



Universiteit Leiden

# **The National Museum of Anthropology as a Contact Zone**

**Shaping a national identity for the Mexican people**

**Gabriela Ulloa Conde**

Supervisor: Dr. M.A. Leigh

Second reader: Dr. M. Keblusek

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## Introduction

**“Museums and other sites of cultural performance appear not as centers or destinations but rather as ‘contact zones’ traversed by things and people”.<sup>1</sup>**

**–James Clifford**

The National Museum of Anthropology has been the guardian of the memory and history of the pre-Hispanic and indigenous culture of Mexico. For already more than 50 years the museum has been giving a place for Mexicans to encounter and experience their exquisite, colorful and rich past. The National Museum of Anthropology is one of the most visited places in Mexico City and the whole country, receiving more than two million visitors a year. Besides accommodating archeological pieces of great importance and value, the walls of the museum were decorated by renowned Mexican artists, such as Rufino Tamayo, Carlos Mérida, Pablo O’Higgins, Iker Larrauri, Luis Covarrubias, Leonora Carrington, Jorge González Camarena, Mathias Goeritz as well as Tomás and José Chávez Morado.

The purpose of this thesis is to research the term ‘contact zones’ that James Clifford applied to the museological context and use it to study the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico. My aim is to find out how does applying the concept of ‘contact zones’ help in the understanding and studying of museums as institutions that influence meaning making and the construction of national identities. The main objective is for my reader to understand the importance of the National Museum and its inheritor the National Museums of Anthropology in giving a space for cultural encounters and their contribution in building a national identity for the Mexican people.

The decision why the National Museum of Anthropology was chosen for this research is because it’s the most important and iconic museum in Mexico and the reason for it, is not because they have one of the most important pre Colombian archeological collections or an incredible monumental building. It is because they represent, they picture and narrate Mexico’s pre-Hispanic history which is precisely where the nation found a common past to build a strong and unifying identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford 1997: p. 8

The following questions will be answered: When studying cultural heritage and national identity, is 'contact zones' a useful tool? How exactly did the National Museum and the National Museum of Anthropology become centers of identity for the Mexican people? What is the link between national identities and 'contact zones'?

Museums are institutions that since their origins have proved to be immensely important in the constructions of meanings and shaping identities, their cultural authority gives them power but also their long trajectory in history. Yes, it is true that their authority can be questionable and that many scholars have said that museums are in crisis but in general they tend to be institutions that people trust. Even though times are of rapid changes in societies that are becoming more plural, museums retain their power, they face challenges and because of them, they have changed and so has the way of studying them.

A museum can become so much more to its society than a place where culture is preserved and exhibited, it can become a place for communities not only to be represented but to address current or past issues, to be a space for debate and discussion. Museums provide spaces for the people and it is exactly this quality that interests, because by approaching the institution from this view, one realizes the different roles they play in society and in doing so, help to shape the society itself.

Because of globalization and pluralization and of course many other reasons, today's societies are deeply multicultural and these can create divisions and tension. Museums have in the past been responsible for certain conventionalisms and normalizing ideas that in present-day could be seen as discriminatory or biased, of course this can be explained by the contexts in which they were originated and existed and an undeniable dominion of the Western world. But of course this is changing, and museums are breaking out of their elitist and exclusive ways and becoming more inclusive while shattering conventions, opening up and not only incorporating new practices but also expanding out of their specific display, preservation and educational functions.

Just like Josie Appleton suggests, museums have to be seen as 'cultural meeting places' that could bring together fragmented societies<sup>2</sup>, they could very well be the

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<sup>2</sup> Appleton 2007: p.121



institutions that make a difference in communities when it comes to giving them a voice and not only that but help cultural encounters. That is why it is crucial to understand museums as ‘contact zones’ and because by doing so it will help understand more how they help building identities and shaping knowledge.

In chapter one ‘contact zones’ will be defined and explored in the museological context. Many scholars have approached the term in different ways and debated whether is relevant to museums. James Clifford’s essay “Museums as Contact Zones” will be the main source of inspiration, it will be discussed and later on many other authors views will also be revisited. Basically this chapter will serve as the theoretical frame used to help understand better the importance of examining museums as not only depositories of culture where objects are displayed but as spaces for the people. Besides ‘contact zones’ other concepts will be reviewed such as national identities, communities, collaboration among others with the hopes that they too aid in a better realization of the potential museums have in society.

In chapter two, the National Museum and the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico are introduced. They are the museums where the concepts and terms discussed in chapter one will be applied and explored. The reason why the National Museum of Anthropology was chosen is because it is the most important museum in Mexico and not only that, but it is where Mexico’s pre-Hispanic past is rescued and where a Mexican identity was built. It is relevant to first explore the role played by the National Museum in the new born Mexican nation and how, through its history and its successors, illustrates the building of a national identity by creating a master narrative. The Mexican nation had a complex development after it gained its independence from the Spanish, there was a need for unity in the country and museums would help in creating a narrative. The National Museum of Anthropology is the culmination of a national project with the objective of rediscovering Mexico’s pre-Hispanic history and celebrating its unique and very diverse indigenous culture.

Finally, in chapter three, the National Museum of Anthropology is seen and discussed as a ‘contact zone’ and how it has become one to the Mexican people. Since its construction to this day, the museum has been a place that is meant to educate about

Mexico's pre-Columbian cultures and history and to cherish the remains and vestiges that have survived the passing of history. The museum serves as a place where not only conserves them but tells the story of an indigenous past that has constituted and shaped the Mexican character. It is a symbol of identity and the space where generations of Mexicans go to seek their cultural roots, their past, and their history.

## Chapter 1. Contact Zones

The notion of studying museums as places where people not only go and behold art, objects, installations, performances, pieces, etc. but also experience, learn and get to know more about something. The epistemological power and function of museums has been proven and acknowledged already in museum studies, this capacity of knowledge-making is what makes museums so important in society. They have the power to influence identities, to “create compelling narratives about the world and its inhabitants”<sup>3</sup> and that capacity is what makes museums able to transform into spaces where cultures intersect and thus become contact zones for the people.

### 1.1 Defining the concept

Mary Louis Pratt was the first author to use the term *contact zones*; she introduced the concept in her article “The Arts of the Contact Zone” in 1991. Pratt defined the concept as a “term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived out in many parts of the world today”.<sup>4</sup> The author’s main focus was in very asymmetrical contexts, where a dominant culture would provide a “negotiated” space for certain kinds of cultural exchange, negotiations and transactions. Pratt’s ideas were centered on literacy, in text documents or autoethnographic texts. Her proposal was that through these texts a culture gets in contact with another one and an exchange happens between them. The texts are not ethnographic but autoethnographic because the dominant culture is not the one writing the texts with their dominant/conqueror perspective, but with the conquered own view and perspective.

Through a letter/chronicle of an indigenous Andean called Guaman Poma, writing to the Spanish king Philip III about the sociocultural complexities produced by conquest and empire in Peru, is what Pratt uses to introduce us to the contact zones, claiming that through texts between different cultures an encounter can occur. Poma’s letter transformed into a contact zone for Spanish culture, Peruvian and indigenous cultures. Pratt’s article illustrates a phenomenon called *transculturation*, which was a term coined

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<sup>3</sup> Moser 2010: p.22

<sup>4</sup> Pratt 1991: p.34

by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940's, that expresses the processes where people of a subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials spread by a dominant culture.<sup>5</sup> Even though a subordinate culture does not control the cultural exchange provided by the dominant, it still controls what they take and absorb into their own culture. All of these transactions and culture processes are a phenomenon or result of the contact zone.

A perfect example of what a contact zone is and how it works was Pratt's experience in a university class that examined the Americas and the multiple cultural histories that have crisscrossed. Of course, the class was very diverse and for this reason instead of being a homogeneous community it was a contact zone. Different people from different cultural and social backgrounds reacted differently to the same histories because the relation to them was different. The students in the class experienced hearing their cultures discussed and objectified in ways that horrified them. "All the students saw their roots traced back to legacies of both glory and shame; all the students experienced face-to-face the ignorance and incomprehension, and occasionally the hostility, of others", which is interesting because it reveals how different cultures when confronted with each other, can be induced into the redeeming of the past and conciliation after understanding of what each of them went through. According to Pratt, the class made every student see the world through different eyes and "along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom- the joys of the contact zone".<sup>6</sup> It is through this example that one truly understands the depth and the significance of the contact zones and the possibilities that arise with its use and applicability in other contexts or even spaces. This process provided by a contact zone is precisely the one that will help examine museums as meaning makers.

Redemption, conciliation, comprehension, acceptance, are some ramifications of the contact zone that are very important to emphasize as well as the perils of it like miscomprehension, incomprehension, denial, rage. These results that come with contact zones illustrate the significance of viewing museums as contact zones, they reflect the

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<sup>5</sup> Pratt 1991: p. 36

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem* p.39

reactions that can occur and should occur after cultural encounters take place and from them learn and grow.

According to Pratt, “the idea of the contact zone is intended in part to contrast with ideas of community that underlie much of the thinking about language, communication, and culture that gets done in the Academy”.<sup>7</sup> Following the lines of the new museology, there’s been new attempts and practices for the museum to engage with communities in order to include all members of society, and not only develop new audiences, but have a place in this changing world where cultural identity is so important and needs to “hold on to what is important from the past and adopt the best features of the new”.<sup>8</sup>

Postmodernist museum studies appropriated the term contact zones and ever since then it has been widely discussed and debated.

James Clifford was the first author to apply the term of contact zones to museums. His essay “Museums as Contact Zones” published in 1997 would open the doors to a new way of perceiving and studying museums. Clifford’s proposal was simple, contact zones are places where cultures, communities, peoples encounter and thus impact each other and this is why museums provide the perfect space for these cultural encounters. Museums are institutions that because of their nature and origins provide an ideal place for dialogue, collaboration, meeting, confronting communities and cultures. He proposes to study and understand museums through contact zones as “sites of identity-making and transculturation”.<sup>9</sup>

Clifford introduces the concept of contact zones in the museological context through his own experience in a museum; in a certain way he saw with his own eyes the transformation of a museum to a contact zone for its respective communities. It was in a meeting at Portland Museum of Art in Oregon, where the museum’s Northwest Coast Indian collection was being discussed. Clifford was present as a consultant, among the participants were several anthropologists, museum staff, some experts on Northwest Coast art and a group of Tlingit elders. Numerous Tlingit elders from important clans were invited to participate; the museum’s expectation was for them to comment on some of the objects and explain what they were used for or by whom they were made, little did

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<sup>7</sup> Pratt 1991: p.37

<sup>8</sup> Davis 2007: p.70

<sup>9</sup> Clifford 1997: p. 219

they know that the elders had other plans in mind. The elders explained that most objects were *aides-mémoires*, occasions for the telling of stories and the singing of songs.<sup>10</sup> Stories were told and songs were performed all in accordance to the required traditional protocols. One of the elders, Amy Marvin narrated the “Glacier Bay story” in relation to a headdress of an octopus which was part of the collection; the story was about an octopus-monster that blocked the whole bay with its tentacles, preventing the Tlingit to fish salmon, in the end a hero warrior had to fight and kill the octopus to save his group. Although the story was beautifully told, Clifford explains that by the end of it, the octopus had metamorphosed into the state and federal agencies that currently restrict the Tlingit the right to fish salmon. “‘Traditional’ stories and myths suggested by the old clan objects end up as specific histories with pointed meanings on current political struggles”.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that the elders felt that the museum provided a space for such matters is extremely interesting and perceptive, they were not only sharing their stories but wanted the museum to take good care of them and somehow act as a platform for the diffusion of these stories. The museum as an institution has always had a sense of obligation, responsibility to society just like Josie Appleton points out in her essay ‘Museums for “The People”?’<sup>12</sup> And it is this quality that converts museums in contact zones, into places where cultures can be given a voice and be heard.

For the Tlingit elders, the objects from the collection were not mainly “art” but records, beholders of myths and stories expressing ongoing moral lessons with present political context.<sup>13</sup> And the fact that the elders were asking what will you do with what we give you, was definitely a result from a cultural encounter. Clifford realized the consultation brought up many questions and concerns to the museum, how much could they decenter the physical objects in favor of narrative, history, and politics? Which community has the power to determine what emphasis the museum should choose? Did the museum now have to contact all the other elders connected to other tribal objects in the collection?<sup>14</sup> The museum was not just a preservation space anymore but also a place that had become a contact zone, a place for collaboration

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<sup>10</sup> Clifford 1997: pp.188-189

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem* pp.189-191

<sup>12</sup> Appleton 2007: pp.115-116

<sup>13</sup> Clifford 1997: pp. 189-191

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 189-191

The meeting at the museum turned into a contact zone, Clifford borrowed the term and redefined it saying a “contact zone is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term “contact” I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. (It stresses) copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power”.<sup>15</sup>

Clifford’s idea is to give the museum a new role or function in its social cultural context; the museum provides a site for cultural encounters, a space where cultures can interact, discuss and exchange ideas or values, a place where to redeem previous damages inflicted and repair, construct, heal. This situation of healing is an ideal one of course, because it is important to notice and understand that not everything can be redeemed and sometimes it is just a one-way dialogue or that the contact zone has its limits.

Clifford addresses these limits of the museums as contact zones, naming them as uneven reciprocities and exploitations. The contact becomes complex since museums and other parties involved have different agendas, power imbalance, regulations, distinct objectives, interests and goals, etc. Museums are depositories of culture, and as such they have always been institutions that articulate identity, power, and tradition. Linking these characteristics to its aristocratic origins of disseminating nationalism and “culturalism” help understand why it is so complex to view museums as contact zones, it has its limits and its potential.<sup>16</sup> Robin Boast is one of the authors that also discussed the negative side of the contact zone by pointing out that they only end up “masking far more fundamental asymmetries, appropriations, and biases”.<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned before, one of the limits of the contact zones is the asymmetric power relations occurring in museums. On one side we have the museum as an institution with its own mission, management, staff and collection; on the other, we have different communities and cultures that become the museum’s audience, but also communities

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<sup>15</sup> Clifford 1997: p. 192

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem* p. 217

<sup>17</sup> Boast 2011: p. 67

whose own history and culture is being ‘appropriated’ and told. The museums are in the position of power, they own the objects and are responsible for the narrative of the collection. How can the museums truly collaborate with the communities? Consulting sometimes might not be enough, considering they might not take into account the consultation or because there isn’t much that can be done or because occasionally the museum cannot reach all communities. That is why collaboration is a keyword in the studying and applying of contact zones. When all parties involved in the museum can cooperate with each other, then a proper contact zone can happen.

Clifford does provide the answer by saying that contact work in a museum has to be active collaboration and a sharing of authority. Consultation is in order, but it is of significance to understand that it is not the same thing to work together (museum and community) just as a consultant from the culture that is being depicted than work with a co-curator.<sup>18</sup>

The other big challenge that museums are facing nowadays is that in the past these institutions were educating and forming a public that in general was homogeneous, building one national identity; today, this is hard to do given that the public is no longer homogeneous. Multiculturalism is a reality and one national identity might not be enough or work for all. Addressing this issue in museums is important and that is the reason why contact zones could be a useful tool to apply to museums; becoming contact zones might be a solution for approaching subjects such as colonization, discrimination, injustice, gender inequality, etc. and reconcile with the past at the same time serving as a platform and center for the communities, giving them a space that is their own, where they can be heard and also be represented.

Clifford concludes that in today’s global context where the sense of belonging to a group depends or is represented by having a culture, museums make sense.<sup>19</sup> Museums become contact zones for cultural encounters between peoples, be it for dialogue, collaboration or for redeeming pasts, shaping knowledge and identities. “Local/global contact zones, sites of identity-making and transculturation, of containment and excess, these institutions epitomize the ambiguous future of ‘cultural’ difference”.<sup>20</sup> And as such,

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<sup>18</sup> Clifford 1997: p. 211

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem* p.218

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem* p. 219



it is noteworthy to recognize the power that museums possess because by doing so perhaps more attention will be given to cultural programs and agendas, which means more money and sponsors to do more. Furthermore, museums as contact zones could be an answer to social inclusion in today's multicultural world, with so many migrations happening, new identities are forming and old ones are being forgotten, maybe the museum could become a place where to address this and carry out cultural programs for tolerance and reconciliation, as well as constructing new narratives.

## **1.2 Current debates**

As mentioned before, postmodernist museum studies have revisited and discussed museums as contact zones. After Clifford published his essay 'Museums as Contact Zones' in 1997, many authors responded or reacted to this new way of perceiving museums. It is necessary to know what has been written about this, to fully comprehend the extent of what contact zones could do to the insight of museums and their functions in society.

Rhiannon Mason reiterates the significance of museums and the interactive nature of the relationships occurring in them between the communities, stakeholders and the institution itself.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, she discusses about how the transcultural encounters occurring in the museums may be more crucial than their role in disseminating knowledge to its visitors. So in a certain way, she is considering contact zones as an alternative model of how museums function within society in opposition to a Foucauldian model, which is about disciplining the visitors only.

In a museum as a contact zone it should be more about encountering and experiencing a culture or cultures than simply being disciplined about them. Mason establishes that by viewing the institution this way, a museum can be understood "as a much more flexible and expansive way of describing a whole range of relations and activities which surround the valuation, collection, and display of cultures and histories".<sup>22</sup> By taking this into account, it would seem that contact zones open up countless possibilities in the range of roles and functions within the museum. Although it is important to note that she raised some questions regarding the audience; visitors

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<sup>21</sup> Mason 2011: p.25

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem* p.25

cannot be considered to be blank slates when entering the museums; they are not a passive audience. They bring their own knowledge and contexts into the museum and this has to be taken into account.

Tony Bennett furthered the exploration of contact zones by introducing the museums as *differencing machines* committed to the promotion of cross-cultural understanding, referring to the social and symbolic exchanges that take place within the museum's environment.<sup>23</sup> His proposal is to examine the transformational capacity of museums, which he says is an "instrument of civilization", for all means he calls museums *people movers*; this idea is particularly insightful as it demonstrates the power a museum can have in influencing its public and their surrounding context. Museums have the unique position that although they deal and interact with the public spheres they are not public spheres in essence, this means that museums are shaped by the public but also shape the public.<sup>24</sup>

The conception of the museum as a "people mover" and a "differencing machine" empowers the notion of museums as contact zones, it is saying that museums are no longer institutions that transmit knowledge or preserve and display objects but also are open to new functions within society. Functions that comprehend the provision of a space for cultural encounters, where different cultures and communities intersect and interact with each other. This is exactly the idea, which will be the path to understand museums as institutions that influence meaning making and construct national identities.

"The emphasis here is on the developing the museum as a facilitator of cross-cultural exchange with a view to taking the sting out of the politics of difference within the wider society. According respect and recognition to previously marginalized or repressed histories and cultures, opening up the museum space to the representatives of different communities by providing them with opportunities for authoring their own stories, connecting exhibitions to programs of intercultural performance, repatriating objects collected (...)"<sup>25</sup> This is the strategy that Bennett proposed with its museums as differencing machines, this proposal is definitely something that could be incorporated in

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<sup>23</sup> Bennett 2006: p.46

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem* p.51-54

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem* p.59

museums as contact zones, as places for the voices of cultures that previously have not been heard.

In addition to Bennett's differencing machines, Andrea Witcomb is another author that discusses Clifford's idea. Witcomb contrasts Bennett's ideas with those of Clifford's in "A place for all of us?" *Museums and Communities*'. Bennett is profoundly governmentalist; his position is that the museum provides a space that supports the governmental goal of civic reform, by recognizing cultural diversity. While Clifford is about cross-cultural experiences and encounters, his contact zones support a museum where both community and museum are trying to come to grips with colonial encounters.<sup>26</sup>

It is of particular interest that Witcomb chose to contrast both authors' interpretations to demonstrate her idea of thinking of museums as communities.<sup>27</sup> Her arguments for this notion is supported by her work in curating an exhibition on the Portuguese community in Perth, Australia called *Travellers and Immigrants: Português em Perth*. When working on the exhibition, Witcomb mentions that she faced many challenges; one was on how to serve all communities. There was the museum community, the Portuguese community, the tourists, local residents, etc.; they all had different interests and different perspectives, so as she said the exposition "begun as a project that had, as its main aim, the representation of an ethnic minority in a public space, the exhibition became an exercise in producing a notion of community with which everyone could be satisfied".<sup>28</sup> This demonstrates that when dealing with identities, many problems come up because by trying to define one, others come up. Contact zones are all about that; they show that when one community is being built by identifying it, you identify the others. This paradox of the contact zones provides insight as in how national identities and viewing museums as contact zones link.

Witcomb explained that besides from satisfying all communities (which is never possible), the communities understood the purpose of the exhibition differently; the Portuguese community could not understand why a contextual narrative was needed, for them displaying the objects was enough and did not need stories behind the objects. But

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<sup>26</sup> Witcomb 2003: p. 81-88

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem* p.81

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem* p.83

from Witcomb's museological/curatorial perspective it was not only about giving them a "voice" but also about situating the Portuguese community in a multicultural context, interpreting their meaning of community and the relationship to other communities. This action is important because it signals that context is always required in contact zones.

These challenges that Witcomb faced in curating an exhibition, illustrate how the museum itself is a community; for her it has its own conventions and cultural values and changes according to its present context.<sup>29</sup> By viewing the museum from this perspective, it is evident that a museum can be so much more than just a mere building disseminating knowledge from a position of authority, but also has its own practices and forms and as such it can affect and determine meanings in society.

Collaboration is essential when contact zones are reviewed; it is a step that is necessary for a museum to become one. Robin Boast discusses that in today's museums, collaboration and dialogue is the name of the game, but he is one of the few that points out the negative side of the contact zones. Besides revisiting what has been written about contact zones he returns to one of Clifford's contact zones examples in his essay. Clifford wrote about the Stanford Papuan Sculpture Garden, where a dozen of sculptors from New Guinea were brought to participate in a project organized by Jim Mason, a student in anthropology in 1994.<sup>30</sup> The project consisted on creating a sculpture garden, the New Guinea artists worked in an open place that could be seen and visited by everyone, they would also teach and show the Palo Alto community more about their culture, their crafts and skills. Everyone was invited to cooperate and participate, financially or by also showing around the travelling artists, who also gained prestige and visited places of their interest. It was a cultural exchange, collaboration between cultures; Stanford's garden became a contact zone for New Guinea people, they had a place in Stanford where they could reach their own culture and also students and Palo Alto community had a place to get to know a new culture.

Boast visited the New Guinea Sculpture Garden along James Clifford in 2008, and while in the beginning it seemed to him the perfect example of a successful contact zone, seeing that "it was a project that directly supported indigenous artists by bringing them

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<sup>29</sup> Mason 2011: p.25

<sup>30</sup> Clifford 1997: pp. 195-196

into direct and meaningful engagements with a diverse group of people on the other side of the world.”<sup>31</sup> Boast reiterated that it was a place where the artists were given a chance to show their artistic production and speak for themselves, that it was a project carried out so successfully that it is now a permanent feature of Palo Alto and a model that has been reproduced in museums. Nevertheless, he explains that when Clifford commented to him that the Papuan artists expected something more out of the exchange is when he realized it was not exactly all positive. “Clifford was showing me that contact zones are not really sites of reciprocity. They are, despite the best efforts of people like Jim Masons, asymmetric spaces of appropriation. No matter how much we try to make the spaces accommodating, they remain sites where the Others come to perform for us, not with us”.<sup>32</sup>

While Boast shows the dark side of the contact zones by pointing out that unfortunately the dominant side wins (in this case the museums and the colonial narrative), reciprocity is tricky and that is why dialogue and collaboration has to be encouraged in museums. Perhaps what he says about contact zones being used instrumentally to mask far more fundamental asymmetries, appropriations, and biases is true, yet the idea of them as a tool to understand museums as institutions that are capable of becoming a platform for cultures to convey and simply have a place, is useful and compelling.

Laura Peers and Alison Brown may have a solution, or at least a proposal in the introduction of their book *Museums and Source Communities*. Once again it is remarked what Clifford stated in his essay, which is that unless museums do more than consult they will still be perceived as a paternalistic, dominant institution that excludes and is condescending. Peers and Brown affirm that consultation with source communities is fundamental, but that it should be a consultation that is not only about asking for knowledge and advice, but that asks for partnership. <sup>33</sup>

This relationship is a commitment between museum and source community in which both parties are equal and comprises the sharing of skills, knowledge and power to

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<sup>31</sup> Boast 2011: p.63

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>33</sup> Peers and Brown 2003: p.2

produce something of value for both parties equally.<sup>34</sup> The word equal is key, both have to be equal in the collaboration and process, the problem remains in museums having different agendas or also that museum people and academia do not want to share, work or collaborate in the same level, they are still the ones that know more. Achieving equality is tricky and needs the effort of both parties to ensure it.

The fact that more museums nowadays are reaching and approaching the communities speaks that a shift is starting to occur, where cooperation and partnership could be possible. “These shifts represent a radical re-envisioning of the nature of museums (...) Bringing source community members into museums turns there ordinarily dominant-society institutions into arenas for cross-cultural debate and learning, and can lead to extraordinary exchanges of knowledge as well as opportunities for people from all walks of life to begin to understand the views of someone from another cultural group”.<sup>35</sup> And this re-envisioning is exactly what a museum as a contact zone should be, one could say that this new vision of museums prompts for change, which in turn could mean change in how we interact and coexist with other cultures.

This idea about contact zones being places of interaction for cultures was considered by Amber Clifford-Napoleone in ‘A New Tradition: A Reflection on Collaboration and Contact Zones’ where she discusses her own experience in the McClure Archives and University Museum at the University of Central Missouri. Clifford-Napoleone explains a project to collaborate with the growing Muslim community on campus to teach the Missouri community about the Middle East and create a cross-cultural place for dialogue and interaction.<sup>36</sup> The exhibition was curated using the Nance Collections and would be displayed on the Saudi Arabia Day celebration. For her, it was not only to be a project of collaboration but also to give a place for interaction and dialogue where the communities felt centered and valued, a true contact zone. The exhibition was organized after the tragic September 11 attacks; Clifford-Napoleone saw the opportunity to create a place of conviviality, and for this reason they added food and drinks served by Saudi students dressed in their traditional gowns. The event was a big success and is organized every year since then.

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<sup>34</sup> Peers and Brown 2003: p.2

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem* p.3

<sup>36</sup> Clifford- Napoleone 2013: p.189

Clifford-Napoleone's experience is enlightening because it addresses what has been discussed before, contact zones provide a perfect room for cultures to interact and coexist, a place where to reconcile and embrace new ways of life. This notion of museums as contact zones where communities come together changes the role of museums, it gives them an accountability sense to society.

"The lesson there is in the contact zone itself, no longer a solely museum space, or a solely academic space, but a dynamic contact zone where ideas and approaches have changed as the atmosphere has changed."<sup>37</sup> This is how Clifford-Napoleone finishes her essay, by highlighting a bigger importance in the exchange happening between cultures than the collections of a museum. This might be true but the value and meaning of museological objects (cultural heritage) cannot be easily dismissed, they help produce and create narrative in museums, which results in meaning-making and identity making. The cultural encounters occurring in museums are equally important.

If cultural rendezvous are as important as the collection in a museum, then the outcome of a contact zone is critical to understand, it is the proof of their importance and usefulness in society. "What does 'contact' mean for the person experiencing it? How is it lived, negotiated and contested?" These questions were asked by Philipp Schorch in his article 'Contact Zones, Third Spaces and the Act of Interpretation'. His reflection upon the impact of contact zones in people serves to approach the concept in a more practical way and actually analyze its possible results and consequences not only in the audience but also in creating identities.

Schorch studied global visitors to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and humanized the contact zone through the actual experience of the people visiting the museum. The museum is known for giving a voice to its indigenous people as well as the non-indigenous, it presents the biculturalism of the country in a way that both have a place for representation. His approach of actually asking visitors what they thought and how they experienced the museum proves the applicability of the concept to museums. The response of the visitors towards the experience of the museum was positive, cathartic

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<sup>37</sup> Clifford-Napoleone 2013: p.192

and it demonstrated the awareness and comprehension people experienced after their visit. Museums should become places to unearth and stimulate cultural processes.<sup>38</sup>

After discussing the most current debates of museums as contact zones, it is noteworthy to point out that there is a general agreement on the possibilities of viewing the museum in a new way that opens up a new role in society and a new way of perceiving the institution.

### **1.3 Contact Zones and National Identities**

Museums contribute to the production of the nation and thus the creation of a national identity.<sup>39</sup> This statement is widely admitted in museum studies and serves to clearly understand that museums have an immense influence when it comes to shaping knowledge and power within society. In the last decade, an ample amount of literature and research has been done regarding “the museums ritualized and symbolic practices, its representations of ‘knowledge’ and its political subjectivity”.<sup>40</sup> A lot has been said about nationalism and national identities in museums.

When visitors enter through the museum doors they subconsciously or maybe a bit consciously accept that what is inside is valid and true, they are after all trusted institutions. This assumption is explained by understanding that the museum possesses an inherent authority; it is an institution that through the years has acquired respect and prestige, so its authority and dominion in the cultural world is somehow indisputable. This leads to an acceptance of what has been displayed and collected is somehow neutral and objective. This of course is not true; there is no such thing as objectivity and in recent years the museums have been put into question, and although these institutions still maintain their authority, at least the reality is out there.

What is displayed and exhibited in a museum already suggests that a process of selection took place, that is what is included or excluded in constructing a narrative already. In national museums by using the collections there is a narrative that supports and produces a national identity. This is the reason why national museums play a crucial function in society and to its respective nations. Going back to the origins and evolution

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<sup>38</sup> Schorch 2013: p.192

<sup>39</sup> Knell 2011: p.5

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem* p.4



of museums, it becomes apparent that both went hand in hand with the creation of nations and legitimizing them.

How can museums legitimize or shape national identities? The institution has a quality that bestows them with a singular influence and that is explained by Donald Preziosi who says “museums are uniquely powerful semiotic and epistemological instruments for the creation, maintenance, and dissemination of meanings by fielding together and synthesizing objects, ideas, bodies and beliefs”.<sup>41</sup> The use of objects in a collection and how they are displayed can demonstrate ideas and construct narratives that support the nation.

First, it is necessary to outline what is understood by nation, there is no single definition of what a nation is, the term has been interpreted different by many scholars but for this research Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* will provide the perfect idea of how nations are going to be defined and treated. Anderson defines nation as “an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”<sup>42</sup> and it is “*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.<sup>43</sup> Following this path museums help constitute this imagined communities, they legitimize the imagination and also present a visual image of these through objects that become symbols of these nations.

The imagined community uses myths, traditions and language in common to consolidate the idea of a nation, of a shared identity but that will not acquire power until they are constantly repeated and disseminated. Museums are perfect instruments to display a vision of this imagined community with collections of valuable objects, art, archeological remains, books and documents, recreations of scenes, etc. However, in order to cultivate a national cohesion it is imperative that conflicts, differences and quarreling among the pre national groups are forgotten and a common past remembered to provide a historical anchor.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Preziosi 2011: p.55

<sup>42</sup> Anderson 2006: p.6

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>44</sup> Mellado 2008: p.31

The idea of one national identity, of one master narrative in museums was practical and easy to implement for a while, but in today's world the reality of diversity has developed into a dilemma. The challenge is the rise of multiculturalism in nations, and although these cultures have really old origins and existed previously, they were suppressed by a dominant notion of identity (supposedly common to all). Nevertheless, recently there has been an inclusive trend in museums that came along with the 'new museology', and because of it museums are trying to give voice to these other identities, to recover and recognize them, a multiple voice narrative and not just a master narrative.

Viewing museums as contact zones assists in providing a space for this cultural rendezvous, for communities to feel represented. The key for these museums to become contact zones is collaboration and a will to truly accept and recognize these communities and like Peers and Brown suggested, form partnerships. Through museums as contact zones not only a space is provided to the nation's history and identity but also to those other cultures and communities within the nation.

If history is defined as an unfinished series of encounters like Clifford suggests, then there is a responsibility and obligation of the world to provide spaces where these encounters can occur and being that museums are the depositories of cultural heritage and history, they could fulfill that task. The significance of recognizing this task is enormous, museums could become active platforms for the voices suppressed and unheard of communities all over the world. It is time to acknowledge the fact that museums are capable of transforming the societies they belong to and help raise awareness of the necessity of more inclusive and fair programs in the communities.

It is curious to note that the connection between contact zones and national identities is a paradox. Contact zones bring out the diversity of identities in society while national identities are about one strong national identification, one identity for everyone. Meanwhile contact zones are all about becoming a place for each culture, community, a space for all to be represented and encounter, it shows the heterogeneity of today's society; nonetheless by becoming a place for cultures to encounter it also brings out that there are stronger identities than others, by including it excludes. On the other hand, national identities stand for one and yet the same thing happens with the contact zones,

by recognizing one national identity you exclude, which in return recognizes that there is more than one identity.

## **Chapter 2. Creating a master narrative for Mexico**

Museums tell stories and it is in this strength that the shaping of knowledge happens; visitors go to the museum and are exposed to a story that in turn teaches and demonstrates something about history, art, science, technology, etc., it can be anything. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explained in her book *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* how museums shape knowledge by using the objects in their collections. Museums create a narrative that corresponds to a common understanding and perception of the world and this master narrative is supported in the display of objects, texts, labels and audio-visual aids. Hooper-Greenhill affirmed that “master narratives are created by presenting a large-scale picture, by eliminating complicating and contradictory detail, by disguising difference, by hiding those elements that don’t quite fit, and by emphasizing those that do”.<sup>45</sup>

The modern museums of the nineteenth century were the ones to reinforce a national master narrative by showing one common identity and leaving out all differences. Their story-telling capability made them useful when it came to help the consolidation of nations, because what a nation needs the most is unity and as it has been discussed that museums can be a very powerful tool in providing a space where to find integrity. A master narrative exposes a memory of the past that in addition supports the present. Nations need an institution that tells their own story, the story of the nation and its people in hopes of building a national identity and a place where their history is preserved and displayed. Mexico would also make use of the museum to create a master narrative to build a national identity.

### **2.1 Creating Narratives**

When Mexico finally gained its Independence in 1821, the country faced the arduous task of rebuilding itself as a new nation with vast territories and a scarce heterogeneous population. During the colonial period racial mixing (mestizaje) happened as a result of the arrival of the Spaniards and from both sides, there was an assimilation of cultures; this induced the developing of a Creole and mestizo culture in the New Spain. That culture was deeply preoccupied in consolidating a national identity based in the Toltec culture

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<sup>45</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 2000, pp. 23-25

which was the first of the “Tierra de Anáhuac”<sup>46</sup>, and the legitimate monarchy or “Mexican Empire”.<sup>47</sup> However, this was the reality for only a few elitist intellectuals, the truth was that the majority of the population was far from being aware of this matters.

The strongest identities in the country were based on regional sentiments and, in the case of the indigenous population, on the individuality of the peoples, which, despite their evolution and fragmentation, remained the basic and often the only social and cultural reference.<sup>48</sup> This meant that the country was in need of a national identity that could become stronger than the others and unify the country in one. The roots for the Mexican identity relied in an indigenous pre-Hispanic common past.

The national history whose foundation would be an extraordinary indigenous past was the narrative chosen by the museums to strengthen a national identity. Previously it was mentioned that narratives are present in all museums, and in them there is a dominant master narrative, in the case of the Mexican museums this one would consist in the telling of the big events like the pre-Columbian cultures, the conquest and the independence war along with their patriotic heroes as protagonists.

Mexico’s history is rich and intricate, it has been defined by a very incredible pre-Hispanic past, a Spaniard conquest that would bring a lot of changes and with it a syncretism of cultures, traditions, religion, etc. that gave a particular colonial nature to its peoples. After the Spanish dominion, another event that marked Mexico’s history would be the independence war that freed the country and saw the rise of the new nation that struggled with its new circumstances; lastly the Mexican revolution was the next big historical event that forever transformed the Mexican people. Mexico has gone through a lot of changes and transformations that in a way have influenced deeply the way the Mexican identity is perceived and felt.

The Mexican identity has been marked by the fusion of numerous cultural, ethnic, social, religious, and political influences and because of this, it is difficult to discuss a national identity but there is one indeed and it is deeply based on an indigenous past. This master narrative that is perceived in the national museums of Mexico is constructed upon magnifying the pre-Hispanic cultures that lived in the Mexican territory prior the Spanish

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<sup>46</sup> Land of Anáhuac: region where the Toltec and Mexica cultures settled.

<sup>47</sup> Escalante Gonzalbo et al 2004: p. 109

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*

conquest. It is in these cultures that a common past was found and it was first presented in the National Museum of Mexico.

The first museum to implement the narrative was the National Museum. It was founded in 1825 by the first president of the Federal Republic of Mexico, Guadalupe Victoria; the museum would help create a common past for the Mexican people. It was indeed needed to find a way to unify a population that had recently reclaimed its independence but that was deeply divided and fractured, and the National Museum would aid in presenting and producing a national history for the newborn modern nation state.

It is in the past that one finds a powerful pillar for nationhood. By rediscovering the Indian cultures that lived in Mexico before, the National Museum started building a national identity with its archeological collection. “The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory, this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea”.<sup>49</sup> Glorifying that indigenous past would be the task of the National Museum and its successor the National Museum of Anthropology would take upon it to present in a new narrative that incorporated more archeological vestiges and an ethnographic collection that represented the indigenous cultures that are still living in present day Mexico.

## **2.2 Shaping a national identity through the National Museum of Mexico**

In 1825, the National Museum was founded with the sum of historical collections that had been formed during the colonial period. One of the main collections was the “antiquities”, which is how pre-Hispanic vestiges were catalogued back then, from that point on, the museum would obtain and collect more archeological pieces from different sites throughout all of Mexico.<sup>50</sup> The other collections comprised the Cabinet of Natural History founded in 1790 by José Longinos, the Botanical Garden of New Spain created by king Charles III and other colonial wonder cabinets that were nourished during the colonial period.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Renan 1996 cited in Knell 2011: p.8

<sup>50</sup> Del Villar 2011: pp.11-25

<sup>51</sup> Garrigan 2012: p.17

As mentioned before, the National Museum is the predecessor of the present system of national and regional museums of history and anthropology in Mexico.<sup>52</sup> By exploring its history and origins, it is easier to realize the importance of the part played in building a national identity. After the Independence in 1821 the Creoles became aware that a common past was necessary and “sought to create a national history capable of overcoming the ‘colonial stigma’ and the ‘split nature’ of a society that debated its remote indigenous past and its immediate ‘creole-mestizo’ present”.<sup>53</sup> The museum would help in founding this new identity, an identity that would be marked by consecrating the pre-Hispanic past with the war of independence.

The museum like many of the time, would be deeply influenced by the *Musée Napoléon* and it would use it as a political tool too; Napoleon Bonaparte understood the educational function of the public museum and that the museum should be a center of national pride and as such, its collections should display and show patriotic values to its visitors.<sup>54</sup> This French influence in Mexico became very evident when new archeological sites were discovered. Not only did the collections grow but there was an interest in appreciating and valuing more the pre-Columbian remains, protecting them and studying them.

The National Museum in the beginning did not have its own building; it was located in some spare rooms from the University of Mexico. As the collection kept growing a new building was needed. It would be Emperor Maximilian who gave the museum a home of its own in Calle de Moneda 13, the former Mint (Antigua Casa de Moneda) in 1865.<sup>55</sup>

During the presidential term of Benito Juárez (1858-1872), the museum went in line with the educational reforms and programs that were going on in this period of liberal consolidation. It was at this time that the National Museum took more shape and form; it had a bigger collection with a building of its own, and it started to really solidify a conscience of common past and identity.

The Gallery of Monoliths was opened in 1887, it housed the largest pieces: The Sun Stone, the Coatlicue (colossal heads), the Chac Mool from Chichen Itza, part of the Panel

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<sup>52</sup> Morales- Moreno 1994: p.171

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem* p.173

<sup>54</sup> Fernández 1987: p.33

<sup>55</sup> Del Villar 2011: p.26

of the Cross from Palenque, and sections of serpents. The gallery was a big success and it soon became an official showpiece for the government of Porfirio Díaz.<sup>56</sup> This points to the importance the indigenous past was given, the vestiges were something Mexicans should feel proud of and show off. It was in fact so important that it led to an official recognition of these archeological treasures as part of the national heritage through the “Decree reaffirming the nation’s ownership of its archeological monuments” in 1897. The gallery demonstrates not only how important pre-Columbian archeological pieces had become in Mexico but also for the Mexican master narrative. Furthermore, the decree confirms and proves that Mexico was claiming its past, reclaiming its archeological heritage from a long history of cultural expropriation, and defending a place for Mexican antiquity within the great canon of historical traditions.<sup>57</sup>

During the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century the museum took part in many international exhibitions and various events like the participation of Mexico at the Paris World’s Fair of 1889. There was also an increase interest in pre-Columbian cultures not only for the newly formed Latin American independent nations but also in Europe and United States of America; this interest was not only in the commercialization of archeological pieces but also a valorization of them, both in its artistic and scientific value, and their importance for history.<sup>58</sup> This helped to add more value to the objects and signaled the prominence of archeology in the academic world.

For the celebration of the centennial of Mexico’s Independence, the museum was transformed, the collections were taken out and the spaces renovated and refurnished, and finally the pieces were displayed in a new manner, a more nationalist and integrationist narrative. These measures show that there was a deeper understanding of the epistemological function the National Museum had. In fact during the dictatorship of General Díaz, the museum would be used as propaganda for his government; actually the monoliths were known as “los monolitos del Porfiriato”.<sup>59</sup> The museum reopened in 1910 after its big renovation as the National Museum of Archeology, History and Ethnology. It

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<sup>56</sup> Del Villar 2011: p.26

<sup>57</sup> Garrigan 2012: p.66

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem* pp. 71-73

<sup>59</sup> Fernández 1987: p.135



was decided that the natural history collections be separated and form the Museum of Natural History in Chopo that was opened in 1913.<sup>60</sup>

Plans of a possible new building to host the newly renamed National Museum were interrupted with the burst of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The social inequalities and the lack of unity among Mexicans would make the revolution much more arduous and bloody, which makes apparent that perhaps the master narrative of a Mexican national identity was not really working.

The reality is that although there was a national project to create a common identity for everyone in Mexico and in some instances it worked, in others the fact remains that the Mexican territories were vast and the reach to the whole population was impossible. Mexico was deeply centralized and the people were more interested in their respective regional problems and the injustice and poverty the Mexican people were living in. It could be said that the audience of the National Museum was people from Mexico City belonging to the elitist class and the academic scientific world and not its general population.

Of course this does not mean that the National Museum failed, the museum strengthened a national narrative, a national history whose basis would be a mystified and extraordinary pre-Hispanic past supported by the archeological remains and like Luis Gerardo Morales-Moreno mentions “the symbiotic relationships among archeology, the state, and the museum formed part of the myth of the Mexican origin. In this sense, the museum contributed to an ideological process of sanctifying the history of the Fatherland and, above all, providing a new basis for national identity”.<sup>61</sup>

In the next decades many changes occurred that would result in shaping the museological panorama of contemporary Mexico. During the administration of president Lázaro Cárdenas in 1939 the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) was created due to the growth of disciplines and activities that required space. The institute is charged with organizing archeological, historical, and anthropological work nationwide; it consolidated research, teaching, and the dissemination of culture.<sup>62</sup> The institute would focus as well in expanding the creation of other national, regional, and state museums,

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<sup>60</sup> Del Villar 2011: p.28

<sup>61</sup> Morales-Moreno 1994: p.181

<sup>62</sup> Del Villar 2011: p.30-31

which would continue disseminating the master narrative of Mexican history. This suggests that they realized that in order to create a successful national common identity they needed to spread it all around the country and not only in one museum.

Another big change that came with the creation of the National Institute of Anthropology and History was the decision to separate the historical objects of later periods from the pre-Hispanic collections of the National Museum of Archeology, History and Ethnology. The historical objects belonging to the department of history were transferred to the Chapultepec Castle to form the National History Museum that was inaugurated in 1944.<sup>63</sup> This would mean that the nation's cultural heritage was split in two museums that would carry on the master narrative, the National History Museum covered Mexican history from the arrival of the Spaniards to the present day and the National Museum of Anthropology would be devoted to the original cultures of Mexico.

The National Museum of Anthropology opened its doors on September 17, 1964 by the president Adolfo López Mateos. The new building was located in Chapultepec Park and architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez carried out the project. The new two-floor building had been completely designed to be a museum that took in consideration the displaying of the archeological collection in its gestation. The first floor was dedicated to the ancient cultural artifacts and remains, while the upper floor was to display cultural objects of Mexican modern cultures, dedicated to ethnography.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile the former building of the National Museum the former Mint would accommodate collections from different parts of the world as well as from Mexico and be transformed into the National Museum of Cultures in 1965.<sup>65</sup>

To sum up, it could be said that the INAH inherited and benefited from the splendid heritage, patrimony and rich tradition of the old National Museum of the Calle Moneda. The new founded museums inheritors of the National Museum would begin to sustain, from the stabilization of post-revolutionary regimes, a more diverse and at the same time more solid structure, that showed the Mexican people the valuable and splendid artistic, historical and cultural treasure they had and possessed.<sup>66</sup> They would continue

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<sup>63</sup> Del Villar 2011: p.30

<sup>64</sup> Ramírez Vázquez 2012: pp.20-22

<sup>65</sup> Del Villar 2011: p.32

<sup>66</sup> Fernández 1987: p.187

strengthening the master narrative, especially because after the Mexican Revolution there was a bigger sense and feeling of what was Mexican, of what was their past, present and future.

It is clear that the master narrative of a Mexican identity was forged in the National Museum with a history and image that found splendor and origins in the pre-Columbian cultures and its archeology, the Spanish conquest and the Colonial period, the heroes of the war of Independence, and later on with the Mexican Revolution. The National Museum had the capacity to create a master narrative, produce its own discourse with a language of its own (using archeological remains and historical objects) and in doing so transmit and construct a national identity for the Mexican people. However, the National Museum of Anthropology would turn out to be more than a modern museum of the nineteenth century like its predecessor was, it would evolve into a museum that incorporated a new narrative, a narrative of multiple voices that gave place to the cultural diversity that characterizes Mexico.

### **2.3 A national project to educate Mexico**

By the 1920's Mexico experienced a series of reforms and changes, the country finally had peace after years of conflict and political- social instability as a consequence of the Mexican Revolution. The revolution echoed the many social problems and inequalities the country had, most of the population were farmers and peasants with no access to justice or proper human conditions. In 1920, Alvaro Obregón became president and his government was the first that dedicated to rebuild the country. The creation of economic, political and cultural institutions responded to the needs the Mexican people had.

One of the issues that needed most attention and focus was education. Unfortunately, ignorance was the predominant sign that determined the majority of the population, approximately 80% of the population did not know how to read or write and schools were limited and deficient. In 1921, the SEP (Secretariat of Public Education) was created and José Vasconcelos would become the first Secretary of Public Education. His first action in favor of popular education would be the “Campaign of Literacy” throughout the whole country and a project of cultural dissemination. Travelling teachers were sent to all the remote and forgotten rural towns of the country; “village houses” were created

to carry out the so-called “cultural missions”, which consisted of basic education, the instruction of methods and techniques to better the agricultural labor and boost local industries.<sup>67</sup>

Teachers were trained, schools built, literary classic books were distributed all over the country and night schools were opened to teach adults to read and write as well. There were a lot of changes that favored the progress of the country and also reasserted a national identity. The Secretary also considered that culture and art helped immensely when it came to the wide distribution of patriotic and moral values, and knew that Mexico's progress was not viable without a strong national identity, as there is no real future without a present supported in the consciousness of the past.<sup>68</sup>

Vasconcelos was a fierce believer of education, he was a revolutionary man that implemented many changes in the educational system of Mexico. “His message was one of spiritual development, of the redemption ‘through work, virtue and knowledge’. He promoted unprecedented civic and voluntary participation in the educational and cultural cause, and made the new crusade a duty of patriotism that was met with enthusiasm and hope”.<sup>69</sup>

During the next decades the education was improved and advanced in the country but it would not be till the 1940’s when a new boost in the educational reforms occurred. Mexico was still struggling with illiteracy, approximately 48% of the population still did not read or write, there was still a lack of schools and adequate classrooms and shortage of school books. Jaime Torres Bodet who had been a pupil of Vasconcelos was named Secretary of Public Education in 1943 and would carry out another “Campaign against Illiteracy” from 1944 to 1946 and an “emergency law” that abided all people between 18 and 60 years old the moral obligation to teach at least one person who did not know how to read or write that was not enrolled in school.

Torres Bodet was Secretary from 1943 to 1946 and returned in 1959 to 1964. He was responsible for the construction of more schools all over the nation and created the Federal Program for Schools Construction. Another issue he faced was the lack of training and commitment of teachers for which he founded the National Institute for Teacher

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<sup>67</sup> Macías Barba 2011: pp. 17-19

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem* p.21

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem* p.16

Training. But it was his idea of implementing a system of free textbooks that made the difference; he edited and distributed free textbooks that guaranteed that all children enrolled had the same didactic resource that contained the minimal knowledge that marked the official programs.<sup>70</sup>

Jaime Torres Bodet was architect of the cultural policy that supported the construction of a new Museum of Anthropology in 1959 to replace the old building in Calle Moneda; for him it was fundamental to rescue the “pre-Columbian treasure”.<sup>71</sup> The National Museum of Anthropology was not to be the only museum to be part of a national project of rescuing the past and shaping a national identity.

The president of Mexico during that time was Adolfo López Mateos, he would show an interest in culture and education and give his support to many cultural projects and enterprises. That is why in the decade of the 1960’s many museums were inaugurated or remodeled among them the National Museum of Anthropology but also the Museum of Modern Art and the Mexican history museum “Museo del Caracol” in the Chapultepec Park, the gallery in the “Palacio de Bellas Artes”, the new Museum of Cultures and a Natural History Museum, etc. In addition, a plan was designed to restore the archeological site of Teotihuacan and create a National Museum of the Viceroyalty of New Spain in the former College of San Francisco Javier complex in Tepotzotlán.

The educational and national project had as its mission to reconcile Mexicans with themselves to discover the value, richness and potential of their historical and cultural roots. The academic and intellectuals’ community played an important role in implementing the reforms and ideas behind the project that was conceived by the figures of Vasconcelos, Torres Bodet, president Adolfo López Mateos, among others who committed in giving Mexico a national unity for the welfare of the nation.

All of these museums constituted the project of building a national identity for the Mexican people. They all promoted and supported a national master narrative based on rediscovering the indigenous roots of Mexican cultures as well as glorifying the Independence war and Mexican Revolution and its patriotic heroes. It is evident that the

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<sup>70</sup> Latapí 1992: p.17-18

<sup>71</sup> El Museo Nacional de Antropología: una crónica de sus primeros 50 años en:

<http://www.mna.inah.gob.mx/contexto/el-museo-nacional-de-antropologia-una-cronica-de-sus-primeros-cincuenta-anos-d-juarez-cossio.html> (seen 20/11/2016)

mid decades of the twentieth century were crucial for the development of a national identity, carried out by educational reforms that sought national unity, welfare and prosperity and that were reinforced by the national museums who presented a visual image of the story of the nation called Mexico.

The National Museum of Anthropology would become a symbol of identity in Mexico. Its inauguration and the presentation of the archeological and ethnographical collections were organized around a striven discourse to build the idea of a nation.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, it is central to underline that the National Museum of Mexico being that it was a modern museum of the nineteenth century was mostly an educational museum that created and supported a narrative that interpreted a simple story which disguised all differences to form an unity around a past. And that the National Museum of Anthropology would create a new narrative that continued in building a Mexican identity, but with a narrative that included all other voices, that embraced the rich and colorful cultural diversity of Mexico. A museum that is an interactional museum that acts as a contact zone to other cultures.

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<sup>72</sup> El Museo Nacional de Antropología: una crónica de sus primeros 50 años en: <http://www.mna.inah.gob.mx/contexto/el-museo-nacional-de-anthropologia-una-cronica-de-sus-primeros-cincuenta-anos-d-juarez-cossio.html> (seen 20/11/2016)

### **Chapter 3. The National Museum of Anthropology as a Contact Zone**

The National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014, with this celebration the museum was consolidated as a symbol of the Mexican identity, it safeguards the legacy and heritage of the original cultures of Mexico, not only for its preservation and transmission to future generations, but to remember and reaffirm the Mexican identity and reality.

As an inheritor of the National Museum it will continue producing a narrative for the Mexican identity. It is precisely in Mexico's ancient past that a common identity was found; the archeological remains and pieces of the collection became objectifications of a national memory, which allowed the people of Mexico to encounter with a cultural identity based in its pre-Hispanic past. These indigenous cultures and its vestiges embodied a past that would be mythologized and idealized in Mexican history. The new museum developed a new narrative that instead of simplifying a story decides to include more voices. The museum became a place of cultural rendezvous, of encountering and discovering the indigenous cultures that proliferated in Mexico and that even today constitute a huge part of the Mexican identity.

It is critical to understand that the museum was founded as a site of memory in which a national project was established. This project meant recovering the indigenous past to shape a national identity, but by doing so other cultural identities surfaced. The National Museum of Anthropology along with the master historical narrative inherited from the National Museum, present a common national identity but in this new narrative other cultures and communities are represented, and it is in this cultural diversity that other identities are found and given voice to. Therefore, the museum becomes a contact zone, where visitors can encounter and discover this cultural diversity. The Mexican national identity is founded on a variety and mix of cultures, the Spanish, the Indian, the Creole and the Mestizo, the present Indigenous cultures, but united by one country and nation.

The National Museum of Anthropology highlights and rescues this cultural diversity. It provides the visitor with a common pre-Columbian past, rescuing the archeological remains of the ancient Indian cultures that prospered in Mesoamerica, yet it also displays the present of the Indigenous communities in the country.

### **3.1 Why can the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico be considered a Contact Zone?**

As established before, contact zones are places where cultures, communities, peoples encounter and thus they can impact each other, in this case the National Museum of Anthropology becomes that place. Why? Because since its beginnings, the museum was meant to be a space where Mexicans could discover their past and for that past to be preserved and conserved. Because it testifies the process of growth and consolidation of pre-Hispanic cultures that settled in Mexico and that shaped Mexican civilization, through a collection that includes antiques, objects, pieces of art and diverse collections.<sup>73</sup> It is a museum that exposes the diversity and cultural richness of the Mexican territory as the result of multiple cultures that have not only been an important part of national history, but also have made a clear mark on the unique features of each region of Mexico.

At the entrance hall of the museum there are two inscriptions that support viewing the National Museum of Anthropology as a contact zone. The inscriptions welcome visitors and allude to the role of the museum of being a space for cultural encounters. The first is a message from Jaime Torres Bodet former Secretary of Public Education who played a crucial role in the construction of the museum. It reads: “Courage and trust about the future the peoples find in the greatness of its past. Mexican, recognize yourself in that mirror of that greatness, confirm, foreigner, the unity of human destiny. Civilizations pass, but in men the Glory of the other men that fought to establish them will forever remain”.<sup>74</sup> (Fig. 2)

The second inscription is a text from president Adolfo López Mateos and goes like this: “The Mexican people raised this monument in honor of the admirable cultures that flourished during the pre-Columbian era in regions that are now territory of the Republic. Facing with the testimonies of those cultures, the Mexico of today pays tribute to

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<sup>73</sup> Saborit and Zarebska 2014: Intro

<sup>74</sup> “Valor y confianza ante el porvenir hallan los pueblos en la grandeza de su pasado. Mexicano, contéplate en el espejo de esa grandeza, comprueba, extranjero, la unidad del destino humano. Pasan las civilizaciones, pero en los hombres quedará siempre la Gloria de que otros hombres hayan luchado por erigirlas” -translation in English made by Gabriela Ulloa Conde.



indigenous Mexico. In whose example recognizes essential characteristics of their national uniqueness”.<sup>75</sup> (Fig. 1)

Both inscriptions besides welcoming visitors to the museum, highlight the importance of the institution in its community, the significance of giving the Mexican people a place for their history and not only that, but a space where they can connect, learn, redeem, comprehend, dialogue, reflect upon their origins, culture and identity.

The museum is not only an archeological collection rescuing the indigenous and pre-Hispanic past for national legitimization but also transforms into a contact zone to confront the Mexican people with their great indigenous past and let them reflect upon it, to feel proud of it and realize the similarities to their way of life. It also displays an ethnographic collection that confronts the visitor with indigenous cultures and peoples that are still alive today in Mexico. Museums as contact zones are not only about visitors learning but also about encouraging debate, reflection, dialogue, etc. thus experiencing a cultural encounter that enriches and invites the visitor to be part of something, to belong and participate.

One of the aspects that is incredibly important in the museum is how since the beginning of the construction of the new museum, there was a decision not only to display the archeological collection; but to also have a collection that displayed the aspects of the indigenous cultures that have survive in order to achieve a broader educational landscape and arouse admiration and respect for the indigenous past. This way the Mexican visitor could have a better appreciation of the direct relationship between the pre-Hispanic heritage with its current culture and costumes, the relationship of his past with his present.<sup>76</sup>

When the decision of building a new National Museum of Anthropology was taken, it was realized that there were not many ethnographic pieces in the National Museum collection and because of this, a variety of expeditions all around the Mexican territory were organized. The mission was to gather information about the ways of life that still remain in the housing, in ceremonies and celebrations, in clothes and dressing, in utensils

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<sup>75</sup> “El pueblo mexicano levanta este monumento en honor a las admirables culturas que florecieron durante la era precolombina en regiones que son ahora territorio de la República. Frente a los testimonios de aquellas culturas, el México de hoy rinde homenaje al México indígena. En cuyo ejemplo reconoce características esenciales de su originalidad nacional”translation in English made by Gabriela Ulloa Conde.

<sup>76</sup> Ramírez Vázquez 2012: p.130

and tools; all that was still authentic in habits and customs. This was a way to show and demonstrate the testimony of the contemporary validity of the pre-Hispanic cultures.<sup>77</sup> In addition, it highlights that for a museum to become a contact zone it has to come in contact with the communities, cultures and collaborate with them, give them a voice within the museum.

By displaying the indigenous present of Mexico the museum inescapably becomes a contact zone; they are inviting all regional identities to have a voice in the museum and for all this different cultures and people to encounter. Furthermore, they encourage visitors to learn more about the indigenous cultures that are part of their history and identity and help in the sustaining of these cultures and communities. It is not only by displaying the indigenous cultures but also by collaborating with the indigenous communities and inviting them over to help and be part of the museum, this decision of collaboration and inclusion is a clear characteristic of a museum functioning as a contact zone.

### **3.2 How does the National Museum of Anthropology become a Contact Zone?**

The museum since the beginning was conceived as not only a depository of valuable objects but as an institution whose mission was to educate and spread the Mexican history and culture to the country and the rest of the world; a place where Mexicans could be proud of their indigenous past and its heritage. The construction of the National Museum of Anthropology was part of the educational reforms and programs carried out by the Secretary of Education Jaime Torres Bodet, who had a vital understanding and vision for education. It was previously discussed that he carried out scholarly campaigns against illiteracy, built rural schools and incorporated free textbooks in all public schools as part of his educational vision and national project. To aid this project of building a national identity and unity he had a National Program of Museums, which included the formation of more national and regional museums across the whole country and especially in Mexico City.

The importance of the museum belonging and coming out of this education projects in hopes of stronger national unity, is that it definitely shows how education was

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<sup>77</sup> Ramírez Vázquez 2012: p.130

the priority for the museum. It was not only that the archeological collection needed a new building, but it was part of a more thorough educational reform where there was an interest to build a museum that could become the symbol of the nation and help build a national identity around the ancient Indian cultures.

The architect and head of the project Pedro Ramírez Vázquez was very conscious of the mission and importance of the National Museum of Anthropology to continue building a national identity and also in providing a space for the Mexican people to discover their origins, their history and their culture. Ramírez Vázquez was deeply invested in building a museum that was contemporary and Mexican; his design is inspired in Mayan architecture and he paid great deal of attention to creating a space that allowed the public to enjoy the collection in a unique way, attending to details and recreating spaces to better highlight certain special archeological objects.

Ramírez Vázquez understood that it was necessary for the visitor to be able to move by choice, meaning that he wanted all the rooms to be accessible from the main patio. This way the visitors do not have to tour the whole museum in order to visit one of the exhibition rooms, it allows visitors to select what they want to see. Each room is signaled by an entrance title corresponding to the name of the exhibition room.

The museum is divided in two, the ground floor is dedicated to the archeological collection organized in 11 galleries, while the upper floor consists of 10 galleries devoted to the ethnographic collection. All the rooms were built, thought and designed as if each of them, was a small museum; each gallery had its own specialist team who was solely dedicated to the culture or cultures that were being displayed.<sup>78</sup> The fact that so much attention and care was taken on each room shows the interest for the museum and its importance in continuing producing a narrative that helped build a national identity, a narrative that would be multi-vocal.

Another crucial aspect was the presentation of the information in the galleries, there was a lot to be explained and said, so it needed an order for the visitor to follow. A museological program was designed by the museum's consultation team. Since almost all the rooms are assign to a specific culture, it was decided that they would start with the situation of the culture regarding space and time; including its geology, orography,

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<sup>78</sup> Ramírez Vázquez 2012: p. 23

hydrography, climate, flora and fauna. Then came the concepts focused on the physical type, demography, language or dialect and personal appearance. Next, the program would open up to the cultural horizons related to the legends, traditions and historical sources to present the most relevant data on economy, technology, recollection of food, as well as everything related to the patterns of population and housing.<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, it was necessary to include the sociopolitical organization, the complete life cycle from birth to death and feature the religion, magic, art, science and mathematical knowledge, astronomy, writing, medicine, urban planning and engineering of the culture in question. And finalizing with an exposition on the outstanding achievements of the culture like heroic facts, legislation, philosophy and other specific to each case.<sup>80</sup> All of this information is presented in labels, texts in the wall, maps, diagrams and audiovisual aids like background music, videos or recordings (Fig.5). The museological program gave the rooms an internal consistency so even if it is a museum divided in rooms they all follow the same program which gives the museum coherence by still highlighting each culture as its own.

The archeology rooms on the ground floor have different heights and spaces in order to best accommodate the vestiges and the recreations of some settings. The 11 archeological galleries are: Introduction to Anthropology, Peopling of America, Preclassic Central Highland, Teotihuacan, the Toltec and their Time, Mexica, Cultures of Oaxaca, Cultures of the Gulf Coast, the Maya, Western Cultures and Northern Cultures.

The gallery of Teotihuacan is bigger than some of the others, given its closeness to Mexico City and that the archeological findings are very rich. The Quetzalcoatl Temple was recreated but this one shows the original coloring lost in the real one, and a model of the city is shown in the garden next to the room (Fig.6). The visitor can submerge in the Teotihuacan world appreciating objects and pieces from the site and learn about its ways of life. This room illustrates perfectly how by recreating spaces and the proper display of objects, the visitor can appreciate more the similarities and differences between the past ways of life to his own ways and reflect upon them. Experiencing the displaying is

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<sup>79</sup> Ramírez Vázquez 2012: p.44

<sup>80</sup> *Ibidem* pp.44-46

precisely what the contact zone wants to achieve to smooth cultural encounters. The room also features a sculpture of the old god of fire, Huehuetotl (Fig.7).

Without a doubt the Mexica gallery (Fig.10) is the most important one and receives special attention at the center of the museum. The gallery opens up in the middle of the building and the first thing the visitor sees is the famous Piedra del Sol (Sun Stone, erroneously called Azteca Calendar stone) (Fig.9). The Mexica founded the city of Tenochtitlan where today sits Mexico City. There is a reproduction of the Tlatelolco Market that reveals the way of life of the Mexica, the figurines were carefully crafted featuring the clothing and also shows the utensils, instruments used by them as well as the provisions. It is significant because it also demonstrates the hierarchies among the people and their social, political positions and their roles. Also important to mention besides the abundance of archeological pieces in here is the model of the Ceremonial Center (Fig.11). Since the beginning it was decided that this gallery would stand out from the rest considering its significance and immediate chronological relation that the Mexica had with the formation of Mexican identity, since it was the culture that lived the Spanish conquest.<sup>81</sup>

Some of the collection pieces found in the Mexica gallery are very well known for all Mexicans, and that is why having them displayed there in all its splendor and grandiosity establishes the unique power that is placed upon objects. The Mexica gallery functions as a place for Mexicans and other peoples to appreciate and value the civilization that lived long ago in Mexico and that in the everyday life of today traces of it can still be found.

It is important to notice that each gallery of the museum is particular and different due to the decision to treat each gallery as a small museum, this demonstrates the work and research behind each gallery and how this results in scenarios for the visitor to enter and experience the Indian world as he discovers the roots to the Mexican identity.

The archeology galleries preserve and safeguard the ancient Indian cultures heritage, its remains and vestiges. The ethnography galleries on the other hand will show the aspects of the ancient Indian cultures that are still alive in the country, in order to achieve a broader educational and cultural panorama that provokes and produces

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<sup>81</sup> Saborit and Zarebska 2014: p.23

admiration and respect for the indigenous past of Mexico. “The visitor, especially the Mexican, could better appreciate the direct relationship of the pre-Hispanic heritage with its current culture and customs, the relation of its past with its present”.<sup>82</sup>

The 10 ethnography galleries that are upstairs are: Indian Peoples of Today which introduces all Indian peoples and cultures that are still alive today in Mexico, their location, influence and their importance to Mexicans (Fig.16); the Great Nayar, the Purépecha, Otapame, Sierra de Puebla, Oaxaca Indian Peoples of the South, Gulf Coast, the Mayan Peoples, the Northeast and the Nahuas.

Today there are 65 ethnic groups living in Mexico, in these ethnography galleries the museum gives them a voice and rescues their cultural heritage so important to Mexico’s history and identity. Mexicans and foreigners can enter the halls and experience the different ways of life of the indigenous people. It is exactly by displaying a wide variety of their aesthetic expressions, like music, regional attires and clothing, and different forms of visual arts and handicrafts that the visitor can see that the *sarape* is still a part of today’s apparel or that most Mexican families still use the *molcajete* to cook their sauces.

In the gallery of Oaxaca Indian Peoples of the South (Figs. 20-22), a region that is characterized for an ample cultural diversity and for having the largest concentration of indigenous communities. There are 18 indigenous communities, the Zapotecan, Mixtecan and Popolacan are some of the most known. This gallery is important because it shows the assimilation among cultures, the biodiversity that enriches their culture, and ways of life that have changed due to the technology and developments that have arrived with time. In the showcases of the gallery the visitor can see handicrafts and embroidery fabrics that can be found in any market, pots of clay that are still used to cook, children’s toys like the *balero* or the *trompo*, and so many things that the visitor can relate to.

The museum as a contact zone is truly perceived by walking in the carefully constructed atmospheres the Indigenous people helped build. In them the visitor can see the different types of households that exist depending on the region, the different materials, the wide variety of clothing and customs. The fact that a Mexican from any part of the country can find its region represented emphasizes that by giving voice to these

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<sup>82</sup> Ramírez Vázquez 2012: p.130

indigenous communities the museum opened a bridge between the Mexican people and the indigenous cultures that distinguish and define the Mexican identity.

The ethnographic galleries display instruments, clothing, cooking utensils, tools, artisanal handicrafts, etc. (Fig.24). These reflect the ways of life of the indigenous peoples and it is important because many of these objects are still in the everyday life of the Mexican. “Many consider these objects typical of a handicraft market, but for those who continue to use them, the ones who live them, the ones who make them, it is a great satisfaction to find their daily life reflected in the museum”.<sup>83</sup>(Figs. 25-26)

Another aspect that demonstrates how the museum indeed became a contact zone that has already been mentioned before, is that in the ethnographic rooms the museum recreated the cultural atmospheric contexts and ambiances of the indigenous peoples' ways of life, their homes, traditions and customs (Fig.27). To recreate the atmospheres, the board of advisors that supervised the construction of the museum decided to bring the actual peoples and have them build the houses and show them how they lived. This step taken to be the most accurate in recreating and displaying indigenous ways of life is a surprising characteristic of the museum especially considering that the museum is from 1964, they gave a voice to the communities and still do nowadays by involving them and inviting them to programs and projects organized in the museum.

Besides collaborating with the indigenous communities the National Museum of Anthropology has a wide variety of educational programs directed to all audiences. They offer one day courses, seminars, activities for kids besides organizing guided tours specialized for different ages. The museum does not limit itself in just displaying their collection but focuses in providing all kinds of programs to its visitors to complement the visit to the museum. In addition, in their webpage they have a wide range of courses dealing with Mexican history, indigenous traditions and ceremonies, anthropology and archeology, etc. with the aim of educating more about the Mexican culture in order for people to comprehend the significance of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past and be more conscious about protecting and conserving it. It also shows that there is a commitment to support and endorse the indigenous communities that still live in the country.

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<sup>83</sup> Ramírez Vázquez 2012: p. 131

The National Museum of Anthropology responding to the new museology transformed the national master narrative created in the National Museum, into a new narrative that incorporated the voices of all. A museum that instead of being only educational became interactional, acting like a true platform for cultures to meet, discover, be represented, come in contact with each other and learn.



## **Conclusion**

The National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico can be considered a contact zone, where the visitor enters and is confronted to a pre-Hispanic past and an indigenous present that have shape the identity of the Mexican people. It is a space where cultural encounters happen, where all cultures of Mexico are represented and given a voice. Mexicans and foreigners have a place, a platform where to discover and experience the history and heritage of the ancient civilizations that settled and lived in the territory of Mexico.

The museum becomes a contact zone by creating a new narrative that allows the wide cultural diversity of the country to be part of the story. It highlights the different cultural identities that form the Mexican identity and reality. The museum metamorphoses into a space where people can face their or other cultures and thus impact each other. A place for cultural encounters that allows learning, dialogue, debate, collaboration, comprehension, redeeming of pasts, discovering cultures and communities. And mostly for these cultures to be represented and have a sense of belonging, of being heard.

James Clifford by applying the notion of contact zones to museums opened the doors to countless of possibilities and action for the museum as an institution in its society. An institution that can change the way communities and cultures are perceived and represented in the world; the museum can help in bringing together fractured and divided societies. Museums as contact zones shape meanings and identities, the notion definitely helps to understand that the impact and influence these institutions have in the world is crucial and could become much more than depositories of culture.

Mexico discovered the importance of their pre-Hispanic past in building a national museum that preserved and conserved the archeological remains of the original cultures. By founding the National Museum of Mexico it was recognized that there was a common past upon which a national identity could be based on. This modern museum served its purpose in providing the Mexicans a master narrative of their history and identity during the nineteenth century. However, the National Museum of Anthropology will evolve into a museum that besides shaping a common identity, created a new narrative that gave

voice to all. A museum that is inclusive and interactional, that recognized the significance of providing a space for cultural rendezvous.

Viewing the National Museum of Anthropology as a contact zone was truly meaningful because it allowed me to realize why it is the most important museum of Mexico, because it showed me that there is a place for Mexicans to go and feel proud of our culture and heritage, and seek the roots of the Mexican origins, history, identities and reality. It allows the comprehension that museums are powerful institutions that influence the way a nation is seen, shaped and built.

The National Museum of Anthropology is a contact zone for Mexicans and for the rest of the world. A place where cultures can encounter and impact each other.

## List of Illustrations

All photos were taken by Gabriela Ulloa Conde.

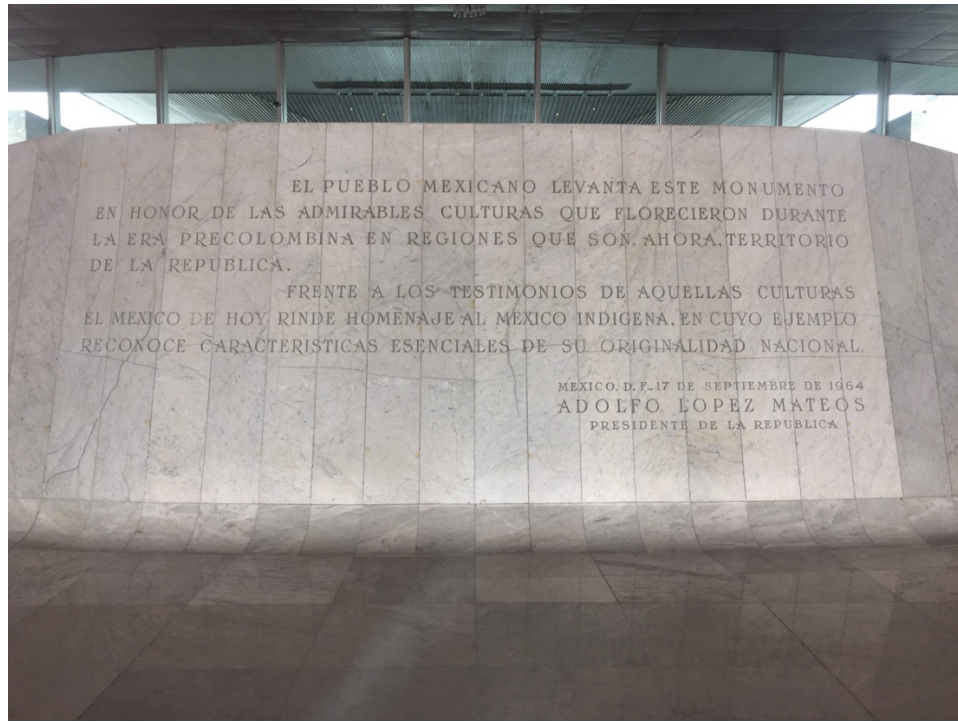


Fig. 1 Text inscription of President Adolfo López Mateos in the entrance hall of the National Museum of Anthropology

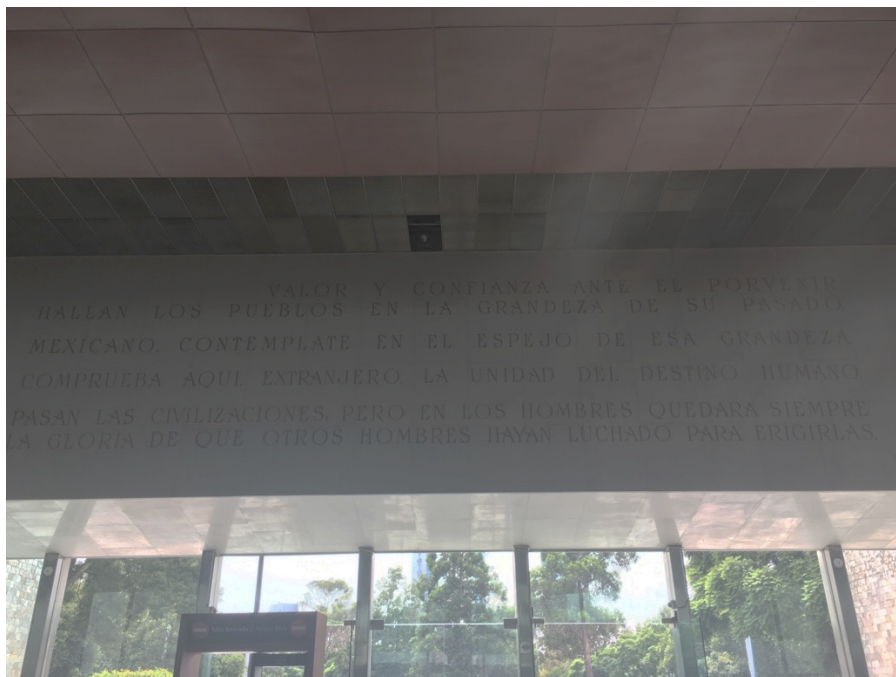


Fig. 2 Text inscription of Jaime Torres Bodet at the entrance of the National Museum of Anthropology

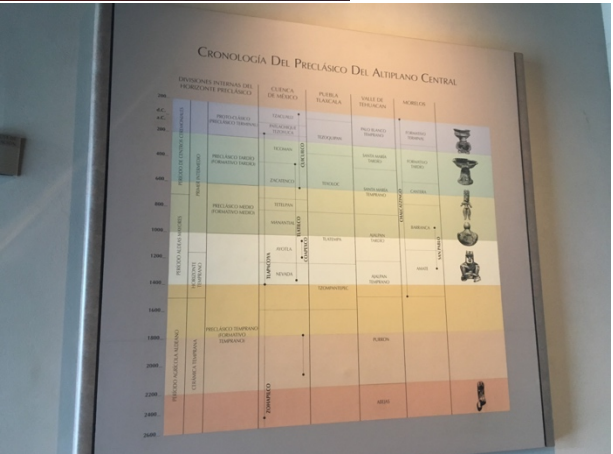
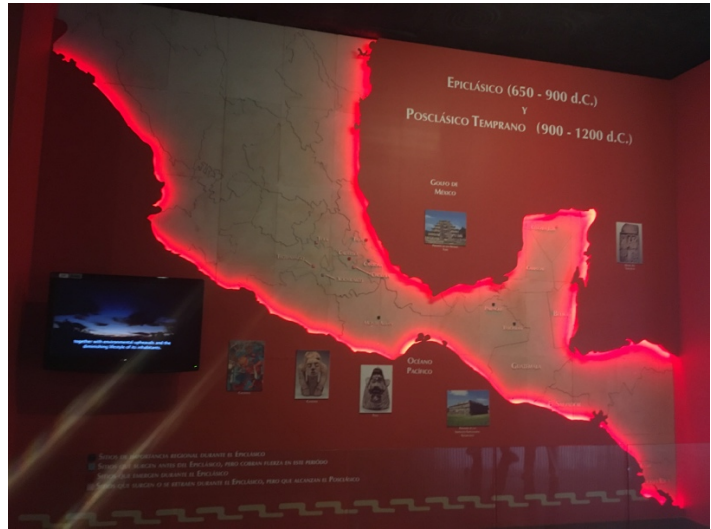


Fig. 3 Main patio at the National Museum of Anthropology



Fig.4 Inscriptions on the walls of the National Museum of Anthropology





### EL SIMBOLISMO ENTRE EL HOMBRE, EL JAGUAR Y EL COYOTE

En la cosmovisión mesoamericana el jaguar representaba la oscuridad, la tierra y a los guerreros valientes. Por su parte, el coyote, en tanto fiera, se emparentaba con los jaguares y también evocaba a los guerreros. Para algunos estudiosos los primeros animales eran compañeros de los "chamanes", personajes que se conectaban con el mundo espiritual mediante trances y estados alterados de la conciencia. Cuando se separaban del plano real podían transformarse en su alter ego, ya fuera un jaguar o cualquier otro animal.

Aquí se aprecian algunas obras que reflejan un estrecho vínculo entre los seres humanos y las fieras, probable alegoría de la ferocidad de los toltecas y de su permanencia a través de la guerra.

### El Mundo Mexica

Durante los últimos años del siglo XIII de nuestra era, los pueblos que se habían asentado en el Altiplano Central Mexicano —después del abandono de Teotihuacán— muestran un proceso de florecimiento político y cultural; se producen entonces numerosos testimonios de un ideal pan-mesoamericano, integrado esencialmente por mitos, diademas y cultos religiosos comunes. Los diversos señores que se consolidaron en aquel tiempo buscaron su identidad a través de estilos artísticos cuyo lenguaje visual fiera un reconocimiento comunitario. Este proceso se inició con el predominio de Cuauhácán y Teotihuacán, al cual sucedió una sucesión de grupos conocidos en las crónicas históricas, como de habla náhuatl o "tribus nahualtecas", cuyo origen se dio en el mítico Aztlan-Chicomoztlan; se trataba de xochimilcas, tlaxcaltecas, huastecas, tepanecas y acolhuas, y los matlatzincas, que hablaban otra lengua.

Los arqueólogos han definido a esta época como Posclásico Tardío (1300-1521 d.C.), caracterizada por la "predominancia del militarismo en todos los aspectos de la vida. Las deidades principales patrocinan las conquistas guerreras; los ritos más importantes giran en torno a la captura de prisioneros, y el sacrificio humano se transforma en el eje motor de la parafamilia cotidiana; la organización política y social se estructura a partir de jerarquías militares, compuestas por hombres jóvenes que se habían destacado por su fuerza, valentía y belicosidad. De igual manera, las expresiones plásticas de la época insisten en los valores iconográficos relacionados con esta actividad guerrera.

Es en este contexto donde se hicieron presentes los mexicas, conocidos también en los textos como aztecas o tlomecacas. Este pueblo, que fundó su ciudad capital, México-Tenochtitlan, en el año 2 Casa (1325 d.C.), se confrontó inmediatamente con sus vecinos, legó alianzas y venció a sus enemigos. Para mediados del siglo XIV se puede hablar del mundo mexica, por el predominio de este grupo en gran parte de Mesoamérica, en donde impuso sus ideales religiosos, militares y políticos.



Fig. 5 Different ways of presenting the information in the National Museum of Anthropology



Fig. 6 Recreation of the Quetzalcoatl Temple and a model of the Teotihuacan city in the Teotihuacan gallery



Fig. 7 Sculpture of Huehuetotl in the Teotihuacan gallery



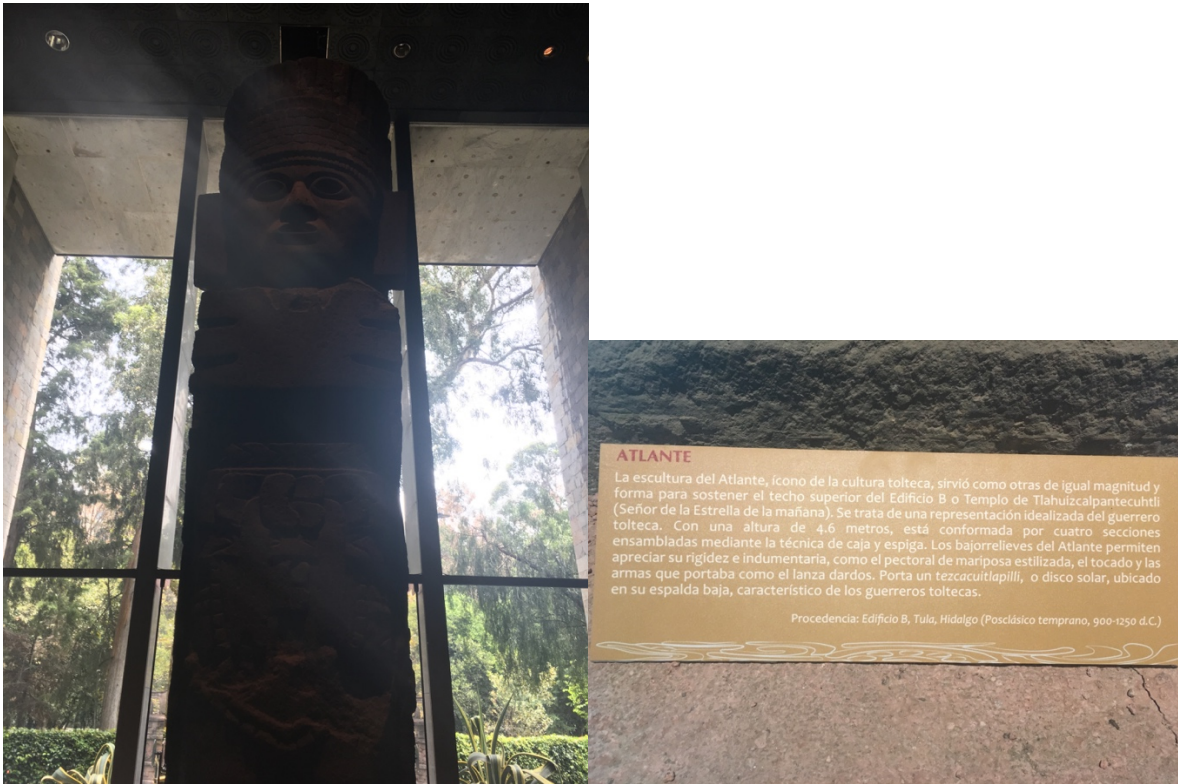


Fig.8 Atlante de Tula sculpture and its label in the Toltec and their time gallery



Fig. 9 Sun Stone in the Mexica gallery



Fig. 10 Mexica gallery in the National Museum of Anthropology





Fig.11 Ceremonial Center model in the Mexica gallery

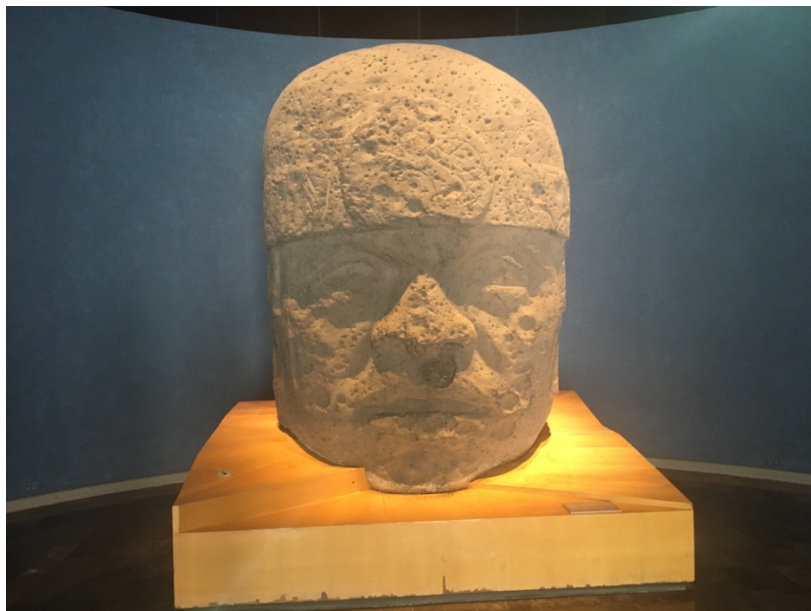


Fig. 12 Olmec Colossal Head in the Cultures of the Gulf Coast gallery



Fig. 13 Chac Mool of Chichen Itza in the Maya gallery



Fig. 14 Recreation of a Maya temple in the Maya gallery garden



Fig. 15 Cultures of the North gallery





Fig. 16 Map showing the presence of Indigenous Cultures in Mexico in the Indian Peoples of Today gallery

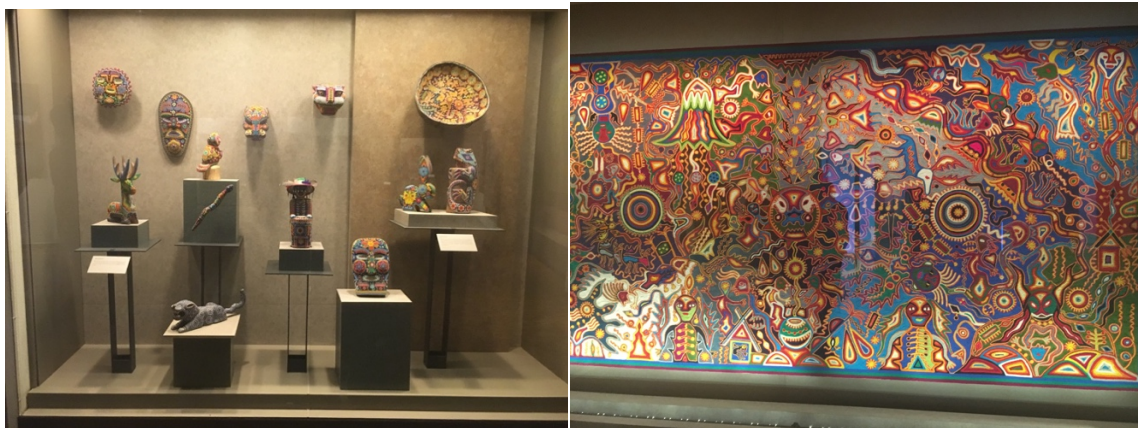


Fig.17 Huichol art and handcrafts in the Nayar gallery



Fig.18 Recreation of a traditional scenery in the Purépecha gallery



Fig. 19 Regional clothing and customs in Sierra de Puebla gallery



Fig. 20 Showcase displaying how children are raised in Oaxaca Indian Peoples of the South gallery





Fig. 21 Recreation of a typical town kiosk in Oaxaca Indian Peoples of the South gallery



Fig.22 Mural depicting everyday life in Oaxaca Indian Peoples of the South gallery



Fig. 23 Huipils a traditional garment in the Maya gallery



Fig. 24 Showcases displaying handcrafts in the Nahuas gallery



Fig. 25 Pottery handcrafts in the National Museum of Anthropology





Fig.26 Tree of Life in the National Museum of Anthropology



Fig.27 Recreation of the cultural atmospheric contexts and ambiances of the indigenous peoples' ways of life in the National Museum of Anthropology

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