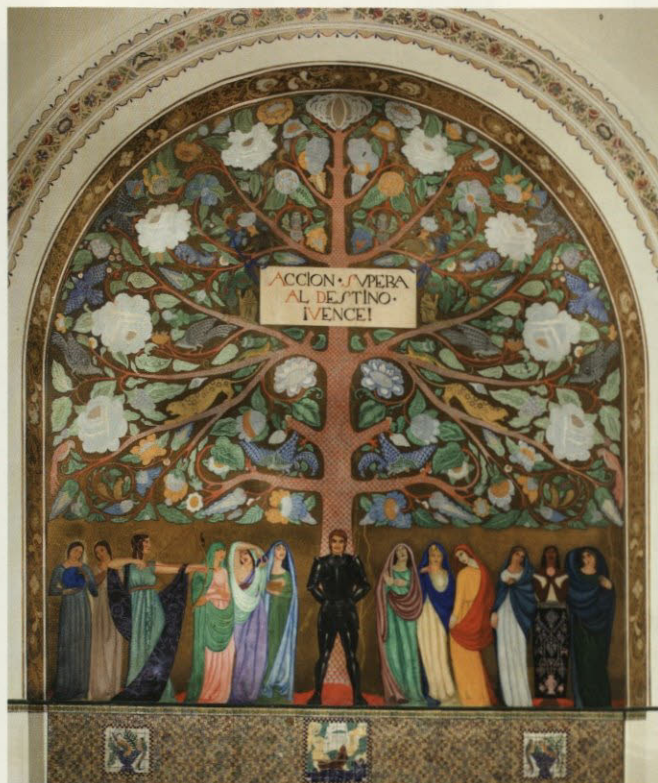
Fig. 2.4. Roberto Montenegro (Mexican, 1885–1968). *The Tree of Life*, 1922. Fresco and encaustic. Museo de las Constituciones, UNAM, Mexico City

the disenfranchised rural and indigenous populations, particularly women, who were most vulnerable to the violence. Yet the conditions under which these artists did so differed considerably. In *The Witch* (1912–16), Goitia's brutal, expressionistic painterly encrustations powerfully blend horror with the uncanny to create a Goya-like monstrosity—a quasi-human face that seems at once alive and dead, dissolving into a skull before our eyes in a portent of our own future (fig. 2.1). Goitia's landscapes would continue this imbrication of painterly expressionism and the horrific, matching the harshness of an arid, unforgiving environment with the cruelty of equally unforgiving humans, such that barbarism becomes an everyday occurrence.

Orozco, by contrast, constructed a different model of “witnessing” the Mexican Revolution, based less on eyewitness accounts than on capturing a collective imaginary of the violence. His series of drawings titled *The Horrors of the Revolution*, produced between 1926 and 1928 at the behest of journalist and cultural promoter Anita Brenner for publication in the United States, reformulated his monumental murals at the National Preparatory School to create dramatic “testimonies” of the savagery inflicted upon the humble, unnamed masses of Mexicans—those for whom the revolution was simply one more episode in a centuries-long history of suffering the cruel whims of those more powerful (fig. 2.2).³ Although produced well after the revolution's ferocity had subsided, Orozco's deftly stark lines, jabbed out with pen and ink, deliberately evoke the urgent austerity of sketches done directly in the field. “Death is the first thing one sees,” remarks Renato González Mello on Orozco's images of this period, “then the revolution, but as war not as a just [social] change.”⁴

Both Goitia and Orozco sought to evoke an intimate connection between visual representation and the catastrophic impact of Mexico's civil war. What matters here is not only the subject matter, but also the way painting and drawing themselves are treated. The power of the atrocities depicted comes from our ability to imagine them, which in turn comes from the artists' deep aesthetic engagement with the very violence they abhorred. With Goitia's *Witch*, for example, painting's capacity to conjure a resemblance is contaminated by the way in which it participates in that conjuring. Here, that means an evocation of the gruesome violence done to a human body. The force of this image comes precisely from the anxiety-ridden questioning that painting undergoes concerning just how far it should engage in the process of illusion-making. How close can it—should it—come to the intolerable barbarity of the experience? How far should painting go if what it is creating is human pain? Should it revel in its ability to efface the distance between the sign for the thing and the thing itself, the painting of torture and torture itself?

Yet whereas Goitia produced a powerful discourse of suffering and marginality based on his eyewitness experiences (one that can be read alongside the photographic testimony of Agustín Casasola [1874–1928]), Orozco's harrowing images rely for their persuasiveness on the sense of immediacy embedded in their very form. In front of the *Horrors*, it becomes impossible to turn a blind eye to the atrocities depicted. In this sense, the impact of pictures such as *The Hanged Man* (see fig. 2.2) depends less on whether Orozco actually saw the events depicted than on the conviction that the image itself



could act as an “eyewitness”—that it could reveal fundamental truths about the historical consequences of human actions.⁵

In contrast to both Goitia and Orozco, Rivera’s distance from the fighting allowed him to marry an engagement with the European avant-garde to an image of revolutionary politics in *Zapatista Landscape* (fig. 2.3). From his vantage point in Paris, Rivera produced a narrative of Revolution—with a capital “R”—that equated pictorial radicalism with Mexico’s tumultuous leap into modernity. His brilliant engagement with Cubism mobilizes fragmented planes and textures to dynamize the pictorial surface as a metaphor for a modernizing social revolution: “[Cubism] was a revolutionary movement,” he declared, “questioning everything that had previously been said and done in art. It held nothing sacred. As the old world would soon blow itself apart, never to be the same again, so Cubism broke down forms as they had been seen for centuries, and was creating out of the fragments new forms, new objects, new patterns, and—ultimately—new worlds.”⁶ Against the pessimism of Goitia and Orozco, *Zapatista Landscape* presents a visionary revolt against the status quo that rises above internecine conflict; nowhere in evidence are the factionalism, the destruction, the violently conflicting ideologies that pitted the agrarian proto-communism of Emiliano Zapata against the bourgeois suffragism of Francisco Madero, the dictatorial *caudillismo* of Victoriano Huerta, and the dirigiste statism of Venustiano Carranza. Although he soon turned away from Cubism, Rivera maintained this populist view of Mexico’s promise, even as that vision was appropriated as official discourse by an increasingly authoritarian, dirigiste nationalist state.

DEFINING THE MODERN, DEFINING THE NATION

In 1922, under the massive cultural renovation program of minister of public education José Vasconcelos, Montenegro produced *The Tree of Life* in the former Jesuit College of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (fig. 2.4). Newly returned from a long sojourn in Europe, the artist used the commission to consolidate his Symbolist-inspired style in a mural that critics lauded as quintessentially “nationalist,” helping to define what Lynda Klich has called “decorative nationalism.”⁷ As Julieta Ortiz Gaitán argues, Montenegro had developed his “elegant and lavish” fantasies as illustrations for fin-de-siècle Modernista publications in which artists and writers deployed a cultural politics of escapism and decadence against Porfirian positivism.⁸ Upon returning to Mexico in 1919, Montenegro reformulated the Aubrey Beardsley-influenced exoticism he had developed in Europe to address the concept of the Mexican “nation,” transposing the morbid sensuality of works like *Salomé-Paris* 1910 (1914; private collection) to the idea of the nation itself.⁹ *The Tree of Life* underscores Vasconcelos’s model of national spiritual renovation through culture, widely promoted as a means of “civilizing” the barbarism of the civil war, through a stylized parade of allegories representing the arts and sciences, depicted as languid female figures congregating beneath a tree bearing the fruits of knowledge.¹⁰ The mural aggrandizes the ornate floral patternings of the tree, incorporating decorative schemes derived from *arte popular* in an early attempt to define a nationalist aesthetic.¹¹

This “decorative nationalism” came to prominence during the period of relative political stability inaugurated by the Constitution of 1917 and consolidated under the presidency of



Álvaro Obregón (1920–24). Artists from Fernando Leal (1896–1964) and Saturnino Herrán (1887–1918) to Adolfo Best Maugard (1891–1965), Montenegro, and others adopted similar combinations of Symbolism, the picturesque, and Mexican subject matter in their search for a modern nationalist aesthetic, deploying a variety of themes—pre-conquest, colonial, indigenous, folkloric—to distinguish their vision from the outmoded academicism of San Carlos. Along with Montenegro, Best Maugard perhaps best exemplifies this stylized invocation of artisanal folk and indigenous arts in the pursuit of a modern national identity (fig. 2.5). Officially institutionalized in his teaching manual, published by the Ministry of Public Education in 1923, Best Maugard’s ornamental geometrization of natural motifs reformulated patterns derived from native cultures into an “authentic” national aesthetic legible to urban elites. At the same time, the sophisticated cosmopolitanism of his works, a product in part of his travels in Europe, aimed to position Mexico as an equal in the international field of artistic production.

Scholars have argued that this fin-de-siècle ornamentalism tended to trap artists, especially Montenegro, “between two worlds”: between Modernismo’s increasingly outmoded decorative stylistics and the innovations of the avant-garde.¹² Yet Montenegro in particular remained a central point of reference, and the artist continued to adapt his style in dialogue with other aesthetic discourses. Thus, the “impressionist nationalism” of Alfredo Ramos Martínez (1871–1946) and Rivera’s post-Cubist classicizing modernism mounted powerful counterproposals against Modernista ornamentalism.¹³ The former, rejecting both academic and Symbolist stylistics in a search for pictorial authenticity, depicted naturalized rural and indigenous Mexicans in local

contexts. In Ramos Martínez’s *Indian Couple with Watermelon* (fig. 2.6), for example, the figures squat low to the ground, painted in dark earthy tones and loose brushstrokes that make them almost indistinguishable from the nature surrounding them.

Rivera, trading his earlier Cubism for a Picasso-inspired *rappel à l’ordre* (return to order) classicism, would soon produce his mural *Creation*, 1922–23 (fig. 2.7), a mix of allegory, universal humanism, and incipient *mestizaje* that boldly repudiated both Ramos Martínez’s “impressionist nationalism” and what Rivera saw as the anachronisms of decorative nationalism.¹⁴ Echoing *The Tree of Life* in its allegorical appeal to the arts as the basis for national renovation, *Creation* nevertheless refuted Montenegro’s superficial ornamentalism in favor of purportedly more authentic Mexican aesthetic values of monumental construction and ordered purity of form. Writing under a pseudonym, fellow muralists Siqueiros and Jean Charlot (1898–1979) linked Rivera to the “healthiest and strongest European pictorial theories” against the “pseudo-modern” aesthetics of Best Maugard, Montenegro, and Ramos Martínez.¹⁵

Despite their differences, however, all these artists displayed a commitment to modernist formal innovation allied with an incipient nationalism that would form the basis of aesthetic developments for decades to come.

“FORGING A NATION”: INDIANIZING MEXICO

Gamio’s famous call for a dynamic cultural politics—*Forjando patria* (Forging a Nation)—written in 1916 in the midst of the armed conflict, set a powerful stage for constructions of Indianness even before the violence had slowed. Arguing the necessity of defining

Fig. 2.5. Adolfo Best Maugard (Mexican, 1891–1964). Drawings published in Luis Lara Pardo, “El arte nacionalista de Best Maugard,” *Revista de revistas*, vol. 11, no. 553 (December 12, 1920), p. 16. Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art, International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Fig. 2.6. Alfredo Ramos Martínez (Mexican, 1871–1946). *Indian Couple with Watermelon*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 39% x 39% inches (100.5 x 100 cm). Private collection. Photograph courtesy Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM, Mexico City

Fig. 2.7. Diego Rivera. *Creation*, 1922–23. Fresco, encaustic, and gold leaf. Simón Bolívar Amphitheater, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, Mexico City



a distinct Mexican cultural identity as the foundation for a renewed national project, Gamio provided urban elites with a platform for exploring the country's rural populations in a contradictory attempt to equate indigenous culture with “Mexicanness” while “redeeming” the *indio* through incorporation into the modern nation-state.

This project, taken up by artists and intellectuals as varied as Goitia, Best Maugard, Dr. Atl, and Herrán, underwrote what historian Rick López has called “the dual process of ‘creating’ the Mexican Indian and of ‘ethnicizing’ the nation.”¹⁶ *Lo indígena* was the leitmotif that would unite Mexico's disparate populations into a “culturally cohesive, politically stable postrevolutionary nation.”¹⁷ Under this elitist ideology, argues López, Mexico's peasants were “recast as Indians” and positioned as “passive” emblems of a “national essence.”¹⁸ Yet this was a messy, contested project, only slowly adopted by the state. Many artists and intellectuals rejected the equation of Mexicanness with contemporary indigenous cultures, instead promoting the nation's Spanish or pre-conquest heritages; others—including Vasconcelos and Orozco—advocated a *mestizaje* that minimized any validation of Indianness. Indeed, in his foundational concept of *mestizaje*, first proposed in the same year as Gamio's *Forjando patria*, Vasconcelos argued that the purported “primitive inexpression” of “Indian” cultures, though necessary to any definition of Mexican culture, needed to be “redeemed” through mixing with the superior universalizing rationalism of Mexico's European heritage.¹⁹ Despite their differences, however, these discourses reformulated contemporary Indians from a national disgrace to the principal symbol of what Dr. Atl would call “a true national culture,” and thereby

effectively marginalized Mexico's popular classes as the depoliticized embodiment of the Mexican nation and as grateful recipients of a postrevolutionary social transformation managed by urban elites. This project, eventually championed by the state, would continue to influence government policy and the national imagination into the present century.²⁰

These tensions emerge in the work of Herrán, whose subject matter wavered between the sensual androgyny of his Decadentist renderings of Aztec religious rituals, such as *Our Gods*, 1914–18, his unfinished mural project for the National Theater in Mexico City (now the Palace of Fine Arts; see fig. 1.3), and paintings, inspired by Spanish Modernistas such as Ignacio Zuloaga (1870–1945), of Mexico's rural *indios*. Herrán's *The Offering*, 1913 (see plate 3) presents a melancholic Symbolist-Costumbrista scene of “timeless” indigenous religiosity that immobilizes its humble participants outside modernity and apart from the violence and social turmoil of the revolution.²¹ Devoid of any reference to agrarian revolutionaries such as Zapata's rebellious followers, Herrán's modest *indios* carry Day of the Dead marigolds in a traditional canoe, introspectively intent upon their archaic devotional practices. Such nonthreatening images of changeless rural life were ideologically palatable to urban intellectual and political elites.

INSTITUTIONS AND NATION-FORMATION

In the 1910s, the Academy of San Carlos became a principal battleground for competing cultural conceptions of the modern Mexican nation. Two pivotal episodes mark the crisis of the academy's outmoded ideologies: the 1910 exhibition organized



Fig. 2.8. Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo; Mexican, 1875–1964). Poster for the *Exposición de artistas mexicanos*, Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1910. Lithograph on paper on canvas, 37 x 25 inches (95 x 63.5 cm). Fondo Luis Gonzaga Serrano, Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA, Mexico City

by Dr. Atl protesting the “surrealist illogic” of the government’s decision to display Spanish art to celebrate the centenary of Mexico’s independence; and the 1911 student strike that led to a profound pedagogical renovation with the founding, in 1913, of the Open-Air Painting Schools (*Escuelas de Pintura al Aire Libre*) under Ramos Martínez, who was appointed director of San Carlos that year.²² Dr. Atl’s poster for the 1910 exhibition, depicting a nude man and woman rising godlike above Mexico’s Popocatepetl volcano (fig. 2.8), reflects his enthusiasm for the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Sorel, which he imbibed during his first extended sojourn in Europe (1896–1903) and which would form the basis for his call to revolutionize art. Ramos Martínez, in the wake of the 1911 student strike, would also call for the renovation of the academy’s obsolete doctrines, not through Dr. Atl’s militant Nietzschean rejection of bourgeois mediocrity, but through a depoliticized model of “direct contact with nature” that would “initiate the formation of a genuinely national art.”²³

After Huerta was ousted by Carranza in 1914, Ramos Martínez was replaced as director of the Academy of San Carlos by Dr. Atl, who championed a nationalism that glorified radicalism, promoted the avant-garde, and contradictorily exalted a nationalist heroics in the name of the people while also declaring that authority should be wielded by a small, enlightened cultural elite.²⁴ Drawing selectively on the writings of Nietzsche, Sorel, and Henri Bergson, Dr. Atl appealed to Mexico’s artists to produce works aimed at the “moral, political, and material regeneration of the nation.”²⁵ But this was no artistic presage of the Mexican Revolution; although Dr. Atl’s call for artistic renovation paved the way for later nationalist intellectuals such as Gamio and

Vasconcelos, what he “envisioned was a [socio-cultural] revolution from above, not a popular uprising,” the creation of “a new world-virile, heroic, . . . and puritanical-based on the sense of duty and sacrifice: a world . . . dominated by a powerful avant-garde.”²⁶ Dr. Atl’s provocative tenure at San Carlos was short-lived, beginning and ending in 1914. Yet his advocacy of a vanguard, socially committed art continued to influence future aesthetic endeavors.

BEYOND THE REVOLUTION

The year 1921, argues Francisco Reyes Palma, was one of “rupture that mark[ed] a definitive move toward a distinct phase” in the search for an aesthetics adequate to the postrevolutionary period of national consolidation.²⁷ The revolution had breached the entrenched power of the oligarchies, setting Mexico on the path to becoming a modern nation founded on inclusion of the masses, even as the form of this inclusion remained the subject of fierce debate. The 1920s saw the commencement of a crucial era of national renovation, in which intellectuals and statesmen alike understood the importance not simply of economic and political reconstruction, but also of forging new symbols of Mexican identity. Mexico’s popular classes had forced their way into the national consciousness, and artists sought to envision this new national polity, thereby proposing new models for the social and political life of the nation. “Art and knowledge must serve to improve the condition of the people,” Vasconcelos exhorted.²⁸ Yet in the decades to follow, this utopian view was progressively coopted by an evermore authoritarian state as part of a nationalist mythology aimed at underwriting its own grasp on political culture.

1. Carlos Fuentes, "History out of Chaos," in Fuentes 1997, p. 35.
2. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Three Appeals for a Modern Direction to the New Generation of American Painters and Sculptors" (1921), in Ades et al. 1989, pp. 322–23.
3. See Indyk-López 2009, pp. 12–74.
4. González Mello 1995, p. 68.
5. As González Mello has pointed out, Orozco's eyewitness experience of the Mexican Revolution's violence remains unclear, and there is no evidence that any of his images of the revolution predate 1924. Ibid., p. 28.
6. Diego Rivera, cited in Craven 1997, p. 11.
7. Klich 2008, pp. 90, 94. She cites Ramírez 1990, pp. 115–17, who in turn cites Carlos Mérida, "La verdadera significación de la obra de Saturnino Herrán: Los falsos críticos," *El universal ilustrado*, vol. 4, no. 169 (July 29, 1920), pp. 14, 26. See also Ortiz Gaitán 1994, pp. 65–66.
8. Ortiz Gaitán 1994, p. 29; Klich 2008, p. 90.
9. Lago 1919, p. 9; Klich 2008, p. 90.
10. Montenegro painted out the original semi-nude androgynous figure centered against the tree in favor of the current more masculine figure, perhaps at the insistence of Vasconcelos. See Ortiz Gaitán 1994, p. 93.
11. The term *arte popular* came into widespread use among Mexican intellectuals beginning in 1921, when the first popular arts exhibition was organized as part of the effort to incorporate indigenous cultures into a concept of an ethnicized national identity. See López 2010a.
12. Luis-Martín Lozano, "Mexican Modern Art: Rendezvous with the Avant-garde," in Lozano et al. 2000, p. 19.
13. Klich 2008, p. 88.
14. *Mestizaje*, a theory of racial and cultural hybridization, was a political-aesthetic construct that based Mexican national identity in the racial mixing of Europeans with indigenous Americans. Aimed simultaneously at differentiating Mexico and Latin America from the region's former Spanish colonizers and at incorporating indigenous peoples into a modernizing national project, *mestizaje* was most prominently advocated by Vasconcelos in his 1925 book, *The Cosmic Race*.
15. Ing. Juan Hernández Araujo [Jean Charlot and David Alfaro Siqueiros], "Aspectos comparativos de la orientación al clasicismo de la moderna pintura europea y mexicana," *El demócrata*, July 29, 1923, p. 3, cited in Klich 2008, p. 392 (translation mine).
16. López 2002, p. 293.
17. Ibid., p. 295.
18. Ibid., p. 326.
19. José Vasconcelos, "Arte creador" (1916), cited in Fell 1989, p. 382. Vasconcelos's concept of *mestizaje* responded to a long history, stemming back to the late eighteenth century, of Mexican resistance to Spanish colonialism and efforts to define an independent national identity based on revaluating the cultural heritage of the Aztecs. Yet these attempts were fraught with ambivalence. A continued belief in European superiority inflected these nation-building projects, engendering policies and cultural practices that recurrently incorporated indigenous peoples into the Mexican nation as second-class citizens. See Alonso 2004.
20. Atl 1921–22, vol. 1, p. 15.
21. Costumbrismo was a literary and artistic genre that depicted common street scenes and social types (such as the pulque vendor or the china poblana), rural customs, and collective rituals and spectacles in both rural and urban settings. See Segre 2007.
22. Charlot 1967, p. 153.
23. Alfredo Ramos Martínez, cited in Useda Miranda et al. 2014, p. 18.
24. López 2010b.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., citing Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 7–17.
27. Francisco Reyes Palma, "Vanguardia: Año cero," in Museo Nacional de Arte 1991a, pp. 43–51; translation from Klich 2008, p. 86.
28. Vasconcelos, "Discurso en la Universidad," in Vasconcelos 1950, pp. 7–12.

