

Taking and Denying

Challenging Canons in Arts and Philosophy

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The 'Unknown Arts' of Ancient America: Challenging Classical Art Canons in Nineteenth-Century France

The Reception of Pre-Columbian Art before the Primitivist and Surrealist Avant-Gardes

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Abstract Pre-Columbian artefacts have been collected and exhibited in Europe since the 16th century. For a long time, they were considered exotic curiosities, 'grotesque' attempts at art by inferior peoples. This was a judgement stemming from a Eurocentric definition of art and, during the 19th century, indissociable from colonial and imperialist ideology. We present some views held in scholarly circles about pre-Columbian art in nineteenth-century France and focus on two artists, Jean Frédéric de Waldeck (1766-1875) and Emile Soldi (1846-1906), who drew from contemporary ethnographic and archaeological research, and pre-Columbian history to challenge the limits of academicism and the *Beaux-Arts* system.

Keywords Pre-Columbian art. Art history and ethnography. Artistic reception. Nineteenth-century France. Pre-Columbian collections. History of collections. Non-European art exhibitions. Academicism.

Summary 1 Introduction: Pre-Columbian Art and the Values of Beauty and Instruction. – 2 Mexican Antiquity Reimagined Through the Lens of Neoclassical Aesthetics. – 3 Between Art and Ethnography: Emile Soldi and the Critique of Hegelian Aesthetics and the Classical *Beaux-Arts*. – 4 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction: Pre-Columbian Art and the Values of Beauty and Instruction

Traditional historiography dates the beginning of the formalist and aesthetic valorisation of non-European and non-classical art to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the contributions of theorists such as Wölfflin or Worringer on the one hand, and the vogue for Primitivism, African, Oceanian, and pre-Columbian art on the other. This phenomenon inspired the Western artistic production of early 'Primitivists' such as Gauguin or Van Gogh, later modernist Avant-Gardes, and durably influenced collecting practices and art market dynamics.¹

The first major exhibition to accentuate the aesthetic rather than the ethnographic or archaeological value of pre-Columbian art was held in Paris in 1928. The exhibition was titled *Les Arts Anciens de l'Amérique* (The Ancient Arts of America), and was organised by the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* (Museum of Decorative Arts) and by Georges-Henri Rivière. It featured contributions from eminent scholars and high-quality pieces lent by private collectors and governmental institutions.² Georges Salles, curator at the Louvre and co-organiser of the exhibit, explains that their objective was to

Faire sortir du domaine du purement scientifique des objets [...] qui méritent d'être aussi considérés du point de vue artistique. (Carnot 1928, 82)

Retrieve from the realm of the purely scientific, objects [...] that ought to be considered also from an artistic point of view.³

The show was a success and a revelation for artists and critics alike. Visitors were struck by a "millénaire sentiment de la beauté" (a millenary sentiment of beauty; Henriot 1928, 1) and the "plaisir de haut goût" (pleasure of the highest taste; Babelon 1928, 5) they felt when looking at the pieces.

¹ See Clifford 1988 and Debaene 2002 for the relations between ethnographers and modernist aesthetes in Paris in the early 20th century. For the pre-Columbian art market in Paris in the Interwar period, see Saint-Raymond, Vaudry 2018. The literature on the complex relations between Primitivism and Modern art is vast, from Goldwater's classic *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1986), to recent surveys such as Flam et al. 2003. It would be impossible to present a comprehensive bibliography on the rich critical corpus on 'primitivism' as a Western construct, its racial and historical biases, but we can cite Connelly 1995; Price 2001 and, more recently, Dagen 2019.

² On the exhibition, see Williams 1985 and Faucourt 2013.

³ Unless otherwise indicated all translations are by the Author.

The reaction to a previous showing of pre-Columbian art at the Louvre nearly eighty years before could not have been more different. A visitor writes:

Il nous répugne d'ailleurs de voir le Louvre, ce sanctuaire consacré aux plus grandes civilisations [...] donner asile à des friperies barbares que [*sic*] intéressent bien plus aux archéologues officiels que les artistes. Cette accumulation de prétendues richesses fera bientôt ressembler [...] notre magnifique musée à une boutique de bric-à-brac. (Texier 1853, 285)

It disgusts us to see the Louvre, this temple devoted to the greatest of civilisations [...] giving sanctuary to barbarian clutter which should interest more official archaeologists than artists. [...] This accumulation of so-called riches will make our magnificent museum look more like a bric-à-brac boutique.

This passage illustrates the general attitude towards non-European artefacts during most of the nineteenth century: they were considered ugly, *maladroit* attempts at producing art by more primitive or inferior peoples. The problem, such as it was framed, came down to their nature: were they objects of curiosity, documents that could enlighten the study of ancient or primitive cultures, or did they also have some artistic value? The question is tied, in part, to the nineteenth century idea of the museum, since a clear distinction was emerging between museums of natural history and museums of classical and modern fine-arts (Paul 2012). In this context, the place and the value of archaeological and ethnographical objects, especially non-European ones, was ambiguous.

For instance, Alexander Von Humboldt thought that pre-Columbian art was useful to study the mores of ancient Americans. But because these objects were hieratical in nature, the product of theocratic societies, they could never truly be considered art, since artistic perfection was something only the ancient Greeks, with their democratic form of government, had achieved.⁴ He also thought they would fit well at the Louvre, where pre-Columbian antiquities could be compared to Egyptian ones (López Luján, Fauvet-Berthelot 2005). Edmé-François Jomard, from the *Bibliothèque Royale* (Royal Library) in Paris, thought along the same lines, although he was in favour of creating a separate ethnographic museum to house them (Jomard 1831, cited in Williams 1985, 147).

⁴ Humboldt's authority on the matter was long-lived: his view that non-European artefacts were foremost of historical interest, and not artistic, was still quoted and repeated at the end of the 19th century (Stüssi Garcia 2018, 26-33).

Another reason why it was so hard to accept that pre-Columbian objects could have artistic value is linked to the institutional history of individual museums, since *where* objects are shown determines the values assigned to them (Dias 2007). Throughout the nineteenth century, the Louvre struggled to be a universal institution with encyclopaedic ambitions and at the same time a fine-arts museum housing the artistic masterpieces of Western civilisation (Bresc-Bautier et al. 2016). Non-European artefacts were part of its collections, but whether they belonged there was a matter of debate. The history of the Louvre's pre-Columbian collections illustrates these tensions perfectly. They were first part of the *Musée de la Marine*, a small 'museum' within the Louvre which contained various ethnographical objects as well as boat models. In 1850, Adrien de Longpérier, curator of the antiquities department, convinced the administration to set aside some rooms for his *Musée mexicain* (Mexican museum). Eventually, criticism and lack of interest saw the collections relegated to backrooms and storage areas. Finally, in 1887, they were transferred to the new *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro* (Trocadéro Ethnography Museum), deemed a more suitable institution to house them.⁵

If during the nineteenth century these artefacts were thought to be chiefly of scientific interest and to belong in an ethnographic museum, or in any case, not at the Louvre, there was an uneasiness in completely denying any aesthetic qualities to them. These pieces came from pre-Conquest cultures whose sophistication and technical skill were attested by historical sources and their material culture could be arranged according to Western categories of artistic production.

For instance, Alexandre Lenoir, curator of the *Musée des Monuments Français* (Museum of French Monuments), recognised that there was artistic intent at work in the Mexican vases and sculptures that he commented in 1830. Pre-Columbian art was decorative and stylised, and possessed clear formal qualities, so much so that he divided his study of pre-Columbian art into the categories used for Western art, that is, painting, architecture, sculpture, and decorative arts (Lenoir 1834). Peruvian ceramics were also generally appreciated for their elegance (Williams 1985, 149) and even Aztec art, despite its unfamiliar forms and subjects, was from time to time praised: Durantv describes a statue of Quetzalcoatl as a beautiful specimen of American art (1878, 59), while de Poligny praises the subtlety of the *sentiment plastique* (plastic sentiment; 1878, 456) conveyed by some modelled heads.

So, the nineteenth-century view of exotic pre-Columbian arts was more complex than it might appear at first. These ambivalences were

⁵ For more detailed studies see Guimaraes 1994; Fauvet-Berthelot et al. 2007; Caubet 2016.

not limited to scholarly circles; they were sometimes also expressed by artists, some of whom were inspired by pre-Columbian art and whom, drawing from contemporary ethnographic and archaeological research, denounced the limitations of academicism and the 'Beaux-Arts system'.

2 Mexican Antiquity Reimagined Through the Lens of Neoclassical Aesthetics

In 1869, visitors at the *Salon*, the official art exhibition of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* (Academy of Fine Arts) of Paris, could find a curious painting depicting an obscure episode of ancient Mexican history. The painting bore the title *The Gladiatorial Sacrifice. An Episode of Mexican History at the End of the Reign of Moctezuma II in 1509* and depicted the death of Tlaxcaltec warrior Tlahuicole before the Aztec emperor Moctezuma II, according to the rite of the 'gladiatorial sacrifice'.

The author of this original painting was Count Jean-Frédéric Maximilien de Waldeck (1766-1875), an amateur antiquarian and artist who lived in Mexico during the 1820s and 1830s. Waldeck was one of the first Europeans to have explored the Mayan cities of Palenque and Uxmal - when he was already well past sixty - and his drawings were amongst the first to introduce these ancient ruins to European audiences.⁶

Waldeck's life reads straight out of an adventure novel: he was born in Paris or in Vienna, and claimed to have studied painting with neoclassical masters Vien and David, but also to have been a student of pre-Romantic painter Proudhon (*Explication des ouvrages de peinture et dessins, sculpture, architecture et gravure des artistes vivants* 1855, 582; 1868, 317). He boasts of having shared many a meal with Napoléon Bonaparte during the Egyptian campaign (Darby Smith 1878, 65) and to have explored India in his youth. In 1825, he travelled to Mexico, where he worked briefly as a mining engineer. While living in Mexico City, he became a favoured portraitist of Mexican and European high society. There, he crossed paths with many early *américaniste* scholars,⁷ and started collecting pre-Columbian antiquities. His journals betray a strong-willed, endlessly self-promoting and somewhat paranoid man, who tended to embellish his own

⁶ Waldeck's *Voyage pittoresque et archéologique dans la province du Yucatan (Amérique Centrale), pendant les années 1834 et 1836* (1838) predates Stephens and Catwood's better known *Incidents of Travel in Central America* of 1841.

⁷ *Américanisme* in French scholarship refers to the general study of the Americas, covering both continents and all periods, drawing from anthropology and archaeology but also linguistics and other social disciplines.

accomplishments, while, at the same time, showing genuine passion for pre-Columbian antiquity.⁸

When he left Mexico in 1836, he smuggled a large collection of antiquities and documents, some of which he kept on show in his apartment near Montmartre [fig. 1] (De Waldeck 1898). He also published a book of his exploration of Mayan ruins, combining picturesque illustrations and archaeological observations.⁹ We know little of his life in the following years, but in the 1860s Waldeck started exhibiting at the Salon. Alongside some subjects from Greek mythology, he also submitted paintings inspired by pre-Columbian America: a still-life of antiquities in 1867, the *Gladiatorial Sacrifice* in 1869, and a landscape of the ruins of Tzendales in 1870.

Waldeck's sudden appearance at the Salon after nearly thirty years was not a coincidence. Indeed, interest in Mexico was at an all-time high in France. In 1850, the Louvre had acquired an important collection of Aztec sculpture¹⁰ and shortly after inaugurated the 'Mexican Museum'.¹¹ At the same time, *Américanisme* was emerging as an independent field of scholarly research (Riviale 1995). Most importantly perhaps, in 1861 emperor Napoléon III had launched a military invasion of Mexico.¹² The expedition emulated Napoléon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign, and French troops were accompanied by scientists and scholars to undertake a vast scientific survey of the country (Riviale 1999). Several new collections of pre-Columbian antiquities thus made their way to France in the following years.

Waldeck was capitalising on this renewed interest in Mexico. He was not the only one, since between 1861 and 1869, one could find many picturesque views of Mexican architecture, as well as scenes of daily life and of famous battles from the Mexican campaign at the Salon. Waldeck's paintings, however, are the only ones depicting Mexican antiquity.

⁸ For Waldeck's Mexican years, see Achim 2013; Diener 2010.

⁹ Despite claiming his drawings of Mayan antiquities were the most exact yet, they are riddled with erroneous embellishments, such as adding elephant heads to figures from the Temple of Inscriptions in Palenque. Waldeck believed his antiquarian work would finally prove the existence of connections between the ancient Mayan people and an Indo-Chinese precursor civilisation (Waldeck 1838, 1872).

¹⁰ The Latour Allard-Melnotte collection, see Fauvet-Berthelot et al. 2007.

¹¹ Adrien de Longpérier, who was not a specialist of Mexican antiquity, visited several collectors and scholars interested in the Americas in Paris to prepare the exhibit. He visited Waldeck in his house in Paris in 1850 to study his drawings, Guimaraes 1994, 21.

¹² The Second French Intervention in Mexico (1861-67) aimed to install Maximilian von Habsburg as Emperor of Mexico, thus counterbalancing the growing influence of the United States in central America and securing access to the mineral wealth in the Mexican north-west. The military campaign was ultimately a failure and an embarrassment for Napoléon's government; the French withdrew and abandoned Emperor Maximilian, who was executed in 1867.



Figure 1 Waldeck poses with some of his Pre-Columbian collections. Anonymous, *Le Comte de Waldeck, à l'âge de 90 ans en 1858*. Photograph. Paris, BnF. Gallica, Bibliothèque National de France

The Gladiatorial Sacrifice is Waldeck's most interesting and ambitious submission. He wished to present a history painting, which was still considered the highest of the genres within the hierarchy of the Académie. This was a challenge for him, since he was mostly a portraitist and landscape artist (Waldeck 1872, 4). To conform to the rules of history painting, he chose a subject that was didactic and edifying, but inspired from Mexican history instead of from Classical antiquity. As a classically trained painter and with his first-hand experience with Mexican archaeology, Waldeck was in a unique position to undertake such an original project. He writes:

J'ai eu le désir, avant de rompre tout à fait avec mes vieux pinceaux [...] [de] vulgariser la connaissance [de l'histoire ancienne du Mexique] par la représentation d'un trait tellement glorieux sous le rapport de la vertu, du courage, de la puissance morale et de la force physique, que les histoires légendaires du siège de Troie et de la valeur d'Achille ne peuvent se comparer avec l'incroyable énergie du héros de mon tableau. (Waldeck 1872, 3)

I wished, before finally laying down my old brushes [...] to explain some [of the ancient history of Mexico] by painting an episode so glorious, so virtuous, that speaks of such courage, of such moral and physical strength, that the legendary histories of the siege of Troy and the courage of Achilles cannot compare to the incredible energy of the hero of my painting.

He was however faced with a problem: how to make an unfamiliar audience understand the scene, when Mexican history was virtually unknown to Europeans and the Aztecs were synonymous of barbarism and bloody human sacrifice? His solution was to publish a booklet, where he retells the story of Tlahuicole, the greatest warrior of the Tlaxcaltec republic. Captured by his enemies, he was brought before the Aztec emperor Moctezuma II, who, impressed by his courage, named him his general. After some years, Tlahuicole refused to lead an army against his own people and asked to be sacrificed instead (Waldeck 1872, 10-11).

This is the moment Waldeck represents: at the centre of a vast arena in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, Tlahuicole, wearing a gold and feathered helmet, faces another warrior on the gladiatorial stone. He wields his *macahuitl*, an Aztec club made of wood and obsidian blades. At the feet of the stone, lay the bodies of the already-defeated warriors, whilst to the left, Tlahuicole's wife and daughters despair over his tragic fate. To the right, upon a richly decorated platform, Moctezuma watches the fight, surrounded by the high officials of his court. In the background, the common people watch from atop a platform. The arena is closed off on the left by monumental zoo-anthropomorphic statues, next to which *copal* (incense) is being burned. After defeating twenty-eight adversaries, Tlahuicole succumbed to his wounds and was transported atop the Great Pyramid, where his heart was to be cut out and offered to the gods.

Waldeck is also counting on the audience being familiar with Neoclassicism and academic tradition to understand what they are being shown, even if they do not know the specifics of Tlahuicole's story. The narrative becomes intelligible thanks to the use of frontal perspective, by placing the main action at the front and centre of the canvas. The characters are presented as in a frieze, and architectural elements are used to delimit each group of actors and moments of the drama. Waldeck also gives a rhetorical quality to the characters' gestures to convey the *gravitas* of the situation, visible, for example, in the postures of the mourning women.

Waldeck is thus re-imagining an episode of ancient Mexican history according to Neoclassical codes, both in his choice of subject – the death of a virtuous hero, who selflessly dies rather than betray his nation – and in his pictorial treatment of it. Tlahuicole becomes an “American Achilles” (Waldeck 1872, 12), whose tragedy is not different from that of the heroes of classical antiquity painted by his master David.

Waldeck also insisted on the authenticity of the story and the accuracy of his depiction of it:

Il n'est pas [...] un monument, une décoration ou un usage dont je ne puis donner la preuve par des documents d'appui. (Waldeck 1872, 4)



Figure 2

An example of Aztec warrior garb and of the gladiatorial sacrifice taken from the Codex Tovar, f. 134. Juan de Tovar, *Modo de pelear entre et que avia de sacrificar, y ser sacrificado*. ca. 1585. Watercolour on paper, 13 × 18.6 cm. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library

There is nothing [in my painting], not one monument, one element of décor, one costume or custom, for which I cannot offer documents as proof.

Upon closer inspection, however, Waldeck had embellished his painting for greater visual effect, or to conform to his theories of an Indo-Chinese presence in ancient Mesoamerica. Some elements are archaeologically accurate, such as the gladiatorial stone, which is modelled after the Stone of Tizoc, probably a *temalacatl* (stone wheel) used in sacrificial rites. The Aztec Sun Stone which hangs on the façade of the temple is generally dated to the reign of Moctezuma II. The arms and costumes of the Aztec warrior societies depicted at the forefront of the scene are also based on illustrations from codices from the early Colonial period [fig. 2]. However, the colossal statues by the arena are whimsical creations of Waldeck's imagination, as are the two jade dragons flanking the Sun Stone and the 'Chinese' temple door leading to the Great Pyramid. He also included the Temple of the Sun and the Temple of the Moon behind the Great Pyramid, which are in fact at Teotihuacan, some fifty kilometres from the Aztec capital.

Despite the originality of the *Gladiatorial Sacrifice* and the high hopes Waldeck had for it, the painting barely attracted the attention of critics, perhaps because even with Waldeck's booklet, the subject was too exotic to the visitors of the Salon. The painting is also rather mediocre – it was, after all, his first attempt at such a complex composition. Furthermore, in 1868 Neoclassical painting in the style of Vien and David had gone out of fashion. That same year works by modernist painters such as Berthe Morisot and Manet featured prominently at the Salon. Emile Soldi explains some years later that:

La peinture elle-même faisait un effet des plus étranges, non par une absence absolue de mérite, mais par l'allure froide, le faire

sec, les contours découpés qui caractérisaient jadis l'école académique, et dont le goût en retard contrastait étrangement avec la peinture [...] goûtée aujourd'hui. (Soldi 1881, 414)

The painting itself gave the strangest of effects, not because it was not good, but because of its cold look, its dry execution, and its cut-out outlines, typical of the old academician painters. The style was outdated, a strange contrast to [...] the paintings in fashion today.

3 **Between Art and Ethnography: Emile Soldi and the Critique of Hegelian Aesthetics and the Classical Beaux-Arts**

Emile Soldi's (1846-1906) comments appeared in his 1881 book *Les arts méconnus. Les nouveaux musées du Trocadéro*, where he makes a strong case for non-Western aesthetics. Soldi's critique was double: he denounced the neglect and exclusion of non-European art from museums and the contempt with which 'industrial arts' were held by academic tastemakers. He writes:

Les œuvres d'art de l'antiquité grecque et romaine sont dites antiquités classiques. Ces œuvres appartiennent aux Beaux-Arts. Pour les adeptes d'une certaine école encore trop puissante, ce sont les seules productions supérieures du génie humain, les seules dignes d'inspirer les artistes. [Tous les autres arts] ne peuvent être comparés - à leur avis - à la plus insignifiante Vénus grecque, et aux plus lourds des monuments romains. (Soldi 1881, 3)

The works of art from Greek and Roman antiquity are called classical. They belong to the Fine Arts. For the adepts of a still too powerful school, they are the only productions of the human spirit that can be called superior, the only worthy of inspiring artists. [Everything else] could never compare - according to them - to the most insignificant of Greek Venuses or the heaviest of Roman monuments.

Interestingly, like Waldeck, Soldi was a classically-trained artist. A student at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, he specialised in relief-sculpting. From 1872 on, he exhibited regularly at the Salon, mostly bas-reliefs inspired from classical mythology and sculpted portraits. It is not clear when Soldi first became interested in non-European arts, but during the Parisian World Fair of 1867 he visited the 'Egyptian temple' (Soldi 1876) and the 'Great Pyramid of Xochicalco' built by Léon Méhédin, where Aztec sculptures sent by French officers

fighting in Mexico were put on display.¹³ Soldi even created a sculpture for the Mexican temple titled *Aztec Woman with Her Child*, which was installed in the Pyramid's garden (Ducuing 1867). In 1876, he presented some papers on ancient Egyptian sculpting techniques and polychrome statuary in antiquity at the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, which were well received (*Journal officiel de la République Française* 1876). In the late 1870s, Soldi had gained a reputation as an authority in non-European sculpture (Hamy 1890, 57).

His reflexions in favour of non-European arts seem to further develop when preparing an exhibition of pre-Columbian art in 1878. The exhibition was organised by Soldi and his friend and explorer Charles Wiener, who had received a grant from the French government's Ministry of Public Instruction to explore Peru and Bolivia and had brought back a large collection of archaeological and ethnographical artefacts (Riviale 2001). Ernest Théodore Hamy, who would later become the first director of the Ethnographical Museum of Paris, recognised the importance of the collection and convinced the French government to move the exhibition to a larger venue at the Trocadéro Palace, an imposing building inspired from Gothic and Byzantine architecture built to host the Paris World Fair of 1878. Hamy and his collaborators - amongst which Soldi - were hoping that the exhibition would raise public interest in ethnography and convince the French government to build a permanent ethnographic museum (Hamy 1890, 56).

Wiener's pieces were installed on the left wing of the Trocadéro palace,¹⁴ where they were soon joined by other pre-Columbian and non-European collections. One of the organisers' concerns was to present objects unfamiliar to visitors in an attractive way. Wiener and Soldi received a generous budget to design the exhibit and create an immersive experience for the public (Hamy 1890, 57). Soldi conceived a décor of ten large canvas depicting landscapes and monuments from Peru and Bolivia, which were painted by M. de Cetner and M. Roux (*Journal officiel de la République Française* 1878).¹⁵ Soldi himself prepared casts of famous monuments and artefacts from Wiener's drawings and collections and sculpted a series of 'ethno-

13 Léon Méhédin was in Mexico as a 'field agent' of the *Commission scientifique du Mexique*, which was created in 1864 to coordinate the scientific side of the military expedition. See Riviale 1999; Demeulenaere-Douyère 2012; Stüssi Garcia 2018.

14 At the same time, the right wing of the Trocadéro was taken by another art exhibit, the *Exposition historique de l'art ancien* (Historical Exhibition of Ancient Art), which covered artistic production in the West from prehistory to contemporary times (De Liesville 1878).

15 Likely, Alexandre Cetner, a student of Frichot and Cabanel, specialised in history and exotic painting. Paul-Louis-Joseph Roux was also a student of Cabanel's and was known as a landscape painter.

graphical' statues. Amongst the reproductions were the carved monolith from Chavín de Huántar known as *The Lance and the Gate of the Sun* in Tiahuanaco. Smaller pieces were affixed to the walls or presented on shelves [fig. 3]. Two sculpted ancient Peruvian warriors in 'authentic garb' from before the Conquest made by Soldi greeted visitors at the entrance (Hamy 1890; Gautier, Desprez 1878). This immersive and picturesque experience was quite different from that of classical art exhibited in fine art museums such as the Louvre.

Soldi also wrote a series of articles criticising the treatment of non-European arts by scholars and artists, which he later further develops in *Les arts méconnus*. He first addresses 'industrial arts', and then focuses on different periods and regions neglected by academics, such as the European Middle Ages,¹⁶ Persian, Khmer or American art. His main argument is that artistic creation should be studied by History and not only Philosophy. In particular, he finds Hegel's idealist aesthetic and tripartite division of Art History into Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic periods to be too simplistic and reductive (Soldi 1881, 275). Art History should be an account of the efforts and results of all artistic endeavours, regardless of the culture that produced them, and avoid endless discussions about Truth, the Sublime, and Beauty (Soldi 1881, xiv).

Soldi's approach can also be qualified as 'materialist' (Williams 1985, 157), in the sense that the materials available to artists are the main constraint of artistic production, which in turn explains differences in form (Soldi 1881, xiii). For example, Aztec sculpture was grotesque and imperfect because ancient Mexican sculptors only had hard stones such as porphyry or granite to work with, and no iron available to make stronger tools. Peruvian ceramics and metalwork, however, were superior and of greater beauty because clay, gold and silver were much easier to work with (Soldi 1881, 396).

However, there were limits to Soldi's cultural relativism. For instance, he did not think that all art had the same aesthetic merit, and neither did he completely reject the idea that function determines form. So, following Humboldt, he writes that Aztec sculpture appears hideous because it reflected "the wild imagination" of Aztec religion during a moment of 'decadent' cultural development (Soldi 1881, 376). Despite his historical and technical explanatory framework, Soldi still held an evolutionist conception of artistic development. If he firmly believed all cultures had the "talent" and "genius" to create art, Western civilisation was ultimately superior because, thanks to its industrial and social progress, artists had been able to completely free themselves from the limits the environment might have imposed on their creative efforts (Soldi 1878, 157).

¹⁶ In this Soldi was a follower of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, whom he cites frequently.



Figure 3 View of the Peruvian room at the Musée des Missions scientifiques at the Palace of Industry in Paris in 1878. Drawing reproduced in Soldi 1881, 389. Gallica, BnF

Soldi's writings also betray a mix of admiration and casual paternalism towards non-European ancient cultures and their modern 'indigenous descendants'. He recounts an anecdote about a young Peruvian boy Wiener had brought back with him to Paris. The unnamed boy, whose "characteristic traits" were proof of the "purity of his race", was playing with some of Soldi's modelling clay, with which he shaped different animals and human figures. These were of "true proportions" and of "great realism", which surprised Soldi, who theorises that the boy's innate and naïve ability was proof that 'their race' must have

aimé et cultivé les arts avec profit, avant que la conquête n'eût fait peser sur leur esprit quatre siècles de misère et d'esclavage. (Soldi 1881, 338-41)

Loved and cultivated art joyfully before the conquest submitted them to four centuries of misery and slavery.

Was there any surprise then, he concluded, that thanks to their ingenuity and diligence, ancient Americans had made art as fine as any the world had produced in grandeur and beauty (Soldi 1881, 379)?

4 Conclusion

The examples of Waldeck and Soldi show that discourses about pre-Columbian arts were already complex during the nineteenth century. Waldeck's personal experience as an amateur archaeologist and as an artist inspired him to compose an original subject drawing from ancient Mexican history. In Waldeck's opinion at least, ancient Mexican heroes could be as noble as those of Classical antiquity, and a source of inspiration for history painting, which was still considered the highest of the genres within the hierarchy of the Académie.

Soldi's critique of the official canon and art institutions was not unique, as it developed within a larger movement against classical aesthetics that included artists such as Gauguin, the Nabis, or the Pre-Raphaelites. Neither did he consider all of pre-Columbian art to be beautiful from the point of view of its plastic qualities. He was, however, the only one to formulate a historical framework in which non-European arts in general and pre-Columbian art in particular could be considered in a more positive light.

Waldeck's Neoclassical style was out of fashion and his Mexican subject was considered too exotic. At the same time, scholars were more concerned with finding the origins and causes of artistic impulse amongst so-called 'primitive peoples', favouring magical, psychological, or cultural interpretations (Dagen 2019) over Soldi's materialist analysis. If neither Waldeck's painting nor Soldi's theories were particularly well received at the time, these two cases show that there was a long process of discovery and familiarisation with pre-Columbian art before its acknowledgement and celebration by twentieth-century Avant-Gardes.

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