

# Investig@rte: the national network of art libraries in Mexico\*

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Mexican art, dating back to 2500 BC, is enormously rich and stylistically varied, the product of the country's indigenous, 'mestizo' [mixed race] and Mexican cultures, which range from Olmec, Teotihuacan, Zapotec and Mixtec, to Mayan and Aztec. During the colonial period, the influence of European art was added, brought via Spain, and at the same time Catholicism prevailed over pre-Hispanic polytheism. Mexican culture as it is known today emerged at the end of the Spanish colonial period and its wealth is amply demonstrated in the content of the writings and other documents found in Mexican libraries today.

*English version by Gillian Varley and Alison Minns*

## Investig@rte: aim and priorities

To promote the richness of Mexican culture, art librarians in this country propose to create a national network of art libraries, whose activities could be managed by the revived Art Section of the Asociación Mexicana de Bibliotecarios, A.C. Mexico City's 100 libraries and collections of documents on Mexican art would form the basis of this network, which would include libraries with collections on the visual arts, architecture, literature, theatre, music and dance.

The first priorities are

- to re-establish the art section of the Asociación Mexicana de Bibliotecarios (AMBAC)
- to draw up the parameters for the network
- to study and analyse other art library networks, such as the Vitruvio network in Argentina<sup>1</sup>
- to expand the existing directory of Mexican art libraries and document collections
- to establish guidelines for running the network.

Several of the elements for this project already exist, namely the directory of Mexican libraries and art collections on the Mex@arte website; the

Méxicoarte database on Mexican plastic arts and architecture; the controlled vocabulary generated from that database; and the Pепенar union catalogue of periodicals on Latin American art and architecture.

It is proposed that the network be called Investig@rte.

## *The directory of libraries*

This directory lists Mexican art libraries with collections that include books, journals, manuscripts and archives, in both print and electronic format.

The concept of a library has been continually redefined throughout history. During the 17th century a library meant not only the place but also the book. I am referring here to the concept of a 'library' as envisaged by a group of scholars, researchers and writers whose analysis was published in the journal *Artes de México*<sup>2</sup> in a special issue devoted to the Palafoxiana Library in the city of Puebla, the broad universal knowledge contained in its books and the artistic wealth of their bindings, typography and illustrations. In this issue Margarita de Orellana sees the library as a huge banquet awaiting the diners (researchers) who look forward



National Library, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)

Photo: Lourdes Cruz

to a great feast, and as a paradise where any editor, designer, illustrator or printer can leave their professional mark in all manner of ways. Alfonso Alfaro echoes the above view by discussing the book as an art object: examples are those true works of art, the legal patents of nobility in the National Library; the items that form the collection of the Franz Mayer Museum Library and those of the library of the Mexican History Research Centre CONDUMEX; the Mexican and European incunabula in those same libraries; or the 'book-object' [libro-objeto] 'where reading combines with artistic endeavour to create an object', such as those exhibited at the Central Library of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). In the same issue Roger Chartier talks of the need to organise all this wisdom effectively to ensure efficient retrieval. Alberto Manuel, referring to the Library of Alexandria, asserts that familiarity with the written word introduced that town's citizens to the habit of reading.

Our directory of art libraries, then, is an invitation to the paradise that is a library; an invitation to devour the pages of its books, to become an avid reader, to rejoice in their art, to accept or reject theories, to encounter the dead as if they had come to life, to defend the book, as Umberto Eco urges in

the same issue of *Artes de México*, because the book is a fragile being, deteriorating with time, prone to destruction by rodents and suffering in inexpert hands. This cultural heritage has inspired learning, knowledge, reflection, inspiration, satisfaction and aesthetic pleasure for all those who visit libraries and enjoy their collections.

### *The Mex@rte web page*

The Mex@rte web page provides a bio-bibliographical guide with images and links. The menu includes

- libraries (information on the documentation collections in Mexico City)
- catalogues (direct access to online library catalogues)
- the pre-Hispanic era and its preclassic, classic and postclassic periods (approximately 4000 years)
- the colonial or Viceregal period, representing 300 years of Spanish conquest and rule; this was also a period in which the indigenous population reasserted its authority, transforming and enriching the styles of the European Renaissance and Baroque

- the modern period (179 years of Mexican independence), when scientific discoveries were making possible the analysis of the natural world and when painting found its national voice
- the contemporary period, when over 2000 artists engage not only in Mexican muralism but also in other artistic endeavours, either in groups or individually.

### *The Méxicoarte database*

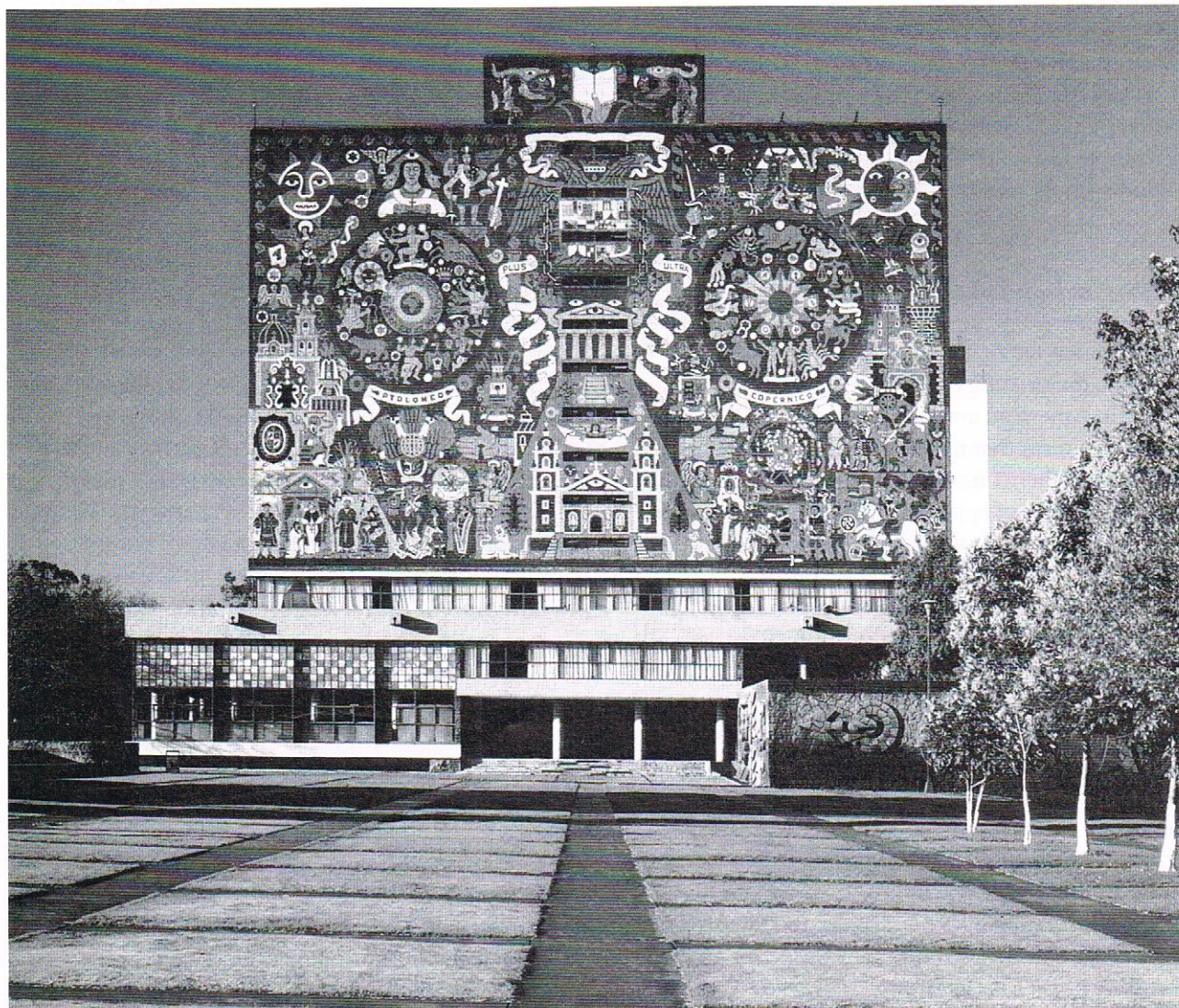
The aim of this database, which is on the web page of UNAM's Libraries Department, is to provide information about Mexican plastic arts and architecture, and it is supported by an information infrastructure which can be used for methodological research in these disciplines. The Méxicoarte database also aims to contribute to the spread of

knowledge about Mexican art through its incorporation into the major information systems dealing with this specialism.

There are currently some 4800 records, linking information on art from the pre-Hispanic, colonial, modern and contemporary periods to that on Mexican plastic arts and architecture. The database also contains one full-text journal (*Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*<sup>3</sup>) and tables of contents.

The methodology for setting up the database involved both print and electronic resources: seventeen bibliographical indexes, six directories, three catalogues and a dictionary were located, reviewed and analysed. The information was assembled and classified, resulting in a total of 7000 items arranged by subject, style (pre-Hispanic, colonial, modern and contemporary), medium (painting, sculpture, drawing, engraving, photography, architecture), author, title and source.

A controlled vocabulary was developed



The Central Library of UNAM.

Photo: Jimena Matecos

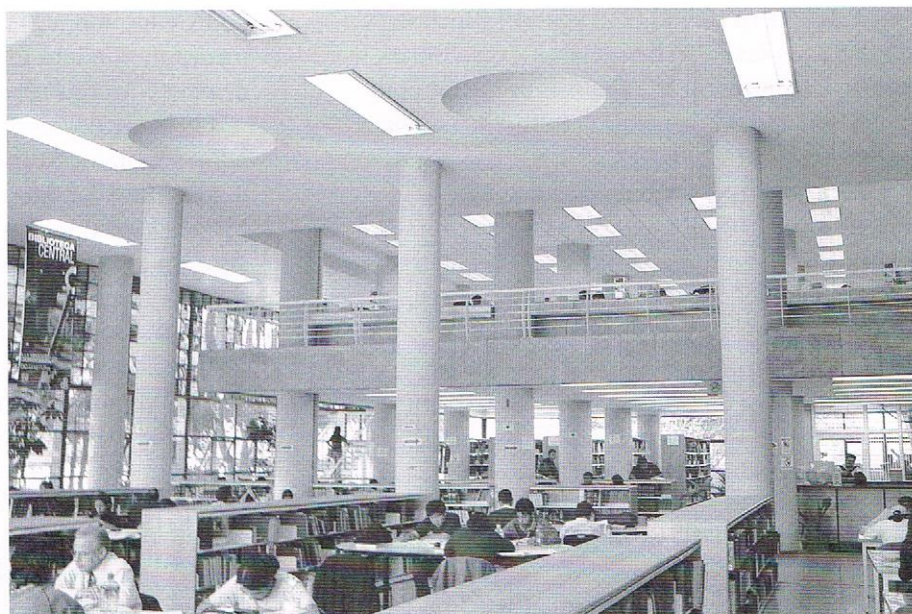
specifically for Méxicoarte, using the model of *Art index* and with similar aims to those of the Getty Foundation's thesaurus: to improve access to information about the plastic arts and architecture, and also to be of value as a cataloguing authority. It offers a structure and a classification scheme that are of great benefit in the documentation process.

The vocabulary can also serve as a search tool in natural language retrieval systems and is valuable for the richness of its content and the contextual knowledge it contains. Its semantic networks show the links and interconnections between concepts and thus ensure more effective retrieval. It contains 997 topics or descriptors and includes synonyms, related terms, geographical locations and 'see' and 'see also' references in an alphabetical sequence. It does include proper names.

### *Union catalogues of periodicals*

The planned national network will be able to use Pепенar, the existing union catalogue of periodicals on Latin American art and architecture. 'Pепенar' is a Mexican term that means to gather, choose or pick one or more items from a selection.<sup>4</sup> The catalogue contains details of approximately 400 titles held in Mexican libraries. It works in a similar way to library networks, by providing access to information, allowing users to select one or more items of data or themes from archives, libraries and museums, and enabling them to find the collection that is of most interest to them.

Another union catalogue which can be consulted online is Seriuam, which was compiled by the UNAM's Department of Libraries; the 219 current periodical titles, available on the website of UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, are an example of what one library can bring to the Investig@rte project. This site also includes links to the indices. A further addition to the project, from the same library, is the Bexart database, which contains records for 10,796 exhibition catalogues.



Electronic Reference Department, Central Library, UNAM.

Photo: Julio Zetter

## The Art Section of the Asociación Mexicana de Bibliotecarios A.C.

AMBAC, the association of Mexican librarians, has been active since 1954. The Art Section was established in 1984, and includes libraries and collections of documents on art and architecture. Forty such libraries and collections were invited to participate and their data were published in the *International directory of art libraries*, the online directory of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA).<sup>5</sup>

In 1992, the president of AMBAC requested that the section cover the arts in general (literature, theatre, music and dance), as well as the visual arts. It should now be possible to re-energise the enlarged Section, which has been inactive since 1992, through the project to create a network of Mexican art libraries.

The aims of the revived Art Section would be

- to encourage the use of art libraries and audiovisual resources as a source of information on the arts
- to foster research into new developments in art librarianship, documentation and audiovisual collections
- to revise and expand the directory of Mexican libraries with holdings on art
- to make contact with Mexican and international organisations with similar aims
- to promote continuing professional development among members, as well as to encourage the exchange of ideas and provide all aspects of technical support.

The Association's underlying goals of education and information can be achieved through conferences, seminars, round-tables, publications, web pages, chat-rooms, etc.

The activities of the Section in managing the national network would include

- maintaining up-to-date information in IFLA's *International directory of art libraries*
- refining the Mexicoarte database
- updating the directory of libraries and the links to their respective web pages
- continuing the expansion of the Pепенar union catalogue of periodicals
- indexing the new series of the journal *Artes de México* (nos. 1-34, 1988-1997) and including it in the Mexicoarte database
- running the Mex@rte web page for people searching for bibliographical information on Mexican plastic arts and architecture, and expanding the range of subjects covered
- compiling biographical information on approximately 2000 Mexican artists and sending it to the Union List of Artists' Names (ULAN) at the Getty Foundation
- developing the existing controlled vocabulary of terms used in the plastic arts and architecture
- developing a course in art librarianship as part of the post-graduate programme in librarianship at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, UNAM
- investigating the creation of a digital library.

Finally, the Art Section will promote Mexico's cultural and artistic richness, which is the fundamental aim of the whole project.

\* Revised version of paper presented to the Section of Art Libraries at the World Library and Information Congress, 70th IFLA General Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, August 2004.

## References

1. See Julieta Stramschak's article in this issue of the *Art libraries journal*.
2. *Artes de México* no. 68 2003.
3. The URL is <http://www.analesiee.unam.mx/>.
4. José G. Moreno de Alba. *Minucias del lenguaje*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992, p.223, 311.
5. <http://iberia.vassar.edu/ifla-idal/>.

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