Popular Culture

Popular Culture: Arts and Social Change in Latin America.
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It was 1999 when the University of New Mexico (UNM) Libraries and the Latin American and Iberian Institute at UNM inaugurated the Herzstein Latin American Reading Room. At the time, the space included computer workstations and paper copies of three hundred serial publications but the advent of greater online serial availability changed this space quickly. In less than a decade all of the computers and many of the serials had become obsolete. The reading room devolved from a focused space for Latin Americanists to an ill-defined working commons. Half empty, beautifully crafted display shelves beckoned to non-Latin Americanists who appreciated the quiet atmosphere and electrical outlets in the room.

This paper provides an overview of a three-year project to restore the integrity of the Latin American Reading Room as an interdisciplinary space focused on Latin and Latino American studies. The Inter-American Studies library program (IAS) began implementing ideas for reinvigorating this space after the appointment of the current coordinator in 2009. One part of this mission involved hosting cross-departmental lectures and exhibits to bring Latin and Latino Americanists back into the space. Another part filled the shelves with visually stimulating, interdisciplinary books which could attract general library users to relevant collections previously “under discovered.”

IAS recognized Spanish and Portuguese language comics and cookbooks as logical choices for the latter task. The staff maintained that, in order for patrons to make connections between those books and materials housed elsewhere in the library, comprehensive book displays would be required. These displays would serve as a bridge between the circulating books and special collections materials. Within this redefined reading room, permanent book collections and special collections exhibits came together to create a boutique space.

The first part of this paper addresses how Inter-American Studies repurposed this library space to display Latin American collections and outreach materials. The second part offers examples of how rotating exhibits of visual
pieces from special collections promoted local discovery and student learning. In the fall of 2012, rotating exhibits focused on Mexican comics and caricatures.

**Virtual and Physical Space**

Comic books embody interdisciplinarity by spanning Library of Congress call number ranges and appealing to a wide variety of user populations. Since comic books are designed around pictorial storytelling, they exemplify the University Libraries’ emphasis on Latin American graphic and popular art. One need only visit the New Mexico Digital Collections’ pictorial web page to experience the depth of UNM’s Latin American graphic art. Yet, in a needs-based digital search environment, local discovery requires that tangible artifacts are physically visible to those passing through library spaces. Literature on the digital humanities lauds digitization as the key to find previously hidden collections. However, these works overlook the failure of global accessibility to translate into local discoverability without curation or marketing. Researchers are more typically trained to look for resources away from home than to seek them out locally, because they conceptualize Internet searching as a “looking out” process.

Together, the comic books and book displays in the reading room welcome users with visually stimulating, popular media that are hard to ignore. These sources can be difficult to find at UNM because they are spread among different libraries. Displaying them together invites users to discover them by browsing display shelves and cases. These displays function for local users as digitization does for those outside UNM. Quite simply, the displays imply: “Hey, did you know you can find comics and graphic art here? If you’re interested in these, you’ll be happy to know our archives have some pretty cool things as well! You should check them out here!” The setting, like the implication, is informal yet no less academic.

Displaying these hybrid forms also challenges users to see them as examples of visual and textual literacies. In so doing, they appeal to media-obsessed students and encourage them to explore. Display essays and questions posted throughout the room suggest that these media are not just recreational. They serve as artifacts for introspective analyses of popular culture in history, social sciences, fine arts, and foreign languages. Ultimately, the goal of these displays is to make special collections, as well as Latin and Latino American holdings, less exclusive and more accessible tools for academic work.

An added benefit is that these books are works of art, so facing them out on display shelves embellishes the Latin American Reading Room. The Taiga Forum on traditional boundaries in libraries, proposes ten “provocative statements” to stimulate conversation. In its fourth such statement regarding libraries as décor, the forum notes that graduate students and faculty will fulfill all their information needs online and never come to the library, but they will
romanticize libraries as “sacred place(s) to commune with books.” The forum adds that libraries will thus be forced to turn stacks into designer reading rooms with books as décor. UNM’s Latin American Reading Room pushes the boundaries of this statement by presenting comics as art and visual media as discovery tools. Statistics gathered while reshuffling these books suggest that library users do interact with them, so they are more than ornamentation.

The room also challenges Taiga statement number nine, which holds that “boutique” services will eventually disappear from libraries. The forum fails to define boutique in terms of services but one librarian’s response offers some probable examples. These include genealogical archives, community digital repositories, library training or programming, and reference instruction and consultation. The reading room combines many of these services with visual stimulation in order to prove that both boutique collections and boutique services set library spaces apart. In doing so, they succeed in attracting users, not only to the physical areas but also to library collections and services.

**Boutique Space**

Borrowed from French for “shop,” in popular references the term boutique identifies a small business establishment such as a store or hotel. These establishments offer unique or highly specialized materials and services. In recent library literature, the term has been used to denote specialized training or small-scale digitization projects, as opposed to larger Google-like endeavors. For the purposes of this paper, we define boutique collections as unique, highly specialized, or niche. Boutique spaces are small, cloistered, and deliberately focused, but also comfortable and welcoming. They are the antithesis of library learning commons, with large open concepts, mobile furniture, and computer clusters. Nonetheless, boutique spaces also offer the potential to serve as laboratories for students, librarians, and faculty. They can also promote cross-disciplinary partnerships and cooperation.

The Latin American Reading Room surrounds a stairwell, with three areas including the room itself, an exhibit gallery, and a meeting room. The glass doors leading into these spaces make some students think they are offices and thus off limits. The reading room is particularly difficult to approach. Users have to enter the gallery or the meeting room to access it. For this reason, IAS develops programming and exhibits to encourage different academic departments, professional academic organizations, and community groups into this space for lectures, workshops, poster sessions, readings and exhibits. Frequently, people at these events remark that they had not known this space was open to the public. Placing comic books on display in the reading room embraces the space as a place for exhibitions. Like exhibits and lectures, the comics displayed in the reading room encourage passersby to learn about library collections.
Though comics have never been a major focus in university library collections, they do epitomize their emphasis on Latin American graphic and popular art. The comics’ pictured frames, which traverse the page from left to right and top to bottom, are reminiscent of ancient codices. UNM’s Latin American holdings boast multiple facsimile versions of these important historical texts. In fact, comics are part of the UL’s significant holdings in Latin American and Latino history, through their coverage of major events, such as discovery and conquest and independence struggles, and their treatments of iconic figures like Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Lampião, César Chávez, and Emiliano Zapata. The graphic reworking of classical Spanish and Portuguese literary pieces, such as *Don Quixote* and *Os Lusiadas*, also points students to larger holdings in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian literature. Indeed, the two hundred and seventy titles that comprise the comic book display in the Latin American Reading Room may be “boutique,” but they are part of a much larger whole. The essay that accompanies the comics displayed in the reading room states as much. It also encourages students interested in graphic art, codices, history, and literature, to venture into the library stacks and archives for additional references.

These comics include the works of major cartoonists such as Magú (Bulmaro Castellanos Loza), El Fisgón (Rafael Barajas Durán), and Rius (Eduardo del Río) of Mexico; Quino (Joaquín Salvador Lavado) and Roberto Fontanarrosa of Argentina; Henfil (Henrique de Souza Filho) and Glauco Villas Boas of Brazil; and Ruz (Carlos Alfredo Ruiz Moisa) of El Salvador. The comics are reprinted from materials published in Latin American newspapers and magazines, such as *El Proceso*, *La Jornada*, *Nexos*, *El Diario de Hoy*, *La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Clarín*, *El Tiempo*, *La República*, *O Pasquim*, *Diário da Manhã*, and the *Folha de São Paulo*. As such, they are important references to daily life in much of Latin America. They critique oligarchical governments, military regimes, and social inequities, yet create beloved characters like “Mafalda” and “Gaturro,” and entertain with parodies such as “Inodoro Pereyra.” They offer visuals of everyday life with their “It’s-funny-because-it’s-true” punch-lines. Some of these comics play on colloquial vulgarities, as does *Pin Che City*, while others, like *Zombies en la Moneda* critique avarice. Repugnant protagonists like “Boogie” and “Migra Mouse” reflect on political and cultural tensions, while superheroes like “Choya Atómica” send messages of peace.

An essay that explains this permanent display invites students to consider comics as physical artifacts of cultures, societies, traditions, and lifestyles. It asks them to think critically about what commercialized media, such as comic strips and graphic novels, reveal about history, art, literature, and sociopolitical realities. The essay encourages students to engage in and share historical and anthropological methods. It also enables them to identify visual and colloquial cues that artists use to represent and transmit information and ideas.
Rotating Exhibits

These contemporary comics are intriguing without reference to similar kinds of historical materials. Nonetheless, connecting them with special collections in general, creates a fascinating continuum for those interested in researching Latin American or Latino graphics, history, politics, or culture. IAS makes this linkage in the reading room by accompanying the permanent display of contemporary comics with a rotating exhibit of two or three pieces from UNM’s special collections. The goal of the rotating exhibit is to increase students’ visual literacy and to help undergraduates recognize that there is a historical continuity among genres. The first exhibit invites students to learn more about Mexican caricature and printmaking. The flat display includes pieces from the Fernando Gamboa Collection of Prints by José Guadalupe Posada. Published in Mexican chapbooks and broadsides, his caricatures and editorial cartoons were important in Mexican political life during the nineteenth century.

José Guadalupe Posada’s “Don Chepito”

“Political cartoons and idiosyncratic comic strips are immensely popular throughout Mexico, and José Guadalupe Posada [1852–1913] is considered the founding father of the genre.” Posada’s satirical prints helped make visual art political and also essential for popular expression. During the Porfirio Díaz regime, when political repression, suppression of civil society, and their resulting public revolts were common, the caricatura política (political cartoon) was the only means of free expression. Many of Posada’s prints portrayed the Mexican population demonstrating against the Porfiriato. Similar political themes appear in the more contemporary works displayed on the shelves in the reading room, though their subject of ridicule was not Díaz but the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional).

In their day, Posada’s satirical prints encouraged popular interaction with politics through comics printed in newspapers and popular broadsides. Likewise, today, the prints and comics invite students to explore Mexican political identity across time and space. The books on display at UNM contain various references from which students can extrapolate satire, political identity and visual art. For example, in word and text, Rius’s Un siglo de caricatura en México highlights visual and historical references to Mexican comic traditions. One of those traditions is Posada’s cartoon character, “Don Chepito.”

While Don Chepito is not a fully developed character like Boogie, for instance, his full name, Don Chepito Marihuano, is evocative. Chepito is the popular diminutive for Joseph. Don, on the other hand, is a mark of respect accorded only to a gentleman of a certain rank in society. The juxtaposition of Don and Chepito is thus strikingly ironic and, if one adds the epithet “marihuano,” one ends up with something like “Sir Joey Potsmoker.”
Don Chepito’s character is thus an antihero. He is the antithesis of Choya Atómica. He is not good-looking or muscular, wears no cape and has no superpowers. Iconographically, he looks like a member of the bourgeoisie. He wears a frock or suit and glasses, and carries an umbrella. His head is too big for his body and he looks old.

Don Chepito usually appears in single-panel cartoons consisting of drawings with a typeset caption beneath each one. For example, he is featured in the broadside, *Canción de los fantasmas de Loreto* (The Ballad of Ghosts of Loreto), and the half sheet, *Los paseos de D. Chepito y amores del picaro viejecito*. In the Ballad of Ghosts of Loreto, Don Chepito is strolling with a *china poblana* (stereotypical young Mexican girl) and a peasant boy in the background. Everything seems to be going fine but the boy has stolen his watch. Don Chepito appears the fool, unaware that he was robbed. In the *Paseos de D. Chepito*, the aging Don Chepito strolls with a lady by a roller coaster in Alameda Park. In the ballad that accompanies the cartoon, he tries to woo the woman with recreational activities afforded a man of his status. She is unimpressed and put off by his arrogance, so she responds by stating that she is afraid of the roller-coaster. Despite his money, Don Chepito has no success with women and is depicted as a lecher.

Posada also uses Don Chepito in a humorous narrative sequence of cartoon panels, the precursor to the contemporary comic strip, even though his attempt never develops into a full-fledged strip with a regular cast of characters. While the library does not own the broadside, *Gran Chasco que se pegó Don Chepito Marihuana: Por andar en amores con una mujer casada*, (The Great Joke Played on Don Chepito Marijuana: Because He Pursued a Married Woman), the exhibit will include two books that show these cartoon panels. In *Posada’s Popular Mexican Prints*, the four panels from *Don Chepito: Por amar a una mujer casada* make an appearance. They tell the story in which Don Chepito woos a married woman, is beaten up by her husband, and is eventually taken away by the police. In *Monografía: Las obras de José Guadalupe Posada* (Mexico, 1930), these four panels appear without order and on different pages, so the seriality of the strip is lost.

The original broadside elucidates that this comic strip has only three panels, not four, but the sequence of events is thought-provoking. The front only shows one panel, in which Don Chepito is beaten up; on the verso, Don Chepito woos the lady and goes to jail. Its nonlinear organization uses brain function that is similar to hypertexting in the computer environment according to Charles Ramírez Berg. He argues that this sequence creates “a flashback from the middle of the narrative, then a flash-forward to its conclusion, and anticipates complex movie narratives that would be common in Mexican classical cinema.”

Qualities akin to those Posada manifests in Don Chepito are not hard to identify in contemporary Mexican comics. Eduardo Rius, for example, also
uses political satire to critique bourgeois cluelessness in Mexico. Similarly, Rius’s work litters the pages of newspapers and calls his contemporaries to arms. His Supermachos and Agachados are also anti-heroes. In these cases however, they represent the Mexican government. Like Posada, Rius’s work is well recognized as a reference for contemporary political cartoonists in Mexico.

Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP)

The second rotating exhibit, which opened in October 2012, included comic strips from the TGP. Building on the legacy of Posada, the TGP used art to advance social causes. It specialized in woodcuts and linoleum prints and produced flyers, banners, posters, book illustrations, and portfolio editions. The TGP’s heyday was from the 1930s to 1960s.

In 1938, the TGP began publishing La hoja educativa ilustrada, a monthly publication designed by Alfredo Zulce and Leopoldo Méndez. This publication invited teachers to subscribe for a small fee. It consisted of one hundred volantes—flyers printed on thin colored paper. While most engravings were single drawings, some included serial images issued for several states under the title, Campesino (peasant), followed by the name of a Mexican state; e.g., Campesino de Puebla or Campesino de Sonora.

These state-specific flyers used cartoons to instruct peasants to sell their wheat, beans, and rice to the Mexico City-based Comité Regulador del Mercado de Subsistencias (Regulatory Committee Subsistence Market). They addressed the peasant directly with the word campesino but used different cartoons to communicate different interests. Some focused on the individual and vilified the merchant, while some appealed to a sense of solidarity within the community. Others promoted the greater good as a means to improve education, health, and other workers’ lives. While the narrative differed, the message was the same: empower the peasant to take control of his life by selling to the regulatory committee. This incipient fair trade movement thus demanded a fair price for the grower’s work. In some instances, the cartoons were interchangeable and printed on flyers, which also advertised produce prices in different states.

The drawings were in pen and ink and showed both groups and individuals from close-, mid-, and long-range perspectives. The cartoonist clearly worked to engage the reader. Like a photographer, he zoomed in and out within the story to visually underscore varied perspectives. Most panels incorporated a humorous element. Captions printed below the images represented the peasants’ internal thoughts and struggles. While all images were accompanied by text, the flyers were more visual than textual, making them accessible across populations. The following are four examples.

José Chávez Morado’s Campesino de Sonora flyer features a cartoon with seven panels of drawings and an eighth of text. The first, very modern, panel
features two realities: the peasant’s hard work plowing his field and the wheat merchant carelessly partying with women and drinking wine. The text panel exhorts the peasant not to sell his wheat for a desultory price to the merchant, who is referred to as a devil, but to sell it to those who will give him a better price, i.e. the Regulatory Committee Subsistence Market.

The *Campesino de Jalisco* flyer, also by Morado, tells the story of San Lorenzo peasants who sell their wheat to the regulatory committee. The one exception is Canuto, who is an idiot. He is portrayed as an unkempt drunk who gives his money to the rich mill owner. In contrast, the other peasants pool their money to build a communal granary, forcing the mill owner to pay them a fair price for their harvest. Meanwhile, in the last panel, Canuto lives in poverty and isolation. This comic strip inspires a vision of the idyllic village where everything falls into place when people work together. They strengthen their schools, maintain clean water, and have abundant bounties when they sell their wheat to the regulatory committee.

Morado’s *Campesino de Coahuila* deals with the same topic from a different angle. It shows how the peasant and other laborers lose at every step of the production chain. The peasant loses when he sells to the mill owner, the mill workers make little money while the mill owner gets rich, and the baker makes little money while his wife complains about the high cost of bread. The peasant and his wife do not eat the bread. Finally, in the last panel, the peasant’s friend José tells him that if he cannot find a good buyer for his crop, he should sell to the regulatory committee.

Stylistically, the *Campesino de Durango y Zacatecas* by Leopoldo Méndez, is more cartoonish. It only features four unframed panels, and urges the bean grower to fight for a fair price by getting rid of two pests: the weevil and the merchant—who are depicted as best buddies. The beetle with its long snout appears as big as the peasant, but by fumigating weevils and using the services of the regulatory committee to banish the merchant, the peasant will triumph.

**Conclusion**

These documents and comics are more than entertainment. They are physical artifacts of culture as well as visual and textual mediums. They function as art and as documents for analyses in history, social sciences, fine arts and foreign languages. Their pictorial storytelling qualities exemplify the University Libraries’ emphasis on Latin American graphic and popular art. Their illustrated frames have a long history in Latin and Latino American literature and offer useful clues for understanding society. However, these documents and comic books are not just for those interested in history and politics. They are actual pieces of art with materials for diverse subject areas. For this reason, we display them in the reading room and use them to inspire critical thinking and debate.
The curator posts questions throughout the Latin American Reading Room to encourage students to compare other special collections documents to the comic books. She asks them to identify the ways that images, character types, or storytelling techniques in the documents compare with contemporary comics. She asks how the images in the special collections pieces reflect larger social or political issues and how those issues evolve through time in the comics. These questions invite students to evaluate a piece or two in special collections and connect these evaluations with contemporary comics. By asking students to find Don Chepito-like characters or TGP-like educational strips in the comics, IAS illustrates the solid tradition of caricature and storyboarding in Mexican graphic art. Establishing concrete connections between historical documents and a contemporary boutique collection attracts general library users to Latin and Latino American collections not “discovered” previously. This process also encourages students to explore the library in critical practice. The reading room invites students to engage in, share, and treat tangible library materials as tools of the scholarly trade, rather than perceive them as unnecessary boutique collections and services.

NOTES
2. Many thanks go to staff and students who helped make this restoration happen, including Molly Nelson, Anthony Pomo, Sara Tuzel, Kristen Valencia, Pauline Heffern, Wendy Pedersen, Deborah Cole, and Clayton Ford.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.


