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**From Pleasure to Pain: Eroticism, Struggle and Gender
in Jesús F. Contreras's *Malgré Tout***

by

Isla Marie Stewart

**A Departmental Senior Thesis Submitted to the Department of Art and Art
History at Trinity University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation with Departmental Honors**

April 29, 2020

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Introduction—Struggle Carved in Marble

The Nacional Museo del Arte's vaulted ceilings, grand staircase, and large columns reference the neoclassical museum's former role as a twentieth-century palatial government ministry building. The staircase directly opposite the entrance ascends on both the right and the left side, creating a dramatic archway. Fidencio Lucano Nava's *Après L'Orgie* (1909) is situated between the two staircases (fig. 1). The title translates as "After the Orgy" and the shocking sculpture depicts a monumental recumbent, nude woman in a twisted, uncomfortable pose. The figure lies on an equally large, jagged rock, with her body seemingly protruding from the rough surface. The woman's face turns toward the viewer while her hips twist backward toward the rock. This position simultaneously conveys extreme discomfort and positions her nude body in a way that exposes her voluptuous curves. Rounded breasts, buttocks and hips contrast with the rocky support. Its title confirms the deep level of exhaustion communicated through the sculpture. The woman's neck is limp, her eyes are closed and the hand closest to the viewer lays almost lifelessly against the marble. Her left hand extends upward and presses against the rock as she spreads her fingers, the only clear indication that she is still alive. The flowers that intertwine through the woman's flowing hair suggest a romantic, symbolic representation of sexuality that contrasts with the vulgar position that initially confronts the viewer. While nude female figures are familiar objects in western art museums, the overwhelming eroticism and powerlessness of the sculpture is distinct. But, Lucano Nava's sexually suggestive figure is not the only sculpture competing with the lobby's grandiose architecture.

Opposite *Après L'Orgie* stands Jesús F. Contreras's *Malgré Tout* (1898), translated as "In Spite of Everything" (fig. 2). *Malgré Tout* faces Lucano Nava's sculpture, as if raising her gaze to look at the figure twisting unnaturally. *Malgré Tout* shares several qualities with Lucano

Nava's *Après L'Orgie*, including the contrast between a nude female figure and a jagged rocky surface. However, several differences distinguish the two sculptures. While Lucano Nava's figure lies on her back and twists her body open toward the viewer, Contreras's figure lies on her stomach and tries to push upward with her feet and torso. In *Malgré Tout*, the body of the woman depicted is angular. She mimics the sharp edges of the rock she is shackled to with a bent knee, sharp elbows and jutting shoulder blades. The figure in *Après L'Orgie* is rounded and fuller, juxtaposing the surface of the body with that of the rock. While Lucano Nava does not chain his figure down, her complete unconsciousness and passivity suggests a type of availability to the viewer that is different from *Malgré Tout*. Contreras allows his figure to open her eyes, raise her gaze and actively fight against her bonds. There is no question whether this figure is dead or alive. While she is chained to the rock, she has not submitted to her situation. The viewer cannot pretend that the nude woman sculpted in *Malgré Tout* willingly chose her situation. As she drags her body across the jagged stone and flexes her toes attempting forward movement, the sculpture portrays defiance and fortitude. It is this element that differentiates Contreras's sculpture so sharply from Lucano Nava's. The virtuous character traits embodied by *Malgré Tout* subtly complicate the blatant eroticism typical of nude, recumbent female sculptures. Rarely had sculptors endowed female nudes with such qualities whereas viewers might expect them in standing male nude figures, especially within Classical precedents.

This project closely examines Jesús F. Contreras's life-size sculpture originally created to represent Mexico during the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition.¹ Contreras trained at the Academia de San Carlos, Mexico City's National School of the Fine Arts, from 1881-1886.² In 1887, he

¹ Patricia Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce: Jesús F. Contreras, 1866-1902* (Prisma, 2002), 151.

² María Guadalupe Rodríguez López, *Jesús F. Contreras, en las exposiciones universales de París, 1889-1900* (Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2016), 5.

received a scholarship to study abroad in Paris at the age of twenty-one.³ *Malgré Tout*'s marble medium, unfinished surface, nude subject, and presence in the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition heavily embody European sculptural traditions rooted in antiquity. After winning the Croix de Chevalier of the Legion of Honor at the 1900 Exhibition, *Malgré Tout* triumphantly returned to Mexico City, becoming the first nude, recumbent female sculpture exhibited at the Academia de San Carlos.⁴ The sculpture's French stylistic characteristics and championship as a symbol of Mexico's national achievement compels a closer look at *Malgré Tout*'s multiple locations, symbolic meanings and the distinct combination of eroticism, symbolism, gender and struggle present in the sculpture.

Chapter One surveys the history of recumbent female nudes throughout western art, from antiquity until Contreras's nineteenth-century contemporaries. This chapter also considers the theories of the male gaze put forth by Kenneth Clark, John Berger, Laura Mulvey and Linda Nochlin. Through an in-depth engagement with theorists and earlier artistic examples, I argue that gender, power and eroticism have always been implicitly linked within nude, female sculpture. However, the relationship between these three components changes when sculpture simultaneously depicts struggle. A figure's reaction to suffering, whether active or passive, alters the erotic impact of nude, recumbent sculpture in important ways. While *Malgré Tout*'s formal character departs from precedents, the figure's active resistance and defiant perseverance despite her shackles sets the sculpture apart.

A deeper consideration of Contreras's artistic training and Mexico's political landscape is necessary to properly situate the sculpture's impact within late-nineteenth century Mexico City. Chapter Two explores Contreras's artistic training in Mexico City and Paris, underscoring the

³ Rodríguez Lopez, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 11.

⁴ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 236.

long history between the two cities. Since the seventeenth century, French artists have taught Mexican students how to paint, sculpt, draw and design.⁵ The complicated relationship between Mexico and France significantly shaped Contreras's career. Importantly, President Porfirio Díaz, who controlled Mexico from 1877-1910, embraced French neoclassicism while crafting a national artistic image.⁶ Contreras emulated Rodin's stylistic characteristics while sculpting *Malgré Tout* to represent Mexico at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition.⁷ By looking toward the French artist, Contreras aligned himself with innovative, modern French sculptural practices. *Malgré Tout*'s expressive facial features, twisting body, dynamic movement, tension, and the unfinished quality of the body as it merges with the rocky surface all reflect Rodin's stylistic tendencies. *Malgré Tout* became the first Latin American work of art to receive the Croix de Chevalier Award at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition.⁸ This recognition of both Contreras and Mexico's global impact on the Exhibition inherently linked the sculpture to an image of a modern, cosmopolitan Mexico capable of competing on a global scale with French ideology and artistic practice.

Chapter Three examines how *Malgré Tout*'s ambiguity and distinctive characteristics contribute to the sculpture's lasting impact in Mexican society. Exhibited in four distinct locations since its creation in 1898, interpretations of the sculpture's potential meaning evolve with each installation. Originally previewed to the members of the exclusive artistic club at Casino Nacional, *Malgré Tout* initially addressed the bourgeois male Mexican viewer before crossing the Atlantic to debut at the 1900 Universal Exhibition.⁹ Additionally, Contreras did not

⁵ Jean Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos, 1785-1915*, (University of Texas Press, 1962), 19.

⁶ Steven C. Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues: A Transatlantic Tale of Bonds, Bankers and Nationalists, 1862-1910," *The American Historical Review* vol. 105, no. 3 (2000): 720.

⁷ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 222.

⁸ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 147.

⁹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 154.

carve “Malgré Tout” onto the sculpture until just before the sculpture left for France.¹⁰ The artist lost his right arm to cancer between *Malgré Tout*’s exhibition at the Casino Nacional and its presentation at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition.¹¹ By carving the letters into the sculpture, Contreras attached a French title to a sculpture carved in Mexico and originally presented to bourgeois Mexican men. By doing so, Contreras underscores the figure’s heroic struggle, clarifies the subject as a woman struggling and explicitly references France’s influence. The artist also might have attached his own personal determination to continue working and struggling against the cancer within his body. While undoubtedly the entire concept did not result from the artist’s personal health battles, the name’s poignancy and significance to sculpture may have been linked to Contreras’s own misfortunes and resilience. With the title carved on the rock and the sculpture set to debut at the Paris Universal Exhibition, a distinctly nationalistic identity accompanied the work of art. Upon returning to Mexico in 1891, the sculpture was installed in the National School of the Fine Arts where it remained until José Vasconcelos placed it in the Alameda Central in the 1920s.¹² The Secretary of Public Education’s decision to move the sculpture to a prominent park shows how works of art function differently in public spaces. In post-revolutionary Mexico, placing *Malgré Tout* in the Alameda Central created a visual symbol of a heroic woman fighting against oppression “in spite of everything.” In 1983 Contreras’s sculpture entered the Nacional Museo del Arte after being restored.¹³ *Malgré Tout*’s prominent place in the museum’s entrance today speaks to the sculpture’s continued importance to Mexico.

¹⁰ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 104.

¹¹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 154.

¹² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 236.

¹³ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 236.

This project argues that Jesús F. Contreras's *Malgré Tout* is not merely a titillating example of an erotic female figure. While Contreras did not challenge the eroticizing male gaze, established in part through centuries of sculptural history, the late-nineteenth century Mexican artist created a heroic nude, recumbent female figure. This argument grapples with the differing interpretations of *Malgré Tout* found in scholarship since the late nineteenth-century until modern times. While it is by no means a straightforward definition of the sculpture's character, this project has tried to pull together the shifting locations, ambiguous meanings and growing body of feminist scholarship to characterize Contreras's sculpture. By representing a conscious woman during an uncertain time in Mexico's political and artistic history, Contreras created a sculpture capable of embodying a revolutionary spirit of perseverance, resistance and fortitude, "in spite of everything."

Chapter I -- Passive Precedents: Inactive Nude Female Figures in Western Art

“Thus, gendered masculine or feminine bodies become more than just bodies; they can be, for example, thought of as “strong” or “sensual,” respectively.”¹⁴

The tradition of depicting women nude, recumbent, and as “available” objects to the male viewer, dates at least to the 2nd century BCE in Western art.¹⁵ Eroticized nude female figures are so familiar in art history that their presence hardly seems noteworthy. But what purpose does the eroticized female figure serve within a work of art? Representations of nude figures are largely context dependent, often mythologized or symbolically charged to convey a value important to the artist’s political or social context. While eroticism conventions assume certain elements about an artwork’s creation, the answer to the question about the purpose of eroticized female figures depends on the artistic, social and historical conditions of the art work’s creation. Additionally, compounding nudity with suffering or struggle requires additional consideration about the artwork’s use of eroticism. Suffering assumes an overall anxiety or response to sorrowful outcomes, while struggle represents the resistance of painful hardships.

In Jesús F. Contreras’s 1898 sculpture, *Malgré Tout*, an eroticized, nude recumbent female is shown struggling against insufferable circumstances. Created to represent Mexico City during the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition, *Malgré Tout* depicts a nude woman lying on her stomach, shackled in chains (fig. 2).¹⁶ The figure clearly strains upward, bending her left leg underneath her and pushing up onto her toes (fig. 3). The figure’s arms flex behind her, capturing complete tension as she pushes against the chains binding her ankles and wrists to arch upward

¹⁴ Pablo, Picatto, “‘Such a Strong Need’: Sexuality and Violence in Belem Prison,” *Gender, Sexuality and Power in Latin America since Independence*, edited by William E. French and Katherine Elaine Bliss (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 87.

¹⁵ Mia Cinotti, *The Nude in Sculpture* (Uffizi Press, 1950), 2.

¹⁶ Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 82.

(fig. 4). Each foot is directly bound to the rock at the ankle, but the figure still presses against her restraints (fig. 5 and 6). Her arms twist behind her back as both elbows jut outward. A manacle circles each of the figure's wrists, connected by a short length of chain (fig. 7). The left wrist flexes backward with tension radiating through each finger as they separate slightly curve. The right hand is tightly clenched, forming a fist. Her face is lifted, with hair cascading down her back and blending with the rock beneath her (fig. 8). The rocks she presses against mimics the contours of her body, increasing in thickness from her toes to her head. Carved into the white marble, the words "Malgré Tout" appear in large block letters stretching the length of her torso (fig. 9). Her nakedness increases her vulnerability, despite her lifted gaze. Additionally, the sculpture is roughly life-size, creating an allusion of humanity within the marble. The Nacional Museo del Arte (1983), the Paris Universal Exhibition (1900) and the Alameda Central (1920s) all displayed *Malgré Tout* from low pedestals.¹⁷ This decision means that the viewer looks down on the sculpture and meets her gaze as she stares upward. While her left breast and her buttocks are visible, the harshness of her knees, hands and feet scraping across the rock complicates the simple eroticism common to nude female sculptures (fig. 2). The sensuality of her body is broken up by the sharp angles of her shoulder, knees, wrists and neck. The placement of her tightly clenched fist and manacled wrists disrupt the curvature of her buttocks (fig. 7). Her suffering seems hopeless. The shackles anchor into the rock, her vulnerability appears unchangeable. And yet, she relentlessly presses against her chains lifting her face upward.

Malgré Tout relies on the extensive precedent of nude recumbent sculptures throughout art history. Specifically, Contreras's study of Rodin's particular artistic style shapes the sculpture's formal character. Rodin's influence on Contreras's *Malgré Tout* is unsurprising given

¹⁷ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 104.

the French artist's renown during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and Contreras's presence in Paris from 1887-1891.¹⁸ While in Paris, Contreras attended the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition, where Rodin sat on the jury.¹⁹ Additionally, on June 21, 1889, Rodin and Monet's joint exhibition at the Georges Petit gallery opened with thirty-six of Rodin's sculptures.²⁰ Rodin exhibited another ambitious solo show at the Pavillon de l'Alma in 1900.²¹ Works meant for *The Gates of Hell* were included in both successful shows, meaning *Danaïd* (1889) would have been available to the public directly after her creation (fig.10).²² Rodin's stylistic and compositional choices shown in *Danaïd* capture his signature style during the height of his artistic influence throughout Paris. The particular way Rodin displays gender, power and eroticism through *Danaïd* represents an important precedent for Contreras's *Malgré Tout*.

Danaïd references the Greek mythological story of Danaus and his fifty daughters.²³ Danaus agrees to marry all his daughters to Aegyptus' fifty sons, but doesn't want Aegyptus to acquire his property.²⁴ To prevent losing his fortune, Danaus instructs his daughters to kill their husbands on their wedding night with daggers he provides.²⁵ As punishment, the daughters are eternally doomed to continually carry water jugs to fill an unfillable basin.²⁶ The despair associated with this unending cyclical punishment is expressed in Rodin's sculpture. One of Danaus' daughters, a Danaïd, is shown lying on her side, with her arms tucked under her head and her hair streaming over her arms. A knocked over jug spills out its water, intermingling with

¹⁸ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 40.

¹⁹ "Rodin and Monet." *Rodin Musee*, <https://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/resources/educational-files/rodin-and-monet>.

²⁰ "Rodin and Monet." *Rodin Musee*, <https://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/resources/educational-files/rodin-and-monet>.

²¹ "Rodin and Monet." *Rodin Musee*, <https://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/resources/educational-files/rodin-and-monet>.

²² "Rodin and Monet." *Rodin Musee*, <https://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/resources/educational-files/rodin-and-monet>.

²³ Campbell Bonner, "A Study of the Danaid Myth," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 13 (1902, pp. 129-173), 129.

²⁴ Bonner, "A Study of the Danaid Myth," 129.

²⁵ Bonner, "A Study of the Danaid Myth," 129.

²⁶ Bonner, "A Study of the Danaid Myth," 129.

the strands of her hair. The nude figure lays across a rock with her body mimicking the rock's overall shape. *Danaïd* is a mix of sharp angles and smooth curves. Suffering seems to overwhelm the figure as her face buries into her shoulder. The figure's legs curl up into her stomach as she kneels over her knees. Her active resignation expresses despair and passivity without showing the figure as unconscious. The suffering of the Danaïd disrupts the erotic representation. The woman's suffering overwhelms her to complete despair, causing her to lay down, resigning herself to the circumstances. A male viewer approaching the sculpture with the expectation of welcoming, rounded female curves finds instead a suffering woman whose body harshly reflecting her circumstances. Contreras's *Malgré Tout* and Rodin's *Danaïd* create similarly angular female bodies on rough, rocky surfaces. However, Contreras's sculpture goes further than Rodin's to complicate the male viewer's expected experience of a nude, recumbent female sculpture. While Rodin's *Danaïd* is not chained or unconscious, she is resigned to her circumstances. Contreras's sculpture struggles against her situation, fighting her shackles despite the unlikely possibility of escape. Contreras captures this inherent tension, using the woman's uplifted face to suggest both her hope and determination. Contreras creates an experience between the sculpture and the viewer that prevents the nude figure from being experienced as simply erotic. The significance and impact of Contreras's nude woman struggling against her circumstances becomes clearer after surveying the long western art tradition of depicting nude female figures.

The Greek Woman as Pleasure

While it is difficult to identify the first representation of a nude, recumbent female, Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos* (4th century BCE) is considered the first monumental sculpture

of a naked woman who stands upright (fig. 11).²⁷ Aphrodite is shown completely nude, clutching a piece of cloth as she disrobes to bathe. The figure is shown vulnerable, increasing the titillating factor because the viewer is not meant to witness Aphrodite's nakedness.²⁸ Additionally, the goddess' connection to love making launched a cult of priestesses who acted as prostitutes or 'hetairai' under the guise of sacred practice to Aphrodite.²⁹ This blatantly erotic connection between voyeuristic nudity and physical sex inherently connects gender, power and eroticism within this sculpture. Classical nude female sculptures would continue to voyeuristically depict passive women in a romanticized, idealized way.³⁰ Furthermore, sculptures depicting nude male figures signified the intellectual strength and perseverance valued by the Greek society. This is exemplified through influential ancient sculptures such as *The Farnese Hercules* (5th century BC) and *Laocoön and His Sons* (40-30 BCE) (fig. 12 and 13).³¹ Women did not embody the high virtues and powerful characteristics found within male nude sculpture. Female nude figures conveyed beauty and passivity. While there is an obvious difference between a standing nude woman, who reads as being actively capable of moving away and a reclining, vulnerable figure, Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos* does not rival the time period's heroic, triumphant representations of male nude figures. Ancient Greek artists' representations of male and female nudes reveal the different power and gender dynamics. By exploring the representations of power, gender and suffering in male and female sculptural figures, it is possible to understand the dynamic between struggle and eroticism that late-nineteenth century artists inherited.

²⁷ R. J. Barrow, et al, *Gender, Identity, and the Body in Greek and Roman Sculpture*, (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 38.

²⁸ Nigel Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture: Ancient Meaning, Modern Readings*. (Thames & Hudson, 1996), 179-180.

²⁹ Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, 176-177.

³⁰ Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, 177.

³¹ Paul Chrystal, *In Bed with the Ancient Greeks: Sex & Sexuality in ancient Greece*, (Amberley Publishing, 2018), 100.

Superman: Heroic Male Sculptural Nudes

Ancient Greek artists often linked athletic nude bodies to the intellectual characteristics desirable in civilized males. Male nude figures possessed defined musculature, emphasizing the figure's dedication to hard work, discipline and physical endurance.³² The emphasis on virtuous characteristics within male nudes does not eliminate the erotic element, however, since homosexuality was relatively common in ancient Greece.³³ But Greek and Roman sculpture symbolized self-control and intellectual strength by depicting nude male figures with smaller penises.³⁴ While modern-day society venerates large phalluses as symbols of power and virility, in classical art large genitalia was considered derogatory due to their inference of a man's barbarity and lack of self-control.³⁵ This emphasis on higher virtues over the erotic potential of a nude body is markedly different from female nude sculpture. *Discobolus* (450 BCE) captures the energy and athleticism associated with male nude figures (fig. 14). This copy of a Greek original by Myron captures a fleeting moment between the disk thrower's preparation and eventual release of the disk. The figure is shown crouched over, with bent knees, looking back toward his right arm holding the disk. The left-hand crosses over the body as the figure twists open toward the right. The figure's right foot is planted solidly on the ground while the left foot balances on the toes. The energy conveyed in this sculpture anticipates the next motion while documenting the previous movement. This combination of tension and movement is reflected in Contreras's *Malgré Tout*. The figure's pose suggests her next movement as her toes curl underneath to press her body forward. Simultaneously, the figure's body maintains the energy and tension that would

³² Chrystal, *In Bed with the Ancient Greeks*, 162.

³³ Chrystal, *In Bed with the Ancient Greeks*, 98.

³⁴ Chrystal, *In Bed with the Ancient Greeks*, 162-163.

³⁵ Kenneth, Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, (Pantheon Books, 1956), 15.

have been necessary for the woman to maneuver her shackled body into its defiant, recumbent pose.

Ancient examples of male nude figures heavily influenced Renaissance and Baroque artists' approaches to depicting male nudes in sculpture. Heroic figures expressing Biblical ideals became commonplace during the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries. Men overcome suffering, conquer their enemies, and appear impenetrable despite their nudity and perceived weakness. The story of David defeating Goliath embodies all these traits. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *David* (1623) mimics *Discobolus*' pose but incorporates the idea of active perseverance in the face of undeniable odds (fig. 15). Bernini's sculpture highlights the nude figure's physical capability and athleticism, rather than eroticism, by discreetly covering the figure's genitalia with a sculpted piece of fabric. The figure lunges forward onto his right leg, bending his knees and twisting to the right as he pulls a sling taught between his hands. A determined expression with a piercing gaze underlines David's concentration and physical strenuousness. Without seeing the outcome of the battle, it is clear David possesses the character to conquer his foe. Bernini's twisting position alludes to the successive actions following the release of the sling. The importance of the sculpture does not rest in the battle results, but rather in David's physical ability, strength of character and perseverance despite the unlikely odds that face him.

This same logic traditionally eludes nude women. Sculptural nude women do not overcome odds, defeat Goliaths or appear strong and capable within their nudity. Furthermore, female nudity within art does not reference admired character traits in the same way that male nudes symbolize strength, discipline, self-control, and endurance. Female nude sculptures define femininity as nudity, beauty, and often passivity. There are no admirable deeper characteristics attached to femininity, largely due to the perceived audience. Instead, female nudity expressly

symbolizes vulnerability. Nude sculptural women nearly always appear passive, if not asleep. There is an undeniable reference to power, or the lack thereof, when artists chose to depict women as vulnerable, exposed and incapable of escaping the marble that keeps them captive in specific, revealing poses. This inherent difference speaks to the presence of a cultural or societal explanation for how men and women are represented differently within the visual arts. While eroticized, male nude figures exist, such as Vincenzo Pacetti's *The Barberini Faun* (220 BCE), they are not shown passive, defeated, or incapable of overcoming their suffering (fig. 16). In this way, eroticized male nudes are characterized differently from their female counterparts. For example, *The Barberini Faun* leans back against a support, stretching one arm outward and the other behind his head. The figure bends his knees, spreading his legs to expose his genitalia and open up his body to the viewer's gaze. The pose is undeniably erotic, but despite the figure's closed eyes and revealing pose, the figure does not seem passive or even unconscious. Tension radiates through his bent limbs and the muscles across his body appear engaged. The figure conveys strength because he looks physically capable of rising at any moment. *The Barberini Faun*'s eroticism is independent from implications of gender or power. Additionally, it is unlikely that *The Barberini Faun* anticipated a female viewer's sexual desire, because works of art do not often acknowledge female desire when depicting nude figures.³⁶ Eroticism expects a male viewer in the same way that artists often anticipate the male gaze when depicting a female figure. However, the interplay between gender, power, and sexuality evolves throughout the history of art. There is plenty of scholarship devoted to analyzing artists' personal psycho-sexual tendencies.³⁷ This project will not pursue artists' personal sexualities, but will instead consider

³⁶ Amanda Herring, "Sexy Beast: The 'Barberini Faun' as an Object of Desire," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2016, pp. 32-61), 45-46.

³⁷ Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art 1730-1970*, (Newsweek, 1972), 7.

how artists represent sexuality within works of art. During the nineteenth century, in particular, the individual artist can be separated from the content of their works as global modernity's rapidly increasing technological, social and economic developments demanded new artistic motifs. Rodin's revolutionary sculptural style exemplifies this type of artistic stylistic development. Depictions of eroticized female figures reflect social views on sexualization, gender and power relationships within a specific geographical and chronological context. Furthermore, Rodin's influence on Jesús F. Contreras's *Malgré Tout* (1898), offers a case study for discussing eroticism and the global interplay between gender, power and sexuality during the late-nineteenth century. By choosing to depict suffering, recumbent nude female figures, both Contreras and Rodin complicate precedents while simultaneously confirming the male gaze. Furthermore, *Malgré Tout*'s departure from these traditional gender separations within artistic representation reveals Contreras's nuanced approach to representing a female nude figure for the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition. However, despite *Malgré Tout*'s different approach to female nudity, the sculpture still anticipates the bourgeois male viewer assumed by artists during the late-nineteenth century. Four influential theories of the male gaze shed light on how art historians work to understand the interaction between nude figures and their perceived audiences throughout the history of art.

Male Gaze Theories

John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* closely examines the female nude within painting and is explicitly interested in understanding the differences between the male and the female nude figures shown within paintings.³⁸ Berger underscores the assumption of the ever-present male

³⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1981), 46.

gaze on the female nude figure. Berger connects this artistic tradition to societal pressures and the reality that women assume the male gaze while conducting themselves within society. Similarly, artists assume the male gaze when presenting the female figure within works of art. Berger calls this distinction the difference between the ones who act and the ones who appear.³⁹ Berger's theory of the male gaze argues that not only do men look at women, but women recognize that they are being looked at.⁴⁰ This line of thought proposes that both men and women turn women into visual objects. Berger makes an important distinction between European art and non-European art traditions when discussing the nude.⁴¹ The author argues that in non-European art nakedness is never supine in the way that it is usually represented within European art.⁴² A majority of the examples presented in this chapter deal with the commonplace recumbent representations of the female nude within European sculpture.

Kenneth Clark's influential *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* examines this type of European representation of the female nude but makes a clear distinction between the naked and the nude: "To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word "nude," on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone."⁴³ Since 1956, scholarship discussing the nude within art often references Clark's definition. This differentiation between nakedness and nudity removes the immorality, discomfort and privacy concerns typically associated with nakedness. The idealized body typically associated with ancient Greek and Roman art removes the viewer from the physical, naked human body.⁴⁴ By replacing flesh with marble and idealizing the

³⁹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 47.

⁴⁰ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 48.

⁴¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 49.

⁴² Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 53.

⁴³ Clark, *The Nude*, 3.

⁴⁴ Clark, *The Nude*, 4.

human body, Classical sculpture created a distinction between nakedness and nudity. Clark's study examines both artistic historical training and anatomy, focusing largely on posed, serenely idealized bodies.⁴⁵ Clark points to Rodin, and later Matisse, as departing from the Classical tradition with "drawings of naked women that reveal a kind of frenzy almost without precedent in art."⁴⁶ Clark's observation reveals the inherent change that takes place within sculpture when nude women struggle and suffer while assuming a recumbent pose. Disruption occurs, because the idealized, serene figures are interrupted by the woman's reaction to misery and suffering. Contreras's *Malgré Tout* captures this frenzy, following in Rodin's footsteps and depicting a nude, recumbent female figure possessing a power denied to previous ancient and Renaissance female nudes.

Even though the female nude figure becomes less straightforwardly erotic when presented as experiencing a type of suffering, the inherent distinctions between male and female nudes are not lost. As Linda Nochlin observes in *Misère*, the female nude figure's suffering is somehow less heroic and more demeaning than the male nude.⁴⁷ This extends the traditional differences between male and female representations within the visual arts. Nochlin expressly points to the representations of prostitutes within nineteenth-century painting to discuss how art represents misery.⁴⁸ The author clearly connects misery and prostitution, arguing art depicting suffering nude women references this relationship.⁴⁹ Contrarily, when Roman and Greek male nudes are shown suffering, the figures shoulder their struggles with pride, dignity and the assumption that they will overcome their circumstances. The mythological Atlas symbolizes this

⁴⁵ Clark, *The Nude*, 3-4.

⁴⁶ Clark, *The Nude*, 288.

⁴⁷ Linda Nochlin, *Misère: The Visual Representation of Misery in the 19th Century*, (Thames & Hudson, 2018), 127.

⁴⁸ Nochlin, *Misère*, 128.

⁴⁹ Nochlin, *Misère*, 129.

distinction. Facing an eternal punishment, the defeated Titan's suffering comes to symbolize a column.⁵⁰ While male misery directly connects to an architectural embodiment of stability, female misery leads to prostitution.⁵¹ The prostitute's image disrupts the ideal of the serenely calm woman. Because of this, female misery is personally demeaning, typically lacking the heroic elements underlying suffering male figures.

Similarly, Laura Mulvey (1975) examines the male gaze shown in cinema and argues that film reflects "socially established interpretation of sexual difference that controls images, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle."⁵² Mulvey states that within patriarchal culture women cannot make meaning, they can only bear meaning.⁵³ Because of this, the female form represented in works of art signifies the male "other," most obviously differing from men with the lack of a penis.⁵⁴ Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" discusses Sigmund Freud's ideas about scopophilia, the pleasure of looking, and the conditions of narrative conventions that give the spectator the illusion of experiencing a private world.⁵⁵ These phenomena trick the audience into experiencing voyeuristic separation. Additionally, the assumed separation between male and female power dynamics means the former assumes an active gaze and the latter a passive existence.⁵⁶ Mulvey also considers how men do not experience the burden of sexual objectification.⁵⁷ The male body does not convey eroticism in patriarchal structures of gazing, because the female gaze is not assumed to be as powerful as the male gaze.⁵⁸ Mulvey's theory

⁵⁰ Nochlin, *Misère*, 129.

⁵¹ Nochlin, *Misère*, 130.

⁵² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 982.

⁵³ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 982.

⁵⁴ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 984.

⁵⁵ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 984.

⁵⁶ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 984.

⁵⁷ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 985.

⁵⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 985-986.

makes it possible to identify continuities between ancient art and twentieth-century films. Artistic representations of the gendered body seem to have changed little within that vast time period. The male gaze described in cinematic experience operates aesthetically the same way in sculpture. This project will use the ideas presented in Mulvey's essay to consider how artists from ancient Greece to the nineteenth century presented the female form as the bearer of meaning. Artists manipulated form to convey the interplay between power, gender and eroticism differently throughout this long time period. An important shift occurred when artists began to depict nude, female figures suffering. Unlike their serene, nude counterparts, suffering nude women complicate the assumed eroticizing male gaze. Developments in feminist theory, a growing dubiousness about psychoanalysis and the desire to look outside of Western art traditions have all contributed to the criticism levied against the theorists. However, the core of all four male gaze arguments described above remains undeniably significant to understanding how the male gaze concept works within the history of art. The overview of passive nude, recumbent female figures from ancient art to the late-nineteenth century below will examine how depictions of suffering complicate the ever-present relationship between gender, power and eroticism.

Sexualized Sleeping Sculpture

Passivity connects representations of nude women from ancient Greece to modern times. The Louvre's *Sleeping Hermaphroditos*, a Roman copy of a second-century BCE original, represents the earliest example of a nude, recumbent sculptural precedent for Contreras and Rodin's work (fig. 17). Acquired by the Louvre in 1807, the sculpture now rests on a marble pillow and bed sculpted in 1619 by Bernini, and would have been on display while Contreras studied abroad in

Paris.⁵⁹ Contreras's time abroad in Paris would have allowed him to extensively study the Louvre collections and observe several of the works discussed in this chapter.⁶⁰ *Sleeping Hermaphroditos* depicts a figure that is both male and female laying face-down with its arms folded underneath its head. The sculpture depicts the Greek story in which Hermaphroditos, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, rejects the nymph Salmacis who then convinces Zeus to merge her body with Hermaphroditos'.⁶¹ From the rear, *Sleeping Hermaphroditos*, resembles a curvaceous female figure. The figure's left arm tangles in the carved fabric that wraps around portions of the body. Intricately plaited hair covers the head that rests on the right arm. Additionally, the delicate facial features resemble a female figure. The body is positioned so that the figure's breasts press flat against the bed while the hips turn toward the side revealing the figure's male genitals. Once the viewer circles the sculpture to view the figure's front, the androgynous combination present in the body becomes evident. The sculpture's entire bottom half suggests a male figure. Thick muscular thighs present an athletic build typically reserved for male figures. The legs actively twist against the fabric with the left foot raised and straining to flex. Alternately, the figure's female top-half conveys calm inactiveness. The feminine head, delicately curved torso, and sleeping pose directly reflect the characteristics typically attached to female sculpture. The sharp contrast between male and female figural representations captured in *The Sleeping Hermaphroditos* shows how artists often reserve powerful, active movements and stances for male figures. This Greek sculpture represents one of the first instances where the artist eroticizes an inactive female body as a foil against the powerful male body.

⁵⁹ Astier Marie-Bénédicte, "Sleeping Hermaphroditos," *Musee du Louvre*, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/sleeping-hermaphroditos>.

⁶⁰ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 40.

⁶¹ Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, *Naked Truths*, (Routledge, 1997), 220.

Contreras travelled to Italy in the summer of 1888 to study ancient and Renaissance sculpture while studying abroad in Europe.⁶² The artist would have been familiar with the famous sculptures on display in Rome and Florence, meaning he would have anticipated previous ways artists approached female nudity, eroticism and struggle within works of art. In Florence, the Uffizi's *The Sleeping Ariadne* typifies similar second-century AD depictions of female figures (fig. 18). An entirely female figure, this partially nude Roman sculpture has remained well known among artists since the Medici acquired it in 1572.⁶³ The sculpture references the Greek myth of Ariadne and Theseus, who fall in love and elope to Athens before Theseus abandons a sleeping Ariadne on the island of Naxos.⁶⁴ The ancient artwork shows Ariadne swooning with her legs crossed and her right arm thrown back behind her head as she tucks her left arm up next to her face. Her left breast is completely revealed. While the woman's clothing covers the rest of her body, the fabric clings the entire length of her body, exposing the curves of her stomach, legs, and hips. The sculpture does not convey a sense of narrative, activity or heroism. Instead, the work of art exclusively explores different approaches to a nude, female figure. The sculpture's representation of a sleeping woman relies heavily on eroticism and voyeurism to inform the pose and details. The fabric that wraps around Ariadne's body closely follows her natural shape, eventually leading the viewer's eye to her exposed breast and thrown-back arms. Sleeping infers complete passivity and vulnerability, optimizing the figure's availability to the male gaze. Sexualized sculptures such as *The Sleeping Ariadne* directly impacted Renaissance understandings of idealized, ancient Roman sculptural forms.

⁶² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 47.

⁶³ "Sleeping Ariadne," *Le Gallerie Degli Uffizi*, <https://www.uffizi.it/en/magazine/sleeping-ariadne>.

⁶⁴ "Sleeping Ariadne," *Le Gallerie Degli Uffizi*, <https://www.uffizi.it/en/magazine/sleeping-ariadne>.

The Sleeping Hermaphroditos and *The Sleeping Ariadne* helped establish the sculptural precedent of associating sexuality, passivity and distress when depicting nude female figures. The combined genders present within *The Sleeping Hermaphroditos* inherently conveys a distressful conflict between male and female. And yet, only the male bottom-half of the sculpture appears active. The sculpture's female portion does not react to the distressing situation. Instead, the sculpture's female upper-half appears to invite viewership. The eroticized sleeping figure's pose reveals her breasts and the curve of her torso. *The Sleeping Ariadne* continues this idea. Abandoned on an island by her husband, Ariadne is resigned and unconscious. The sculpture does not convey distress or struggle. Without knowing the Greek myth, *The Sleeping Ariadne* simply presents a passive, erotic figure. Although Contreras's and Rodin's sculptures do not mimic Ariadne's or the Hermaphroditos' poses exactly, similarities abound in showing suffering, struggle and eroticism. This suggests both Contreras and Rodin understood the precedent for exploring power and gender relations within their sculptures.

Italian Sculptural Precedents

Contreras's travel to Italy in the summer of 1888 means he would have come in contact with some of the important ancient, Renaissance and Baroque precedents from the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries.⁶⁵ Michelangelo was the sixteenth century's foremost Italian sculptor. Throughout his lengthy career, he often combined eroticism with suffering. Michelangelo's sculptural approach idealized nude figures. While the artist created multiple nude sculptures and paintings, his most significant nude female sculptures recline on the New Sacristy tombs. Commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de Medici in 1519, the tombs for Lorenzo and Giuliano de

⁶⁵ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 42.

Medici remain incomplete.⁶⁶ The unfinished quality disrupts Michelangelo's traditionally smooth sculptural bodies, but the intended effect remains. By 1533, Michelangelo had abandoned the female figures, *Dawn* and *Night* (fig. 19 and 20).⁶⁷ Both women lean on one arm with the other arm curling in toward their faces while simultaneously drawing up their left legs. Michelangelo's women appear detached and melancholic. Both women are more muscular than sexualized, typical of Michelangelo's later career figures. Each sculpture is paired with an accompanying male figure, *Dusk* and *Day*, who exhibit similar poses to their female counterparts (fig. 21 and 22). All four figures convey the same sense of physical power with their muscular definition. Yet, the reclining poses and somber expressions negate any activeness their bodies might otherwise express. The figures' nakedness does not denote eroticization. The sheer might of all four figures' bodies, and perhaps the unfinished sculpting, portrays a sense of reflectiveness and meditation on mortal strength. This tone aligns with the commission for the two powerful leaders' tombs. The philosophical embodiment of Dawn, Dusk, Day and Night captures the fleeting, cyclical experience of human life. In this particular example, Michelangelo represents power through the nude figures, but complicates this message of sheer physical power with the inactive poses and melancholy character suggesting death. Michelangelo's tendency to create muscular female forms speaks to the artists' overarching interest in the abilities and physical presence of the human form.

Bernini's famous seventeenth-century style combines emotional facial expressions with chaotic movement to represent scenes with heightened tension. Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1650) shows St. Theresa's body clothed in dramatically draped fabric (fig. 23). The cloth clings to Theresa's body, reflecting the earlier *Sleeping Ariadne*. The religious element contrasts with

⁶⁶ "Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici," *Grove Art*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T057716>.

⁶⁷ "Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici," *Grove Art*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T057716>.

prior mythological stories but helps to complicate Bernini's stylistic choices. Erotic religious figures do not often explicitly reference sexual innuendos. In Bernini's sculptural group, however, the cupid stands over Theresa. One hand grasps her clothing and the other hand is ready to plunge the arrow into her heart. Theresa's limp figure and slightly open mouth contribute to the eroticization of the saint's religious experience. Bernini continues Michelangelo's previous disruption of traditions established in ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. The artist connects St. Theresa's powerful religious feelings to the erotic typically connected to sexuality. While St. Theresa is not completely passive, the sculpture reduces her deeply spiritual experience to an emphatic, partially erotic experience. In this way, Theresa's powerful spiritual reaction highlights her physical form instead of her mental or spiritual fortitude. Contreras's *Malgré Tout* does the opposite. Contreras represents his figure's nudity and physical form to highlight her mental and spiritual fortitude. Despite her immobility and lack of freedom, *Malgré Tout's* female figure conveys virtuous characteristics often denied to women in sculptures such as Bernini's *St. Theresa*.

Nineteenth-Century French Contemporaries

Contreras and Rodin's contemporaries during the late nineteenth-century further embraced romanticized, sensuous representations of female nude figures. All the previous sculptural examples depict nude, recumbent female figures evoking mythological or religious stories to justify the figures' nakedness and appeal to learned audiences and patrons. By the nineteenth-century, artists begin to depict nude figures without mythological themes or religious heroines. By doing so, these artists collapse viewers' ability to separate themselves from the nude sculptural women before them. By stripping their artistic subjects of their mythological cloaks,

artists reveal them as ordinary women. This approach to showing female vulnerability addresses male bourgeois viewers and patriarchal styles of control. Audiences could easily dismiss a nude mythological figure as simply portraying a fantastical story. Questions about how nude mythological sculptures related to gender, power and sexuality could be ignored because the works of art simply represented stories. Nineteenth-century artists, including Contreras, begin to explore the dynamics between power, gender and sexuality in new ways by depicting non-mythologized women.

Auguste Clésinger's *Woman Bitten by a Snake* (1847) is one of the first examples of a non-mythologized nude, female sculpture (fig. 24). Completed in 1847, Clésinger's *Woman Bitten by a Snake* was prominently installed at the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition that Contreras attended.⁶⁸ The nude woman in Clésinger's sculpture dramatically arches her back, pressing her chest outward while she twists her neck around. A snake subtly wraps around the wrist that rests behind the figure's back. This small detail requires the viewer to carefully examine the sculpture before recognizing that the woman is writhing in pain. The figure's thrown back head does not contain dramatic facial expressions that portray pain or suffering. The sculpture's exaggerated pose and highlighted sexuality combat any empathy the woman's pain should generate. While the sculpture's imagery references Cleopatra's story, the title does not associate the nude female with the Egyptian queen. Clésinger's sculpture originally shocked audiences.⁶⁹ A rumor spread that Clésinger used a well-known prostitute's body to create a plaster mold before sculpting the piece.⁷⁰ Clésinger's inclusion of cellulite marks on the sculpture's legs contributed to the

⁶⁸ "Woman Bitten by a Snake," *Musée d'Orsay*, https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/notice.html?no_cache=1&numid=5980.

⁶⁹ Wendy Nolan Joyce, "Sculpting the Modern Muse: Auguste Clésinger's 'Femme piquée par un serpent,'" *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* vol 35, no. 1 (2006, pp. 166-168), 166.

⁷⁰ Nolan Joyce, "Sculpting the Modern Muse," 167.

rumor.⁷¹ This intricate detail mimics a human body, discarding the classical tendency to idealize the female form. Additionally, Clésinger's sculpture appears to create a more dramatic, erotic version of the Roman *Sleeping Ariadne*. Both the French and the Roman sculptures were mistakenly linked to Cleopatra imagery.⁷² The similarities between an 1847 sculpture and a second-century BCE work illustrates the continued history of created nude, recumbent women reclining in positions that allow viewers to freely examine their bodies. *Woman Bitten by a Snake* heightens the erotic element more than previous examples. The twisting, uncomfortable position and reference to a real-life prostitute emphasizes the figure's eroticism over her suffering. Clésinger adapts the nude, recumbent position common throughout previous centuries to explore both eroticization and distress. While earlier examples use a woman's passivity to present serene, eroticized figures, Clésinger's figure's unconsciousness reveals her suffering. Nude female sculptures automatically raise questions about gender and sexuality, but passive recumbent female figures highlight the imbalanced power structure between the sexes. When artists represent non-mythologized women powerless, passively experiencing suffering, the figure's nudity no longer exists simply to allow the male viewer to appreciate a nude female body.

While Clésinger's *Woman Bitten by a Snake* depicts a completely unconscious women experiencing suffering, Rodin's *Danaïd* includes a subtle activeness and resistance to blatant eroticism despite the recumbent, nude figure's pose. The sculpture references a mythological story where the woman's suffering comes from her father's directive and not her own actions.⁷³ The despair expressed in *Danaïd* seems to capture the pointlessness and exhaustion inherent to a cyclical, eternal punishment (fig. 10). The passivity shown in Rodin's sculpture does not invite

⁷¹ Nolan Joyce, "Sculpting the Modern Muse," 167.

⁷² Nolan Joyce, "Sculpting the Modern Muse," 167.

⁷³ Bonner "A Study of the Danaïd Myth," 129.

voyeurism in the same way as previous sculptural examples. In order to reduce *Danaïd* to a simplistically erotic sculpture the viewer would have to choose to actively ignore every other aspect of the sculpture. To dismiss such blatant suffering is nearly impossible because of the innovative stylistic elements that Rodin employs to depict this sculpture. The combination of the curvature and angularity within the body and her overall form's similarity to the rock's inanimateness complicates the portrayal of the suffering nude female figure. Rodin's figure is not idealized. Her sharp hip bones and vertebrae protrude from her flesh, dispelling the idea of a soft, smooth, passive woman. *Danaïd* represents the harshness of her situation through her body's shape and pose. As her hair intermingles with the water spilling from her jug it further connects her body to her suffering. Contreras's *Malgré Tout* also connects a nude female body to her bleak circumstances through its formal character and subtle resistance against explicit eroticism. Neither Rodin nor Contreras represent their nude female sculptures laying on their backs completely on display. Their bodies' angularity and similarity to the rocky surfaces differentiates the figures from the soft, rounded bodies shown in earlier depictions of nude women resting on soft beds. At the same time, Contreras's sculpture introduces a different kind of titillation with the addition of shackles chaining his figure down. *Malgré Tout*'s nude woman cannot escape and to some viewers this may have increased the sculpture's eroticism. However, her resistance against such unchangeable circumstances is not reduced by her chains. The presence of chains combined with the words "Malgré Tout" underline the figure's struggle in spite of everything that holds her down.

These examples represent a small sample of the vast artistic tradition of nude recumbent women. Rodin and Contreras' knowledge of many of these works is highly likely given their

travels throughout Europe.⁷⁴ Both *Danaïd* and *Malgré Tout* emphasize the figures' reactions to suffering over eroticism. While Rodin's sculpture references a mythological story, the sculpture's exclusion from the Gates of Hell decontextualizes the piece and separates it from the story's intricate narrative.⁷⁵ Contreras's *Malgré Tout* also represents a non-mythological woman but goes beyond Rodin's depiction by giving his figure agency and consciousness. Instead of representing *Malgré Tout* in interminable agony, Contreras's figure actively struggles against her circumstances. Despite her shackles, the figure refuses to passively resign to her suffering and curls her toes under to prepare to continue pressing forward. The marble woman expresses the heroism and virtuous character typically reserved for male nude sculptures. Contreras's departure from centuries of precedents resulted in national and international acclaim following *Malgré Tout*'s triumphant exhibition at the 1900 Universal Paris Exhibition.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 41.

⁷⁵ "Rodin and Monet." *Rodin Musee*, <https://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/resources/educational-files/rodin-and-monet>.

⁷⁶ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 146.

Chapter II -- Looking toward Paris: Mexico's Relationship with France

"The feat of winning a great art prize has been made by a compatriot without influence, without other titles than his talent...and it is Jesús Contreras, that you can be proud of, from now on, to have been the first of our artists to conquer that golden fleece." [Manuel Flores on Contreras receiving the Croix de Chevalier of the Legion of Honor at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition.]⁷⁷

Jesús F. Contreras' artistic training and the tumultuous political era in which he worked directly contributed to the stylistic and nationalistic components in *Malgré Tout*. Porfirio Díaz's presidency (1877-1910) brought an increased focus on modernizing Mexico City's aesthetic. President Díaz's lengthy presidency and significant impact on Mexico's artistic development came to be known as the 'Porfiriato.'⁷⁸ Paris supplied a modern, cosmopolitan artistic style led by Auguste Rodin's sculptural innovations.⁷⁹ Contreras time in Paris led the Mexican artist to incorporate Rodin's emotive, unpolished approach to sculpture in his own work. After *Malgré Tout* won the Croix de Chevalier of the Legion of Honor at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition, Mexico embraced the Rodinesque artistic style.⁸⁰ This art prize aligned the Porfiriato with the European nations that had previously won the award, distinguishing Mexico as the first Latin American country to ever receive the Legion of Honor.⁸¹ While the Porfiriato eventually caused disparity among economic classes, Díaz's pursuit of a unified nationalistic artistic style helped establish Mexico's artistic competitiveness on a global scale.⁸²

Because Contreras created *Malgré Tout* for the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition, he would have anticipated the likely male bourgeois viewers while sculpting the nude, recumbent

⁷⁷ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 151.

⁷⁸ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 41.

⁷⁹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 40.

⁸⁰ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 147.

⁸¹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 147.

⁸² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 150.

female figure.⁸³ Contreras titles the sculpture “*Malgré Tout*,” differentiating her from mythologized women and underscoring her struggle with the phrase “in spite of everything.” By representing a non-mythological figure and carving the title into the sculpture, Contreras directs the viewer’s attention toward the woman’s human struggle. The title’s prominent place on the sculpture allows Contreras to clarify what is happening, while also simultaneously underscoring the sculpture’s French qualities. Additionally, the sculpture’s marble material is inherently European, with the marble for the sculpture being imported to Mexico before the 1900 Universal Exhibition. Prior to Contreras’s time studying abroad from 1887-1901, the artist worked mainly in bronze.⁸⁴ The permanence of marble helps to underscore the unchangeable nature of *Malgré Tout*’s struggle.

Malgré Tout’s body language also directs the viewer’s attention. Her gaze directs outward. It is physically possible for her to confront the viewer and involve them directly with her struggle. As she presses against the rock, straining her shackles and looking outward, the viewer cannot escape the desperate plea inherent in her every limb. The figure defiantly raises her gaze and fights her restraints even though her struggle will probably not end in victory. Her humanness is extremely apparent, underscored by the sculpture’s life-sized dimensions and its installation below eye-level at the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition, the Academia de San Carlos, the Alameda Central and the Nacional Museo de Arte. Despite the strong character and humanity *Malgré Tout* captures through her continued struggle, her nakedness highlights her cruel situation and increases her vulnerability. The viewer can walk around her life-size body, unfocused on her desire to escape, captivated only by her inability to do so. The combination of this type of erotic titillation with her struggle complicates the sculpture’s reception. And yet her

⁸³ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 70.

⁸⁴ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 30-36.

blatant nakedness and particular type of eroticization did not prevent her public acceptance.⁸⁵

Malgré Tout became the first nude, sculpture exhibited at the Academia de San Carlos. The image successfully and subtly combines eroticism, suffering, struggle and power with sufficient complexity and ambiguity that goes beyond simple pornographic images of nude women.

Mexico's Artistic Context: The Academia de San Carlos

Following the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition, *Malgré Tout* returned to Mexico occupying a favorable location at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, the former Academia de San Carlos.⁸⁶ The Academia's role within Mexican artistic production as the premier school for artistic training highlights Contreras's impact on future artistic production within Mexico City. Additionally, prior to *Malgré Tout*, the Academia had never exhibited a female nude sculpture.⁸⁷ The Academia's artistic influence and political importance shaped Contreras's training long before the young artist ever encountered Rodin's work. Born in 1866, Jesús F. Contreras grew up in central Mexico and studied at the Escuela de Plácido Jiménez from 1874-1876.⁸⁸ Here the Aguascalientes native learned to engrave and sculpt wax figures before apprenticing with a Mr. Flores to focus on goldwork.⁸⁹ Moving to Mexico City in 1881, Contreras entered the Academia de San Carlos to study fine arts.⁹⁰ Founded in 1785 as The Royal Academy of San Carlos in New Spain, Mexico City's Academia de San Carlos still exists today.⁹¹ Originally based on the Royal Academy of San Carlos in Spain, the Academia de San Carlos adopted policies, students, and the

⁸⁵ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 236.

⁸⁶ Rodríguez López, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 20.

⁸⁷ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 80.

⁸⁸ Rodríguez Lopez, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 11.

⁸⁹ Rodríguez Lopez, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 11.

⁹⁰ Rodríguez Lopez, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 11.

⁹¹ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 19.

director of the original.⁹² From the beginning, the Academy taught students to mimic European drawing standards and practices.⁹³ The Bourbon monarchy's control of Spain during this time period created a distinctly French influence within the Academy. Consequently, Contreras was subject to European artistic influence before ever travelling outside of Mexico's borders.

The Academia's first teachers were Mexican artists who taught the Academia's students until the Spanish teachers arrived.⁹⁴ The first painting professor, José de Alcívar, heavily influenced Mexico's artistic teaching until the first decade of the nineteenth century.⁹⁵ Alcívar emulated the Academy's dedication to replacing the former baroque style with France's neoclassical style. In 1791, Manuel Tolsá arrived from Spain and became the sculpture director.⁹⁶ Tolsá's architectural contributions to Mexico City include completing the Metropolitan Cathedral and the Palace of Mining. Little of the Spanish artist's sculpture remains except the large equestrian statue of Charles IV of Spain, *El Caballito* that now resides outside the Nacioanl Museo de Arte (fig. 25).⁹⁷ Tolsá's artistic style embraced late-eighteenth century European neoclassical design elements. Tolsa also furthered the Bourbon monarchy's desire to disseminate a neoclassical artistic tradition throughout Mexico.

The Independence battle brought uncertainty about the Academy's financial situation which was formerly funded by the Spanish crown. September 16, 1810 launched the Mexican War of Independence from Spanish control. After Mexican Independence was finalized in 1821, the school stretched Spanish contributions until 1824, marking the beginning of decades-long economic turmoil.⁹⁸ The Academia de San Carlos did not fully function again until 1843. This

⁹² Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 19.

⁹³ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 25.

⁹⁴ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 30.

⁹⁵ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 32.

⁹⁶ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 44.

⁹⁷ Salvador Pinoncelly, *Manuel Tolsá, Arquitecto* (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1998), 36.

⁹⁸ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 69.

turbulent period without a formal artistic school allowed artists to explore new approaches to art making. Sculptor Patiño Ixtolinque became the unofficial general director in 1825, following his bold military role during the Revolution. Patiño was one-hundred percent indigenous and defined a nationalistic image that incorporated indigenous figures as symbols of national character.⁹⁹ While seventeenth-century vignettes and coats-of-arms often symbolically represented indigenous women in pre-Hispanic clothing, Patiño introduced a deeper exploration of Mexico's nationalism.¹⁰⁰ Patiño's sculptures, *America* and *Liberty*, reference an awareness of ancient Mesoamerican technical traditions (fig. 26). Carved for an unexecuted funerary monument to Revolutionary figure José Maria Morelos y Pavón, *America* and *Liberty* reflect the neoclassical stylistic elements supported by Tolsá.¹⁰¹ Patiño's students, such as Salomé Pina, introduced romantic styles less grounded in neoclassical traditions to the Mexican artistic context. Pina's charcoal sketch of an older man with a furrowed brow and rugged facial hair represents the emotive expressions which highlighted figure's faces during this stylistic development. This new generation of Mexican artists did not depend on earlier Greco-Roman traditions to develop a nationalist style. The artistic freedom to cultivate different styles separate from academic teaching ended in 1843. General Antonio López de Santa Anna issued a reorganization decree, returning governmental patronage to the Academia.¹⁰² Another presidential decree selected three directors of painting, sculpture and engraving from Europe, ending the unification between teachers and artists interested in defining Mexico's nationalistic image separate from Europe's neoclassicism.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 70.

¹⁰⁰ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 70.

¹⁰¹ "Pedro Patiño Ixtolinque," *Grove Art*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T065779>.

¹⁰² Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 102.

¹⁰³ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 103.

Following the second presidential decree, Manuel Vilar and Pelegrí Clavé became the directors of sculpture and painting.¹⁰⁴ Both Catalan artists arrived from Rome in January of 1846.¹⁰⁵ With Vilar's appointment, Mexican sculpture took a decided stylistic shift. Clay modelling from life and the mechanical transition of clay models to marble sculptures replaced former practices.¹⁰⁶ Vilar's *Tlahuicole* (1851) is an example of the academic realist style the artist brought to the Academy's sculpture department (fig. 27). The sculpture shows the ancient Tlaxcaltec warrior, Tlahuicole, tied to a sacrifice stone positioned with his arms raised. His left hand makes a fist while his right hand firmly grasps an object. Defined musculature and a slightly contrapposto stance reflect strength and capability. A fig leaf covers his genitals, censoring the sculpture. *Tlahuicole*'s muscular body and standing pose overshadow the rope binding the figure. The rope does not diminish the figure's movement and strength. This return to Greco-Roman ideas portraying male nude figures as symbols of strength and power influenced later depictions of pre-Hispanic figures. Miguel Noreña continued Vilar's sculptural practice in his *Cuauhtémoc* (1887), a sculpture Contreras worked on while studying at the Academia (fig. 28). In this way, Contreras's artistic training is directly connected to the new directors' artistic teachings following the reorganization decree.

At mid-century, as Mexico's prosperous local bourgeoisie increased demand for portraits, still lifes and daily scenes, artists reintroduced a non-academic style in artistic production. In 1869, Clavé stepped down as painting director, bringing native Mexican José Salomé Pina back to the Academy. Pina studied abroad for fourteen years before returning to Mexico.¹⁰⁷ Pina's arrival at the Academia de San Carlos, renamed the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1867,

¹⁰⁴ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 107.

¹⁰⁵ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 107.

¹⁰⁶ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 108.

¹⁰⁷ James Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, (Thames & Hudson, 2013), 169.

brought realistic detail to genre paintings and an emphasis on painting Mexican history.¹⁰⁸ This stylistic shift emphasized eroticism, violence and dramatic lighting with deep shadows.¹⁰⁹ Santiago Rebull's *The Death of Marat* (1875) expresses the new painting style (fig. 29). The painting depicts Charlotte Corday's bathtub assassination of Jean-Paul Marat. The moment Rebull captured shows Marat clutching his breast as his wound opens. Corday fills the central position within the painting and occupies a strong stance debunking the common gender associations toward women. The French subject matter portrays the woman as the aggressor, capable of successfully completing a violent, revolutionary action. This painting presents the female protagonist in a striking position of authority, fully clothed, while the naked man lays dying from her actions. Rebull continues to use nudity as a sign of vulnerability and powerlessness. Corday's figure appears powerful within the scene because of her active pose, determined facial expression and resistance against political and social expectations. By committing an assassination, Corday violates the social code of a civilized society. This fact is only heightened because she is a woman. Similar to Contreras' sculpture, Rebull's painting follows French artistic practices, drawing from the more realistic, dramatic, and emotional style Pina studied while abroad.¹¹⁰

Political History before the Porfiriato

Political divides began to affect the Academia de San Carlos' teaching during this period. As tensions increased between the two parties, Liberals and Conservatives, arguments about national artistic unity broke out. Both groups shared the belief in a national artistic unity.¹¹¹ They

¹⁰⁸ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 176.

¹⁰⁹ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 108.

¹¹⁰ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 109.

¹¹¹ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 166.

disagreed, however, on whether or not the national artistic character should incorporate elements from before the Spanish Conquest.¹¹² Manuel Vilar's *Tlahuicole* (1851) became the first sculpture to deal exclusively with Mexico's pre-Hispanic past. Later artists continued to draw almost exclusively from Central Mexico's Toltec and Aztec civilizations when referencing pre-Hispanic peoples.¹¹³ Tensions grew with the Indian uprising in the north, the disastrous economy and the lack of political consensus between the Liberals and the Conservatives.¹¹⁴ In June 1863, Napoleon III occupied Mexico City and crowned Austria's Archduke, Maximilian von Hapsburg, Emperor.¹¹⁵ The new Emperor tried to unite the two political factions with life-size portraits of both Liberal and Conservative leaders.¹¹⁶ While artists such as Santiago Rebull painted political portraits, fighting between Liberals and Conservatives continued eventually leading to Maximilian's assassination. After Benito Juárez's inauguration as President, Liberal intellectuals with indigenous and mestizo backgrounds refocused the artistic community toward history painting.¹¹⁷ The Academia de San Carlos focused on healing the deepened political divisions and correcting European stereotypes of Mexico by emphasizing national unity and pride.¹¹⁸ One component of this approach equated the Aztecs with the Romans and the Maya with the Greeks. By doing so, the Liberals argued artists did not need to imitate Greek and Roman classicism, because Mexican history provided equally significant local precedents that similarly embodied power and classical ideals.

¹¹² Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 166.

¹¹³ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 204.

¹¹⁴ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 204.

¹¹⁵ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 717.

¹¹⁶ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 174.

¹¹⁷ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 204.

¹¹⁸ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 205.

The Gender Binary in Mexico

Despite the Liberal argument about the Aztecs' similarity to Greco-Roman civilizations, the Academia de San Carlos's sculpting directors had referenced Greek and Roman sculptural precedents since the school's founding. Manuel Tolsá brought plaster pieces replicating famous Greek and Roman sculptures to Mexico when he moved from Europe.¹¹⁹ Because the Academy's founding principles incorporated these ancient art traditions, Mexican depictions of nude male figures followed Classical examples.¹²⁰ Defined musculature embodying strength, discipline, and heroism and male nudes portraying virtuous characteristics permeated Latin America as well as Greece and Rome.

Artists often presented Mexican history as equal to European mythologies by portraying the symbols, allegories and important figures of Mexico's cultural heritage within the neoclassical tradition. Vilar's *Tlahuicole* and numerous public statues capture this pursuit within Mexico's artistic traditions.¹²¹ Because of this, similar differences between representations of genders within ancient art appear in Mexico's sculptural practices. However, while nude female figures were prevalent in ancient art, Mexican artists did not publicly display sculptural nude female figures.¹²² José María Obregón's *The Discovery of Pulque* (1869) exemplifies this tradition (fig.30). The painting portrays a young woman, Xóchitl, offering Tecpancaltzin, the King of Tula, a jar containing the drink pulque. Xóchitl is accompanied by both her parents.¹²³ Both the young woman and her mother are fully clothed, while her father's nude chest and legs starkly contrast the different representations of gender. Jesús F. Contreras' *Malgré Tout* breaks

¹¹⁹ "Malgré Tout," *Museo Nacional del Arte* plaque.

¹²⁰ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 112.

¹²¹ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 114.

¹²² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 222.

¹²³ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 122.

with this tradition.¹²⁴ Contreras's decision to include nudity and eroticization within his depiction of a vulnerable, suffering female figure is more significant, because *Malgré Tout* broke with Mexican artistic precedents.

While there are plenty of European and French examples familiar to Mexican artists, the Mexican artistic portrayal of femininity did not include nudity. Mexico's artistic conventions portrayed women as moral figures, fully clothed and usually shown as maternal or religious characters. Partial nude figures appeared in painting, but often met with resistance, and explicitly nude women were completely excluded from the Academy space until Felipe Santiago Gutiérrez's *Huntress of the Andes* (1891) (fig. 31).¹²⁵ Surprisingly, Gutiérrez exhibited his painting at an annual Academy exhibition.¹²⁶ For reasons unknown, the Academia dedicated an entire room to showing eroticism within art, including completed paintings like Gutiérrez's and drawing studies of the nude figure.¹²⁷ Contemporary viewers reacted strongly to Gutiérrez's foreshortened figure.¹²⁸ The nude woman lies on her back, stretched out across an animal skin and grasping a spear while a landscape fills the background. The painting depicts the huntress as unconscious, reflecting European painting traditions, but flips the figure's orientation toward the viewer. The woman's head is shown in the painting's foreground and her legs stretch back toward the landscape. The nude figure's gaze does not contribute to the viewer's experience of her nudity. Instead, the strangely positioned body writhes uncomfortably and portrays a mythological story of the Huntress of the Andes. The painting maintains the European precedents which removed the viewer from the painted figure's humanity by representing an

¹²⁴ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 222.

¹²⁵ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 236.

¹²⁶ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 122.

¹²⁷ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 122.

¹²⁸ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 122.

unconscious, mythological woman with an averted gaze. While Contreras's *Malgré Tout* is the next example of a public representation of a female nude figure, the sculpture received resounding public approval.¹²⁹ Contreras's sculpture marked a distinctive departure in Mexican artistic history. *Malgré Tout*'s ambiguity and heroism disrupt the nude figure's eroticization, allowing the sculpture to become the first accepted public female sculpture displayed at the Academia de San Carlos.¹³⁰

The Porfiriato

The 1871 elections brought heightened political unrest as General Porfirio Diaz unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow President Juraz.¹³¹ Diaz finally took control in 1877, and his regime as President spanned from 1877 to 1910, with a four-year gap from 1880-1884.¹³² Porfirio Diaz's presidency dissipated the artistic community's hopes for pursuing a nationalistic artistic style. Diaz combatted the country's economic turmoil by working to establish Mexico as a global power. Paris's preeminent status as a cultural capital and a shining example of modernity's possibilities led to Diaz's desire to bring Parisian artistic styles to Mexico City.¹³³ However, this emphasis on French artistic traditions did not completely abandon Mexican artistic tradition. The Academia's initial directors taught French artistic styles and students often studied abroad in France.¹³⁴ While encouraging artists to follow French aesthetics, Diaz also sought foreign investments in Mexico City's economy.¹³⁵ Paris' status as an economically and culturally

¹²⁹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce* 236.

¹³⁰ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce* 236.

¹³¹ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 717.

¹³² Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 719.

¹³³ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 719-720.

¹³⁴ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 719.

¹³⁵ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 718-719.

prosperous metropolis, extended across the Atlantic Ocean to Mexico City.¹³⁶ The French style proved attractive to Diaz, despite Napoleon III's forces' fairly recent occupation of Mexico.¹³⁷ Diaz followed in France's footsteps and prescribed the impersonal, highly regular and systematized cultural experience Hausmann, Napoleon's architect and city planner, imposed in Paris several decades earlier.¹³⁸ The former general attempted to ignore the sensitive social, class and gender issues brought on by Paris's occupation of Mexico City.¹³⁹

Political caricaturists capture the disconnect between Diaz and his constituents during this turbulent time period. France and Mexico began producing lithographs for books and literary magazines, such as *La Orquesta*.¹⁴⁰ Edited by cartoonist Constantino Escalante, *La Orquesta* criticized the conservative belief that art represents high ideals and moral virtue.¹⁴¹ These types of literary magazines offer insight into how the country responded to Diaz's national artistic style. The economic disparity that accompanied Mexico City's modernization would eventually lead to the Revolution of 1910 led by Francisco Madero.¹⁴² During the Porfiriato, however, artistic styles conformed to the dictator-president's preferred attitude.¹⁴³ The Aztec god Cuauhtémoc reinforced the connection between the Aztecs and Roman gods, suggesting Mexico's lengthy and powerful history apart from Europe.¹⁴⁴ Miguel Noreña collaborated with his students to create bronze sculptures for a Cuauhtémoc monument during Contreras' time at the Academia de San Carlos (fig. 28).¹⁴⁵ Located on the Paseo de la Reforma, the main

¹³⁶ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 720.

¹³⁷ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 720.

¹³⁸ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 720.

¹³⁹ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 722.

¹⁴⁰ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 220.

¹⁴¹ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 220.

¹⁴² Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 720.

¹⁴³ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 720.

¹⁴⁴ "Miguel Noreña," *Grove Art*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T089580>.

¹⁴⁵ "Miguel Noreña," *Grove Art*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T089580>.

boulevard in Mexico City, this monument captured the tension between the strong Spanish, creole, mestizo and Indian factions and the academic style supported by President Porfirio Díaz.¹⁴⁶ The sculptures along the Paseo de la Reforma act as a memorial to past Mexican heroes.¹⁴⁷ The Monument to Cuauhtémoc, the last defender of the Aztec empire against Spain, celebrates Mexico's indigenous heritage.¹⁴⁸ Díaz referenced Aztec ancestors who heroically struggled to protect Mexico as reflections of his own role in the fight against Maximilian.¹⁴⁹ Díaz experienced a real political and economic gain through linking himself to the Aztec rulers.¹⁵⁰ With fiscal goals in mind, the Porfirian government asserted their right to collect state revenues, proclaiming a central state ruled by Mexico City.¹⁵¹ The sculptures combine historical details with neoclassical idealization, conveying the academic European approach popular during the time. This synthesis between Mexican elements and European models exemplifies the new national identity Díaz projected to secure European investment in Mexico's economy.¹⁵² Additionally, Díaz emphasized one significant culture, the Aztecs, to consolidate support around one pre-Hispanic people.¹⁵³ By simplifying references to Mexico's pre-Hispanic past, Díaz strengthened the comparison between the Aztecs and the Romans.¹⁵⁴ Noreña's Cuauhtémoc Monument possesses a neoclassical artistic language that foreigners and locals alike could understand, making Mexico's Indian past accessible through the artistic fusion between styles.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁶ Lynn Gipson, "Mexicanidad and the Monument to Cuauhtémoc on the Paseo de la Reforma," *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 11, no. 4 (March 1989): 284.

¹⁴⁷ Gipson, "Mexicanidad and the Monument to Cuauhtémoc," 285.

¹⁴⁸ Gipson, "Mexicanidad and the Monument to Cuauhtémoc," 285.

¹⁴⁹ Barbara A. Tenenbaum, "Streetwise History: The Paseo de la Reforma and the Porfirian State, 1876-1910," *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico*, edited by William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin, and William E. French (SR Books, 2004), 141.

¹⁵⁰ Tenenbaum, "Streetwise History," 140.

¹⁵¹ Tenenbaum, "Streetwise History," 141.

¹⁵² Tenenbaum, "Streetwise History," 142.

¹⁵³ Tenenbaum, "Streetwise History," 142.

¹⁵⁴ Tenenbaum, "Streetwise History," 143.

¹⁵⁵ "Miguel Noreña," *Grove Art*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T089580>.

Modernismo

In 1888, Nicaraguan poet Ruben Dario launched the literary phenomenon *modernismo*, rejecting technology and industrialization and stressing subjectivity and spirituality.¹⁵⁶ *Modernismo* developed as the antithesis of Diaz's nationalistic style.¹⁵⁷ Growing out of the literary magazine tradition, *modernismo* focused on challenging traditional 'academic' movements believed to no longer reflect cultural values.¹⁵⁸ In the 1890s, academic journals such as *Revista Moderna* rebuked art focused on realism or genre scenes.¹⁵⁹ Run by art editor, Julio Ruelas, *Revista Moderna* allowed modernista artists and literary critics to create a cultural critique.¹⁶⁰ Ruelas fought against the return to academic realism. While studying in Germany, the art editor encountered revolutionary artistic movements, such as European Symbolism, concerned with innovating artistic practice to reflect modernity's changing social dynamics.¹⁶¹

Modernista journals and artists, including Contreras, rejected the Academia's commitment to academic realism, genre painting, and alignment with one racial group.¹⁶² *Modernismo* writers and artists embraced art's ability to communicate values and ideas beyond idyllic historical or anecdotal scenes.¹⁶³ A tension grew between *modernismo* values and the Porfirian regime concerned with courting foreign investors, the Catholic church and wealthy citizens able to support the government financially. Contreras's success at the 1900 Universal Exhibition helped launch a national regard for artistic styles besides academic realism.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁶ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 213.

¹⁵⁷ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 213.

¹⁵⁸ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 214.

¹⁵⁹ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 76.

¹⁶⁰ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 216.

¹⁶¹ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 216.

¹⁶² Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 216.

¹⁶³ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 217.

¹⁶⁴ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 236.

Additionally, the artist's ambiguous approach to nudity and nationalistic identity allowed both modernista artists and Porfirio Diaz to celebrate *Malgré Tout*'s stylistic elements.¹⁶⁵

Saturnino Herrán, arguably the most influential modernista artist, led the way for modern Mexican artists during a tumultuous artistic period.¹⁶⁶ Both Herrán and Contreras created important sensual nudes in service of a nationalistic identity. Herrán's *Legend of the Volcanoes* (1910) focused on the national narrative of white and indigenous peoples within Mexican society (fig. 32).¹⁶⁷ The triptych painting portrays an Aztec myth about the origin of volcanoes.¹⁶⁸ Lovers from different economic classes who were forbidden to marry, died of grief and transformed into two mountains: the dormant female (Ixtaccihuatl) and the active male (Popocatepetl).¹⁶⁹ Herrán alters the myth, representing two different races, an indigenous male and a white female.¹⁷⁰ By doing so, the artist paints the white female as a particularly charged object of desire. Tensions between race and gender escalated during the Porfiriato as problems of underdevelopment and instability persisted.¹⁷¹ The gender crisis within Mexico developed gradually, but the renewed insistence on male honor, respectability and national brotherhood during Diaz's presidency led to an increased embrace of white traditions.¹⁷² Highly gendered images presented the ideal Mexican woman as a religious, moral indigenous figure similar to the Virgin of Guadalupe.¹⁷³ Contrarily, the ideal Mexican man was portrayed as a powerful "man on the horse" referencing Roman equestrian statues from Classical antiquity.¹⁷⁴ Herrán's painting

¹⁶⁵ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 236.

¹⁶⁶ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 220.

¹⁶⁷ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 220.

¹⁶⁸ Oles *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 221.

¹⁶⁹ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 221.

¹⁷⁰ Oles *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 221.

¹⁷¹ Anne Rubenstein, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, (University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 9.

¹⁷² Rubenstein, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, 8.

¹⁷³ Rubenstein, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, 9.

¹⁷⁴ Rubenstein, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, 8.

provides a resolution to this deep divide presumed to exist during the Porfiriato.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, because the moral, national hope for Mexico to become a globally competitive country did not rest on the shoulders of white women, artists such as Herrán and Contreras could depict nude, white female figures within their artwork without receiving backlash from the public.

By contrast, indigenous women were almost never shown nude in artistic representations. A small number of anthropological photographs show partially nude indigenous women. In these depictions, the photographs frame indigenous women as representations of a type or character in society. Désiré Charnay's *Indigenous Woman* is one example of such a photograph from 1858.¹⁷⁶ This photograph shows a woman in profile, almost fully clothed. The photograph captures a sideview of the woman's right breast where the fabric of her clothing does not fully cover her. The woman's partial-nudity is not immediately recognizable due to the large parcel slung over her right shoulder. The sheer bulk of the cloth that surrounds the woman gives the illusion that she is fully clothed, with the partial nudity only serving to convey her lack of adequate clothing as she walks down the street burdened with a parcel.

By the 1890s, discussions about women's role in society appeared in political cartoons and stories.¹⁷⁷ These depictions of indigenous and modernized women mocked the emergence of new female social roles. In 1898 *El Hijo de Ahuizote* portrayed a crowd applauding a female bullfighter as they shower her with cooking pans and other household items.¹⁷⁸ These cartoons sketched these undesirable women with bare legs, showing the immodesty and degradation associated with women who abandoned their roles at home.¹⁷⁹ Mexican women did not quickly

¹⁷⁵ Rubenstein, *Masculinity and Sexuality in Modern Mexico*, 8.

¹⁷⁶ Rose Casanova, *Mexico, a Photographic History: a Selective Catalogue of the Fototeca Nacional of the INAH*, (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2007), 96.

¹⁷⁷ William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 126-127.

¹⁷⁸ Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, 126-127.

¹⁷⁹ Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, 128.

challenge their domestic role, fearful of the ridicule that would accompany moving into modern spaces.¹⁸⁰ *Malgré Tout* does not explicitly comment on the role of women in society, nor is there substantial evidence to support Contreras's interest in the women's movement. However, the sculpture is clearly not a mother or domestic woman. Contreras gives his nude figure a type of agency and heroism rarely associated with women in public spaces. And by choosing to portray a white woman, the sculpture's eroticism is less shocking to *Malgré Tout*'s Mexican audiences.

Contreras in Paris

Contreras balanced Diaz's obsession with foreign artistic styles and *modernismo* artists' concerns with revolutionizing Mexican culture within his artwork. This synthesis originated from artist's time studying abroad in Paris in 1887.¹⁸¹ In 1888, while studying in Paris, Contreras studied in workshops dedicated to casting and stonecutting.¹⁸² Contreras began making minimum wage while working in Mr. Gagnot's candelabrería, a workshop devoted to bronze metalworking. The young artist also studied bronze work and became familiar with the French working artists' dedication to manual labor as a vehicle for moral ennoblement and social progress.¹⁸³ After Gagnot's candelabrería, Contreras studied in renowned architect Colibert's workshop for three months.¹⁸⁴ Contreras worked alongside French artist Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi and created two marble busts.¹⁸⁵ There is not substantial evidence to suggest why Contreras began working in marble, but his change in material occurs while studying in Europe.¹⁸⁶ Contreras designed and cast four candelabra statues, six reliefs of pre-Hispanic

¹⁸⁰ Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, 129.

¹⁸¹ Rodríguez Lopez, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 11.

¹⁸² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 39-40.

¹⁸³ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 41.

¹⁸⁴ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 41.

¹⁸⁵ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 41.

¹⁸⁶ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 42.

divinities and many other historical figures for the 1889 Universal Exhibition Mexican Pavilion at the Thiébaud Frères foundry.¹⁸⁷ After the success of the 1889 Paris Exhibition, Contreras received his title as a professional sculptor, allowing the artist to return to Mexico and continue working within the profession.¹⁸⁸ After returning to Mexico, Contreras spearheaded the creation of the Mexican Artistic Foundation under President Porfirio Diaz.¹⁸⁹ Contreras's role as the Foundation's director allowed him to create public statuary devoted to Mexican historic events and important public figures.¹⁹⁰ The artist also conducted classes at the Escuela de Artes y Oficios and the National School of Fine Arts focused on incorporating industrial processes into the preparation of sculpture.¹⁹¹ This departure from the academic techniques consistently practiced at the National School of Fine Arts proved so controversial that he had to step down from his teaching positions due to controversy.¹⁹² Mexico's belief in maintaining tradition and academic realism was countered by the modernista artist's movement.¹⁹³ Contreras's determination to introduce modern, French techniques garnered the artist the modernista artistic movement's support throughout the remainder of his career even through future collaborations with President Diaz.¹⁹⁴ *Malgré Tout*'s success at the 1900 Paris Exhibition, eliminated any hostility Contreras received from the National School of Fine Arts. In 1901 *Malgré Tout* would debut in Mexico immediately following the Exhibition.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁷ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, page 45.

¹⁸⁸ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, page 60.

¹⁸⁹ Rodríguez Lopez, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 12.

¹⁹⁰ Rodríguez Lopez, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 12.

¹⁹¹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 46.

¹⁹² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 41.

¹⁹³ Oles *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 221.

¹⁹⁴ Oles *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 221.

¹⁹⁵ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 41.

Universal Exhibitions

The Paris Universal Exhibitions encapsulate both Contreras and Porfirio Díaz's approaches to national artistic character from 1889 to 1900. The 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition, particularly, brought together Latin American and European sculptors whose work reflected similar concerns with gender, eroticism, suffering and power.¹⁹⁶ Both Rodin and Contreras attended the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition.¹⁹⁷ Rodin's status as an influential, innovative sculptor was firmly cemented by this time, with the French sculptor sitting on the jury during the 1889 Paris Exhibition.¹⁹⁸ *Malgré Tout* did not debut at the Universal Exhibition until 1900.¹⁹⁹ The Mexican pavilion was Mexico's main project during the 1889 Paris Universal Exhibition.²⁰⁰ Designed to reflect Aztec culture and style, the pavilion differentiated Mexico from the other countries present at the World's Fair.²⁰¹ The Mexican Pavilion stood at the base of the Eiffel Tower, directly confronting French innovation and artistic ability.²⁰² The Pavilion incorporated bronze sculptures, designed by Contreras himself, on either side of a large, non-functional staircase, bracketed by large pedestals with Aztec writing and ancient symbols.²⁰³ The Aztec elements, bronze sculpture and large text declaring "Republica Mexicana" proclaimed Mexico as a proud inheritor of Aztec artistic elements and grandeur.²⁰⁴ Contreras' bronze sculptures depicted gods and kings from the pre-Hispanic period.²⁰⁵ These sculptures emulate similar characteristics portrayed within the Cuauhtémoc monument and were later moved to

¹⁹⁶ Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation*, (University of California Press, 2018), 65.

¹⁹⁷ Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*, 65.

¹⁹⁸ "Auguste Rodin," *Rodin Musee*, <https://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/resources/educational-files/rodin-and-monet>.

¹⁹⁹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 144.

²⁰⁰ Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*, 64.

²⁰¹ Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*, 64.

²⁰² Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*, 65.

²⁰³ Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*, 65.

²⁰⁴ Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*, 66-67.

²⁰⁵ Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs*, 67.

Aguascalientes and Mexico City.²⁰⁶ The shift from the 1889 Pavilion to Contreras' marble *Malgré Tout* reveals the *modernismo* movement's influence on Contreras. As the Mexican artist began to synthesize his Mexican and French artistic influences, his style developed from the late-nineteenth century academic realism to reflect Rodin's dynamic sculptural style.

Mexico's developing artistic traditions and search for a national identity directly influenced how Contreras approached *Malgré Tout*. The fight for national identity and artistic character would continue throughout the twentieth century as the country grappled with its history and cultural ancestors. Unfortunately, Contreras' tragic death cut his life short as cancer took first his arm and then his life in 1902.²⁰⁷ His early death left his significant role in the building tension between Mexico's President and the literary magazines' mission unfinished. Despite this, the Contreras's decision to include Rodin's expressive emotion, dynamic movement and tension within *Malgré Tout* extended his artwork's impact past his own lifetime. Even while Contreras created public monuments for Porfirio Diaz, the artist continued to reject academism and polish. Embracing Rodin's unfinished dynamic style devoted to expressive movement and emotion, prevented *Malgré Tout* from conforming to President Diaz's systematic artistic vision. Instead, Contreras returns to the Academy's French roots, but rejects academic realism in favor of emulating Auguste Rodin's innovative sculptures.

²⁰⁶ "Jesús F(ructuoso) Contreras," *Grove Art Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T019250>.

²⁰⁷ Rodriguez Lopez, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 12.

Chapter III – Struggling Against Suffering: Jesús F. Contreras’s *Malgré Tout*

“The artist and the poet must ask for everything at their time and their century. Their works must be the reflection of their time...gender issues, treated with inspiration and talent, often conquer more applause and reputation than many high-brow works, because they are easily understood by all with interest...within every class of society.”²⁰⁸

As Contreras balanced the artistic innovations and techniques he learned while studying in Paris with the Mexican Artistic Foundation’s mission, he imbued *Malgré Tout* with elements from each country’s respective artistic traditions. In 1901 *Malgré Tout* debuted in Mexico at the Academia de San Carlos, proclaiming Mexico’s acceptance of the ambiguous, heroic sculpture. In the 1920s, José Vasconcelos moved *Malgré Tout*, and a number of other nude marble sculptures, into the Alameda Central, a public park in Mexico City (fig. 33).²⁰⁹ The installation within the Alameda Central reveals the stark difference between gender conceptions during the Porfiriato and post-1910 Revolution. Encountering a non-mythologized female nude figure within a public park would have been unthinkable under President Díaz’s leadership. The desire to create a strong country capable of competing on a global scale required women to remain in their roles as homemakers and caretakers of children. Women were looked to as the moral backbone of society, demurely and conservatively guiding their children through life. Naked female figures were not exhibited in public spaces. This changed with *Malgré Tout*. The sculpture’s multiple contexts, from the private exhibition at the Casino Nacional in 1898 to the public Alameda Central, reveals the artwork’s distinctiveness.

Contemporary audiences had criticized Gutiérrez less than a decade earlier for representing a nude female figure within his painting.²¹⁰ Yet, in 1901 *Malgré Tout* was

²⁰⁸ Miguel Portillo *El Siglo XIX* (7 January 1880) reproduced in Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 33.

²⁰⁹ Rodríguez López, *Jesús F. Contreras*, 12.

²¹⁰ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 212.

celebrated as an extraordinary work of art. Wasn't Contreras's nude figure as explicitly naked as the huntress shown in the painting? Contreras's figure is shown shackled and incapable of escaping her bounds, unlike the huntress who seems to be relaxed and peaceful. Contreras's figure is also not a mythological or figure type. It seems that this direct representation of a nude female figure would have incited outrage within a society that had, until nine years prior, never supported nude female figure in works of art.²¹¹ The public presentation in the Nacional Casino, the Alameda and at the 1900 Universal Exhibition demands a close examination of the symbolic and ambiguous meaning behind Contreras's figure.

Indigenous or Parisian?

Malgré Tout's French title provocatively aligns Contreras's sculpture with France. The artist's participation at the 1889 and 1900 Paris Universal Exhibitions supports Contreras's emulation of French artistic styles. However, Contreras's French title does not simply label a sculpture following Rodin's artistic style. The artist carved the stylish, dynamic lettering saying "Malgré Tout" right before the sculpture left Mexico to participate in the 1900 Universal Exhibition.²¹² Because the artist chooses to sculpt a nude, eroticized woman shackled to a rock, by carving the words "in spite of everything" into the marble Contreras underscores the figure's struggle. The unfinished, dynamic figure exudes the tension of a body straining against inescapable circumstances. *Malgré Tout* does not represent a slave woman, but a woman struggling against her shackles with determination and perseverance. The title's inclusion clarifies the subject matter. The title does not reference a mythological story, but uses the French language to express fortitude: doing something "in spite of everything." Contreras does not

²¹¹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 104.

²¹² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 104.

simply create the titillating, erotic sculpture portraying a mythological, unconscious woman that European audiences might have expected. *Malgré Tout*'s formal character disrupts how viewers experience the work's eroticization. The title's inclusion points toward a heroic reading of the sculpture, toward an inherent characteristic not typically associated with nude female figures. Similarly, Contreras does not create the type of sculpture Mexican audience would have anticipated. Mexican artists typically use the female body as representative of women's traditional, moral role in society.²¹³ Mexican artists often confined women to scenes within the home and their roles as mothers.²¹⁴ By carving a nude, female sculpture, Contreras does not conform to either Mexican or French audiences' expectations about women in art.

Adriana Zavala's book, *Becoming Modern Becoming Tradition*, discusses how Mexican women at the turn of the century struggled to maintain traditional female roles while the rest of the country progressed toward modernity.²¹⁵ Zavala examines the moral, social and political pressures placed on women during this time period, emphasizing representations of women in artworks as evidence for the growing tension between genders.²¹⁶ Additionally, Zavala uses nineteenth and twentieth-century magazines and literary traditions to show the public discussions about changing gender roles within Mexico.²¹⁷ The theories argued in this book show the gender dynamic within artistic production that Contreras would have been familiar with when sculpting *Malgré Tout*.

Artistic representations of *costumbrismo* (local customs), artistic representations depicting a type through moralizing images, helped to illustrate nineteenth-century Mexican

²¹³ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 23.

²¹⁴ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 23.

²¹⁵ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 24-25.

²¹⁶ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 24.

²¹⁷ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 25.

women as moral, pious, family-centric figures.²¹⁸ Petronilo Monroy's *Allegory of the Constitution of 1857* exemplifies the type of image meant to show Mexico's national spirit through an angelic representation of a woman (fig. 34).²¹⁹ Depicted as classicized, noble and potentially European, the allegorical woman represents the country's virtues while simultaneously illustrating the type of woman upheld by the country. The Mexican Revolution from 1910-1927 ushered in a significant redefinition of female identity within Mexico.²²⁰ During this time period, Contreras's *Malgré Tout* occupied a prominently public spot in the Alameda Central park.²²¹ As the nation fought to define an identity after the Porfiriato, female participation in the Revolution brought the first real action within women's movements.²²² In 1923, feminist congresses were held to debate women's emancipation from domestic life, bringing the discourse into public life.²²³ However, the Revolution also renewed the sense of heroic manhood, painting men as superhuman redeemers.²²⁴ This emphasis on male power and physical strength complicated the feminist movement during this period.

As Mexico worked to redefine a productive and prosperous society following the Revolution of 1821, women's role as mothers were emphasized throughout social and political conversations.²²⁵ While advocates championed education, they also stressed the importance of women exemplifying virtuous, maternal, and traditional characteristics. Women needed to keep family life and tradition alive while men modernized Mexican cities and society. A famous novel, *La Quijotita* (1819), written by José Joaquín Fernández argues for the importance of

²¹⁸ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 23.

²¹⁹ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 26.

²²⁰ Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representations in Mexico* (Columbia University Press, 1989), 101.

²²¹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 141.

²²² Franco, *Plotting Women*, 102.

²²³ Franco, *Plotting Women*, 102.

²²⁴ Franco, *Plotting Women*, 102.

²²⁵ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 33.

educating women to equip them for raising children and residing over their homes.²²⁶

Fernández's novel tells the story of two sisters: one sister possesses admirable traits and triumphs by maintaining a home and raising children while the other sister exhibits a flawed character and resorts to prostitution and an early death.²²⁷ The distinction within the novel was reflected in literary magazines and political discussions throughout the nineteenth century.

Because of these deeply held beliefs, artistic representations of women often showed women guiding their children and teaching them moral lessons through example. Alberto Bribiesca's *Moral Education: A Mother Guides Her Daughter to Aid a Mendicant* perfectly expresses this sentiment.²²⁸ The scene shows a tender relationship between the mother and her daughter who help a man wrapped in bandages, carrying a cane in one hand and a hat in the other. Books, maps and various studying materials fill the painting's background, pointing to education's importance. Furthermore, popular women's magazines, such as *El Álbum de la Mujer*, portrayed popular sumptuous European fashions as frivolous and distracting from Mexican expectations of womanhood.²²⁹ Women's magazines proposed modesty as the highest trait a woman could portray through her fashion choices. At the same time, however, the idyllic physical characteristics portrayed in these magazines and paintings aligned with white womanhood. Depictions showing Mexican women with pale skin, dark hair, and white teeth suggested Mexican women emulate their European counterparts.²³⁰ As Mexican women grappled with how to present themselves in society, the first echoes of feminist thought resounded within women's magazines such as *Violetas del Anáhuac*.²³¹ This magazine printed the first call for

²²⁶ José Joaquín Fernández, *La Quijotita*, (Mexico City: 1819) in Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 35.

²²⁷ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 35.

²²⁸ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 43.

²²⁹ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 37.

²³⁰ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 45.

²³¹ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 51.

universal suffrage in December 1888, vocalizing the desire to change women's place in society.²³²

Virgin to Femme Fatale

The most important literary magazine, *Revista Moderna*, responded to call within women's magazines for universal suffrage. Poets and writers began to recast the stereotypical view of women from moralizing and pious to seductive and deceptive. In this way, the modernistas transformed the image of the Mexican woman from the Virgin of Guadalupe to a femme fatale. This change expressed the danger male viewers associated with female power.²³³ This tendency to blame female figures for downfall or corruption is prevalent through the Western world and the Catholic religion.²³⁴ The sins and pitfalls of male society and prominent male figures is often connected to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. Eve coaxes Adam to eat the Apple leading to his corruption. Adam's willingness and personal choice to commit sin does not factor into the conception of Eve as a sexual and devious *femme fatale* character leading to the downfall of all of mankind.²³⁵ The modernista movement was grappling with the separation and differences between the two sexes during the Porfiriato as the literary movement attempted to define a new, progressive society while struggling against President Diaz's ideas about Mexican modernity.²³⁶ Any feminist arguments encountered resistance entrenched in the idea that women who were not serene, graceful figures were intent on capitalizing on male carnal desire to exploit men and exact control over the patriarchal society.²³⁷ By degrading and

²³² Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 51.

²³³ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 69.

²³⁴ Franco, *Plotting Women*, 115.

²³⁵ Franco, *Plotting Women*, 115.

²³⁶ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 210.

²³⁷ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 74.

sexualizing the female body, writers could recraft Mexican femininity on their own terms. Felipe S. Guitérrez paints *Huntress of the Andes* at the same time that this conception of Mexican femininity took hold.²³⁸ The largely negative reaction to Guitérrez's painting did not prevent later artists from continuing to portray women with romantic, sensuous characteristics.

Similarly, *Malgré Tout*'s nakedness completely rejected the Academia de San Carlos's artistic standard during the nineteenth century. Contreras does not follow the academic realist style Noreña championed. The rejection of the academy's teachings highlights Contreras's embrace of modernista ideas. The artist synthesizes Diaz's artistic goals with modernista aesthetic beliefs, referencing Contreras's commitment to combining Mexican and French artistic influences within his work. Contreras' decision echoes other modernistas who employed the female body to contrast the military bronze heroes and common angelic depictions of household women.²³⁹ Despite the subtle shift in Mexico's stereotypical representations of women, *Malgré Tout* is the first sculpture to represent virtuous characteristics through the composition.

Malgré Tout

Malgré Tout resists earlier stereotypical depictions of serene woman unconscious and available to the assumed male viewer's gaze. *Malgré Tout* is impactfully awake. Not only is she conscious, but she is not completely passive despite her shackles. The figure's body position reflects the earlier male half of the Greek *Sleeping Hermaphroditos* sculpture. However, in Contreras's representation, the active, struggling figure flexing their feet and bending their knees is completely female. The sculpture also reflects Rodin's *Danaïd* by choosing to show the figure lying flat on her stomach. Despite the apparent eroticization of *Malgré Tout* in her current

²³⁸ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 75.

²³⁹ Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico*, 218.

position, there is an important distinction between this pose and the traditional pose within sculpture and artworks throughout the history of art where the woman lies on her back, completely exposed. In Contreras' artwork the figure is moving, scraping her body along the harsh rock surface and resisting her chains. Additionally, the figure's facial expression is hopeful despite the hopelessness of the situation.

Contreras's synthesis of Mexican and French artistic training evident within *Malgré Tout* references the prevalent European influence within Mexico since the Academia de San Carlos' founding.²⁴⁰ However, the artist rejects his teacher's academic realist style in 1898 while creating *Malgré Tout*, expressing a desire to find a way to depict the tides of modernity sweeping his country without relying on Noreña's style. While *Malgré Tout* directs viewer attention back to France's artistic traditions, it also points back to Mexico's artistic tradition. The Mexican and French artistic traditions became inherently intertwined with the arrival of European teachers at the Academy in 1785 and again with the Catalan teachers that would educate Contreras' generation's teachers.²⁴¹ In this way, *Malgré Tout*'s boldly French title and style do not reject the search for a national character. Mexico's artistic style and traditions were founded within European, and specifically French artistic ideas and pursuits.

Competing Interpretations

Different critical reactions and theories about Contreras's *Malgré Tout* have emerged since its creation. The sculpture has been linked to the artist's personal struggles with cancer which claimed his arm, and then his life.²⁴² Fausto Ramirez suggests the artist always intended to

²⁴⁰ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 174.

²⁴¹ Charlot, *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos*, 175.

²⁴² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 87.

use the sculpture as a metaphor for his battle with cancer.²⁴³ However, the exact timeline of Contreras's illness and amputation are not clear, complicating this assertion. Additionally, the projection of the artist's personal struggles onto the artwork does not account for the sculpture's renown and reception as a national symbol during its unveiling. Justo Sierra proposes that *Malgré Tout* allegorizes Mexico's struggle to gain independence and reach modern greatness.²⁴⁴ Sierra played a major part in the Academia de San Carlos acquiring the sculpture after the 1900 Universal Exhibition.²⁴⁵ His belief in the sculpture's representation of Mexico's identity probably contributed to *Malgré Tout* becoming the first female nude sculpture in the Academia.²⁴⁶ Additionally, the critic Manuel Flores touted the sculpture as a perfect example of modernity during this time period.²⁴⁷ Flores aligned Contreras with the great art of Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, saying that artistic greatness is characterized by "capturing human suffering...passion...and noble aspirations like justice."²⁴⁸ Flores argues that the nude female figure captures something essential about honorable humanity.²⁴⁹ To struggle in spite of everything against affliction reflects an admirable human characteristic represented through Contreras's sculpture and the artist himself.²⁵⁰ Flores's description of *Malgré Tout's* reflects the sculpture's cosmopolitan and ambiguous character. Whether the ambiguity points to its nationalistic character, the artist's personal struggles with cancer or something else entirely, the sculpture represented and celebrated Mexico at the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris. At a time

²⁴³ Ramirez, "Historia minima del modernism en diez imágenes" in Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 81.

²⁴⁴ Sierra in Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 81.

²⁴⁵ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 87.

²⁴⁶ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 87.

²⁴⁷ Flores in Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 82.

²⁴⁸ Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 82.

²⁴⁹ Flores in Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 82.

²⁵⁰ Flores in Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*, 82.

when the country itself was searching for its identity, Contreras developed a sculpture steeped in French artistic traditions showing a woman struggling against the chains that kept her recumbent.

Four Distinct Locations

Malgré Tout's four different locations speak to the sculpture's synthesis of both French and Mexican artistic influence. Originally previewed to the members of the exclusive artistic club at Casino Nacional, *Malgré Tout* initially addressed the bourgeois male Mexican viewer before crossing the Atlantic to debut at the 1900 Universal Exhibition.²⁵¹ The sculpture's first public appearance before a Mexican audience makes it more significant that Contreras then carved the letters "Malgré Tout" onto the side of the sculpture. By doing so, Contreras underlines his desire to connect the sculptural figure with the French language and the idea of "in spite of everything." The open-endedness of this phrase makes it impossible to say for sure what Contreras meant by the title. At some point between 1898 and 1900 the artist lost his right arm in his battle against cancer. The poignancy and significance of the phrase "in spite of everything" may have been linked to Contreras's own misfortunes and resilience. *Malgré Tout*'s success at the 1900 Universal Exhibition attached a level of national pride and renown to the work. Upon returning to Mexico in 1891, the sculpture was installed in the National School of the Fine Arts where it remained until José Vasconcelos placed it in the Alameda Central in the 1920s.²⁵² The Secretary of Public Education's decision to move the sculpture to a prominent park shows how works of art function differently in public spaces. Unlike the intellectual environment of the National School of Fine Arts, the Alameda allowed anyone to approach Contreras's *Malgré*

²⁵¹ Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 236.

²⁵² Pérez Walters, *Alma y Bronce*, 236.

Tout. In post-revolutionary Mexico, placing *Malgré Tout* in the Alameda Central created a visual symbol of a woman fighting against oppressive circumstances “in spite of everything.”

But most importantly, Contreras’s *Malgré Tout* depicts a woman in a way that is rarely seen within Western art. Jesús F. Contreras’s *Malgré Tout*’s suffering woman clearly symbolizes virtuous characteristics beyond sexuality. In the same way that athletic male nude sculptures of Greek and Roman times symbolized virtuous characteristics, *Malgré Tout* portrays optimism and perseverance in spite of harsh and seemingly inescapable struggle. The struggling nude is not shown passive or defeated, but actively works to overcome the struggle that is currently absorbing her. This message is not diminished by the figure’s nudity. Contreras does not challenge the intended, eroticizing male gaze. But Contreras depicts a woman struggling forward, showing fortitude and perseverance despite her circumstances. By combining the nationalistic, French style supported by Diaz and the new, progressive approach venerated by the modernistas. Contreras’s female figure is not moralized or restricted to a national character. Instead, Contreras presents *Malgré Tout* as a symbol of hope and perseverance despite challenging circumstances. The sexualization and eroticism is inherent to the nude sculpture. But similar to Rodin’s representation of *Danaïd*, the nudity within the sculpture is not the only element. The eroticization of the figure does not diminish the suffering. The viewer cannot eroticize the figure without actively encountering her suffering. The struggle is an inherent piece of the sculpture that defines how the eroticization is seen. Unlike prior examples explored in the first chapter of this project, the interplay between gender, eroticism and power favors admirable characteristics over simple eroticization and sexualization.

Contreras does not employ the female nude to shock and vulgarize. Instead, the artist returns to the French roots that helped shape the Academy. The city cannot escape the

tumultuous relationship with Europe or Porfirio Diaz. Tensions are increasing as the President's vision for Mexico leads to economic divide and increased hostility toward Diaz's lengthy presidency. The frustration and desire for changed circumstances would eventually lead to an overthrow of Diaz's regime.²⁵³ Contreras' participation in Porfirio Diaz's vision for Mexico City ended before the 1910 Revolution's bloody confrontations. *Malgré Tout's* virtuous characteristics contributes to its continued relevance within Mexico's artistic history. Because the work expresses characteristics that sustain across time, different movements and political desires can use the ambiguous sculpture as a visual symbol. *Malgré Tout's* impact and relevance continues decades after its creation, similar to ancient heroic male nude sculpture, because of the shared reference to universal human characteristics.

²⁵³ Topik, "When Mexico Had the Blues," 724.

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FIGURES



Fig. 1. Fidencio Lucano Nava. *Après L'Orgie*. 1909. Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.



Fig. 2. Jesús F. Contreras. *Malgré Tout*. 1898. Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.



Fig. 3. Jesús F. Contreras. *Malgré Tout*. 1898. Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA. *Alma y Bronce: Jesús F. Contreras 1866-1902*. By Patricia Pérez Walters. Aguascalientes, Mexico: Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes, 2002. P. 149. Print.



Fig 4. Jesús F. Contreras. *Malgré Tout*. 1898. Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.



Fig. 5. Jesús F. Contreras. *Malgré Tout*. 1898. Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA. *Alma y Bronce: Jesús F. Contreras 1866-1902*. By Patricia Pérez Walters. Aguascalientes, Mexico: Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes, 2002. P. 155. Print.



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Fig. 8. Jesús F. Contreras. *Malgré Tout*. 1898. Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA. *Alma y Bronce: Jesús F. Contreras 1866-1902*. By Patricia Pérez Walters. Aguascalientes, Mexico: Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes, 2002. P. 150. Print.

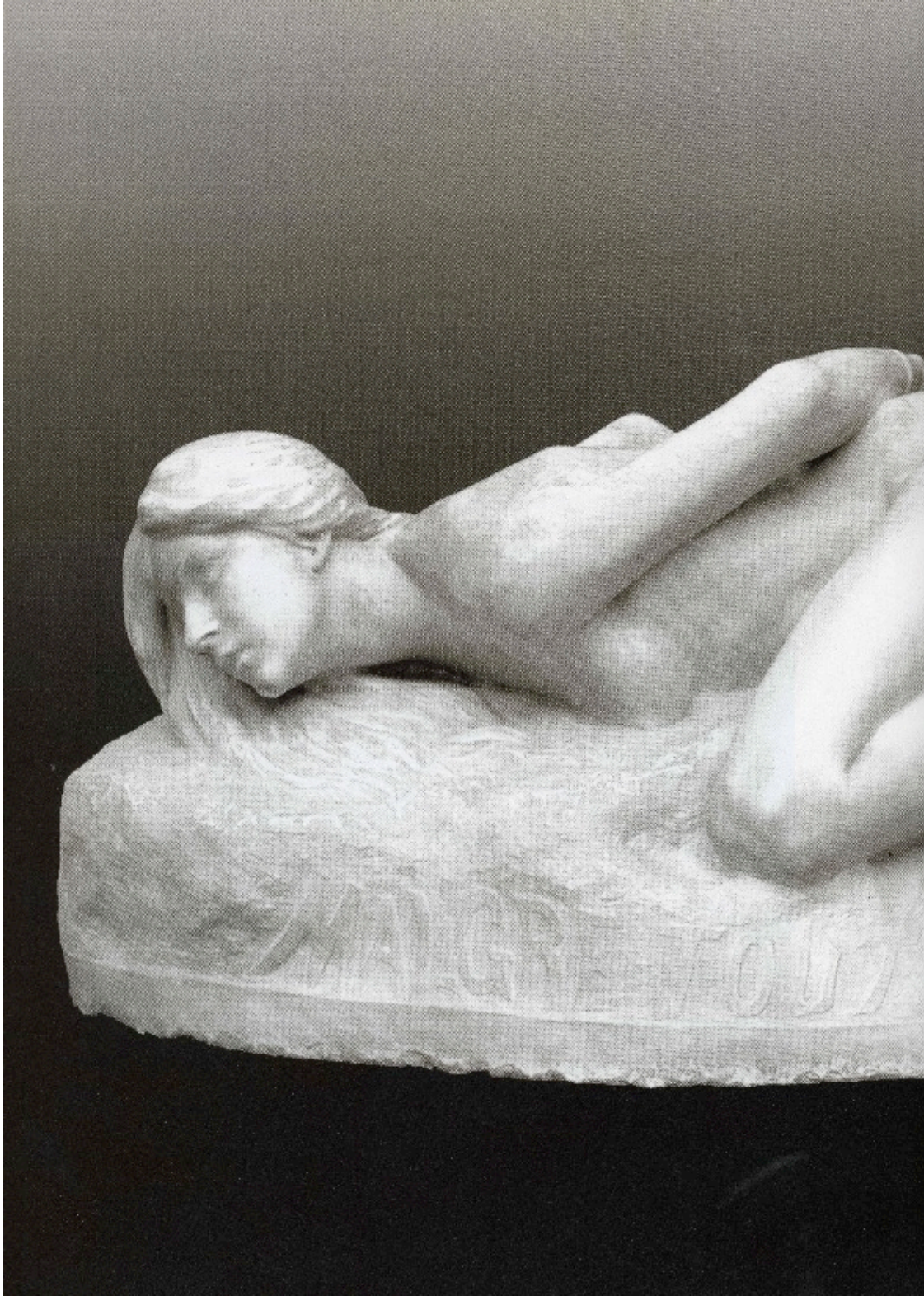


Fig. 9. Jesús F. Contreras. *Malgré Tout*. 1898. Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA. *Alma y Bronce: Jesús F. Contreras 1866-1902*. By Patricia Pérez Walters. Aguascalientes, Mexico: Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes, 2002. P. 148. Print.



Fig. 10. Auguste Rodin. *Danaïd*. 1889. Marble. ARTstor. ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York. Web. 26 April 2020. <https://library-artstor-org.libproxy.trinity.edu/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_101310197277>. Digital Image.



Fig. 11. Praxiteles. *Aphrodite of Knidos*. 350-40 B.C. Marble. ARTstor. ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York. Web. 26 April 2020. <https://library-artstor-org.libproxy.trinity.edu/assest/ARTSTOR_103_41822000151058>. Digital Image.



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Fig. 19. Michelangelo Buonarroti. *Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici, Dawn*. 1519-1534. Marble. ARTstor. ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York. Web. 26 April 2020. <https://library-artstor.org.libproxy.trinity.edu/asset/AHLIEBERMANIG_10313145923>. Digital Image.



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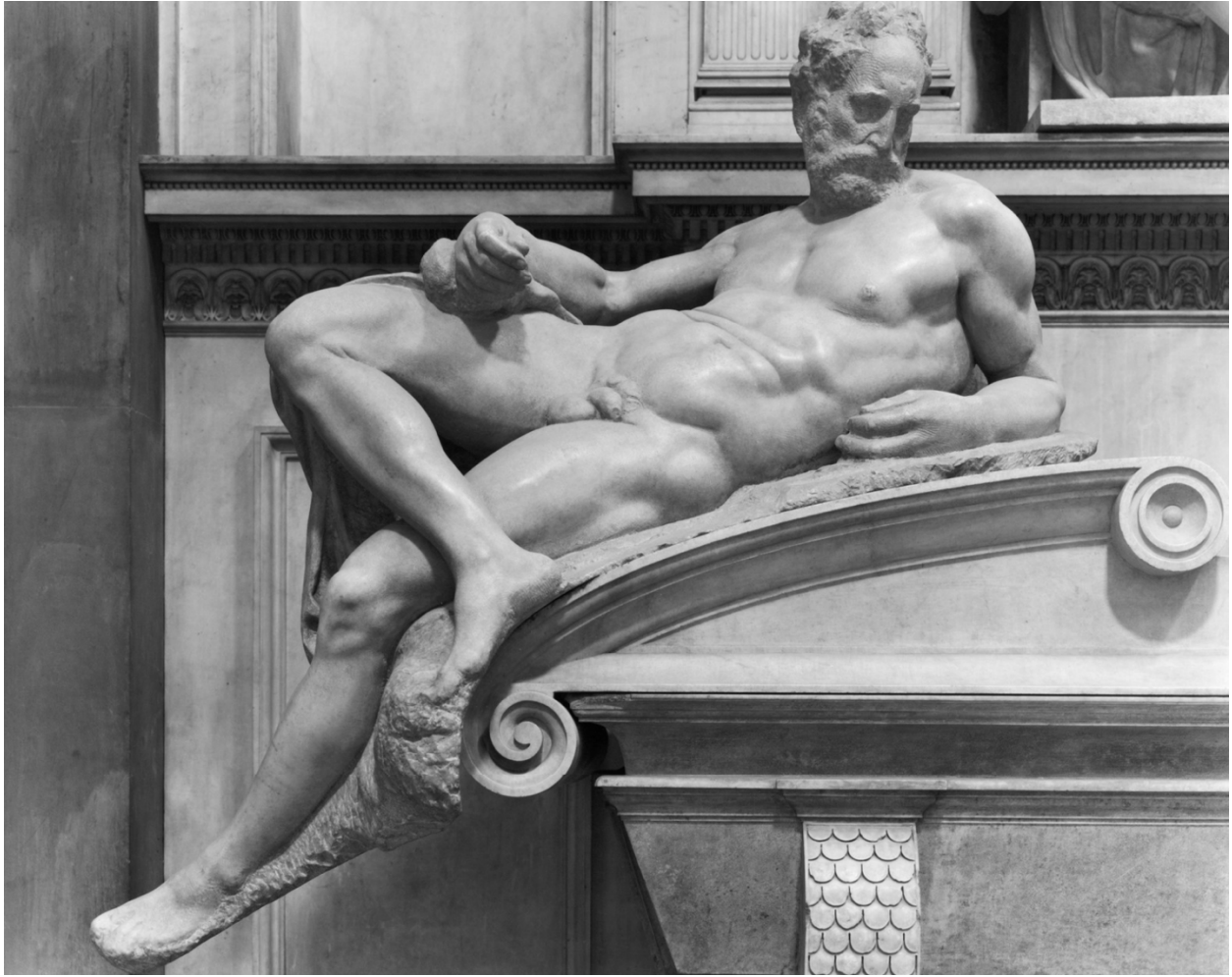


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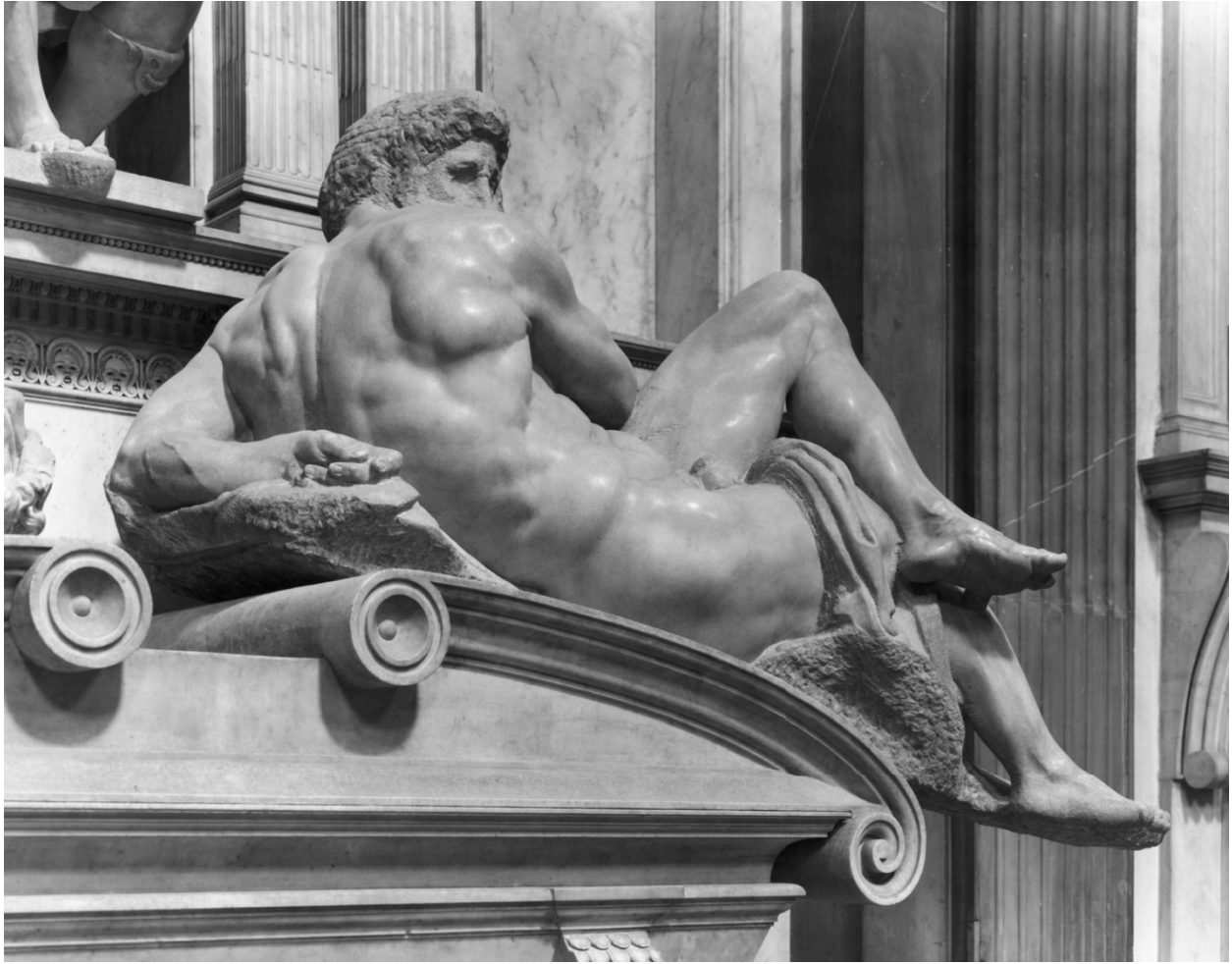


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Fig. 32. Saturino Herrán. *The Legend of the Volcanoes*. 1910. Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA.
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Fig 33. Jesús F. Contreras. *Malgré Tout*. 1898. Alameda Central Park, Mexico City, Mexico.



Fig. 34. Petronilo Monroy, *Allegory of the Constitution of 1857 (Constitución de 1857)*. Before 1869. Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA. *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition*. By Ariadne Zavala. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010. Figure 4. Print.