Selected from the museum’s extensive holdings of Mexican photographs, this exhibition presents ninety photographs by thirty-five photographers. While the entire collection includes performance and conceptual art, abstractions, and color images—which convey the full vitality and diversity of contemporary Mexican photography—this exhibition concentrates on pictures that document contemporary Mexico. The country is distinguished by a rich and complicated culture, where skyscrapers flank ancient Aztec ruins, and where Spanish, French, and American influences vie for dominance with indigenous prehispanic cultures. The images here range from Graciela Iturbide’s photograph of an Indian woman carrying a portable radio through a desert to Rubén Ortiz’ picture of two kids with punk hairstyles sitting beneath a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper. In addition to the contrasts between urban and rural customs, other recurring subjects establish the importance in Mexico of religious life, festivals, sports, politics, ancient birthrights, and imported commodities.

The photographers approach these themes with distinctive poetic distance, refusing to simplify irreconcilable incongruities. This style has evolved from a rich, internationally recognized literary and artistic heritage. The dean of its photographic practitioners, Manuel Álvarez Bravo (b. 1902), was a member of the Mexican Renaissance who continues to photograph and exhibit his work. Through his remarkable images, and as a teacher and employer of young assistants, he has served as a mentor for successive generations of Mexican photographers. Also featured in this exhibition is the work of five other senior members of Mexico’s photographic history: Héctor García, Ignacio “Nacho” López, Mariana Yampolsky, Pedro Meyer, and Víctor Flores Olea. García and López (both b. 1923) were crusading photojournalists who examined social exploitation and political corruption throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Yampolsky came to Mexico to work as an engraver and curator in a graphic arts workshop, but in the 1960s began to photograph Mexico’s agrarian, religious, and architectural heritage. Flores Olea (b. 1932) is a photographer, writer, and politician who serves today as president of the Consejo Nacional para La Cultura y Las Artes. Beyond his own photography, Pedro Meyer (b. 1935) has devoted substantial time to promoting Latin American photography in his roles as a critic, organizer of conferences, and cofounder of the Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía.

While the senior members of Mexican photographic history are well represented in the exhibition, most of the featured photographers were born during or after World War II. They comprise an active community that has earned international acclaim from exhibitions held throughout the Americas, Europe, and Asia. In 1985 members of the Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía assembled 125 of the photographs now in the museum’s collection for sale to support relief efforts for the Mexico City earthquake. Three-quarters of this exhibition is drawn from that collection, which was purchased for the museum with funds provided by the Houston Hispanic community, the Wortham Foundation, the Brown Foundation, the Frees Foundation, and the Comité Patriótico Mexicano. The effort to purchase this vital collection was also supported by Vinson & Elkins and guided to completion by museum trustee Pampa Trotti. Since the acquisition, the Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía has helped research the collection and its photographers. This exhibition, accompanying publications, and educational programs are supported by Target Stores and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. The museum is grateful for the support of each of these generous benefactors.

Peter C. Marzio
Director
Portraits

Between the world wars, the Mexican Renaissance established one of the most vital contributions to early twentieth-century art to have emerged in the Americas. Its leaders, including Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, were popular subjects for photographers. Kehlo, photographed by Manuel Alvarez Bravo shortly after her marriage to Rivera, is dressed in the traditional costume and jewelry of Mexican Indians, whose cultural heritage she and Rivera championed over European influences. A piece of indigenous art rests on the floor by her skirt. Bravo also photographed the writer Octavio Paz and the sculptor Juan Rulfo in equally characteristic and appropriate settings. Héctor García photographed Rivera in his studio and the muralist and political radical Siqueiros reaching through prison bars.

Many portraits in the exhibition are of anonymous citizens. But whether they are photographing the giants of Mexican culture or an unknown person selling frijoles on a street corner, the photographers' approaches are consistently sympathetic without being sentimental. Some subjects assume erectly still and frontal poses; others accommodate the photographer only for the fractional second of a shutter's click; and others play to the camera like celebrities. John O'Leary poses two slender young wrestlers against a wall of muscle-bound Adonis. Graciela Iturbide photographs a woman possessing a steady gaze and the hint of a smile while holding four dried fish out the window of her mud and timber house. In a picture titled The Weapons, Pablo Ortiz Monasterio portrays a man clenching flowers in a bottle in one hand and long sticks in the other. Victor Flores Olea depicts three Christmas wise men with tinsel crowns, reflector sunglasses, and baseball gloves. These pictures are simultaneously compelling and defiantly impenetrable.

Cultural Artifacts

In contemporary Mexico, modern society coexists with artifacts and rituals from Mexico's ancient past; in fact both its European and native pasts survive in modified form. Working in the tradition of Alvarez Bravo, Mexican photographers have become masters of evocative and unexpected juxtapositions. Many of these juxtapositions are discovered, while others are set up by the photographers. Randomly plastered wall posters offer particularly rich cross-cultural incongruities, as Gilberto Chen discovered when he photographed the images of Michael Jackson and the Virgin of Guadalupe juxtaposed on a wall. Chen also photographed a skeletal man on a skeletal horse — drawn in the tradition of the Mexican illustrator José Guadalupe Posada — seemingly about to ride off a wall to skewer a pedestrian. Adrian Bodek found commercial advertising displays to be fecund sources of humor. In La Calaca, where a corseted mannequin and a weight scale flank a skeleton, there is a touch of gallows humor.

Each year, Mexico hosts 7,500 festivals; photographers have found these celebrations and their accompanying costumes to provide rich sources of imagery. José Luis Neyra came upon a table of wide-eyed masks awaiting
revelers. Flor Garduño, José Kuri Breña, Salvador Lutteroth, and Mariana Yampolsky each posed merrymakers in full regalia against plain adobe walls. These are not costumes purchased in drugstores. Instead, their designs and handcrafted materials evoke whimsically personal interpretations of traditional heroes. Apart from the frivolities of festivals, both Jesús Sanchez Uribe and Gerardo Suter have found inspiration in Mexico's more solid and massive cultural artifacts—its architecture, with elaborate iron grillwork, ceramic cornices, and friezes with mythical beasts.

**Religion**

Religion in Mexico draws upon the Catholic beliefs imported by the Spanish Conquistadors and the colorful festive folklore of the Indians, as Christopher Columbus referred to them. When the Conquistadors came to the Americas they imposed Catholicism on the natives. There was a fusion between Spanish and native traditions, both of which came to coexist rather than to replace existing beliefs. Today in Mexico there are numerous special fiestas that are still celebrated. These rituals remain strong from one generation to the next, while some ceremonial details vary from region to region. In her photograph *Puebla*, Flor Garduño has captured two festival participants at rest. One is a musician crouched against a wall holding a musical instrument. The other standing man wears a decorative hat and a wooden horse tied around his waist symbolizing St. James. Fiestas commemorate such Catholic holidays as Holy Week and honor the patron saint of a village or town.

Special dances are performed during the fiestas, many of which involve the use of masks and ornate costumes. Among the many dances performed in contemporary Mexico, the tiger dance is the most popular. In ancient times the natives used the image of the jaguar or ocelot, since the tiger was not indigenous to their country. As in the past, many masks today are made of wood, leather, clay, paper, cloth, wire, mesh, gourds, and wax.

There could not be a more clear depiction of religious devotion and Mexican national pride than is revealed in the photograph *Mexico, D.F.*, by Victor Flores Olea. In this work a man proudly carries the Mexican flag while behind him follow men upholding a banner depicting the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. The Virgin is honored by all Mexicans on December 12, the anniversary of her last visit.

![Image of man holding flag and banner](image1)

The Virgin first appeared to Juan Diego, a poor convert, on December 9, 1531. An eighteenth-century chapel on Tepeya Hill marks the spot of her appearance. Visitors from across the world visit the Basilica of Guadalupe, situated at the foot of the hill in the town of La Villa de Guadalupe Hidalgo, three miles from the Mexico City Cathedral.

![Image of a church](image2)
ENTERTAINMENT

Masks are traditionally worn not only for religious festivals and carnivals, but also for entertainment. A mask helps one to assume another identity or even to hide the harsh realities of life. The use of these disguises invokes a sense of mystery and excitement, and forces the viewer to focus on the form of entertainment as opposed to the particular performer.

Carlos Contreras in Bibis Circus has accurately chronicled the realities of traveling circuses. The clown's painted face conceals his harsh life. Although not a glamorous setting and sometimes a dangerous one, the show always seems to go on, to the enchantment of the children in the audience.

Lourdes Grobet, with her eye-catching photographs of female wrestlers, has taken entertainment and sport to a different level. In her series titled Double Struggle, she depicts the lives of female wrestlers. With her camera, she not only documents the sport, but also provides a unique glimpse into the lives of the participants. The title of the series demonstrates Lourdes' sympathy towards the difficulties women experience in society, especially when they work in a male-dominated sport or profession.

Sports figures often serve as role models or heroes for children, as seen in John O'Leary's Opium Dreams. Here, two young men pose in front of a wall decorated with images of wrestling heroes. Although not terribly glamorous, the wrestlers succeed in entertaining the masses and eliciting the hero-worship of children.

URBAN VS. RURAL

In this exhibition one perceives the sharp contrast between the photographs of urban scenes and those of rural areas. Mexico is blessed not only with natural beauty, but also with a great cultural heritage, providing photographers with a variety of scenes from which to choose. Each photographer has approached similar topics differently. Mariana Yampolsky patiently waits and evaluates until she is able to capture everyday and intimate moments that would have been lost if not preserved by the camera. For example, in Caress she records the sweet embrace of a mother and child. Pedro Meyer, on the other hand, haunts us with his beautiful but disturbing photographs. His work titled The Iguana Woman is full of wonderful tonalities, but it becomes terribly ominous once one realizes the similarities between the vendor and her merchandise. The deep wrinkles on her face resemble the folds on the iguana's skin.

Like Meyer, Carlos Somonte finds unexpected juxtapositions. His approach is direct; his statement subtle but precise. In the photograph Rhinoceroses one confronts the backs of these two animals, which are usually photographed from the front. The rhinoceroses become shapes trapped within the symmetry imposed by urban society.

Rubén Ortiz explores how Mexican youth attempt to balance their very complex heritage with the new influences of their urban environment. In Mexico, 72.5 percent of the population lives in urban areas, thus making Mexico City one of the largest urban centers in the world. In the photograph The Last Supper, Ortiz captures the clash between beliefs and lifestyles. His images in the exhibition — which look as if they could have been taken in any large city, such as Houston — are simultaneously inviting and chilling.