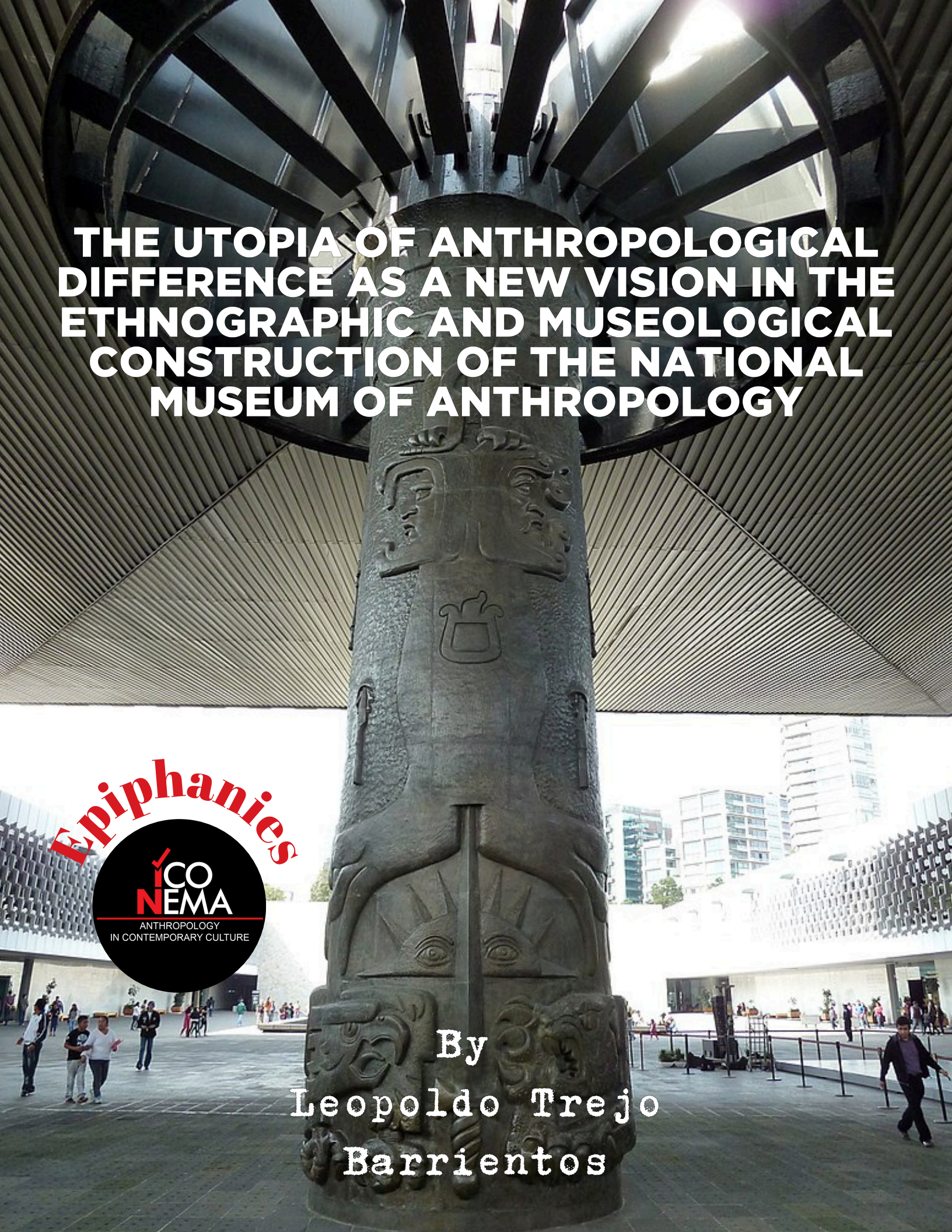


THE UTOPIA OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE AS A NEW VISION IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC AND MUSEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Epiphanies
ICONEMA
ANTHROPOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

By
Leopoldo Trejo Barrientos

The history of the National Museum of Anthropology (MNA) dates back to the first half of the 19th century, when President Guadalupe Victoria decreed the founding of the National Museum in 1825. This decision: "[...] reflects a widespread trend among the newly independent countries of Spanish America: that of creating national or regional museums. Thus, Chile had its first museum in 1822, Argentina and Colombia in 1823, Peru in 1826, and Bolivia in 1838. Founding museums followed the founding of independent nations." (Achim, 2014, p. 74).

But since communities are imagined (Anderson, 2006) and traditions are invented (Hobsbawn, 2012), the new nation-states felt the urgency of creating an "essential" continuity between the pre-colonial past, the present and the dreamed future, for which they wove their national being from the paradoxical relationship between a population that assumes itself to be modern and reproduces the values and institutions of European tradition (first creole and then mestizo), and others, historically discriminated against and exploited, that the State encompassed in the supra-ethnic category of indigenous or Indian (Bonfil, 2019, p. 22).

This supposed continuity between pre-Hispanic cultures and present-day indigenous peoples has accompanied the construction of the Mexican state and is the main obstacle to the development of ethnography and museology at this emblematic museum.

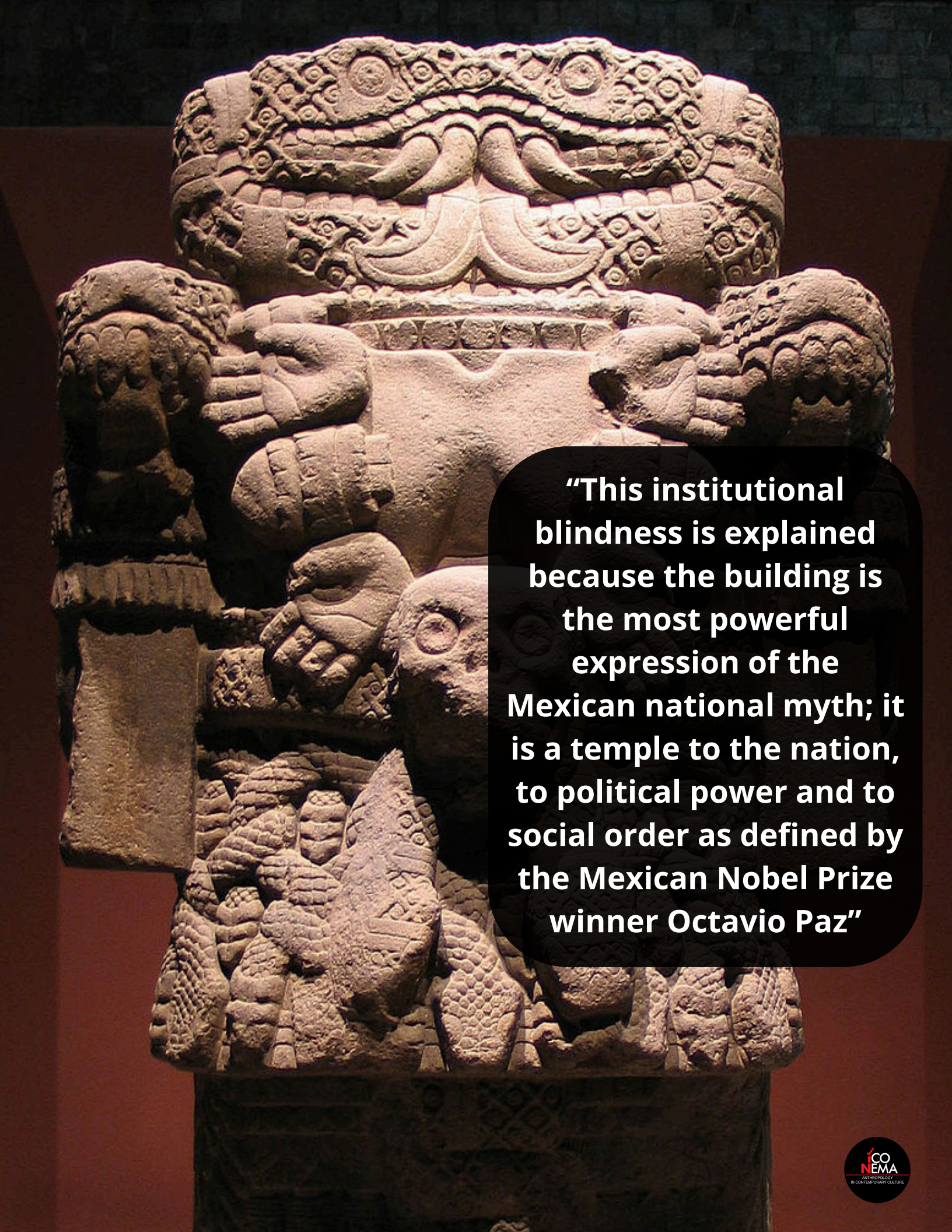
The creation, in 1887, of the Anthropology and Ethnography section at the National Museum of Mexico marked the beginning of the temporal continuity between these disciplines and the indigenous, where anthropology, specifically archaeology, represents the origin of the nation, while ethnography is tasked with accounting for the "civilizational continuity" through the collection and study of living peoples. These peoples, following the classic evolutionary scheme of the *scala naturae*, in which living beings are organized hierarchically from simple to complex, with humans at the top, dating back to the works of Plato and Aristotle, were viewed as backward and their cultural expressions as survivals of the great dead civilizations.

Despite the initial success of this equation, since the 1960s it has become very difficult to sustain, among other things, due to decolonial struggles, the profound transformations experienced by indigenous peoples, the proliferation of other types of non-indigenous otherness, the professionalization of social anthropology, the constant questions that indigenous peoples ask about anthropological work in general and ethnographic work in particular, and, of course, the crisis that anthropological museums have suffered since the 1960s, especially large national temples such as the MNA.

From the perspective of museological studies, Francisca Hernández explains that the emergence of the so-called "new museology" in the 1980s responded to the crisis of traditional museums —positivist and historicist, focused on the figure of the figure of the curator and where the visitor is passive and the learning processes homogeneous— which are incapable of

responding to the multiple and accelerated socio-cultural changes taking place in the global world (Hernández, 2006, pp. 91, 95-98, 123). For his part, from the perspective of social anthropology, Adam Kuper argues that anthropological museums have been in crisis for decades (Kuper, 2023, p. 337), a statement that he shared with the authorities of the MNA who expressed their surprise since the number of visitors is growing and the site is considered one of the most famous museums in the world. This institutional blindness is explained because the building is the most powerful expression of the Mexican national myth; it is a temple to the nation, to political power and to social order as defined by the Mexican Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz (1972).

Since its founding, the MNA has been experiencing a museological and anthropological crisis, the result of the institutional folly of maintaining the continuity between dead (pre-Hispanic) and living (contemporary) Indians. The restructuring of the ethnographic



“This institutional blindness is explained because the building is the most powerful expression of the Mexican national myth; it is a temple to the nation, to political power and to social order as defined by the Mexican Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz”

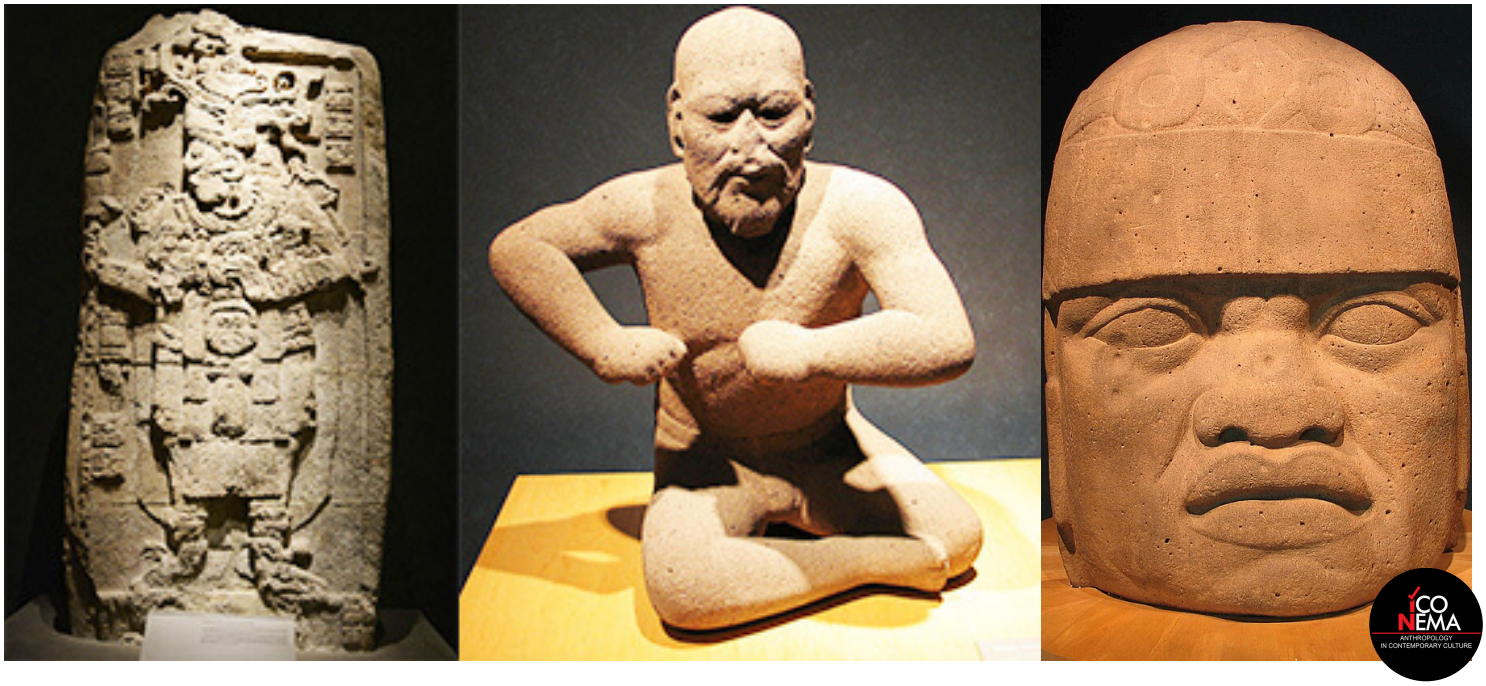
galleries in 2025 reflects this long-standing crisis, which has been denounced since its inauguration in 1964, but is ignored because it runs counter to the founding myth of the State and its heritage policy. If, as Adam Kuper envisions, the "future of anthropological museums in Mexico is a matter of national interest" (2023, pp. 337), everything indicates that it will be impossible to transcend the traditional vision.

The critique I propose is the result of an ethnography of the public and the curatorial sphere in the ethnography area of the MNA, as well as a comparison of different partially or totally ethnographic museums that share the "modern" vision of the exhibition of otherness.

By "modern" vision, I understand that which, following Elaine Heumann (2005) and Jette Sandahl (2005), reproduces dichotomies such as savage/modern, soul/matter, culture/nature, and of course, past/present, among others, from which it creates and reproduces an orthodox evolutionary view of peoples..

This vision contrasts with the "native" perspective of museums such as the National Museum of the American Indian in New York, which has chosen to privilege native curators.

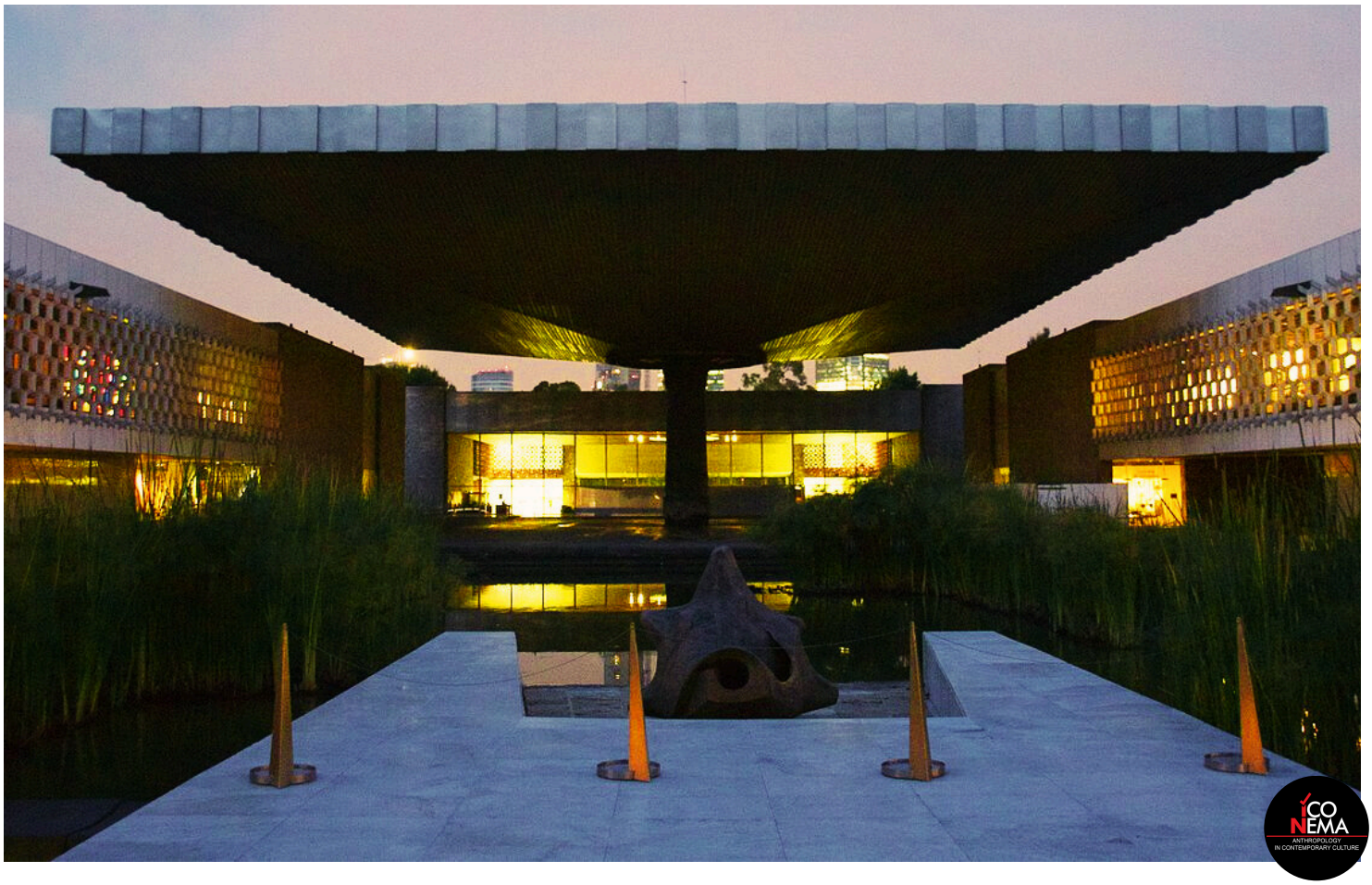
In the hypothetical continuum demarcated by modern and native visions, the MNA would have to decide between remaining imprisoned in the former and reproducing traditional forms as it has done until now; or perhaps opting for the latter to embrace some of the ideas of the new museology and museums of identities (Kuper, 2023) or, as I propose, being ethnographic in the strictest sense, a choice that would force it to commit to the theoretical and methodological demands of a reflexive, holistic discipline, free of nationalist constraints and, therefore, close to the proposals of critical museology.



Highlights

Since I joined as curator of ethnography at the MNA, I've been struck by the streams of people visiting the archaeological galleries and the few visitors who came up to learn about the ethnographic ones. I decided to investigate and measured the time they took to tour my old Gulf Coast of Mexico gallery, and it turned out that no one took more than two minutes to walk through. Considering that the gallery encompassed two historical regions comprising at least twelve indigenous peoples speaking languages belonging to four linguistic families, it's clear that cultural diversity and its complexity went unnoticed.

In 2016, I repeated the exercise in the recently inaugurated Otopamese peoples' gallery. Unlike my previous survey, this time I questioned the visitors. As expected, they knew little or nothing about the peoples on display, and all they remembered were the most colorful pieces. The yoke of pre-Hispanic origins and the continuity of indigenous essences are behind this disinterest, which is only justified if we agree that contemporary peoples are survivals or living fossils of a bygone world. To disguise this nationalist connection, nothing better than the rhetorical recourse to the mirror and the idea of reflection: I am Mexican because I have something indigenous in me and therefore I can look at myself in the generic face that the past presents to us. But since it is not clear what in me is indigenous, the museum fulfills the task of recognition, of identity, but not of the external, mestizo, urban, national self; but of the deep Self, of the deep, interior, rural Mexico for which Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1994) fought so hard.



From an ethnographic perspective, it is obvious that the MNA is not a "great mirror" of the living Indigenous world. Discursively and spatially, each floor displays distinct universes whose continuity was constructed by the nationalist discourses that inspired the independence movements of the early 19th century (Early, 2002; Bartra, 2005; López, 2017). In this context, it is clear to Mexicans that on the ground floor we look to the ancestral or root Indigenous person, the warrior and original architect of our homeland, while on the first floor we are confronted with the immediate, uncomfortable, and contemporary Indigenous person to whom we do not know what we owe. It is the Indigenous problem that for much of the 20th century justified racist policies of acculturation or directed assimilation, but which, in the early 21st century, is presented by the same ethnocidal State as a heritage treasure to be safeguarded.

The problem for the national state and its museums was that dozens of communities survived Spanish and internal colonialism, and in the 21st century, they defend their identities and territories and do not conform to the archaeological model of the Indian as root or reflection, forcing a change of perspective. But how do we transcend the plane of archaic reflection? The strategies we have implemented since 1964 have failed because the link of continuity between archaeological and ethnographic exhibitions is incapable of accounting for the transformations undergone over five centuries—as was the original plan—and, on the contrary, posits and reinforces the false permanence of pre-Hispanic Mexico in countless groups whose historical and cultural specificity is annulled thanks to the supra-ethnic category of indigenous, which is now constitutional.

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The obligatory contrast the museum poses between the two floors puts curators-ethnographers in a difficult position, because when faced with the grandeur of pre-Hispanic civilizations, we must juggle to ensure that current cultural difference is not read as continuity, but rather as a discourse of difference and resistance. Therefore, it is essential to assume that this is not a single "indigenous" museum, but rather two different museums united in the same architectural space. If the archaeological mirror is a metaphor for the known, the recognizable, the identical, transcending it means rendering strange what at first glance seems one's own, identifiable.

If I had to radically distinguish between archaeological and ethnographic exercises in the MNA, I would bet on the optical distances that define them. Archaeology is born from the real and unbridgeable historical abyss that prevails between the observer and the exhibits; between them exists a communication gap that allows for speculative play (speculative insofar as there is no dissent). Archaeology is a monologue in front of the mirror. Ethnography, for its part, recognizes no unbridgeable distances; on the contrary, it postulates their impossibility unless it decides to resume its old colonialist jargon. But by rejecting them, it is forced to construct its own abysses in the present to convince itself that beyond evolution, development, and folklore, contemporary peoples and collectives produce differences that do not reflect the national. Roger Bartra was right when he stated that:

> *If the museum ceases to be a spectacular gallery of the hallmarks of national identity, the function of ethnography can change substantially. It can cease to be a guide for indigenous zombies who wander through its halls like tourists, and become a discipline capable of deciphering not only exotic survivals, but also signs of modernity and postmodernity. (2006, p. 347)*

Contexts

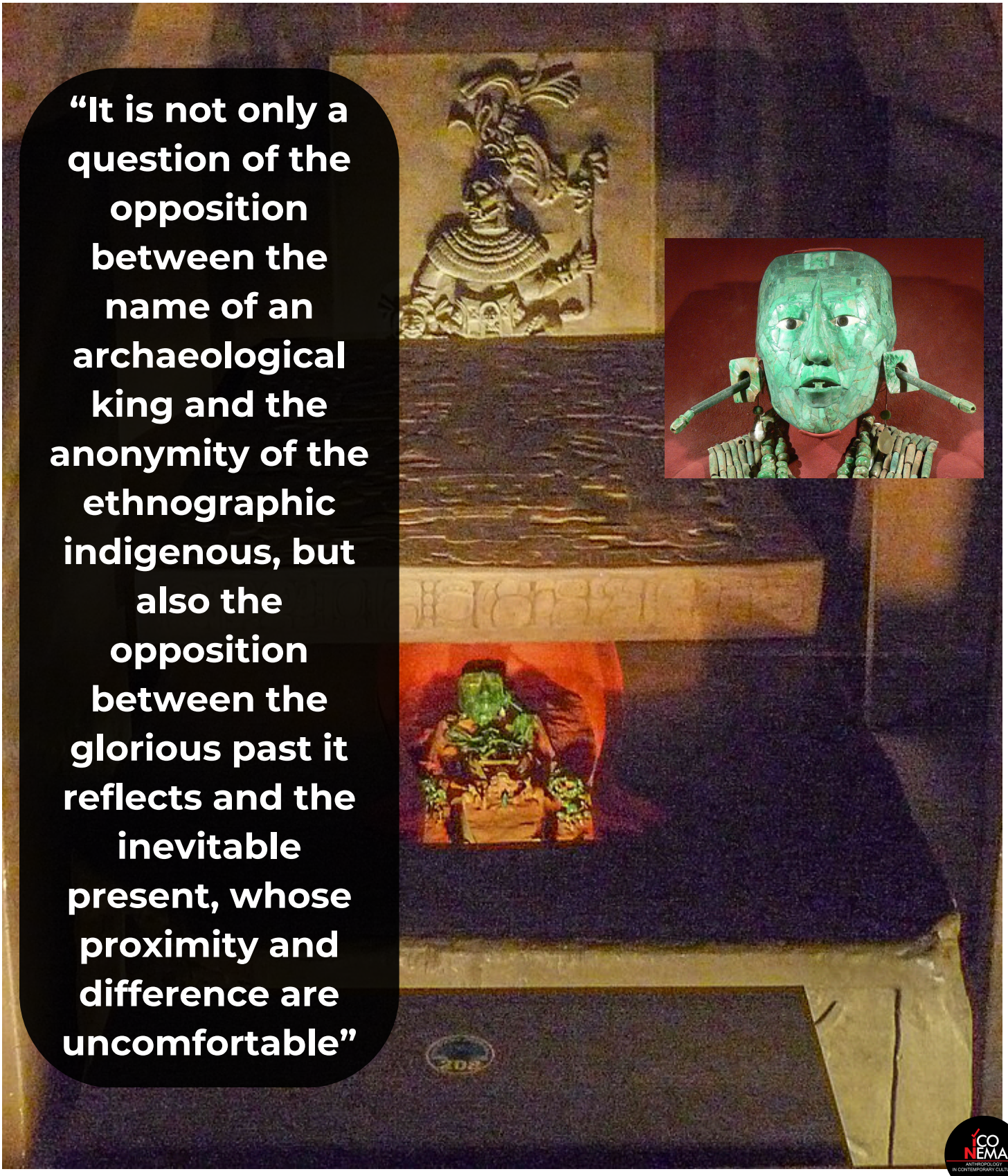
I joined the Ethnography Department at the MNA not because of a vocation for museum studies, but because I needed a job. My knowledge of museums was nil, since during my years studying ethnology, I never had a class, subject, workshop, or talk dedicated to research in these spaces, curatorship, and even less so, museology. During the first few weeks, my colleagues instructed me in the new profession, which was limited to solving cataloging problems and planning new acquisitions based on identifying "gaps" in the different collections. When I inquired about the exhibitions, they told me that the room I was assigned had been renovated four years earlier, so I would have to wait at least 20 years for a new comprehensive reorganization.

Although in the two decades I spent at the MNA, I heard about great museologists like Luis Vázquez, Iker Larrauri, and even Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, little or nothing was said or discussed about museology. In such a scenario, each professional thinks about the museum from their own discipline (Hernández, 2006; Lorente, 2006), such that archaeology colleagues curate from an archaeology perspective, while ethnographers, from an ethnographic perspective. Thus, without direction but convinced that things weren't going well, I developed ideas that ended up being very close to critical museology. Based on the premise that ethnographic difference isn't discovered or observed with the naked eye, the first thing I questioned was the reproduction of contexts. Why were we so concerned for decades about the detailed reproduction of the worlds of indigenous peoples? Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, architect of the brand-new MNA building, gives us the answer:

> *These rooms [ethnographic] presented greater challenges in terms of museographic expression, as we did not wish to lose their anthropological, historical, and living value, without falling into what can easily be solutions with decorative rather than scientific inclinations. With the advice and direction of those responsible for each of the ethnographic rooms, the installation was always very demanding of authenticity; therefore, when the script called for the reproduction of a specific habitat, the inhabitants of the areas themselves were transported to Mexico, with all their construction materials, furniture, and belongings to assist us, although in reality, they directed the architects and museographers. (Ramírez, 2006, p. 53)*

The recreation of contexts, a widely used solution until the 2025 restructuring, is linked to the ideas of reflection and "authenticity" and confronts us with the problem of the relationships between objects, the recreated contexts, and the texts that describe them; in other words, it confronts us with the problem of representation. The comparison between the archaeological tomb of the Mayan king Pakal and the lost ethnographic Totonac house will serve as an example. Pakal was and remains a Mayan ruler of the Classic period (205-950 AD); meanwhile, we know nothing about the lady who lived in the Totonac house, except that she was Totonac and judging by the bamboo, palm and earth

house, also poor. It is not only a question of the opposition between the name of an archaeological king and the anonymity of the ethnographic indigenous, but also the opposition between the glorious past it reflects and the inevitable present, whose proximity and difference are uncomfortable.



As Jonathan Friedman (1992) pointed out, from the present we shape the past and project ourselves into the future. Of course, to carry out this work of recognition, it is necessary to lack referents, faces capable of speaking to themselves. The reproduction of archaeological contexts is not experienced as artificial because it is known to be artificial in advance; in the absence of referents or dissent, difference is taken for granted. The opposite occurs in ethnography, as it is almost impossible to lack references from indigenous peoples, which, unfortunately, are far from positive, especially if they occur in urban centers or marginalized rural areas where social inequality is evident. The stereotype we have of contemporary indigenous peoples is uncomfortable because it reflects 500 years of colonialism.

Despite the vindication movements of communities fighting against this stereotype, the social divide and historical prejudice end up obscuring those postcards that show us successful communities proud of their differences. Fortunately, these images are increasingly common, and in the medium term, perhaps they will force a change of perspective in museums. While this happens, how do we ensure that urban audiences interpret strange clothing, dirt floors, and altars with paper gods as worthy differences? How do we ensure that they don't correlate poverty and marginalization with the complex symbolic worlds we present behind our museum showcases?

If our intention is not to denounce social backwardness—the State forbids us to do so—but rather to promote knowledge of of

Totonac coastal house. Former Gulf Coast Hall (1964-2025), MNA. (Leopoldo Trejo Barrientos, March 10, 2008).

other worlds, the reproduction of contexts is of little help. Despite being detailed and faithful, ethnographic houses and models seem more artificial than pre-Hispanic tombs because we have failed to generate a cultural estrangement capable of canceling out the gaze toward the past. Therefore, despite the fact that they have been significantly reduced in the recent restructuring, I affirm that the reproduction of contexts and settings undermines anthropological difference.

“The devil is in the details, not in the contexts. Fidelity removes from us the political responsibility of creation, that is, of choice. If curatorship is an exercise in content selection and creation, fidelity has no place because it suggests objectivity, one of the first renunciations made by critical museology, which seeks, instead, the exacerbation of subjectivities”

Instead of turning houses and models into the image of any day in any community, our obligation is to highlight their architectural characteristics but, above all, the symbolic connections they have with other aspects of social life. Something similar happens with mannequins; we could remove them to delve deeper into the cosmic meaning of a scarf, or the indices of authority and gender of this or that textile. The accumulation of objects and linear and assertive discourses no longer work, and it is necessary, as critical museology proposes, to focus on fragmented journeys and the generation of questions. The devil is in the details, not in the contexts. Fidelity removes from us the political responsibility of creation, that is, of choice. If curatorship is an exercise in content selection and creation, fidelity has no place because it suggests objectivity, one of the first renunciations made by critical museology, which seeks, instead, the exacerbation of subjectivities (Lorente, 2006, 2015, 2019, 2021; Hernández, 2006).

The same applies to our museum labels and guides. These texts shouldn't describe what people are looking at; on the contrary, they should warn visitors that what they are seeing is not what they think they are seeing. Just as there is no "natural" connection between the past and the present, there is no connection between the object and the text that names it. A circular clay griddle used to cook corn tortillas should cease to be a comal and become, for example, an altar to the Moon.

Let us risk revealing, through obstacles and games, the analogies that each people draws about their world. In this sense, long and anonymous explanatory notes are merely an old and tired pretext to avoid authoring a true anthropological text that, instead of "objective" and "faithful" descriptions, presents the hypotheses, doubts, and paths to our interpretations.

Just as René Magritte played with the relationship between text and the image of a pipe, we should also play with the relationship between ethnographic objects and the audience's prejudices. Among Totonac women, the "comal" is also used as an offering to the Moon and to cure menstrual ailments or overcome difficulties in getting pregnant. We must emphasize these types of non-obvious associations, not just their everyday function.
Source: Image created by Leopoldo Tejo Barrientos.

On the other side of the mirror

Large national museums like the MNA can hardly transcend their walls to reach communities and territories and be a factor of local transformation, as proposed by the new museology (Hernández, 2006; Lorente, 2006). However, for the purposes of objective representation, traditional museology has normalized the idea that communities go to the museum to show themselves. In the last days of October 2006, a group of Totonac men came to the MNA to perform the now-lost Dance of the Old Men. Taking advantage of their stay, we visited the archaeological and ethnographic rooms of the Gulf of Mexico, since, in theory, they should recognize each other in both.

In the first, we spent more than an hour, in the second, less than half an hour; in the first, they posed next to an Olmec head and took souvenir photographs, in the second, they did not. What idea, what doubt, what new knowledge could they have gained from their experience in the ethnographic room that represents them?

Dance of the Old Men and celebration of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day of the Totonacs of the Huasteca at the MNA (Leopoldo Trejo Barrientos, 2006).

The archaeological rooms sparked the greatest interest among my Totonac friends. However, unlike the general public, they did identify with the ethnographic room, even though this recognition did not translate into curiosity or interest. Regarding the first point, it is essential to emphasize a profound difference, as their interest in archaeology was not motivated by nationalism. For them, archaeological artifacts are not archaic evidence of a glorious past, but rather its present; they are the "ancients" upon which the rain cycles, good harvests, and the powers that enable shamanic work depend. For them, archaeology is not a national history or a reflection; on the contrary, it embodies the present of their religious beliefs.

Upstairs, they expressed indifference. The exercise of viewing themselves as museum objects made them aware that their world is "curious" to us. A mirror for the mestizo Mexican to recognize himself as "Indian," the Gulf Coast room was for the Totonacs a reminder of our prejudices about them and the way they themselves have internalized them. That's why these kinds of replicas have to say more than they show; we have to make any audience feel strange, postponing any attempt at recognition. Hence the urgency of exhibiting hypotheses, not truths, since the former guarantee an interpretive challenge for visitors that may give rise to multiple doubts depending on the cultural capital of the different audiences.

Another example of Native American concern about how we represent them took place in 1999. To give greater visibility to the Huasteca region compared to the Totonacapan, the curatorial team decided to incorporate a replica of a Teenek house. Unlike the Totonac house, this room has a circular floor plan, an architectural solution associated with the strong winds that batter the Huasteca during the summers and autumns. True to the traditional museology of the 1960s, members of the Teenek communities were invited during the process to build and decorate it.

Totonac musicians during their visit to the Mexica room of the National Museum of Anthropology (Leopoldo Trejo Barrientos, 2010).

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“This case confronts us with an old dilemma: should we curators step aside so that Indigenous people can decide how to be represented, as proposed by the Native vision expressed in the "identity museums" (Kuper, 2023)? Is the Native vision the only option to avoid the rusty colonialist discourse of anthropology and its museums? Launched point-blank, we can only nod”

The house was impeccable. Structurally, the possibilities for modification were limited, and I can affirm that the recreation was architecturally "faithful" to the world there. However, the question remained as to whether Teenek houses there are actually so well-maintained. Aware that they would be seen as the "Indian" reflection of the national, they opted to disguise the context to the point that, at least for the ethnographer, the exercise bordered on falsehood. This case confronts us with an old dilemma: should we curators step aside so that Indigenous people can decide how to be represented, as proposed by the Native vision expressed in the "identity museums" (Kuper, 2023)? Is the Native vision the only option to avoid the rusty colonialist discourse of anthropology and its museums? Launched point-blank, we can only nod.

Granting that anthropology could one day generate knowledge without domination, the inverse question arises: is a discourse about itself anthropological? There is no doubt that the Teenek were, are, and will be outside of anthropology; neither they nor any other indigenous people need to be defined by anyone, much less require an anthropologist to define themselves.

However, their profound difference, the one that opens the possibility of dissent, is only possible through estrangement, that is, tto knowledge acquired through methods and conceptual frameworks foreign to their cultural specificity and superficial differences.

From my perspective, anthropological museums like the MNA have little chance of transitioning toward the native model, especially if they are the pivot of national identity (Kuper, 2023, p. 337). I can't imagine the day when the government and authorities renounce essentialist discourse and hand over the galleries and collections to indigenous peoples. In this scenario, it's more interesting to ask whether the MNA is truly anthropological. I don't think so. We have made the mistake of assuming that difference is at stake in the variety of languages and dress, when in reality it is constructed, negotiated, and, therefore, the responsibility of the researcher. Ignoring any critical exercise, at the MNA we have promoted the contemplation of difference instead of intellectual participation, which is achieved by placing obstacles to the gaze, to common sense, and to linear and traditional teaching.

As can be deduced from critical museology, it will be essential that no one recognizes themselves in our galleries, even those being represented.

As Oscar Wilde famously said, the true duty of ethnography in museums is not to represent cultures as they really are, but as they really are not, or do not know they are.

Ethnographic Room "Textiles of Mexico" (Leopoldo Trejo, 2024)

“Oscar Wilde famously said, the true duty of ethnography in museums is not to represent cultures as they really are, but as they really are not, or do not know they are”

Projections

In February 2025, the MNA inaugurated five large ethnographic galleries. Among other things, the curators decided to do away with regional criteria, allowing the space of eleven old galleries to become five large thematic exhibitions: 1) Peoples, Languages, and Territories; 2) Agri-Food Processes; 3) Histories, Identities, and Resistance; 4) Festivals and Rituals; and 5) Textiles. These are beautiful galleries where the reproduction of contexts is minimal. We learned our lesson! Unfortunately, the continuist interpretation deepened, as the objects are displayed without temporal or geographical references. The elimination of regions, a principle of diversity that allowed for the correlation of territories and architectural spaces, reinforces the supra-ethnic postulate that indigenous peoples form a cultural bloc opposed to the national being: "They are all Indians and their names are Juan," goes the racist saying. While regionalization criteria were a headache for sixty years, their elimination further distances the museum from the people and communities, reinforcing renewed nationalism.

On the other hand, linear and assertive discourses, simple, superficial, and condescending explanations are the rule, and visitors do not intellectually engage with the exhibits, as they were designed to boast the nation's cultural richness. In this context, the curatorship consisted of piling up extraordinary pieces to achieve great visibility and impress the public. Native peoples were folklorized, perpetuating (renewing?) stereotypes, such that the old opposition between archaeology and ethnography, between the dead and the living Indian, is now posed in terms of the majestic past versus the flamboyant present. This solution allows many Mexicans to recognize their national roots in living peoples, a process of cultural appropriation that justifies the State speaking of them in terms of "our Indian peoples" or "our living roots."

Despite their virtues, the new galleries faithfully reproduced the old traditional scheme and, therefore, like Narcissus, their reflection speaks only to the national self. Indifferent to the global museum crisis, to alternative museological theories, to the demands of indigenous peoples, but confident in the success of the archaeological galleries, which ensure a minimal visitor quota, the curator-ethnographers believe that it is sufficient to update the exhibitions based on old and exhausted schemes.

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