

Bowdoin College Museum of Art | Brunswick, Maine

PASADO Y PRESENTE
Twentieth-Century Photographs of a Changing Mexico
January 7–March 15, 2020

Throughout the twentieth century, the new and the old have been in continuous dialogue with each other in Mexican culture. In literature, religion, art, architecture, and fashion, the past and the present collide and combine in revealing and meaningful ways. The photographs in *Pasado y Presente* (“Past and Present”) offer a window on modern Mexico through the lens of artists sensitive to a changing country. Some, like Manuel Álvarez Bravo and Manuel Carrillo, were Mexican themselves and aimed at capturing traditional and modern Mexico respectively. Others, like the Hungarian photographer Kati Horna, made a new home in a Mexico renowned for welcoming progressive thought and visionary artists. Still others, like Americans Marilyn Bridges and Ken Heyman, capture Mexico through the perspective of an outsider. Together they portray a culture that has not lost its traditional values but has carried them, in different ways, into modern life.

This exhibition was curated by the students in “War of the Latin American Worlds,” a fall 2019 course in Hispanic and Latin American Studies taught by Carolyn Wolfenzon Niego. Each photograph has been interpreted by a member of the seminar and is paired with a suggestive passage that is drawn from contemporary Mexican authors encountered in class, including Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, José Emilio Pacheco, and Sabina Berman. Together, these voices speak to the themes made visible in the photographs and highlight connections across the arts in modern Mexico.

Pasado y Presente: Twentieth-Century Photographs of a Changing Mexico was curated by students taking the fall 2019 course “War of the Latin American Worlds” taught by Carolyn Wolfenzon Niego. Over the course of the semester, the class met regularly in the Museum to develop the exhibition, reviewing works in the Museum’s collection, identifying thematic links between selections, and carefully refining the vision of modern Mexico on view. The students’ names are listed below and also appear on the labels they have authored.

Emma Adrain ’21
Kathleen Armenta ’21
Eugen Cotei ’21
Luis Cuervo ’20
Luis Miguel Guerrero ’20
Jamil Guzman ’21
Erin Harris ’20
Matt Keller ’20
Emma Lawry ’20

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Matthew McCarthy '21

Elise Morano '20

Clare Murphy '20

María Perez Mendoza '21

Ely Spencer '20

MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO

Mexican, 1902–2002

Votos (Votive Offering), 1969
gelatin silver print

Gift of Michael G. Frieze, Class of 1960
1979.81.3

Elaborately embroidered strips of fabric form a votive offering likely created during a religious festival. Employing a tight crop that focuses our attention on the detailed imagery, Bravo reveals the fusion of religious traditions that took place with the colonization of Mexico. The animals and flowers on the forefront derive from indigenous culture, which places a strong emphasis on nature. However, the dominance of Catholicism prevails in the panel: the Sacrament of Communion, during which a wafer of bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ through transubstantiation, is evoked at the top center of the votive. The miraculous moment is witnessed by a heraldic angel and native creatures, all turned towards the transformation.

María Perez Mendoza '21

“Lo único que la hace a una mover los pies es la esperanza de que al morir la lleven de un lugar a otro; pero cuando a una le cierran una puerta y la que queda abierta es nomás la del Infierno, más vale no haber nacido El Cielo para mí, Juan Preciado, está aquí donde estoy ahora.”

“The only thing that keeps us going is the hope that when we die we get taken from one place to the other; but when one door is closed and the only remaining open one is that of Hell, it is better to not have been born at all Heaven to me, Juan Preciado, is right where I am now”

Juan Rulfo
Pedro Páramo (1955)

MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO
Mexican, 1902–2002

Dos Mujeres y la Gran Cortina con Sombras (Two Women, Large Blind, and Shadows), 1977
gelatin silver print

Gift of Michael G. Frieze, Class of 1960
1979.81.5

Álvarez Bravo’s photographs transform social critiques into rich visual metaphors that document Mexico’s modern realities and scenes of everyday life. In this photograph, a closed store window is both a richly textured visual plane and a boundary, dividing society into those with purchasing power and the majority devoid of it. Despite sustained economic growth between 1940 and 1970, the benefits of the modernizing “Mexican Miracle” failed to reach the middle and working classes. This stratification is especially evident in Mexico’s sprawling cities. “My work is commissioned,” Álvarez Bravo once claimed, “it isn’t an explicit commission, it’s implicit as part of the society in which I live.”

Elise Morano ’20

“Sin embargo había esperanza. Nuestros libros de texto afirmaban: Visto en el mapa México tiene forma de cornucopia o cuerno de la abundancia. Para el impensable año dos mil se auguraba—sin especificar cómo íbamos a lograrlo—un porvenir de plenitud y bienestar universals.”

“Nevertheless, there was still hope. Our textbooks confirmed this: Mexico, as can be seen on the map, is shaped like a cornucopia, a horn of plenty. For a still unimaginable 1980, a future of plenitude and universal well-being was predicted, without specifying just how it would be achieved.”

Jose Emilio Pacheco
Las batallas en el desierto (1980)

MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO
Mexican, 1902–2002

Dos Pares de Piernas (Two Pairs of Legs), 1928–1929
gelatin silver print

Gift of Michael G. Frieze, Class of 1960
1979.81.10

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A peeling, painted billboard advertises high street fashions—crisply creased trousers, pleated skirts, and fashionable footwear—to the upwardly mobile, attesting to the emergence of consumerism. The text of the advertisement, “Barato Inimitable” (“Cheap and Unbeatable”), reveals the forces of industrialization and globalization driving the availability of consumer goods. Above, the electrician’s signage hints at the labor and technology behind Mexico’s modernization. The photograph is pervaded by an air of mystery, both revealing the subtle textures and rhythms of daily life and probing the unseen. Here, the disembodied legs in stride suggest a society on the move. But who are they, and where are they going?

“Siempre has creído que en el viejo centro de la ciudad no vive nadie. Caminas con lentitud, tratando de distinguir el número 815 en este conglomerado de viejos palacios coloniales convertidos en talleres de reparación, relojerías, tiendas de zapatos y expendios de aguas frescas. Las nomenclaturas han sido revisadas, superpuestas, confundidas. El 12 junto al 200, el antiguo azulejo numerado—47—encima de la nueva advertencia pintada con tiza: ahora 924.”

“You will be surprised to imagine that someone lives in Donceles Street. You have always believed that no one lives in the old centre of the city. You walk slowly, trying to distinguish number 815 in this conglomerate of old colonial palaces converted to workshops, watchmakers, cobblers, and outlets for bottled water. The numbers have been revised, overlaid, confused. 13 next to 200, the numbered blue tiles—47—above the new placard written with chalk: now 924.”

Carlos Fuentes
Aura (1962)

MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO
Mexican, 1902–2002

Ya Mero (Almost), 1968
gelatin silver print

Gift of Michael G. Frieze, Class of 1960
1979.81.12

A well-dressed couple walks arm-in-arm with a confident stride towards an unknown destination. Their fashionable attire stands in contrast with their environs: a man-made jetty strewn with trash. The cloudy sky and mountain range, whose outline evaporates into the background, convey ideas of vast emptiness and uncertainty. The couple might represent modern Mexico as the country moves towards the future.

Ely Spencer '20

“En la reverberación del sol, la llanura parecía una laguna transparente, deshecha en vapores por donde se traslucía un horizonte gris. Y más allá, una línea de montañas. Y todavía más allá, la más remota lejanía.”

“In the reverberation of the sun, the plain looked like a transparent lagoon, undone in vapors where a gray horizon was translucent. And beyond, a line of mountains. And even further beyond, the farthest remoteness.”

Juan Rulfo
Pedro Páramo (1955)

MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO
Mexican, 1902–2002

Gorrión, Claro (Skylight), 1938–1940
gelatin silver print

Gift of Michael G. Frieze, Class of 1960
1979.81.13

This photograph depicts a nude woman lying on top of a cracked and patched-over skylight. With her limbs haphazardly arranged, she appears unaware of the camera. Manuel Alvarez Bravo’s work rejects the picturesque in favor of more metaphorical, even surrealist photographs that reflect the tension between Mexico’s traditional values and modern manners. The title, *Gorrión* (sparrow), suggests the fragility of the woman whose weight rests on a broken surface. By comparing the woman to a sparrow, Alvarez implies that the presence of both modern social practices and traditional values in Mexican society is a delicate coexistence.

Clare Murphy ’20

“Es bien curioso: cuando te pienso en tus manos, en tu boca, tus pechos, tus piernas: en alguna parte de ti. No es hasta que te veo de nuevo que todo se reúne en una persona específica, que respira y piensa y está viva Eso me da pavor, saber que aparte de mí, existes.”

“It’s very curious: when I think of your hands, your mouth, your breasts, your legs: of some part of you. It is not until I see you again that everything unites into a specific person, who breathes and thinks and is alive That I dread, knowing that apart from me, you exist.”

Sabina Berman
Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda (1996)

MARILYN BRIDGES
American, born 1948

Temple 33 and Temple 20, Yaxchilan, Mexico, 1982
silver gelatin print

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Gift of Mark Greenberg and Tami Morachnick
2010.52.3

Marilyn Bridges is an American photographer and pilot known for her aerial landscapes. Here, a bird's-eye view reveals the effects of time and the staying power of history in Mexico's changing landscapes. From her elevated vantage point, glowing white temples contrast with the dark shadows of the trees, lending the ancient ruins an almost sacred luminescence. Bridges utilizes dynamic light to emphasize the relationship between forms. The juxtaposition of the ruins with the encroaching vegetation suggests the conflicting impulses to modernize Mexico without forgetting the past.

Emma Lawry '20

“El paisaje es histórico, y por lo tanto se convierte en un documento en el cifrado, un texto jeroglífico. Las oposiciones entre el mar y la tierra, la llanura y la montaña, la isla y el continente, simbolizan las oposiciones históricas: sociedades, culturas, civilizaciones. Cada tierra es una sociedad: un mundo y una visión del mundo y del otro mundo.”

“Landscape is historical, and thus becomes a document in cipher, a hieroglyphic text. The oppositions between sea and land, plain and mountain, island and continent, symbolize historical oppositions: societies, cultures, civilizations. Each land is a society: a world and a vision of the world and the otherworld.”

Octavio Paz
El laberinto de la soledad (1950)

MANUEL CARRILLO
Mexican, 1906–1989

Girl with Chicken
vintage gelatin silver print

Gift of Christopher Foundation for the Arts, Elizabeth Hayes Christopher, Class of 1986, and Scott Christopher
2017.4.6

A young girl wearing a *rebozo* protectively holds on to a chicken in her lap, reminding us of efforts by Mexican indigenous youth to preserve agriculture and tradition. Her face is partially covered and shielded by the chicken, possibly alluding to the reciprocal and protective relationship between indigenous peoples and the land. While they are surrounded by darkness, the two figures are illuminated in profile. This brightness is echoed by a symbolic white feather that rests on her knee, a small reminder of one's innocence and perhaps even a sliver of hope for the future survival of rural Mexico.

Erin Harris '20

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“Oyó el canto de los gallos. Sintió la envoltura de la noche cubriendo la tierra. La tierra, «este valle de lágrimas.»”

“He heard the sound of roosters crowing. He felt the blanket of night covering the earth. The earth, ‘this valley of tears.’”

Juan Rulfo
Pedro Páramo (1955)

MANUEL CARRILLO
Mexican, 1906–1989

Woman Carrying Pot and Bag
vintage gelatin silver print

Gift of Christopher Foundation for the Arts, Elizabeth Hayes Christopher, Class of 1986 and Scott Christopher
2017.4.11

Manuel Carrillo shows us the perseverance and hard work behind the people who make up the ever-changing Mexican culture. The cobblestone path and the dilapidated buildings that create the alley in the picture show us an aging environment. An older woman carrying a pot and bag confirms this movement of time. She seems to be caught in the middle of a step, perhaps going to or from home. What is clear is that she is going somewhere, bringing something. Her focused gaze reflects a sense of tenacity and experience. Much like the Mexico found in the novels of Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes, there is a juxtaposition of movement within a standstill. Mexico exists by way of its past and its history, now and in the future.

Jamil Guzmán '21

“No volverás a mirar tu reloj, ese objeto inservible que mide falsamente el tiempo acordado a la vanidad humana, esas manecillas que marcan tediosamente las largas horas inventadas para engañar el verdadero tiempo, el tiempo que corre con la velocidad insultante, mortal, que ningún reloj puede medir.”

“You will not look at your watch again, that useless object that falsely measures the time agreed to human vanity, those little hands that tediously mark the long hours invented to deceive the true time, the time that runs with insulting, deadly speed, that no watch can measure.”

Carlos Fuentes
Aura (1962)

MANUEL CARRILLO

Mexican, 1906–1989

Dog on Master's Grave
vintage gelatin silver print

Gift of Christopher Foundation for the Arts, Elizabeth Hayes Christopher, Class of 1986, and Scott Christopher
2017.4.3

In this photograph of a faithful dog guarding the master's grave, ears perked and at attention, Manuel Carrillo pictures, quite literally, the convergence of life and death. Alluding to the tradition of Catholicism, suggested by the cruciform gravestone and its promise of ever-lasting life for those who honor its tenets, Carrillo poetically prompts the viewer to consider the meaning of death and the nature of the choices that define our character and our legacy.

Emma Adrain '21

“ . . . Ella se había convertido en mi obsesión. Por alto esté el cielo en el mundo, por hondo que sea el mar profundo.”

“ . . . She had become my obsession. As high as the heaven is, as deep as the ocean is.”

José Emilio Pacheco
Las batallas en el desierto (1980)

MANUEL CARRILLO
Mexican, 1906–1989

Boys Playing Baseball
vintage gelatin silver print

Gift of Christopher Foundation for the Arts, Elizabeth Hayes Christopher, Class of 1986, and Scott Christopher
2017.4.1

In this photograph, Carrillo encapsulates the complex lineages of many traditions in Mexican society. Although baseball hails from the United States and is often dubbed “America's game,” the game also has deep cultural roots in Mexico. The boys in this photograph find themselves in the heat of a game of baseball, playing on a makeshift and natural field. Carrillo utilizes the mountains and the beach to imply that baseball has been embedded in the physical landscape of

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Mexico, inextricably tying the sport to the very essence of the country, signifying that these boys have claimed baseball as a piece of their own identity.

Matthew McCarthy '21

“Nos modernizábamos, incorporábamos a nuestra habla términos que primero habían sonado como pochismos. . . y luego insensiblemente se mexicanizaban: tenquúu, oquéi, uasamara, sherap, sorry, uan móment pliis.”

“We modernized and incorporated into our vocabulary terms that had sounded like Chicanoisms. . . and then slowly, imperceptibly, had become Mexicanized: tenquúu, oquéi, uasamara, sherap, sorry, uan moment pliis.”

José Emilio Pacheco
Las batallas en el desierto (1980)

KEN HEYMAN
American, 1930–2019

Boy offering flowers, in a flower pot to girl, Mexico
gelatin silver print

Gift of Richard and Elena Pollack
2014.47.4

Special occasions warrant particular codes of dress, whether in familial or social settings. Mexico's Catholic population reserves Sundays as a day of worship. Here, a woman lovingly gazes at the toddler as she stands with her children. The photograph captures the warm essence of family and community, and the interaction with faith through the innocence of these children. Both the girl's attire and appearance suggest observation of the holy day. A boy, not as formally dressed, balances a flowerpot offering the older girl white lilies. The flowers represent innocence, faith, sincerity, and protection and reinforce the woman's nurturing gaze, full of hopeful wishes for the next generation.

Luis Miguel Guerrero '20

“Este mundo nos está presionando desde todos los lados, recogiendo puñados de nuestro polvo aquí y allá, y rompiéndonos en pedacitos mientras rociamos el suelo con nuestra sangre. Tu madre dijo que al menos tenemos el amor de Dios.”

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“This world is pressing on us from all sides, collecting handfuls of our dust here and there, and breaking us into little pieces while sprinkling the ground with our blood. Your mother said at least we have the love of God.”

Juan Rulfo
Pedro Páramo (1955)

KEN HEYMAN
American, 1930–2019

1961, Mexico (Man Harvesting Onions), 1968
silver gelatin print

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Nicholas
2014.53.21

In this photograph a farm worker labors during an onion harvest. In the background, full white sacks of harvested onions stand out against the empty field and represent completed work, while the sack tied around his waist and the lines of unharvested crops in the foreground represent his ongoing efforts. The agricultural system captured in this photograph stands in contrast to the indigenous methods of farming, stressing not a quasi-industrial paradigm of “production,” but rather an ethos of ecological balance committed to maintaining the health of the soil over multiple generations. The photograph also prompts the viewer to contemplate the well-being of the laborer pictured. To what extent might such methods of agriculture exploit not only the land by robbing it of its nutrients, but also the vulnerable individuals, including the poor *campesinos* and indigenous people forced to mass-produce crops?

Eugen Cotei '21

“Cae una gota de agua, grande, gorda . . . cae sola. Pero no hay ningua más. No llueve . . . y a la gota caída por equivocacion se la come la tierra y desaparece en su sed. Para que sirve [el llanto].”

“A drop of water falls, big, fat . . . it falls alone. But no others follow. It does not rain . . . and the fallen drop is eaten by the earth and disappears in its thirst. What can this land be used for?”

Juan Rulfo
Nos han dado la tierra (1953)

KATI HORNA
Hungarian-born Mexican, 1912–2000

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Study from “Oda a la Necrofilia”
(with Leonora Carrington), 1962
vintage silver print

Untitled, from “Oda a la Necrofilia,” 1962
vintage silver print

Museum Purchases, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund
2019.29.1–2

These images by Kati Horna, a Hungarian-born photographer active in Mexico, capture the complex themes of identity and purity. In this pair of photographs we see an enigmatic woman. Her identity is hidden from view, covered by a black veil in one image, and partially nude with her back turned in another. The space around the figure consists of an unmade bed, a white mask, and a candle, most likely signifying a time of solitude and reflection. The photographs evoke an ambiguous feeling of attraction to the unknown. The woman could represent purity in a Mexico that condemns “La Chingada,” the one who is violated. According to the author Octavio Paz, all Mexicans are the product of an original rape, the violations by the Spanish conquistadors who then abandoned Mexico.

Luis Cuervo '20

“La soledad es necesaria para alcanzar la santidad. Se han olvidado de que en la soledad la tentación es más grande.”

“Loneliness is necessary to reach saintliness. They have forgotten that in loneliness, temptation is much greater.”

Carlos Fuentes
Aura (1962)

DANA SALVO
American, born 1952

Altar with Bulldogs, Zinacantan, Mexico, 1991
color print

Museum Purchase
1991.63

Mexico’s rich culture is a mixture of indigenous and colonial pasts. Modern Mexican spirituality—including belief in an afterlife and devotion to faith—pays homage to this marriage of heritages. In this symbolically charged photograph, a humble altar converts an otherwise ordinary corner of a room into a space of sanctity and faithfulness. Similar altars are commonly found in Mexican homes.

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The scene of a red adobe wall and blue tarp may display inexpensive materials, but they frame the beauty and piety of the altar. The tarp bathes the scene in a blue glow. The Virgin of Guadalupe appears in the center, surrounded by important saints and illuminated by white flowers, candles and hanging images of purity and divine respect. Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint and central Marian figure, points to the complex cultural hybridity of Mexico and its embrace both of indigenous tradition and the influence of Catholicism.

Kathleen Armenta '21 and Luis Miguel Guerrero '20

“Only, I know how far away heaven is from us; but I know how to shorten the paths. All you have to do is die, God willing, when one wants to, and not when He has proposed.”

“Sólo que sé lo lejos que está el cielo de nosotros; pero sé cómo acortar los caminos. Todo lo que tienes que hacer es morir, si Dios quiere, cuando uno quiere, y no cuando ha propuesto.”

Juan Rulfo
Pedro Páramo (1955)