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The Stakes of the Collection in the 21st Century
San Francisco, Mexico, and the Teotihuacan Murals

by Kathleen Berrin

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Few gifts could have been more unexpected than the Wagner Bequest of over seventy painted wall fragments from the ancient civilization of Teotihuacan. This windfall bequest came in the summer of 1976 when I was assistant curator in the department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum.¹

The first time I saw the Teotihuacan mural fragments, there were some 300 square feet (28 m²) of them. They were spread out on the floors of several rooms in the home of the late Harald J. Wagner. For most of his life (1903–76) Harald Wagner had been an avid collector of many types of art, though none of our museum staff seems to have ever met him. Standing in his home and gazing down at the mural fragments, I saw thick, crumbling walls of variously sized adobe pieces, with bold images painted upon them in true fresco technique. The images appeared to depict elite personages wearing head-dresses, chanting priests, warrior birds, feathered serpents, and anthropomorphized jaguars and coyotes. A few of them were mounted on corkboard or had plaster infill, but they were for the most part unsupported, ranging in size from fragments the size of a large coffee table to pieces the size of crumbs. Most
2. Wagner Mural fragment with plaster restoration, as it arrived in its packing crate.

rested tentatively on the floor as if some unknown person, taking a break, had been working on a giant jigsaw puzzle.

I was asked by the museum administration to thoroughly research the provenance, authenticity, storage, and conservation needs of the Wagner mural collection. The Wagner building was soon to be sold to pay the costs of administering the estate, and in a matter of weeks the murals were to be packed up in custom-built crates and transported to our museum storage. We quickly learned that there were no prototypes to follow. There were less than a dozen other Teotihuacan murals to be found in institutional collections in the United States and Europe. These murals in museums – much fewer in number than the Wagner corpus – had been individually removed from the Teotihuacan site as early as the 1940s.

The mural collection and the moral, political, philosophical and artistic issues it raised were so multifaceted, enmeshed, and sometimes contradictory, we had to proceed slowly, checking and rechecking our data. We realized that the museum could not operate in a vacuum, but that very few assumptions, other than the physical
reality of the collection itself, could be taken for granted. Problems ranged from delicate issues of legality or ownership, to historical or iconographic questions of interpretation, to the correct treatments for preserving the mural fragments, questions of international protocol, involvement of government agencies, and what should be the ultimate disposition of the collection. We anticipated that Mexico’s position would be that the murals were national patrimony, unlawfully unearthed from Mexican soil. Our museum also considered them to be world art treasures, unfortunately looted but legally present in this country according to US law and released by a California court to the City of San Francisco and the de Young Museum. What follows is an overview of what happened between San Francisco and Mexico, regarding the care, preservation, and disposition of the Teotihuacan murals, and a discussion of other collaborative projects that have taken place during the last thirty years.²

Harald Wagner and the Teotihuacan murals

Some background is required to understand the importance of Teotihuacan and its mural traditions.³ In its own time (0–600 C.E.), Teotihuacan had been an ancient superpower, a planned urban complex with vast avenues, monumental structures, and more than 2,000 residential compounds. Depending upon their status – some were more elaborate than others – many of these ancient compounds had rooms of repetitive painted wall murals. When Teotihuacan underwent an apparent civil war around 600 C.E., the ceremonial centre of the city was razed and burned. Most of the people of Teotihuacan living outside the centre gradually relocated; the ancient buildings disintegrated and collapsed, and the forces of nature, above and below ground, over eons of time, had their effect. For centuries the Wagner murals lay untouched and buried. In modern times, people built their homes on top of the buried ruins of the forgotten compounds, creating yet another layer of human settlement and human life. The murals would not be rediscovered until sometime in the mid twentieth century, when farmers were perhaps laying foundations for houses or planting rows of maguey cactus on their land.

Enter Harald Wagner, an only child and a native of Falls City, Oregon, who came to San Francisco in 1927 as a young man and obtained a job as a draughtsman at the prestigious architectural firm of Bliss & Faville. Under his mentor William Faville’s influence, Wagner developed an enthusiasm for painting and sketching, collecting art, and living a life of style and taste. He became a serious collector of the work of American artists Arthur and Lucia Matthews; he also collected many types of Asian art.

In the 1950s Harald Wagner, then a somewhat affluent and sophisticated man, made his first trip to Mexico. Probably it was love at first sight; Harald Wagner began spending half of each year in Mexico and became a fluent Spanish speaker. He bought a hacienda in Jalisco that had been damaged during the Mexican Revolution and made enthusiastic plans to restore it. Then he surrounded himself with pre-Columbian art, Spanish colonial paintings, and watercolours of all kinds. Between the mid-1950s and his death in 1976 he maintained a dual residence in San Francisco and Mexico.
The sales receipts left by Harald Wagner indicate he actively collected Teotihuacan mural fragments in Mexico between 1963 and 1968. During those years Teotihuacan mural fragments were widely available, casually bought, easily found in public markets. They were perfectly acceptable as collectibles, but people generally avoided them because they were dirty, had a tendency to disintegrate and were difficult to handle. With his passion for art and his architectural training, Harald Wagner may have seen himself as a steward for these neglected fragments and perhaps wanted to save as many as possible. He seems to have had dreams of gathering them and eventually reconstructing them. Whatever his intention, Harald Wagner had the mural fragments trucked to San Francisco between 1966 and 1967. In the following two years he showed them to many of his friends.

Once the murals were in San Francisco, Wagner and friends worked sporadically to stabilize and refit the pieces. Apparently it was Wagner’s eventual plan to sell the murals as a group. Between 1967 and 1972 he tried to sell them to various museums. He was never able to find a buyer – perhaps because he refused to separate individual pieces from the collection and insisted that the collection be kept together in its entirety. Perhaps another difficulty for Wagner in the early 1970s was the growing sense of public consciousness and unease about looted sites and archaeological treasures. In declining health and unable to find a buyer, Wagner decided once and for all to leave all the fragments to the de Young Museum. He stated his wishes in a handwritten will and never told the museum of his plans to bequeath the collection.⁶

Mexico and the Teotihuacan murals

As the twentieth century unfolded, Teotihuacan became a major tourist destination, a prestigious archaeological zone, an immense tourist attraction, and foremost national symbol. By 1963, the site had grown so important, it was to be enlarged to almost twice its existing size by presidential decree. This was an enormous undertaking that involved studying and restoring major archaeological structures. It also required building a ring-shaped super-highway to provide maximum public access to the newly enlarged site.

Many changes were happening to Mexico’s cultural institutions in the early 1960s. The National Museum in Mexico City was to be inaugurated in September 1964. In the vicinity of the established Teotihuacan zone, the Mexican Government had purchased tracts of land owned by surrounding citizens and townships in order to enlarge the Teotihuacan archaeological park. Because all natural resources and archaeological objects are by Mexican law owned by the Government of Mexico, it would not have mattered exactly where the murals were removed to. Wherever they were found, they would have been considered as the property of the Mexican nation.

A period of concentrated art historical and archaeological research on the murals by a team of experts in the late 1970s had revealed that the Wagner murals were of exceptional quality and condition and many of them formed interrelated groups. However, because of the unprecedented nature of the mural donation – its size, importance, and attitudes about cultural patrimony in Mexico, our museum wanted to take the initiative to
approach the Mexican Government and create a co-operative programme of care and restoration work.

Our museum had a definite plan in mind. We believed that a voluntary return of a significant portion of the murals to Mexico would be ethically warranted and important. We also wanted to retain permanently a select group of Teotihuacan murals in San Francisco. We hoped to educate the public and call attention to the problem of looting by providing an educational exhibition telling the story of the murals and explaining the necessity of preserving the crumbling fragments. We intended to create a joint public conservation exhibition, utilizing conservators both in Mexico and the United States.

Having clearly established the legality of the murals in California according to US law, but not that of Mexico, our museum had the delicate problem of deciding whom to contact in Mexico. The de Young Museum, like many American museums, had considerable autonomy, albeit belonging to the City of San Francisco. But Mexico’s cultural institutions and collections are all owned by the state. No museum there could speak for Mexico without involving several branches of the Mexican Government. Everyone said that the primary agency in charge of antiquities was Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Anthropología e Historia (INAH).^6

The first issue that became immediately apparent was the problem of a city museum in negotiations with the Government of Mexico. To bridge the gap, we engaged the United States Embassy in Mexico City. This enabled us to work government-to-government and keep our relationship evenly balanced. But there were also issues of protocol and cultural differences to be breached.^7

All these delicate negotiations took years—and required the active involvement of the museum’s board of trustees, director and staff, San Francisco’s Deputy City Attorney’s office, and government officials at INAH. Opposing American and Mexican attitudes about the ownership of the murals were really at the crux of the problem.

Working with all attendant cultural and political sensitivity, all parties ultimately had to ‘agree to disagree’ on the issue of ownership. We could agree, however, on the importance of the mural collection and the necessity to join together to protect and preserve them and this became the basis for our collaboration. There were many versions of agreements—it took months of negotiations, face to face, back and forth, in Spanish and in English.

An unprecedented, primary Joint Agreement was finally signed on 7 December 1981. At this point, our trustees had agreed to voluntarily return at least 50 per cent of the murals to Mexico in order to create a positive moral climate and precedent. INAH had agreed to pay for the transportation costs of the murals that were returned to Mexico. We had established that our museum would be responsible for raising funds to pay for all the conservation costs and that INAH would provide conservators from Churubusco to engage in a joint conservation effort in San Francisco.
Reconstructing the Wagner fragments

The most vital questions regarding the curatorship of the collection were concerned with research, establishing interrelationships between fragments, and making comparisons with other existing pieces in collections throughout the world. Library research yielded sparse results as it was difficult to find research materials. The few existing publications on Teotihuacan murals were limited in scope, accessibility, and images. Even among pre-Columbian specialists, firsthand knowledge of Teotihuacan murals was limited.

Art historians and archaeological experts had pored over the fragments and attempted a reconstruction. Because the fragments were crated and not easily available, extensive storage space had to be found to uncrate them. The space we finally found had limited availability. But we defined a window of time when the murals would be uncrated and made them available to everyone who needed to see them. Our colleagues from Mexico came to San Francisco. Everyone connected with the Wagner estate received a viewing, museum trustees, government officials, Wagner’s friends, and scholars—all were invited to come.

Once the murals were unpacked and available for study, scholarship on the murals accelerated and we could see subtle physical evidence proving which fragments were contiguous or related. Probably the most exciting part of our research finally came in 1983/84 when René Millon and the archaeologists of INAH did a surface analysis of the portion of the Teotihuacan site from which they suspected most of the Wagner murals derived. Our museum has never supported archaeological work directly but, for the first time, we provided the archaeological funds for Millon’s field season. So with this support, as well as that of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Rochester, INAH and archaeologists and conservators in Mexico, the team was able to go forward. After clearing surface vegetation and performing intensive surface collection of mural fragments and looters’ pits in the area in a subterranean compound called Techinantitla, the project established the original location for most of the major mural paintings in the Wagner collection.

Conservation issues and disposition of the collection

It had taken four years to complete the Primary Joint Agreement. But there were still complex issues to discuss regarding conservation treatments for the collection. Since 1976, all unearthed Teotihuacan murals in Mexico had been routinely treated by Mexican conservators, eliminating all the adobe backing down to the delicate lime layer holding the painted surface, and replacing it with a new permanent support of synthetic manufacture, composed of polystyrene pearls, epoxy resin, and volcanic ash. The resulting mural was much thinner and lighter, showed no tendency to crumble, and could easily be handled or stored.

Other conservators believed fervently that such an irreversible method of treatment was absolutely not indicated, particularly if the murals were treated with special adaptations and careful handling. For the larger fragments they suggested a custom-fit aluminium framework that would
follow the rough perimeter of each one. Interlocking fragments, such as a 14-foot (4.27 metre) long feathered serpent, would be constructed with welded joins and include structural clips for support.9

This difference of opinion over removing or preserving the adobe backing placed tremendous pressures on our joint conservation project, which was planned to take place in 1984 in the form of a public conservation exhibition involving a team of Mexican and American conservators.10 There had been a number of face-to-face meetings in San Francisco and Mexico, but no compromise ultimately proved possible and both sides were polarized. We decided to reconcile the conflict through administrative channels. An INAH representative was designated to come to San Francisco to mediate the situation. He met with us and a jointly authored proposal of 7 February 1985 was the eventual outcome. This proposal described the two diverse treatments and acknowledged that ‘some murals may require special considerations in their treatments and several choices may be possible. If we cannot agree on a technical point, then the opinion of the conservator to whose institution that particular mural will ultimately be disposed will be the opinion to be followed in the treatment’.11

This conservation proposal was finalized none too soon, since a second phase of public collaboration was about to take place in a matter of weeks. Now all that remained was to divide the collection into those murals that were to be returned to Mexico, and those that were to remain in San Francisco.

Although we thought that the disposition of the collection might be problematic, it turned out to be much easier than agreeing on conservation procedures, given the size and repetitive nature of the Wagner collection. Our rationale for distributing the collection was based on several factors. Because there were twelve ‘themes’ in the collection and generally several examples on a given theme, it was possible to split the holdings and divide up the collection so that each side had a representative selection. We were always of the view that the most
important and highest quality art historical examples should stay in San Francisco, given the mission of our institution as a museum dedicated to diversity in the fine arts. And we were candid about sharing this information with Mexico. We also knew that there were already hundreds of Teotihuacan murals in Mexico that were not publicly available—unpublished and inaccessible. So we argued that because there were such tremendous mural riches already in Mexico and so few in the United States, we were justified in retaining the most important art historical examples of the Wagner collection for San Francisco. For Mexico, the quantity of mural fragments that San Francisco voluntarily returned was more important. We apportioned the collection, using photographs, in the space of a morning and documented it in another written agreement. Ultimately, Mexico received from San Francisco over two-thirds of the Wagner collection.

The public conservation exhibition took place in 1984 in a prominent upstairs gallery at the de Young Museum. It was like working in a fishbowl, but the visiting public loved it. In February 1986, once the murals were all conserved, Mexico's share was returned to INAH in a celebratory manner. Soon after, INAH and the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City showcased the returned murals in a special exhibition entitled *Exhibición de Recuperación de Frescos Teotihuacanos* which opened on 19 February 1986 at Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology.

**Subsequent collaboration**

Having collaborated for nearly twenty years with Mexico on the Teotihuacan murals, our museum was enthusiastic about the possibility of developing a major exhibition on all the arts of Teotihuacan, which would be drawn primarily from Mexican national collections. The Teotihuacan murals project had paved the way, for even though there had been major obstacles and areas of disagreement, our relations had been largely amicable and gratifying. We had made many friends in Mexico. Although the cultural leaders tended to change along with changes in the presidency, we had developed strong and trusting relations and both sides were enthusiastic about the honesty with which we could resolve the inevitable future issues.

Thus the concept of the exhibition *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods* was born. We spent the years between 1987 and 1993 at various negotiation levels. What became immediately clear as we eagerly requested important loans from Mexico (we called them art objects—Mexico termed them national patrimony) was that in order to obtain major loans, it would be necessary to provide some type of reciprocity or cultural exchange to Mexico. For reciprocity, San Francisco ultimately supported the production of a new film about Teotihuacan for the National Museum of Anthropology. We also provided major institutional support for the new Teotihuacan Murals site museum.

In 1988, a new agency, the National Council for the Fine Arts (CONACULTA) was created in Mexico by presidential decree. This decentralized agency was and continues to be of major importance, although it was initially unclear how INAH and CONACULTA would interact. Again we relied on the US Embassy for guidance and to help define the political terrain. There were
even more government officials with whom we would need to meet but there was also more creativity. Today, over eighteen years later, CONACULTA and INAH continue to work together to protect Mexico’s tremendous antiquities and artistic resources.

The 1993 exhibition and catalogue, *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods*, was a bilateral collaboration, with Mexico’s active participation in the bilingual storyline or interpretation of the objects, the production of the catalogue essays, and the object entries. I remember numerous meetings about all aspects of the project at the prestigious National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City. As complex as it was, the collaboration process was extremely worthwhile because it forced us all to see beyond our respective positions and made us work towards mutual understanding and an optimum outcome.

Integral to the success of these Teotihuacan negotiations was the central role played by the United States Embassy in Mexico City. Most of the artworks in the exhibition had never before been shown outside of their respective countries. The San Francisco exhibition was so
important that we received a personal visit to San Francisco from the President of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gotori.

We continued visiting Mexico and maintained our friendships during the 1990s. Then a complex acquisition opportunity arose. In 1999 our museum was offered a Maya stela of unknown provenance that could have originated anywhere in the Central Maya region, but most likely in Mexico or Guatemala. After many months of diligent research, we had proved beyond a doubt that the stela had been in the United States legally according to US law and that it could have originated anywhere in present-day Mexico or Guatemala. Our director, with the approval of our board of trustees, nevertheless made several trips to Guatemala and Mexico to hold face to face talks with cultural leaders and make sure neither country would object to its future acquisition. Both countries thanked us for bringing this matter to their attention in such a forthright manner and eventually found it acceptable for us to move ahead. We now exhibit the stela in San Francisco with the credit-line stipulating that it is part of the national patrimony of either Mexico or Guatemala, and we acknowledge deep appreciation to both those countries.13

In the late 1990s we decided that it would be desirable to put on a Maya exhibition and produce a publication jointly with Mexico.14 Courty Art of the Ancient Maya was a joint exhibition by our museum and the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., requesting some of the most important ancient Maya monuments and ceremonial objects from the Government of Mexico. To reciprocate, the Mexican Government requested a loan of 300 works of African art from San Francisco’s permanent collection, which could be featured in Mexico City’s National Museum of Anthropology. We were in the process of rebuilding a new de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park and much of our collection was packed up, so the timing of this request was perfect. Mexico’s designated African curator came to San Francisco several times to work with the collections. We lent over 300 African works two years before the Maya exhibition contract was finalized. The spectacular exhibition, ÁFRICA, was inaugurated by President Fox at the National Museum of Anthropology and History in September 2002. It circulated to Monterrey, Mexico, the following year.15

On several other occasions San Francisco has lent important collections to Mexico. During 2004/05 we lent the exhibition American Accents to the Museo Amparo in Puebla. A selection of paintings from the Rockefeller Collection was splendidly installed at this prestigious institution. During 2004/05 our museum also sent a large show of Henry Moore sculptures and drawings to the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa (Jalapa), an institution less well known in the United States but one that compares in majesty to the great National Museum in Mexico City.

Then in 2004, when plans were under way to re-open a new de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park, our director asked Mexico for the loan of a monumental work of art to celebrate the opening of the new building. We suggested a colossal Olmec head dating from 1200 B.C.E., a six-foot (1.85 m) tall basalt object, weighing in at 10,000 lb (4,600 kg). The loan request was favourably received and soon granted.
Olmec Colossal Head No. 4 from San Lorenzo, Veracruz, one of Mexico's largest and most important works of national patrimony, remained in San Francisco for a loan period of fourteen months. Over 1.6 million visitors had the privilege of viewing this amazing treasure. It was of course given a central place - both aesthetically and symbolically - designating the heart of our museum's permanent collection of art of the ancient Americas. Colossal Head No. 4 was one of the most popular artworks featured in our museum that first inaugural year. A special gallery devoted to documenting San Francisco's historic Wagner mural collection lay only a stone's throw away. It was a fitting juxtaposition to have the Olmec colossal head and the Wagner murals in close proximity.

In retrospect, during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Wagner collection of Teotihuacan murals triggered a domino series of collaborations and exchange relationships between San Francisco and Mexico that have been extremely gratifying and satisfying for all concerned. We also see, in retrospect, that there were perhaps other historical factors working in our favour. This was, for example, a period of increased interest in improved international relations for both countries. Economic needs on both sides paved the way for NAFTA in 1993. We shared a mutual desire to use international exhibitions as a way to gain increased status and attention.

We didn't know it in 1976, but the Harald Wagner Bequest of Teotihuacan Murals changed the history of our museum. The resulting years of collaboration changed us and refined our institutional identity. These projects had an impact on the way the art of Mexico was studied or understood in many parts of the United States, and on Mexico's subsequent relationships with other American museums. These projects also changed perceptions of ourselves and our place in the global museum network.

The gains from these collaborative projects were, of course, both measurable and
immeasurable. We have a special permanent Teotihuacan gallery dedicated to documenting San Francisco’s unprecedented collaboration with Mexico, which will always be on view for visitors to see. We have prepared a number of scholarly publications and public programmes or films documenting the projects and our relationship over time. The demands of the Teotihuacan murals project in the early years eventually netted a full-time conservator for arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, an important position that has remained a permanent one since 1983. The negotiations also updated our museum’s collection and in 1983 we added a seven-page appendix of Principles to Insure Legal, Moral, and Ethical Acquisition Decisions.

There were many intangible benefits to these projects. The Teotihuacan mural project gave our department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas a more scholarly emphasis and helped us to a better understanding of issues of collection ownership that will challenge us all in the twenty-first century. The Teotihuacan negotiations taught us the importance of approaching each collection situation methodically, on a case-by-case basis. These cumulative experiences also taught us to respect multiple points of view, to bring in a variety of outside advisers, to gather as much information as possible, and to deal in a forthright way with tough issues involving cultural objects. We learned that there is a difference between legal and ethical actions, and that joint collaboration can yield unexpected benefits. Perhaps most of all we have a much better and more solid understanding of collection issues in the twenty-first century. And we will honour and value our very special relationship with Mexico in years to come.

| NOTES |

1. The M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, located in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, is one of two buildings comprising the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The other building is the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in Lincoln Park.

2. A project like this always involves a large number of talented individuals too numerous to name. It was my privilege to serve as the project curator or co-ordinator; however, the success of the Wagner negotiations had more to do with a particular point in history and the interaction of a specific group of individuals than it did with any single individual. For a full account of our initial situation see Braun, Barbara (1962) Subtle Diplomacy Solves a Custody Case, Art News, Summer.


4. Investigative reporter Ron Russell has written an insightful article about Harald Wagner. See the unfortunately titled ‘Looted: rare murals from Mexico, plundered from an ancient site, were donated to the de Young Museum by an intriguing S.F. character’. San Francisco Weekly, Vol. 25, No. 31, 30 August-5 September. 2006, pp.17-23.


6. INAH or the National Institute of Anthropology and History is the Federal Government agency responsible for research, preservation, protection, and promotion of prehistoric, archaeological, anthropological, historical and palaeontological heritage of Mexico. Created in 1938, under the Ministry of Public Education, it was subsequently reinforced in 1970 by the Federal Law on the Cultural Heritage of the Nation, which provided for its legal status over built and movable archaeological property throughout Mexico. Today INAH has authorization over 348 museums in Mexico (national, regional, local, site, community) as well as 600,000 archaeological objects, 1.5 million photographic archives, and also documents and manuscripts.

7. Our primary liaison – to whom we will always be grateful – was Bertha Coa Echiniique, now senior cultural affairs specialist at the US Embassy in Mexico City.


