

Frank Mehring (Ed.)

The Mexico Diary

Winold Reiss between Vogue Mexico
and Harlem Renaissance

An Illustrated Trilingual Edition
with Commentary and Musical Interpretation

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Foreword by Sydelle Rubin-Dienstfrey

Chronology by C. Ford Peatross with Renate Reiss

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Translations by Renate Reiss and Marietta Saavedra Arellano

Selections set to music and performed by Jens Barneck
and Frank Mehring

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Winold Reiss (1886-1953), about 1920. Photograph by Nickolas Muray.

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
List of Illustrations	xi
Foreword by Sydelle Rubin-Dienstfrey	xv
Winold Reiss (1886-1953): A Selective Chronology of his Life and Work by C. Ford Peatross with Renate Reiss	xix
I. Introduction: <i>The Mexico Diary</i>—Winold Reiss between Vogue Mexico and Harlem Renaissance	1
1. Remapping American Modernism	1
2. The Mexican Imagination in Germany	10
3. To Harlem via Mexico: <i>The Mexico Diary</i>	17
4. Confronting the Metropolitan Moloch	29
5. Mediating the Mexican Experience	37
6. Conclusion	46
II. The Mexico Diary of Winold Reiss	51
Note on the Diary Text	51
Mexico Diary Route: Map	52
<i>Meine Reise durch Mexico</i> (Original German Version)	54
<i>My Travels through Mexico</i> (English Translation)	91
<i>Mi Viaje por México</i> (Spanish Translation)	125
Facsimile Prints of Select Diary Pages	163
III. Mexican Drawings and Paintings by Winold Reiss	171
Bibliography	209
Audio CD <i>Vogue Mexico</i>	215

Acknowledgments

When I first encountered Winold Reiss's Mexico diary, back in the winter of 2007, I was struck by how strongly this German traveller experienced Mexico. He had become disillusioned with life in New York City during the difficult years of the Great War, and his encounters with Mexico's landscapes and people, its colors, sounds and sights rejuvenated his artistic vision. I found his diary and the works he created during this 1920 trip a fascinating key to better understand Vogue Mexico and developments in the visual Harlem Renaissance. Reiss jotted down his observations and impressions like sketches, quick and sure, and noted his own feelings and reflections on what he saw and experienced. It is obvious that this artist loved the written word, and we know he loved music and singing. So it seemed rather "self-evident" to put his own words together with his own pictures, and not neglect music: he has inspired, almost a century after his trip, the creation of a soundscape to help us enter into the world he experienced. We can accompany him from New York to Mexico and back again, reading, looking and listening.

This publication has been almost a decade in the making and exists because of the insight, generosity and inspiration of many remarkable people. I am grateful to Renate Reiss for access to the Reiss Archive, and for her enthusiasm, joy and unwavering support. Special thanks go to Marietta Saavedra Arellano for her Spanish translation, to C. Ford Peatross for the chronology, and to Sydelle Rubin-Dienstfrey for the foreword.

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FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART



Frank Mehring
Nijmegen, May 2016

List of Illustrations¹

Frontispiece

Winold Reiss, about 1920. Photograph by Nickolas Muray.

Introduction

- Ill. 1: W. Reiss, Title page, *The New Negro*, 1925.
- Ill. 2: W. Reiss, *Langston Hughes*, 1926. Pastel on Whatman board, 30 1/16" x 21 5/8" (73.3 x 54.9 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of W. Tjark Reiss in memory of his father, Winold Reiss.
- Ill. 3: Title page, *Mexico Diary*, Manuscript Version III. 8 1/4" x 6 3/4" (20.9 x 17.1 cm).
- Ill. 4: First page, *Mexico Diary*, Manuscript Version III. 8 1/4" x 6 3/4" (20.9 x 17.1 cm).
- Ill. 5: W. Reiss, *Turtle*, 1920. Crayon on paper, 19 3/4" x 14 1/2" (50.2 x 36.8 cm). The Brinton Museum, Big Horn, Wyoming.
- Ill. 6: W. Reiss, *Heavy Shield*, 1927. Mixed media on Whatman board, 30" x 21 5/8" (76.2 x 54.9 cm).
- Ill. 7: Photograph showing W. Reiss and his son, Winold Tjark, with Blood Indians of Waterton Lakes, Alberta, Canada. *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 16, 1928.
- Ill. 8: A. von Humboldt, *Ansichten der Kordilleren und Monumente der eingeborenen Völker Amerikas*, detail of Mexican hieroglyphs. Paris, 1810/13. Pl. XLVII (338).
- Ill. 9: Illustration, C. Sartorius, *Mexiko: Landschaftsbilder und Skizzen aus dem Volksleben* (1859).
- Ill. 10: Hugo Brehme, Postcard of Campeche. 3 3/8" x 5 3/8" (8.5 x 13.6 cm).
- Ill. 11: Hugo Brehme, Postcard of Tepotzotlán. 3 3/8" x 5 3/8" (8.5 x 13.6 cm).
- Ill. 12: First page, *Mexico Diary*, Manuscript Version I. 9 1/2" x 7 1/2" (24.1 x 19 cm).
- Ill. 13: Photograph showing Dr. Schaefer and W. Reiss on a forest road in Mexico.
- Ill. 14: Photograph showing W. Reiss drawing a Mexican soldier with Dr. Schaefer sitting next to him.
- Ill. 15: W. Reiss, *Candelario Segura, Mucoloac, D.F.*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 10" x 13 1/2" (25.4 x 34.2 cm). See also Pl. 9.

1 Except where stated otherwise, Winold Reiss works reproduced in this volume are in private collections.

- III. 16: W. Reiss, *Aztec Indian from Tepotzotlán, Mexico*, 1920. Color pencil and pastel on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm). See also Pl. 26.
- III. 17: W. Reiss, *Miss Hurston (Zora Neale Hurston)*, 1925. Pastel on Whatman board, 16 1/2" x 16 1/2" (41.9 x 41.9 cm). Fisk University Museum of Art, Nashville, Tennessee.
- III. 18: W. Reiss, *Montezuma's Death*, 1920. Tempera on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm). See also Pl. 37.
- III. 19: W. Reiss, *Mexican Fantasy*, 1920. Tempera on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm). J.N. Bartfield Galleries, New York. See also Pl. 1.
- III. 20: W. Reiss, *African Phantasy: Awakening. The New Negro* (facing p. 232), 1925.
- III. 21: W. Reiss, *Love*, ca. 1920. Woodcut print on paper, 19" x 18" (48.3 x 45.7 cm).
- III. 22: W. Reiss, *Face and Hands over City*, undated. Ink on paper, 10 7/8" x 8 3/4" (27.6 x 22.2 cm).
- III. 23: Photograph by N. Muray showing W. Reiss painting Rosa Rolanda, 1920.
- III. 24: M. Covarrubias, *Winold Reiss*, undated. Caricatura del personaje, 6.7" x 3.7" (17 x 9.4 cm). Archivo Miguel Covarrubias. Colección Mexico City Collegian.
- III. 25: W. Reiss, *The Seeing Eye*, ca. 1920. Conté crayon on watercolor paper, 9 1/2" x 7 1/4" (24.1 x 18.4 cm).
- III. 26: W. Reiss, *Mexican Mural, Country Scene*. 16' x 5'6" (487.6 x 167.6 cm). Location unknown. Photograph by N. Muray, about 1921.
- III. 27: W. Reiss, *Mexican Mural, Market Scene*. 15'9" x 5'7" (484.6 x 170.1 cm). Location unknown. Photograph by N. Muray, about 1921.
- III. 28: W. Reiss, Anderson Gallery exhibition folder (inside), 1922. 8" x 5 1/4" (20.3 x 13.3 cm).
- III. 29: W. Reiss, Anderson Gallery exhibition folder (outside), 1922. 8" x 5 1/4" (20.3 x 13.3 cm). See also Pl. 30.
- III. 30: W. Reiss, *Funeral in Guadalupe*, 1920. Tempera on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm). See also Pl. 8.
- III. 31: W. Reiss, *Teoloyucan, Mexico*, 1920. Watercolor on paper, 19 7/8" x 14 7/8" (50.5 x 37.7 cm). See also Pl. 28.
- III. 32: W. Reiss, *Man from Tepotzotlán*. "Mexican Types." *Survey Graphic* (May 1924). Print on paper, 12" x 9" (30.5 x 22.9 cm).
- III. 33: W. Reiss, *Native of Tlaquepaque*. "Mexican Types." *Survey Graphic* (May 1924). Print on paper, 12" x 9" (30.5 x 22.9 cm).
- III. 34: W. Reiss, *Congo*, "Harlem Types." *Survey Graphic* (March 1925). Print on paper, 12" x 9" (30.5 x 22.9 cm).
- III. 35: W. Reiss, *A College Lad*. "Harlem Types." *Survey Graphic* (March 1925). Print on paper, 12" x 9" (30.5 x 22.9 cm).
- III. 36: M. Covarrubias, Cover, *Survey Graphic: Mexico* (May 1924). Print on paper, 12" x 9" (30.5 x 22.9 cm).

- Ill. 37: W. Reiss, *City of Cuernavaca*, 1920. Color Gravure Section, *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*, June 1, 1930. Print on paper, 21 1/2" x 15 3/4" (54.6 x 40 cm). See also Pl. 13.
- Ill. 38: W. Reiss, Cover, *Survey Graphic* (March 1925). Print on paper, 12" x 9" (30.5 x 22.9 cm).
- Ill. 39: W. Reiss, Cover, *Opportunity* (February 1925). Print on paper, 11" x 7 3/4" (27.9 x 19.7 cm).
- Ill. 40: W. Reiss, *Alain Locke*, 1925. Pastel on Whatman board, 30" x 22" (76.2 x 55.9 cm).
- Ill. 41: W. Reiss, *Aztec Woman and Child, Tepotzotlán*, 1920. Mixed media on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm). See also Pl. 35.
- Ill. 42: W. Reiss, *The Brown Madonna*. Frontispiece in *The New Negro* (1925).

Color Plates²

- Pl. 1: *Mexican Fantasy*, ca. 1920. Tempera on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 2: *Rio Grande*, ca. 1921. Ink on paper, 22" x 16 3/16" (55.9 x 41.4 cm).
- Pl. 3: *Yaqui Indian from Northern Mexico*, 1920. Mixed media on paper, 19 7/8" x 14 7/8" (50.5 x 37.8 cm).
- Pl. 4: *A Spaniard from Laredo*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm).
- Pl. 5: *Spanish Woman from Laredo*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm).
- Pl. 6: *Aztec Girl from Xochimilco*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 22 1/2" x 17 1/2". (57.2 x 44.5 cm).
- Pl. 7: *Mexican Fantasy V*, 1920. Watercolor on paper, 19 3/4" x 14 3/4" (50.2 x 37.5 cm).
- Pl. 8: *Funeral in Guadalupe*, 1920. Tempera on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 9: *Candelario Segura, Mucoloac, D.F.*, 1920. Colored pencil on paper, 10" x 13 1/2" (25.4 x 34.2 cm).
- Pl. 10: *Indian Boy from Acopilco*, 1920. Colored pencil on paper, 13" x 10" (33 x 25.4 cm).
- Pl. 11: *Aztec Boy, Tepotzotlán*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 12: *Indian Boy from Tepotzotlán*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 13: *City of Cuernavaca*, 1920. Print on paper, 21 1/2" x 15 3/4" (54.6 x 40).
- Pl. 14: *Mexican Fantasy IV*, 1920. Mixed media on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm).
- Pl. 15: *Zapatista Soldiers*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 15" x 19 3/4" (38.1 x 50.2 cm).
- Pl. 16: *Carlos Fernandes, San Anton y Cuernavaca*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 14 5/8" x 10 1/8" (37.1 x 25.7 cm).

2 All drawings and paintings in this section are by Winold Reiss.

- Pl. 17: *Zapatista Soldier from Cuernavaca*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm).
- Pl. 18: *Zapatista Soldier from Cuernavaca*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 19: *Popocatepetl*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 11" x 8 1/2" (27.9 x 21.6 cm).
- Pl. 20: *Indian Boy from Guadalajara*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 19 7/8" x 14 7/8" (50.5 x 37.8 cm).
- Pl. 21: *Indian Boys from Guadalajara*, 1920. Colored pencil on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm).
- Pl. 22: *Indian from Tlaquepaque #1*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm). Bernard Goldberg Fine Arts, LLC.
- Pl. 23: *Indian Boy—San Andrés, Guadalajara*, 1920. Color pencil and watercolor on paper, 19 7/8" x 14 7/8" (50.5 x 37.8 cm).
- Pl. 24: *An Officer, Mexico*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 25: *Indian Girl from Tepotzotlán*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 26: *Aztec Indian from Tepotzotlán, Mexico*, 1920. Color pencil and pastel on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 27: *Indian Girl from Tepotzotlán (Mother and Baby)*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm).
- Pl. 28: *Teoloyucan Mexico*, 1920. Watercolor on paper, 19 7/8" x 14 7/8" (50.5 x 37.8 cm).
- Pl. 29: *Indian Man*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 26 1/2" x 19" (67.3 x 48.3 cm).
- Pl. 30: *Miche Indian, Tehuantepec, Mexico*, 1920. Mixed media on paper, 19 7/8" x 14 7/8" (50.5 x 37.8 cm).
- Pl. 31: *Woman with Red Headdress*, 1920. Color pencil on paper, 19 7/8" x 14 7/8" (50.5 x 37.8 cm).
- Pl. 32: *Zapoteca Girl from Mitla*, 1920. Graphite, watercolor and gouache on paper, 19 7/8" x 14 7/8" (50.5 x 37.8 cm). The Wolfsonian—Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection.
- Pl. 33: *Zapotec Indian of Mitla, Mexico*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 18 7/8" x 14 7/8" (47.9 x 37.7 cm).
- Pl. 34: *Zapoteka Girl from Mitla*, 1920. Pastel on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 35: *Aztec Woman and Child, Tepotzotlán*, 1920. Mixed media on paper, 20" x 16" (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
- Pl. 36: *Tropical Fantasy*, 1920. India ink and watercolor on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm).
- Pl. 37: *Montezuma's Death*, 1920. Tempera on paper, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1 cm).
- Pl. 38: *Mexican Fantasy III*, 1920. Watercolor on paper, 19 7/8" x 15 7/8" (50.5 x 40.3 cm).

Foreword

Sydelle Rubin-Dienstfrey

Frank Mehring's compilation and analyses of Winold Reiss's "Mexico Diary" present a new cornerstone in the growing scholarship on this artist. Written over the course of Reiss's two-month travels through Mexico, the diary provides greater understanding of the artist's visual production, methodology, and philosophies, and most importantly, furnishes a key to investigating the artist's intercultural exploration of Mexican cultures during a pivotal renaissance when the country's renewed spirit of nationalism gave rise to aesthetics that not only respected but in fact revered its Pre-Columbian roots. Experiencing this post-revolutionary moment in the New World firsthand was invaluable for Reiss's impending role in the New Negro movement, preparing him as Mehring states, "to critically engage with issues of racial segregation and African-American recognition, and to come to terms with his own disillusionment regarding the promise of American democracy" (5). The words and images within this diary provide critical insights into Reiss's pioneering role in catalyzing African American self-recognition in the 1920s.

To better understand the context of Mehring's contribution I offer an abridged, and personal, perspective on prior research concerning Reiss's work. I first encountered Winold Reiss as a graduate student. The assignment involved writing a book review of Alain Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925). I owned the 1992 edition, which was a faithful reprinting of all writings but contained no artwork. When I saw the first edition, I could not believe my eyes. Certainly, the literary contributions to the anthology were undisputable; however, this first edition also included notable color plates of Reiss's pastel portraits depicting the first generation of the 20th century's black intelligentsia as well as several anonymous yet dignified African-American sitters. Reiss approached each sitter's individualized and ethnic physiognomy in a veristic manner. As a result, Reiss's representations stood apart from the usual stereotypical grimaces of blacks during that period. Alain Locke, the esteemed editor of both *The New Negro* and the *Harlem Survey Graphic*, contrasted this general state of affairs with the images included in his survey:

Caricature has put upon the countenance of the Negro the mask of the comic and the grotesque, whereas in deeper truth and comprehension, nature or experience have put there the stamp of the very opposite, the serious, the tragic, the wistful.¹

Reiss's portraits reflected the "serious" countenances that Locke so desired. Yet, this solution in turn contained a puzzle. Who was Winold Reiss, and how had he produced

1 Alain Locke, "Harlem Types," *Survey Graphic* (March 1925): 652.

a vision that was so true and so relevant and so opposite the predominant mode of black representation of the 1920s? So began my study of this fascinating artist.

Locke's reference to caricature stuck with me, and several years later I wrote a dissertation that united Winold Reiss and Miguel Covarrubias, a Mexican-born caricaturist who like Reiss was enrapt by the richness of African-American culture above 110th Street. Within one year of his 1923 arrival in New York, Covarrubias began visiting Harlem daily, striving to mirror in his drawings the cultural renaissance fermenting among African-American musicians, dancers, singers, actors, as well as poets, writers, and other black intellectuals he encountered. His caricatures and drawings elicited strong responses from contemporary critics—ranging from laudatory to vitriolic; however, an understanding of the Mexican caricature tradition and its requisite abstractions and/or exaggerations of form, sometimes to the point of macabre, allows for a more balanced interpretation.

Thus, my research linked Reiss and Covarrubias, a somewhat unexpected pairing of two emigrant artists who brought yet another perspective to the table of Harlem Renaissance studies, that of non-black, non-American emigrants who were nevertheless entrenched in the New Negro Movement and shared an ethnographic methodology. Both men, relatively new arrivals to the United States, employed their talents and their empathy as emigrant outsiders to recognize another arrival—the “coming out” of a new and modern African-American culture. Against this backdrop of shared interests, it was natural to ask whether the two artists knew one another and whether they drew from a common inspiration. A partial answer to the first question arose in the form of a sketch that I found while researching the Covarrubias Archives at La Universidad de las Américas in Puebla, México. Buried in the copious ephemera and notes created by the artist and maintained there was a portrait drawing done in profile (ill. 24). The image was untitled, but the likeness was unmistakable. Covarrubias's subject was clearly Winold Reiss. Thereby one small piece of this puzzle was revealed. However, the much larger share lay buried in the Reiss Archives in the form of notes written by Reiss during his travels through Mexico. So when Frank told me about his plans to publish the Mexico Diary, I was ecstatic.

In *The Mexico Diary: Winold Reiss between Vogue Mexico and Harlem Renaissance*, Mehring has made significant contributions that add to our understanding of Reiss's oeuvre and methodology. First, the translations from German to English and Spanish provide side-by-side readings of Reiss's words in the native languages of the peoples directly connected to this intercultural exchange, giving all scholars at this crossroads a window onto Reiss's observations, interior thoughts, and emerging philosophies. In addition, Mehring includes the artwork that Reiss created alongside the artist's words. This is invaluable, for it provides a means to understand and analyze Reiss's thought processes behind these images, offering an invaluable map with which we can now explore the context of Reiss's portraits, “Mexican fantasies,” and later murals.

Mehring identifies underlying themes related to Reiss's personal struggles and crises and explains that for Reiss, Mexico served as a locus of spiritual renewal. Mehring finds that Reiss's words repeatedly allude to a binary between "the American dream of freedom gone wrong with a glimpse of a paradise lost" (19). By the time of these travels, the German-born Reiss had lived in the States for seven years, combatting an unremitting tide of prejudice in a post-World War climate. Furthermore, despite the fact that New York's metropolis brought the promise of opportunity and fueled his career in certain respects, Reiss suffered the effects of a relentless pace of urbanization and longed for the tranquility of the Blackforest woods he held so dear. Mehring sets this scene for the reader, informing us that Reiss arrived in Mexico longing for a somewhat romanticized vision of "pre-industrial purity." In the end, Reiss's depictions of distinct countenances, skin tones, hairstyles, and physiognomic features reveal a humanity that departs from false pretenses of romanticism and primitivism.

Mehring also situates the German-Mexican travel relationship within a larger cultural and historical context. He positions Reiss as one who "follows in the footsteps of a long line of German émigrés who sought out Mexico as a place of refuge, recreation, and opportunities," (13) among them Alexander von Humboldt and the perhaps less well known Christian Sartorius, whose written account of the Mexican promised land provided a catalyst for thousands of German émigrés. These included none other than professional photographer Carl Wilhelm Kahlo, father of the renowned Frida.

Finally, Mehring carefully considers the fact that Reiss wrote three manuscripts of his diary, and Mehring describes and analyzes each one. The initial draft provides "a unique sense of immediacy;" the second revision demonstrates Reiss making more explicit connections between the texts and drawings he made *in situ*; the third actually includes a title page revealing that Reiss might have intended to publish this work. In the end, we learn that Reiss abandoned the project. Mehring muses on possible reasons for this, which I will leave for you to explore for yourself in the pages before you. Fittingly, with the publication of this volume, Mehring completes what Reiss might have had in mind to do nearly one hundred years ago.

By presenting these translations of Reiss's Mexico Diary, Mehring has peeled back critical layers behind Reiss's commitment to cultural pluralism. Most intriguingly, the diary entries tell of Reiss meeting and engaging with some of the primogenitors of Mexico's post-revolutionary nationalistic philosophies of *Mexicanidad* and *indigenismo*—Adolfo Best Maugard, Jorge Enciso, and Doctor Atl—as well as one of the most significant cultural intermediaries between the United States and Mexico, Katherine Ann Porter, who would serve as the editor of the special issue on Mexico for the *Survey Graphic* (May 1924). As Mehring notes, Porter remembered the uniquely "faithful dedication" and "spiritual dignity" in Reiss's portrayals of the Mexican peoples and invited Reiss to contribute his "Mexican Types" to *Survey Graphic's Mexico: A Promise*.

Furthermore, Mehring astutely links Reiss to another contributor to the special edition, José Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos was the Minister of Education who under President

Alvaro Obregón instituted reforms between 1910 and 1920 that educated Mexicans of every age group and socioeconomic level about native art and thereby increased people's pride in their heritage. For instance, Obregón established the *Escuelas al Aire Libre* (*Open-Air Art Schools*) where Mexican Modernists including Miguel Covarrubias taught children about their ancestral arts and folklore. As opposed to the penchant for assimilation that Reiss found to be overwhelmingly prevalent in the United States, Reiss felt at home with Mexico's impassioned reverence for ethnic and cultural uniqueness. Vasconcelos spearheaded a movement to release colonialism's cultural stranglehold by designing programs to liberate Mexican society from its Europeanization and inspire veneration for the country's Indian roots. Throughout the pages of Reiss's diary, we witness the German-born artist seeking those Indian roots by depicting individuals of various origins—Aztec, Zapotec, Mixtec, etc.—as well as journeying to various pre-conquest sights and lands—the pyramids of Teotihuacan, the ruins of the Colima Valley, the plumes of Popocatepetl, and the list goes on. Finally, Mehring examines Vasconcelos's manifesto entitled *La Raza Cosmica* (*The Cosmic Race*) (1925), finding that it “foreshadows a new concept of race, which was very much in line with what Winold Reiss tried to translate into forms and colors on canvas” (44).

Winold Reiss was one of the earliest artists to travel from the United States to Mexico after the Revolution. Although scholars usually point to the American artist George Biddle as the arbiter of America's zeal for Mexican aesthetics and iconography, Reiss's travels preceded Biddle's 1928 sketching trip through Mexico with Diego Rivera by nearly a decade. Reiss's portraits of indigenous peoples and depictions of Pre-Columbian ruins and landforms of vivid hues captivated Americans. At the heart of this cultural exchange are the visual and literal reflections recorded on the pages of Reiss's “Mexico Diary.” As Frank Mehring has demonstrated, Reiss witnessed and identified with a pivotal cultural moment in Mexico, one in which a newfound loyalty to native peoples and native artistic production was in vogue. From this experience, Mehring suggests that Reiss's travels throughout Mexico and his embrace of its emerging perspectives on race, its refreshing respect for the Mestizo, the Indian, and the Black, prepared him to embark on another chapter, his work in Harlem with Alain Locke and other pioneers of the New Negro Movement. Fueled and enlightened by the impassioned post-revolutionary climate, Reiss would transfer his dedication to racial uplift from Mexico to Harlem, his artistic energy flowing between Vogue Mexico and the Harlem Renaissance.