

THE PROFITS OF CULTURAL INTERCHANGE

Address by Charles A. Thomson ²

[Released for publication July 8, 10 a. m.]

It is a welcome privilege for me to participate once more in the Institute of Public Affairs of the University of Virginia. Six years ago I came to Charlottesville to speak before the Institute's round table on inter-American affairs. But even prior to that visit I had formed the habit of following with close attention the yearly discussions here. Under the supervision of President John Lloyd Newcomb and the direction, first, of Dr. Charles G. Maphis, and now, of Prof. Hardy Cross Dillard, the Institute of Public Affairs has become one of the most prominent focal points within the United States for enlightenment of public opinion.

Among the "New Problems of Government" which claim our attention at this year's session may well be included the question of our cultural and intellectual relations with other nations, particularly those with our fellow republics of this hemisphere. That such relations are of importance to our Government was evidenced by the establishment a little less than a year ago of the Division of Cultural Relations in the Department of State. While creation of the Division indicates recognition by government that it has a contribution to make in this field, the function of the new Division will not be to supplant in any degree the significant activities toward international understanding now carried on by colleges, universities, foundations, institutes, and other private agencies, but rather to render those activities more effective by the provision of an official agency serving as a clearinghouse for exchange of information and a center of coordination and cooperation.

²Delivered before the Institute of Public Affairs of the University of Virginia July 8, 1939. Mr. Thomson is Assistant Chief of the Division of Cultural Relations, Department of State.

In much of our thinking within this country concerning cultural exchange, emphasis is placed on what we can contribute to the other American republics. Generosity seemingly prevails over self-interest. It is complacently and perhaps all too easily assumed that the United States is equipped to pour out knowledge and enlightenment on the peoples of the south. There is much talk of the contributions which may be made to the other American republics by our teachers, writers, and technical experts, but little consideration of what gifts of value we may receive from their creative thinkers and artists.

Yet cultural interchange in its nature is fundamentally reciprocal. It is necessarily a matter of give and take. It means influencing and being influenced. If we have much of value to contribute to the other American republics, we also have much to receive. It may be salutary to remember that during the colonial period what we commonly call Latin America far outweighed in importance Anglo-Saxon America. During the nineteenth century the balance swung in the other direction. But now the pointer has begun to swing back. The other American republics are growing in economic power and political significance. We may look forward to a day when their population will outstrip our own. It is worth-while then to turn our thoughts toward the profits which may come to the United States and its people from inter-American exchange in the cultural and intellectual field.

At the start we should do well to recall that a great expanse of our country—running westward from Louisiana and Texas across New Mexico and Arizona to California—has a cultural background on which has been indelibly fixed the Hispanic impress. Language, social institutions and customs, architecture, and many other phases of life bear witness to the

strength of the contribution which Spain and Mexico have made to the development of this vast region.

Yet another region of the United States has profited perhaps even more strikingly than the Southwest from Hispanic-American influence. I refer to a contribution all too generally overlooked. Walter Prescott Webb, in his notable book *The Great Plains*, has pointed out that the advancing movement of American pioneers successfully pushed westward during more than 2 centuries through the forests, first of the eastern seaboard, then beyond the Appalachians, and then across the Mississippi Valley. But the frontiersmen came to a halt when they reached the Plains country in the neighborhood of the ninety-eighth meridian. The methods and ways of life—means of travel, weapons, tools, systems of agriculture—which had worked in the woods broke down when tried on this vast, level, treeless, and semiarid area. For the greater part of half a century, from 1840 to 1885, the frontier stood still; or rather it leaped the Plains to the Pacific coast.

In this interim the Plains, a broad belt stretching northward from Texas to Montana and the Dakotas, were won for American life by techniques and instruments that had been borrowed originally from Mexico. The horse, which entered Texas across the Rio Grande, first enabled man to dominate the Plains' immense seas of grass. It was the use of the horse in the management of cattle that created the ranch of the west as distinguished from the stock farm of the east. The cattle ranch, the range-cattle industry, were a contribution to the United States from Mexico. It was this contribution which created the Cattle Kingdom in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and gave to our history and tradition, to our present-day motion pictures and "pulp" magazines, that most dramatic and dynamic figure of American life—the cowboy.

Mexico is continuing her gifts to us. The artistic renaissance which has accompanied that nation's recent social and economic revolution has been a force markedly influencing art currents in the United States. The Mexican paint-

ers evolved in the mural a new technique for the modern world, and in their emphasis on the contemporary social struggle of their native land a new attitude toward the content of painting. For almost 20 years our painters and art students have been drawn southward to view the works of José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and other leaders of the Mexican school. The murals by these painters which adorn the walls of the patio of the Ministry of Public Education, the Preparatory School, the National Palace, the Agricultural School at Chapingo, and the Palace of Fine Arts have made of Mexico City a mecca for art lovers. These pictures reveal a movement which is living and vital as a result of its revolutionary strength, its impetuous force, its biting irony.

We have not only gone to Mexico; we have invited Mexican art to come to us. Pictures by Diego Rivera decorate the walls of the Stock Exchange Club of San Francisco, of the Detroit Institute, and of the Workers School in New York City. Murals by Orozco are to be found at Pomona College in California, at Dartmouth College in New England, and at the New School for Social Research in New York City. In addition, numerous pictures by these and other Mexican painters have been acquired by public and private galleries.

One critic has remarked that the Mexicans are "a more creative influence in American painting than the modernist French masters. It is even possible that they will give us a tradition from which the American painters will draw. For, as their country like ours belongs to the New World, their work seems to be a part of our actual native expression. Mexico remains the one country which has produced a contemporary plastic art of national dimensions."³

The influence of the Mexican school has been an important factor in the recent encouragement of mural painting for public buildings in the United States, which has been such a significant development within the past few

³ Charmion von Wiegand, "Mural Painting in America," *Yale Review*, June 1934.

years. It is worthy of note that the mural, which in production is often a group creation and which exists not for the enjoyment of a privileged few but for all, is essentially a democratic art form.

In music the influence of the "other Americans" has as yet been less significant than in painting. It is only within recent years that composers in the other American republics have sought to make of music a medium for expression of the distinctive quality of their national life, or, as one Mexican composer puts it, "to create a vigorous art that would stem from the people and would reach out to the people." These musicians have rich resources on which to call for development of an independent musical culture. Among North American critics, Aaron Copeland and Paul Rosenfeld have pointed out the advantages over composers in the United States possessed, say, by Carlos Chávez, who may draw inspiration from the deep wells of an ancient civilization. Many of Chávez' own compositions are already well known: "The Four Suns," an Aztec ballet; "H. P." (Horse Power: Dance of Men and Machines), and "Indian Symphony." His "Pirámide" was given its world premiere by the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra.

In Mexico as director of the Orquesta Sinfónica, Chávez has been giving concerts for 10 years to workers and peasants, in addition to his regular subscription audiences at the Palace of Fine Arts. To link the musical tradition of the early Indians to the present day, Chávez developed a special Mexican orchestra to play this characteristic music, in which conventional instruments were complemented by Indian *huehuetls*, *teponaxtles*, *chirimías*, water drums, and rasps. Chávez has himself directed some of our most famous orchestras—the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Philadelphia Symphony.

In the person of Heitor Villa-Lobos, Brazil has given to South America, according to one critic, "its one great genius" among living musicians and "the most significant American composer of the twentieth century."⁴ Villa-

Lobos' music has been presented in the United States by our leading orchestras and by the Schola Cantorum of New York; it has been employed by Martha Graham in her dances; it has appeared frequently on the programs of concert soloists.

Villa-Lobos devoted years of study to his people's folklore, traveling through the most remote and isolated sections of the country. He so steeped himself in the cultural traditions of his nation that his music provides a comprehensive and varied picture of the land of his birth. After a stay in Europe, where he had been widely applauded, he returned to Brazil in 1932. He abandoned composing and has since devoted his major efforts to the musical education of his countrymen, particularly of the school children. It is his theory that the child can best learn to love great music by singing it, and he has arranged for choral rendition the master works of musical history, which are now performed in Brazil by groups of thousands of school children.

Time is not available to speak of other significant composers: of Eduardo Fabini of Uruguay or of Amadeo Roldán, whose music with its Afro-Cuban themes has been performed in New York and at the Hollywood Bowl. The new and dynamic composers of the other American republics are better known to each other, and their music is better known to the outside world, in large part due to the efforts of Curt Lange, the German-Uruguayan, who founded and has maintained with sacrificial enthusiasm the *Latin-American Bulletin of Music*. A distinctive contribution to the wider knowledge of Latin-American music in the United States has come from the Pan American Union, through the four concerts given each year in Washington, which often have been broadcast over national hookups.

The best friends of the Latin-American composers would not have us overrate their accomplishments. They are only at the begin-

⁴ William Berrien, "Latin American Composers and Their Problems," *Bulletin of the Pan American Union* (Washington), October and November 1937. Citation from the November issue, p. 838.

ning of the development of an authentic independent movement. To date, the serious music of the other American republics has had less extended influence probably than their popular and folk music. In Mexico, Manuel Ponce, whose "Estrellita" and "A la orilla de un palmar" are so well loved, initiated as early as 1921 a movement to popularize the *canción mexicana*. "Estrellita" has been the ancestor of numerous Broadway "hits." Today this composition and many others of Mexico's melodious popular songs are known far beyond her borders, both in the United States to the north and in the countries to the south. In this country Aaron Copeland has based his "Salón México" on popular tunes. At São Paulo, Brazil, last September I attended a concert in one of the largest theaters given by Pedro Vargas, the Mexican radio tenor. The building was packed by a polyglot audience—Italians, Spanish, Portuguese, Brazilians, Germans, Syrians, Hungarians, and Japanese. The program was made up entirely of Mexican popular songs. *Paulista* audiences have a reputation for coolness, but Vargas' singing brought forth warm applause and insistent demands for encores.

According to some prophets, the popular music of Brazil itself may in the future prove as successful in winning foreign audiences as has that of Mexico. It may be welcomed in the United States, for this music is marked as is our own popular music by a distinctive negroid element. Already well established here are the Argentine tango, the Cuban son and rumba. Our daily radio programs include Mexican, Argentine, Cuban, and other Latin-American music, and the more serious productions of the composers to the south are finding an increasing place in symphony and concert programs.

Spanish architecture, it is well to recall, came to us through Latin America; and to mention it, particularly that of the "mission" type, is enough to suggest the large influence it has had in the United States. In addition the pre-Colombian styles of the Indian cultures have made their impress, as is exemplified, to

cite only one example, by the Mayan Theater of Los Angeles. If we come to the present day, the development of modernist architecture in Mexico has been so significant that the *Architectural Record* devoted in 1937 an entire number to the subject, declaring that the United States cannot boast of a modern architectural movement so solidly based as that to be seen in Mexico.

During recent years we have profited increasingly from the popular arts of the countries to the south. Textiles, rugs, glass, and pottery have been employed extensively in interior decoration. One large New York department store carries goods with motifs drawn from the Indian arts of Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru. We are producing footwear designed on Ecuadorian models and hats which show the influence of the curious inverted-dishpan headgear of the Indian women in Cuzco, Peru.

The above suggestions may suffice to indicate that the United States already owes much to the peoples of the other American republics in painting, music, architecture, and various popular arts. We may expect that the future will see the enhancement of this contribution both in the fields already mentioned and in many other areas of life. For the influence of our neighbors comes to bear upon us, not only directly, but also indirectly, through the students and investigators who in increasing numbers will go out from the United States to do research in the other American republics.

Hispanic America has long attracted our workers in archeology and anthropology. The sites of the Maya culture in Guatemala, Honduras, and Yucatan and of the pre-Inca and Inca cultures of Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador—to mention only two areas—have been visited, excavated, and studied by numerous North American scholars. Mexico and Peru now possess groups of native workers, headed by Alfonso Caso in the first country and by Julio Tello in the second, who not only know a great deal more about the antiquities of their respective nations than do North Americans, but who have developed field and laboratory

methods which our archeologists recognize as in many ways superior to those in vogue in this country. Thus the opportunity to work in the other American republics has benefited the science of archeology in the United States, and also contributed to a more accurate knowledge of the pre-history of this country. Moreover, a broader concept of the development of Indian cultures in the whole Western Hemisphere has brought with it a clearer understanding of the character and possibilities of our own Indian population. The policy of our own Government toward the Indian may well benefit from a comparative study of the policies of other nations in this hemisphere. In fact, Herbert E. Bolton, in his memorable presidential address to the 1932 meeting of the American Historical Association, has pointed out that the entire history of our country is only to be understood, if it is studied, not as a movement to itself, but rather as part of the epic of that "greater America" which we share with the other nations of this hemisphere.

Mexico's educational program has been carefully surveyed by educators in this country in the hope that it might be suggestive of fundamental solutions, particularly with regard to the needs of different minority groups in continental United States and in some of its outlying possessions.⁵ Within recent years large numbers of our teachers and educational authorities have crossed the Rio Grande to view at first hand Mexico's dramatic expansion of rural education, whose goal has been to raise the economic and social level of native peoples speaking different languages and possessing different customs and traditions, and to "incorporate" these peoples into the country's civilization and culture. Efforts have also been directed toward making the school a constructive community center, an agency which will provide not only instruction but also serve to improve agricultural methods, standards of health and hygiene, and otherwise contribute to social welfare. After a visit to Mexico, Prof.

⁵ Katharine M. Cook, *The House of the People* (Washington, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1932).

John Dewey declared: "There is no educational movement in the world which exhibits more of the spirit of intimate union of school activities with those of the community than is found in this Mexican development."

The experience of the other American republics with regard to another racial group, the Negro, may also prove of value to our students of social relations. In this hemisphere Brazil is second only to the United States in the numbers of its colored population. All phases of its economic, social, and political development have been profoundly influenced by the presence of millions of Negroes and mulattoes. For example, the writings of Nina Rodrigues, Gilberto Freyre, and Arthur Ramos have led to a revaluation of the African contribution to that country's development, somewhat similar in character to the reinterpretation of the role of the Indian in national culture which has taken place in Mexico. The African influence on Brazilian language, cooking, architecture, music, painting, and poetry is being studied with intense interest and sympathy.

Thus the 20 other American republics may serve observers and students as an immense social laboratory, not only in the relationships between different racial groups, but also in the field of agricultural organization, the application of government control to economic activities, and other questions. Interchange in the areas of tropical agriculture and tropical medicine may also bring direct benefits to the United States. Time is not available to attempt any discussion of these fields, but passing reference may be made to the Department of Parasitology in the Medical School of the University of Havana, which is ranked by some authorities as the best in the world. Very fine work has been done in Brazil, much of it in the Chagas Institute, in the field of South American dysenteries and other diseases. I need not labor the point that this country has a direct and vital interest in the establishment of high standards of public health within the territories of our neighbor nations. The Butantan Institute in Brazil has attained international leader-

ship in the development of serums against snake bites, and the United States has profited from its work by the establishment of a branch station in this country.

Cultural interchange with the other American republics may offer to the United States—in addition to such direct contributions as have been already mentioned in painting, music, architecture, and popular arts, and such indirect contributions as may result from the observations and researches of our students—profits of a more general and less tangible character. Our philosophy of life may be modified, our scale of values supplemented, our point of view enlarged by continuing contacts with our neighbors in this hemisphere.

During my recent trip to South America I was profoundly impressed by the attitude of these peoples toward the future. In a world shadowed by dark portents, they have retained their optimism. In contrast with the prevailing attitude in Europe, in contrast with the shift in attitude which has taken place in this country since 1929, they definitely believe that the best lies ahead, not behind. They look to the future with confidence, assured that it will in its time bring to fruition their hopes and dreams.

In conclusion then, the profits of cultural interchange are real. The future may bring them to us far more abundantly than has the past. Both the United States and the other American republics remained colonies in the cultural sense long after their political bonds with the mother countries had been broken. We looked to Britain for our models and standards; the countries to the south looked to Spain and France. But now we and they are coming of age. Both of us are learning to stand on our own feet, and to have confidence in our own judgments as to what is good in intellectual and cultural achievement. We in this hemisphere are developing, some more slowly than others, a culture which is not borrowed from across the seas, or reflected from other and older nations, but which is our own, which is made in America. Therefore the time is ripe as it has never been before for exchange between the two Americas. In the past the east-west bonds linking both Americas to Europe have been strong. Neither of us would see those bonds weakened. But now the two Americas have something to give each other. The argosies of the spirit for this hemisphere may come from the south and north, as well as from the east and west.