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Review / Reseña

Shelley E. Garrigan, *Collecting Mexico: Museums, Monuments and the Creation of National Identity*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012.

Developing an Artistic Sense of *Patria*

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Garrigan's study focuses on the relationship, sometimes contradictory and sometimes synergistic, between the act of collecting (art, artifacts, data) and the creation of national identity. With a nod to Jens Andermans's *The Optic of the State*, Garrigan's book fits into a trend of recent studies dealing with the modern nation-state's use of art collection as a tool for consolidating power and giving that power a patina of inevitability, as the curator/collector works to make a specific sequence of objects appear to be the natural one. In this formulation, collection shares something with narration: it functions as the bare bones sketch of a national historical narrative in which a series of objects, like a series of events, leads cleanly and inexorably to the government of the present.

Garrigan takes the relationship between collection and exchange value as a point of departure, noting that creation of a national Mexican state coincides with the development of an international art and artifacts market. The question is not so simple as a contrast between the spiritual capital accumulated in national museums and the financial capital invested by private collectors. As Garrigan sees it, the development of an artistic sense of *patria* (or a sense of artistic patria) is defined in Mexico by "a dialectical tension *between* those two opposed systems of value" (4).

This confluence of the uses of art and artifact in the era of positivism suggests too many questions for any single academic monograph to answer. Garrigan chooses to concentrate on the contribution collected objects make to the institutional development of a mystical concept of the Mexican state. Her approach could be boiled down to two questions: How did the Mexican state create a shared sense of meaning by putting together displays of objects? and why was the process so successful?

The task of deciphering what she accepts as a successful and organic-looking state narrative calls for skepticism, and early on Garrigan cites Marshal Berman on "the *a priori* precocity of modernization as a phenomenon" (21) and Justo Sierra on chronology and storytelling. Garrigan explains that the curator/collector is a storyteller and thus bound to employ a logic that reveals the arbitrariness of chronology, a logic in which "beginnings are neither original nor permanent in that they are not only infinitely repeatable but replaceable as well" (13). Curation is, therefore, in part the art of creating natural-looking beginnings, endings, and narrative arcs from material that offers almost infinite possibilities.

Seeking as it does to unravel the process by which Mexico successfully created an idea of itself through the collection of objects, Garrigan's book is "pedagogical," if we take Georges Didi-Huberman's sense of the term, in which he cites Karl Kraus: "to learn to see all things from the perspective of conflict, of transformation, of separation, of alteration" (aprender a ver todas las cosas bajo la perspectiva del conflicto, de la transformación, de la separación, de la alteración). Garrigan pays special attention to the "how" question at the center of her study, providing real insight into the painstaking, contradictory, and anything-but-linear

creation of the state aesthetic.

The first chapter deals with painting, a form impossible to separate from the legacy of colonialism given Mexico's history of producing "pinturas de castas"—literal attempts to use painting to produce and express a racial taxonomy of colonial life. The late-nineteenth-century creation of a Mexican painterly aesthetic, as chronicled by Garrigan, depends on a delicate dance between artist's intentions and the perceived limits of public taste. Here the question of imitation vs. originality, with all of its inherent problems, comes to the forefront of the debate. Garrigan traces the recurring question of just how "Mexican" Mexican painting should be, noting that while conservatives tended to favor a universal notion of the sublime, liberals pressed for "typical themes" as an affirmation that the republic's quotidian life was indeed worthy of being immortalized on the canvas.

Garrigan also explores a parallel, but by no means analogous, divide between the universal sublimity of the republic's patriotic rhetoric and the more earthy language of a growing local and international art market. This juxtaposition of transcendental rhetoric and the marketplace is one the book plumbs fruitfully in a variety of contexts, and here it leads Garrigan to a convergence that again touches on pedagogy or, as she puts, the shared prospect of development in which "Mexican consumers would learn what to buy and the artist would learn what to paint" (64). Pedagogy is everywhere in this chapter, from José Martí's prescription for a "school of Mexican types" to Alberto Bribiesca's "Moral Education: A Mother Leads Her Daughter to Help a Begger" (1879) with its demonstration of "the spiritual side of consumerism" (58). What emerges from Garrigan's analysis is a republic that expects a great deal from painting and posits the artists as, by turns, chroniclers of a "real" Mexico that already exists and the creators of an idealized state that should exist.

The next two chapters deal with archaeology and national monuments, and here the relationship between patrimony and commerce provides insight into the politics of a developing national *zeitgeist*. Regarding archaeology, Garrigan notes the artifice behind the national celebration of indigenous objects and sites, calling the process a shift that

moves the objects from "other" to "national property" (7). As in chapter 1, Garrigan finds that the obvious contrast between the marketplace and the national pursuit of patrimony is internal to the act of collecting, especially in a nation with "prolonged experience of cultural loss through patrimonial confiscation" (65). Collection, as Garrigan sees it, embodies a combination of destructive forces and redemptive intentions, juxtaposing a physical process that separates objects from their natural environment with a "nostalgic, ironic, and impossible gesture of recuperation" (99).

Garrigan's technique of probing the contemporaneous discussions of what have come to be accepted as historical trends is an effective point of departure for analyzing what she calls "a type of ceremonial frenzy that marked the late nineteenth century." One particularly telling example is the drive to construct a monument to the memory of Benito Juárez, a project begun soon after his death in 1872, but finally postponed (until 1905) because the process of running submitted proposals through a gauntlet of public criticism plus a panel of judges bogged down, producing no agreement about either the best site or the best form for the monument. The sincere and widely held desire for a monument did not, Garrigan concludes, survive a process designed to make it rise organically from the public will (111).

The reflection on monuments and nationalism leads Garrigan not only to comment on the link between modernity and the concepts of membership and association, but also another curious conjunction of private capital and public enterprise. Noting that Mexican nationalism tended to use a "vocabulary of moral debt" when remembering fallen heroes, Garrigan points out that "the need for private sources of funding to homage the memory of the nation's fallen heroes provided an opportunity for the inherited obligation to be fulfilled through monetary contributions" (129). Here we have a special sort of blood money for which the paying party need not feel any guilt or shame.

Garrigan's reflections in chapter 4, which covers the 1889 Paris World's Fair, lead her to shift from guilt to melancholy, citing Roger Bartra on the specifics of the Mexican case. This particular emotion, she concludes, citing both Bartra and Freud, is best understood not as a

characteristic of Mexican thought per se, but as a basic condition of occidental culture's focus on the sublime. Spectacles such as the Paris exhibition therefore stand out as "a type of bandage to cover an otherwise jagged seam of destabilizing national catastrophes" (142-43). Garrigan again pays fruitful attention to the details of what the principal actors were saying in the moment, especially when she reconstructs the controversy and internal debate over the exposition's decision to designate an area where the Latin American nations' exhibits would be housed and to locate that area far enough away from the U.S. and European displays, "thus reducing the possibility of unfavorable comparisons" (150). Garrigan concludes that there "is an irony to the politics of space and presence witnessed here: one argues for representative autonomy when the ultimate object is social membership" (150). This irony goes back to the old problem of the national aesthetic explored in the book's first chapter—to what degree is projecting nationalism an act of agency and to what degree is it confined to spectators' expectations? The discontent Garrigan uncovers in the Mexican reaction to the fair's organization points to an almost aesthetic displeasure with what the organizers assume their public will expect of the nation and the region.

Perhaps the most surprising analytical angle of the entire book is the approach taken with the official use of statistics in the last chapter. Again, the focus on contemporaneous discussions uncovers a wide-ranging meta-discourse on the topic in question. Long before the positivist projects for producing national statistics came to fruition late in the century, a national discussion on the need for such statistics and the question of what they might be expected to represent was well underway. Garrigan provides some early insight from Manuel Ortiz de la Torre's 1833 text on what a national statistics *should* accomplish for Mexico. While the lack of illustrations from Torre's text makes some of what Garrigan is describing difficult to visualize, she points out his clear attention to visual presentation allows his text to shape, with its graphs and subdivisions the "*idea* of a national image," a notion Garrigan argues "is every bit as powerful, given its direct association with scientific truth, as the material forms of national collections viewed thus far" (156). Once again, thematic unity comes from

the juxtaposition of quantifiability with mystical transcendence. Jens Anderman has argued that "to collect also implies to postulate a space or territory," and Garrigan manages to spotlight the relationship between sharp points of data and the abstractions they are made to represent.

Mapping and statistical analysis emerge here as acts of faith, different by degree but not in kind from the idealistic creation of national myths and monuments. If pedagogy begins, returning to Didi-Huberman's definition, with the skeptical evaluation of compelling mythical structures, then Garrigan's study operates on a second level, beginning with skepticism but moving towards an analysis of how the myths are made rather than a denunciation of the arbitrary nature of their construction.