From Mexican artists to the Soviet state: the story of an unwanted gift

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From Mexican Artists to the Soviet State
The Story of an Unwanted Gift[1]

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Introduction

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera got divorced on November 6th, 1939. It was a short-term separation: on August 8th, 1940 they renewed their marriage vows. Nevertheless, it was enough time for Frida to create several iconic pieces: *The Two Fridas* (1939), *The Dream* (1940), *Self-Portrait with Cut Hair* (1940), and *The Wounded Table* (1940). One of them, *The Wounded Table* (*La mesa herida*) (122x244 cm) became the largest painting ever created by the artist. Researchers attribute this quite unusual to the artist "gigantism" of the work to a desire to surpass the size of Diego Rivera's works as they were displayed at the same show, the *International Surrealist Exhibition* in 1940. After Mexico, the exhibition was successfully held in New York and upon returning from the United States, and until 1945 the painting was kept at the house of the artist, the famous Blue House (*La Casa Azul*) in Coyoacán, Mexico. In August 1945, Frida presented *The Wounded Table* to the Soviet Union. The last time it was seen, was in the exhibition of Mexican art in Warsaw in 1955 where it was sent from Moscow, and has since been considered lost.

For many years, this painting was the Holy Grail for many researchers and fans of Frida's art, and the topic was seductive enough to start my own research devoted to the issue. As the subject was not new, I decided to approach it from the other angle: my starting point were the questions about an initial intention of the donation, about people and institutions involved in this process and the reasons behind it.

The research started with a discovery of a body of documents related to the Mexican-Soviet cultural relation in The State Archive of Russian Federation (GARF)[2] and in The Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (AVP

[1] Acknowledgments: I would like to thank my generous and supportive friends: Nadya Sinyutina for her continuous encouragement and the advice she provided while proofreading my article, and Sani Kontula-Webb for her invaluable contributions to the English text.

[2] *Государственный архив Российской Федерации* (The State Archive of Russian Federation abbreviated – ГАРФ, GARF).

RF)[3] – the archives, where a major part of the documental collection from soviet official institutions could be found. Then by using a narrative and document-based retrospective reconstruction I attempted to retrace the history of the donation and recreate its chronology. I managed to find about thirty documents dated from 1946 to 1955 of different origin: official and diplomatic correspondence, extracts from diplomatic diaries, records and reports of Soviet organizations, responsible for the international cooperation which became the source base for the research.

The studies of Alexandr Sizonenko[4], Tatyana Chekova[5], Vladimir Savin[6] devoted to different aspects of the Soviet-Mexican cultural relations; works by Michal David-Fox[7], Aleksandr Golubev[8] and Nina Javorskaya[9] on the Soviet system of cultural display, as well as published official directives and articles about the Soviet art establishment of the 1930s-1950s[10] were helpful to reconstruct the context of the time and the connotations of an international art exchange in the Soviet Union in the 1940s and 1950s. Also important to

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[3] *Архив внешней политики Российской Федерации* (The Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation abbreviated – АВП РФ, AVP RF).

[4] Александр Сизоненко, "СССР и Латинская Америка во время Великой Отечественной воины", *Латиноамериканский исторический альманах*, no. 16, 2016, с. 141-148. (Alexander Sizonenko, "The USSR and Latin America during the Great Patriotic War", *Latin American historical miscellany*, no. 16, 2016, pp. 141-148.)

[5] Татьяна Чекова, *Становление и развитие российско-мексиканских культурных связей (1890-1968). Диссертация на соискание уч. ст. канд. ист. наук.* Самара, 2007. (Tatiana Chekova, *The Formation and Development of Russian-Mexican Cultural Relations (1890-1968). PHD dissertation,* Samara, 2007.)

[6] Владимир Савин, "Из истории культурного сотрудничества общественных организаций СССР и стран Латинской Америки", *Вестник РУДН. Сер. Международные отношения*, no. 1, 2001, с. 109-120. (Vladimir Savin, "From the History of Cultural Cooperation of Public Organizations of the USSR and the Countries of Latin America", *Bulletin of RUDN. International Relations Series*, no. 1, 2001, pp. 109-120.)

[7] Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941,* Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2011.

[8] Александр Голубев, *"...Взгляд на землю обетованную": из истории советской культурной дипломатии, 1920-1930-х годы*, Институт российской истории РАН, Москва, 2004. (Alexander Golubev, *"...A Glance at the Promised Land": The History of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy, 1920-1930 Years*, Institute of history of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 2004.)

[9] Нина Яворская, *История государственного музея нового западного искусства. Москва 1918-1948*, РИП-холдинг ГМИИ, Москва, 2012; *Idem, К истории международных связей государственного музея нового западного искусства*, М., Советский художник, 1978. (Nina Yavorskaya, *The History of The State Museum of New Western Art. Moscow 1918-1948*, Publishing house of the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, 2012; *Idem, The History of International Relations of the State Museum of New Western Art*, Soviet artist, Moscow, 1978.)

[10] *Против формализма и натурализма в искусстве*, ОГИЗ-ИЗОГИЗ, Москва, 1937 (*Against Formalism and Naturalism in Art*, OGIZ-IZOGIZ, Moscow, 1937.)

mention are publications by Helga Prigniz-Poda, devoted to the history of modern Mexican art and, in particular, to the life and work of Frida Kahlo[11].

During the research a story of one of the world's most famous Mexican lost painting turned into a story of dysfunction of the Soviet institutions for cultural exchange or rather the change of their function with the change of political discourse, and became a spectacular example of the soviet visual censorship. The evolution and the rise of this censorship is reflected in correspondence and protocols of the official meetings of Soviet cultural authorities related to the donation.

Mexican-Soviet Cultural Exchanges in the 1940s

The first and major document-based finding was that the unusual and generous gift made by Frida Kahlo was neither occasional nor unique. In 1945 she agreed to become a participant of a large art exchange program between Mexico and the Soviet Union. For the first time a concept of exchange was introduced in 1943 by the Soviet ambassador to Mexico Konstantin Umansky[12] and the initial idea of the project was to familiarize the Soviet public with Mexican visual arts by donating works of leading contemporary Mexican artists to a Soviet museum[13]. The plan was very unconventional and depended heavily on the personality of the ambassador.

After a twelve-year absence, the diplomatic relations between the USSR and Mexico were rebuilt in November 1942. Konstantin Umansky (1902-1945) became the first Soviet ambassador to Mexico after the twelve-year break. Young, fluent in several European languages, sociable and experienced as he served as a Soviet Ambassador to the USA in 1939-1941, Umansky was also well known to Stalin, to whom he translated conversations with foreign guests on several occasions. He was specifically chosen for this job as Latin America and Mexico in particular were viewed as a very important and promising area of diplomatic work for Soviet Union at those times.

In 1943 Umansky arrived to Mexico City where on June 22nd he presented credentials and a personal message from Josef Stalin to Manuel Ávila Camacho, President of Mexico. The Soviet diplomatic work in Mexico started from a zero level, with no connections with a local community or help from predecessors, but Umansky believed that there was a way to establish business

[11] Helga Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo: The Painter and Her Work*, Prestel Pub, New York-London, 2010; *Idem*, *Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: Mexican Modern Art*, Skira Rizzoli, New York, 2015.

[12] Konstantin Umansky (1902-1945) – Soviet ambassador to Mexico in the period 1943-1945.

[13] AVP RF f. 182 op. 2 p. 11 d. 46 list 13.

and friendly relations with leading political and public figures of the country by means of intensive personal contacts. He soon got close to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and to the Military minister, the minister of Education and to the President Camacho as well. Artists and writers were especially welcomed in the Soviet Embassy in those times, and muralist Diego Rivera and writer José Mancisidor, renowned leaders of Mexican cultural circles, were frequent guests at the Embassy. Umansky used all the possible opportunities to promote the Soviet Union and its values: a journalist in the past, in the 1920s, he started a magazine called *The Bulletin of the Soviet Embassy*. He contributed vastly to the organization of a photography exhibition, *Russia at War* in Mexico City, and to the performance of *The Seventh Symphony* by Dmitry Shostakovich, etc. Estimating the work of Umansky in Mexico many years later the newspaper *Excelsior* reasonably noted: "Umansky opened a new era in local diplomatic activities... Many foreign diplomats have to admit that they lived in the diplomatic world of Umansky"[14].

The ambassador started direct negotiations with the leaders of the Mexican art scene and later with the Institute of Mexican-Russian cultural exchange (*Instituto de Intercambio Cultural Mexicano-Russo*, abbreviated MRI), a public organization founded on March, 14th in 1944 by the prominent culture and art figures of Mexico to intensify Mexican-Russian cultural contacts.

The idea of introducing contemporary Mexican art to the Soviet public had the most promising preconditions: on July the 27th of 1943 the *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* (*Всероссийское общество культурной связи с заграницей*, abbreviated VOKS), in a letter to its representative in Mexico, noted that the section of the Soviet painters and sculptors of VOKS organized an exhibition of Mexican art posters and it received great attention from the Moscow public. Members of the section expressed a desire to get acquainted with the contemporary art of Mexico and requested that more Mexican art should be sent to Moscow[15].

The Role of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS)

The *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* (VOKS) was a key institution for Soviet cultural diplomacy in the mid-1920s to

[14] Александр Сизоненко, "СССР и Латинская Америка…cit.", с. 144. (Alexander Sizonenko, "The USSR and Latin America…cit.", p. 144.)

[15] Владимир Савин, "Из истории культурного сотрудничества общественных организаций СССР…cit.", с. 117. (Vladimir Savin, "From the History of Cultural Cooperation of Public Organizations of the USSR…cit.", p. 117.)

1950s, which controlled and conducted all Soviet international cultural contacts. Created in 1925 as a public association with a large number of members (there were state cultural institutions, state executive organizations, as well as prominent figures of art and science as founding members), in fact it was the state organization to manage all kinds of cultural relations with foreign states and to coordinate this work at the scale of the whole country. The Society had the right to directly contact overseas cultural institutions and individuals, such as writers, artists, librarians, journalists, and scientists, and had its own permanent representatives abroad for this purpose. These representatives worked closely with a local Soviet diplomatic corpus, but were able to act independently within the cultural field. Another essential element of the VOKS's structure was the referent's office, which had the duty to identify individuals, organizations, and institutions able to become influence agents to transfer the Soviet cultural and ideological impact abroad.

The *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* had a thematic and a geographic division: for example, contacts with Mexico were overseen by the American Department, which managed the interconnections with all countries both in Northern and Southern American continents and at the same time in the 1920s and 1930s VOKS had an Exhibition Department, in the 1930s-1950s an Art Department, and in the late 1940s a department of Soviet culture had been established, while the Art Department became one of its divisions[16]. The head office of the organization was located in Moscow, but it also had several local branches in the largest Soviet cities such as Leningrad, Khar'kov, etc. The field of VOKS activity was enormously vast and included all possible spheres of influence within the cultural field: it dealt with libraries, museums, concert halls, botanical gardens; operated an international network of friendship societies; oversaw contacts with publishing houses and traveling international exhibitions; prepared visits of the leading Soviet specialists abroad and produced special programmes for visits of foreign writers, artists, musicians and directors to the USSR; organized books exchanges in cultural and scientific spheres on the state and institutional levels etc. Mostly this wealth of information and tremendous efforts were addressed to the Western capitalist world: the presentation of Soviet scientific, cultural and artistic achievements was an important part of teaching foreigners to understand Soviet reality. In words of a first chairwoman Olga Kameneva[17] the main activities of VOKS was:

[16] Александр Голубев, *"...Взгляд на землю обетованную"*…cit., с. 103. (Alexander Golubev, *"...A Glance at the Promised Land"*…cit., p. 103.)

[17] Olga Kameneva (1883-1941) was a chairwoman of the *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* in the period 1925 to 1929.

> "to organize the dissemination of the proper information among the intellectuals, as they play a dominant role in the bourgeois countries . It is the mouthpiece of public opinion, or it creates public opinion through the press. It is among the intellectuals we need to spread information about the advantages of socialist culture, that is not suffering from the policy of the Bolsheviks, but moreover blossoming, because of our using of positive experience of pre-revolutionary culture"[18].

Or, as it was reported in one of the official documents of 1926, "in the political part of its work in capitalist countries VOKS is organizing public opinion in favor of the Soviet Union"[19]. The best-known part of this work was the coordination of a number of visits of western writers to the USSR in the 1930s: Herbert George Wells, Bernard Shaw, Romain Rolland, André Gide, Lion Feuchtwanger were among them. This cultural export policy was at play up to the time of the dissolution of the Society in 1958 and its replacement by a new one known as the *Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* (Союз Советских Обществ Дружбы, abbreviated ССОД, SSOD).

Reconstructing the Sending of Mexican Art to the Soviet Union

When the Soviet Ambassador to Mexico was collecting works from artists who agreed to present them to the Soviet state, and when VOKS was handling a request for Mexican art from soviet art professionals all seemed to be a miraculous exception, and at the same time "a marriage made in heaven". Unfortunately this project was not to be finished by Konstantin Umansky. In 1945, on January 25th Umansky died together with his spouse in a plane crash while officially visiting Costa Rica where he was appointed Soviet Ambassador from 1944.

Only ten months later, after the inauguration of the new Soviet Ambassador to Mexico Alexander Kapustin, on October 10th 1945 the Soviet diplomats prepared a draft letter to thank the artists who expressed the willingness to donate their artworks:

> "Dear sir, the Institute of Mexican-Russian cultural exchange, a society formed by prominent Mexican intellectuals and artists seeking to glorify the most outstanding aspects of the Mexican culture in the country, turned to me and announced that you have shown sensitivity and generosity and expressed a desire to present one of your paintings to the collection of Mexican art that will be exhibited in the art museums

[18] Александр Голубев, *"...Взгляд на землю обетованную"*…cit., c. 104 (Alexander Golubev, *"...A Glance at the Promised Land"*…cit., p. 104.)

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 105.

> of the Soviet Union. Thank you very much for your treasurable donation. I hope that the spiritual connection between Mexico and my country will be strengthened this way. Alexander N. Kapustin"[20].

In a mailing list for this letter the following artists were included: Dolores Cueto, Ignacio Aguirre, Raul Anguiano, Frida Kahlo, Arturo García Bustos, Luis Arenal, Angela Cervantes, the widow of the artist Joaquin de Clausell, Olga Costa, Isidoro Ocampo, and Francisco Mora[21].

Two months before the official letter of the Soviet authorities, on the 16th of August 1945, a letter of thanks to Frida Kahlo was sent by Samuel Vasconcelos from the *Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange*. Also on September 13th, 1945, he had issued a receipt for the painting *The Wounded Table* on behalf of the Institute. Interestingly, this text goes:

> "…received from senora Frida Kahlo a painting in the frame, the size of 2.45x1.20 titled *The Wounded Table*, which will be sent to the USSR to be kept in the Mexico Hall at the Museum of New Western Art in Moscow. If for some reason this painting is not taken, it will be returned to the sender in excellent condition"[22].

It is important to clarify the role of *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange* in the system of Soviet-Mexican cultural relations. *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange* or *The Mexican-Russian Institute (MRI)* was a public organization founded on March 14th, 1944 by the prominent culture and art figures of Mexico. Its main goal was to acquaint Mexicans with Russian culture and the USSR citizens with the Mexican culture. Within this very broad field, the Institute was active in many directions: publishing the magazine *Soviet Culture*, organizing photo exhibitions, lectures and film screenings about life in the USSR, spreading books of Russian and Soviet writers. At the beginning of *The Institute's* work it didn't receive Soviet subsidies and was funded as a public society by the donations from individual and collective members (among whom were such major organizations as the Mexican national Bank and the Association of sugar producers), and was also supported by the Mexican government. But the situation changed in less than four years and by 1948 the Institute was fully and openly funded by the Soviet authorities through the Soviet Embassy in Mexico and by this time its role was similar to the roles of other "foreign societies of friendship" managed by the *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* to act like a local office of VOKS and spread pre-approved information about USSR in a severe propagandist style[23]. After the premature death of Konstantin Umansky,

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[20] AVP RF f. 182 op. 1 p. 3 d. 9 list 43.
[21] *Ibidem*.
[22] A copy of the letter was provided by the Embassy of Mexico to Russia.
[23] AVP RF Referentura po Meksike, op. 29 p. 111 d. 800/ме. list 61.

MRI led the project and became a mediator between artistic community and the Soviet diplomatic corpus.

Since the first testimonial letter to artists had been sent, it took almost two years to collect and to transfer all promised works from artists to *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange.* On March, 19th, 1947 Samuel Vasconselos, a secretary of *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange*, sent a note to the Soviet ambassador Alexander Kapustin transferring a number of works of Mexican artists to the Soviet authorities:

> "I am hereby handing over to you several paintings, prints and photographs, which were graciously presented by the outstanding Mexican artists, with the mediation of the Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange, for the Museum of New Western Art in Moscow, in order to become permanent exhibits there, representing Mexican visual arts. […]
>
> The following artists gave their works:
>
> Paintings: Ignacio Aguirre, Raul Anguiano, Luis Arenal, Joaquin Clausell, by courtesy of Angela Cervantes, widow of Joaquin Clausell, Olga Costa, Lola Cueto, Jose Chávez Morado, Francisco Dosamantes, Arturo Garcia Bustos, Frida Kahlo, Isidoro Ocampo, Carlos Orozco Romero y Francisco Mora.
>
> Graphics: Ignacio Aguirre, Raul Anguiano, Luis Arenal, Alberto Beltran, Angel Bracho, Fernando Pacheco, Francisco Dosamantes, Jesus Escobedo, Arturo Garcia Bustos, Leopoldo Mendez, Francisco Mora, Isidoro Ocampo, Pablo O'Higgins, Jose Maria Guadalupe Posada, by courtesy of his descendant Blas Venegas Arroyo, Julio Prieto, Everardo Ramirez, Ramon Sosa-Montes and Alfredo Zalce.
>
> Photography: Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Doris Heyden de Alvarez Bravo"[24].

This document is of great importance for establishing the main actors of this donation. As it could be seen a leading role of *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange* as a mediator and a negotiator is substantiated, while *The Museum of New Western Art* in Moscow was expected to be the hosting venue of the imminent show.

The State Museum of New Western Art[25] was founded in 1923 in Moscow, after the association of *The First Museum of Modern Western Painting* (based on the nationalized collection of Sergey Shchukin) and of *The Second Museum of Modern Western Painting* (based on the nationalized collection of Ivan Morozov). Sergey Shchukin and Ivan Morozov were world known Russian (or, more concrete, Moscow) collectors of Western European, mainly French, paintings and sculptures of the 1860s-1910s, and both owned many outstanding pieces by Édouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Camille Pissarro, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and

[24] AVP RF f. 182. op. 2 p. 11 d. 46. list 13.

[25] Государственный музей нового западного искусства (*The State Museum of New Western Art*, abbreviated ГМНЗИ, GMNZI).

Auguste Rodin. After the amalgamation of the collections, the head of the museum Boris Ternovets[26] did a lot for the new acquisitions to enter the museum inventory, for example in the late 1920s he added a new vast collection of modern Italian art (i. e. *Italian Room*) to the museum. Since the revolution and through the 1920s *The State Museum of New Western Art* was the only institution in the Soviet Union professionally working with the visual modern art and living artists and the only museum that had a collection of modern art of the top class. In 1930-1931 *The State Hermitage Museum* in Leningrad[27] received 79 works from the collection *The State Museum of New Western Art* and immediately put it into display as a permanent modern art collection show. *The Hermitage* also attempted to create a *Room for Contemporary Art* in 1932, an exhibition space connected to a modern art collection with the intention to show up-to-date art regularly[28]. Unfortunately this initiative did not live long, it did not survive the turn of the 1940s. Thus, by the 1940s *The State Museum of New Western Art* was the only possible partner for a forthcoming donation. Therefore, "The Mexico Hall at the Museum of New Western Art in Moscow" promised to Frida Kahlo in the letter from Samuel Vasconselos was not an empty promise or something abstract or improbable, but the only one realistic option at that moment.

The list of artists mentioned in a letter[29] was very cohesive and truly breathtaking. Obviously almost all referenced artists were influenced by leftist ideas and/or socially engaged, most of them were involved into the antifascist movement in late 1930s-1940s and were renowned social justice warriors, using their art to spread ideas and fight against poverty, injustice, violation of the civil rights, fascism. Mexican art of the 1940s political content and up-to-date social dedication of the artists were the most common feature. In the 1930s most of the active and progressive artists were united under the umbrella of *Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios* (LEAR)[30] and then of the *Taller de Grafica Popular* (TGP)[31], which were famous leftists artistic unions of the time. At the same time, this list spans across several generations of artists and includes: works of a famous political printmaker, engraver and cartoonist Jose Maria Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913), who inspired all socially engaged Mexican artists of the XXth century; works of a most prominent Mexican impressionist Joaquin Clausell (1866-1935) that were given by inheritors; and

[26] Boris Ternovets (1884-1941) was a director of The State museum of New Western Art in 1923-1937.

[27] St. Petersburg was renamed into Petrograd in 1914 and then into Leningrad in 1923, in 1991 the city became St. Petersburg again.

[28] Katarina Lopatkina, "The Room of Contemporary Art in the State Hermitage from 1932-1937", *Hermitage Magazine*, no. 23, 2016, pp. 22-26.

[29] AVP RF Referentura po Meksike, op. 29 p. 111 d. 800/ме. list 61.

[30] League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (abbreviated LEAR)

[31] People's Graphic Workshop (abbreviated TGP)

works of the 19-year old painter and graphic artist Arturo Garcia Bustos (1926-2017), one of "Los Fridos"[32] who became involved due to Frida's influence and her own participation in the project. A wide age spectrum, the variety of artistic approaches (realists, surrealists, impressionists, folk art related) and techniques (painting, graphics, photography) of the named artists gave the opportunity to introduce to Soviet viewers the Mexican art scene of the first half of the XXth century in its full diversity.

Nevertheless, despite of artists' leftist sympathies and serious diplomatic support, the entire project existed and evolved as a great exception from the common rules. As I showed above, importing any kind of cultural objects or activities to the Soviet Union was not the main purpose of the *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* (VOKS) from the very beginning of its existing, so exhibitions of foreign artists were a by-product of cultural communication, often being treated as a diplomatic advance to one of the foreign "societies of friendship" for the forthcoming exhibition of Soviet artists abroad[33]. At the same time, it should be stressed out that the organization of the exhibition exchanges or/and donations of the artworks was (and still is) far more complicated and expensive than for example book exchanges, or even movie screenings, and the Soviet government in general was not interested in such activities or in the increase of the financial pressure. The matter was complicated by an ideological factor. In the early 1930s VOKS started officially using a rhetoric of "protection from destructive capitalist intervention"[34] which gradually yet quickly became dominant. In this period any kind of work or contacts with foreigners were deemed dangerous and contagious, so even just working in VOKS became extremely unsafe: in 1931 VOKS' employees were accused of "uncritical revival of communication" and "careless handling of the parcels from abroad", which was considered as an assistance to the intelligence activities of hostile countries. In the meantime VOKS was supposed to become a "filtering and controlling" organisation for foreign "alien cultures"[35]. In the late 1940s the situation had only worsened. Surprisingly, not only was the idea of Konstantin Umansky supported, it outlived him, and despite all difficulties, after several years, it was finally carried out, perhaps thanks to a major contribution to the work and (possible) financial support by the *Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange*.

While negotiations were conducted, the Mexican government made its best to submit and guarantee the space for Mexican art in Moscow: on July 21st,

[32] Narrow group of Frida Kahlo students.

[33] Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2011. p. 279.

[34] *Ibidem*.

[35] *Ibidem*.

1947 the head of VOKS, Vladimir Kemenov received a visit from the Ambassador of Mexico to the USSR Luciano José Joublanc Rivas, who expressed his desire to organize an exhibition of Mexican artists in Moscow. In the working diary Vladimir Kemenov wrote on this day:

> "I replied that this is an interesting proposition, but to implement it now is difficult due to the lack of available exhibition spaces. I added that we already have several exhibitions in line to show and with each of them we are dealing with difficulties of this kind. It took some time to organize the Yugoslavian exhibition, and it was to VOKS's benefit that the Museum of Fine Arts had an unoccupied hall. Before the war, this kind of exhibitions were shown at the State Museum of New Western Art, which is now under reconstruction after damages caused by the war time air raids. When this Museum is reopened, we will be able to return to this discussion"[36].

Separately I would like to draw attention to how notably Vladimir Kemenov, the Head of VOKS, was uninformed on the Mexican donation: he found an exhibition to be an interesting proposition but an impossible project, and not a word was dropped about the collection gathered in Mexico.

Though 26 names were mentioned in a letter of Samuel Vasconselos to ambassador Alexander Kapustin, in December of 1947 it was reported that 19 works of Mexican artists arrived in Moscow[37]. *The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* became a host party, not *The State Museum of New Western Art*. As it was mentioned in Kemenov's statement in June 1947, the museum was "under reconstruction after damages caused by the war time air raids"[38] and what was more important, but never openly declared, the museum has been closed for the public for ideological reasons through the period 1946 to 1947. Curators were carrying out research, designing concepts of new exhibitions, and all the paintings, drawings and sculptures were kept packed and stored. By 1948, *The Room of Mexican Art* at the Museum did not exist and there are is evidence that the work on it was in progress[39]. Moreover, on March 6th, 1948, an order to disband the museum was issued as the museum was expected to be "a hothouse of servility to the decadent bourgeois culture", its collection was divided between *The Pushkin Fine Art Museum* and *The State Hermitage Museum*[40].

Thus it was VOKS and its employees who were responsible for the fate of the newly arrived Mexican art collection. Unfortunately, as VOKSs head office was not previously involved into correspondence with *The Institute of*

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[36] AVP RF Referentura po Meksike, op. 22 p. 108 d. 800/ме, list 21.
[37] GARF f. 5283 op. 22 d. 193 t. 1 list 45.
[38] AVP RF Referentura po Meksike, op. 22 p. 108 d. 800/ме, list 21.
[39] Нина Яворская, *История государственного музея нового западного искусства*...cit., с. 415. (Nina Yavorskaya, *The History of The State Museum of New Western Art*…cit., p. 415.)
[40] *Ibidem*, p. 430.

Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange on this topic and no documents were enclosed into shipped artworks, the identification of works and even understanding of the fact of the donation turned into a very difficult and contradictory process. After receiving the artworks, the American Department of VOKS was obliged to manage them, so a head of the department Ivan Khmarsky prepared a memorandum to the chairman of VOKS Vladimir Kemenov with his own suggestions for the further work. He wrote:

> "A collection of Mexican paintings and drawings that arrived from Mexico to VOKS, was sent by *Mexican-Russian Institute of Cultural Exchange* for the further transfer to the *State Museum of New Western Art*. Most of the received works are samples of a decaying bourgeois formalist art. Among graphic works, some are done realistically; two prints are devoted to a criticism of American imperialism. VOKS has not received any profiles of Mexican artists who sent their work to Moscow or the titles of the works. We only know that the graphic works are mostly provided by the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* – left-progressive union of the Mexican graphic artists.
>
> I deem necessary:
>
> 1. To request a telegram with profiles of the artists and the exhibition catalogue.
> 2. To organize a viewing of Mexican paintings and drawings at the meeting of Fine art VOKS section.
> 3. To publish in the newspaper *Soviet Art* or in the magazine *Art* prints devoted to criticism of American imperialism and to provide in these periodicals brief information about submitted works.
> 4. To send the works to the *Western Art Museum.*
> 5. To send a letter to the *Mexican-Russian Institute* from the Fine Arts section of VOKS to thank them for the gift, point out the best works, criticize degenerative pieces and to present point of view of Soviet people on a public works of art.
> 6. To send an article to the magazine of *Mexican-Russian Institute* devoted to the All-Union Art Exhibition in Moscow and series of photographs of the best works of Soviet art"[41].

Also, Ivan Khmarsky sent a message to the representative of VOKS in Mexico on March, 24th of 1948:

> "In December 1947, a collection of paintings by Mexican artists sent by the Mexican-Russian Institute has arrived to VOKS. Reporting just for your information only that due to the fact that the vast majority of paintings are of bourgeois formalist art, alien to the principles of realism, wide display in Moscow is impossible. After the decision on their use, we will notify you about it. Since the exhibition came without a catalogue, immediately send us a list of the authors and titles of their works, as well as short profiles of the artists"[42].

[41] GARF f. 5283 op. 14 d. 419. list 51.
[42] AVP RF, Referentura po Meksike op. 29 p. 111 d. 800/ме. list 26.

Criticism continued in the letter from the board of the organization, sent to a representative of VOKS in Mexico on the same date. On March 24th, 1948 the head of VOKS Vladimir Kemenov wrote:

> "In case of the works of Mexican art, it is necessary to bear in mind that we are interested in the works of the realist movement, democratic in spirit, aimed against imperialism in any form. When it comes to the selection of paintings obtained from the *Mexican-Russian Institute*, it consists mainly of formalist works that are alien to the principles of Soviet realist art; the possibility of displaying such artworks in the Soviet Union is excluded. The fact of sending such works to the USSR puts VOKS in a difficult situation and only complicates our relationship with the *Mexican-Russian Institute*"[43].

As it could be seen, the future of this collection in the Soviet Union was foredoomed on entering the country. As it was stated, "the possibility of displaying such artworks in the Soviet Union is excluded" where "such works" meant "works that are alien to the principles of Soviet realist art"[44]. The late 1940s were hard times for the art of foreigners and international contacts in the Soviet Union. In the period 1947 to 1953, at the eve of the "cold war" Soviet relations with Latin America were very strained. By 1952 all Latin American countries, except Mexico and Argentina, had broke diplomatic relations with the USSR. Cultural contacts at that time were minimal, mainly upheld by the enthusiasm of individuals. At the same time inside the country, a fight against "formalism" that had been going on for ten years, was continuing. In 1936, the newspaper *Pravda* published an article by Vladimir Kemenov "Against Formalism and Naturalism in Painting", and in 1948 the struggle had entered a new round – into a music sphere. In fact, the fate of Mexican donation was in the hands of a man, who wrote in 1936:

> "Let's face it: the formalism is not only unacceptable ideologically and politically for us, it is definitely anti-art. The images created with formal method are of no artistic value primarily because they are with an outrageous irresponsibility mutilating a nature, a man and our socialist reality. Formalism is also anti-art from the point of view of perfection, harmony and expressiveness of pictorial means"[45].

There was no professional institutions working with international art: as it was indicated before, *The State Hermitage Museum* that attempted to create a *Room for Contemporary Art* in 1930s, did not continue this program after 1945, moreover, at the end of the 1940s its permanent exhibition of French art of the

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[43] *Ibidem*, list 36.

[44] *Ibidem*.

[45] Владимир Кеменов, "Против формализма и натурализма в живописи", *Против формализма и натурализма в искусстве*, ОГИЗ-ИЗОГИЗ, Москва, 1937, с. 20-28. (Vladimir Kemenov, "Against Formalism and Naturalism in Art", *Against Formalism and Naturalism in Art*, OGIZ-IZOGIZ, Moscow, 1937, pp. 20-28.)

late XIXth-early XXth century was closed for public[46]. In 1946-1947 the *State Museum of New Western Art* had been closed for public and then in 1948 disbanded. As VOKS was supposed to be a "filtering and controlling" organisation for foreign "alien cultures" we could suggest that the "profiles of Mexican artists" that Ivan Khmarsky was so eager to get, were necessary to reassure the board of *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* in their correct course of action and to determine and to name artistic *personas non grata*.

VOKS had been corresponding with Mexico about profiles almost a year, until January 1949. On January 11th, 1949 the Soviet Ambassador to Mexico Alexander Kapustin sent to Moscow a list of names and biographies of 19 artists, and on February 21st, 17 photo-reproductions[47]. In the cover letter he noted that "judging from the reproductions, the paintings of Luis Arenal (number 12), Carlos Orozco Romero (number 13), Federico Silva (number 14), Frida Kahlo (number 15) and Roberto Montanegri (number 16) cannot be put to public view"[48], which means that he was, although his assessment was devastating, far more delicate in his evaluation than his Moscow partners. Also it is interesting that artists Federico Silva and Roberto Montanegri were not mentioned in the letter from Samuel Vasconselos to Alexander Kapustin dated March, 19th 1947 on transferring the works of Mexican artists to the Soviet authorities, also the number of artists differs in the letter and in the VOKS correspondence, so it is possible that before sending artworks to the Soviet Union the list of pieces and artists has been revised – some artists and works were added and some excluded.

Thus, after one and a half year a meeting of the Fine Arts Section of VOKS became possible as all the needed documents were delivered. It took place in the middle of the year and was chaired by Aleksandr Gerasimov[49], the head of the Fine Art Section and a favourite artist of Joseph Stalin. Painter, architect and art theorist, Gerasimov was the first President of the Academy of Arts of the USSR (1947-1957) and by 1949 a winner of four Stalin prizes, which was the highest art award in the Soviet Union at those times.

The results of this meeting have been published in a summed up statement in 1949. Gerasimov resumed that:

> "Presented Mexican paintings were formalistic and surrealist by the method of execution. It was not possible to display them publicly so the Fine art section asked to remove canvases from their stretchers and pass them on to the *Pushkin Fine Art*

[46] Katarina Lopatkina, "The Room of Contemporary Art in the State Hermitage…cit.".
[47] These documents are not traced yet.
[48] GARF f. 5283 op. 22 d. 193 t.1 list 89.
[49] Aleksandr Gerasimov (1881-1963) was a soviet painter, a leader of the Union of Artists of the USSR and the Soviet Academy of Arts, was at the forefront of the attacks against cosmopolitism and formalism in mid. 1940s-1950s.

> *Museum* for storage. At the end of the report Gerasimov concluded: 'Let's apologized to Pushkin, comrades!'"[50].

Despite this proposal, all the pieces remained at VOKS[51]. Unfortunately, only one work from this donation was mentioned after 1949, it was *The Wounded Table* by Frida Kahlo. In 1952 the piece was requested for an exhibition "Art of Mexico since pre-Columbian times to the present day" in Paris. The exhibition was organized with the support of the Mexican government and was intended to show the whole range of fine arts of Mexico. The hosting venues became *Palais de Tokyo* in Paris (1952) and the Tate Gallery in London (1953). It was the Soviet Ambassador to Mexico, Aleksandr Kapustin who sent a request for a work to VOKS, and VOKS – through the foreign Ministry of the USSR – replied that "the specified painting according to the opinion of Soviet specialists has no artistic value, was never exhibited and is stored at VOKS. The VOKS Board considers it appropriate to transfer a painting by F. Kahlo to the Mexican Embassy in the USSR at its disposal"[52]. Despite the agreement of the Soviet side, the piece was not sent to the exhibition as the Mexican Embassy considered the transportation of the work to be too expensive and it was left in the VOKS spaces[53].

Simultaneously with the negotiations about the show, the Soviet Union negotiated the arrival to the Soviet Union of the artist herself. The Soviet Foreign Ministry informed the VOKS that on

> "February 23, 1953, Frida Kahlo, the wife of the famous Mexican progressive artist Diego Rivera, in a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador to Mexico, comrade Aleksandr Kapustin informed him that Diego Rivera is finishing a portrait of Josef Stalin. Frida Kahlo wanted to bring this portrait to Moscow personally and asked to help her with an organization of a trip this summer. Comrade Kapustin indicates that Frida Kahlo is an artist of futuristic style. It is known that in 1948 she sent a gift to the VOKS. According to comrade Kapustin, the desire of the artist Frida Kahlo to visit the Soviet Union evoked with, apparently, a need to be examined by Soviet doctors, as she suffered from serious leg injuries caused by a car accident. Please inform about your decision on the possibility to allow Frida Kahlo to come to Moscow"[54].

On May 23, 1953 VOKS replied shortly, that it is not interested in the visit of the artist[55].

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[50] The museum was named after Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), a prominent Russian poet.
[51] It was mentioned in requests for Kahlo's paintings for an exhibition in Paris in 1952 and in Poland in 1954.
[52] GARF f. 5283 op. 22c d. 382 list 31.
[53] *Ibidem*, list 82
[54] *Ibidem*.
[55] GARF f. 5283 op. 22c d. 382 list 84. Frida Kahlo died on July, 13, 1954, aged 47.

A new request for painting followed in 1954, already after the death of Frida Kahlo. Art historian Teresa del Conde, in her article "*The Wounded Table*", devoted to the fate of the work, suggests that the painting was requested for the exhibition on a demand of the artist's widower, Diego Rivera, in memory of Frida[56]. Indeed, it was Diego Rivera who appealed to the Soviet Ambassador to Mexico asking for an opportunity to show *The Wounded Table* at the show – this time in Warsaw in 1955[57]. On December 2nd, 1954 after a short correspondence between VOKS and the Foreign Ministry of the Soviet Union, the painting was sent to Poland. Helga Prignitz-Poda, one of the leading scholars on modern Mexican art and on Frida Kahlo's heritage in particular, writes that the painting was shown at the exhibition of *The National Front of Representatives of the Plastic Arts* (El Frente National de Artes Plásticas, abbreviated FNAP) in Europe and Asia (Warsaw, Berlin, China), and that after the exhibition the location of the painting is not known[58]. The exhibition, organized by the *National Front of Representatives of the Plastic Arts* was a complex project that lasted two years. It started in the Warsaw gallery *Zachęta* in February 1955, and finished in Beijing in 1956. During this time, there had been several curators, the list of the authors changed from city to city and exhibits were added or/and removed from venue to venue, also as a result of sales or donations. The exhibition was also proposed to the USSR, with muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, one of the most prominent Mexican painters, advocating for the idea. However, the Ministry of culture of the USSR, rejected the proposal, as it was declared "due to the extreme lack of the exhibition areas in Moscow and a lot of art exhibitions to be sown, including foreign ones"[59]. It was also stated that "this exhibition may be organized in Moscow not earlier than the summer of 1956"[60], but it was not shown in the USSR neither in 1956 nor later.

The Last Traces of the Unwanted Gift

Getting back to the painting *The Wounded Table* by Frida Kahlo, it should be noted that despite the fact that it was a travelling exhibition, a new exhibition catalogue was published in every country. Not only did language change, but also it had a new cover, an updated selection of illustrations, as well a list of authors and works. Guillermina Guadarama in her book on the history of *The National Front of Representatives of the Plastic Arts*, based on archival documents and publications in the Mexican press, restores the schedule of movement exhibitions in Europe:

[56] Teresa Del Condo, "Mesa herida", *La Jounada*, no. 4, sept. 2007 http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2007/09/04/index.php?section=opinion&article=a06a1cul (07.12.2015)
[57] GARF f. 5283 op. 14 d. 659 list 67.
[58] Helga Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo*…cit., p. 37.
[59] GARF f. 5283 op. 14 d. 660 list 149.
[60] *Ibidem*.

- Warsaw (Poland) – February-March, 1955
- Sofia (Bulgaria) – May 1955
- Plovdiv (Bulgaria) – June-July 1955
- Bucharest (Romania) – July 1955
- Cluj-Napoca (Romania) – without specifying the date.
- Berlin (Germany) – October 1955
- Brno (Czechoslovakia) – February 1956
- Prague (Czechoslovakia) – March 1956
- Bratislava (Slovakia) – 1956[61].

According to the catalogues of these exhibitions, *The Wounded Table* was mentioned in the Polish exhibition catalogue, under No. 49 on a page 23, and on a page 63 there is a reproduction of the painting[62]. In the Bulgarian catalogue the reproduction is absent, but the painting itself is still on the list of works, and published under No. 49[63]. Then it appears in the catalogue of the exhibition in Bucharest, the work listed under No. 50, with no picture[64]. In Cluj the exhibition of Mexican art was held from 30 July to 14 August 1955, but there were only graphic works displayed. In the exhibition catalogue in Berlin *The Wounded Table* in not on the list[65], and is also missing from the Prague catalogue as well[66]. Thus, it is possible to assume that the last place of *The Wounded Table* display was Bucharest, and not Warsaw as it was previously suggested, which gives a new search direction. Unfortunately, the fate of other paintings, which stayed in USSR, also remains a mystery, as well as a list of these paintings and prints. They are yet to be found.

Concluding Remarks

My research started as a pursuit of *Wounded Table*, a long-lost painting by Frida Kahlo once donated to the Soviet Union, and unfolded in a direction that not only allowed me to shed new light on the fate of the painting, but also

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61 Guillermina Guadarrama, *El Frente National de Artes Plásticas (1952-1962)*, Abrevian, México, 2005, p. 16.

62 *Wystawa sztuki meksykanskiej. Malarstvo współczesna grafica XVI-XX w. Luty-marzec 1955*, Warszawa, 1955. pp. 23, 46. (*Exhibition of Mexican Art. Modern Paintings and Grafics XVI-XX Centuries. February-March 1955*, Warsaw, 1955, pp. 23, 46.)

63 *Мексиканска художествена изложба. Живопис и графика. София, май*, София, 1955, с. 9. (*Mexican Art Exhibition. Paintings and Grafics, Sofia, May*, Sofia, 1955. p. 9.)

64 *Expozitia de pictură și grafică mexicană. București, Iulie*, București, 1955, p. 19. (*The Exhibition of Mexican Pictures and Graphics. Bucharest, July*, Bucharest, 1955, p. 19.)

65 *Mexikanische Malerei und Graphik, Ausstellung. Berlin. 10 September-9 Oktober 1955*, Berlin, 1955. (*Mexican Painting and Graphic Exhibition. Berlin. 10 September-9 October 1955*, Berlin, 1955.)

66 *Mexické vytvarne unėní. Praha. Slovansky ostrov*, Brezen, Praha 1956. (*Mexican Art Exhibition. Prague. Slovansky Island*, Brezen, Praha, 1956.)

to observe the evolution of Russian-Mexican relations that framed the donation epic. I approached the issue with questions about the very fact of the donation: why and how was it made; what were the institutions and people involved; and what happened to the donation in the USSR?

My archival research revealed that the donation of Frida Kahlo's painting was not an individual artistic undertaking, but a result of intensive Soviet-Mexican diplomatic work that was initiated by the Soviet Ambassador in Mexico Konstantin Umansky. In 1943 he authored the idea of organizing a donation of artworks by prominent Mexican artists following a request of the painters and sculptors' section of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (Всероссийское общество культурной связи с заграницей, abbreviated VOKS), at the time – a key institution which controlled and conducted all Soviet international cultural contacts. The donation was intended for *The State Museum of New Western Art*. The organizational burden fell onto the *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange* founded as a public organization by prominent art and cultural figures of Mexico in 1944 to facilitate Mexican-Russian cultural contacts.

However, the archival materials indicate that as negotiations and the organizational process progressed, so did a change in the political climate, functions of the respected institutions and key involved figures. Konstantin Umansky died tragically in early 1945, breaking an essential communication link between *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange* and the VOKS. In the late 1940s the latter was slipping into increasingly protectionist cultural rhetoric and politics, with its main focus on becoming a "filtering and controlling" organisation for foreign "alien cultures". *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange* by 1948 was assimilated into the network of "foreign societies of friendship" funded and controlled by the Soviet government. Finally, the intended host institution – *The State Museum of New Western Art* that was, in fact, the only institution capable of accepting this gift of contemporary artworks, was abolished on the cause of being "a hothouse of servility to the decadent bourgeois culture" in 1948. All these allowed for more ruthless control of "imported" culture and more aggressive visual censorship in the USSR.

Several lines of correspondence between Soviet authorities in Moscow, Soviet Embassy in Mexico, VOKS, and *The Institute of Mexican-Russian Cultural Exchange* that I uncovered, reveal that the efforts of the local cultural agents in Mexico and the head office of VOKS were not coordinated. Besides, VOKS was increasingly taking a censoring stand that made the Mexican donation not just unexpected but genuinely unwanted. Despite increasing ideological pressure the donation proceeded, and finally, in December 1947 the works of 19 Mexican artists arrived in Moscow. There, they were denounced as inappropriate, banned from being shown to the public, and due to absence of a suitable institution stored in VOKS. Since that time the artworks are considered

lost, and only one of them is mentioned in the documents after 1950 – it is *Wounded Table* by Frida Kahlo. In 1954 it was given for the touring exhibition organized by the *National Front of Representatives of the Plastic Arts*. My research places its last known location in Bucharest, and not in Warsaw as it was previously thought.

The story of this Mexican donation that started as a romantic gesture of friendship and ended as one of the victims of the Soviet ideological machine is yet another exemplary case of a vulnerability of art trapped into political and ideological millstones. Further research into the subject is necessary to determine the location of the artworks from the Mexican unwanted gift; including, ironically enough, the most wanted work of Frida Kahlo.