The Chicanization of Mexican Calendar Art
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This paper is dedicated to Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, a scholar who had the foresight to provide leadership in the area of Chicano art scholarship before it even had a name and a dedicated mentor who has influenced subsequent generations of scholars like myself.

I, like many other Chicanos grew up with Mexican calendars in my home. There were the ones that functioned as calendars and several others that had been framed and exhibited in our living room and kitchen. I also saw them at my grandparents’ and other relative’s houses. The framed ones came with us from Mexico; the yearly ones, we got at the panaderia. A framed copy La Noche Triste by Jesus Helguera still hangs in my parents’ living room.

During the Chicano movement, I became aware of them again—as images transferred onto t-shirts, posters, murals, and even album covers. Now as a curator, I have become more conscious of the mixed messages inherent in the majority of them. And that’s what I would like to focus on in my presentation. Specifically, I will begin with an introduction to Mexico during the 1930s-50s (the height of the production and distribution of these calendars), the calendar’s commercial purpose versus their cultural impact, and finally, what I call, the calendar images’ Chicanization by Chicano/a artists.

Post Revolutionary Mexico rebuilds itself…

As is true of all countries that have gone through a civil war, Mexico after the Revolution of 1910 sought to re-unify itself. This process was very difficult due to several factors. It had just lost close to a million of its population, the majority of them males who were its primary workforce. ¹ There was widespread financial devastation as a result of not only the economic upheaval of a10-year war, but also the sporadic government changes due to assassinations. Most of the nation’s resources were own by a few, very rich individuals, the vast
majority of them foreigners. There were also the nation’s very challenging demographics. Mexico’s population was composed of hundreds of different indigenous groups that did not speak Spanish and the majority of the mestizo population was rural, illiterate, and poor.

When Cuahtemoc Cárdenas came into power in the 1930s, he tried to build on the efforts of previous presidents to forge a national identity. In the mid-1920s, these efforts had included José Vasconcelos’ mural art commissions, of which José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros were the main beneficiaries. Many of the visual artists, including Los Tres Grandes looked to Mexico’s pre-conquest history for subject matter in their murals and also depicted the daily life of the contemporary indigenous population in their canvas artwork. Under Cárdenas, there was a more “socialist” bent to the government, which included widespread literacy programs aimed at the rural areas and the nationalization of private, foreign companies such as the railroads and oil refineries. After WWII, there was a big push for industrialization and modernization. Mexico City, like New York, became a great cosmopolitan center for visual art, dance, music, cinematography and literature. Many of the artists, writers, and composers involved with this Mexican “golden age” of the 1940s, including Juan Rulfo, Carlos Chávez, Miguel Covarrubias, Manuel Alvarez Bravo and “El Indio” Fernandez tapped the indigenous and rural traditions for their artworks.

The role of calendars...

In the 1920s, Mexican businesses began to import lithography machines to print their own calendars. The calendar’s socially and visually accessible format combined an aesthetically pleasing image with a product. However, seizing on the nationalist agenda, calendars became not only a conscious attempt to combine art and technology, but also a popular means to reach
commercial goals by promoting a very specific national identity based on an evolving sense of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness).

Local businesses gave them out free of charge to their customers, thus assuring wide distribution. For the majority of the people in Mexico, calendars became an economical way to have “art” in their homes. For the cigarette, liquor and, later, the tire companies that publicized on them, they were an easy way to advertise their products to generations of Mexican families. The calendars also became vehicles for constructing a romantic Mexican reality and promoting specific aesthetic standards. In fact, according to Mexican scholar and curator, Alfonso Morales Carrillo, “what seemed to be a simple annual advertising strategy developed into one of Mexico’s most powerful forms of cultural promotion and graphic arts traditions.”

There were many artists on contract with the two most important producers of these calendars, which were Casa Editorial Litolesa and Galas de Mexico, but the most recognizable is Jesus de la Helguera. Helguera was born in Mexico in 1910 to a Spanish father and Mexican mother. At the age of five, his family moved to Spain where he lived for over 20 years. His artistic talents were nurtured by his family from an early age and at the age of 12, Helguera entered the *Escuela de Artes y Oficios* and later attended the prestigious *Academia San Fernando*. At both schools he received rigorous training in the academy style of drawing and painting. He was able to work as an illustrator in Madrid and Barcelona before becoming a professor of visual arts in Bilbao at the age of 18. Two years after the Spanish Civil War broke out, Helguera (now married) returned to Mexico in 1938. In 1939, he painted *Poco a poquito* (Little by Little) and *La fiesta del Istmo* (The Isthmus Celebration), which became his first images to be reproduced on calendars. However, it was *La leyenda de los volcanes* (The Legend of the Volcanos), painted the following year, that brought him to the attention of don Santiago Galas,
the owner of Galas de Mexico. Helguera remained on contract with him as the exclusive artist of *Cigarrera La Moderna* until his death in 1971.

Helguera worked like all artists on contract at the time. Galas would come up with a theme, including the characters and location. The artist, along with a scriptwriter and two photographers, would then travel to a selected location. There many staged photographs would be taken of the landscape and the people. Though Helguera never painted outdoors, he did pencil sketches. Once back at his studio, he used these and the photographs to create his canvas paintings.  

Though Helguera worked from photographs to develop his paintings of indigenous themes, Helguera idealized the characters according to his own personal taste, which was formed by his training in Spain. No matter how indigenous looking the models or the majority of the population at the time, Helguera’s women are always light skinned with large dark eyes, have tiny waists and brown wavy hair. The men are tall, muscular and with European features. Even when he painted scenes supposedly representing Aztec or Maya eras, the *indigenas* all have European features.

Mexican art historian Teresa del Conde has described Helguera as “a pioneer of a new popular art that is not going to be, but is already here now, as a product of the times, very much in tune with the waning of the 20th century we are living in.” I believe this to be true, but I do not share the statement’s positive connotations. Helguera’s artwork, like that of other painters of that period (and still prevalent to this day), practiced a subtle racism that promoted a romanticized European aesthetic at the expense of an indigenous reality. During a time when the *mestizo* (mixed race) population was growing yet indigenous groups were still a significant portion of the Mexican populace, Helguera’s art depicted a fantasy society that was not only
heavily European, but had also seemed to have evolved from European ancestors. Until his
death in 1971, Helguera, like the other calendar artists, reinvented a Mexican history and
portrayed a present that was more aligned with western European “classical” notions of beauty
based on Greek and Roman human physical ideals and the French romanticism taught in the
European and Mexican art academies. This attitude can still be seen in Mexico’s modern
calendars and even more so in its *telenovelas*, the television soap operas. Both are still populated
with an overwhelmingly EuroMexican cast of characters and lifestyles.

The Chicanization process...

Mexican calendars had been in the United States even before they were available
commercially at local *panaderías*, *carnicerías*, or *tiendas de provisión*. Families brought them back
during yearly Christmas visits to Mexico, or had them sent in the mail by relatives. As prevalent
domestic items, many Chicanos grew up with them. So it is not surprising that these calendars
became a part of the artistic and cultural reclamation process of the Chicano Movement. Along
with Pre-conquest glyphs and symbols, *lotería* cards, religious icons and popular art, the
Mexican calendar became another source Chicano artists tapped to explore their identity and
history. But whereas these calendar images had been used in Mexico to “europeanize” the
national identity, Chicanos used the very same images to “indigenize” a Mexican American
self-image. It was a significant tenet of the “I’m brown and I’m proud” movement of the Brown
Berets, as well as of nationalist *indigenistas*.

In fact, Mexican calendars informed much of the iconography of *indigenismo*. Indigenism
sought to reestablish linkages between Chicanos and their pre-Conquest Mexican ancestors and
to reintroduce indigenous knowledge through its ancient philosophy, literature, and
ceremonies. “Ancient and surviving Indian cultures were valued,” according to Chicano scholar
Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “as root sources from which to extract lasting values that would bring unity and cohesion to the heterogeneous Chicano community.” This indigenous connection was best exemplified by the concept of Aztlán. Defined as the mythic homeland of the Aztecs before they set off to found Tenochtitlán (present Mexico City), during the Chicano Movement Aztlán became synonymous with the United States southwest and Chicano nationalism. Aztlán and indigenous imagery (including that found on Mexican calendars) provided a culturally unifying heritage based on a foundation of spiritual principles and a geographic location.

In addition to the artwork, the calendar’s accessible format also inspired many California Chicano artist collectives to produce a series of silkscreen calendars promoting Chicano culture and history. Among them were Mechicano in Los Angeles, Galería de la Raza in San Francisco, Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) in Sacramento, and La Brocha del Valle in Fresno. Unlike the Mexican versions, these calendars consisted of a suite of six to twelve prints, with a different artist for each print. Some were based on an overall theme, such as *The History of California* (1977) calendar produced jointly by the Galería de la Raza and RCAF. In a print created by RCAF’s Louie Gonzalez created for this calendar, the concept of Aztlán is joined with the outcome of the Mexican American War of 1848. Though Gonzalez’s poem speaks of the loss of the Southwest by Mexico, the image presents an optimistic view of Aztlán’s rebirth and reclamation by the Chicano Movement and is visually represented by the merger of the United Farm Worker union flag into the rising sun over a rural landscape.

However, it is the reinterpretation by Chicano artists of the imagery found on the Mexican calendars that is one of the most important contributions made by the Chicano art movement. There are many examples, but I will focus on three by Helguera: *Amor Indio*, *Grandeza Azteca*, and his most famous, *La leyenda de los volcanes*. 
In 1954, Helguera painted *Amor Indio*, which is one of his most romantic images. Here the Aztec warrior is caught in the tender moment of gazing into the face of his beloved, who waits for his kiss with eyes closed. Helguera has added a dramatic sky behind them, a freshly killed meal on the ground, and a baby deer resting on the woman’s lap. This is the image that most non-Chicanos, nationally and internationally, are familiar with because of its wide distribution as the cover image of the 1972 debut album by San Francisco’s rock group, Malo. In the mid-1990s, it became available again with the reissue of Malo’s first record as a CD. The Helguera image was not only used on the cover, but a detail of it is printed on the CD itself. In fact, the image has become associated with Malo to the point that their publicity materials still feature the image. I would even argue that today most people, including some Chicanos think it is a Chicano, rather than Mexican image. This is an example of how Chicanos adopted a Helguera image without changing it, yet through its association with a Chicano product—in this case, Chicano music—it directly transferred the original commercial intent into a cultural reclamation project.

*La leyenda de los vocanes* was painted in 1940 and marked the beginning of Helguera’s artistic revision of Aztec mythology. According to the Aztec legend, Popocapetl wanted to marry the Princess Ixtaccihuatl, but to do so he had to earn his warrior feathers in battle. Upon his triumphant return, Popo finds that Ixta, believing he had died in battle, had killed herself. Grieving, he takes her lifeless body in his arms to the highest mountains in Mexico so that the snowflakes would wake her. But she never wakes up and they both remained frozen, forming the silhouettes of the two famous snow-covered volcanoes in Mexico. The most popular of Helguera’s images, it has been reproduced consistently on calendars to this day. It is also the image that many Chicano artists have chosen to reinterpret and even subvert its original commercial intent by consciously infusing it with socio-political meaning.
Luis Jimenez is an artist who creates works on paper and monumental sculptures. Using both media, he has recreated the scene from *La leyenda de los volcanes* and updated it into a more sensual, tragic love scene titled, *Southwest Pieta*. There is the obvious reference to Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, which portrays the Virgin Mary holding the lifeless body of Christ after his crucifixion. In Jimenez’s lithograph version of *Southwest Pieta* (1983), it is a man, Popo who is holding his dead lover, Ixta. Behind them are the volcanoes that bear their names, but the similarities with the Helguera painting end there. Jimenez has added imagery that references its Chicano, in this case bi-national, origins. According to Jimenez, “Those same images and symbols that are so important in Mexico are also equally important to us in the U.S. Certainly the eagle—it’s the national symbol for both countries. The rattlesnake is important from a religious standpoint. The *nopal* cactus was an important food and actually still is, as is the maguey.”

Another variation of the same Helguera painting is the lithograph entitled *Air, Earth, Fire and Water* (1994). In this highly sexualized interpretation, Jimenez has transformed the legend into the four basic elements of life: the eagle atop the warrior’s head symbolizes the element of “Air.” Ixta is now the earth itself, a volcano spewing fire that spills into a body of water that flows from her head as hair. In this version, we are reminded of the reason for the legend itself, the ancient connection between the formation of the mountains (nature) and a tragic love story (humans), and thus the inseparability between nature and passion, and nature and human life.

In 1965, Helguera painted *Grandeza Azteca*, which provided another variation on the Popo and Ixta myth. In this painting, Helguera depicted the moment in which Popo carries Ixta lifeless body in his arms. In this painting, their frontal pose is the central image, even though a huge mountain looms behind them. Though Popo’s pose is still very powerful and regal, his
face is full of personal pain and confusion. In 1974, Manuel Cruz of East Los Angeles took this Helguera’s image and used it in a mural he painted at the Ramona Gardens Housing Project. However, in Cruz’s visual translation, Popo is transformed into an Aztec warrior that carries the dead body of a Chicano youth killed in barrio warfare. This Popo laments the death of all Raza youth and turns his personal grief into a call for Chicano unity on behalf of social action.

Another example of a socio-political reinterpretation of Helguera’s *Leyenda de los volcanos* is Alma Lopez’s digital photograph, *Ixta* (2000). Against the backdrop of the Helguera painting to the top of the composition, Lopez layers her scene with the Los Angeles skyline and the US/Mexico border directly behind and below the central image. There are two other important changes: Ixta and Popo are recreated as young women and Lopez has utilized computer technology to “restage” the ancient scene within a contemporary time frame. This is what Alma says about her piece:

Growing up in El Sereno, a neighborhood in northeast Los Angeles, I would see this image of Popo & Ixta on murals, lowrider cars, and Low Rider magazine. As an artist, I asked my two friends to help me recreate this familiar myth however, the two princesas are on the US/Mexico border. This image is important to me in that it addresses and challenges images that I grew up with in my neighborhood. 8

Lopez is challenging the Helguera version of the myth through her eyes as a Chicana Lesbian. She has chosen to depict the middle event of the myth, the discovery of Ixta’s dead body by her lover. In re-enacting the myth with Chicana protagonists, Lopez’s version foregoes the implied safe distance afforded by a historical painting or print. Instead, she confronts us directly with a photographic image that reveals another “picture” of our Chicano/a reality. In her recreation, the tragic love story is subverted into a parable about the consequences of restrictive gender constructions that regulate love and desire, as well as a stark reminder of the dangers urban youth face daily.
Humor as a political tool has a long history within Mexican graphics and its legacy continues in Chicano art. In his seminal series entitled *The Legend of Ixta and Popo*, Arizona photographer Roberto Buitrón utilizes biting humor and the substitution of a Chicano couple as the doomed Aztec lovers to address relevant cultural and political issues. From a total of almost 40 photographs, Buitrón chose images to create and publish calendars from 1990 – 1992. Reminiscent of the *fotonovela* format of popular Mexican magazines based on sequential staged photographs, the series follows Ixta and Popo through the trials and tribulations, successes and triumphs of the Chicano experience. According to Buitrón, “the work addresses many issues of today, such as gender, cultures, histories, diversity and politics in a monolithic society. In particular, it addresses the Chicano community and questions of assimilation and displacement, heritage and invisibility, customs and change.”

By utilizing a staged, soap opera approach to denounce underlying societal problems, Buitrón makes the work humorous and accessible, and thereby increasing its impact. The outrageous sense of irony contained in his piece, *Leverage Buyout* where we see Ixta sitting at a table surrounded by Euroamerican men is a powerful statement about the invisibility of women, especially women of color in the boardrooms of multinational corporations. Aspects of the connection between ancient spirituality and modern mental health are exposed in *Popo in Therapy*, in which as a contemporary indigenous man, Popo attempts to deal with cultural change and identity crisis by seeing a psychiatrist instead of a traditional healer or shaman. *No salen sin ella* (Don’t Leave Home Without It) is a play on the words of the American Express motto, which is meant to convey a sense of confidence inherent in carrying their credit card. In Buitrón’s photograph the credit card and the power it bestows on the user is also a metaphor for the access and safety that a green card affords immigrants against deportation and economic exploitation.
In conclusion, I think that the Mexican calendar images became double-edged swords with regards to their role in creating a Mexican national identity. While they tried to promote a positive image of an indigenous and rural Mexico, they drew on European aesthetic standards to construct this identity. In doing so, they continued the colonial legacy of the conquest, specifically the degradation of the native population. Jesús (de la) Helguera was very much a product of his time and of his artistic training. He not only ascribed to the EuroMexican agenda, but also firmly believed in its aesthetics. On the other hand, calendar images became initial resources for Chicano artists to learn about Mexico’s indigenous past, cultural traditions and regional diversity. In fact, calendar images provided some of the most memorable icons in Chicano art, especially during the 1970s. However, unlike the Mexican goal of celebrating a “Mexicanness” based on European aesthetic, Chicanos gravitated to the calendars in order to reclaim and affirm their indigenous heritage and mestizo identity. More importantly, through a process of Chicanization many artists took these very accessible images and transformed them into powerful socio-political statements about the condition of Mexicans and their descendents living on this side of the border—a practice that continues today.

Their ability to resonate with people from different classes and generations on both sides of the border is what accounts for the long lasting appeal of Mexican calendars. Some of us view them as nostalgic reminders of home. However, art historians such as myself view their social implications, especially as it relates to aesthetics and national identity. But I believe their greatest value lies in their ability to inspire new generation of artists to create their own relevant reinterpretations. And in this chicanization process, these artists help the rest of us to continually re-evaluate and re-define notions of aesthetics and identity (national or otherwise) within a critical framework of historical relevance and societal self-assessment.
Notes


5. Ibid, 22.


