



Article: Saving Film History through Photography

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Saving Film History through Photography

Claudia Sofía Arévalo Gallardo

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ABSTRACT

In Mexico, the preservation of the ephemeral paper materials related to motion picture film productions (posters, stills, etc) is not considered to be as important as the preservation and conservation of the actual films, even within institutions devoted to the preservation of Mexican cinema. Specialists in the history of film also give greater significance to films themselves, relying on them as the sole primary sources, despite the fact that other closely related ephemeral materials can provide equally important information. On many occasions, such information cannot be found elsewhere. The intent in conserving such materials and making them available to the public is to change the way scholars view these ephemeral objects.

Two unique lobby cards of the 1917 film *En defensa propia (In Self Defense)* were found in the collection of the Cineteca Nacional de México (National Film Archives of Mexico). *En defensa propia* was made by Azteca Film, the first Mexican film production company: there are currently no extant copies. As these lobby cards are the only known records of this film, they are of great importance to the cinematic history of Mexico. These materials also demonstrate the relationship between still photography and motion pictures. In this case, the still photographs are a key element to better understanding the motion picture film. Preserving such paper-based objects not only increase knowledge of the history of Mexican motion picture films, but also of the history of motion picture advertizing in Mexico.

The conservation treatment of these lobby cards is intended to ensure their preservation for future generations and to inform scholars and the public of their value as documentary objects of film history.

1. INTRODUCTION

Popular live entertainment in Mexico at the end of the 19th century was mainly theatrical or musical performances. However, new technologies were often adapted for entertainment purposes, especially for the amusement of the citizens of Mexico City.

Audiences were used to the familiar forms of entertainment, which was highly dependent on the interaction between the actor and the live audience. As motion pictures were a new and unfamiliar entertainment form, film producers needed to catch the attention of a potential audience. New methods of advertising were developed, one of which led to the lobby card.

LOBBY CARDS

Lobby cards were graphic advertisements designed and sent to cinemas by film studio publicity departments. They were intended for display in the lobbies of theaters, on easels or tacked to the lobby walls, to entice the movie-going public. They were done in sets of eight to twenty, with design elements and text that reflected the content of the newly released movie. They are printed images (often photographic) mounted onto an 11 x 14" paperboard secondary support.

The design would be one larger attached 11 x 14" image or a smaller 8 x 10" photograph, which allows the inclusion of the film's logo, credits, and/or additional artwork. One film may have both 11 x 14" and 8 x 10" lobby card sets: the photographs on the different-sized sets may have identical or entirely different images.

THE HISTORY OF LOBBY CARDS

The earliest known lobby cards date to 1908 and were part of the advertising material provided by the early film companies to theatre owners: widespread use of lobby cards began in the 1910s. These cards, with sepia or duo-tinted 8x10" images, were placed onto easels beside the box office window or inside the theater lobby. Brown and white rotogravure reproductions of stills, the images displayed were selected to give a sense of the movie's story line and to supply the credits. Prior to 1916, the images displayed on lobby cards were frequently taken directly from the motion picture film and enlarged. Alternatively, dedicated photographer may have been hired specifically to produce still shots for advertising purposes.

The style and format of lobby cards is relatively consistent over time. There appears to have been a notable shift in style to a more high-contrast image in 1919, however so few lobby cards exist that it is extremely difficult to study any stylistic changes. As the use of lobby cards declined, they were collected by only a handful of film enthusiasts. Now these ephemeral items, whose initial value had been less than the cost of printing, have reached exorbitant prices at auction. In addition to titles, directors, and notable talents, any printed text would caption an image or made appeals to a potential audience based on plot, tone, or visual artistry. As filmmaking and advertising became more sophisticated, so did the content presented by lobby cards.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEXICAN CINEMA

The early and rapid popularity of cinema in Mexico is reflected by the printed culture of the time, with advertisements placed in newspapers, flyers, posters, and gazettes: by 1906 there were 19 movie salons in Mexico City. Not every movie theater advertised in the same way: some relied on flyers and programs, while others displayed large posters on street corners. In Mexico City, the relatively small lobby cards displayed at theater entrances evolved into such a quantity of large-scale posters and other advertisements that in 1913 new regulations appeared which limited film advertisements to authorized locations only.

In 1916, the Mexican Revolution and accompanying bouts of censorship led to the decreased production of motion pictures. The ongoing political instability was more favorable to imported

full-length features: by 1917 the majority of motion pictures were imported into Mexico. These European films, especially *films d'art* from France and Italy, would be the artistic point of reference for the eventual rebirth of the Mexican film industry, which began in 1917 with the end of the Mexican Revolution.

The first broadly acknowledged full-length Mexican film is *La luz, tríptico de la vida moderna* (1917). An earlier full-length film *1810* or *¡Los libertadores de México!* (1916) by the Yucatecans Carlos Martínez de Arredondo and Manuel Cirerol Sansores is known. However, as it was filmed in the remote provincial Yucatán, it has been overshadowed by *La luz, tríptico de la vida moderna*, which was made in Mexico City. Other notable films of this first golden age of film are *En defensa propia* (1917), *La tigresa* (1917) and *La soñadora* (1917). These films were all produced by Compañía Azteca Films, a firm founded by Enrique Rosas and actress Mimí Derba. A number of these films are no longer extant, and collections contain little to no materials related to them.

LOBBY CARDS AT THE CINETECA NACIONAL

The archive at Cineteca Nacional holds more than 365,000 items related to the history of Mexican cinema, dating from early 20th century to the present day. These materials include color and black-and-white photographs, photographic albums, transparencies, costumes, projectors, cameras, magic lanterns, drawings, awards, documents, posters, and lobby cards. Despite these extensive holdings, there are few objects in the collection from the golden age of silent Mexican film: some reproductions of newspaper articles and a few lobby cards, four of which are pictured below (Figs 1-4).



Figs. 1, 2. Lobby cards for *Alma de sacrificio*, 1917, directed by Joaquín Coss and Enrique Rosas. Cineteca Nacional México©.



Figs. 3, 4. Lobby cards for *La soñadora*, 1917, directed by Eduardo Arozamena and Enrique Rosas. Cineteca Nacional México©.

Looking at figures 1-4, the typical style of a lobby card can be easily determined. This uniform method of presentation is perhaps due to the specific design request of the film production company. In 1919 there is a notable change in the style of lobby cards: the photographs used increase in contrast, likely to better catch the eye of the movie-going public. However, as there are so few extant lobby cards, it is difficult to accurately determine any stylistic changes over time.

After the 2012 publication of the ten most wanted lost films by the film library at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), staff at the Cineteca Nacional began to search the archive holdings for materials related to the titles specified. In that way, two rare lobby cards of the film *En defensa propia* were rediscovered in the archives. Since their existence was previously unknown, the objects were slated for display in the opening exhibition of the new film museum at the Cineteca Nacional.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE LOBBY CARDS

At the middle of the last century global perceptions of cinema changed from viewing motion pictures as a form of popular entertainment to considering them as being worthy of preservation. In Mexico there are two major institutions dedicated to the preservation of the country's cinematic history: the Cineteca Nacional and the Filmoteca UNAM. These preservation and conservation endeavors focus heavily on the actual films themselves.

Over the last few decades there has been a gradual shift in the way that scholars and collecting institutions of all types have approached archival objects. The artifactual value of such pieces is now considered to be of equal importance to their informational value. Despite this, paper-based ephemera related to cinematography (such as posters, photographic stills, etc.) are not given the same importance as the motion picture films themselves. Scholars also place great value on the films themselves, using them as important study sources, but ignoring the ephemeral materials that may provide equally important information, some of which may not be found elsewhere.

For instance, the two lobby cards of *En defensa propia* are objects of high historical importance to the history of Mexican cinema because they are the only existing visual record of the film. As such, they are a direct source of information. The images themselves provide information in regards to topics such as wardrobes, sets, and locations and the information on the lobby cards' secondary supports supplies the production company, scriptwriter, and director. By preserving these objects not only is awareness and knowledge of *En defensa propia* increased, but also that of silent film advertising methods in Mexico.

2. CONSERVATION

Though all of the rediscovered lobby cards were originally desired for an exhibition at the Cineteca Nacional, only one lobby card was ultimately selected. *En defensa propia* (*In Self Defense*) was directed in 1917 by Joaquín Coss. The film was produced by Enrique Rosas and Mimí Derba, of Azteca Films / Rosas-Derba y Cia. Derba also wrote the script.



Fig. 5. Recto, before treatment.



Fig. 6. Verso, before treatment.

Cineteca Nacional México©.

The lobby card is a silver gelatin developed-out photograph (fiber based paper) adhered overall for a secondary support of light green cardboard. There are also several areas of historic retouching that no longer matches the photograph.



Fig.7. Details, historic retouching.

CONDITION

The lobby card exhibits deterioration of both the photograph and the cardboard secondary support.

The secondary support was soiled overall, and had yellow/brown tidelines related to past water exposure. There was significant edge wear, loss, and delamination at the corners and outer edge of the paperboard, as well as a number of thumbtack punctures in the corners where the lobby cards were displayed within a movie theater (Fig. 8). There were also a number of accretions scattered across the recto and verso of the secondary support. Paper adhesive tape was also found on the verso of the object.

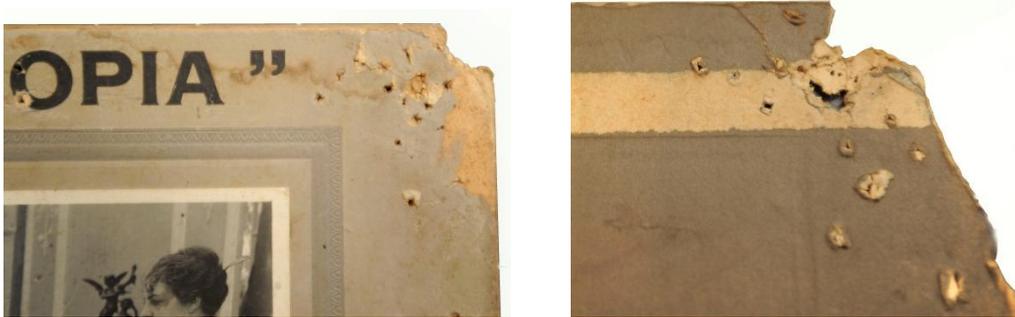


Fig. 8. Detail images of damages at the corners of the secondary support, recto (*left*) and verso (*right*).

The photograph has a number of scratches on the recto, some of which extent through the emulsion/baryta and into the paper primary support, and several small losses. There are also a number of minor accretions and small dark water stains (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Detail images: scratches (*left*), minor stains (*center*), and small losses to the surface of the photograph (*right*).

JUSTIFICATION FOR TREATMENT

With ephemeral objects such as lobby cards, it is important to consider their dual nature as both documentary objects and as art objects. It is tempting to give priority to either the informational or artifactual value of such objects: however, they should be treated as a whole unit with a complex function and history.

As stated by Brandi (1988) in his theory of conservation, this “must address to the recovery of the potential unit of the work of art, provided that this is possible without committing a historical art forgery, and without erasing any traces of the passing of the work of art through time,” [compiler’s note: translated from Spanish by the author].

It is important to understand the aging processes of the components of a work of art in order to identify the natural transformations that materials undergo. This is why it is fundamental to understand the “characteristics of the work in order to achieve a full projection of it in the future, apart from the implicit deduction of how it must be conserved and of the transmission of the conservation process as a historic testimony” (Brandi 1988) [compiler’s note: translated from Spanish by the author].

When considering the condition of the lobby card, noting moderate deterioration, it was possible to conclude that the state of conservation of the lobby cards was good. The primary issues were aesthetic, as the scratches, accretions, and loss to the image layer prevent a viewer from focusing on the content. However, as an ephemeral object with a dual nature (information/aesthetic), it was decided that addressing the aesthetic issues was not the most important aspect of the proposed conservation intervention. As mentioned above, this lobby card is one of only two extant original objects from the film *En Defensa Propia* and as such, the documentary value exceeds the aesthetic value.

Accumulated surface dirt and grime on the photograph caused it to appear in much worse condition than it actually was, making reduction of the surface dirt a major goal of the conservation treatment. The areas of image loss within the photograph were actually quite small, almost imperceptible, but addressing them in the treatment would also help to reintegrate the aesthetic qualities of the image.

With the secondary support, instability related to damages at the corners of the support represented the biggest risk to the integrity of the object. The tidelines were also distracting to a viewer, and were reduced. The reduction of the tidelines could be considered an aesthetic decision, but their reduction also helped to eliminate acidic degradation products from within the secondary support. Punctures caused by tacks in the corners of the support remained untouched as they are evidence of the use of the object. The only punctures that were treated were those that contributed to the instability of the secondary support.

3. TREATMENT

DRY SURFACE CLEANING

Eraser crumbs were used to clean the surface of the secondary support. The eraser crumbs were manipulated on the surface of the photograph in circular motions, with a cotton ball. Soiled crumbs were removed from the surface with a soft brush. This process was repeated on the verso of the secondary support. A microspatula was used reduce accretions.



Fig. 10. Accretion reduction.

AQUEOUS SURFACE CLEANING

A methylcellulose poultice was used to reduce the appearance of the tidelines on the secondary support (Fig 11). After three to five minutes, depending on the intensity of the tideline, the poultice was removed. Methyl cellulose residue was reduced with a cotton swab and distilled water. The area was dried using a tacking iron and a dry blotter (Fig. 12). The paper tape on the verso of the secondary support was removed in the same way (Fig. 13). This process was done only on the secondary support, and not on the photograph itself.



Fig. 11. Methyl cellulose poultice applied to the secondary support. Detail of recto (*left*) and on verso (*right*).



Fig. 12. Drying the support with blotter and a tacking iron.



Fig. 13. Removing the paper tape from the verso with the poultrice.



Fig. 14. During surface cleaning: recto (left) and verso (right).

STABILIZING THE CORNERS OF THE SECONDARY SUPPORT

The delaminating corners of the secondary support were first stabilized by applying methyl cellulose between the delaminating layers. Methyl cellulose was also used to reinforce any small tears surrounding the tack holes.

It was decided that the secondary support would be further stabilized by filling the losses at the corners. To do this, the outlines of the losses were first traced onto an acid-free, 100% cotton ragboard, which was then cut into the proper shape (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. A ragboard insert is cut to size.

As the secondary support was a thick paperboard, these ragboard inserts served to bulk up the reconstructed corner to the appropriate thickness. The thickness of the inserts was approximately half that of the original secondary support. Two inserts were cut for each loss. They were secured in place with small bamboo struts that were inserted between the delaminating layers of the original paperboard secondary support (Fig. 16). For further details on this technique, see figures 18-20.

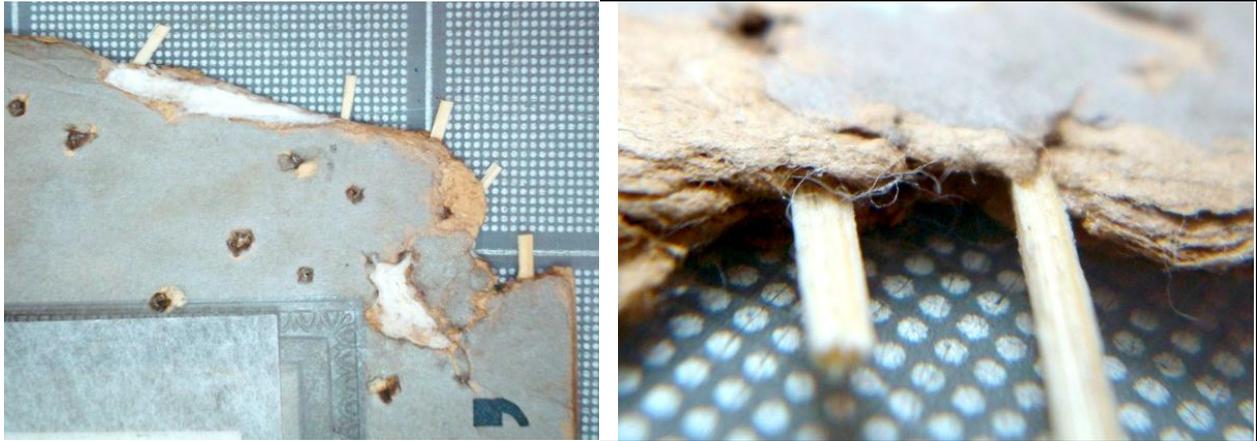


Fig. 16 Bamboo struts in place (*left*); detail, the struts inserted within the delaminating layers (*right*).

Gaps between the ragboard insert and the original mount were filled with a paste of Japanese paper and methyl cellulose (Fig 17).



Fig. 17. A Japanese paper/methyl cellulose mixture is inserted into the gaps between the original secondary support and the ragboard insert (*left*); a detail of a gap with the filler in place (*right*).



Fig. 18. Two ragboard inserts are cut for each loss. The thickness of each insert is approximately half that of the original secondary support. One of the inserts has been secured to the original paperboard with the bamboo struts inserted within the delaminating layers of the board. The insert is placed *behind* the struts. The adhesive used is methyl cellulose.



Fig. 19. The second tailored insert is secured to the object, also with a methyl cellulose adhesive. This insert is placed *over top* of the bamboo struts, sandwiching them between the two ragboard inserts. These two inserts together make a fill of the appropriate thickness, held in place with the bamboo struts.



Fig. 20. Gaps between the insert and the original support are filled with a mixture of Japanese paper and methyl cellulose.

AESTHETIC REINTEGRATION

Losses within the photographic image were inpainted with watercolors, over a thin isolating layer of methyl cellulose.

Inpainting was done within the secondary support only in areas of new material. In order to reintegrate smoothly within the object, these areas were toned to match the exposed core of the paperboard and not the grey facing paper.



Fig. 21. Inpainting fills within the secondary support.

COMPLETED TREATMENT

The majority of the conservation work was done on the secondary support, not the photograph. However, for a mounted photograph the physical stability of the support guarantees the physical stability of the photograph. Both elements constitute the unit, and if one is lost or damaged, the other suffers accordingly.



Fig. 22. Recto, after treatment.



Fig. 23. Verso, after treatment.

Cineteca Nacional México©.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The lobby card, a once common form of motion picture advertising, is now virtually unknown outside of a small group of film historians and collectors. Despite having been created for an ephemeral purpose, enough lobby cards have survived the passing of time to now transcend their original commercial advertising function. Lobby cards can be displayed and enjoyed as works of art, provide information regarding no-longer extant motion pictures, and serve as a source of delight for film aficionados.

The difficulties in establishing a chronology of the changing functions and aesthetics of motion picture lobby cards within the scope of Mexican cinematographic history are enormous. Many of the existing lobby cards are in poor condition, and significant conservation treatment would be necessary in order to stabilize them in preparation for access by scholars, even in digital formats. Also, a significant portion of both film-based and paper-based materials were lost in the 1982 nitrate film fire at the old Cineteca Nacional. The material lost, which constituted a considerable part of the Mexico's cinematographic heritage, has never been completely recovered.

The permanence of such materials can only be guaranteed by ensuring that they are properly documented and preserved. Proper documentation would include tasks necessary to maintain intellectual control: describing, identifying, and cataloguing the material. Preservation entails recording conditions and exhibition histories, documenting all conservation treatment, and maintaining storage and exhibition environments that will slow the deterioration of such fragile materials.

The conservation treatment of these lobby cards is intended to ensure their preservation for future generations and to inform scholars and the public of their value as documentary objects of film history.

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All photographs of the Lobby Cards are property of Cineteca Nacional de Mexico, by FIORES or Sofia Arévalo, 2012.

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