

MORE THAN VESTIGES: PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES OF ANCIENT MEXICO

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Abstract: This article explores the importance of photographic archives (*fototecas*) in preserving the sources with which to create a national visual history and identity. It charts the arc from imperial photography of Mexico, lodged in European and U.S. archives, to the development of Mexican institutions dedicated to the preservation of the photographic patrimony. Particular attention is paid to the photography of indigenous peoples by foreigners and Mexicans, and the location of the archives in which that imagery is held. Some of the archives mentioned are found in Mexico: Archivo General de la Nación, the Fototeca Nacional-Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), the Museo Nacional, and the Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (INPI). Others are located elsewhere: the Smithsonian Institute, the Getty Museum, the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, American Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. Among the photographers mentioned are: Desiré Charnay, León Diguét, Teoberto Maler, Frederick Starr, Carl Lumholtz, Julio de la Fuente, and Nacho López.

Keywords: photographic archives, Native Americans, Mexico, *Indigenismo* (Indianism), imperial photography.

It is hard to escape the impression that sixteenth-century Europeans...all too often saw what they expected to see... But, how to convey this fact of difference, the uniqueness of America, to those who had not seen it? The problem of description reduced writers and chroniclers to despair.

J.H. Eliot (1970, 21)

A thought-provoking gauntlet has been thrown down: “imagine that photography does not have its origins in the invention of

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the device, but rather in 1492” (Azoulay 2021: 27). What sort of photographic archives might exist of the conquest and colonization of Mexico? Let us assume that it was a European invention that the Spanish brought with them in the course of establishing the empire and dominating the indigenous, though the latter must quickly have learned to make use of the new media for their own purposes.

The first photos from the Caribbean would have shown the startled reactions of “rather primitive” natives to the fortune-hunting, battle-seasoned, sexually-starved, and highly-militarized Spanish forces. For instance, one can imagine the celebratory safari-style shots of imperial violence: the cut-off heads held up proudly and the lopped-off ears worn around the necks of the conquistadores (as in Vietnam), the festive reveling in torture (as in Abu Ghraib), even the ghoulish pornography that might exist of rapes or “snuff” imagery. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas would have critically documented the cruel practices of the Spanish, sending the pictures to the king to prove his allegations. The denunciatory visual evidence would be suppressed and hidden in the imperial archive, but foreign enemies would circulate it, as they did with the powerful, if inaccurate, engravings of Theodore de Bry in las Casas’ *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, a major contribution to what Spanish imperialists describe as the “Black Legend”.

Of the Mexican conquest there would be many photos of the indigenous civilizations that came peacefully to join the Spanish, believing that they would be useful tool to free themselves from the Aztec empire under which they suffered. These pictures would show that many of the actual military operations were undertaken by these indigenous allies, who outnumbered the actual Spanish forces by thousands to one. However, they might not be immediately accessible in the imperial archives because they contravene the Spanish myths of the conquest as a result of white superiority and technological advantage. Some photos would have shown what an extraordinary cultural accomplishment was the bustling colorful city of Tenochtitlán, seated in the middle of a lake, with its canals, streets, and monumental painted temples. To conquistador Bernal

Díaz del Castillo, it was “like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis, with great towers and temples (*cúes*) and buildings rising from the water, and all built of stone and masonry (*calicanto*) [...] I’m not sure how to recount it: to see things never heard of, never seen, never even dreamed of” (Díaz del Castillo [1568] 1939: 308). Other photos might have documented how it was reduced to rubble as religious sites were dismantled and their stones thrown into the canals, bringing to an end a city built upon and connected by water.

The imperial archives would contain evidence of war, growth, and scientific discoveries. The building of cities constructed on top of destroyed indigenous ruins would be documented, although those carrying out the labor would probably be replaced with photographs of smiling natives in exotic clothing. The intellectuals and scientists of the empire would come from the church in such men as the ethnographer Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. Their dedication to studying the flora and fauna, including the native inhabitants, would be preserved in Spain or some other European museum. Although the spectacular mass sacrifices and skull racks would be photographed prolifically, probably few images would have been made of innumerable atrocities celebrated by the conquerors, the effects of the plagues, overwork, rape, depression, and alcoholism that led to an enormous loss of life among indigenous communities. There may have been critical imagery by some in the religious orders, and contestatory indigenous photographs documenting settler colonialism – the way the natives were forced off land, and incorporated at the lowest level of the workforce – but it would have been unearthed from church archives or remain in small private collections that have disappeared over time, such as the 1910-1920 images of Emiliano Zapata’s forces made by Cruz Sánchez, the photographer that most documented that revolutionary army, but whose archive has yet to be discovered (Berumen 2009: 385).

Of course, photographs from the 15th century do not exist, but remnants of the original civilizations have been captured on film since the 1840s¹. One might be tempted to think that photographs



have somehow preserved a paradise lost: an ancient, bucolic and communal possibility for living. Anthropologist Roger Bartra makes short work of that inducement; for him they embalm something very different: “they are testimony of one of the greatest cultural catastrophes in the history of the universe: the devastation of pre-Hispanic societies, the global destruction of their cultures and the annihilation of their populations” (Bartra 1996: 238).

It would appear that foreigners were the first to turn their photographic gaze upon Mexico’s indigenous cultures. Such traveler-photographers were usually funded by their governments, and should be seen as part of the broader process of imperialism and neocolonialization, providing intelligence about unknown areas of the world. The intellectual and artistic forerunner of French imperialism in Mexico, Desiré Charnay was commissioned by the Ministère de l’Education to spend the years 1857-1861 there. On his return to Paris in 1861, he immediately presented Napoleon III with a photographic album of his travels documenting the ancient Mesoamerican ruins. He came back with the invading army in 1864, accompanied by a large expedition organized by the French Scientific Commission on Mexico. Mexico was made into a scientific object, and the reconstruction of its ancient past was an attempt to “civilize” the country. According to Charnay, Mexicans “should only applaud” the French invasion, and he felt it was imperial destiny, “does it not correspond to a nation like ours, leader and light of the world, to take possession of these precious monuments” (Bueno 2016: 29).

Among Charnay’s official missions was that of providing the Louvre Museum with visual information about the rich cultural heritage of Mexico, with the idea of producing a publication that would “give amateurs foreigners, and artists a collection of the more curious Mexican monuments, and of the imposing ruins”. (Casanova 2005: 12). Charnay made “some anthropological pictures of Indians, front and side view, near a measuring apparatus, or others where Indian and European helpers appear to give scale to the monuments” (Naggar 1993: 44). When Charnay returned in

1888 to continue uncovering antiquities for the Trocadéro Museum, he faced resistance from the Mexican Congress who rejected a contract that allowed him to export pieces in return for photographs of them. One deputy claimed that it was like a marriage that takes away a daughter, but leaves her father with her portrait (Bueno 2016: 49). His imagery is widely distributed in French archives, as well as other imperial collections such as the Smithsonian Institute and the Getty Museum.

An officer of Maximilian's forces, Teoberto Maler – and his images – remained in Mexico when the invading forces retired. He made himself into an itinerant photographer who lived from taking portraits in modest rural towns all over Mexico, representing businesses, and documenting pre-Hispanic ruins (Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba 2008). His attraction to the country was based on his empathy with the native populations, to which he scrupulously referred as the “original peoples” rather than *indios*, a term that carried(s) a denigrating connotation:

the original peoples or “*los indígenas*” are the most interesting for me. They are the most solid part of the population in Mexico, upon whose shoulders fall the major part of the work, but they live in extreme ignorance, because the dominant classes tax them but only construct schools for Spanish speakers and will not tolerate schools in the Indian languages (Maler, cited in Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba 2008: 75).

Maler learned Nahuatl, and clearly understood that the miserable living conditions suffered by the native peoples were a product of their exploitation. Moreover, he explicitly celebrated the natives' countrywide attempts to overthrow the white and mestizo ruling classes. Although some photographers had Native Americans as their clients, Maler's may well be the first portraits commissioned by indigenous people in Mexico, and he commented that what “Zapotec women most desire is to have an effigy of themselves” (Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba 2008: 31). The acquisition of Maler's archive by the Fototeca Nacional (National Photographic Archive) is no doubt related to the fact he stayed in Mexico, his empathy for its



native population, and his corresponding capacity to capture that on film.

León Diguét and his photographs are largely unknown and unstudied, but they can be found in the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris. As with Charney, Diguét was commissioned by the French Ministry of Education to undertake six scientific missions during 1893-1914 (Debroise 2001: 126). His achievements were not limited to photography, for he carried out thoroughgoing investigations of many Mexican resources: shellfish and succulents, orchids and insects, cochineal and oyster cultivation, modern Indians and their ancient ruins. He studied the Huichol language, and wrote a book about it in 1911: *Idiome Huichol: Contribution à l'étude des langues mexicaines*, which was published by the "Journal de la Société des Américanistes". He took the *de rigueur* police-style frontal and profile shots, but he also made portraits, as well as documenting their ceremonies, dwellings, and ritual objects.

Diguét's is essentially a colonialist vision: the Amerindians are simply another product of nature about which knowledge could prove profitable, as well as primitive examples that demonstrate the superiority of Caucasians by comparison. Hence, there is no evidence of rapport with his unsmiling subjects, who appear quite uncomfortable in front of the camera. The inducement Diguét offered the Indians for their consent and participation is unknown. A picture of two Huichol women, breasts exposed, pressed up against an adobe wall offers an example of his perspective and the natives' rather forced resignation to their fate. One of the natives returns the camera's gaze with particular vehemence, as if made to feel somehow ashamed to be photographed in a dress that was perfectly natural to them.

Anthropologist Frederick Starr was the most imperial of ethnographic imagemakers, exemplifying academia's role in the neo-colonial process, and his photos have found their final resting place in a great archive of empire, the Smithsonian Institute. A professor at the University of Chicago for some forty years, he was funded by

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that institution to research in Mexico during the years 1896-1899, although the bulk of his financing may have come from trafficking in archeological pieces². Ethnological studies were (and are) related to the interests that finance them, and in the developed countries were part of the rationalization of racism and neocolonial rule. One of the most racist and uninformed anthropologists of his time, he compared Mexican indigenous peoples to pygmies, and suspected that the Oaxacan Mixes practiced cannibalism.

Starr employed the carrot of money as well as the stick of official authority to ensure that Indians participated in his investigations. He sometimes paid volunteers to allow themselves to be measured and photographed, often with the frontal and profile poses employed in police photography. The anthropologist also hired some natives to have their heads molded in plaster casts, which must have been a rather unpleasant experience. More important than money were the letters Starr had from the dictator, Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), to all the pertinent officials giving the unconditional order to cooperate with him; Starr was instructed to go first to the political boss before making contact with the Indians (Starr 1908: vii). For photohistorian Jaime Vélez Storey, Starr's *modus operandi* was that of direct coercion, which also involved the church: "it was neither closeness nor friendly interaction nor consensus that permitted him to make his photographs, but the force of governmental and clerical authority" (Vélez Storey 2012: 49).

The Norwegian, Carl Lumholtz, displayed a very different attitude toward Amerindians. Although his appreciation of their cultures was conditioned by the reigning concept of a hierarchical cultural development, he nonetheless understood that it did not necessarily signify underdevelopment: "I felt myself carried back thousands of years into the early stages of human history. Primitive people as they are, they taught me a new philosophy of life, for their ignorance is nearer to the truth than our prejudice" (Lumholtz, cited in Broyles et.al. 2014: 77). The anthropologist carried out scientific expeditions throughout Mexico from 1890 to 1910, traveling back to the U.S. to raise funds from time to time. He attracted



the interest of millionaires Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, and the Vanderbilts, who were interested in opening up the unknown areas to investment. However, his financial backers remained anonymous, as the work was carried out under the auspices of the American Geographical Society and the American Museum of Natural History.

On his third trip to Mexico he studied the Tarahumara, Cora, Tepehuan, Tarasco and Huichol cultures. His imagery of these groups is among the finest of ethnological photography, for he abandoned anthropometric documentation to focus on daily life. Moreover, he had learned how to take good photographs, and his images registered the different meanings of indigenous clothing decorations. These Indian cultures were largely unknown, and resistant to outsiders. However, Lumholtz was able to establish a friendship with a Tarahumara shaman, Rubio, who opened doors for his cameras, even allowing him to record their sacred ceremonies. Most of his imagery is of Indians posing, some of whom smile, but he also captured them in the acts of hunting, grinding corn, and weaving. His negatives are housed in the American Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo.

Research in Mexican archives reveals relatively few images of Native Americans made by Mexicans during the period 1860-1910. However, Porfirio Díaz eventually commissioned pictures of the ancient monuments and current inhabitants for international consumption. Images of the indigenous peoples were a cornerstone in the Mexican expositions in Paris in 1878 and 1889, the 1892 *Exposición histórico-americana* in Madrid, *Exposición Colombina Mundial* in the Peabody Museum at Harvard University in 1893, and the *X International Congress of Americanists* in 1894 in Stockholm (Rabiela, Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba 2018: 13)³. In 1889, an extensive photographic project was funded throughout Mexico in order to prepare for such international exhibits. This resulted in the first “ethnographic mapping” of “Indian nations”, as they were referred to on the backs of the images (Rodríguez Hernández 1997: 27). The director of the Museo Nacional incorporated already-existing

images from their holdings, and photographers were hired all over the country to participate in constructing what to this day remains Mexico's "calling card": the pre-Hispanic civilizations.

Mexican photographers appear to have largely ignored the Indian nations until they "crash the party" and force themselves onto the stage. Hence, they generally had to make their presence known by subverting the established order of representation whether they be the Mayans who rose up in the Caste War in Yucatán (1847-1901) or the Yaquis who had offered continual resistance on the northern frontier. With the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, Amerindians entered massively into the anti-Porfirian armies, from many different groups. Yaqui and Mayo Indians appeared with bows and arrows as part of Maderista forces in the northwest; Chamula giants and dwarfs were photographed with a Maderista governor in Chiapas (Mraz 2012: 221, 81).

With the triumph of the (moderate) revolutionary forces in 1917, governmental policies toward the Amerindians underwent a profound transformation. The indigenous peoples were now incorporated as a nationalist symbol within Mexican culture, rather than just for international consumption. Moreover, the misery in which many Amerindians lived was defined as a socio-economic problem that could be solved, instead of a demonstration of their racial inferiority. Nonetheless, with few exceptions, "Indians themselves lacked any shared sentiment of Indianness"; post-revolutionary *indigenismo* was a creation from above, and "cannot be attributed to any direct Indian pressure or lobbying" (Knight 1990: 75, 82).

A key figure in carrying out the new government's policy was Manuel Gamio, who argued in his influential work, *Forjando patria* (1916) against the evolutionary racist and hierarchical theories espoused by liberal thinkers that consigned Indians to a primitive dead end: "the Indian has the same aptitudes to progress as does the white" (Gamio 1916: 38). He called for anthropological studies that would establish respect for the native cultures, paving the way for the eventual "fusion" of Indians and mestizos, by involving the former into the capitalist project: "we do not intend to incorporate



the Indian by suddenly ‘Europeanizing him;’ on the contrary, we will ‘Indianize ourselves’ a bit” (Gamio 1916: 172).

Governmental agencies were established to embody the pluralist ethos espoused by Gamio, who was appointed the founding director of the Department of Anthropology, created in 1917 within the Secretariat of Agriculture and Development. President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) was particularly concerned to find ways to incorporate the native communities. In 1936, he established the Department of Indian Affairs (Departamento de Asuntos Indígenas-DAI), and in 1939, he created the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). The DAI was replaced by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) in 1948, and is today known as the Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (INPI) (Dawson 2004). These projects evolved into extraordinary spaces that offered the opportunity to develop systematic esthetic projects for photographing the native peoples, which provided work to outstanding ethnographic imagemakers such as Julio de la Fuente, Alfonso Fabila, Alfonso Muñoz, and Nacho López, among many others. The INAH and the INPI also contain large archives of Indianist imagery.

Julio de la Fuente offers one of the more fascinating stories of politically-committed Indianist photography, dedicated to enabling ethnic justice, as well as carrying out a “salvage ethnography” of disappearing cultural artifacts. From the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s, de la Fuente focused on developing forms of visual education within the INI as well as in the Amerindian communities: teaching courses on drawing and the making of lithographs and posters, as well as programming film series in which movies were critically analyzed. He published prolifically, writing about indigenous ceremonies, illnesses common among the native peoples, rural schools, ethnic relations, nutrition, statistical bias in the national census, the transformation of clothing styles as cultural change, and folklore.

To judge from his images in the Fototeca Nacho López of the INPI, de la Fuente was constrained by anthropological methods

that took precedence over his political commitments or esthetic concerns. The 2500 photographs are largely informational rather than expressive; they demonstrate the necessity to take pictures containing as much data as possible, in order to provide material for later confirmation and revision by other anthropologists. The archive is composed of landscapes and townscapes, markets, churches, indigenous dwellings and ceremonies, pre-Hispanic architecture, standing portraits largely of women, children, and INAH functionaries, as well as photos of schools, some taken at a distance of children and their teacher gathered to be photographed. The reception of his images among the Zapotecs provides a window onto how those pictured felt about de la Fuente's work. They criticized the lack of pictures showing agricultural labor or the elaboration of sandals, but felt his photographs, above all those that visually preserved traditional clothing such as the *huipil* (a common upper-body garment among Amerindian women in Mesoamerica) were generally valued as documents of a history that should be recovered and preserved for the community (Petroni 2009).

Nacho López could arguably be considered the maestro of this genre in Mexico, not only in terms of his exceptional images, but in his reflections on photographing Amerindians. From the mid-1950s to the end of 1970s he worked at times for the INI, photographing a wide range of *pueblos indígenas*, among them, Tzeltales, Tzotziles, Mixes, Coras, Huicholes, Tarahumaras (Rarámuris), and Chontales; his Indianist photography was published in an INI book, *Los pueblos de la bruma y el sol* (López 1981). In 1978, López contributed an article, *El indio en la fotografía*, for a publication celebrating the 30th anniversary of INI, where he argued that, “the camera can be an instrument of aggression or a connection between friends” (López, cited in Mraz 2021: 174).

Developing rapport – that delicate, if difficult to describe, relationship between photographer and photographed – is crucial to moving beyond the representation of non-concurrence, and may well be one of the primary mediations of the Indianist esthetic. The personal relations that López had established with the native peoples are

apparent in their interaction with the photographer, at whom they smile trustingly, as can be seen in his imagery of the Tzotziles. Even when Amerindians do not smile at López, they return the camera's gaze, masters of the situation rather than objects of the photographer. López searched for ways to empower the Amerindian peoples and to avoid exoticism. Establishing rapport and utilizing angles to give them force within the image were two important esthetic strategies. Another was infusing images with movement within the frame. Rather than being quiet and resigned, the indigenous in López's images are often active and caught in the act of moving.

The 150,000 images of indigenous peoples in the Nacho López Fototeca of the INPI are indicative of the efforts Mexican governments since the revolution have made to construct memories and identities through photographic imagery. Mexican photographic archives are the most developed in Latin America, and perhaps the entire neocolonial world⁴. The Fototeca Nacional of the INAH contains almost a million images, and the Archivo General de la Nación is home to some 6 million negatives. In 1988, a researcher encountered more than 500 photographic archives in Mexico, and there have since been significant developments in founding municipal *fototecas*, and in publishing books of that imagery (Davidson 1988). Moreover, the Fototeca Nacional has been instrumental in the creation of local archives, offering training in cleaning, preserving, digitalizing, and cataloguing images. Perhaps because Mexico is a particularly ocular culture, there has been a general comprehension of the strength provided by the preservation of their own visual history. As photohistorian Elizabeth Edwards affirmed, "communities which had photographs related to their past were believed to be in a more powerful position in asserting their identities, in negotiating their place in the modern world and in the complex inter-community politics around local leadership and resource ownership" (Edwards 2005: 321).

After Egypt, Mexico was the world's most-photographed country by foreigners during the 19th century (Naggar 1993: 44). The vast majority of those images went into imperial archives. The

Mexican Revolution produced a consciousness of the necessity to rescue and preserve the sources upon which to construct a new national identity. One of those sources, certainly one of the most important in Mexico, is photographic imagery. The indigenous peoples are the cornerstone of that identity, and post-revolutionary governments established institutions, such as the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) and the National Institute of Indian Peoples (INPI), which created photographic archives that include large numbers of Indianist images. The establishing of Mexican *fototecas* from the national and state levels to the municipalities offers an instructive example of how what we might loosely call “The Mexican Archive” moved from being under imperial dominion – where information could be censored, unavailable for consultation or too costly to reproduce – to become one of the most powerful tools with which to construct Mexican nationhood and identity.

NOTES

¹ I have written more extensively about Indianist Imagery: *Imperial, Neocolonizing, and Decolonizing Photography*, in *Mraz* 2021: 140-186.

² Gabriela Zamorana, communication, 20 July 2017.

³ The Brazilian government, in contrast, had included Amazonian tribes more than ten years before, in the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1867 (Navarrete 2017: 84).

⁴ With the exception of the Moreira Salles Institute’s holdings of 2 million images in Rio de Janeiro, Latin American photographic archives are relatively small and scattered among national libraries and regional collections. I thank Fernando Osorio for informing me in general terms about the condition of photographic archives in Latin America.

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