

The 1940 *International Exhibition of Surrealism*: A Cosmopolitan Art Dialogue in Mexico City

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The links between surrealism and Mexican artists have been widely explored in the literature, particularly in the context of the visits of leading French surrealists like André Breton and Antonin Artaud to Mexico in the 1930s. Despite an abundance of scholarship on this issue, however, little work has been done on Mexico's first and foremost public event dedicated to surrealist art – the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* held in Mexico City in 1940. Using archival materials, press reviews, and photographs, this article provides a comprehensive overview of the exhibition, an analysis of its conceptual underpinnings, and an outline of its critical reception, as well as a discussion of its generative and multi-faceted role for Mexican art and its institutions. In particular, we analyze the extent to which the organizers drew upon previous European exhibition discourses and display techniques, and how these practices were adapted for a Mexican audience and the context of the Mexican art scene in 1940. We emphasize the artistic dialogue and discrepancies between Mexican and international artists that led to, and were reinforced by, the exhibition.

The exhibition was organized by the Peruvian poet and painter César Moro and the Austrian artist Wolfgang Paalen, at that time enthusiastic surrealists close to Breton's inner circle. It opened on 17 January 1940 at the Galería de Arte Mexicano (GAM), which by virtue of this exhibition became the preeminent private art gallery in Mexico City. The exhibition notably featured two sections: one focused on international artists and the other on Mexican artists. In our analysis, we emphasize the coexistence of the local and the international in the exhibition, and the tensions created by using this distinction implicitly as a marker of quality. A vivid debate ensued, for example, around the inclusion of Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Manuel Álvarez Bravo in the international section alongside the works of Giorgio de Chirico, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, and Marcel Duchamp, sent to Mexico by Breton, rather than around the choices for the Mexican section that featured diverse artists such as Agustín Lazo, Carlos Mérida, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, and Antonio Ruiz.

We argue that, notwithstanding these tensions, the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* enacted a cosmopolite vision within the hegemonic and post-revolutionary canon of Mexican cultural nationalism, and opened the doors for new influences in the aesthetic and institutional development of Mexican art. We conclude by outlining the considerable impact the exhibition had on Mexican art institutions and curatorial practice beyond the 1940s, becoming a catalyst and enduring reference point for the development of modern Mexican art.

Three Surrealists, One Gallery

A common starting point for the analysis of the links between Mexican artists and surrealism in the 1930s and 40s is André Breton's visit to Mexico in 1938.¹ During his journey, Breton visited Trotsky and met many Mexican artists and intellectuals, most notably the artist couple Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Breton was visibly inspired by these encounters. As a result of the visit, and in light of the imminence of war in Europe, Breton launched a manifesto to renew the mission of art as a revolutionary weapon against both fascist and communist militancy.² Back in France in 1939, Breton further organized the exhibition *Mexique* at Galerie Renou et Colle in Paris, and poured his impressions of the country into a widely read text published in *Minotaure* ("Souvenir du Mexique"). Faced with the European war and the collapse of cultural and moral values, the poet admired Mexico for the "purity" of its primitive cultures and saw in the country the promise of a "land of freedom" (Debroise 184).

On the other hand, Breton also welcomed the opportunity to extend the influence of surrealism to Mexico. The Mexican Revolution had brought about a redefinition of visual archetypes and considerable debate about the mission of art in society. By the time of Breton's visit, the art scene was roughly divided in two groups, the "Mexican School," consisting mostly of supporters of realist, nationalist, and political art, and a heterogeneous group of "non-nationalist" artists who received much less support from the State and embraced a more cosmopolitan conception of art. In this deeply divided art scene, Breton's visit to Mexico between April and August of 1938 spawned both supporters and opponents.

¹ We would like to thank *Dada/Surrealism's* reviewers for their perceptive and constructive advice in revising this essay. On Breton's journey to Mexico see Bradu; Garza Usabiaga "André Breton"; Greeley.

² Breton, Leon Trotsky, and Diego Rivera collaborated on the manifesto *Toward an Independent and Revolutionary Art*, claiming that artistic freedom was a crucial element of Marxist revolution and of the struggle against fascism. See Greeley for a discussion on this topic.

Breton's trip to Mexico and its reverberations throughout the French art scene interested other surrealist artists who visited Mexico or settled there temporarily or permanently. Among these artists were Benjamin Péret, Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, Alice Rahon, Wolfgang Paalen, and César Moro. It is from the presence of Paalen and Moro in Mexico that the project of the 1940 *International Exhibition of Surrealism* was born.

Wolfgang Paalen had entered the ranks of the Parisian surrealist avant-garde in 1936 and participated in the major surrealist exhibitions of this period. He played a key role in the organization of the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris³ and had a solo show at the Galerie Renou et Colle facilitated by Breton. In 1939, Paalen left Paris for New York to escape the turmoil of war. Upon arriving in America, his interest in primitive art led him to take a trip to British Columbia and Alaska during the summer of 1939, together with his wife Alice Rahon (an artist herself) and their friend the photographer Eva Sultzer. Paalen was amazed by the natural beauty of the area and developed an interest in the myths and ancestral religions of the Northern regions.⁴ As a result, he began collecting the art of the indigenous populations. In September 1939, following an invitation by Frida Kahlo, Paalen and his two companions headed south to Mexico City where they became friends with Kahlo, Rivera, and the gallery owner Inés Amor. It was the couple Rivera-Kahlo who introduced him to Mexican culture, particularly the pre-Columbian art for which the Austrian painter developed a deep appreciation.

Paalen soon began to envision a surrealist exhibition in Mexico, similar to the ones that had taken place in Europe. To carry out this ambitious project, Paalen joined forces with César Moro, a Peruvian poet, painter, and follower of Parisian surrealism since the late twenties. Moro had moved to Mexico City in 1938 and had established close connections to the cosmopolitan wing of the Mexican art milieu, befriending for example the painter Agustín Lazo and the writer Xavier Villaurrutia. In previous years, Moro had already tried to spread the influence of surrealism in Latin America by the way of smaller exhibitions and magazines. For example, he had founded the cultural magazine *El uso de la palabra* in Peru with his friend and colleague Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, and he had organized a surrealist exhibition in 1935 in Lima, where he exhibited his own works next to those of five Chilean artists (Ades 30).

Paalen and Moro decided that the most appropriate venue for the planned exhibition was the Galería de Arte Mexicano (GAM). The GAM, run by Inés Amor, was in many ways the first modern Mexican gallery, with close ties to the main actors of surrealism in Mexico. Inés Amor had begun her activities as a gallerist

³ For an analysis of the 1938 surrealist exhibition display see Kachur, Altshuler, and Housefield.

⁴ For more information on the months prior to Paalen's arrival in Mexico, see Neufert 111-29 and Winter 71-85.

together with her sister Carolina in 1935 as a response to the blatant lack of exhibition spaces for modern artistic expression in Mexico City. Official governmental policy in the mid-30s under Lázaro Cárdenas had scorned easel painting as too “bourgeois,” and had instead favored the creation of public murals. In order to create a space for the display, distribution, and sale of contemporary Mexican art outside the official doctrine, the sisters Amor and a group of befriended artists began holding small exhibitions in the mezzanine of the Amor family home before relocating to a small gallery space in 104 General Prim Street in Mexico City, which later became the GAM. Rivera’s support was crucial for the success of the gallery in the early years, and the sisters in turn marketed Rivera’s works. Breton, during his visit to Mexico, held several conferences at the GAM at the request of Diego Rivera (Amor, Manrique, and Conde 34). By 1939 Inés Amor’s ambitions for the gallery had grown substantially, and she bought a larger space in 18 Milan Street. The surrealist exhibition of 1940 would become the opening event of that new space.

An Austere Display

Since the 1930s, surrealist art installations had sought to change the way viewers observed art. According to Lewis Kachur, from the early thirties onward, the main focus of surrealism shifted towards a search for “convulsive beauty” – a display of “the marvelous” – themes that later became the slogans for surrealist artistic display (Kachur 23). In this context, the gallery was a location in which to enact a translation of dreams into the space, forming a visually provocative and unsettling environment for the aesthetic experience of the public.



Figure 1: A view of the display of the exhibition, unknown photographer, GAM Archive, Mexico City.

In contrast, the GAM hanging was much more austere and conventional than its European surrealist predecessors. The exhibition focused primarily on paintings, but also included other media such as photography, drawing, gouache, collage, and watercolors. In photographs of the 1940 exhibition preserved at the GAM archive we can see that, in comparison to exhibitions like the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* at the Paris Galerie des Beaux-Arts, the objects were arranged in a rather orthodox, orderly fashion (fig. 1). The works were displayed on the wall in one or two rows, depending on their size. In addition to contemporary works, ancient Mexican or *art sauvage* objects were displayed inside cabinets or over neutrally colored pedestals. The organizers did not alter the other colored gallery walls and the only objects hanging from the ceiling were typical electric lamps.

Unfortunately, certain kinds of source material (comprehensive photographs for each room, information about the exhibition design, floor plans, etc.) are not available, making deep analysis of certain aspects of the exhibition difficult. In that sense, it is not clear why or which of the organizers chose such a conventional arrangement. One possible influence on their decision could be seen in the “white cube” paradigm that had emerged at the Museum of Modern Art in New York since the 1930s, and to which Amor had been exposed through her continuous contact with the museum and friendship with Alfred Barr, Jr.⁵ In any case, the austere installation invited viewers to experience an ordered contemplation of the artworks rather than attempting to disorient their senses.

However, in other ways, the Mexican exhibition also clearly established visible links to other international surrealist exhibitions, especially that of 1938 in Paris, as demonstrated by both the catalogue and the choice of display. For example, the first image one encountered in the 1940 catalogue was a photograph by Raoul Ubac showing the mannequins of the 1938 show. In the gallery, a photograph by Denise Bellon on the same subject was on display. Photography, in this sense, was not only used as an artistic medium, but also as a way to revive aspects of previous surrealist exhibitions for the Mexican viewer and as a document-witness to the history of surrealist exhibitions.

A further notable feature of the exhibition, however, that puts it in contrast to previous exhibitions is the scarcity of surrealist objects, arguably the highlight of

⁵ By the time of the surrealist exhibition, Inés Amor had taken four exhibitions of modern Mexican art to New York, where she established a friendship with Alfred H. Barr (Amor, Manrique, and Conde 76-77). At the same time, the Mexican government and the MoMA were already planning the exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* to be held in the New York museum in 1940. Kachur has documented the tensions between Alfred H. Barr, Paul Éluard, and André Breton about the scope and display of the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* at the MoMA in 1936-1937 (13-17), which was arguably also rather orderly in its display.

many earlier shows. In the catalogue, an apologetic note by Paalen explained that the absence of sculpture and surreal objects was due to transportation problems in the difficult times of World War II.⁶ Paalen tried to address this absence by including a few surrealist objects from his own work, like his 1938 *The Genius of the Species* (a gun made from animal bones) and a reproduction of *Articulated Cloud* (an umbrella made of sponges and mirrors that Paalen had already presented at the surrealist exhibition in 1938). Figure 1 also shows an ivy-covered chair in the corner of the room, perhaps a distant evocation of the vegetable soil used in the Galerie des Beaux-Arts for the 1938 exhibition, or of Dalí's *Rainy Taxi*, a car overgrown with vines, which was presented at the same occasion.⁷

International and Mexican artists?

According to the exhibition catalogue, the exhibition featured 108 pieces of contemporary art by fifty-one artists. These were complemented by eight works of pre-Columbian art and five masks from Diego Rivera's private collection in addition to five pieces from Paalen's "primitive art" collection. By gathering such a heterogeneous set of objects in one space, the exhibition intended to create a dialogue between objects from different times and spaces that could be decrypted actively by the viewer.

The show included artists from fifteen countries, and the catalogue made a clear distinction between international contributions (ninety-two works) and a section called "Painters of Mexico" (sixteen works). Breton had sent Paalen works from Paris for the international section, and their sheer dominance in terms of numbers set the tone for this international exhibition. While Breton's selection included the work of both first and second generation surrealists, the exhibition noticeably favored pieces produced since the late 1930s.

The selection of works that appeared in the Mexican section was undertaken by Paalen. It included eight artists: Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, Agustín Lazo, Roberto Montenegro, Guillermo Meza, Antonio Ruiz, the writer Xavier Villaurrutia, José Moreno Villa, and Carlos Mérida. Despite their foreign origin, the latter two were considered Mexican artists. Mérida, originally from Guatemala, had been living in Mexico since 1919 and had gained some reputation by calling himself a "surrealist" as a way to combine a cosmopolitan and distinctly American identity in his work (Gilbert 30). Moreno Villa, a Spanish political exile,

⁶ According to Paalen's notes, he had originally planned to present sculptures of Hans Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, and Max Ernst. It is not known what type of surrealist objects would have been part of the exhibition (Paalen and Moro n.p.).

⁷ The theme of vegetation is important in Paalen's oeuvre. During the exhibition of 1938, he had presented an installation of works involving water and plants called *Avant la mare* (*Before the tarn*).

had immersed himself in the country's art to the extent that, in his own words, his work "had been Mexicanized" (Celia n.p.).

Within this exhibitionary division of "international" and "Mexican," it stands out that the works of Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Manuel Álvarez Bravo did not appear in the Mexican section, but were instead displayed as international works. The organizers did not provide any public justification for this inclusion. However, these three artists were known to enjoy a special status among their peers due to their close relationship to Breton and the enthusiasm he had shown for their works.⁸ According to several witnesses, Rivera asked Paalen explicitly to be included in the international group (Debroise 185), and it stands to reason that the three artists were in fact included in the international section because of an explicit endorsement by Breton as full members of the international surrealist community. This interpretation is supported by Inés Amor's later comment for a series of interviews in 1975 that the presence of the other Mexican painters in Paalen's show was mere "courtesy" (Amor, Manrique, and Conde 111).

According to some sources, Rivera not only insisted on his inclusion in the international section, but also demanded a preferential display of his works. César Moro wrote to his friend Emilio Adolfo Westphalen on this matter: "You cannot imagine the fuss Diego has made, who, like Frida, has painted two enormous canvases and wants the best place . . . and the idiotic titles of his paintings. . . . There were many unfortunate circumstances that caused Breton to fall into Rivera's trap."⁹ Photographic evidence preserved from the exhibition seems to support Moro's point. Figure 1 shows the central space allocated to Rivera and his work *Majandragora Aracnilectrosfera Smiling* (1939), the large realistic portrayal of a woman with a shawl holding a skull in her lap. Framed by a floral wreath, the painting clearly stands out from the rest.¹⁰ Likewise, one of Frida Kahlo's pieces, *The Two Fridas* (1939), featured prominently in the exhibition. The viewer could appreciate the painting even from afar due to its placement at the end of a corridor that connected several rooms of the gallery (fig. 2).¹¹ Figure 1 reveals further signs of the preferential treatment given to certain artists. In the center of the photograph, to the left of the ivy-covered chair, one can see Paalen's own *Orpheus*

⁸ Breton had presented Kahlo's and Álvarez Bravo's works during the *Mexique* exhibition in Paris alongside pre-Columbian pieces and popular arts and crafts.

⁹ Letter from César Moro to Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, 27 January 1940, Westphalen Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (qtd. in Ades 30).

¹⁰ The floral wreath around Rivera's portrait could be seen as a reference to Day of the Dead or post-mortem painting traditions in Mexico, which matches the morbid topic of the painting.

¹¹ Frida Kahlo submitted two unusually large paintings in comparison to the rest of her oeuvre – *The Wounded Table* (1939) and *The Two Fridas* (1939). Both works were specially prepared for the occasion of the exhibition.

occupying the center of one of the main walls in the gallery, serving as an exemplar of a pictorial technique called *fumage* recently invented by the painter.¹²

The four photographs presented in the exhibition by Manuel Álvarez Bravo were not specifically made for the display, but were earlier works from the period between 1931 and 1935. Nonetheless, Breton asked Álvarez Bravo to contribute an exclusive image for the cover of the exhibition catalogue. Initially, the artist submitted his *The Good Reputation Sleeping* (1939), a photograph of a female nude lying in the sun. While making reference to classical themes such as erotica and sleep, the image also suggests “chastity, incitement, slumber, threat, flirt and rape,” characteristic themes of surrealism, and thus creates a visual-linguistic sexual scene (Tejada 34). Colette Álvarez, the artist’s wife, remarked on the subject: “Breton has asked for a surrealist photograph, and Manuel said that he had tried to take this one very automatically, in the surrealist way. He told me that he wanted to do it without thinking, just as it occurred to him” (Álvarez Bravo 155). However, Breton decided not to include it as a cover photo and instead chose *About the Winter* (1939), an image showing a piece of stained glass leaning against a wall in ruins and overgrown by vegetation. According to Colette Álvarez Bravo, the decision was made because “the editor didn’t want to deal with this one [the photograph] being censored.” This raises the question whether there was an explicit fear of censorship among the organizers. Similarly, some of the most critical remarks against Catholicism were also censored from the final version of Moro’s introductory text in the catalogue (Ades 34). It is hard to assess if Moro and Paalen were trying to be prudent so as not to have their visas revoked, whether it was Amor who pushed for a more conservative display, or perhaps both. On the one hand, Inés Amor certainly wanted to draw attention to her newly opened location; on the other, she might have decided not to attract public criticism or even official censorship at such an early stage.

The fact that most of the contributions by Mexican artists were made explicitly for the exhibition gave rise to a debate about *how* surrealist these artists in fact were, and how faithfully they adhered to the principles of surrealism in creating their works. Some scholars have argued that the works presented by the Mexican artists “easily stand out in the overall production of these painters because of their will to be surrealists nearly by force” (Debroise 186).¹³ This debate is not surprising.

¹² *Fumage* was an automatic method “which consisted of allowing soot residues emitted by a candle flame to settle on paper or canvas, and interpreting these deposits” (Revel and Habasque n.p.).

¹³ Rodríguez Prampolini presents an analysis of the participating painters vis-à-vis the artistic tradition of “the Fantastic” that had existed in Mexico prior to surrealism and concludes that they could not be considered as such (45-65).



Figure 2: A view of the exhibition, unknown photographer, 1940, GAM Archive, Mexico City.

On the whole, Rivera's oeuvre can hardly be called surrealist. Yet his relationship with Breton in the late 1930s had led him to adopt a certain surrealist influence in some of his paintings. This can be seen in his second contribution to the exhibition, *Minervegtanimortvida*, a still life in which logs and stones turn into the body of a woman (or vice versa). The work shows Rivera's interest in the organic aspects of the body, which, according to Edward Sullivan, evokes the images of Salvador Dalí, though without the psychoanalytic projections often present in the works of the Spanish artist (103). As for Kahlo, Breton himself had called her paintings "surrealist" and had a strong affection for her work. The personal elements she made visual and their imaginative, enigmatic, even schizoid character, resonated well with Breton's aesthetics (Debroise 180). Likewise, the artists presented in the Mexican section of the exhibition did generally not call themselves surrealists. However, they were certainly intrigued by the avant-garde movement and gladly accepted the invitation to present their works.

This paper does not aim to provide an answer to the question of to what extent these painters should indeed be called "surrealist," or how "orthodox" the participants were in their adherence to supposed surrealist practices. Suffice it to note that the Mexican section of the exhibition was far from homogenous and included many different themes and styles. For example, *Malinche's Dream* (1939) by Antonio Ruiz, an image depicting the body of a woman lying on a bed covered

with bedclothes that become the land underneath a Mexican town, can arguably be better understood in political rather than surrealist terms. It can be read from different perspectives to either evoke a nation, a map, the cultural contact of the Conquest, or Hispanic and pre-Columbian elements. It can also be seen as the desires of a woman, her connection to the world of dreams, and the existence of a false reality (Eder). Similarly, Agustín Lazo in *The Interlocutor* (1937), showing some of the elements involved in a phone conversation floating in the void, presents a spooky scene hiding a personal projection of the self. In contrast, Carlos Mérida decided to exhibit a work closer to abstraction, entitled *Ecstasy of the Virgin in the Immobilization of Desire* (1939). Yet, this diversity by itself does not set the Mexican exhibition apart from its predecessors, but is broadly in line with the heterogeneous nature of surrealism that rejects a single visual style.

Pre-Columbian Influences

Another characteristic feature of the exhibition was the inclusion of pre-Columbian, popular, and “savage” art objects.¹⁴ The juxtaposition of “primitive” and modernist works was relatively common practice among the avant-gardes in the first decades of the twentieth century and a method used in many surrealist exhibitions (Staniszewski 81). One well-known example is the 1936 *Exhibition of Surrealist Objects* at the Galerie Ratton in Paris.¹⁵ Breton, Paul Éluard, and other surrealists had started collecting pre-Columbian art throughout the 1920s, and many Mexican artists did the same. Rivera was a prominent pre-Columbian art collector who used his collection for political purposes, arguing that pre-Columbian art and archeology could serve as vehicles to revitalize and build Mexican identity.¹⁶

Rivera introduced Breton to pre-Columbian art (or, more precisely, the pre-Columbian art of western Mexico) during his 1938 trip. Breton consequently held this art in high esteem and, on his return to Paris, organized the exhibition *Mexique* in 1939. The show displayed pre-Columbian and popular art pieces acquired during his trip alongside the works of Manuel Álvarez Bravo and Frida Kahlo as a way to reinterpret the history of Mexican art. In the catalogue accompanying this exhibition, Breton explicitly highlighted the “Colima figurines that are women and cicada” (Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* 143). This mix of objects of different periods in time was used again as an artistic resource in the 1940 exhibition. For example, the pre-Columbian statuettes of Colima from Rivera's collection, a snake-

¹⁴ The term stems directly from the exhibition catalogue (Paalen and Moro n.p.).

¹⁵ The exhibition included objects from Alaska, Africa, and New Guinea from the collections of Breton, Ernst, Éluard, the French archeologist Georges Salles, and Charles Ratton himself (Golan 52).

¹⁶ On Rivera's collection of pre-Columbian art and his interest in the objects of western Mexico, see Braun; also Garza Usabiaga “Anthropology in the Journals.”

woman and a vase-man with snake legs, combined anthropozoomorphism with a surrealist aesthetic, and were put in dialogue with modern works such as *Zoomorphic Couple* (1933) by Max Ernst.

Paalen also decided to include primitive wooden objects from his own collection. While all objects presented in the exhibition under the category *art sauvage* were actually from New Guinea (collected most likely during earlier years), he nevertheless felt compelled to share the formative impact of his exposure to the primitive art of North America through Eva Sultzer's photographs of totem art in British Columbia. Paalen was particularly interested in totem forms, their reference to ancestral myths, and the fascinating foreignness of matriarchal religion, which the Austrian-born artist had studied on his trip to Alaska and Canada before arriving in Mexico (Neufert 111).

The presence of such objects in the exhibition underscores the broader surrealist interest in mythology, and was picked up by the exhibition catalogue. In the introduction, César Moro gave a brief overview of the European avant-garde and its close connection to Mexico's past:

We are witnessing in Mexico the combustion of the heavens: A thousand signs mix together and stand out the conjunction of constellations that renew the brilliant precolumbian [sic] night. The most pure night of the new continent, where great dream potentialities made the powerful jaws of civilization in Mexico and Peru clash together. Countries which keep, in spite of the invasion of the Spanish barbarians and their followers today, a thousand luminous points which must join very soon with the line of fire of international surrealism.¹⁷

For Moro, the presence of pre-Columbian objects was a way to advance his own political agenda. According to Moro scholar Yolanda Westphalen, the catalogue text belongs to Moro's militant surrealist epoch, when the poet sought to construct a foundational myth capable of connecting ancient traditions to a utopian world and to project artistic practice "into an ideological program of constructing a new order" (Westphalen 25). The text reveals how Moro conceived surrealism as the confluence of the individual, the collective, and the cosmic. The reference to "the Spanish barbarians and their followers today" and the imagery around a clash of civilizations seem to transpose the mythic and triumphant past into the war-torn present. Moreover, the passage can be read as an opposition to the prevailing *indigenismo* in Mexico and Peru. According to Westphalen, Moro criticized artist-*indigenistas* as merely focused on folklore. He deplored their lack of interest in present-day indigenous communities and their emancipation, as well as the *indigenistas'* complicity "to perpetuate the order of things and ensure a profitable

¹⁷ The exhibition catalogue was published in a bilingual English-Spanish edition. Moro's quotation has been taken from the English version of his essay, translated by J. Vasques Amaral as indicated in the catalogue (Paalen and Moro n.p.).

exportation art" (128). By elevating remnants of the past (i.e. pre-Columbian art) as the signposts for the "constellations" of the future and a way to reconnect with the universal, Moro moves beyond the folkloristic and into the political, asserting an important catalytic role for them in the shaping of Latin America.

A Memorable Performance?

The *International Exhibition of Surrealism* in Mexico adopted another practice previously used in other international exhibitions: what amounted to performance art *avant la lettre*. An "appearance of the Sphinx of the Night" was announced to the opening-night visitors in the invitation. The Sphinx was impersonated by Isabel Marín, the sister of Diego Rivera's first wife Lupe Marín, who would later become Paalen's third wife. Marín appeared at eleven o'clock in the dark gallery wearing a butterfly-shaped mask and a long white dress. The appearance of a mystical female figure was not a novel feature in surrealist exhibitions. For example, Sheila Legge had enacted Dalí's *La Tête à fleurs* during the London exhibition in 1936 (Castañeda 12-13), and Héléne Vanel had performed *L'Acte manqué* in Paris, also conceived by Dalí, where her convulsive dance simulated a hysteria crisis at the opening of the exhibition.¹⁸

Marín's mask was designed by Paalen, who also decorated a long dress by Marín for the occasion.¹⁹ The Sphinx's outfit perhaps operated as the embodiment or extension of Paalen's 1937 painting *La Toison d'or* (fig. 3), which was not on view at the GAM show. The butterfly can be seen as a metaphor of camouflage and metamorphosis, a common theme in surrealist thought. Roger Caillois' popular text "Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia," published in *Minotaure* in 1935, stands as a witness to the importance of this topic. According to Caillois, the *caligo* butterfly spreads its wings to imitate a bird's eyes and scare its predator, but it is an optical illusion. Caillois wrote that "resemblance is all in the eye of the beholder" (6), referring to the fascination those fake eyes exert over the viewer staring at them. With the costume, Paalen tried to transgress the materiality of the original work and turn it into an experience for the spectator inside the exhibition space. According to Moro, the Sphinx was shown to the viewer like an echo of the inscrutable quality of "the work, which is the answer, all the answers and, above all, the question" (qtd. in Andrade 163).

¹⁸ Vanel's performance had been announced earlier but without an exact time, so that she surprised the Parisian public. On the contrary, the exact time (eleven o'clock) of Marín's performance was written in the show's invitation. For a study of Vanel's dance, see LaCoss 37-61. Unfortunately, there exists little information about Marín's performance. It is known that a speech was given during the exhibition opening by Eduardo Villaseñor, a wealthy businessman, writer and politician, probably after Marín's performance (Rodríguez Prampolini 55). However, the content of the speech and its length are unknown.

¹⁹ According to Lourdes Andrade, Alice Rahon made the Sphinx costume (163).



Figure 3: Wolfgang Paalen, *La Toison d'Or*, 1938. Wolfgang Paalen Collection, Franz Mayer Museum, Mexico City.

In her memoirs, the gallerist Inés Amor recalled the “spectacular” entry of the Sphinx “after the lights were turned off, her image being illuminated with a spotlight” (Amor, Manrique, and Conde 112) (fig. 4). Marín's performance, unlike Héléne Vanel's in Paris, was not accompanied with any type of dance. In an interview in 1994, Isabel Marín recalled a conversation with Amor in which the latter told her not to do anything and stay quiet during the performance as she was supposed to represent a sphinx. In Marín's opinion “everybody in Mexico talked about the performance for a year, it was a very remarkable international event” (qtd. in Bradu 197). However, most reviews published in the Mexican press did not share this alleged enthusiasm; on the contrary, the performance was criticized as “dull” and reviewed with a mocking tone.

In summary, surrealism in Mexico was far from a monolithic or established movement at the end of the 1930s. Despite its heterogeneous and somewhat tentative character, however, it can be seen that the surrealist proposition in Mexico was markedly different from its European predecessors and especially from the provocative 1938 Parisian exhibition. The austere display, the lack of bizarre surrealist objects, as well as a more contemplative, less agitated performance led to a more humble setting and shaped the critical reception of the

event in the press, which in the end was more focused on reviewing other aspects surrounding the exhibition rather than the display itself.



Figure 4: The appearance of the “Great Sphinx of the Night” (Isabel Marín) during the opening night of the exhibition. *Exposición Surrealista Scrapbook*, GAM Archive, Mexico City.

An "Anachronistic" arrival of Surrealism in Mexico

The *International Exhibition of Surrealism* stirred many different reactions. This mix of praise and rejection is already visible in the testimonies of the organizers themselves. On the one hand, Inés Amor declared in 1975 that she had regarded the exhibition at that time as a successful opportunity to change stereotypical views about Mexico outside the country. “Due to Paalen or the exhibition itself, we had everybody’s attention, which it is quite relevant [sic] . . . this was the beginning of an international interest in Mexico and its artistic activities. . . . Through this more direct knowledge, many of the ideas about Indians with feathers were discarded, and people began to realize that Mexico was a country with a very ancient culture and with a present muralist movement, besides being a country that was able to assimilate any foreign artistic influence” (Amor, Manrique, and Conde, 112). César Moro, on the other hand, was deeply

dissatisfied with the outcome, confiding to Westphalen in 1940 his impression of "a private viewing with a totally mad and imbecile crowd, less reaction even, so far, than in Peru."²⁰

The Mexican press discussed the exhibition opening as a noteworthy social event, and generally praised the gallery's attempt to create a cosmopolitan show. The art critic and writer Luis Cardoza y Aragón, who ran a cultural column in the quasi-official post-revolutionary newspaper *El Nacional*, noted: "A surrealist exhibition in Mexico that shows the work of artists of universal prestige is clearly an important event. Curiosity, the need of experimentation, the will to excel, the education of taste are taking place through private organizations such as this gallery, which is offering the visitor a collection worthy of New York or even Europe" (Cardoza y Aragón, "Exposición surrealista"). Cardoza y Aragón further used the exhibition as an occasion to remark on the absence of sufficient exhibition spaces in Mexico City and questioned the national policy of art institutions: "What are they doing? Why don't we have yet a museum of modern art?"²¹ He pointed to the great cultural possibilities in Mexico in such domains as magazine and newspaper publication, ballet, and experimental theatre, and acknowledged the important impulses the GAM had brought to national art as a private sector institution.

Yet, not all the comments were positive. While the Mexican press generally recognized the important role of surrealism in modern art history, several critics questioned the "delayed" arrival of this avant-garde movement in Mexico. The journal *Romance*, the eminent literary organ for Spanish exiles, argued: "This is neither a good nor a bad show. Anachronistic, yes. . . . Surrealism is dead as a battle, as a school, as a warning, as an insolence . . . finally, it is dead, as a movement" (Gaya n.p.). At that time, many critics were interested in the paintings by Dalí, de Chirico, Magritte, and Tanguy, but were at the same time hostile towards more recent surrealist painters including Paalen. Cardoza y Aragón noted that the surrealism of the 1940s was, in fact, repetitive and lacking creativity. "It's the heretics we are interested in. . . . It is easy to tell in this gathering of talent and anxiety what is talent from what is surrealism-by-recipe. . . ." ("Exposición surrealista").

As for the Mexican artists in the exhibition, commentaries mainly focused on the fact that they could not be considered "true" surrealists. The playwright Luis G. Basurto devoted many articles to reviewing the Mexican artists that were part of the show, explaining why the public should not mistake them for surrealists (Basurto n.p.). According to Basurto, Rivera was using "indecent tricks" to make his works look surrealist, such as the depiction of a glove, a knife smeared with blood, red nails, or a spider web. For Basurto, this was simply "fake." In a similar

²⁰ (Qtd. in Ades 30). Letter from César Moro to Emilio Adolfo Westphalen, 19 February 1940, Westphalen Papers, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

²¹ The Mexican Museum of Modern Art would not open until 1964.

vein, Cardoza y Aragón wrote about Rivera's case: "Like the Holy Father, Rivera is everywhere at the same time, but, unlike the Holy Father, he is often not there . . . but, he knows very well what he is doing! His genius and inventiveness allow him to participate in the most childish games" ("Exposición surrealista"). Rivera defended his participation: "Surrealism is the full realism of painting. We incorporate into the paintings the visions we have during wakefulness . . . therefore, through a surrealist painting, we can have a whole vision of things" (qtd. in Debroise 184). Lola Álvarez Bravo, the wife of Manuel Álvarez Bravo and a photographer herself, equally tried to respond to the attacks against Mexican artists in the exhibition: "It is a prejudice to go and see an artwork assuming that one is going to understand it. It is only about the forms and the colors. That's all" (qtd. in Debroise 184).

The controversies surrounding the Mexican artists in the exhibition continued over several years. Particularly Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who did not consider himself a surrealist artist, continued to be the target of attacks in the Mexican artistic milieu. For example, in 1945 the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros accused Álvarez Bravo of committing a "Bretonian" aesthetic crime, implying that he had subordinated his artistic production under Breton's ideas of Mexico (qtd. in Kismaric 35). Some of Breton's close friends such as Luis Cardoza y Aragón later radically changed their opinion about the role of Mexican artists in the exhibition, stressing the originality of a "Mexican school" that owed nothing to the surrealist movement. In the magazine *Taller*, Cardoza complained that the works of Mexican painters were included in the catalogue "in the spirit of provincial surrealism. . . . We have argued that none of them can be seen as surrealist . . . and there is actually no need for them to be!" ("Demagogos De La Poesía" 50). This argument of an independent originality of Mexican artists would become a central feature of the writings of Cardoza y Aragón over the next years. For instance, in the introduction to the catalogue *Pintura francesa contemporánea* (Contemporary French painting) for an exhibition held at the Fine Arts Palace in Mexico City in 1941, he insisted on a New World/Old World dichotomy in the international art scene: "We are facing two universal trends: the occidental one, represented mainly by the School of Paris, headed by Picasso, and the New World one, with José Clemente Orozco as the most representative painter in Mexico" (Cardoza y Aragón, "Prefacio" 7).

Beyond mere aesthetics, the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* also reverberated through the Mexican art scene on a political level. Heated, politically loaded debates about Rivera, Breton, and the artistic movement of surrealism were not uncommon in Mexico at that time, predating even Breton's original visit in 1938.²² The political sympathy of Rivera and Breton towards Trotsky had been an issue of recurrent domestic and international tension, and was one of the reasons why many Mexican communist intellectuals, who generally favored Stalinism over Trotskyism, were hostile towards surrealism on both political and aesthetic

²² See Bradu; Reyes Palma.

levels. Trotsky was assaulted in his house in May 1940, four months after the exhibition, by a group of radicals that included the artist David Alfaro Siqueiros. He barely survived the attempt and was assassinated in August of the same year.

The exhibition and its reception must be understood against this backdrop, and as a foreshadowing of further, political and artistic turmoil. One remarkable example is César Moro's text for the exhibition catalogue, in which he foresaw the possibility of attacks against the exhibition not only inside Mexico but also abroad. In particular, he was aware of the fact that Louis Aragon used his influence in the French Communist Party to undermine Breton's activities as well as those of his friends elsewhere.²³ With a clear reference to Aragon's affinity for Stalin, Moro praised "the joint efforts of men like André Breton, who have given . . . the best of their time to the great and wonderful task of transformation . . . in spite of the treasons like the scandalous and full-of-meaning one of Louis Aragon, . . . who passed as one of the animators of the surrealist movement fifteen years only to fall in 1932 into the lowest moral level of a provoker at the service of darkness and confusion" (Paalen and Moro n.p.).

The Aftermath and Impact of the *International Exhibition on the Mexican Art Scene*

For a variety of reasons, surrealism in Mexico was to follow a different path from its European progenitor. For one, it lacked the consistent and dedicated group of adherents willing to maintain and defend surrealism as a visible, generative movement, as Breton's inner circle had done in Paris. Both Moro and Paalen, the exhibition's two main organizers, openly broke away from surrealism in subsequent years and started to pursue new aesthetic directions. Paalen devoted himself increasingly to the study of pre-Columbian art and emphasized in this creative work the union of art and science, making the transition between surrealism and abstract expressionism.²⁴ Paalen was also instrumental in the founding of the magazine *Dyn* (1942-1944), in which he embraced novel directions of the avant-garde movement while staying at arm's length from the orthodox surrealism of Breton. César Moro, too, increasingly criticized Breton's retrograde intentions to restore automatism as a means for poetic expression (Ades 34).

The largely eurocentric *International Exhibition of Surrealism* also became a catalyst for midcentury Mexican art. For Inés Amor, the surrealist exhibition had

²³ At a conference in November 1938, Breton declared that during his visit to Mexico Louis Aragon had sent letters to the Mexican LEAR (League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers) asking to sabotage Breton's work (Breton, Parmentier, and Amboise 38–39).

²⁴ For a more comprehensive treatment of Paalen's rupture with Breton and his subsequent experiences with *Dyn* see Winter 123-58. Leddy and Conwell and Parkinson elaborate on Paalen's interest to join Pre-Columbian art imagery with elements of wave mechanics inspired by physics.

been a great personal and financial success, and established her gallery as an eminent exhibition space and obligatory passage point within the Mexican art scene. Her central role in the exhibition made Amor a leading cultural agent in the years to come, particularly in the promotion of Mexican art both inside and outside the country. As Jorge Alberto Manrique notes, Amor would leverage her influence to “open her gallery to both refugees and rebel artists of the ‘Mexican school,’” adding “to the already existent influence of Diego Rivera . . . that of other artists like Paalen” (Manrique 138). Manrique’s point is underscored by the various exhibitions held at GAM during the following years. Three artists of the Mexican section of the exhibition – Guillermo Meza, Antonio Rodríguez Luna, and José Moreno Villa – had solo shows at GAM in 1940. The gallery also became the center of gravity for several international artists in exile, such as Leonora Carrington, Alice Rahon, and Paalen himself, the latter of whom also held solo shows at the gallery.

The years following the exhibition also saw the emergence of another group of artists in Mexico that used the surrealist infusion as a springboard to break with previous traditions and the dominance of the muralists, which they considered outdated. Particularly during the 1950s, young painters such as José Luis Cuevas, Manuel Felguérez, Pedro Coronel, Günther Gerzso, and Juan Soriano strictly opposed Mexican muralism and aspired to become part of other contemporary movements around the globe. This search for a new international dialogue was further facilitated by the arrival of a new group of European artists and writers – some close to surrealism – in the early 1940s, such as Benjamin Péret, Remedios Varo, and Leonora Carrington. This combination opened up a new, fresh path for the Mexican art scene while muralism arguably entered into a more institutionalized period.

The *International Exhibition of Surrealism* was also an innovation in the sense that it presented an early example of the display of pre-Columbian objects from the western region of Mexico to the public. Several sites in Colima State had been discovered only in the early 1930s and their objects were mostly unknown to the Mexican public. The surrealist exhibition of 1940 ignited an ethnographic and aesthetic interest in these objects that reached its peak in the mid-1940s with two exhibitions: *Indigenous Art from North America* at the National Museum of Anthropology in 1945 and *Pre-Columbian Art from Western Mexico* at the Palace of Fine Arts in 1946 (Garza Usabiaga “Anthropology in the Journals”). This wave of interest had been largely fueled by Rivera, who already in 1941 published the book *Art in Ancient Mexico* in New York, which included reproductions of his own collection and helped create a trend among national and international collectors around the small figures of western Mexico that were first presented in the exhibition (Braun 268).

The 1940 exhibition further became a major source of influence in terms of display techniques and exhibition narratives. It notably left its mark in Mexican art history by bringing together, for the first time in Mexico, pre-Columbian and

modern works in a single exhibition. This exhibitionary strategy, already widely used in the United States and in Europe, would later become a central element in the temporary exhibitions organized by Fernando Gamboa, the towering figure in modern Mexican museography and cultural diplomacy. In the 1940s, he held important retrospective exhibitions dedicated to Rufino Tamayo (1948) and Diego Rivera (1949), both at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Mexico City. Gamboa rigorously advocated an exhibition style that put the work of modern artists in the context of their "historical and artistic background." According to Gamboa, the pre-Columbian and popular artworks included in these exhibitions enhanced the comprehension and glorification of modern art, and revealed the inspiration those artists took from what he considered "truly Mexican" roots.²⁵

Even if it has been under-studied, the 1940 *International Exhibition of Surrealism* continues to be a reference used by several curators and scholars today as a means to highlight the contribution of Mexican art to the international scene. Several recent exhibitions have paid tribute to the importance of the surrealist exhibition in the history of Mexican art. For example, in the recent 2012 exhibition *Vasos Comunicantes (Communicating vessels)* at the National Art Museum of Mexico City, the curators evoked the Bretonian principle of communicating vessels to illustrate the continued importance of the cosmopolite dialogue that first took place in 1940. In the words of the organizers: "This physical principle allows us to show the process by which two or more continents, linked together, always aspire to have the same level of importance in a statement of many voices, since, in the history of art, the Americas often remain as a relegated continent."²⁶ They continue: "Surrealism is the tube that connects the continents . . . and, therefore, the avant-garde that allows America to acquire the same level of plastic enunciation as Europe."²⁷ *Vasos Comunicantes* did not seek to recreate the display of the 1940 exhibition, but enacted "an homage to the first exhibition in Mexico on this avant-garde movement" (Sánchez).

Conclusion

While much of the existing analysis of Mexican surrealism is centered on Breton, our paper has shown how the presence of other actors such as Paalen and Moro was equally central to how surrealism took hold in Mexico, and how surrealist display techniques and narratives were adapted to a specifically Mexican cultural and social context. With Europe in the midst of a violent war, the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* of 1940, featured a curatorial proposal aiming to confirm Breton's appreciation of Mexico as "the most surrealist country in the world," as interpreted by Paalen and Moro. The vision of Mexico as a chosen revolutionary

²⁵ For an analysis of Rivera's retrospective in 1949, see Rodríguez Mortellaro.

²⁶ <http://www.munal.mx/micrositios/Surrealismo/>.

²⁷ *Ibid.* On the exhibition catalogue, see Useda Miranda.

land and the inclusion of both pre-Columbian art and local modern works in the display were intended to create a bridge between the evolution of the European avant-garde on the one side, and the past and present of the host country on the other, in an attempt to establish Mexico City as a new hub where the surrealist insurrection could flourish. Nonetheless, while Mexico City was a flourishing urban center, it was also the home of a considerably more conservative society than its European counterparts. As a result, it is likely that explicitly sexual and anti-Catholic contents were omitted from the exhibition from its very inception to adapt the previously more radical surrealist displays to a Mexican audience.

Despite the later breakup of Moro/Paalen and Breton, the surrealist exhibition of 1940 can retrospectively be seen as a milestone in the development of modern Mexican art that influenced the aesthetic and cultural debates in the country far into the 1950s and 1960s. It helped create a break with the hegemonic nationalist art paradigm, it considerably strengthened the budding landscape of private galleries outside the national establishment, and it injected a fresh breeze of curatorial practice into Mexican exhibitions that would become a cornerstone of self-image of the country over the decades to come. Those who only point to Breton and the late arrival of surrealism in Mexico – including scholars such as Olivier Debrouse, who noted that surrealism arrived to Mexico in a “soft” version through the 1940 exhibition (188), or Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, who concluded that the influence of the exhibition and surrealism in general on Mexican artists has remained minimal (56) – miss this important historical dimension.²⁸

²⁸ For a deep analysis of the reasons behind Rodríguez Prampolini’s argument, see Castañeda.

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