

East and West? A different story: the impact of Mexico on 20th century Asian art

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Carlos V. Francisco, *Sewmate*, 1967, oil on canvas, Central Bank of the Philippines Collection. Image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Manila.

It is accepted universally that the world splits through the Pacific. There is a date line knifing down, where travellers lose and gain time – an unheard of concept for the rest of the Westernised world. In the past, the Pope started the idea with the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, expanded in 1529 to divide the world through this misty line, allocating colonial possessions (if they could be got) to the Portuguese and Spanish depending on their geographic relation to it. Today, the Pacific Ocean looms as one of the last great unknowns, a huge area to be flown over, with grateful reference to a few islands on which to either land to refuel, or aim towards if shipwrecked.

Yet at a key stage in the history of Asian art, around the middle of the 20th century, there was a very strong artistic relationship between artists in Asia and Mexico. Today, it does seem strange. Certainly, contemporary Mexicans look easterly, to Europe, or north and south to the rest of the Americas. This article aims to trace what happened in Asia in relation to Mexico; it is a story too for a place like Australia – unusual in its cultural positioning outside a simple East/West reading of culture.

The impact of mid-century Mexican art – the art of Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco and David Siqueiros, in particular – on the art of their contemporaries in Asia was surprisingly considerable and wide-ranging. It took two very important forms: the confidence that the then-colonised artists in Asia gained from the internationally recognised achievements of the

non-European, non-Caucasian Mexicans; and the physical form of their work – large, political and often on the wall.

This impact came at a key time in Asia when the Second World War was changing long-established European colonial control; national independence was becoming a political possibility; information about ideas and trends elsewhere was more accessible through reproductions and books; and travel for artists was more available. When many artists of Asia were starting to flex their own locally-derived artistic muscle, the example of the revolutionary Mexicans was of great interest and inspiration. But first should be acknowledged an earlier and very close relationship: the galleon trade from Acapulco, on the west coast of Mexico, to Manila, meeting up with the trade goods passing through the Philippines' capital from China, as well as from other parts of Asia, including spices from the East Indies. The Manila galleons were the largest ships then built, made of Philippines' hard wood, and their trading led to huge profits for their owners. From the 17th to the early 19th century (when Mexico gained independence from Spain), the trade included ivory (via India and Africa) and Chinese silk to Manila and Mexico.

It was from the 1930s that the Mexican artistic wave passed over parts of Asia. The new work of Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros and, as we shall see, artists like Miguel Covarrubias (whose work had been acknowledged and was successful not only in Mexico but also in the USA), gradually



Salah Guira, *Corollaries*, 1956, oil on canvas. Private collection. Image courtesy CARD (Centre for Archiving Research and Development), Oskar's Connoisseurs of Art Pty. Ltd.

became known in Asia too. They were successful in the West but not of the West, and that, like the Japanese military defeat of Western powers, was an important psychological step in the minds of many artists in Asia still struggling with colonialism and other forms of Western hegemony.

Further, the Mexican work was about issues that had import in Asia during this decade in particular – a time of political challenge and social change – and it was created with a mass local audience in mind. There were three main issues, besides the fact that the artists were not Caucasian. First, it was political art (with Siqueiros expelled from the US for his work). Second, it was about local issues (Rivera consciously researched pre-Hispanic culture and made local images of Mexican life scenes of drama and importance). And third, they made the work accessible to the public, particularly through murals but also through cartoons. In Asia this was reflected in the emergence of paintings which were figurative, emotive, narrative and often large.

The first in Asia who overtly followed the Mexican lead were, unsurprisingly, the Filipinos. Victorio Edades (1895-1985) travelled to the USA to study in 1919 and stayed there until returning to Manila in 1928, staging one of the capital's most influential exhibitions of 'modern' art. He collected books on Mexican art, including the muralists, during his time in America and they, like the new ideas on art that he discussed with his younger acolytes and subsequent partners, Galo Ocampo (1913-85) and Carlos V (known as 'Botong') Francisco (1912-69), influenced the path of the most interesting art of the Philippines in the 1930s and onwards.

Most importantly, the three artists joined to paint a number of very large, influential and public murals. Unfortunately most were lost in the Second World War and remaining photographs only give a pale monochrome hint of their achievement. The first was the series done for the Capitol Theater in Manila, in 1934. Edades wanted to:

... infuse the strength and simplicity of the Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and Orozco into their collaborative work ... to forget the one-point perspective common to easel painting and juxtapose objects, events and figures ... to depict the nation's progress toward self-government, for the Philippine Commonwealth was shortly to be established ... The right side of the (Capitol Theater) mural depicted Spanish influence in religion and trade while the left side symbolised the contributions of the United States, such as industrialisation and a system of government. In between, a *nipa* hut stood for native Philippines culture. Out of these three influences, a glorious 'Filipinas' arose in a great upward sweep. The title of the mural was *The Rising Philippines*.³

They went on to paint murals at the State Theater (see opposite), as well as for leading businessmen. All the commissions were influenced by architect Juan Nakpil, and the trio painted images for his house as well. The most important commission for a private dwelling was the ceiling mural for the residence of President Manuel L. Quezon. The final work with Edades in charge, done before the war and the first in actual fresco, was for the Quezon Institute, a government hospital. All the images were educational, celebratory and affirmative, in contrast to the Mexican artists' tendency for satire and irony. However, their sheer size, narrative intention, focus on indigenous history, and formal qualities – the flat shallow picture plane (as Edades articulated) and flattened, simplified figures delineated with a flowing but overt outline – all related strongly to the Mexican works.

It would be of interest to know the reaction to a late mural by Edades done in 1939 for the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco, in terms of the audience understanding that the work, called *Unity of Culture*, with many Filipino references but owing so much to the well-



Tin Sibiak, *Inventory, Studies for the Colonial Accusatory (1988)*

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LEFT: Carlos V. Francisco, Victorio Edades and Galo Ocampo. *State Theatre Mural*, 1935 (detail), Manila. Images collection of Victorio Edades. RIGHT: Miguel Covarrubias. *The Only Hop*, 1936. Photograph. Courtesy Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts



known Mexicans, was by a Filipino. Edades's and Ocampo's work was different to Francisco's in the way they showed the stylistic influence of the Mexicans. Francisco acknowledged his debt to the work of Rivera, but as critic Alfredo Rocas says: 'He learned much from Rivera. But Rivera's figures were massive, hulking, not at all graceful like Botong's.' Rocas analyses Francisco's special Filipino character in his portrayal of men: 'As in [Filipino nationalist] Rizal's novels, they are all sad, strong men, and the women are always somewhat *mestiza*, romantic, like elusive goddesses ...' Francisco, like Rivera, celebrated the simple life of the local people, painting scenes of the countryside, in villages and simple domestic settings. Like Rivera, he imbued these scenes with a heroic strength, implying that from these people came the locus and focus of the wider society. He also included local, indigenous Filipino symbolic references, documents of belief and place. Francisco lived this simple life himself, refusing invitations for international travel, remaining as one of the people in his own village of Angona, a little outside Manila. He is loved and respected for this as well as his art. This lived affinity with the intentions of the Mexicans is furthered by his stylistic affinity, especially with

Rivera's work: large, flat, linear, decorative figures active across a usually flat picture plane.

A multi-talented and open-minded man of the world in the 1930s was Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias (1904-57). Not as well known as Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco or, more recently, Kahlo, he has been receiving more attention recently in North America through exhibitions and publications. The focus in these, not surprisingly, was the very successful *entree* for the Mexico City-born young man in 1923 to New York, making very witty drawings of notables of the time for upmarket publications. He quickly joined the fashionable crowd of New York, and always through his life seemed instinctively to have fruitful contact with creative and interesting individuals. Certainly, his book *Island of Bali*, published in 1937, describes his personal journey getting to know people who showed and told him the intricacies of this complicated island society. The book, which became very well-known, includes his spare, fluid, witty line drawings of people, costumes and details of Balinese life, and a number of images of his paintings of Bali. These paintings, like *Every Night is a Festival in Bali*, reproduced in *Life* magazine, 1937, also made the exotic island culture better known.

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ABOVE: Nuneleco Alvarado, *Land not bullets*, 1992. oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 11 panels. Installation view, Queensland Art Gallery, 1993. Collection the artist. LEFT: Detail view of Nuneleco Alvarado, *Land not bullets*, 1992.



Covarrubias's book talks of himself and his wife, Rose, also from Mexico, as 'Western', and indeed his reputation as an artist was made in the USA. But this belies two important issues that seem, indeed, to come from his Mexican background. First was his interest (of itself) in a culture like Bali. His work in New York was in part known because of his depiction of Harlem's inhabitants: images of nightclubs and dancing, done with the fluid liveliness seen later in his images of the *barong* or *legong*. He chose to look outside the mainstream culture of the Anglo West, and celebrate what he saw there. *The Island of Bali* is extraordinary for its admiration of and sympathy with this culture, seeing the complex issues of its capacity to change with the onslaught of outside interest. His last chapter is titled 'Modern Bali and the Future'.

The second issue is that he did bring with him to the US his use and interest in the style and details of pre-Hispanic Mexico. The spareness of his figures, their round sculptured solidity (certainly of his painted figures) and plasticity speak of pre-Columbian sculpture, and are reminiscent of Rivera's monumentalising work. His tubular Balinese figures with smooth, unboned limbs, clearly articulated with strong outlines, are apparent in the work of Anak Agung Gde Sobrat (1911-92) who knew Covarrubias and is mentioned in his book.

Despite Covarrubias's focus on Bali, his work has been acknowledged as more influential in China, specifically



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SANGGAWA, Palo-Sebo, 1995, oil on canvas. Collection Queensland Art Gallery. Purchased 1995 with a special allocation from the Queensland Government. Celebrating the Queensland Art Gallery's Centenary 1895-1995.

in Shanghai which he only briefly visited on his way to the Dutch East Indies. Shanghai in the 1930s was the centre of modernising frenzy, with foreigners and locals alike striving to work hard and live fast in this booming 'international' city. It was a centre for writers and social commentators, attracted and appalled by the city's opportunities and social turmoil. Visual artists responded to both mainstream international art trends of the time – often coming in through Japan but also directly through books and reproductions – and also developed huge followings for popular forms of visual commentary: woodcut images, drawings for the many magazines and newspapers abounding, and cartoons. One of the leading cartoonists was Zhang Guangyu (1900-64) who, in the 1920s and '30s in Shanghai, led others in establishing magazines, exhibitions and support for this newish visual form. The young artists were attracted to the critical social images of George Grosz and David Low, Kathe Kollwitz and Francisco Goya and Miguel Covarrubias.

Covarrubias was seen as a 'Western' artist, known through his work made in New York. But there was acknowledgement of the importance of Mexican forms in his work, particularly the geometric designs. And it was known that he was Mexican, a man like them who might be attracting a different response in the mainstream Anglo world of the

United States. Zhang and his confrère Liao Bingxiang (1915-2006), like Covarrubias, looked to local folk art traditions as well as high-art references. Zhang particularly admired Covarrubias's style – within the realm of the cartoon but also elegant and stylish, spare and flowing. Perhaps his reduced, curving, elegant lines appealed to the Chinese respect for the beautifully controlled brush stroke of traditional art, especially compared with the jagged and often harsh line of Grosz or Kollwitz. Covarrubias visited Shanghai in September 1933 and was met by admiring young Chinese artists.⁴ However, his less strident political style and indeed the elegance of his work were no longer seen as relevant after the events of the Japanese invasion of 1937 and China's long period of civil war.

Many artists in Java were involved in the war against the Japanese and then against the Dutch in the 1940s, and it was only at the end of that decade and into the 1950s that they could again turn greater attention to their art. Javanese artists had long admired what their confrères in the Philippines had achieved in their struggles for independence. And they too knew of the achievements of the Mexican revolutionary artists. Many wanted to go to Mexico to see the works. Two who did were Sudjana Kerton (1922-94), who travelled there in the 1950s, and Affandi (1907-90), one of the leading artists of the period. While Affandi respected the work of the Mexican artists, their overt political stance and flat linear style is very different from his expressive, personal brush strokes.⁵ Sudjana Kerton stayed in the US until the 1970s, and it was only on his return then to Indonesia that his contribution to Indonesian art was really made.

Others wanted to go, but could not. One of these was the great Indonesian artist Hendra Gunawan (1918-83), whose political views led to his arrest. He had been central to the development of a socially focused art in Yogyakarta, central Java, in the years around the struggle for independence, and he remained outspokenly aligned to left-wing politics. Indeed, his long association with *Lekra*, an artists' group close to the Indonesian Communist Party, led to his long-term imprisonment. Before this, in the 1950s, he had taught at the main art academy in Yogyakarta and

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travelled to the USSR, PRC, East Germany, Italy and Rumania, but he never made it to Mexico.⁶

In India, again the period after independence in the 1950s opened more opportunities for its artists. One of the main artists to depict social issues, Satish Gujral (b.1925), travelled to Mexico to study in 1952. He had seen the traumas of Partition in his native Punjab. He studied first in Bombay and came in contact with the modernist movement there, though was less attracted to the new 'expressionist' style. He was more interested in local traditions and, always, social issues. He subsequently gained a Mexican Government scholarship and went there, rather than to London or Europe as other young Indians did. He served an apprenticeship with Rivera and Siqueiros, though the bravura of his style is closer to Orozco's work, and held his first solo show in Mexico City in 1953. He painted many murals on his return to India (and also in the USA), from the 1960s into the 1980s. Gujral's later work was also not widely followed, markedly different from the more lyrical narratives of the Baroda school. Another individual link between India and Mexico was the appointment of (later Nobel laureate) author Octavio Paz, (1914-98) who had earlier written on Mexican identity, as Mexico's Ambassador to India in 1962.

The last few decades have seen the third manifestation of the link between Mexico and Asia in the work of the Filipino artists who paint the huge, mural-derived images of life in both art galleries and wider afield. Pablo Baens Santos (b.1943) and Danilo Dalena (b. 1942) were early leaders of this new group of artists. Others who emerged include Edgar Fernandez (b.1955) who began a series of large, melodramatic, religious history paintings about the Philippines, a mix of Hollywood, Spanish baroque and a detailed rendition of the symbols of oppression and nationalism (an example being *Unfinished painting of the present*, 1990-93, 3m x 6m). Likewise, Nunelucio Alvarado (b.1950) with his huge (2.7m x 15m) canvas *Land not bullets* (1992) (see page 14), showed the plight of poor farmers in the Visayas. Alvarado's work – flat, linear and massive – is truly a formal descendent of the Mexicans. The group of muralists called Sanggawa, that rose to prominence in the late 1990s, continues this heritage. More than other Asian artistic descendants of the Mexicans, their work is successful because it glorifies the spirit and history of the local people in story, symbol and materials, but also points out very vividly the various problems and failings of the powerful – whether politicians, landowners or the hierarchy of the church.

I have speculated on a geographic reason why this debt to Mexico is so little articulated: the Pacific Ocean is a formidable physical and psychological barrier. But social history also has a role. Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser make the point in their book on art in Latin America, *Drawing the Line*, that Siqueiros and others had led many of the revolutionary practices for the US artists from the

1930s, including the use of machine paint and engines, which artists like Jackson Pollock took over, but that by the 1950s the debt to Mexico was unfashionable to state, and the references were instead to European sources.⁷ They further argue that the promotion of abstract art by the US in Latin America also reduced acknowledgement of the importance of the figurative Mexican work. In this post-war period in Asia too, the increased prosperity and force of the new abstraction took the wind out of the sails of the social realist artists and, with it, due acknowledgement of the role of these important non-European precursors.

Notes

1. There are still verbal references: the *mantones de manila*, the embroidered silk and fringed scarves worn with combs and over shoulders by women of Spanish background, either in the Americas or Spain itself, which came from China, but with their Filipino name. Amongst the legion of carved ivory Christian figures seen and collected through Mexico are those that originate with Chinese artisans in Manila. Their round-cheeked, tiny mouthed, sloe-eyed faces are of Chinese deities or beauties, rather than European or Middle Eastern ones. I like to think their swaying figures are not only due to the bend of the ivory tusk but also to the traditional Chinese admiration for the bound-footed stance of their women-kind.
2. Purita Kalaw-Ledesma and Amadis Ma. Guerrero, *Edades: National Artist*, Filipinas Foundation, Manila, 1979, pp.71-72.
3. Alfredo Roces 'Interview', Manila 1972, in Cid Reyes, *Conversations on Philippine Art*, Cultural Centre of the Philippines, Manila, 1989, pp. 103, 105.
4. A wide-ranging discussion on this period of cartooning in Shanghai is in Hung Chang-tai, *War and Popular Culture; Resistance in Modern China 1937-1945*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994.
5. See Astri Wright, *The Jakarta Post*, 28 June 2000, for comments on Sudjana Kerton's and Affandi's Mexican interests. She is reviewing an exhibition at the Mexican Ambassador's residence, which includes 'two wonderful works made in Mexico ... a sketch of a village market scene and an oil painting of a Mexican family'. She also says that reproductions of two other Mexican paintings are exhibited as well.
6. See Astri Wright 'Painting the People' in Joseph Fischer (ed.), *Modern Indonesian Art*, Jakarta and New York, 1990, p. 123.
7. Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser, *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America*, Verso, London, 1989, pp. 86-87.

Alison Carroll has been an academic, critic, writer, curator and administrator of art exhibitions and artist exchanges with Asia for over 20 years. She established and is Director of the Arta Program at Asialink.

