

Viva Mexico: Graphic Identity in Chicago's Pilsen Neighborhood

by Victor Margolin

The question of identity and how it is expressed is a central theme of contemporary cultural studies. Identity is particularly important in the case of Mexico where there has been extensive emigration. Within the Mexican diaspora, the country's current citizens, former citizens, and their descendants continue to make reference to their homeland even though they live elsewhere.

Today Mexicans and Mexican-Americans comprise a significant percentage of greater Chicago's population. During the 1950s, the West Side neighborhood known as Pilsen, which ranges from 18th St. on the northern end to 26th St. on the south, became the center of Mexican life in the city. It was the first neighborhood where organizations that focused specifically on Mexican concerns were formed and it is today a center of visual which depicts Mexican identity or *Mexicanidad*.

The Chicano movement of the 1960s was the basis for a wave of social murals in the United States that represented the concerns of Mexicans. Today one can see a number of murals in Pilsen that were inspired by murals of the 1960s as well as by the earlier Mexican murals of the 1930s. One example, which establishes a lineage of liberation that extends from Cuauhtémoc through Benito Juárez to Emiliano Zapata, follows the Mexican government's nation-building strategy of the 1920s and 1930s which attempted to unite Aztec resistance to the conquistadores with the reform movement of Juarez and the leadership of Zapata during the Revolution (Figure 1).

Since the early 1960s when Chicano artists began to use a wide variety of motifs that originated in Mexican culture, the direct borrowing and adaptation of Mexican symbols has been an important means of expressing cultural identity in the United States. This has not always been done with historical accuracy and some of these symbols, taken out of their original cultural context, have simply become icons with generic meanings that are used for many different purposes.

One example is the Calendar Stone which represents the cosmic scheme of the Aztecs. In Pilsen one can find the stone on a street mural combined with a group of figures who may have originated with the depictions of Aztec gods in the Codex Borbonicus, the first manuscript of the early Colonial period. But no references are made to an archeological site. Both calendar stone and god figures are set in a scenic mountainous landscape and the calendar is reproduced in strong colors instead of in a way that suggests stone. In another mural the calendar is incorporated into an image that recalls the American social murals of the 1930s. The theme is "Unidos para el

Progreso” (United for Progress), a slogan that also refers to the rhetoric of the 1930s. Here we see the massive figures of American social realism (even though they are Mexicans) rather than the style of the muralistas. The calendar depicted in this mural functions as an image of power to inspire the two figures to work hard to improve their situation in America. The same calendar image also serves as a kind of logotype on the wall of a social service center (Figure 2) where it indicates that this center is for people of the community, a significant factor in Chicago where all minorities have had to fight hard over the years to obtain social services from the city. And lastly, we find the Aztec calendar in the Nuevo Leon Restaurant where it is used as decor as it is in many other Mexican eateries in the United States. Here it is not employed directly as a commercial icon but rather as an image to establish a Mexican ambiance for the restaurant’s customers.

One curious phenomenon in the depiction of Mexican identity both in Chicago and in Mexico is the continued circulation of the sleeping Mexican, an icon seen by many as a negative image which reinforces stereotypes of lazy campesinos. This image appears frequently in Chicago, notably on restaurant signs and even on food packaging. In Pilsen, it can be seen side by side with the wall murals and it contributes to an extremely complex field of imagery that represents cultural identity in Chicago’s Mexican community. On one particular restaurant sign, the sleeping figure is playfully shown dreaming of tacos. We can contrast the sleeping Mexican with another figure, the charro, a type of cowboy, who is also used in Chicago to characterize a number of restaurants. The charro, a property owner unlike the campesino, is a more noble figure though not one associated with revolution as are the figures depicted in the murals.

One expression of *Mexicanidad* that is unique to the Mexican restaurants in Pilsen, as opposed those in Chicago’s Anglo neighborhoods, is the reference to a particular town or region in Mexico. In Pilsen, not only restaurants but also markets, bakeries, and other stores make reference to specific places in the homeland, usually a particular city or a state. The reference to a specific place is significant because it implies communication with people who understand the reference rather than a public who has no interest in going beyond a more generic representation of cultural identity. The Monterrey Supermarket on 18th St. uses a specific icon from Monterrey’s landscape, the mountain known as the Cerro de la Silla, a powerful image that evokes a strong sense of place (Figure 3).

It is rare in Pilsen to see a visual form that is created by a professional graphic designer. Instead signs are produced in other ways. Some are done in professional sign shops while others are simply typical vernacular signs made by someone with no particular training in art or design. One example of vernacular lettering for the restaurant “Mi Barrio,” draws heavily on the bulging forms that originated with New York’s graffiti artists who first wrote their names with spray paint on

the city's subway cars and urban walls in large rounded letters (Figure 4). The Mexican figures are depicted humorously unlike the serious representations in the social murals. We see a mariachi at street level with his hat pulled over his eyes and the head of the other figure is actually the dot on the "i" in the word "mi."

This engagement with *Mexicanidad* through art and advertising serves several purposes for the Mexican community in Chicago. First, it is a resistance to the assimilationist tendencies of an earlier period of immigration. Following the strong assertion of Mexican identity that began with the Chicano movement of the 1960s, Pilsen's graphics defines a distinct Mexican presence in Chicago, particularly through the results of the mural movement in which Chicago artists were leaders.

Second, they counter a previous indifference to Mexican culture by the larger American public. Miguel Covarrubias satirized this indifference in his painting of the opening of the exhibition "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art" at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1940 which depicted a statue of the fearsome Aztec goddess Coatlicue surrounded by apathetic New York glitterati.

Third is the graphics' resistance to the appropriation of Mexican culture by American enterprises that use a semblance of that culture for purely commercial purposes. Consider the design of the Taco Bell fast-food restaurant, with its reference to the Alamo, or the packaging for Tostitos, a product named with a word that does not even exist in the Mexican vocabulary. On the Tostitos package Mexican culture is represented in the form of some motifs adapted from ancient temple architecture and a stone bowl for grinding corn which is now used for serving salsa dip. Without resistance *Mexicanidad* would be reduced to commercial pastiche.

What is perhaps more important than any of the above mentioned reasons to value the street graphics of Pilsen is that they continue to reinforce the street as a vibrant center of social life. According to the urban planner David Diaz, the street space of ethnic communities is a powerful alternative to the specters of empty streets and vast cavernous buildings that postmodern theorists such as Frederic Jameson postulate.

In Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, the relation between graphic expression and cultural identity is strongly stated even though the varied examples of ethnic representation have no formal or ideological unity. What should be noted, however, is that the different conceptions of *Mexicanidad* coexist because of some larger belief that it is better to share a broad but differentiated cultural identity than to be fragmented and ultimately made invisible once again.