

Postscript: Reflections on the Conquest of Mexico

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The legendary conflict depicted in the Kislak Conquest of Mexico paintings has had a lasting impact on world history. The manner in which subsequent generations have understood these events has, nonetheless, changed quite dramatically over time. Yet, the processes of self-identification and remembrance, two of the key forces underlying artistic production, are precisely what feed the continuing interest in the Conquest of Mexico. Those processes are dynamic, ongoing, and far from complete.

The essays presented here provide three very different points of view from which to approach the subject. Ardren supplies an introduction to the imperial city that was once the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. Rich, sophisticated, by all accounts dazzling, this city was easily as large and magnificent as sixteenth-century European capitals. In the second essay, Few makes it clear that the *reconquista* in Spain forms an essential point of reference for understanding Spanish exploration and conquest of the New World. She focuses on the history of the Conquest and developments of the colonial period, during which Mexico became a

vibrant, multiethnic society. Although the diversity of seventeenth-century Spanish colonial society is invisible in the Conquest paintings, it doubtless informed the culture of both the painters and the patrons of these images. In a third essay, Brienen challenges the veracity of colonial images of native peoples of the Americas. Whatever the truth may have been, the Kislak paintings of Cortés' victory over Moctezuma and the Aztecs are dramatically romanticized versions of a subject that was deeply meaningful to its original audience.

In the years that followed the creation of these works, the Conquest continued to be an important artistic subject. Throughout the colonial period (1521-1810) and into the independence era (1810-1910), artists increasingly glorified the ancient Aztec heritage in much the same way European neoclassical artists lauded ancient Greeks and Romans. By the twentieth century, however, the imperatives of the Mexican Revolution (1910) radically changed the focus of Conquest depictions. Rejecting European visual culture, pre-Hispanic iconography was appropriated by

artists as emblematic of Mexico's noble heritage. In works from this period, the indigenous people and places of Mexico are depicted as colorful and sympathetic, while Spaniards are generally shown as sullen, even grotesque, oppressors. Rivera's murals at the National Palace in Mexico City (1929-1954), which include hundreds of figures and lavish images of native civilizations, exemplify these trends.

Since that time, one of the greatest challenges posed by the Mexican Revolution has been joining the region's diverse populations into a modern nation. To foster a sense of unity and national identity, Mexican cultural institutions increasingly have sought ways of understanding the Conquest within the larger context of thirty centuries of civilization. In the process, the Conquest of Mexico—and the imposition of a colonial European regime—have come to be regarded by many as significant, but ultimately discrete, episodes within the longer sweep of history. By integrating colonial events into a larger continuum, Mexicans are provided a means by which both indigenous and European aspects of heritage are made valuable.

Every generation regards the Conquest based on its own standards. Accordingly, the event continues to be investigated and reinterpreted in the visual arts, literature, and the popular imagination. This exhibition allows us to take part in this ongoing

process by encouraging viewers to question and reflect on the volatile meeting of Europe and America five centuries ago.

SOURCES:

Alarcón (1997)
Errington (1993)
O'Neill (1990)
Braun (1993)