

From Puebla to San Carlos: The Journeys of the Olavarrieta Collection (1907–1909)

Ir a la versión en español

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ABSTRACT

In 1907, artist Gerardo Murillo, Dr. Atl, made an inventory of a 295 piece collection donated to the state by Alejandro Ruiz Olavarrieta, a businessman and politician from Puebla. This RESEARCH proposes an approach to this compilation from the analysis and systematization of said relationship, through the titles and attributions established by the artist, as well as from the public exhibition organized two years later at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (ENBA, for its acronym in Spanish, National School of Fine Arts). This exercise will allow some questions to be asked about the process of conforming and conserving the Academy's collections, and the tracking of some of its pieces today.

KEYWORDS

collecting, cultural heritage, museums, conservation history, modern art

At 10 in the morning on Tuesday, February 5, 1909, the exhibition of the Olavarrieta Collection opened in one of the galleries of the Academia de San Carlos (Academy of San Carlos). Justo Sierra, Minister of Instrucción Pública (Public Instruction), and the Undersecretary Ezequiel Chávez were received at the Academy by the architect Antonio Rivas Mercado, its director, and by the artist Gerardo Murillo, Dr. Atl, who designed it. He

would give these authorities a tour of the exhibition, highlighting the importance of some of the pieces in the collection, which from then on would form part of the pictorial heritage of what was then called Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (ENBA, for its acronym in Spanish, National School of Fine Arts) located in the historic center of Mexico City (Se inauguró la exposición [...], 1909, p. 1).

The collection was bequeathed to the federal government in 1907 by Puebla's businessman Alejandro Ruiz Olavarrieta, and Gerardo Murillo carried out its inventory, classification, appraisal, restoration and exhibition. It consisted of 295 paintings of European and Mexican origin and 200 pieces of ceramics (Notas de la semana, 1909, p. 8). In this article, the Olavarrieta Collection will be analyzed based on Murillo's inventory for the ENBA and its exhibition in 1909. This two-sided analysis will allow us to ask some questions about the process of formation and conservation of the collections of the former Academy in Mexican modernism, specifically in the first decade of the 20th century, which today are part of the public collections of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA, National Institute of Fine Arts) and of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM, National Autonomous University of Mexico).

ALEJANDRO RUIZ OLAVARRIETA'S PRIVATE MUSEUM

The corridors of Alejandro Ruiz Olavarrieta's home in the city of Puebla de los Ángeles were visited by many people. Those who knew "that private museum consider it one of the most valuable treasures in Puebla"¹ (Un museo particular en Puebla, 1905, p. 3). Its spaces were full of objects: "paintings, statues, artifacts, fabrics, jewelry, decorations, tableware, books, medals and much more of what can be imagined to have great artistic value and indisputable antiquity... [such as]... dishes gifted by Emperor Francisco José to the defenders of Maximilian; Sèvres vases; Chinese and Japanese jars, ...[or]... canvases of indisputable merit" (Un museo particular en Puebla, 1905, p. 3).

Alejandro Ruiz Olavarrieta was part of Puebla's bourgeoisie and a symbolically important figure in society since he had been a substitute deputy for the city of Puebla in Congress, along with José Luis Bello (1861), secretary of the board to organize hospitals in Puebla (1862). Ruiz Olavarrieta also headed the committee to create the *Programa de Educación e Instrucción Primaria para las Escuelas de Enseñanza Gratuita* (Primary Education and Instruc-

¹ Editorial translation. All quotes are translations from the original texts in Spanish.

tion Program for the Free Teaching Schools, 1868). Years later, he also participated in the XVI Meeting of the International Congress of Americanists (1895), in the sixth session with the memory: *Disertación sobre el origen de los pobladores de América* (Dissertation on the origin of the settlers of America) (Ruiz, 1897, pp. 278-280), which deals with the origin of the inhabitants of Mexico and their relationship with one of the 10 tribes of Israel, which gave him entry to a circle of intellectuals who were still explaining the origin of man in biblical interpretations, a very fashionable position in Puebla at that time (Sexta sesión [...], 1895, p. 2). In 1896 Ruiz Olavarrieta was commissioned to give a speech at the banquet in honor of Porfirio Díaz, with the inauguration of two statues made by Jesús Contreras: *Nicolás Bravo* and *Ignacio Zaragoza*. In his greeting to the president, Ruiz Olavarrieta exclaimed: “The most glorious and recent pages of our history have been written in Puebla and, especially, by the patriotism of its children, and in them, you are the *caudillo* who, before the sublime ideal of freedom and the Republic, postponed everything for the salvation of the homeland” (Fiestas de Puebla, 1896, p. 2). It can be noted that this businessman was a politician allied to the Porfirian regime and, at the same time, very active in the Puebla Catholic community.²

However, Ruiz Olavarrieta seems best known for creating Monte de Piedad Vidal-Ruiz, although it was the idea of his sister, María Gertrudis Benigna Ruiz Olavarrieta. She wanted to use the inheritance her husband, José Manuel Vidal, left her to create a private charity in Puebla. Unfortunately, she was unable to do so, and the money changed hands, first to her brother’s, the statesman Joaquín Ruiz, and, after his death, to Alejandro’s, who in 1890 established the Monte de Piedad Vidal-Ruiz. Directed by a Council, it would function as a pledge credit agency at a low annual interest rate, which in time, would also grant mortgage, rents, and court deposits (Ruiz, 1893, p. 2). Six years after its opening, this establishment became state property and, from then on, it was an institution belonging to the State Public Charity (Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 1896, p. 10).

The people of Puebla would also know Ruiz Olavarrieta’s house since it was established both as a public and private space: a “museum-home”. It was where the Ruiz family lived and, at the same time, where people could appreciate the different art pieces that

² Several journalistic notes in *El Tiempo. Diario Católico* describe that a lamp was given to the Cathedral of Puebla and that Bishop Francisco expressed his gratitude. See: el grabado y el detalle de la lámpara regalada a la Catedral de Puebla (Lamp given to the Cathedral of Puebla) (Regalo a la Catedral de Puebla, 1893, p. 1) and the Bishop’s response that was published a few days later.

Ruiz Olavarrieta enjoyed either painting or buying on his travels through Europe, Jerusalem, Egypt, among other places. Although such objects did not obey any order or classification, but rather responded to the collector's interest, they were not only arranged for personal gratification, since access was allowed to whoever requested it: hence its mention as a "private museum."³

From that moment of exhibition, the importance of some of the pieces in the collection was known, announced as containing works by great European artists, whether they were "original drawings by the master of Rafael de Urbino, paintings by Murillo, Rubens, Van Dyck, by Alberto Durero, one by Velázquez and the other by Rivera" (*Un museo particular en Puebla*, 1905, p. 3), as well as precious objects: "triptychs of vibrant mosaics; ancient mosaic paintings with portraits of characters; ivory boats in which every detail captivates the most demanding;⁴ exquisite porcelains; boxes, glasses, vases, bottles, each piece worth a treasure; books edited and printed by Gutenberg, of greater merit than the incunabula, and a painting by Raphael, worthy of the best museum" (*Un museo particular en Puebla*, 1905, p. 3). All of them were considered precious pieces thanks to the quality of their artistry and the importance of their provenance.

The collecting that took place in the city of Puebla was one of the most solid of the 19th century and, in it, the figure of Alejandro Ruiz Olavarrieta stands out as "the philanthropist who assembled the most valuable art collection Puebla has ever had" (Pérez, 2009, p. 35).⁵ Although eclectic because of its lack of a defined line—as has been described—, it did not take significant risks considering that it followed a moderate and traditional interest, fostered by the search for the great European masters' artwork, and also all those exotic pieces whose precious materials would show the wealthy existence of the businessman and reflect the extent and splendor of his travels.

³ Apparently "museums" were not alienated to Puebla culture, since in 1827 the artist José Manzo inaugurated the "Museum of Antiquities" in a high gallery above the first patio of the State College, and the following year he would install a "Cabinet of Natural History". In the same way, the "home-museum" of Francisco Cabrera Ferrando is mentioned, with its galleries full of archaeological pieces, marbles, bronzes, clocks, microscopes, paintings, engravings, photographs, Chinese porcelain. See: Fernández, 2000, pp. 121-123.

⁴ It seems that the Olavarrieta ivories collection was acquired by José Mariano Bello y Acedo, and integrated into the collection that his father had started (Cabrera, 1987, p. 25).

⁵ The Collection contained, in addition to paintings, "all kinds of art objects, enamels, porcelain, bronzes, ivories and any other precious objects Mexico had, brought to the Nation of the Philippines, arriving in Europe or manufactured in the country" (Cabrera, 1988, p. 32).

After Olavarrieta's death, it was announced that he had bequeathed his collection to the federal government⁶, which would be divided into two offices: the objects would go to the Museo Nacional (National Museum, predecessor of the Museo Nacional de Antropología [National Museum of Anthropology])⁷ and the paintings, to the ENBA, both in Mexico City (Informe del Ciudadano Presidente [...], 1908, p. 3). This decision was widely criticized by Ruiz Olavarrieta's fellow citizens of Puebla, who, like the Bello family, thought it would be best to donate it to the Puebla city Government, as they considered that it should remain there without being separated or moved to any federal institution ("La Patria" en Puebla, 1909b, p. 7). In this way, if Ruiz Olavarrieta had already left the management of the Monte de Piedad in the hands of the State of Puebla, why should he not also leave his private collection under state control? Perhaps he thought that the Academy would ensure that his collection was kept together without being dispersed (as had happened with those of José Antonio Cardoso Mejía and Francisco Díaz San Ciprián from Puebla) and that, thanks to the exhibitions in its galleries, it would have a greater outreach, hoping that his name would remain for a long time in the national imagination.

INVENTORYING THE COLLECTION

In November 1907, Gerardo Murillo was sent to Puebla by the Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes (Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, formerly the Secretaría de Educación Pública [Secretary of Public Education]) to collect, classify, and study the pieces of the Olavarrieta Collection. The inventory he drew up included 295 items, in which the author's name is occasionally alluded to, and a title or theme of the work is generally given, along with the school to which the piece belongs based on its formal characteristics (Báez, 2003, p. 369; AAASC, 1907, folder 11309)⁸. Regarding the collection, valued at 260 000 pesos, ac-

⁶ The newspaper established "It is made public that Mr. Don Alejandro Ruiz Olavarrieta, a wealthy owner from Puebla, who died a few days before, donated his notable collection of paintings and his copious library to the Nation, to enrich the National Palace. I wish this behavior had many imitators!" (Efemérides del año 1907, 1908, p. 9)

⁷ In an official letter by Ezequiel Chávez it is established: "Today I say to C. Gerardo Murillo the following: 'Please deliver to the director of the National Museum, for the Department of retrospective industrial art of the same establishment, all the objects that are not paintings and sculptures from the collection ceded to the Government by Mr. Alejandro Ruiz Olavarrieta.'" That is to say, it was believed that the objects "[...] would enrich the sections of history and retrospective industrial art" (AAASC, 1908, file 10).

⁸ To better understand the collection, I needed to transcribe the inventory into a table and reorganize it for analysis, whether by author, school, genre, subject, and other parameters.

ording to Abelardo Carrillo and Gariel, it was the first time that an individual ceded this quality and quantity of treasures to the Mexican State⁹ (Carrillo y Gariel, 1944, p. 55).

From the inventory analysis and the reorganization of the information proposed by Murillo, we know in more detail what the pictorial collection might have been. However, it must be borne in mind that this is the work of a modernist artist whose eye was shaped by academic training (in Felipe Castro's workshop), non-traditional training in Guadalajara (with Félix Bernardelli) and a trip to Europe. In the way how Murillo assigned schools and attributions to the pieces, he shows us his visual culture, his view, and his preferences, all acquired both in the Guadalajara workshops and in exchanges with artists in Italy and France or contact with the collections of the great European museums at the turn of the century.¹⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising that he mentions the great names of European art history, such as Bartolomé Murillo, Francisco de Zurbarán, Rembrandt, Rubens, Rafael Sanzio or Titian.

On the basis of the titles mentioned in the inventory and the themes that can be deduced from them, it is possible to propose an organization of the pictorial genres that made up the microcosm of the collection: religious history painting (174 pieces), landscape painting (48), portraits (33), customs (17), mythological history (10), still life (9) and 4 pieces whose titles do not give us enough information to carry out a classification. Thus, it is possible to notice (from Murillo's perspective and classification) the predilection for the representation of scenes on the life of Christ, portraits of saints, and other religious stories, which made up more than half of the collection and dominated the collector's taste, followed, by far, by landscape painting and portraiture (Figure 1).

Although historiographically, greater weight has been given to the European pieces in the collection, one of the successes of the inventory is to place the great European artistic schools, such as the "Spanish school" or "Flemish school," with the same hierarchy as the "Mexican school." This idea had been configured theoretically by José Bernardo Couto in his *Diálogo sobre la historia de la pintura en México* (*Dialogue on the history of painting in Mexico*)—published posthumously in 1872—and put into practice with

⁹ Ana Garduño has established that the donation of art was, since then, "a scarce cultural practice [that] shows a lack of social commitment of the elites with the strengthening of the artistic field; nevertheless, [...] there are notable cases of cultural solidarity". One of them, that of Olavarrieta (Garduño, 2008, p. 199).

¹⁰ Murillo's first trip to Europe (1897-1903), the visits to different cities and museums, as well as artistic activities and plastic production can be traced in the letters to his relatives, that were given to Antonio Luna Arroyo when he was writing the biography of Murillo, which now remains in the personal archive of Griselda Luna.

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Schools		
Spanish school (includes: Murillo, Zurbarán, Velázquez, Greco and Ribera “El Españolito”)		45
Flemish school (includes: Rembrandt and Rubens)		29
Italian school (includes: Rafael, Tiziano and Mantegna)		57
German school		7
French school (includes: Girodet)		24
Mexican school		49
Olavarrieta		2
Copies		12
Named authors with unidentified origin		40
Atribution		6
Without attribution or school		24
TOTAL		295

FIGURE 1. Organization of the information provided in the Inventory carried out by Gerardo Murillo (Table: Rebeca Barquera, 2021; source: Archivo de la Antigua Academia de San Carlos [Archive of the Old Academy of San Carlos, 1907, folder 11309]).

the foundation of the galleries of the Ancient and Modern Mexican School of Painting at the Academy of San Carlos.¹¹ With this specialized vocabulary, continuity was established regarding the writing of art history proposed by the Academy in the middle of the last century.

Similarly, according to the scholar Miguel Ángel Fernández, the Puebla galleries—both the episcopal and the secular—had an important interest in Mexican paintings; hence the 49 pieces in the collection attributed to figures such as Miguel Cabrera, Joaquín Ramírez, José María Velasco, Hermenegildo Bustos, among others. Likewise, Fernández affirms that, unlike what happened in the capital city, in the “metropolis of Los Angeles”: “collecting was more than a hobby: some of its inhabitants wrote about antiquities as if it were about ‘raising the dead’” (Fernández, 2000, pp. 115 & 121), which explains the significant interest in collecting objects of various origins, such as Chinese porcelain or enamels from the time of Henry IV.¹²

¹¹ See the theoretical importance of Couto in J. Gutiérrez Haces, 2001 (pp. 90-193).

¹² “Among the enamels there are some valuables, among others, two ancient ones that represent Henri IV and the Duchess of Angoulême, and many others with biblical scenes or profane subjects, all of inestimable value. Nothing was spared to bring together this precious collection, which will occupy vast halls by itself, and it has not yet been decided where it will be placed, with all the comforts and good light conditions and decorum it deserves” (Cuantioso legado [...], 1907, pp. 64-65).

Photographs of the pieces donated by Ruiz Olavarrieta were reproduced in the press: there is a mention of a Titian piece; paintings from the French school, such as a Delacroix *Pietà* (Figure 2); paintings from the Spanish school, such as a Delacroix *Pietà* (Figure 2); from the Spanish School: two sketches by Murillo, *La Concepción* (*The Conception*) and *La Asunción de María* (*Assumption of Mary*), and a painting by Herrera, among others (Figure 3).



FIGURE 2. Delacroix's *Pietà* in the Olavarrieta Collection (Source: *Arte y Ciencia*, April 7, 1909, p. 271. [Raíces digital](#), Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM).

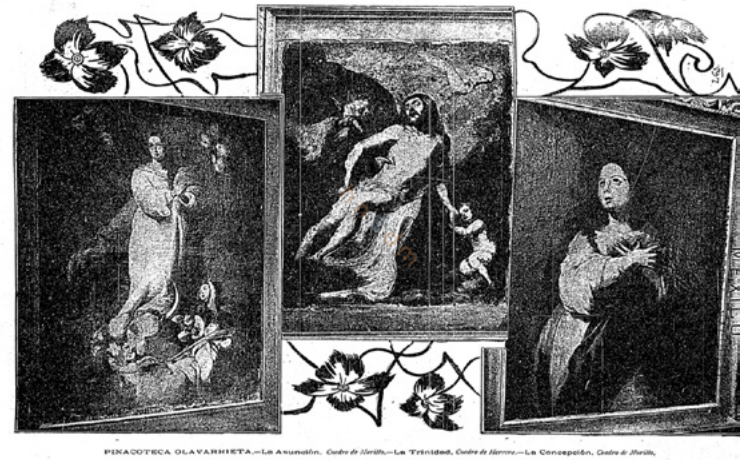


FIGURE 3. Pinacoteca Olavarrieta: *La Asunción*, painting by Herrera, *La Trinidad*, painting by Herrera, and *La Concepción*, painting by Murillo. Photographic montage with the attributions made by Gerardo Murillo for the exhibition at the ENBA (Source: G. Murillo. *Pinacoteca Olavarrieta*, February 7, 1909, p. 15. Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México).

In addition, Murillo was responsible for narrating stories about the pieces in the collection, for example:

Mr. Olavarrieta was traveling through Seville, and guided by his artistic tastes; he attended a public auction of good canvas. The Jesuits, owners of the treasury, required funds and auctioned off several paintings of indisputable merit to the highest bidder. A Ticiano went up for sale, and Mr. Olavarrieta bid at the auction until he acquired the canvas for 150 000 pesetas. It had just been left in his hands when a representative of the Louvre Museum arrived at the auction with instructions to pay for the painting whatever the Jesuits asked for. It was late. Our countryman had acquired it and did not want to part with it, although the French commissioner intended to hand him 100 000 pesetas in less than an hour [Nuestros Grabados, 1909, p. 12].

This history of a Titian painting allows us to see the importance that was already given to the life of objects, the principle of provenance, and, mainly, to Murillo's voice as an artist specialized in European art. In this case, the origin would be a collection belonging to the Jesuits of Seville, who began to auction pieces of undeniable quality, since the participation of the authority and, even more so, the Louvre's representative dispute over the piece granted it value.

Although this is not the space to develop the story about each piece, two more should be mentioned due to the problems they present. The two versions of *Las hijas de Lot* (*Lot's daughters*) are attributed to two French painters: one to Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and the other to Anne-Louis Girodet (1767-1824).¹³ Murillo analyzed the first as a sketch made with evident mastery, understood as "a very high feeling of nature explained with a completely masterful technical skill" (Murillo, 1909, p. 16). For the artist, "The composition, the drawing and the technique, together with the quality and preparation of the canvas, are sufficient elements to classify it among contemporary French productions or those immediately after Poussin, whose influence bears all the characteristics" (Murillo, 1909, p. 16). It could be by Poussin or some other painter who followed his method and pictorial technique, focused on the care of the drawing and the composition of the landscape surrounding the scene.

The one attributed to Girodet makes Murillo imagine Jacques Louis David's reaction when he saw his disciple's work: "Ah! That Girodet is crazy... he is crazy or I no longer understand anything about the art of painting" (La Gran Colección, 1909, p. 12). For the Mexican artist, "*Lot's daughters* is a gracefully composed painting and the light is distributed with skill and good taste. The intonations of the flesh are beautiful, warm, and thus, slightly false; the general coloring, always within this false, unsound character, is harmonious and the execution of the work, simple" (La Gran Colección, 1909, p. 12) and is probably contemporary with his well-known work *Pigmalión y Galatea* (*Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1819). With the above, Murillo reveals his taste in color, which did not follow what the French painter considered to

¹³ There is an interesting error in the press concerning to one of the attributions, since in the article "Large legacy of paintings and works of art" (1907, p.65) of *El Arte y la Ciencia México* it is established that one of the paintings of Lot's Daughters had been attributed to Titian, however, this is not the case in Murillo's inventory. Perhaps the mistake stems from the first inventory carried out by a notary from the state of Puebla after Olavarrieta's death, when the decision of a donation became public knowledge. The first notarial inventory is mentioned in the note "New Treasures Given to National Museum" in *The Mexican Herald*, 1907 (p. 23).

be the hinge between neoclassicism and nineteenth-century romanticism.¹⁴

About its provenance, it is said that Murillo “had information from the painting dealer and painter Mr. Latschiver, established in Paris, that in 1870 this work was sold by a family that left the city during the Prussian siege, to a Mexican named Olavarria [sic], in whom the surname Olavarrieta can be recognized” (La Gran Colección [...], 1909, p. 12). This anecdote, reproduced also by Abelardo Carrillo and Gariel in his book on the Academy’s galleries, allows us to account, first, for the interest in establishing the trajectory of the pieces that were part of the Academy’s European art collection, and then, to take for granted the belief in the connections that Dr. Atl maintained with French painters and merchants (Carrillo y Gariel, 1944, p. 56).

The three pieces mentioned above are currently kept in the Museo Nacional de San Carlos (MNSC, National Museum of San Carlos) and there is still much to be studied about them as plastic objects; however, their belonging to the collection is an important entry route for their study. Of the second *Lot y sus hijas* (*Lot’s daughters*), the file kept by the museum intuitively suggests that it belonged to the Olavarrieta Collection, although the first, now attributed to “some painter from Bologna,” has been removed from the layer of meaning that granted being part of an eclectic collection formed in Puebla at the end of the 19th century (Figure 4). The MNSC has identified 36 pieces whose “probable origin” was the Olavarrieta Collection. If *Lot’s daughters* is added, as well as other pieces (*Calvario* [*Calvary*], copy of a work by Andrea Mantegna, *El niño dios con un cordero* [*The child God with a lamb*], copy of a work by Murillo, and *Galileo*, copy of a work by José de Ribera, el Españolito), identified from the interweaving of information from inventories and archival documents, there would be 40 pieces by Olavarrieta located in the museum’s collection.¹⁵

Before the establishment of art Academies, it is known that in the artists’ workshops, copies of the most important compositions were made to reach different clients; likewise, grantee Mexican ar-

¹⁴ This comment recalls Murillo’s caustic criticism of Julio Ruelas’ *El sueño de Athos* (*Athos’s dream*), considering it “a childish fantasy” with “false colors”, in “bad taste”, among other remarks. See: Murillo, 1906.

¹⁵ The records of the works in the MNSC collection generally date from the 1980s, although they have been supplemented over the years and the experience acquired in the proceedings. This number could increase (possibly double) with a documentary crossover between the Archive of the former Academy of San Carlos and the Centro Nacional de Conservación y Registro del Patrimonio Artístico Mueble (Cencropam, National Center for Conservation and Registration of Movable Artistic Heritage).

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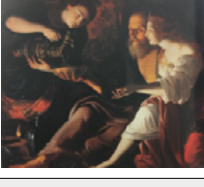

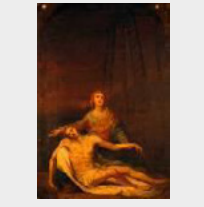


Photography in press of the time	Author	Title	Piece at the museum	Author	Name	SIGROA
	Tiziano	<i>Bacanal (Bacchanal)</i>		Unknow	<i>Bacanal (Bacchanal)</i>	15853
	Poussin	<i>Lot y sus hijas (Lot's daughters)</i>		Italian School, bolognese	<i>Lot y sus hijas (Lot's daughters)</i>	8243
	Girodet	<i>Lot y sus hijas (Lot's daughters)</i>		Girodet de Roucy-Trioson Montargis	<i>Lot y sus hijas (Lot's daughters)</i>	5626
	Delacroix	<i>Pietà</i>		No author	<i>Pietà</i>	9173
	Murillo	<i>La concepción (The Conception)</i>		Unknow	<i>La Purísima Concepción (The Purest Conception, copy by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo)</i>	8380

FIGURE 4. List of some pieces belonging to the Olavarrieta Collection, now in the National Museum of San Carlos (Table: Rebeca Barquera, 2021).

tists in Europe had to send copies of pieces deemed “masterpieces” so that they would be part of the teaching process at the Academy. Therefore, many of the works belonging to the Olavarrieta Collection are one of these two forms of “copy”; perhaps they lost their unique character, but they acquired historical value. In this sense, by identifying “copies” and “attributions” in the inventory, Gerardo Murillo was delimiting and promoting the specialization of his eye regarding European painting in its strokes, colors and authors, which would later lead him to catalog the Alberto J. Pani

Collection.¹⁶ Thus, in addition to the inventory and classification in pictorial schools, Murillo would restore the pieces and design the provisional placement of the important canvases in a suitable gallery. That is, he organized an exhibition.¹⁷

“OLAVARRIETA PICTURE GALLERY” IN THE GALLERIES OF THE ACADEMY

A photograph shows a group observing the pieces mounted on the walls. All men dressed in suits, some wearing hats. There is a joyful combination of colors on the walls: while one is painted white, another, next to it, has a dark hue. However, what is it that attracts the viewer’s attention? A mural painted in the frieze at the top of the dark wall (Figure 5), depicts five naked women in various positions. From right to left, one is fully frontal; another is seen from the side, with her right leg bent; the next is crouched with her arms loose; the following, also crouched, points with her left arm at the woman next to her, who has turned to the right. Behind them, a diagonal line is barely discernible, perhaps suggesting the silhouette of a mountain and some letters that are not quite distinguishable. The mural painting of nude women, allegories, is ignored in the photograph, by visitors to the exhibition. This mural painting may have been the first painted by Gerardo Murillo in Mexican territory. A composition expressly designed as part of the organization, made to accompany the exhibition.¹⁸

It was common to carry out decorations in the Academy of San Carlos galleries.¹⁹ For example, for the inauguration of the one that

¹⁶ The appraisal of the Pani Collection was carried out by Gerardo Murillo together with Roberto Montenegro, Diego Rivera and Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel, accompanied by the publication in 1921 of the *Catálogo de pinturas y dibujos de la Colección Pani (Catalog of paintings and drawings of the Pani Collection)* by the National University, carried out by Murillo, with a cover by Roberto Montenegro, which would end in the purchase of the collection by the Mexican State. See: Alberto J. Pani (2003, p. 75). Recently, in her master’s thesis in Visual Arts, Angélica Ortega studied the collection that today is part of the MNSC. See: Ortega, 2020.

¹⁷ For this work, Murillo received 4 177 pesos and the commission of Guillermo de Heredia, Félix Parra and Leandro Izaguirre reported on his work and authorized the payment in December 1908 (AGN, Ramo de Instrucción Pública, 1908, box 12, exp. 7).

¹⁸ In my doctoral thesis, I follow the mural exercises of Gerardo Murillo, from the ones he carried out in Europe, to this one in the Olavarrieta Picture Gallery, or those of the Antigo Colegio de San Pedro y San Pablo, at the moment in which José Vasconcelos consigned it as an Annex of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School). See: *Muralismo borrado. La irrupción de la vanguardia desde los muros del anexo de la preparatoria en el Antigo Colegio de San Pedro y San Pablo (Erased muralism. The irruption of the avant-garde from the walls of the annex of the high school in the Old College of San Pedro and San Pablo)*, 2022.

¹⁹ It should be noted that the use of the word decoration with a pejorative connotation became popular in European modernism, that is, at the beginning of the 20th century, with the so-called “artistic avant-garde”. They argued that the decorative

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FIGURE 5.
Photograph of the
Olavarrieta Picture
Gallery, with a mural
by Gerardo Murillo
in the background
(Source: *Arte y
letras*, February
14, 1909, p. 13.
Hemeroteca
Nacional de México).



bears the name of Clavé (Galería de la Moderna Escuela Mexicana [Gallery of the Modern Mexican School]), Ramón Sagredo was appointed to paint its panels with portraits of 24 prominent figures in the arts and sciences, such as Archimedes, Euclid, Brunelleschi, Cimabue, Giotto, Michelangelo, Humboldt, Overbeck, Galileo, Newton, Velázquez, Murillo, among others. In the same way, eight important figures for the founding process of the Academy were chosen to be placed on the ceiling of the Centennial Gallery, portrayed by Manuel Ocaranza and Antonio Joaquín Pérez. The paintings would be accompanied by medallions with allegories of painting and engraving, for which José Obregón was appointed and for those of architecture and sculpture by Petronilo Monroy, all of them probably supervised by the painting professor at that time, Santiago Rebull.²⁰

It is not surprising that Murillo wanted to decorate the gallery where he was going to hold his exhibition. A mural painting with a theme: an offering to Ruiz Olavarrieta as a patron of the arts. This was, certainly, an opportunity to make his own artistic proposal, to show his vision of form and color. Thus, sometimes the press calls it “Pinacoteca Olavarrieta” (“Olavarrieta Picture-Gallery”), be-

had a “feminine” and “domestic” connotation; that is, this reading implies the use of a patriarchal visual language. In this context (modernist Mexican art prior to muralism), the artists understood “decoration” and “the decorative” from their association with the synthesis of form, symbolic correspondences, and the intimate relationship of the piece with its spatial and architectural context.

²⁰ It is recommended to see the photographs of the galleries and their decorations, compiled in the book *Historia gráfica. Fotografías de la Academia de San Carlos 1897-1940* (*Graphic history. Photographs of the Academy of San Carlos 1897-1940*) (Fuentes, 2018).

cause of its quality as a place for the exhibition of pictorial works, and in others “Salón or Galería Olavarrieta”, as if it were a specific place within the organization of the Academy building. In this way, it seems that the exhibition was set up in the Landscape and European Painting galleries, located on the east side of the first floor of the building, where “the decoration and installation works were being carried out with great activity, in which the greatest taste and the most successful artistic direction preside over” (Exposición de San Carlos, 1908, p. 3).

Thus, those works mention the making of the mural and the arrangement of the pieces on the walls: “[...] most of the paintings are not of great interest; and it is fair to say, that there are 23 works of great merit” (La Gran Colección [...], 1909, p. 12). In the photograph mentioned above, some of the works selected for the exhibition can be seen, mounted following a single line and leaving enough space between them, which leads one to think of a modern assembly that sought individual appreciation of the works, as opposed to clutter, which was common in the galleries and salons of the Academy.

At that time, “[the] collection of paintings from our Academy of Fine Arts [...]” was considered “poor and rickety” (Nuestros grabados, 1909, p. 12), to which only the 23 paintings chosen by Murillo would be added. There is another photograph in which more than twenty paintings can be seen, some hanging on the wall, others on the floor, facing each other, which are named *Desechos del Legado Olavarrieta (Rubbish from Olavarrieta’s Heritage)* (La Gran Colección [...], 1909, p. 12); but that rubbish was also observed by visitors to the Academy and was possibly for sale.

Murillo explained: “There are certain works which at first glance, and after long analysis, reveal in all their components their indisputable origin, from the quality of the canvas to the last brushstroke, which becomes, clearer the more it is observed” (Murillo, 1909, p. 14), a phrase with which he tries to describe his procedure for selecting and cataloging the pieces, based on meticulous observation and careful evaluation. Therefore, after this work, Murillo was commissioned to make a selection of the paintings kept in the old warehouse of the ENBA, which would dictate what deserves to be preserved to form “[...] a retrospective art gallery” (Gacetilla, 1908, p. 3).

THE REMAINS OF A PICTORIAL SHIPWRECK. FINAL THOUGHTS

The configuration of the galleries and collections of the San Carlos Academy was a process that has been going on since Gerónimo

Antonio Gil founded the institution, which came to be systematized thanks to the deals, transactions and initiatives by José Bernardo Couto in the middle of the 19th century. The master painter Pelegrín Clavé was responsible for supervising the restoration work on the pieces selected to make up the collections of the “Ancient and Modern Mexican School” as well as those that, over the years, through donations, purchases or, mainly, due to the reception of copies made by the grantee artists in Europe, they had formed the collection of the “European Schools”.²¹

After this management, interest in maintaining the pieces seemed to diminish, and although the restoration work continued, it was carried out and supervised mainly by the painter and photographer Efigenio Caboni and the master painter José Salomé Pina. At the beginning of the 20th century, Manuel G. Revilla was entrusted with a catalog of the pieces of the Academy, which he later produced with the collaboration of José Salomé Pina and José Juan Tablada.²²

However, it was Gerardo Murillo’s 1908 “Report on the selection of the paintings kept in the old ENBA storehouse”, that opened the century with a strong position on conservation, considering that these stored works “[...] are the ‘debris’ that has slowly deposited the aesthetic criteria of all those in the Academy of San Carlos who were responsible for selecting the paintings for the art gallery and never, before the judgment of anyone, have these works been valued” (Báez, 1993, p. 120); that is, for the artist, the need to keep everything that arrived was more powerful than generating selection criteria and restoration programs, to the point that the pieces seemed, writes Murillo, “remains of the pictorial shipwreck” that owed its permanence more to the negligence of the authorities than to its pictorial quality. For him, there was only one “passable” work among the 246 “monstrosities” stored. Most of them belonged to the old Mexican school, although there were also pieces from the Flamenco and Spanish schools. Almost all of them, he said, were in very poor condition and not even worth selling, as it would look like a “junk bazaar”.

²¹ A detailed study of the phenomenon is needed. For the moment I have identified the documents in the guides made by Eduardo Báez, to, in a second moment, delve into the management and conservation of the art collections exhibited in the galleries and stored in the Academy’s warehouses.

²² Receipts from Manuel G. Revilla for the amount paid to make the catalog raisonné of the existing works of art in the School (AAASC, 1903a, folder 11262) and Official Letter from the Ministry of Justice and Public Instruction on the payment of 50 pesos to each, January 6, 1903 (AAASC, 1903b, folder 11215). The manuscript of this catalog was found in the General Archive of the Nation and published in number 9 of the magazine *Cuadernos de Arquitectura y Conservación del Patrimonio Artístico*, entitled “La escultura del siglo xx”, 1980.

The need for space was urgent, as the collections continued to grow. The European works in the Olavarrieta Collection and the European Painting Gallery were soon complemented with “exemplars of the contemporary Spanish school that was not represented” (Carrillo y Gariel, 1944, p. 56) and that would come from Government acquisitions to the Spanish Central Board of the Centennial in the Porfirio Díaz’s celebrations of the 100 years of the Independence of Mexico.

In the same way, it is important to consider that Murillo’s judgments about the collections of the San Carlos Academy and the Olavarrieta legacy gave him the possibility, the following year, to ask Justo Sierra to organize an exhibition of Mexican art to celebrate the centenary, as a response to the Spanish celebrations. This exhibition would be one of the key moments in the expansion of the modern art collections of the Academy, as well as in the acquisition and promotion of national art.

Finally, after these reports, important decisions were made at the Academy, such as that of transferring some pieces to museums in the interior of the Republic, selling some to individuals, and destroying some others. The classification and exhibition of the Olavarrieta Collection and the role of Gerardo Murillo as curator made it possible to establish an approach to the Academy’s collections, closely related to the emergence of State museums, including the National Museum of San Carlos. How far to preserve, restore and remember is a political problem that, is posed by an institution such as the Academia de San Carlos, and a donation, like that of Alejandro Ruiz Olavarrieta, can be an entryway to understanding the configuration of what we today consider the cultural heritage of the Mexican state.

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