Narratives of Violence and Tales of Power: The Work of Jorge González Camarena, the History of the Castillo de Chapultepec, and the Establishment of the National Museums in the Project of Mexican Nationalism

Rebekah Bellum

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Rebekah C. Bellum  December 2015

Jorge González Camarena, La Fusión de Dos Culturas, 1963, National Museum of History, Mexico City
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Narratives of Violence and Tales of Power:
The Work of Jorge González Camarena,
the History of the Castillo de Chapultepec, and the Establishment of
the National Museums in the Project of Mexican Nationalism

by

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ART HISTORY

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2015
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend, Matthew Naegeli.
He was a brother and a friend, and his life was too short.
His interest in the arts, in architecture, in history, and in culture,
always sparked my excitement to continue my studies.
He was a man of immeasurable talent and creative energy.
He was smart and hilarious, and he encouraged those
around him to find and foster creativity within themselves.
In this year after his death, rather than be stunted by sadness, I have decided to do
extraordinary things, to signify his extraordinary impact on the world.
This thesis project is one of those extraordinary things; not because it is
extraordinary in itself, but because it is written.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people helped and supported me throughout my thesis writing process. I offer my sincere thanks to these people who made this project possible.

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I would also like to thank my thesis chair, professor, and friend, Kirsten Buick. Thank you for your ceaseless encouragement, guidance, and support of me from before I even started to work on my thesis. You have taught me things that profoundly broadened the way I think, and your comments and review of my work helped to provide a depth and cohesion in my thesis that truly made it better.

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NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE AND TALES OF POWER:
THE WORK OF JORGE GONZÁLEZ CAMARENA, THE HISTORY OF THE
CASTILLO DE CHAPULTEPEC, AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS
IN THE PROJECT OF MEXICAN NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

In the project of nationalism in Mexico, the governing bodies acted out a
deliberate process of reclamation of the histories and mythologies of Mexico for the
purpose of state programming, and for the development of an official narrative of
nationality. In my thesis, I trace the effects of nationalism by first looking into a history
of power in Mexico as articulated through the adaptive reuse, over centuries, of the
Castillo de Chapultepec building. This building has housed the National Museum of
History (Museo Nacional de Historia) since the early 1940s, and has played a prominent
role in the construction and perception of national identity in Mexico. Second, I
examine the development of the national museums in Mexico as an official method of
nation and culture building, as traced through the work of Jorge González Camarena
that has been included on a national stage. Third, I examine the painting La Fusión de
Dos Culturas, painted by Camarena in the early 1960s, within the context of the 1960s
historical exhibitions in the National Museum of History, establishing the important role
that Camarena played in the official project of nationalism.
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Introduction:

The Reclamation of Place, History, and Art in the Modern Project of Mexican Nationalism
As the turbulent Mexican Revolution approached its end during the 1920s, Mexico and the newly established government began distinct projects aimed at re-sculpting and redeveloping Mexico’s national identity. The earlier, post-Independence ideas of nation and of national identity were markedly changed during this time, leading to a new iteration in the constantly developing conception of the Mexican nation. Though this type of nation building was not uncommon in Latin America, most Latin American countries went through this process during the 19th century after declaring freedom from Spain. Mexico’s story was a bit different as the 19th century saw insecurity in the face of different wars from different foes and, finally, a president-dictator whose grip on society left very little room for a national identity beyond his pseudo-European framework.

The Mexican Revolution changed this explicit Euro-centric focus of the ruling bodies as it uprooted the established power of the dictator Porfirio Díaz and brought the lived realities of “common” Mexican people into the national consciousness. As the government, under President Venustiano Carranza, embarked on the road of nation building, one of the most critical vehicles for establishing and disseminating the product of the newly formed nationalism was art. The leaders of the government looked to revolutionize the face of Mexico to the world and to its own people, and they did this in large part through an art that was truly “revolutionary.”¹ As this initiative took root, the

¹ This idea comes from a Diego Rivera quote that is included on the current 500 peso bill. The quote says: “Se ha dicho que la revolución no necesita al arte, pero que el arte necesita de la revolución. Eso no es cierto. La revolución sí necesita un arte revolucionario.” My translation: “It has been said that a revolution does not need art, but art needs a revolution. This is not true. A revolution does need an art that is revolutionary.”
government also sought to establish a program of national museums to serve as the vital organs from which the national identity could develop and flow.

In modern Mexican history, one of the most prominent artistic movements to enact the widespread dissemination and construction of both political and cultural ideals was the post-revolutionary mural movement. This movement, beginning with the solicitation of several murals for the Colegio de San Ildefonso in 1922 through 1923, was formed in direct accordance with national governmental directives. The movement was designed, through collaboration between then-president Álvaro Obregón and the secretary of public education José Vasconcelos, as a way to disseminate federally formed ideas about the nation and about citizenship therein.

The question of citizenship was undoubtedly central to the mural project. In his book *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940: Art of the New Order*, Leonard Folgarait argues that the Mexican government used the project of muralism to further its claims that the political elite, those who made up the government, represented all of the people of the nation, regardless of socio-economic position. He explains that despite these claims, the government was reluctant to enact policy that would bring about any real social change.²

Instead, post-revolutionary Mexico was torn by policies that effected the obliteration of a middle class and widened the divide between the wealthy and the impoverished. Even with a reality of socio-economic inequality, the government sought

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to use the project of national muralism as a propagandistic tool to convince the masses of the success of their so-called social aspirations. David Craven, in his book *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990*, draws similar conclusions to Folgarait’s, but adds another nuance about the modernization of the state. Craven proposes that post-revolutionary art in Mexico, exemplified by the mural movement, was indeed a cultural production, but also acted as an institutional arm in the project of modernizing the nation in the eyes of both national and international audiences. As such, the post-revolutionary mural movement was focused inwardly, on the control of the Mexican consciousness, but also outwardly, on influencing the perceptions of the international world towards a vision of modern Mexico.

In a similar way, the later, post-World War II mural movement, which gave rise to a second generation of muralists, was pushed forward primarily by the national government. The goal was to realign the population under the newest iteration of the dominant narrative of Mexican identity and nationhood. This iteration of nation building, and the redevelopment of a national identity, came about in a time when the ripples of the revolution had finally subsided. In this time, unrest grew in the population under the realization that, despite promises to the contrary, very little had actually been done to improve the social and economic experiences of the people. The reorientation of the nation in this time was carried out largely through the grand-scale reorganization of the national public museums. The museums were institutions used by the

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government to create educational programs for the nation, as a way to further develop the Mexican culture of the new, post-World War II era.

Four primary museums were reinvented and reorganized during this time, including the National Museum of History (Museo Nacional de Historia), the National Museum of Anthropology (Museo Nacional de Antropología), the Museum of Natural History (Museo de Historia Natural), and the Palace of Fine Arts (Palacio de Bellas Artes). All four of these institutions became canvases through which the government could mold, within the greater population, a sense of national identity in Mexico. The use of muralism in these official federal political project—the Museums—did not exist in a vacuum, but rather was tied to large-scale architectural constructions, in the form of public and governmental buildings. The large-scale built spaces served as platforms by which conceptions of nationality were generated and made available to the populace.

A considerable part of the reorganization and development of these institutions was focused on large-scale mural commissions, painted by some of the most prominent muralists from both the first and second generations. Mural projects were completed at three of the four museum institutions mentioned; at all except for the Museum of Natural History. Some of the key artists who contributed to the museum mural projects, which started with a first wave in the mid-1930s at the Palace of Fine Arts, but primarily grew between the 1940s and 1960s, were Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Roberto Montenegro, Rufino Tamayo, Juan O’Gorman, and Jorge González Camarena. The mural projects at this time formed an important part in the
development of national education programming. In a sense, the murals functioned in a way that was similar to the religious art in the convents (conventos) and parish churches found in Mexico throughout the early colonial period. They visually depicted the ideals of Mexican culture and nationalism, and the lessons to be learned for the great masses of citizens who, presumably, required such an education. The dissemination of these ideals was achieved through the systematic drawing in of the population. Within Mexico City, all children in public schools would be brought to each of these institutions, at least once, during their education. To this end, admission to the National Museum of History was free for all students accompanied by their teachers, and for all members of the armed services accompanied by their officers.4

Thus, in the twentieth century, dating back to the early 1920s, the most well-known form of artistic production in Mexico has been muralism. These large-scale, publicly accessible works of fine art were crafted over decades to tell the stories of Mexico’s history and of her people. Located primarily in public, educational, and governmental institutions, the works of muralism, which were inspired by the artists who produced them and by key members of the presidential administrations, were foundational in producing and disseminating a dominant historical narrative for the modern nation of Mexico. From the 1930s through the 1960s, the commissioning of mural projects further developed alongside the emerging national museum system. At three of the most important national museums in Mexico mentioned above, all located

within the heart of Mexico City, large-scale mural projects formed the foundations upon which the exhibitions of fine art, of history, and of anthropology were built (Figure 1). These artistic foundations remain, and continue to inform and reflect ideas of national identity, both nationally and internationally.

Within this context, Jorge González Camarena, who was commissioned to produce work for this state-sponsored, institutional stage, played an important role in the national dissemination of culture. In the 1960s, he was commissioned to paint murals at all three of the institutions that were integrating murals into their exhibits at that time. Those murals included Liberación de la Humanidad or Liberación, painted in 1963, located at the Palace of Fine Arts; Las Razas, painted in 1964, located at the National Museum of Anthropology; and La Fusion de Dos Culturas, originally titled La Conquista, painted from 1960 to 1963 and Carranza y la Constitución de 1917, painted in 1967, both located at the National Museum of History (Figure 2). Camarena also has a third painting included in the exhibits at the National Museum of History, titled Benito Juarez, painted in 1968 (Figure 3). Though this is a smaller oil on canvas, it contributes to a notable collection of works included in official institutions.

The National Museum of History, located at the Castillo de Chapultepec in central Mexico City, used its exhibits to display an overarching history of the nation of Mexico that reaches back to some of the earliest inhabitants in the land, the Aztecs. It continues to do so today. The sweeping narratives told in the exhibits, which trace historical moments of battle, rebellion, and triumph, mimic a long history of the building
and site at Chapultepec Hill. In the parallels between exhibit and building, a history of power and colonialism is revealed, seen most clearly in the practices of the Aztecs and Spaniards. Remnants of the structures and practices of colonialism, however, can be traced into the post-revolutionary, modern Mexican state. The ties between the history of power at Chapultepec and the federally directed Museum of National History bring into question the way the public institution functions, and was intended to function, as a place of power among the masses of Mexican citizens.

In the project of nationalism, there was a deliberate process of reclamation acted out by the governing bodies, first in the reclamation of the physical places of power for the purpose of state programming, then in the reclamation of the mythologies of Mexican history by the institutionalized, museum arm of the government, and finally through the reclamation of the artistic voices native to Mexico, used in the crafting of a narrative of nationality through mural projects. In this thesis, I trace the effects of nationalism in three ways. In Chapter 1, I examine the process—which lasted from the time of the monarchical political systems in the Colonial era through the post-revolutionary national political system—of reclamation and adaptive reuse of the Castillo de Chapultepec building and site for the purpose of garnering an official power of place. In this chapter, I look into a history of power and places of power in Mexico as articulated through the adaptive reuse, over centuries, of the Castillo de Chapultepec. This building has housed the National Museum of History since the early 1940s and plays a prominent role in the construction and perception of
national identity in Mexico. Because of historical events associated with the building and site, it also acts as a center for national pride and patriotism.

In Chapter 2, I examine the development of the national museums in Mexico as an official method of nation and culture building, traced through the inclusion of the work of Jorge González Camarena on a national stage. In addition, I explore correlations that link the importance of that museum program to the development of national identity and culture ideals. In Chapter 3, I examine the painting, La Fusión de Dos Culturas, painted by Camarena in the early 1960s, within the context of the 1960s historical exhibitions in the National Museum of History. Through this painting, I establish the important role that Camarena played in the official project of nationalism. I identify possible ways in which the artist’s voice and critical thought regarding nation reveal complications in the more generalized view that his national art was equivalent to a national truth. In Chapter 4, I re-examine the way Camarena’s paintings function in the historical exhibition at the National Museum of History. In this chapter, I use the context of the present-day exhibition and political climate, rather than that of the 1960s, to begin to demonstrate some ways in which the process of nation building through art has continued and evolved even to the present day.

Camarena has been established as an important contributor to the history of fine art in Mexico but is little known outside of his own country. Camarena presents an interesting case, because although many of his murals were federally commissioned, they show a depth in their content, themes, and styles that allows for, and even
encourages, interpretations that do not directly align with the dominant narratives promoted by the government. He was, and is, celebrated as a national artist for his “mexicanness” and the “mexicanness” embodied in his artistic expression. Yet, his work diverges from the national body of fine art almost as much as it aligns with it. Through the following study of the institution of nationalism in Mexico, I hope to illuminate some ways in which the architecture and art of modern Mexico have been attributed with power over time and have been important in the development of a national identity and patriotism. These expressions of Mexican material culture tell a story of power, violence, colonialism, and freedom. Though they began as articulations of the ruling bodies, the multiplicity of ways in which they were accepted, understood, and remembered reflects the range and diversity of the peoples of Mexico.

Important to this work about nationalism and nation building in Mexico are the ideas articulated by Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities*. Anderson compiles and identifies aspects and processes that are central to worldwide projects of nation building and explores many of the motivations that led to the universal movement, as well as some of the ramifications for this broad evolution of the world’s political systems. The process of nation formation in Mexico, which focused primarily on the ideals of culture, education, and identity, in many ways parallels the ideas that Anderson expresses in his book. The parallels are found in Mexico’s monarchical/colonial past, in the physical and social revolutions that created a break with the old political structures, in the development of a new language—muralism—that expresses the central ideals of the new, imagined community, and in the use of
institutionalized systems—the museums—to disseminate official discourse about citizenship, history, and nationhood.

Because so much of the identity of the Mexican nation centers on the visual language and narrative of muralism, Anderson’s theories about language and nation are very important to this thesis. Anderson gives us a sense of how important language is to the identity of a nation, not only from a political standpoint, but from a personal one as well. He explains that, “What the eye is to the lover – that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with – language – whatever language history has made his or her mother-tongue – is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother’s knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed.”

It is language that allows us to associate our nationality with our identity. And, it is because of language, the visual vernacular language of muralism, that the federal murals of Mexico can be conflated to represent the nation as a whole.

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Introduction Images
Figure 1 Map of the central area of Mexico City. The City Center, or Zocalo, Palace of Fine Arts, National Museum of Anthropology, National Museum of History, and Museum of Natural History are all marked with stars. From https://www.google.co.tz/maps/@19.424062,-99.1738148,14z
Figure 2 Jorge González Camarena’s four murals included in the national museums. Clockwise from top left: *La Fusión de Dos Culturas*, 1960-1963, National Museum of History; *Carranza y la Constitución de 1917*, 1967, National Museum of History; *Las Razas*, 1964, National Museum of Anthropology; *Liberación de la Humanidad*, 1963, Palace of Fine Arts
Figure 3  Jorge González Camarena, *Benito Juárez*, 1968, oil on canvas, 2m x 1.2m, located in the National Museum of History, Castillo de Chapultepec, Mexico City
Chapter 1:

The Castillo de Chapultepec—A History of Power, Conflict, and Nationalism
In the central region of Mexico City lies the Bosque de Chapultepec, a large scale open space that serves the city as a highly used and diverse park akin to Central Park in New York City. This important space provides a place of refuge, a pocket of the natural world nestled within the busy, urban, heavily populated city. It draws visitors of all socio-economic levels from all regions of the country, and tourists from all over the world. In addition to being a thriving green space, the Bosque de Chapultepec houses many important cultural institutions, including the National Museum of Anthropology, the Museum of Modern Art (Museo de Arte Moderno), and the Museum of Natural History, along with many other institutions and businesses that provide cultural enrichment, recreation, and entertainment for the city. Near the eastern edge of the park stands the Castillo de Chapultepec, a centuries old castle that today houses the National Museum of History (Figure 4).6

Perched at the top of the large hill in the Bosque de Chapultepec, the Castillo de Chapultepec occupies an area whose recorded history of power dates back to a time before Spanish colonization, when Aztecs ruled the region. The name of the park, Chapultepec, derives from the Aztec/Nahuatl word meaning the Hill of the Grasshopper,7 and refers to the very hill where the museum stands (Figures 5 and 6). I propose that over the course of centuries, the site, and later the Castillo de Chapultepec building that stands on it, have been attributed with an inherent power of place. I

6 The National Museum of Anthropology, the Museum of Natural History, and the National Museum of History share a common history, and the collections of all three institutions originated from the same collection. At different points in Mexican history, those in charge of the national collections decided to separate them into the three institutions that survive today. See pages 41-44 for more information.

7 Lacroix, Museo Nacional de Historia, 5.
suggest that the different and changing factions who throughout history have ruled the polity, the colony, and the nation, have consistently claimed the power of this place to support their own ruling regimes by adaptively reusing the site and building.

Further, I suggest that the very architecture of the building tells the story of a rich and varied history of influence within the nation of Mexico and of an ongoing process of national culture and identity building. In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which different ruling groups have appropriated the power of this place for their own use. To do this, I will examine the transitions of control shown by the history of the power shifts that have centered on the site and building. As a further means of examination, I will consider the building through a lens of adaptive reuse, both in terms of its cultural significance, and in terms of its architectural relevance and preservation.

In addition to being a place of power historically used by ruling groups, in the modern state, the Castillo de Chapultepec also embodies a center of cultural identity and pride for the greater national body. As such, the building and site at Chapultepec are intrinsically linked to current conceptions of “nation.” The building, site, and modern institution of museum were all actively used by the Mexican government in the post-revolutionary through mid-twentieth century project of nation building. The sense of national identity and pride associated with the Castillo de Chapultepec is centered primarily on specific historic events that have taken place at the building. Over the course of its history, the building has held meaning for both elite, ruling groups, and for the general population. The different standards of access that have been used to
include or exclude people of different socio-economic levels have created different meanings for the different groups. These meanings, along with the castle’s simultaneous embodiment of its past—both architectural and historical—and projection of a national future, aligns with ideas presented by Homi Bhabha in his book, *The Location of Culture*. Seen in this way, the Castillo de Chapultepec is a place where “space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.” By looking at the Castillo in conjunction with the theoretical ideas expressed by Bhabha, one is able to develop a picture of the complexities of the building and its site, of its histories, and of its tangible presence as a location of culture. In the modern state, ideas of culture became synonymous with ideas of nation.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha describes a current of modern thought that locates ideas of culture within “the realm of the beyond.” According to this strain of thought, the “realm of the beyond” implies a nebulous and indefinable space that is separate from the lived present. Bhabha proposes that culture and identity, though built on a mythology of the past and of the future, are actually developed within an infinitely complex, layered, and changing present. This complex present, rather than the vague space indicated in modern thought, is actually the “beyond.” He theorizes that, even though our definitions and understandings of the present are built on

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9 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.
interpretations and constructions of the past, the “beyond” is a place where past and future are simultaneously layered and separate, and ever shifting. He says:

It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond...The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.  

Deep within the heart of Mexico City, in one of its oldest and most continuously occupied sites of power, Bhabha’s ideas of the “beyond”, of the location of culture, and of the moment of transit are manifested at the Castillo de Chapultepec.

Today, the Castillo, a grand fortress-like building with European neo-classical styling, looks much as it did in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The summit of Chapultepec Hill forms a large elevated platform, and the building is situated to occupy the areas by the steepest edges, giving it the most prominence, creating the most formidable architectural language, and allowing for many views that overlook the surrounding park and city (Figure 7). From the platform of the hill, the building extends up two levels. In some areas, due to the way the site slopes and the fortress-like qualities that were designed into the construction of the building, the foundations reach below the platform almost as far. Some service spaces and other areas that are not open to the public occupy the regions below the level of the platform. The earth forms steep walls below the east and north sides of the building, and visually, gives the

10 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 1-2.
appearance of continuing the sheer face of the foundation walls down into the natural earth and rock formations below.

The exterior faces of the building, as well as the ground paving to the south and west that eventually abuts the access pathway leading down the hill, are constructed of stone masonry (Figure 8). The stone appears to be a gray variant to the local, porous, volcanic stone, *tezontle*, so prominently used in the colonial architecture of Mexico City. Despite the overtly European styling of the building, the local stone construction, offset by white plaster interior walls, places it soundly within a Mexican context. Seen in plan, the building is composed of two primary masses – a narrow rectangular mass to the west, and a large square mass to the east (Figure 9). Both of these areas are made up of two stories of rooms and are open to enclosed central courtyard areas. Large covered porticos with arched openings run along the south façade of the rectangular mass. The center portion of the portico juts out toward the exterior of the building, and opens up to a grand staircase inside that leads to the second level above. Large terraces extend above the portico on the west portion of the building, and define much of the second level of the east portion. From the terraces, users can overlook the park, and city beyond, or they can look into the interior courtyards.

As already noted, the building strongly evokes European-style construction and references classical origins in its use of ordered, repetitive façades, archway entries and passages, symmetry of façade and plan organization, extensive use of columns, as well as decorative use of stonework, both to evoke the cadence of columns on a wall, and to accent the banisters, arches, and other building elements. Within these dominant
European features, however, the building also contains undeniable aspects and details specific to Mexico that were added over its centuries of use and that mark ideological changes over time. Ornate archways at the main entry, supported by truncated columns and punctuated with stone sculptures of flowers and female busts (Figure 10) are mimicked by stained glass windows on the second floor that draw focus to an image of an eagle with serpent in beak, perched on a cactus (Figure 11). Decorative wrought iron doors feature medallions that depict a similar image (Figure 12). The inclusion of this image within the building references the origin myth of the Aztec founding of Tenochtitlán, the precursor to Mexico City.

The eagle, serpent, cactus motif came to represent the nation of Mexico after its independence from Spain, and is featured prominently on the national flag. At the Castillo de Chapultepec, this and other nationalistic imagery allow the building, as it exists today, to reveal the moments of transit that occurred at the site, and to provide insight into the events, attitudes, influences, and histories that contributed to the formation of a national identity. They mark physical changes that speak to the cultural and ideological changes that ignited and resulted from the development of the Mexican nation.

In the late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries, in one of the first recorded moments of transit centered on Chapultepec Hill, long before the arrival of the Spanish, the Aztecs declared the site to be sacred. They established the area at the top of the hill as a religious and political center, as well as a place of military fortification. They had arrived at and inhabited Chapultepec several decades before they settled the city of
Tenochtitlán. Tenochtitlán. It was not until after they established their great city on Lake Texcoco, however, that “the Aztecs, who were rapidly acquiring increasing power, built a temple on the summit of the hill, and the great Aztec ruler Motecuhzoma-Ihuicamina ordered his image and those of his ancestors carved on the rocks on the eastern flank.” The ancient indigenous rulers claimed the space by constructing on it a shrine to the god Huitzilopochtli and a dwelling place for the Aztec rulers. Later, they fortified the hill to protect it against attacks, making the site a stronghold.

The very overt and deliberate way that the Aztecs claimed the space at the top of the hill is significant in terms of the connections understood in Aztec culture between power and place. Tim Cresswell, in his book Place, explains that, “place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power.” This definition of place resonates with the Aztec practice of selecting, claiming, and appropriating spaces that they would in turn invest with the power of the royal and the sacred, set within the context of a specific place.

In his book, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual, Jonathan Smith furthers this understanding of place and discusses a similar process—of selecting and classifying significant places—that takes place within the diverse mythologies of many different cultures. Based on these diverse cultures and their mythologies, Smith explains that the

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12 Lacroix, Museo Nacional de Historia, 6.
processes for identifying sacred or significant places will be different. Regardless of the culture or mythology, however, Smith provides insight into the memorialization of a sacred place that offers a deeper understanding into the practices of the Aztecs, and later the Spaniards and Mexicans. He says, “...although each place might, in the myths, be the accidental by-product of their wanderings, once marked, each place is precisely where the event occurred – it cannot be another. The specificity of place is what is remembered, is what gives rise to and is perpetuated in memorial.”\(^{15}\) The place is intrinsically imbued with power, regardless of the cultural or cosmic ideals used to select the location. Once the space is made into a place, the specificity of its location becomes as important as the power invested there. This idea holds true for the Castillo de Chapultepec, evidenced by the centuries in which it has been recognized as a place of power.

For the Aztecs, (also known as the Mexica peoples), the design of ceremonial or sacred places was based on their ideas about cosmology and the four cardinal directions. Setha Low describes the Great Temple, the Templo Mayor that stood at the center of Tenochtitlán, as being the “place, real and symbolic, where Mexica power was centered.”\(^{16}\) Because Aztec urban and ceremonial design strategies were carried throughout the Empire, a similar sense of power would likely be attributed to the sacred ceremonial space at Chapultepec as well. This is further supported by the strong ties between Aztec religious and military operations. In his book on the Aztecs titled *Aztec*

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Thought and Culture, Miguel León-Portilla explains that the Aztec were a “mystico-militaristic” people who saw their sacred beliefs and their military pursuits as being united and as serving the same purpose. He states that “Aztec religion, on the mystico-militaristic level, sought to preserve the life of the Sun...through ceremonial warfare and human sacrifice.”

At Chapultepec, the grouping together of sacred, military, and elite domestic functions, all indicate that the site was recognized as being powerful, and that this power was assumed by the Aztecs for the purpose of furthering their empire.

León-Portilla goes on to describe the Aztecs as being an undeniable military power, often overshadowing the other indigenous, Nahuatl-speaking groups that lived in the Valley of Mexico before the Spanish colonial era. Such ceremonial warfare and sacrifice led to the conquering of many peoples in and around the Valley of Mexico. These groups were made to pay tribute to the Aztec empire, and though often allowed to maintain separate traditions, were counted as part of the population of Aztec domain. In this way, the Aztecs were established as a dominant colonizing and conquering force that held power over many subject communities. Because of the strong conquering and colonizing imperatives of the Aztecs, it is thought that Chapultepec Hill was likely used by other tribes even before the Aztecs came to power, and was seized as part of an early Aztec military conquest, even though previous records of activity on the site are not available.

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18 León-Portilla, Aztec Thought and Culture, 177.
19 Lacroix, Museo Nacional de Historia, 6.
A couple of centuries after the Aztecs made their mark on Chapultepec Hill, the Spanish Conquistadors, another powerful colonizing force, arrived in the Valley of Mexico. Their arrival and conquest of the Aztec Empire brought about another moment of transit for the sacred site, which continued the struggle for the claim to its power. In her book, *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*, Setha Low, an anthropologist whose work focuses on space and place, describes this type of site, where appropriation of control has been repeatedly fought over, as contested terrain. She says that struggles over contested terrains "illustrate how important these symbolic spaces are for the formation and maintenance of cultural identity, and how meanings from the past are encoded in the built environment and manipulated through spatial representations and architecture to create the socio-political present."\(^{20}\) The Spaniards enacted this type of spatial manipulation in order to claim the site as a beacon of their religious-militaristic strength.

Shortly after their arrival, the Spaniards destroyed the buildings the Aztecs had placed on the sacred hilltop. The destruction of indigenous seats of power was a widespread practice used by the Spanish throughout their American colonies.\(^{21}\) They recognized a benefit to reclaiming those spaces in order to demonstrate their own power and that of their religion, while revealing domination over their enemies and subjects. At Chapultepec, there was an intentional move to reclaim the power associated with the site as a way to redefine the significations of its spatial hierarchy. In


the early 1550s, under the direction of Spanish Viceroy Don Luis de Velasco, a chapel was built at the top of Chapultepec Hill. Though the chapel building does not still stand, its construction reinforced the official program of the Spanish crown—to colonize the New World through the wide scale spread of Catholicism.

Near the end of the colonial period, in the 1780s, the Bourbon viceroys who were ruling New Spain at the time used the same site to build a summer palace, the Castillo de Chapultepec (Chapultepec castle), for themselves. It is unknown how long the chapel stood and operated on the site. The building of a summer palace, however, marked a shift in the focus of the rulers of New Spain. The early construction of the chapel pointed to an ideal that supported the greater viceregal directive of systematically aligning the indigenous population under the teachings of Catholicism. Replacing the chapel with a summer palace indicated a physical redirection of emphasis that used the place of power as a means of furthering the opulent lifestyle of the acting viceroys.

In addition, this building project represented Bourbon policies associated with the separation of Church and State and the gradual dismantling of ecclesiastic power in New Spain that were taking place at that time. As it grew later and later in the colonial era, the Church was increasingly seen as a challenge to royal authority, and its position was greatly diminished. The wealth, properties, and possessions of the Church were then considered to be wasted resources by the viceroys, and were systematically

22 “Chapultepec,” Britannica Concise Encyclopedia; Lacroix, Museo Nacional de Historia, 6.
23 “Chapultepec,” Britannica Concise Encyclopedia.
absorbed by the colonial government in order to strengthen their own ruling position.\textsuperscript{25} At that point in the history of New Spain, there was already an undercurrent of unrest running through the population that stemmed from a desire for independence from Colonial rule.\textsuperscript{26} The colonial power in Madrid was aware of this unrest and felt a sense of urgency to implement actions and changes that were meant to strengthen Spain’s control over its American territories. Instead, the tightening grip of the monarchy and viceroy greatly fueled this desire for independence.

The construction of such a luxurious palace at that time, therefore, on a site whose power had been recognized and capitalized on for hundreds of years, is significant. I suggest that it implies that the Iberian viceroys recognized coming troubles, and wished to reassert the depth of their wealth, their power over their subjects, and the Spanish crown’s right to rule the colony. The official colonial program of missions and expansion was replaced with a more limited official program—to maintain the appearance and justification of colonial control. The history of the site was repeated once more as the ruling group attempted to harness the power of Chapultepec to exert dominance over the greater population.

In 1821, after eleven years of war, insurgence, and fighting, Mexico gained Independence from Spain.\textsuperscript{27} The viceregal summer palace at Chapultepec fell out of use for some time following the beginning of the first Mexican empire, and in the years of

\textsuperscript{25} Hernández Durán, “Thesis Defense Questions.”
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 222.
early nationhood. In 1841, during a time of relative national turmoil,\textsuperscript{28} the viceregal palace was reclaimed and converted into the National Military Academy. In this time, Mexico was facing constant threats at its northern borders from encroaching U.S. forces. The year 1846 marked the start of the U.S./Mexican War, which was fought primarily for control over the northern Mexican provinces of New Mexico and California.\textsuperscript{29} In 1847, the fortified Chapultepec Hill and Military Academy were captured by U.S. troops in what was one of the bloodiest battles of the war.\textsuperscript{30}

The castle, which was defended by one thousand military troops and the young cadets in training at the military academy, was the last stronghold within Mexico City to fall to the Americans. The events of this battle at the Castillo de Chapultepec continue to bear much weight in terms of national history and cultural identity. The site and battle mark the birth of the Niños Héroes myth that still embodies much national pride and veneration. The myth goes that, in a heroic display of national pride, rather than allow themselves to be captured, the young cadets in training at the Academy wrapped themselves in Mexican flags and threw themselves off the top of the building to their deaths on the cliffs below. This story gained national significance throughout the years and decades following the war, and symbols of the heroic acts of these young men continue to be seen throughout the nation in the form of paintings, statues,

\textsuperscript{28} Meyer, Sherman, and Deeds, \textit{The Course of Mexican History}, 249.
\textsuperscript{29} Texas had already ceded from Mexican control at that time, and had joined forces with U.S. troops.
commemorative plaques, street names, metro station names, and buildings (Figure 13).\textsuperscript{31}

Almost half a century after Mexico had gained its independence from the Spanish crown, European forces again attempted to occupy Mexico and impose colonial rule. At the initiation of the mid-1860s European intervention in Mexico, the Spanish, British, and French monarchies joined forces under the Convention of London to retrieve the monetary debts owed them at that time by the Mexican government, then led by Benito Juárez. Once it became clear that France held aims of occupying the country to align it under its empire, however, both Spain and England withdrew their forces. This historical development, however, was not purely imposed from the outside. A portion of the Mexican population, those in the conservative political party, was unhappy with the current leadership of the country and worked to solicit and facilitate this change in government.\textsuperscript{32} After many fierce battles, French troops were able to displace President Benito Juárez, and to install a European royal as Emperor of Mexico. In this way, Austrian archduke Maximilian von Hapsburg was positioned, but also initially welcomed by some, as Emperor of Mexico in 1864. After the second Hapsburg Empire was in place, the same conservatives who had welcomed Maximilian realized that his politics did not align with their own and they worked to orchestrate his execution in 1867, allowing President Juárez to resume control of the nation (Figure 14).

\textsuperscript{32} Hernández Durán, “Thesis Defense Questions.”
Naïve, but generally good-hearted towards the people he ruled, Maximilian and his young wife Carlotta (Charlotte) arrived in Mexico believing they had the full support of the Mexican people. This naiveté was in part due to Maximilian’s upbringing in an established monarchical political system, and to his understanding of the traditional way that monarchies had been formed. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson provides an explanation for some of the pervading thoughts surrounding the ideologies and justifications that typically led to the formation of monarchies throughout history. He explains that “Kingship organizes everything around a high centre. Its legitimacy derives from divinity, not from populations, who, after all, are subjects, not citizens.”

There was a disparity, therefore, between this mode of thought about divine monarchical rule, the “high centre,” and the mode of thought focused on freedom from imperial rule that was prevalent among the citizens of Mexico at the time of Maximilian’s Empire. An understanding of this disparity and of the established political systems at work, elucidate the reasons for Maximilian’s enormous political struggles during his short rule of Mexico.

Though unexperienced and unprepared, Maximilian made attempts to understand and gain the favor of the people after he had assumed the role of Emperor of Mexico. Soon after his arrival in Mexico, when it was determined that the national palace was not an acceptable place for him and his wife to live, Maximilian decided to rebuild the old viceregal castle at Chapultepec, and to establish it as his official imperial residence. In *The Course of Mexican History*, the authors, Michael Meyer, William

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Sherman, and Susan Deeds, explain that once settled at his new residence, “...Maximilian made himself accessible to the people. Once a week he opened the palace to his subjects, and in many small ways he tried hard for acceptance.”

Maximilian’s attitudes and actions toward the people bring to mind some of the theoretical ideas of Homi Bhabha expressed earlier in this chapter. In the established site of power at Chapultepec, Maximilian began to blur the lines between uses of exclusion—reserved for those of elite or royal status—and those of inclusion—in which all people, regardless of cultural or ethnic background or wealth, could enter. Although the castle’s use during Maximilian’s reign was primarily reserved for elite inhabitants, his attitudes began to soften the boundaries between the royal and the greater population.

Under Maximilian’s direction, alterations and restorations were made to the castle in order to make it a suitable place for him to live and lead his new empire. Maximilian was the first recorded resident of the castle to participate actively in the preservation of the building. Although many changes have been made to the building since the time of Maximilian’s occupation, the alterations and restorations that he made to the palace have largely been carried through to the present. The current building bears much resemblance to the building as it existed in the Maximilian and Carlotta era. Primarily, Maximilian restored the Alcázar, the lavish, garden-filled court on the east edge of the castle, lined with two levels of rooms and terraces (Figure 15).

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In its current condition as the National Museum of History, the permanent exhibits in the collection at the Castillo de Chapultepec are separated into two primary sections: The Museum of History, and the Alcázar. The Alcázar section is made up of different historical restorations. The court, interior gardens, and surrounding rooms have been restored to represent spaces as they would have existed in select moments from the building’s history. Several of the rooms on the lower level have been restored to depict the mid-nineteenth century residence of Maximilian and Carlotta. Restoration is a particular strain of the practice of historic preservation. According to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, restoration is “the act or process of accurately depicting the form, features, and character of a property as it appeared at a particular period of time by means of the removal of features from other periods in its history and reconstruction of missing features from the restoration period.”36

Through the restoration of the building, diverse moments from its history can be conflated into one experience. A richness—of culture, identity, and history—comes from the layering of different time periods, and the events, people, and movements that those periods represent. By this division between restored past and curated historical exhibit, the museum draws a separation, within its very organization, between the old monarchical political system and the new, post-revolutionary state. Within this separation, the monarchy is recognized by the museum for the role it played in the

history of Mexico, but is removed from the political phase that followed, that of state formation. According to Benedict Anderson, this separation, though often desired by the post-revolutionary political structure, does not reflect the interdependence that actually occurred between nation and monarchy. He explains that nationalism would not exist without the formerly prevalent form of political life—the monarchy.37

The project of nation formation in Mexico is typically understood to have existed in two distinct phases. The first phase is generally accepted to have begun in 1867, with the death of Maximilian, and to have lasted through 1876, with the presidential election of Porfirio Díaz.38 In reality, this phase was not confined in so neat a way. Traces of nation formation are actually seen much earlier, beginning in the late-eighteenth century. These early signs of nation formation are marked by different movements, including the resistance against the Bourbon Reforms and then by the Independence period. This first phase of nation formation was drawn out in different developments and manifestations over time.39 The second phase began after the early-twentieth century revolution and lasted well into the twentieth-century. I suggest that the national project of institutionalized museum development, from the 1930s through 1960s, contributed to the intentional project of nation formation that took place during that second phase, and will discuss these ideas further in chapter 2.

37 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 19.
The death of Maximilian spoke strongly, both to Mexico and to the world, asserting that Mexican independence was not a passing phase. The castle that he had used and restored, however, was soon recognized once again for the strength, stature, and power that it denoted for its inhabitants. Staci Widdifield, in her book *The Embodiment of the National*, focuses her research on the first phase of nation building in Mexico, but changes the parameters of the time period slightly. Where the first phase is typically accepted to be framed by political events, Widdifield chooses to focus on the years 1869 through 1881, framed by the "seven biennial public exhibitions sponsored by the Academy of San Carlos," the official Art Academy of New Spain, and then Mexico. She draws on ideas of “imagined communities,” as articulated by Benedict Anderson, to create a picture of the political life of that time period, seen through a lens of the artistic production in Mexico. In her book, Widdifield discusses the phenomena in New Spain and Mexico in which “both the narratives and objects of pre-Hispanic history have served since the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest as a seemingly limitless source for Mexico to justify, if not reinvent, its own history and shore up structures of power and strategies of social control.” The continued and systematic reuse of the castle and site at Chapultepec Hill, particularly during the periods of nation building, are markers of this reinvention. The reclamation of the indigenous past, which harkened back to the early days of the Aztec occupation at the site, served to validate the modern development of the nation.

42 Widdifield, *The Embodiment of the National*, 78.
Following the French intervention in Mexico, the Castillo de Chapultepec was declared the official residence of Mexican presidents. Its function as the official presidential residence began in 1884 and lasted for approximately sixty years. At different times during this period, the building was simultaneously used both as a residence and as either the Military Academy or as governmental offices. Presidents Francisco I. Madero (1911-1913), Venustiano Carranza (1914-1920), Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-1932), and Abelardo Rodriguez (1932-1934) all resided in the Castillo while there were governmental offices located on the east side of the building. During this time, residential functions and more overt national political functions shared a common space at Chapultepec.

The intersection of public and private life for the ruling body was not a new model in the operation of a political structure. The sharing of a common space for both public and private functions at Chapultepec appears to have roots in the vestiges of old monarchical political systems in which domestic functions and imperial functions were inextricably linked for the royal body that became, both symbolically and actually, the physical representation of the empire. Anna Whitelock explains this phenomenon in her book, *The Queen’s Bed*, which chronicles the life and reign of Elizabeth I. In describing Elizabeth’s sixteenth century English monarchy, Whitelock says that “the Queen’s Bedchamber was at once a private and public space. The Queen’s body was more than its fleshly parts; her body natural represented the body politic, the very state itself. The health and sanctity of Elizabeth’s body determined the strength and stability of the

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43 “Chapultepec,” Britannica Concise Encyclopedia.
realm. In the case of early nationhood in Mexico, the station of president, much like that of monarch, merged domestic and state functions, public and private spaces, and individual and political bodies. In this way, during the era of early nationhood, the remains of colonial rule continued to make a presence in the everyday ruling of the nation.

Enrique Krauze, in his book *Mexico: Biography of Power*, discusses the systems and narratives of power operating within the Mexican government throughout much of its nationhood. He notes that from the time of the presidency/dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, beginning in 1876 and lasting well into the post-revolutionary, modern state, the political leaders were predetermined to lead by the political elite. The presidency of Manuel Gonzalez, a four-year stretch during the period of the Porfiriato, came about as a result of the practice Krauze describes, in which the existing president engaged in a secret deliberation or *tapadismo*. Krauze likens this practice to one in which “a conclave of nobles and military chieftains, meeting in complete privacy, would discuss the selection of the heir to the throne.” Although the nation was supposedly free from colonial rule, and operating as a democracy, the skeleton of imperialism continued to permeate the socio-political fabric of Mexico.

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46 *Porfiriato* is the name given to the era of Porfirio Diaz’s political reign in Mexico, from 1876-1910.
47 Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power*, 552. Note: Benedict Anderson describes a similar process that he calls “inter-monarchic approval,” in which ascenders to the throne would be accepted or approved, based on the actions of the would-be ascender. (Anderson, 21).
During much of his presidency, Diaz would play the roles of both selector and of chosen candidate. Early on, however, Diaz practiced the *tapadismo* process of election, and succeeded in having Gonzalez, one of his friends, voted into the presidency. He did this in an effort to give his own presidential reign the appearance of true democracy. Krauze maintains that this system of political elitism remained in place long after the *Porfiriato* ended. He goes on to note that after the revolution, these “elite” leaders attempted to recreate the revolutionary drive within the population. Often, they did this by superficially showing sympathy towards the masses, who were living through great injustices. Though some of the presidents actually worked to correct some of these injustices, most of them pushed only for personal gains of wealth and power, and for the gains of their personal friends. The ramifications and backlash of the revolution were felt strongly throughout Mexico well into the second half of the twentieth century.\(^{48}\)

Throughout this time of supposed democratic rule, structures that imitated the imposed power of colonialism remained. With few exceptions, the wealthy and powerful elite continued to determine the course the nation would take.

Throughout the enactment of these systems of power, the Castillo de Chapultepec continued to play an important role. President Gonzalez, the personal friend of Porfirio Diaz who served as “puppet” president from 1880 to 1884, lived in the Castillo, and made some important alterations to the east side of the building in 1881. At this time, the Military Academy was still housed in the west side of the building. The combination of these two functions reinforced the idea that the Castillo was a center for

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democratic and military power. At the end of Gonzalez’s term, Diaz returned to his self-appointed role as president, remaining in power until the revolution. During Diaz’s long presidential reign, the Military Academy remained unaffected. Diaz maintained control over the Castillo de Chapultepec during that time, but used it primarily as a summer residence.

After Diaz’s reign ended, many of the post-revolutionary presidents who resided at the Castillo made important alterations and restorations to different parts of the building. Lazaro Cardenas, the last president to reside in the castle during his presidency in 1934 through 1940, undertook a complete restoration of the palace terraces (Figure 16). He was very interested in the history of the building, and invested much of his time and resources in its preservation and maintenance. In 1940, under Cardenas’s direction, the building was officially converted into a museum, though it would not open to the public for several years. The INAH Official Guide to the museum explains that, “General Lazaro Cardenas, who was president at the time, issued an enactment on December 13, 1940, to the effect that the Castle should undergo a final transformation and become the National Historical Museum.”

Four years later, under the presidency of Manuel Avila Camacho, the museum was officially inaugurated and opened to the public in September of 1944.

Today, visitors to the museum can see a confluence of the uses, events, and significances that preceded it. The castle has been converted into a public institution, and as such, has created a much more complex layering of past and present, inside and

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49 Lacroix, Museo Nacional de Historia, 9.
outside, and inclusion and exclusion of the citizens of the nation than existed previously.
The funding and structures of control, however, maintain the Castillo de Chapultepec in its place at the top of a centuries-old struggle to create and impose spatial and social hierarchy. A large part of the work of the museum, though primarily focused on forming and furthering nationalistic historical narratives, is to act as historic preservationist, both for the museum building and site, and for the reclaimed historical artifacts and stories that played a role in shaping the course of the nation.

Those in charge of overseeing the preservation of the building’s architecture carefully maintained the historically significant features and design aesthetic, while making gentle modifications to improve its functionality as a modern museum. One of the most notable cross sections of historic and modern building is found at the covered terraces around the Alcázar. The terraces, which were once open to the air, have been enclosed with glass curtain walls that make very little visual impact on the façade of the building (Figure 17). To achieve this, the preservationists insured that, to the maximum extent possible, the structure, used to support the curtain walls, was made of glazing. Only small metal clamps with post-tensioning wiring detract from the otherwise clear, modern enhancement. In addition, the interior courtyards at the History Museum portion of the building have been covered with a translucent fiberglass paneling system in order to create a weathertight interior space (Figure 18). Where a typical roof would have completely changed the experience of the courtyard, the translucent panels maintain a connection to the sun and an experience of diffuse natural daylight within
the enclosed space, while providing a weathertight interior that can accommodate
works of fine art and historical artifacts.

Important events that took place at the site—like the battle of the Niños Héroes—have been explicitly commemorated in several ways within the building. In
1970, a large mural was painted on the ceiling of the entry stairwell that honors the
heroism of the young cadets (Figure 19). Additionally, an exhibit room on the second
level of the History Museum displays posthumously painted portraits of the cadets, who
sacrificed their lives for their country and marks their ages at the time of their deaths.
But, in a more expansive way, the exhibits within the museum are used to recapture and
preserve the entire past, both historical and mytho-historical, of the nation. Big
moments of encounter, success, trial, and conflict are reclaimed as belonging to the
nation. These moments are stitched together to craft a national narrative imbued with
the threads of officially constructed identity and culture.

Not only did the building, the Castillo de Chapultepec, go through many changes,
owners, and reconfigurations over the centuries, but the institution of the National
Museum of History went through a concurrent history of changes and advances. The
way in which the modern museum and collections came together and were gathered
over centuries adds a nuance to the understanding of the national narrative presented
within the exhibits. The inception of the National Museum of History dates back to
1790, during the late colonial period, with the formation of the Museum of Natural
History. Although this original institution survived only a short time, and was
dismantled during the Wars of Independence (1810), it served an important role in establishing a view of the history and roots of the place. The exhibits brought together collections that the Kings of Spain had begun amassing in 1774, to demonstrate aspects and material goods of the different and diverse people groups that they had conquered.50

In 1822, Emperor Iturbide formed a Conservatory of Antiquities and a Cabinet of Natural History using the collections that remained from the earlier Museum of Natural History. The Museum of Natural History collections were primarily composed of indigenous artifacts, objects, and remains of material culture that had been accumulated under the order of the controlling viceroys during the colonial period. In that time, there had been a royal imperative, rooted in the European-based movement of the Enlightenment, to document the lives and qualities of the new colonial subjects, in a “scientific” way. A main goal in the thorough system of documentation was to determine in what ways, and to what extent, the indigenous subjects could be profitable for the Spanish crown. The documentation, which also included the extensive written records that made up many of the viceregal Codices, was viewed as objective documentation of these unknown, indigenous subjects. The preservation of these colonial collections into the modern museum provided a significant basis on which to establish the indigenous roots of the nation.

Later, under President Guadalupe Victoria’s decree, the Mexican National Museum was founded on March 18, 1825. In 1834, the collections from the Conservatory of Antiquities and the Cabinet of Natural History were incorporated into the collections of the Mexican National Museum. The museum responded to the political turmoil of the times, and operated in an irregular way for many years, remaining closed during the U.S./Mexican War. On December 4, 1865, Emperor Maximilian von Hapsburg decreed to have the Public Museum of Natural History, Archeology and History established, using the collections of the Mexican National Museum. This institution was located in the Casa de Moneda, the Royal Mint, which had a long history dating to the colonial period and had served as the birthplace for the Academy of San Carlos—the official Art Academy in New Spain and Mexico. After the triumph of the Republic and the establishment of the Mexican state, this museum returned to its title of National Museum.

In the 1940s, the collections of the National Museum were dispersed into three separate institutions—the National Museum of Archaeology, the Museum of Natural History, and the National Museum of History. As previously mentioned, all three of these institutions are located within the grounds of the Bosque de Chapultepec Park. James Oles, in his book *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, provides an explanation for the development of the national museums in the period dating after World War II through the mid-1960s. He says, “Like the Plaza (de Tres Culturas), the museums in Chapultepec Park were official declarations that Mexico was a unique and unified nation distinguished by extraordinary cultural achievements, and that the bloody sacrifices of
the past had given way to a glorious and stable present.”

The museum contains objects that “have proved of significance in the development of the nation,” as determined by the ruling elite. In this way, the location of the museum at the Castillo de Chapultepec operated as a strategic move by the government to inspire acceptance of a national narrative of identity. At the Castillo, the significant history of the nation is shrouded within the Niños Héroes myth.

Preceding and closing the circuit through the history exhibits at the National Museum of History, are reminders of the self-sacrificial child warriors—speaking to a core of national pride. Blanketing a narrative of the history of the nation, which dates back to Aztec royalty and the arrival of the first Spaniards, within a renowned history of national pride, engenders within the masses obedience and acceptance of the official ideas of nation. In addition, this official narrative is dispersed widely, because visits to the museum are built into the official system of public education for all school children within the city.

The building that remains on this site today, the Castillo de Chapultepec, has served an important role through the rich and varied histories of many different political regimes, technological changes, times of war and of peace, and cultural and national advancements. Although the building has been occupied and run by different political regimes, technological changes, times of war and of peace, and cultural and national advancements. Although the building has been occupied and run by different political regimes, technological changes, times of war and of peace, and cultural and national advancements. Although the building has been occupied and run by different political regimes, technological changes, times of war and of peace, and cultural and national advancements. Although the building has been occupied and run by different political regimes, technological changes, times of war and of peace, and cultural and national advancements. Although the building has been occupied and run by different political

52 Lacroix, Museo Nacional de Historia, 10.
entities and powers over the centuries, its architectural foundation has remained and been preserved and adapted for modern use. Different iterations of adaptive reuse point to a fusion of cultures, histories, and mythologies of nation over time. Additionally, the adaptive reuse of this important building and site demonstrates a distinctive symbol of power associated with place, both for those wielding the power, as well as for their subjects/citizens.\textsuperscript{53}

Through many different faction changes, the Castillo de Chapultepec was adaptively reused to remain a symbol of power for the colony, and later, a symbol of nationhood for the state. This concentration of power at a specific site is supported by the Castillo’s long and complex history. Arguably, since the 1940s when the building was converted into the Museum of National History, it has been a center for the generation and dissemination of a state-scripted national identity. The political initiatives that worked to bring about the creation of these narratives of nationhood through the federal museum institutions will be discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{53} The subjects become citizens through the processes of nation formation described by Benedict Anderson.
Chapter 1 Images
Figure 4 Bosque de Chapultepec, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 5 Stone sculpture of the Chapultepec Hill Glyph, located at Chapultepec Park, photo by author, 2014. Reminders of the Aztec origins, such as this, can be found throughout the park.
Figure 6 Illustration of the Chapultepec Hill Glyph, Tovar Codex, 16th Century
Figure 7 View looking up at the Castillo de Chapultepec from the access path below, photo by author, July 2014. The stone of the foundation wall mimics the natural outcroppings of stone below.
Figure 8 Castillo de Chapultepec, view of south façade, looking north, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 9 Castillo de Chapultepec Massing Diagram, Ground Floor Plan, diagram by author, base plan from Lacroix, *Museo Nacional de Historia*, 8.
Figure 10 View of the front entrance to the Castillo de Chapultepec, looking north, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 11 Nationalistic stained glass window, second story, Castillo de Chapultepec, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 12 Wrought iron door with emblem of Mexican nationhood, west courtyard, Castillo de Chapultepec, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 13  Detail of the Monument to the Niños Héroes, Chapultepec Park, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 14 Maximilian of Hapsburg by Alfred Graefle, 1865, oil on canvas. Painting hangs at the National Museum of History.
Figure 15 Interior view of the Alcázar, facing northwest, Castillo de Chapultepec, image from http://www.ptzacatecas.org.mx/2014/11/21/museo-nacional-de-historia-de-mexico/


**Figure 16** View of second level terraces at the Alcázar, looking northwest, Castillo de Chapultepec, image from Lacroix, *Museo Nacional de Historia*, 3.
Figure 17  View of preservation measures taken to enclose the Alcázar terraces, Castillo de Chapultepec, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 18  View of preservation measures taken to enclose the western courtyards, Castillo de Chapultepec, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 19  *Sacrificio de Los Niños Héroes*, Gabriel Flores García, 1970, fresco
Photo by author, July 2014.
Chapter 2:

The National Museums of Mexico and the Federally Commissioned Work of Jorge González Camarena in the Project of Nation Building
The political construct of nation exists so widely in the world today that it is difficult to imagine a different system by which to separate, organize, identify, self-identify, and govern political groupings of people. But nations did not just form, they are not natural occurrences. Rather, they were carefully conceived of and constructed. Benedict Anderson explains this concept of nationality in his book, Imagined Communities. He says “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”\textsuperscript{54} Such was the case in Mexico. The careful structuring of nationalism in Mexico, in the second, post-revolutionary phase of nation formation, was largely built upon large-scale public art projects, and later, upon the creation of a national museum system that created a new visual vernacular language for the nation.

Since the early formations of Mexico, the people—indigenous, European, and mestizo—have practiced, in varying forms, the artistic expression of their cultural, religious, and historical roots. The practice of the arts is a defining characteristic of the nation, both historically and in the modern state. After the revolution, an artistic tradition was developed and refined in Mexico in order to express a visual and narrative language of \textit{lo mexicano}, or \textit{mexicanidad}, that which is in its essence, Mexican.\textsuperscript{55} The development of \textit{lo mexicano} began a process of giving voice and language to early ideas

\textsuperscript{54} Anderson, Imagined Communities, 6.
of national identity. Much of the manifestation of this narrative language took the form of large-scale public mural projects.

Today, Mexico is still known for its rich tradition of post-revolutionary muralists. The greats, *los Tres Grandes*—Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros—are among the most famous Mexican artists known today, both nationally and internationally. The Mexican mural movement, which developed in the early 1920s in post-revolutionary Mexico, was influential in generating social, cultural, and political change, primarily through its impact on the early development of ideas of national identity. Because of the complexity of the social and political situations in Mexico in the post-revolutionary period, and the deliberate, self-conscious use of art in the development of Mexican nationality, the project of nation formation in Mexico presents an interesting example within the broader movement of nation formation. Nation building, however, was not a phenomenon unique to Mexico. Beginning largely in the mid-eighteenth century, wide scale political restructuring and the development of nations became a worldwide trend.

In his book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson identifies several factors that contributed to this global movement of nation formation, presenting a broad view into the universal trend. As was discussed in Chapter 1, the first factor that prompted nation formation was the influence of an imperial past.\(^{56}\) Though the construct of nation differs in many ways from the construct of dynasty, Anderson points out that there is a certain relationship that exists between the two—a response by the nation to the imperialism of its past. Anderson proposes that “…nationalism has to be

understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being.”57 The second main factor that Anderson identifies in nation building is revolution—the means by which the people force a change in the political structure. Anderson explains that in the global trend of nation building, there is always an “impulse of resistance,”58 a reason for which the people finally fight back against the oppression of empire. This impulse of resistance triggers revolutionary action.

A third main factor that Anderson identifies as contributing to the formation of nations is the creation, primarily through print capitalism, of a new tier of vernacular languages. Where earlier, literacy and language was tied directly to Latin, a language inaccessible to all but the monarchs and the clergy, the expansion of print capitalism allowed greater prominence for vernacular, spoken languages. Anderson explains that the development of these print languages allowed for increased communication and identification for groups of people that spoke different dialects of one language. One French, Spanish, or English translation could be understood by all who spoke the different dialects of those languages, thereby creating “the embryo of the nationally imagined community.”59 The increased association between people allowed by the generation of these print, vernacular languages triggered a process of awareness for the people who belonged to a specific place and language field.

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57 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 12.
58 Ibid, 51.
59 Ibid, 44.
I propose that in the post-revolutionary project of nationalism in Mexico, this new, unifying vernacular language was manifested as a visual language that was carried out and disseminated through works of muralism. In the period following the revolution, the visual vernacular language of muralism was developed and came to be understood by all Mexican citizens as representing Mexican national identity. The muralistic tradition, however, did not end with the post-revolutionary period. It continued to be carried out within public institutions well into the second half of the twentieth century, and gave rise to a second generation of Mexican muralists, whose work was foundational to the formation of Mexico’s national museum system.

One of the most well-known artists of that second generation was Jorge González Camarena,60 who produced work extensively within Mexico over the course of much of the twentieth century (Figure 20). He began generating commercial work in 1929, providing illustrations for the covers of various magazines, including Cemento Blanco Portland, and Tolteca, and continued to develop a career in canvas painting, sculpture, and muralism; working until shortly before the time of his death in 1980. Over the course of his career, culminating in his federal commissions to paint mural projects at three of the Mexican national museums in the 1960s, Camarena was placed in a position by the government to give voice and artistic expression to the development of an art that was integral to the project of nation formation.

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Though primarily considered as a muralist of the second generation, Camarena also had connections to artists who were influential in the first generation of muralism. Of particular import was his friendship with Gerardo Murillo, a father of modern Mexican art (Figure 21). Murillo took on the name Dr. Atl\(^61\) in 1902 to associate himself more closely with the indigenous past of Mexico, and was deeply influential in the government’s development of the post-revolutionary mural language, designed to tell the story of Mexico. As a professor at the Academy of San Carlos, he taught and influenced many important modern Mexican artists, including Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco. He worked to develop and promote Mexican artists, rather than continuing the practice of importing European art, which was common in the colonial era and throughout the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. In 1913, just after the revolution, Dr. Atl joined the forces of President Venustiano Carranza and was appointed as Chief of Propaganda. Later, in 1920, he became the director for the Mexican government’s Department of Fine Arts\(^62\). In these roles, Dr. Atl was closely associated with and influential in the first, post-revolutionary, artistic movement in Mexico.

Dr. Atl, who was very significant in the development of modern muralism in Mexico, described Camarena as occupying a category of his own, which fell somewhere between the first and second generations of muralists. He said, “Camarena is the muralist of the middle generation, more Mexican, more in accord with the ideas that

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\(^61\) Atl is the Nahuatl word meaning water.
inspired the artistic revolution of our country.” Though Camarena was born later, Dr. Atl aligned him with the earlier generation of muralists in terms of his artistic voice and thematic inspiration. This assessment by Dr. Atl is important in placing Camarena within the large history of Mexican art production, and makes a clear statement about Camarena’s work. Atl’s validation of both the quality and content of Camarena’s art lends weight to the argument that Jorge González Camarena was an important contributor to the production of modern fine art in Mexico. Although very little critical scholarship has been done on the work of Camarena, particularly in English, Dr. Atl’s declaration proves the significance of Camarena’s contributions to the production of a Mexican nationalistic art.

Though he followed in a powerful line of muralists, I propose that Camarena was an important artist in his own right, contributing new nuances to the visual language and vocabulary of Mexican muralism, and distinctive interpretations to the mytho-historical narratives of the Mexican past. In addition, I propose that Camarena used a narrative language of violence, at times subtle and at times overt, in much of his historical art as a means to critically engage and signify the scars and ripples which Mexico’s history of colonialism and power—past and present—created within the nation. In this chapter, I will focus on the 1930s to 1960s project of nation building in Mexico. To that end, I will briefly discuss the development of Mexico’s national museums and the intentional federal use of muralism therein. Within the context of the

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63 Author’s translation. “Camarena es el muralista de generación media, más mexicano, más acorde con las ideas que inspiraron la revolución artística de nuestro país.” Quote from Fernández, Revolución Constructiva, 7.
national museums of Mexico, I will analyze the federally commissioned murals painted by Camarena that are included in three of the four primary national museums, to build a case for his important contributions to the greater oeuvre of modern Mexican art and to the generation of a Mexican nationalism.

I propose that through his federally commissioned work, Camarena contributed a different conceptualization of revolution, of violence, and of nation to Mexico’s vernacular language of muralism. I will frame the discussion of Camarena and his work in an analysis of the purposeful use of muralism in the development of the national museums in Mexico. Through an investigation into Camarena’s four federally commissioned murals from the 1960s, along with his other work that occupied a national stage, I will demonstrate that Jorge González Camarena made significant contributions to ideas of national identity, ideas that represented a wide variety of viewpoints, and to the second phase of nation building in Mexico which relied heavily on modern, federally-sponsored art production. In these ways, the physical preservation of Mexico’s places of power, explained in Chapter 1 and demonstrated by the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Castillo de Chapultepec architectural site will be shown to have been built on and echoed in the historical preservation of Mexico’s stories and myths of origin through the visual narrative work of public mural projects in the development of the national museums.

Much of the art produced in the modern Mexican era explores questions of identity, often illustrating, again and again, visual constructions of the roots of the
nation. While many artists depicted certain strains of the colonial narrative, this narrative was seldom expressed through a language of such graphic violence and compositional order as was crafted by Camarena. Because his art is so widely displayed in prominent government institutions, funded by federal commissions, the divergent way in which he represents old tropes is interesting. In his work, he returns often to themes of the collisions of cultures, the glorification of indigenous roots, and the damage and rebirth left in the wake of violent encounters. 64 Although there are instances of violence in the mural projects of los Tres Grandes of the first generation (Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco), these instances are broadly shown as generalized violence. Within the tradition of depicting the initial clash between the Aztecs and the Spanish, Camarena’s depiction differs in that he shows the Aztec and the Conquistador simultaneously killing one another. Camarena painted his museum-commissioned murals in the post-World War II world, when the idea of total war was present and understood in a tangible way. This idea of total war is captured in Camarena’s work. In his depictions, Camarena globalizes the conquest, associating it with an image of total war that the world could understand, while particularizing it to the context of Mexico. Camarena takes a traditional subject, the mytho-historical initial encounter between the indigenous and colonial cultures, and indexes it to the contemporary experience.

As a way to form a theoretical basis for and to approach these ideas of identity, colonization, narrative voice, and violence, I again use the work of Homi Bhabha, as

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64 See Chapter 2 Images, Appendix A, page 109 for a brief catalog of Camarena’s art that demonstrates the many faces of violence seen so prominently throughout his work.
presented in his book, *The Location of Culture*. In his chapter titled “Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative,” Bhabha analyzes the work and post-colonial theoretical contributions of Frantz Fanon, an Afro-French psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary from the Caribbean island of Martinique, a French colony. Fanon’s work focused on post-colonial studies, decolonization, and critical theory, and was centered on the effects of the French colonization of Algeria.

In the chapter, Bhabha delves into a critical analysis and presentation of the distinctive characteristics of Fanon’s ideas, explaining that the “force of Fanon’s vision” comes from

...the tradition of the oppressed, the language of a revolutionary awareness that, as Walter Benjamin suggests, ‘the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight.’ And the state of emergency is also always a state of emergence. The struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole. The analysis of colonial depersonalization not only alienates the Enlightenment idea of ‘Man’, but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge.65

According to these theories, history exists as both perpetual emergency and perpetual emergence, as an entity that is understood and experienced in a multiplicity of completely disparate ways, and as a collective unit by which the participants can either be estranged from or united to a sense of identification. So to, there is not a single experience for the dominant group and a single experience for the marginalized. Those

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65 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 41.
categories are challenged altogether. Rather, in a history of colonialism, identity is confronted with violence, emergency, but also emergence on all fronts.

This view of history correlates closely with Bhabha’s views of culture and identity, which were referenced in Chapter 1 of this thesis. There is dynamism, a proclivity for movement and change that Bhabha associates with the concepts of culture, identity, history, and time. Within the complexities of these things, opposition can arise in the form of violence or oppression. But, there is also the possibility for counter-resistance efforts to arise, and for positive change to be achieved. The ideas of depersonalization, estrangement, and displacement that permeate the stories of identity for the colonial subject do not have to be the final word. The outlook for the colonial and post-colonial state is bleak, but shows a thread of hope for new growth, new culture, and emergence. All of these things, the cultural tensions between violence and oppression and reinvention and hope, are found within the story of nationalism in Mexico. In addition, both violence and oppression, and hopefulness and emergence are themes often repeated throughout the works of Jorge González Camarena.

Jorge González Camarena was born in 1908 in Guadalajara, Jalisco, and moved with his family to Mexico City in 1918. From an early age, Camarena showed an interest in art and painting (Figure 22). On trips to visit his extended family, he would watch an aunt work—she was an amateur painter—and would studiously observe her technique. Prompted by art teachers, Camarena decided to enter the Academy of San

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Carlos, the National School of Fine Arts,\textsuperscript{67} at the end of his primary education. Though he was initially opposed by his parents,\textsuperscript{68} he remained in the Academy from 1924 through 1928, joining the ranks of the many modern Mexican artists who were academically trained.

In the middle of his time at the Academy, in 1925, Camarena took one year away, in which he studied at the Escuela de Pintura al Aire Libre (the Open Air School of Painting) in Tlalpan, directed by Francisco Díaz de León. At the Open Air School of Painting, Camarena came under the mentorship of Dr. Atl. At this time, Dr. Atl, admiring Camarena's artistic abilities, invited Camarena to participate in his book project, \textit{Las Iglesias de México}. Camarena agreed, and provided studies for the watercolor illustrations of the churches highlighted in the books (Figure 23).

In 1928, near the end of Camarena’s formal artistic education, Diego Rivera became the Director of the Academy of San Carlos; the result of a movement to rid the school of its “antiquated methods of teaching.”\textsuperscript{69} In that year, Camarena participated in Rivera’s then-revolutionary pedagogical program that united painting, architecture, and sculpture students for their core courses in the first three years of study. Due to angered faculty and alumni, the new curriculum was short-lived. Soon after it had begun, Camarena, along with the rest of the students who had participated in Rivera’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[67] La Institución Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA).
\item[69] Sainz, “Jorge González Camarena,” 5.
\end{footnotes}
program, were suspended at the end of the school year, thus ending Camarena’s time at the Academy.\textsuperscript{70}

A defining experience for Camarena came about in 1932, when he was commissioned to restore the 16\textsuperscript{th} century frescoes at the Convento de San Miguel in Huejotzingo, Puebla (Figure 24). His work on the 16\textsuperscript{th} century murals influenced his development of a personal visual style in several ways. He was exposed to and was able to work on mural-scale paintings and to gain an understanding of composition, technique, and the incorporation of a visual narrative. In addition, Camarena was able to gain a deeper understanding of the centuries-long tradition of muralism in Mexico, which his work would later continue. The commissioning of this work in Huejotzingo, given by Jorge Enciso, Director of Colonial Monuments for the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) came about, in part, because of Camarena’s friendship with Dr. Atl and his experience working on the Las Iglesias book project. Camarena’s work at the convento lasted for two years, from 1932 to 1933, and provided him with great exposure to early colonial art, and to life in a rural, culturally indigenous, community. This work also gained Camarena access and exposure to the official, state-run, artistic community, directed by INAH.

At that time, the frescoes at Huejotzingo had only recently been discovered, and little was known about the paintings’ origins. Camarena, through much careful observation and research, was able to identify the artist of the Huejotzingo murals as

\textsuperscript{70} Favela Fierro, \textit{Jorge González Camarena}, 108.
being Marcos Cipactli.\textsuperscript{71} Cipactli was an indigenous artist, descended from Nahuatl peoples, who was highly favored by colonial missionaries for the quality and aesthetic of his work.\textsuperscript{72} This important connection speaks both to Camarena’s skill as a restorationist and to his insight and sensitivity to artistic style. Through this work at the convento, his understanding of the characteristics, styles, and subject matter that formed the arts of the pre-Hispanic era grew.

In addition, his time in Huejotzingo gave him early exposure to the historical language of muralism. In Mexico, a relatively unbroken thread of muralism was carried forward from the early colonial period into the post-revolutionary mural movement, and beyond. Camarena’s knowledge of the language of muralism served him throughout his career. He drew on it as he began to complete his own mural projects, starting in the late 1930s. In the book Jorge González Camarena: Antología, compiled by the National Council for Culture and Arts, Camarena is described, from this early time in the 1930s, as creating his personal style by using ordered geometric division to compose and structure the elements that make up his work. He named this unique system \textit{cuadratismo}—a personalized form of methodical, dynamic, and narrative cubism.\textsuperscript{73} This artistic system was particularly well-suited to the large-scale murals that he painted, which were necessarily situated within physical architectural spaces. In his method of artistic constructions and stylings, Camarena created structural elements and forms that

\textsuperscript{71} Sainz, “Jorge González Camarena,” 6.
\textsuperscript{72} Zires, “Los Mitos de La Virgen de Guadalupe,” 285.
allowed his paintings to reference and resonate with adjacent architectural space, which in turn added a depth to the reading of his works. He worked to create an art that was responsive to the environment in which it was displayed, and that was deeply steeped in the nature of his own individuality and in the culture of a truly Mexican artistic tradition.

During this time, while Camarena was developing his own stylistic vocabulary, he was also developing an interest in historical subject matter. In her book, *Jorge González Camarena: Universo Plástico*, Maria Teresa Favela Fierro gives insight into the motivations that inspired Camarena’s work. She says, “The Guadalajaran artist was always concerned with rescuing our pre-Hispanic past in terms of its historic, religious, and artistic aspects, and in terms of its transcendence over the course of centuries.”

Camarena’s interest in Mexican history was also thought to stem from a profound and personal sense of pride in his nation (Figure 25). A 1964 newspaper article attributes Camarena’s thematic historical approach to art to his personal nationalism. Author Mireya Folch asserts that “he (Camarena) is 100 percent Mexican and he concerns himself exceedingly with the origin of Mexican-ness.” These concerns were surely sharpened by his time at the convento in Huejotzingo.

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74 Author’s translation. “El artista tapatío siempre estuvo preocupado por rescatar nuestro pasado prehispánico en sus aspectos históricos, religiosos y artísticos, y su trascendencia a lo largo de los siglos.” Quote from Favela Fierro, *Jorge González Camarena*, 54.

75 Author’s translation. “…él es ciento porciento mexicano y le preocupa sobrermanera el origen de la mexicanidad.” Quote from Folch, “Los Muralistas,” *Novedades*, January 1965. Article accessed through the Archival Collection of the Fundación Cultural Jorge González Camarena, A.C.
Camarena painted his first mural, titled Alegoría de Zimapán, in 1939 at the Hotel Fundación in the state of Hidalgo (Figure 26). After this point, Camarena received many commissions to produce murals through the late 1970s. In total, he painted over 30 murals, most of which are located within governmental or institutional buildings, nationally funded museums, or public universities. The themes of his murals vary, but many are dedicated primarily to illustrating different aspects of the history of Mexico, or of the state of humanity in general.

As his career progressed, Camarena continued to form an active presence among the larger national artistic community in Mexico. This included sitting on roundtable discussion panels with artists from different generations to comment on the body of Mexican fine art. In addition, Camarena participated in and juried some of the annual Expositions of Mexican Fine Arts, put on by INBA, the National Institute of Fine Arts. In 1959, Camarena was named as a member of the Commission of Mural Painting by the director of INBA, Celestino Gorostiza. The other members named at that time included David Alfaro Siqueiros, Juan O’Gorman, José Chávez Morado, and Federico Cantú.76 The Commission was formed, by order of President Miguel Alemán, to promote “a serious, analytical study, of the Fine Arts of Mexico.”77 In these roles, Camarena contributed to the formation of nationalistic ideals of art production that were driven and influential at a political level.

76 Favela Fierro, Jorge González Camarena, 53.
77 Ibid, 110.
In addition to the platform provided Camarena in three of the big national museums of Mexico, Camarena’s work also occupied two other stages that impacted public education and public awareness in Mexico. First, for some time, many years after *La Conquista* was first painted, the image was used on the 50 peso piece, reproduced in commemoration of five centuries of Mexican history (Figure 27). Second, in the early 1960s, about the same time as he was painting his institutional mural projects, one of Camarena’s paintings was selected by the National Commission of Free Text Books to be used as the cover illustration for the *textos gratuitos*. These were free text books distributed to all public school children to be used as workbooks for their different subjects. The painting selected to occupy the free textbook covers, *La Patria*, was painted in 1962 (Figure 28). According to Jorge Meléndez Fernández, in his book *Revolución Constructiva: Jorge González Camarena*, this painting “would remain in the memory of millions of people as, during the 1960s, the National Commission of Free Text Books reproduced this allegory, that presents the values of Mexican culture and nationality, on all of its covers.” The cover, which was used for most of the 1960s and 1970s, has been recirculated and used at different times in the past fifty years. The cover was recirculated and used in elementary schools throughout Mexico as recently as 2010.

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78 Favela Fierro, *Jorge González Camarena*, 57.
79 Comisión Nacional de los Libros de Texto Gratuito.
80 Author’s translation. “...se perpetaría en la memoria de millones de personas, pues durante la década de los 60’s la Comisión Nacional de Libros de Texto Gratuitos reprodujo en todas sus portadas esta alegoría que presenta los valores de la cultura Mexicana.” Quote from Fernández, *Revolución Constructiva*, 7.
The development of Camarena’s career and his contributions to a body of national art in Mexico both inherently point back to the federal development of a national museum system. From the 1930s through the 1960s, an official, federally-initiated program was pushed forward to develop and reorganize a system of national museums in Mexico. The motivations for this development of a public museum system were political, and were intentionally used to further the work of nation and culture building in Mexico. As previously mentioned, of the four museums included in the public museum program at that time—the National Museum of History, the National Museum of Anthropology, the Museum of Natural History, and the Palace of Fine Arts—all but the Museum of Natural History used murals to bolster and frame the other exhibits.

In her book, How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture, Mary Coffey describes the museum as being “a privileged site of institutionalization.” She explains that, “chroniclers of the public museum have demonstrated that museums play a constitutive role in state formation and political projects to define citizenship.” These conceptions of museums and of nation are reinforced by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities, who explains that “…museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political.” Anderson describes the institutionalized museum as being used in projects of nation formation worldwide, in conjunction with systems of census taking and map making. He labels these three things as “institutions of power.”

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82 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 178.
museum, the census, and the map were used as a system by which a nation could categorize and catalog their archaeological, historical, demographic, and geographic domain.83

In the case of the museum in Mexico, the function of archaeological and historical classification is evident in both the reorganized colonial antiquities collections, noted in Chapter 1, and in the use of modern muralism to craft and visually display a nationalistic narrative of Mexican history. The mural projects commissioned for the Palace of Fine Arts, the National Museum of Anthropology, and the National Museum of History expanded the museum’s collections of indigenous and colonial objects and works of art, and played a role in chronicling and promoting the accepted history of the nation.

Through his participation in these official platforms, Jorge González Camarena made an important presence within the institutional development of a national art in the second part of the twentieth century. The works that Camarena painted for national platforms were all focused on themes of either the history of Mexico or the state of humanity, which were the two most prominent and frequent themes that Camarena covered in his body of work. In his treatment of these themes, Camarena reveals a point of view that not only captures a historical or allegorical moment, but also exposes his own critical understanding of the subject. His inclusion of well-formulated, thoughtful insights resonates once more with the work of Homi Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha states,

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What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.  

In his work, Camarena showed thought beyond the standard narratives of national history and myth. He was able to create space for different interpretations of his work regarding the formations of the nation. These multiple interpretations included those that fell in line with the federally endorsed objectives, promoting a single, dominant narrative of national identity, but also those that, though proud in their sense of Mexican nationalism, recognized the damage done and the violence enacted through the colonial structures of the past and through the traces of colonialism that continued into the modern nation.

A closer look at Camarena’s works that were included on the national stage illustrates more clearly his unique point of view, and stylistic language. *Liberación de la Humanidad* (1963) and *Las Razas* (1964) show two different aspects of the human condition. In *Las Razas*, Camarena depicts an originary scene, made up of stylized depictions of the female progenitors of the different people groups throughout the world (Figure 29). Highlighted at the center of the scene, forming the focal point of the image, is a depiction of the indigenous “American” woman, signifying the roots of Mexico and of the Americas. The composition of the painting is read in horizontal bands, and, through his inclusion of abstracted geometries and pictorial imagery, is a

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84 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2.
good example of Camarena’s signature style of *cuadratismo*. The horizontal bands are organized with the faces of the women occupying the top tier. Below the faces is a band made up of the women’s outstretched hands, with palms facing out, followed by a band made up of the trunks of the women’s bodies. At the bottom of the image is a band that consists of a conglomeration of ruins, representing ancient civilizations from around the world.

In the ruins, there are conflations of material culture left by early colonizers, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as by early pre-colonized or indigenous civilizations, like the Rapa Nui peoples of Easter Island. In this painting, Camarena portrayed a sense of oneness, a unity found in the human condition. Out of the crumbling pasts common to all peoples—whether by means of a colonial intervention, or not—comes the richness and diversity found in the variety of the peoples of the world. Camarena described his work as looking “…for the essence of our peculiarities”, saying “…when one appears more peculiar is when he becomes more universal. In other words, I aspire to create an art that is my own and that is differentiated based on the peculiar spirit of *lo mexicano*.“

*Las Razas* exemplifies Camarena’s ideal of depicting the universal condition from out of the peculiar or particular experience, while still being influenced by his understanding of Mexicanism.

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**Author’s translation. “…yo busco la esencia de nuestras particularidades...cuando se manifiesta alguien más particular es cuando se hace más universal. En otras palabras, aspire a crear un arte propio y diferenciado basado en el espíritu peculiar de lo mexicano.”** Quote by Jorge González Camarena found in Fernández, *Revolución Constructiva*, 7.
*Liberación de la Humanidad* (Figure 30) depicts a scene that, like *Las Razas*, shows a narrative progression tracing the conditions of emergency to emergence. The scene is broken into three distinct sections, and is widely understood to be read as a progressive triptych. According to much of the archival record written about this piece, the scenes advance, representing a preexisting condition of slavery at the left, the fight for freedom in the center, and the culmination of freedom for humanity at the right.86 Within this overall, three part composition, Camarena used a clever convention that worked to fit the mural within its built environment. As a way to accommodate for the two large columns that stand less than ten feet in front of his mural, Camarena divided his painting into three sections, each separated by depictions of stacked architectonic blocks that form transitional spaces between the three scenes, and align with the physical columns in the architectural space (Figure 31).

Camarena created further distinction between the three sections by applying different color palettes to each. In the slavery section, he used a muted palette of neutral colors made up of grays and browns to depict two figures, a man and a woman, shown as being literally and figuratively bound. In this section, the male figure is depicted in the bondage of ropes, which are wrapped around his body from ankles to neck, while the female figure is depicted with the traces of bondage and restraints imprinted into her skin, like tattoos that cover much of her body. In the fight for freedom section, he used a palette of bold, highly saturated, reds, greens, purples, and

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yellows. The prominent central figure draws the primary focus in the piece. He is a man, kneeling with his back facing the viewer, tied to, but breaking away from, a jagged wooden structure, like a cross. This man is the largest figure in the scene, and is painted with the most vibrant colors used in the piece. In this figure, the viewer sees the application of a convention that Camarena used in many of his large-scale projects to depict dynamism and movement, found in the depiction of the central man’s left arm, which is shown in double. The scale of the figure, and the visual importance placed on him arguably allows the viewer to relate to his condition, and to the present and pressing struggle for the realization of freedom. This depiction of struggle resonates with Bhabha’s ideas mentioned earlier in this chapter, providing a visual depiction of both emergency and emergence. Finally, in the freedom section at the right, Camarena used bright colors, but with a less saturated application. His layering of different reds, yellows, and oranges, all with bright undertones, gives a sense of an otherworldly, ethereal presence. The woman depicted, glowing and showing a single kernel of corn in her outturned hand, suggests that the achievement of freedom is both a utopian construction and a return to the indigenous roots of the people, to the fruits of the land, and to the bounties of harvest native to the region.

In his paintings at the National Museum of History, Camarena includes subtle undercurrents of themes of humanity, as seen through a focused lens of Mexican history. Each of the three paintings (two murals and one smaller canvas painting) shown within the permanent history exhibit at the museum depicts a different snapshot view of the broader history, or mytho-history of the nation. In all three of the paintings,
Camarena used a bold, saturated, color palette. The colors used were primarily reds, greens, and whites—a palette typically symbolic of the nation, referencing the national colors. In addition, he used the same stylistic convention mentioned earlier on these two mural projects, showing specific elements of the imagery in double, as a way to convey movement and action.

Both of Camarena’s mural paintings at the National Museum of History make reference to a moment of conflict or emergency, and to one of progress or emergence. In *La Conquista* (Figure 32), he depicts a version of the mythological origin story of the nation of Mexico—the initial encounter of the Spanish conquistador and the Aztec warrior that led to the generation of the mestizo people of Mexico. This moment, which has traditionally been celebrated in artistic depictions as the moment that gave birth to the mestizo, is shown here as a wholly violent encounter that brings, first, death.

Camarena, through his image of *La Conquista*, upset the historically accepted notion of European colonial authority, giving both Aztec and Spaniard a more equal footing in the battle over who defines Mexico, but also creating some separation between the citizens of modern Mexico and the figures that mythologically were made responsible for its birth. Benedict Anderson comments on this idea that national community is inherently linked to a historical past and an unknown future. He explains that “if nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into
a limitless future." Camarena’s depiction of the origin story of Mexico provides roots for the nation, but makes it clear that the modern nation of Mexico, with its limitless future, is not solely made up of its roots. There is a clear separation shown between the immemorial past and the limitless future.

In his book, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz describes a theoretical view of the origin myth of the Mexican, which, when seen alongside Camarena’s depiction, lends some insight into the complexities of Mexican identity. Paz says, “The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them. He denies them. And he does not affirm himself as a mixture, but rather as an abstraction: he is a man. He becomes the son of Nothingness. His beginnings are in his own self.” Here, Paz negates views of the Mexican as a hybrid of two things. Rather, from the moment of emergency, emerged something new, not the syncretism of disparate cultural values, but the self-referential creation of completely new models, out of nothingness and death. In Camarena’s conquest scene painting, he portrays a sense of the origins of Mexico that is similar to that expressed by Paz. Though he recognizes the encounter between the Aztecs and Spaniards and in so doing makes reference to the often repeated visual trope of the mytho-historical origins of Mexico, he draws a clear separation between that historical past and the unseen future of Mexico, heading into the late-twentieth century, and beyond. By showing this scene of

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87 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11-12.
88 Octavio Paz, “The Sons of La Malinche,” in *The Labyrinth of Solitude; The Other Mexico; Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude; Mexico and the United States; The Philanthropic Ogre* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 87.
total war and of the total death of the historical and mytho-historical origins of Mexico, he creates a clean slate, which recognizes, but is not dependent on its colonial roots.

In *Carranza y la Constitución de 1917* (Figure 33), Camarena depicted events surrounding a crucial turning point in the development of the modern Mexican nation. The year 1917 marked the executive acceptance of the current constitution, which displaced, amended, and revised the Benito Juarez constitution from 1857. Though the 1917 constitution included many liberal changes to reflect the progress of the post-revolutionary state, few of them were actually enacted during the presidency of Venustiano Carranza. As a result, many of the people animated by the movement of the revolution were disappointed.89

This mural shows a clear example of Camarena’s *cuadratismo* style. He has created a series of highly ordered forms, but within the faces and other figural elements, pieces of overlapping geometries begin to take shape. In this painting, the eagle image, symbolizing the post-revolutionary, post-constitutional nation, takes shape from out of the repeated rows of constitutionalists, the signers of the constitution. The eagle takes a much different form in this painting than it does when representing the eagle warrior at battle in *La Conquista*—more stoic and fixed. In addition, Camarena used a visual language that united the groups of the signers of the constitution together with the Zapatista warriors who fought for the revolution. Both factions, though separated on either side of Carranza, are ordered like soldiers, in uniform rows. And so,

despite the signers’ and Carranza’s lack of revolutionary action in the years following 1917, Camarena attributes them with acting out of revolutionary motivations.

In Camarena’s piece, a depiction of violence is seen in the ruins at the bottom, left-hand corner of the painting (Figure 34). The stylization of these ruins references not only the important buildings central to the Mexican nation, such as the Palace of Fine Arts (Figure 35), but also structures that allude to both the colonial and indigenous pasts. Camarena used similar visual language to conflate the complex histories of the nation in other, smaller, canvas paintings, such as Mestizaje Arquitectónico and Fusión de Razas y Ciudades.90 The inclusion of ruins at the base of the painting, with figures forming a band at the top is a similar language as was used in the Las Razas painting, depicting a hopeful view for the future, despite failings of the past. It is likely that the violence in this scene operates in much the same way.

Camarena’s work has been important within the nation of Mexico, and because of the federally commissioned platform he was given within the national museums, it has been important to the modern project of nation building. In much of his work, the themes that he chose to represent are soundly rooted within Mexican culture. Due to his public and nationally appointed platforms, his interpretations of these themes are widely recognized throughout the country, and are influential. Based on the examples included at the National Museum of History, the National Museum of Anthropology, and the Palace of Fine Arts, Camarena used the national platforms he was given in a meaningful and critical way. On the one hand, each of his institutional murals fulfilled

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90 See images of the two paintings noted in Chapter 2 Images, Appendix B, page 120.
the job that they were commissioned to do. For this reason, they have been on display for over 50 years. On the other hand, however, they illustrate and signify more than the simple institutional program for national identity and culture.

Over decades of honing his artistic language and content, Camarena developed his own personal voice regarding the events and figures that made up Mexico’s past. Through his body of work, including those works on display in the national museums, Camarena shed light on his personal understanding, celebration, and criticism of Mexico’s roots—both historical and mythological. In a largely understated way, Camarena incorporated themes of past and present colonialism, and the lasting ramifications left in its wake, throughout his work. In his careful treatment of both humanity and Mexico, however, he was able to exercise balance, imbuing the history of colonization with violence, and with hope, and with a complexity to encompass many narrative strains.

In this chapter, I have argued that Camarena’s institutional murals were important to the state directed project of nation building, as carried out in the development of a national museum system from the 1930s through 1960s. Through his paintings, however, Camarena was also able to express his own voice, a voice that, arguably, represented the condition and experience of the common man. In this way, Camarena supported official directives through his federally commissioned art, but also recognized past and present injustices, and offered a version of the Mexican historical narrative that subtly subverted the official, top-down, dominant version. In Chapter 3, I
will further discuss the role that Camarena’s art played in the project of nation building through an analysis of his National Museum of History mural, *La Conquista, or La Fusión de Dos Culturas*. In this analysis, I will flesh out some of the ways that Camarena’s critical thought about his work separates it from its official status, while still allowing it to contribute to national ideas about culture and identity, and emergency as emergence.
Chapter 2 Images
Figure 20 Jorge González Camarena, *Self Portrait*, student work, 1925, oil on canvas, 51.5cm x 38cm
Figure 21 Dr. Atl (left) with Jorge González Camarena at the inauguration for Camarena’s mural *Belisario Domínguez*, 1957
Figure 22 Photograph of Jorge González Camarena as a child, date unknown
Figure 23  Illustration from *Las Iglesias de México*, volume IV, by Dr. Atl, 1925, watercolor on paper; Camarena worked on studies for the watercolor illustrations for some of the volumes of the book
Figure 24  *Tota Pulchra*, 1550-1570, fresco, located at the Convento de San Miguel, Huejotzingo, Puebla, Mexico
Figure 25 Jorge González Camarena, Derecho de Conquista #2, 1979, oil on canvas, 60cm x 75cm
Figure 26 Jorge González Camarena, *Alegoría de Zimapán*, 1939, fresco, 2m x 2m, Hotel Fundición, Zimapán, Hidalgo
**Figure 27** 50 Peso Bill with image of Jorge González Camarena’s mural *La Conquista* or *La Fusión de Dos Culturas* printed on it
Figure 28 Libro de Texto Gratuito cover, illustrated with Jorge González Camarena's *La Patria*, 1962, oil on canvas
Figure 29 Jorge González Camarena, *Las Razas*, 1964, acrylic on polyester and fiberglass, 2.5m x 4.3m, National Museum of Anthropology, Introduction Hall. Image from Fundación Jorge González Camarena.
Figure 30 Jorge González Camarena, *Liberación de la Humanidad*, 1963, acrylic on canvas on a movable frame, Palacio de Bellas Artes. Image from Fundación Jorge González Camarena.
Figure 31 Jorge González Camarena, *Liberación de la Humanidad*, 1963, acrylic on canvas on a movable frame, Palacio de Bellas Artes, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 32 Jorge González Camarena, *La Fusión de Dos Culturas or La Conquista*, 1960-1963, oil on canvas, located in the National Museum of History, Castillo de Chapultepec
Figure 33  Jorge González Camarena, *Carranza y la Constitución de 1917*, 1967, oil on canvas, located in the National Museum of History, photo by author, July, 2014
Figure 34 Jorge González Camarena, detail of Carranza y La Constitución de 1917, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 35  Palacio de Bellas Artes, view of central dome, photo by author, July 2014
Chapter 2 Images, Appendix A
Figure 36 Jorge González Camarena, *Historia de México*, oil, 1m x 3m, located at the Salvador Ugarte Library, Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, Monterrey, Nueva Leon
Figure 37 Jorge González Camarena, detail of Belisario Domínguez, 1957, oil, 130m x 130m, located in the Senadores Building, Mexico D.F.
Figure 38  Jorge González Camarena, *El Abrazo* or *El Abrazo Mortal*, no date
Figure 39 Jorge González Camarena, *La Pareja*, 1964, oil on polyester and fiberglass, 2.15m x 1.42m, in the Gloria Ruiz de Bravo Ahuja Collection; referencing the mytho-history of Hernán Cortés and Malinche
Figure 40 Jorge González Camarena, La Muchacha del Diablo, 1968, oil on canvas
Figure 41 Jorge González Camarena, Trilogía de Coahuila, 1977, located at the Palacio Municipal de Saltillo, Coahuila
Figure 42 Jorge González Camarena, *Malinalli*, 1979, oil on canvas, 70cm x 80cm
Figure 43 Jorge González Camarena, *San Jorge y El Imperialismo*, 1979, oil on canvas, 1.25m x 2m
Figure 44 Jorge González Camarena, *Nuestro Tiempo*, 1980, oil on canvas, 1.2m x 1.83m, this is the last work painted by the artist
Figure 45  Jorge González Camarena, *Los Abuelos*, oil on canvas, 1.66m x 1.67m
Chapter 2 Images, Appendix B
Figure 46 Jorge González Camarena, *Mestizaje Arquitectónico*, oil on canvas, 60cm x 75cm
Figure 47 Jorge González Camarena, Teocalli Mexicano, oil on canvas
Figure 48  Jorge González Camarena, *Fusión de Razas y Ciudades*, oil on canvas
Chapter 3:

*La Fusión de Dos Culturas—Camarena’s Subversion of Dominant Narratives*
From the late 1950s through the 1960s, an atmosphere of social unrest grew in Mexico. Campaigns for labor reform led to large-scale strikes by railroad workers, teachers, and others. The government reacted swiftly, and at times, violently against uprisings instigated by different labor unions and by neo-Zapatista groups who echoed earlier calls for revolutionary action to affect agrarian land reform. Decades after the revolution, a communal desire for social progress and improvement continued to permeate the sensibilities of the masses, and conversely, to influence the actions taken and restrictions imposed by the federal government. It was this political and social context that gave birth to the student protest culture that spread in the late 1950s through the late 1960s, culminating in the 1968 protest and massacre at the Plaza de Tres Culturas, in Tlaltelolco, Mexico City. Enrique Krauze explains that, in this time:

A fierce antagonism began to develop between two antithetical forces: the student and the grenadier. Although not all the students were ideologically to the left (during this period there was also a growth in the old and powerful student militancy of the right that dated back to the thirties), a new interpretation - from the left - was taking root in the consciousness of Mexican students: the so-called revolutionary Mexican state was in reality an ignoble front man "for the bourgeoisie and for imperialism." Opposed to it were the classes of the workers and the peasants and their faithful spokesmen: the students, the artists, and the intellectuals.91

Krauze’s explanation describes the atmosphere in which Camarena was working during the era of his federal museum commissions. Camarena had strong ties to the artist community in Mexico, and would have been well aware of the student protest culture that was on the rise during that time, as well as of the socio-political climate that motivated the student protests. A great part of the artist community in Mexico in that

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91 Krauze, Mexico: Biography of Power, 643-644.
era was dependent on federal commissions from the government, but simultaneously recognized and spoke out against the injustices that the government allowed, enforced, and perpetuated among the greater population of Mexico. Each of these artists, including Camarena, had to negotiate a line between the government and the people. During this time of social unrest and political activism, Camarena did this in each of his federal commissions. As mentioned in earlier chapters, Camarena was commissioned to paint four murals in the early 1960s in three of the most important national museums in Mexico: the National Museum of History, the Palace of Fine Arts, and the National Museum of Anthropology. Despite the inclusion of Camarena’s work in these three important federally funded museums in Mexico City, very little critical scholarship has been written about him or about his prolific body of work.92

In her book *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* published in 2012, Mary Coffey made one of the most recent contributions to the field of scholarship about Mexican muralism. In the book, Coffey provides chapter-long, in-depth analyses into the development of each of the three museums listed above, which includes brief explanations of all four of Camarena’s

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federal mural projects in the chapters devoted to each institution. Regarding the two
murals at the National Museum of History, Coffey provides some analysis into their
significations, and explains that his pieces are important within the context of the
museum’s exhibition, which establishes an overarching history of Mexico.93 At the end
of the chapter, however, she accuses him, and other second generation muralists like
him, of uncritically applying the visual languages established by the renowned muralists
of the first generation in their own mural projects—most notably that of Diego Rivera,
without holding any of their “political sensibilities.” She also dismisses Camarena’s work
in the museum as being “pure social realist kitsch.”94

In an analysis of La Fusión de Dos Culturas and the 1960s history exhibit at the
National Museum of History, I propose that Jorge González Camarena, functioning
within the social, political, and cultural context of the late 1950s and 1960s, referenced
earlier artistic visual language while creating a unique style that worked to subvert or
critique the continuing, seemingly “imperial,” control of the federal government. A
study of the content and style of his painting reveals that the complexity of his work
allowed for an ambiguity of meaning that simultaneously referenced the ancient past
but was soundly situated in the present of the 1960s. In addition, as was introduced in
Chapter 2, Camarena’s specific depictions of the different figures and elements within
the scene lent a diversity of meaning to the painting, when seen situated within the
larger body of conquest genre paintings. The National Museum of History

93 Coffey, Revolutionary Art, 94.
94 Ibid, 125.
commissioned *La Fusión de Dos Culturas* to represent the origins of the nation in its then-developing Conquest exhibit. The Conquest exhibit formed part of the larger permanent history exhibit that served as a platform to create government-endorsed constructions of national identity. I propose that Camarena, in his execution of *La Fusión de Dos Culturas*, added layers to this foundational meaning in order to fulfill the federally funded commission while simultaneously allowing the painting to operate as a reflection of the broader reactions and sensibilities of the nation. In this way, in *La Fusión de Dos Culturas*, I argue that Camarena produced a federally backed piece of public art that reflected the ideals of the political elite, but also took into account the strikingly different experiences of the masses.

I use Mary Coffey’s book as a lens by which to look at the development of and goals for the National Museum of History in its early days, and as a way to examine Camarena’s *La Fusión* mural, as situated within the overall history exhibition. In the introduction to her book, Coffey details a brief history of different phases of ebb and flow through which Mexican muralism passed, and the changing federal, municipal, and corporate entities historically associated with these phases. This history establishes a framework for her analysis, demonstrating the way the museum has historically functioned in Mexico, as an institutional arm of the federal government. In the core of the book, Coffey explores political, didactic, and aesthetic questions about muralism by analyzing its institutionalization, seen through the murals’ inclusion in the three primary government funded museums, established between 1934 and 1964.
Coffey follows a long line of scholars who have demonstrated the existence of connections between art production and display in Mexico, and how federally held rhetoric influenced ideas about national identity. Jean Charlot, Leonard Folgarait, Mary Kay Vaughan, Adriana Zavala, and David Craven, among many others, have identified different ways that the mural movements not only reflected current social and political atmospheres in Mexico, but also were active in creating these very atmospheres.95 Coffey diverges from previous scholarship by conducting an in-depth analysis into each of these three important museums in Mexico City and expounding on the ways they served and continue to serve as platforms for the public consumption of nationalistic ideals, histories, and murals.

According to Coffey’s research, the inclusion of murals at each of these institutions took different forms and served different purposes, but illustrates a continuous evolution of governmental thought regarding museology, public education, and the establishment of official culture and national identity. In a thirty year period following the Revolutionary era, beginning with the inauguration of the Palace of Fine Arts in 1934 and lasting through the inauguration of the National Museum of Anthropology in 1964, modern national museums were being developed and defined in

Mexico. The establishment of the Palace of Fine Arts, according to Coffey, “announced the beginning of a sustained state-level investment in an institutional infrastructure for the promotion and dissemination of national culture.”96 In addition, the commissioning of the large scale projects was “a sign of the government’s renewed commitment to mural art.”97 From the earliest inceptions of the national museums in Mexico, the government held an explicit goal to craft and shape general perceptions about the nation, in that historical moment, that were supported by a long narrative history, woven throughout the mural projects.

The evolution of the national museum program continued at the National Museum of History, and reflected and supported the public education reforms that were taking place throughout the country at that time. Coffey explains that the National Museum of History was “a modern instrument of public education.” Citing the words of its first director, José de Jesús Núñez y Domínguez, she says that the museum was intended to “teach the public [how] to see.”98 The National Museum of History was intended to provide a specific form of public education as a way of establishing within the population a sense of its present and historical citizenship, as well as the comportments and mentalities that were expected to accompany it. It was intended to teach the public how to see, but in a way that conformed to the sight lines of the political elite—those making the driving political decisions for the nation.

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96 Coffey, Revolutionary Art, 25.
97 Ibid, 25.
98 Ibid, 78.
In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson explains similar phases of nation building as deriving from the evolution and development of earlier models. As more and more nation-building projects were undertaken worldwide, a wide variety of models and methods were created, and “the lessons of creole, vernacular and official nationalism were copied, adapted, and improved upon.”\(^9^9\) Anderson goes on to explain that “as with increasing speed capitalism transformed the means of physical and intellectual communication, the intelligentsias found ways to bypass print in propagating the imagined community, not merely to illiterate masses, but even to literate masses reading different languages.”\(^1^0^0\) This was the case in Mexico during the time when the National Museum of History’s permanent exhibitions were developed. Earlier ideas about nationalism had been tested and improved upon, and there was a very strategic formation of the museum institutions in Mexico to serve as the environments in which to educate the public. The system of murals, expressing the new visual vernacular language of Mexico described in Chapter 2, were intentionally crafted and used in the official project of nationalism to communicate ideals to all, independent of educational, social, or economic backgrounds.

Mary Coffey describes the majority of the murals at the National Museum of History as being “situated as technologies of truth, explanatory illustrations, rather than as radical political devices or as historical artifacts of the post-revolutionary cultural movement.”\(^1^0^1\) She carries this analysis out into criticism against Camarena, in

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\(^9^9\) Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 140.  
\(^1^0^0\) Ibid, 140.  
\(^1^0^1\) Coffey, *Revolutionary Art*, 94.
particular, but also against Juan O’Gorman and José Clemente Orozco, for their mural contributions to the history exhibit. Of the artists included there, only David Alfaro Siqueiros is largely excluded from Coffey’s criticism. Her primary comment is that these artists removed from their work all critical messages against the political structure, for the sake of crafting their “murals as technologies of truth rather than partisan tracts or devices for radical political change.”

The points that Coffey brings up are interesting, yet leave the artists with little agency or voice. Instead, according to Coffey’s criticism, these artists, and most of all Camarena, functioned more like puppets who had wholeheartedly bought into the mission and ideologies of the federal government, in order to create an official truth for the population. Based on Camarena’s history, education, and body of artistic production, all described in Chapter 2, this puppet-like work mentality seems unlikely. I propose that there is the possibility to read and understand his paintings at the National Museum of History in a different way, as fulfilling a more complex role in the project of nationalism, than that described by Coffey. Later in this chapter, I will use an analysis of *La Fusión de Dos Culturas* to serve as a case study to this end.

Just as the first generation post-revolutionary muralists had done before him, Jorge González Camarena drew on the visual language of the traditions of art that had preceded him. By the time Camarena was painting murals, a nationalistic language of muralism had already been established in Mexico. This was a visual vernacular language that was already legible to the Mexican public. Camarena, particularly by the 1960s,

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102 Coffey, *Revolutionary Art*, 125.
when he painted murals for the national museums in Mexico, had developed his own unique style of depicting figures and narratives within a scene. Though similarities can be found between Camarena’s work and some of that of the earlier muralists—in his use of bold colors, his inclusion of mytho-historical themes, and his employment of the narrative and of narrative sequencing—his style was uniquely his own, and is easily recognizable as being attributed to him. And so, although Mary Coffey maintained that Camarena and other muralists of his generation uncritically used visual language from the earlier muralists, but lacked any of the “authentic” rights to the development of that language, it seems more likely that Camarena intentionally drew on the experiences of his past, and on visual production from the Mexican past, to create a visual language that could be understood by the nation.

As this widespread legibility seems to condemn Camarena, in Coffey’s eyes, as a producer of “social realist kitsch,” her dismissal of his work in this way conjures questions about what classifies a piece of art as kitsch. Is comprehensibility alone enough to make such a classification? Her view of Camarena’s work seems to mirror the class stratification that was proliferated in the nation at the time when he was actively creating a nationalist art. In making the assertion, Coffey implies that only those paintings with overt political and social critiques can be considered as important critical art, but does not recognize the possibility for more subtle subversive or critical expressions. Within the Conquest exhibition itself, Camarena’s painting was the only art object with a modern Mexican aesthetic, in a room that was filled with European-influenced, highly academic paintings. Coffey’s interpretation of his work as kitsch, and
therefore of diminished value as a work of art and as a political intervention, reinforces the age old designations of good and bad art that were so prevalent throughout the colonial period. In colonial art production, buen gusto, or good taste, traditionally valued the dominance of the European, and pushed to the periphery art from the Americas.

In *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, Elena Poniatowska provides insight into these ideas of good and bad taste that are situated within a Mexican context. She says:

The unique features of Mexican popular culture make it a source of insight into the national identity. In the chronicles of the past, "Indians" managed to save themselves almost every time; today the city and modernity contaminate the air of the countryside, debasing indigenous popular arts. An example of this is the aesthetics of bad taste, so widespread in Mexico and known under the category of *lo naco*. Lo naco arises simultaneously with mass culture, which Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer saw as a threat to the authenticity of art in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In Mexico, however, lo naco and great art feed each other and occasionally become fused. Mexican popular culture swallows the whole of society without contradicting the essence of art.103

Here, Poniatowska illuminates several different aspects of cultural and social sensibilities that are prominent in Mexico, and are informative for one looking in from the outside. First, in Mexico, popular culture is integrally linked with national identity. Second, the artistic traditions in Mexico have roots reaching back to indigenous practices. These practices have survived despite the encroaching “contamination” of the urban environment, of colonialism, and of ideas regarding modernity and progress.

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The indigenous artistic roots are important and influential within the overall body of Mexican art production, but are designated as “popular” rather than “fine” art. The focus on the indigenous past, however, is reflected strongly in the gathering together of a national historical narrative, and abstractions of indigenous themes and artistic approaches exist throughout the body of Mexican fine art.

Third, as is common to the field of Art History, in Mexico there has been a practice of qualifying some art production as having an aesthetic of bad taste. This qualification is generally reserved for that art that is considered to be “popular,” and reveals historically unquestioned biases that have their roots in prejudices based on socio-economic level, and on perceptions of modernity, urbanity, and ethnicity. Finally, Poniatowska explains that despite ideas of lo naco, and bad taste, Mexico presents a case in which popular culture, national culture, and Fine Arts, are intrinsically linked and are “fused” together. This link creates a widespread accessibility and legibility in both popular and fine arts that are not necessarily common to the art productions found in most European or American cultures. Here, prevalent questions of “authenticity” do not apply. Rather, the lines between the “popular” and the “fine” are blurred. In Mexico, all artistic production is informed and influenced by the composite body of material culture, creating a rich grouping of work that borrows from, abstracts, and recreates diverse genres, themes, eras, and artistic forms. Such a composite body of factors influenced the work of Jorge González Camarena.
Along with the influences of early colonial mural paintings, mentioned in chapter 2, Camarena was influenced by twentieth-century European modernism. Evident in his work are the styles that greatly influenced him, including cubism, surrealism, and later, geometrism. He developed and refined a geometric style as he progressed in his career, working out ordered ways to divide and sub-divide his canvas, allowing many distinct pieces to make up a unified whole. Despite showing signs of European stylistic influence, Camarena, and many who have written about his work, are decisive in the truly “Mexican” character of his artistic style and of the subject matter that he portrayed. While his earlier paintings were much more academic, naturalistic, and less stylized, his later paintings and murals contained the qualities of geometrism, by means of the cuadratismo style of composition that he had honed and crafted. By the time Camarena was commissioned to paint La Fusión de Dos Culturas at the developing History of Mexico exhibit in the National Museum of History in 1960, he had already painted over a dozen murals, and was well-established as a nationalist painter.

Silvio Zavala, who served as director of the museum from 1946 through 1954, was the first to determine that murals needed to be commissioned in order to compensate for the museum’s then undersized collection, which consisted primarily of indigenous artifacts, objects, and remains of material culture that had been accumulated under the order of the controlling viceroys during the colonial period, as well as some colonial era paintings (Figure 49). When Antonio Arriaga took over the

104 García Barragán et al., Jorge González Camarena, 15.
105 Coffey, Revolutionary Art, 92.
directorship, from 1954 through 1978, he continued to carry out Zavala’s vision, and commissioned some of the great muralists, including Camarena, O’Gorman, Orozco, and Siqueiros, to complete projects for the museum’s permanent exhibitions. Mary Coffey explains that “while today the museum is full of murals, those integrated into the main sequence of galleries on the first floor are the most important in the development of historia patria and for an analysis of mural art’s relationship to the governmental articulation of the perpetual revolution.” The idea of an ongoing revolution was important in developing the public’s perception of nation.

Those paintings on the first floor, including La Fusión de Dos Culturas, were meant to relay the history of the nation through a series of exhibits which began with the Conquest, proceeded through major historical events and periods, including Mexico’s Independence from Spain, and ended with the revolution. The commissioned murals, other art objects, and the very arrangement of the exhibitions, were intended to craft a particular viewpoint about the history of Mexico for the viewing public—a viewpoint that reinforced the legitimacy and soundness of the ruling administrations. La Fusión de Dos Culturas occupied a central part of the Conquest Room exhibition, alluding to the ancient birth of the nation, while Carranza y la Constitución de 1917 was added later to close out the Mexican Revolution exhibit, representing a more recent historical marker of nationhood. Because Camarena’s paintings occupy such important placement within the overall historical exhibition, his interpretations carry weight, both

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107 Ibid.
in terms of the intentions of the museum and government, and for the understanding of
the viewing public.

The narratives created by the historical exhibitions at the National Museum of
History made reference to the myths and histories surrounding the birth and
development of Mexican nationhood. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, a late anthropologist and
historian, contributed profound insight to the discourse written about the making of
histories into myths. In his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*,
he discusses the process of transforming historical events into myths. He explains that a
historical moment becomes a myth through a two-step process. In this process, the
making of the historical event into a narrative transforms the actual historical event into
an agreed upon story of what was said to have happened. In the first step, chronology
of events is emphasized and valued above the circumstances that led to the events, and
the history is simplified into a single linear trajectory. Second, because of this
linearization of history, the context surrounding the events begins to disappear.  
He continues by discussing the ramifications of this transformation.

The isolation of a single moment thus creates a historical “fact.”... The naming of
the “fact” is itself a narrative of power disguised as innocence... Many historical
controversies boiled down to who has the power to name what. To call
“discovery” the first invasions of inhabited lands by Europeans is an exercise in
Eurocentric power that already frames future narratives of the event so
described. Contact with the West is seen as the foundation of historicity of
different cultures. Once discovered by Europeans, the Other finally enters the
human world.

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109 Ibid, 113-114.
Trouillot’s theories about history and myth hold implications for the construction of a dominant narrative of Mexico’s past. In the creation of a dominant narrative, however, there is always a voice silenced, a story untold. In the case of Mexico’s National Museum of History, I argue that both the directors and the federal government who funded the museum worked to establish the dominant narrative of Mexico’s history through the permanent historical exhibitions.

The Official Guide of the Castillo de Chapultepec, which was published by the INAH (National Institute of Anthropology and History) in 1960, provides a view of how the permanent history exhibitions functioned in the late 1950s and early 1960s, during the time of their development. The exhibits were arranged to be seen in a sort of chronological sequence, and were titled: Antecedents of the Spanish Conquest*, Hall of the Conquest*, Hall of the City of Mexico, Hall of the Viceroyalty (this portion of the exhibit was divided into two rooms – Halls A and B), Hall of the Independence*, Halls of Independent Mexico from 1821 through 1867, Hall of the Empire*, Hall of Heroic Flags and the Pavilion of the Guard, and Hall of the Mexican Revolution of 1910*. In the early 1960s, all of the historical mural projects either were completed or were in progress, with the exception of Camarena’s second mural, Carranza y la Constitución de 1917. The exhibition, at that time, began with a brief introduction to the events leading up to the conquest, but focused primarily on the events occurring between the period of the

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110 Lacroix, Museo Nacional de Historia, 21-24, 34. At the time this guide was published, in 1960, many of the exhibitions were under renovation or reorganization. In addition, several of the mural projects that form the backbones of the different exhibit halls were not yet completed, including Camarena’s painting La Fusión de Dos Culturas. For clarity, I have indicated the spaces that were under renovation in the early 1960s with an asterisk (*) after the space name.
conquest and that of the revolution. The sequence culminated in the expansive Siqueiros mural project, *Porfirismo y la Revolución*, which stretches over all of the walls of an entire room. Apart from the murals, the exhibits were filled with different pieces from the National Museum’s collection, including old weapons, maps, colonial portraits, and other paintings and artifacts.

The *Guide’s* discussion of the Conquest, which introduces a brief section on that exhibit, gives insight into the way the museum used the 1960s displays to frame the events that led to the formation of the colony. It says, “The conquest resulted in the fusion of races and cultures.” It goes on to talk about the mural of Jorge González Camarena, which was still in the process of being completed at the time the guide book was published. In a brief statement, the guide book provides an insight into the museum’s early expectations for this painting, which would be foundational to the early Conquest exhibit hall. His mural is described as one that will “refer to the union of the western and American cultures of the sixteenth century.” Though correspondence and archives regarding the original commissioning of Camarena’s mural project were not released for research, these descriptions provide a foundational understanding of the way in which the museum administration of the 1960s expected the mural to function, and the type of imagery they expected to receive—fusion, unity, and the coming together of different cultures.

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112 Author’s translation. “La conquista dio lugar a la fusión de razas y culturas.” And “…referente a la union de las culturas occidentales y americanas del siglo XVI.” Original quotes from Lacroix, *Museo Nacional de Historia*, 12.
La Fusión de Dos Culturas measures approximately 13.7 feet tall by 16.7 feet wide (4.2m x 5.1m), and fills the northeast wall of the Conquest Room exhibit (Figure 50). The painting’s large size and relationship to the architectural environment allows it to function as a mural even though it does not follow the traditional buon fresco style of painting, or painting on plaster, used by many of the earlier muralists. Instead, Camarena used oil paint on canvas to complete the scene, and incorporated a bold color palette, dominated by reds, oranges, and browns and accented by greens, teals, and grays. The formulation of his palette seems to allude to the patriotic colors of the Mexican nation: red, white, and green.\textsuperscript{113} In this painting, Camarena used the unique style that he developed and crafted throughout his career. He expertly applied bright, saturated colors using bold gestural brush strokes to paint stylized representational forms, though still managing to maintain crisp edges. The naturalism he applied to the figures gives way to a stylized abstraction, visible particularly at the horse’s joints and in the flags and banners that populate the background. From a distance, the individual figures and the scene read as a whole, complete image, but upon close inspection, each component could be broken out into a puzzle of diverse geometrical shapes. These separate geometries are demonstrated clearly in each feather, each joint, and each panel of armor.

The main focus of the painting is on the three figures who occupy the central space. The two primary figures, a feathered eagle warrior and a Europeanized armored warrior, are each depicted as simultaneously killing and being killed by their opponent.

\textsuperscript{113} Coffey, Revolutionary Art, 94.
Both of the warrior figures wear armor and accoutrements that hide their humanity, reducing them to emblems, each signifying an entire people group. Between the two figures, only a glimpse of the forehead and fingers of the eagle, and one booted foot of each, visible beneath their ornate costumes, speak of their humanity. As such, the eagle warrior assumes the qualities of an anthropomorphized animal, while the armored warrior appears to be a machine. This mechanization is reinforced visually because the only inclusion of metal in the scene is found in the Conquistador’s armor and sword. All of the other elements and figures are organic, wooden, or otherwise tied to the land. These outward symbols of two diverse backgrounds allow the viewer to understand the figures as representing not individuals, but entire cultures.

In this context, the feathered eagle warrior represents the Aztecs, the indigenous group ruling Tenochtitlán at the time of the conquest, and the armored warrior represents the Spaniards, the European foreigners who conquered and colonized the Americas. The eagle warrior, occupying the highest rank in the Aztec military hierarchies, fights a high-ranking Spanish warrior, evident by his possession of a horse. As previously mentioned, both of these figures are simultaneously killing and dying, in a scene rife with gratuitous violence. The eagle warrior is killed by the conquistador’s sword piercing his stomach while the conquistador is killed by the eagle’s spear driven through his neck. Camarena illustrated the ferocity of the battle through the use of his signature compositional convention, introduced in Chapter 2, focused on the arm of the eagle warrior. In order to suggest action and movement, he shows the eagle’s right arm in double—first bent at shoulder height behind his head, and then
extending upward and forward—to convey the thrust of the spear through the conquistador (Figure 51). Camarena used the same convention in his Palace of Fine Arts mural, *Liberación de la Humanidad*, to suggest a similar sense of urgency and dynamism (Figure 52).

Behind the two primary figures, the third figure, a large horse, appears to be crushed beneath the raging battle fought by the warriors above. The horse, contorted and seemingly panicked, appears to be falling backwards, away from the viewer. The background of the image reflects the chaos and destruction of a grand scale battle, with jagged pieces of a wooden structure being trampled beneath the horse’s feet. The left side of the image appears to be engulfed in flames. Banners and flags fill the right side of the scene, which seem to reference a European influence of heraldic imagery, despite the eagle feather adornments, mimicking the eagle warrior’s uniform, that top the majority of the banners. Below the flags and banners is a depiction of what looks like an eagle feather headdress, shown in oranges, reds, browns, and black (Figure 53). The feathers cascade down along the edge of the painting, and near the bottom corner of the scene, seem to vacillate between feather and flame. In the middle of the headdress, the wisps of the flames that emanate upwards take the form of an eagle clutching the body of a serpent in its open beak, clearly outlined in a vivid orange.

By including the eagle and serpent, Camarena not only references the myth of the moment of encounter between colonizer and colonized, from 1519, but also the pre-Spanish foundational myth of the ancient establishment of Tenochtitlán. The myth
goes that the Aztec peoples were wandering in search of the land where they would make a great city; a land prophesied by their god, Huitzilopochtli. The prophecy directed the Aztecs to search for the place “where an eagle with a serpent in its beak perched on a cactus” (Figure 52). This prophecy was fulfilled when the Aztecs came across the site in Lake Texcoco in 1325, almost two-hundred years before the arrival of the Spaniards.

Considering the two depictions of eagles in La Fusión de Dos Culturas, and the vastly different depiction of the eagle in Carranza y la Constitución de 1917 (Figure 55), I propose that these works can be read as drawing a comparison between the eagle and the phoenix. This would mean that the prophesied eagle with serpent in beak, shown in the flames in La Fusión de Dos Culturas (Figure 56), was reinvented as the mighty Aztec eagle warrior who was then killed at the hands of the conquistador, only to come back again even stronger as the symbol of the Mexican nation, constructed by the liberating efforts of the post-revolutionary state and the signers of the constitution. Viewing the eagle as correlating with the symbolism of the phoenix suggests rebirth and continuity from the pre-colonial through post-revolutionary eras in the project of nation building. The nation was reborn, and though scarred and severely damaged along the way, came through the colonial era. According to this interpretation, the symbol of the ancient past, the symbol of the moment-of-contact, and the symbol of the modern Mexican nation are all iterations of one continuous strain of history, reinvented and resilient despite violence, hardship, war, death, and subjugation.

Seen as containing this type of phoenix imagery, Camarena’s paintings include and comment on imagery established not only in Mexico’s visual past, from the pre-colonial through the post-revolutionary eras, but also on styles of imagery borrowed from significant moments in European history and artistic interventions in that history. Conquest tropes seen repeatedly in Mexico’s visual production have historically worked to reinforce the founding myths of the Mexican nation. Though Camarena’s paintings function to support these myths within the greater exhibit, I believe that his paintings subtly subvert their very premise through his violent interpretation of the typically unifying scenes that date back to the colonial period.

Since the inception of colonial rule in New Spain, there have been recurring iterations of paintings and images that represented the initial encounters between the Spaniards and the Aztecs, primarily focusing on the first meeting between Hernán Cortés and Moctezuma (Figure 57). Starting in the 1540s, this type of conquest imagery was the primary historical narrative depicted, and was mythologized throughout the colonial era. Camarena’s work draws on this long history of conquest imagery, developed through a wide variety of artistic media including prints in manuscripts and written documents, paintings, and sculptures. The great majority of these images reference earlier established conventions seen in wedding portraiture that was used to demonstrate contractual relationships. Through the portrayal of giving and receiving

gifts, these types of images revealed an intentional and consensual joining together of two parties—a meaningful union.

As styles and practices changed later in the colonial period, some of these images drew on conventions found in family portraiture and made reference to the caste paintings, showing the light-skinned Spaniard (Cortés) with the dark-skinned indigenous (Moctezuma), and a third man between the two to represent their “child,” the mestizo. In light of the history of colonial conquest imagery in Mexico, Camarena in *La Fusion de Dos Culturas*, expresses a far more violent interpretation of the birth of the nation. Though it is clear from the official guide from 1960 that the museum administration expected something more in line with the historical depictions of the genre, for Camarena, the birth comes through the death of the two primary originating groups. Both groups suffer a fatal wound, and neither group is innocent of harm, all for the sake, or to the end of creating a new nation; a “mestizo” nation, *lo mexicano*. In Camarena’s portrayal, the merging of the nation’s ancestors—mythologized as being the noble indigenous and the elite Spaniard—created a deep wound that had to be overcome, rather than portraying a harmonious fusion of diverse peoples, as was expected by the museum. In this way, Camarena contributed to an official history, while making a class commentary about the privileging of elite status.

The violent tone apparent in Camarena’s depiction of the encounter reflected the violence and discontent taking place in Mexico in the late 1950s and 1960s. The socio-political condition is exemplified in the life of a neo-Zapatista peasant leader from
Morelos, Rúben Jaramillo, who worked for land retribution and formed the "Committee for the Defense of the Sugarcane Workers." After suffering government persecution for years, Jaramillo and his entire family were killed in March of 1962 by military men, who acted with the knowledge and agreement of then President Adolfo López Mateos.116 López Mateos was president during the commissioning of all four of Camarena’s federal museum murals. The tragedy of this situation, and of others like it, illustrates the desire of the government to maintain control and order in the nation at the expense of justice, and the unfair treatment inflicted upon the population who wished and acted for social change.

Camarena’s painting, _La Fusión de Dos Culturas_, reflects this socio-political climate. In the painting, two different cultures, shown to be equally matched, died in order to allow for the generation of a new culture. Despite the promises of the revolution, the current social situation of the nation witnessed not equality, but continuing colonial relationships of oppression and dominance. Jorge González Camarena’s painting makes a commentary about the ongoing “colonial” nature of the governmental rule, where the government dominates and the masses are forced to submission. By showing the death of the conquest myth, Camarena joins a long tradition of artists and authors who found the conquest myth to be problematic, and he challenges the privileging of the elite to rule the nation. It is as though he calls for the death of the old system, of the old dominant narrative, so that the current nation might move forward in healing, freedom, and rebirth.

Because of the many layers of meaning and ambiguity in his work, the richness of his artistic style, and the way he referenced but then diverged from earlier conquest imagery, I believe that Camarena’s work is not kitsch, but rather a critical art that intentionally subverted the dominant national narrative. The events that followed the mythologized first encounter of Cortés and Moctezuma are not represented in the standard conquest illustrations. Although the Spaniards eventually turned on Moctezuma to overthrow his rule, the abundantly repeated imagery from the colonial period shows these two elite factions joining together in peace.

In the first post-revolutionary mural movement, the artists, including los Tres Grandes, begin to depart from the colonial depictions, and show battle scenes and instances of generalized violence in their narrative constructions of the origin story of Mexico. Camarena’s contribution comes out of this tradition, but he changes the nature of the violence, and the tangibility of the battle. Camarena shows the Aztec and Conquistador in action, simultaneously killing each other. His depiction is not a generalized, static battle scene, but rather, an active scene, with specific characters scaled to human proportions. Camarena’s painting came at a time when the idea of total war was present in the world, and the effects and repercussions of that total war—World War II—were still remembered and felt. In his painting, Camarena captured the globalized concept of brutal war, but particularized it to the context of the Mexican past. In this way, Camarena upended the past standards and traditions related to the Mexican origin myth. Instead of showing a scene of peace, or one of generalized violence, he showed instead the death of the two originating elite factions. At the first
encounter, he shows a wound that the joining of these two elite groups caused, a
wound which the Mexican peasant and worker, whether mestizo or indigenous, was
forced to survive, in the past and in the present. In so doing, he pointedly criticized the
elitism that was traditionally celebrated and perpetuated in Mexico.
Chapter 3 Images
Figure 49: Exterior Photo of the Castillo de Chapultepec Entrance, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 50: View looking towards the northeast wall of the Conquest Room exhibit (towards Camarena’s La Fusion de Dos Culturas), National Museum of History, Mexico City, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 51: Detail of *La Fusión de Dos Culturas*, Jorge González Camarena, 1963
Figure 52: Detail of *Liberación de la Humanidad*, Jorge González Camarena, 1963
Figure 53: Detail, *La Fusión de Dos Culturas*, Jorge González Camarena, 1963
Figure 54: Eagle and Serpent Sculpture at the National Museum of History, photo by Anna Bellum, August 2009
Figure 55  *Carranza y la Constitución de 1917*, Jorge González Camarena, 1966
Figure 56 La Fusión de Dos Culturas, Jorge González Camarena, 1960
Figure 57: Meeting Between Cortés and Moctezuma at Tenochtitlán, Artist Unknown, late 17th century, oil on canvas
Chapter 4:

Redefining the Conquest—Camarena and the National History Museum
Vestiges of the old, post-revolutionary and mid-century national political structures continued, though in ever lessening degrees, to affect the political and social make-up of Mexico well into the twenty-first century. This could be clearly seen in the authoritarian rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) that lasted for over seventy years. Though that seventy year rule has now been broken, the movement towards democracy is slow. But, there has been an ever-pressing struggle to achieve true democracy within the nation. In his 2013 book, *The Mexican Transition: Politics, Culture, and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*, Roger Bartra explains that the one thing “that characterizes the Mexican transition to democracy... is its exasperating, albeit smooth, slowness. Twelve years after the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) lost the presidential election the country is still faced with the solid presence of an enormous territorial space dominated by governors from the old authoritarian party who control their domains in the customary style of the country’s PRI presidents.”\(^{117}\)

These long-lasting remains of the old political systems also hold ramifications for the national museum system, and for the articulation of nationality in Mexico. Bartra gives insight into the way the struggle between old and new plays out within a cultural field. He says, “The challenge facing the government is for the old revolutionary culture to be defeated by a new governmental culture. The old revolutionary culture is expressed in connection with symbols of authoritarian nationalism, of redeeming

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indigenism, of an institutionally rebellious people, of constant agitation to gain benefits, of social movement co-optation, of cacique and leader prestige, of the fear of repression.”\textsuperscript{118} Evidence of the political and systematic changes and tensions that have occurred in Mexico in response to all of these things is clearly seen in the way the National Museum of History has evolved and changed over the years since its inception, but has also maintained a continuity of mission during that time.

In \textit{How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture}, Coffey establishes a continuity in the way the National Museum of History functioned in the mid-century and the way it functions today. She says “while Mexican museographers have continuously updated the displays within the halls of the permanent exhibition, the basic narrative described here has changed very little.”\textsuperscript{119} In part, this is due to the large scale murals that define and anchor the exhibitions, and have remained unchanged since their initial installations. Camarena’s two paintings continue to serve as bookends for “the main historical exhibitions” at the museum (Figure 58).\textsuperscript{120}

Today, though many of the objects and paintings have stayed the same, the gallery spaces are framed in a different manner than they were in the 1960s, when the artists were being commissioned to paint the murals that would ground the exhibitions. Now, the galleries are called: Dos Continentes Aislados (Two Isolated Continents), El Reino de Nueva España (the Reign of New Spain), which fills multiple rooms, La Guerra de Independencia (the War of Independence), La Joven Nación (the Young Nation),

\textsuperscript{118} Bartra, \textit{The Mexican Transition}, 128.  
\textsuperscript{119} Coffey, \textit{Revolutionary Art}, 94.  
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 94.
Hacia la Modernidad (Towards Modernity), and Siglo XX (20th Century). One of the most notable changes between this arrangement and the earlier 1960s set-up is that it is no longer designed to end with Siqueiros’ murals, *From Porfirianism to the Revolution*. Rather, Siqueiros’ works have been pulled out from the overall chronological sequence of the history exhibits and exist as their own separate display. By the late 1960s, Camarena’s second mural, *Carranza y la Constitución de 1917*, had been added into the sequence. Later, the exhibit depicting the 20th century, framed by Juan O’Gorman’s murals, *The March of Loyalty, and Effective Vote*, was added as well. In the following section, I will discuss the exhibits according to these newer designations, and will focus on their modern-day implications for the nation.

Though his painting *La Fusión de Dos Culturas* was used by the museum’s curators in the elaboration of a dominant narrative, Camarena did not depict a scene that simply reiterated conventions found in conquest imagery of the past. Rather, as was introduced in Chapter 3, through his totally violent, divergent depiction of the conquest, I argue that his painting worked to subvert the elitism that permeated the dominant story. This subversion is made more explicit when viewed within the broader exhibit of which the painting forms a part, situated within the current exhibition. I will focus this analysis on the museum-given title of the painting, on the sculpted busts of Hernán Cortés and Moctezuma that stand directly before the painting, and on the painting *El Bautizo de Cuauhtémoc* located across the gallery.
The painting’s name was given by the museum’s curatorial staff, and today, though various elements of the exhibition have changed and been updated over the years, the name remains. The name, La Fusión de Dos Culturas, was given after the painting had been installed in the exhibition. According to a newspaper article from 2002, the title was changed to be printed on the 50 peso bill years later.\(^{121}\) Initially, Camarena had given the piece the title of La Conquista. The hostility shown in the scene is not reflected in the painting’s title, La Fusión de Dos Culturas. Rather, the title implies that through the tumultuous, though necessary, collision of initial contact between these two cultures, a new, hybrid culture was forged. Despite the title, what is being depicted is not a fusion, the joining together of two disparate things into something new, but rather an encounter of extreme violence—the death of two disparate things at the hands of each other.

The violence is juxtaposed with the title, and holds ramifications for the way the painting functions within the exhibition. The majority of the rest of the paintings in the first room of the Reign of New Spain section are colonial era, European-styled portraits of different friars and figures associated with the expansion of the colony through the work of the church. A series of maps titled Sembradores de Misiones: El Proceso de Expansión Territorial Novohispana (1526-1821)\(^ {122}\) shows the way in which the colonial power expanded its reach over the land through the work of the mendicant friars.\(^ {123}\)


\(^{122}\) Author’s translation: Planters of Missions: The Process of Novohispanic Territorial Expansion.

Camarena’s painting shows the initial moment of contact, which is framed within the exhibit as being simply the point of departure for the dominance of the Spaniards over their colony, and the acquiescence of the indigenous populations to the religion, customs, and traditions of the imposed colonial power. Nothing within the exhibit supports, makes reference to, or follows up on the violence portrayed in Camarena’s painting. There is only the brutal war, and then inexplicably, or at least unexplained, the acceptance of the Christian peace and civilization that followed.

Directly in front of Camarena’s mural stand two sculpted busts on pedestals, which were productions of the colonial era. On the left is a portrayal of Hernán Cortés (Figure 59) and on the right is a portrayal of Moctezuma (Figure 60). These figures are placed directly in front of Camarena’s La Conquista painting. Their placement reinforces the museum’s intention for the painting: for it to represent the origin myth of the nation. It is meant to be a reinvention of the myth that surrounds the initial encounter between the arriving European colonial power and the existing Aztec royalty. I suggest that though Camarena has intentionally left ambiguity in the characters shown, the museum has provided faces for them, in the form of the busts that stand at either side of the painting. It is as though the ambiguity left by Camarena did not align directly enough with the myth of the conquest, and so additional clarification was provided by the museum about the figures responsible for affecting the dawn of the Mexican people.
Across the exhibition space from *La Fusión de Dos Culturas*, on the opposite facing wall, is a large-scale painting from the colonial era titled *Baptism Scene, or El Bautizo de Cuauhtémoc por fray Bartolomé Olmedo* (Figure 61). This work, which measures approximately 13 feet tall by 13.4 feet wide was painted with oil on canvas in the mid-eighteenth century, and has been attributed to José Vivar y Valderrama. The placement of this work across from Camarena’s speaks to the way that the origins of the nation were used within a broader narrative about the nation’s history. Cuauhtémoc, the Aztec ruler who directly followed Moctezuma, exemplifies an early second period in the colonial experience. The initial encounter between Moctezuma and Cortés, their exchange of gifts, their initial respect for the other, and the eventual execution of Moctezuma, gave way to Cuauhtémoc’s short-lived rule of Tenochtitlán. The painting does not show the torture and murder of Cuauhtémoc at the hands of the Spaniards that ended his reign, though several such paintings exist. Such a depiction would have echoed the violence revealed to have pervaded the early colonial period in Camarena’s painting. Rather, this final leader of the pre-colonial realm is shown as actively participating in a euro-Christian rite of passage and declaration of faith. Viewed together with Camarena’s painting through the lens of the dominant narrative, the viewer could understand that the conquest—the meeting of comparative equals—quickly became an era of consented dominance in which the royalty of the indigenous

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ancestors was carried forward, but their traditions and beliefs were replaced by European ideals.

These art objects and others were used by the museum to reinforce a calculated retelling of the nation’s history. This retelling aligns with the dominant narrative of the Mexican nation, which claims a direct connection with the strength and nobility of both the elite Aztecs and the royal Spaniards. The class element of the dominant narrative ties back into Enrique Krauze’s quote included at the start of Chapter 3. Krauze talked about the worker and peasant classes, supported by the students, intellectuals and artists, fighting against the continuing imperialism of the federal government. Camarena, who lived and worked during this time, would not have been unaffected by the discontent felt by so many at the class-based injustices that were taking place.

Mary Coffey’s research about the function of muralism within the nation-building project of the national museums in Mexico, also discussed in Chapter 3, not only shed light onto the social, cultural, and political systems at work within the national museums of Mexico, but also identified some serious criticisms about the way these systems have imposed values upon the people and the nation. Coffey’s thorough contributions to this field of study provide a ground on which to draw comparisons between and analyze the decisions made and programs pushed forth by the three most important national museums in Mexico in the second half of the twentieth century, and by the political regimes that controlled them. As is made evident by Coffey’s work, clear
criticisms can be brought against these institutions and the penchant for propagandistic dissemination that infused their programmatic development.

When viewed in a different light, it is evident that many clearly positive qualities and results came about because of the work done by these same institutions. To be sure, the museums possessed a strong point of view about the histories and narratives they disseminated, and continue to disseminate. The histories included throughout their exhibitions reveal biases, and, as is common to all histories, are not objective, disinterested, retellings of the past. Within the subjectivities included in the stories told, however, there also came about a widespread exposure to history, fine art, and culture for the great masses of Mexican citizens. And, though imbued with official political biases, this exposure has provided access for people of all socio-economic levels to truly first class public art, and to the sense of national pride that centers on the body of public art production in Mexico.

In *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, the compiled essays present a different point of view of the dissemination of “official culture” in Mexico, providing a glimpse into the complex nature of the project. Rather than detailing a binary power relationship between government, as the dominant power, and populace, as the subjects, the essays in this book point to a more even-lived experience in which people process what they hear and see in an individualized way, and make decisions for themselves about their identity and culture. The book expresses a sense that the development of a national identity in Mexico, though a deeply political
process, was generated at a more personalized scale, rather than in a broad-scale, nationalistic manner. The essays make a case that a cultural and political dialectic pervaded nationalism in Mexico in the 1940s through the 1960s. The mythological and broadly accepted perception of the modern Mexican state was juxtaposed with a lived experience that often contradicted the party line of the ruling regime. Between these two extremes lay the shared sense of national identity, one that was informed by both the State and by the masses. Gilbert Joseph explains that throughout the essays, there is an examination of “how the state and ordinary Mexicans, working sometimes in opposition to and sometimes in collaboration with each other, used these dichotomies for their own divergent or overlapping purposes, often redefining the binaries in the process.”

The work of Camarena in the National Museum of History and the other national museums of Mexico provides only one glimpse into the complex project of nation building in modern Mexico, and into the articulation and manifestation of that project. The countless other murals, museums, and institutionalized systems—like the public education system—add, by degrees, to our understanding of the different views and insights into this multi-part, multi-player project that shifted and changed over decades of its implementation. The implementation of this complex project has, over its course, had both positive and negative results for the citizens of the nation.

125 Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov, Fragments of a Golden Age, 17.
Chapter 4 Images
Figure 58: Floor plan showing the current order of exhibition spaces at the National Museum of History, http://www.castillodechapultepec.inah.gob.mx/recorridosP/salasHistoria/recorridoMuseoHist.html
Figure 59: Sculpted bust of Hernán Cortés, National Museum of History, photo by author, July 2014
Figure 60: Sculpted bust of Moctezuma, National Museum of History, photo by Anna Bellum, August 2009
Figure 61: View of El Bautizo de Cuauhtémoc, attributed to José Vivar y Valderrama, at the National Museum of History, image from http://www.mnh.inah.gob.mx/index_2.html
Conclusion
As demonstrated in this thesis, there was a deliberate process of reclamation in the project of nationalism in Mexico acted out by the governing bodies, first in the reclamation of the physical places of power for the purpose of state programming, then in the reclamation of the mythologies of Mexican history by the institutionalized, museum-arm of the government, and finally through the reclamation of the artistic voices native to Mexico, used in crafting a narrative of nationality through mural projects. In my thesis, I trace the effects of nationalism in three ways. In the first chapter, I focus on the reclamation of the Castillo de Chapultepec building and site that has historically been used to garner an official power of place. This site has a long and complex history articulated by the power invested in it by the Aztecs, then by the Spanish colonial viceroys, and finally by the Mexican national state. In its present use, the Castillo de Chapultepec building houses the National Museum of History, and has done so since the early 1940s. The rich history of the places of power in Mexico plays a prominent role in the construction and perception of national identity. Because of historical events associated with the Castillo de Chapultepec building and site, such as those celebrated in the Niños Héroes myth from the Mexican/American War, the building also continues to serve as a center for much national pride.

In the project of nationalism, the architecture, exemplified by the Castillo de Chapultepec, and art of modern Mexico have been attributed with power over time and have been important in the development of a national identity and patriotism. These expressions of Mexican material culture tell a story of power, violence, colonialism, and freedom. Though they began as articulations of the ruling bodies, the multiplicity of
ways in which they were accepted, understood, and remembered reflects the range and diversity of the peoples of Mexico, and the broad success—though perhaps in ways unexpected by the ruling bodies—of the project of nation formation.

In the second chapter, I examine the development of the national museums in Mexico as an official method of nation and culture building. I trace this development through the works of Jorge González Camarena that have been included on the national stage. The development of the national museums from the 1930s through 1960s was intrinsically linked to, and important in, the development of national identity and cultural ideals during that era. The mural projects that were commissioned to be included in these museums form a base for the exhibitions, and a framework by which the exhibitions can be seen and understood.

In the third and fourth chapters, I examine Camarena’s painting, *La Fusión de Dos Culturas* (1960-1963), within the context of the historical exhibitions in the National Museum of History during the 1960s and in the present day. Through my analysis of this painting, I establish Camarena as an important player in the official project of nationalism. I also propose possible areas in which the specific artist’s voice and critical thought regarding nation were broader than the federal commissions under which he worked.

Though little-known outside of Mexico, Camarena is an important contributor to the nation’s history of fine art. Throughout his career he received and completed many federal commissions. Still, his paintings often show a depth in their content, themes,
and styles that allows for, and even encourages, interpretations that don’t directly align with the dominant narratives promoted by the government. Camarena has been celebrated as a national artist for the “mexicanness” embodied in his artistic expression. Yet, his work diverges from the national body of fine art almost as much as it aligns with it. I argue that his paintings show the influences of the modern Mexican visual language of muralism joined together with Camarena’s own critical thought and artistic voice regarding nation.

Important to this work about nationalism and nation building in Mexico are the ideas articulated by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*. In this work, Anderson compiles and identifies aspects and processes that are central to worldwide projects of nation building. He explores many of the motivations that led to this universal movement and also discusses some of the ramifications for this broad evolution in the world’s political systems. The process of nation formation in Mexico was focused primarily on the ideals of culture, education, and identity, and parallels the ideas that Anderson expresses in his book in many ways. These parallels include Mexico’s monarchical/colonial past, the physical and social revolutions that created a break with the old political structures, and the use of institutionalized systems to disseminate official discourse about citizenship, history, and nationhood. In Mexico, these institutionalized systems were the national museums. Finally, Mexican nation formation parallels Anderson’s ideas through the development of a new language that is necessarily created to express the ideals central to the new, imagined community. In
the case of post-revolutionary Mexico, I argue that this is the visual language of muralism.

Because so much of the construction of Mexican national identity centers on the visual language and narrative of muralism, Anderson’s theories about language and nation add an important nuance to this thesis. Through his work, Anderson gives us a sense of how essential language is to the identity of a nation, not only from a political standpoint, but from a personal one as well. He explains that:

> What the eye is to the lover – that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with – language – whatever language history has made his or her mother-tongue – is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother’s knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed.\(^{126}\)

It is language that allows us to associate our nationality with our identity. And, it is because of language—the visual vernacular language of muralism—that the federal murals of Mexico have been and continue to be conflated to represent the nation as a whole.

Within this visual vernacular language of muralism, Jorge González Camarena made significant contributions to the development of Mexican nationalism, particularly through his federal museum murals painted in the 1960s. Due to the many layers of meaning and ambiguity in his work, and the richness of his artistic style, I argue that Camarena’s work is a critical art that intentionally subverts the dominant national narrative. Through this subversion and the complexity of his mural contributions, he

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\(^{126}\) Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 154.
offers viewers the chance to form their own understanding of the histories of Mexico, according to their own agency and experiences.

The project of Mexican nationalism, from the 1940s through the 1960s, was complex, and was enacted by different players and through different institutions. The government commissioned mural projects for the national museums in order to provide the population with a visual narrative language by which to understand the histories and mythologies important to Mexico. Through these means, the political elite adapted the historical places of power, the histories of Mexico, and the visual narratives of the artists to structure and create the “official” nation of Mexico.

Camarena’s work and critical point of view were important to the project of nation building in Mexico, both officially and unofficially. Through his work he satisfied federal commissions meant to perpetuate a dominant narrative of Mexican nationalism. At the same time, however, he critically engaged with the history of colonialism, oppression, and violence that affected the lived experiences of the masses. His works were and continue to be housed in the national museums that have, since the mid-twentieth century, been an arena in which the population could be educated about their own culture and nationality. Within that context, Camarena was able to maintain his own agency and voice, both as an artist and as a citizen of Mexico. Beyond “official” nationality, there was, and continues to be, an unofficial nationality of the individual, influenced but not determined by the official narratives.


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