



LIBRADO GARCÍA SMARTH ETERNO RESPLANDOR

Gallery texts Librado García Smarth: Eternal Glow

Librado García Smarth. *Eterno resplandor* (Librado García Smarth: Eternal Glow) is the first-ever solo exhibition at a Mexico City museum for this artist born in 1892.

From late 1910 until the mid-1930s, Smarth produced a body of photographic work that earned him a place among the leading exponents of Pictorialism and as a pioneer of Modernism. He was a self-made man and an independent artist. However, neither his name nor his works are recorded in the annals of Mexican photography. This is changing thanks to Carlos Monsiváis, who collected around seventy of his photographs and included them in *Te pareces tanto a mí* (*You Look So Like Me*), an exhibition curated by Rafael “El Fisgón” Barajas at the Estanquillo Museum in 2008.

Librado García Smarth: Eternal Glow is structured around the archive of the artist’s work kept in the Estanquillo Museum, complemented by those held in other institutions and by individual collectors. In this anthological approach to the photographer’s work, the curators made a selection of period, vintage prints, mostly exhibited for the first time more than a century after their creation. How does an unknown photographic past affect us?

We hope and desire that these photographs will also lead us to ask ourselves about history, memory, discrimination, sexuality, human rights, racism, social inequalities and their harmful effects on the life of individuals and impact on society.

Let us move toward the light that radiates from Smarth’s work and bathe ourselves in its eternal glow.

David Torrez

Biography

Librado García Valdés Smarth was born in 1892 in Hacienda de la Cuesta, Nayarit. In 1910, he set up his studio in Guadalajara, possibly having learned the secrets of photography from Henry Ravell. He had previously been employed as a telegraph operator, postal worker, and circus artist. At some point between 1918 and 1919, he opened a studio on Madero 66 in Mexico City. From 1923 to 1925, he taught photography at Guadalajara's Federal Industrial School. In 1931, he published five photographs, and his last known portrait, perhaps a self-portrait, appeared in the *Social* magazine in the October-December edition. He then disappeared without trace.

Individual exhibitions of his work include *Estudio del artista (Study of the Artist)*, Guadalajara, 1920; *Atelier del artista (Atelier of the Artist)*, Mexico City, 1921; *Librado García Smarth, Obras maestras fotografía (Librado García Smarth: Photography Masterpieces)*, Galería Patricia Conde, 2016; and *Entre el pictorialismo y la vanguardia (Between Pictorialism and the Avant-Garde)*, Casa ITESO Clavijero, 2021. We know his work was also included in the following collective exhibitions: *Liceo de varones (Boys' School)*, Guadalajara, 1921; *Exposición Nacional de Fotografía (National Photography Exhibition)*, Mexico City, 1928; World Fair, Seville, 1929; *11 fotógrafos (11 Photographers)*, Mexico City, 1929; *Plástica Jalisciense 1668-1953 (Art from Jalisco, 1668–1953)*, Museo de la Universidad de Guadalajara, 1953; *Fotografía del siglo XX (20th-Century Photography)* Museo Nacional de Arte, INBAL (2004); *Te pareces tanto a mí (You Look So Like Me)*, Museo del Estanquillo Colecciones Carlos Monsiváis, 2008; *Nosotros fuimos (We Were)*, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, 2015; *Pasado venidero (The Past Ahead)*, Museo del Estanquillo, 2015; *Estancias privadas de la coleccionista (The Collector's Private Rooms)*, Museo Dolores Olmedo, 2015; Galería Patricia Conde, AIPAD, New York, 2016; Galería Jean-Mathieu Martin, ZonaMaco, 2016; *Cuerpos Expiados (Expiated Bodies)*, Galería López Quiroga, 2016; *¡Que se abra es puerta! Sensualidad, sexualidad y erotismo en las colecciones Carlos Monsiváis (Open the Door! Sensuality, Sexuality, and Eroticism in the Carlos Monsiváis Collections)*, Museo del Estanquillo, 2016; *La parte más bella (The Most Beautiful Part)*, Colección Piero Slim, Museo de Arte Moderno, 2017; *Naturaleza muerta (Still Life)*, Galería López Quiroga, 2017; *Un paseo por las artes visuales en las colecciones Carlos Monsiváis (A Tour of the Visual Arts in the Carlos Monsiváis Collections)*, Museo del Estanquillo, 2019; *Quiromancias (Palmistry)*, Galería López Quiroga, 2019; and *Antínoo, El eterno efebo. Homenaje a Francisco de la Maza (Antínoo, the Eternal Youth: In Homage to Francisco de la Maza)*, Museo de San Carlos, 2022.

His work has been identified in the following institutions: Fototeca Antica, Puebla; Centro de Estudios de Historia de México, Fundación Carlos Slim; Fundación Televisa; Galería López Quiroga; Casa Museo Luis Barragán; Tecnológico de Monterrey; Universidad de las Américas, Puebla; Fundación Juan Ocón, Suiza; Museo Claudio Jiménez Vizcarra, Guadalajara; Patronato del Museo Nacional de Arte, INBAL; Museo Elías Nandino, Cocula, Jalisco; and Museo del Estanquillo Colecciones Carlos Monsiváis.

Guadalajara and Mexico City: the studio

From 1910, Librado García Smarth had studios in Guadalajara at Corona 128, and toward the end of that decade his premises were in Mexico City at Madero 66. He lived and worked in both until the early 1930s.

U.S. artist Henry Ravell, a resident of Guadalajara from 1895 to 1915, possibly taught him the secrets of photography. By 1913 Smarth was already enjoying success and recognition.

This section charts these difficult beginnings, when survival depended on who happened to walk into the studio. This frequency enabled experimentation, attempts at something new and images that differed from the early prints but found their reward in the identity of the second or subsequent efforts.

In his studio's glass cases he exhibited and flaunted his accomplished celestial, luminous, mysterious atmospheres, and then transferred them to the shelves and the family album, before making the leap to newspapers and magazines.

It's not a photo, it's a Smarth

By 1918, Smarth was enjoying a certain fame and prestige. Critics commented on his bold techniques, daring poses, and his photographs' characteristic language, despite their many different formats and the fact that many were unsigned.

Many artists, intellectuals, and politicians posed for his portraits, including Roberto Montenegro, Jesús Reyes Ferreira, Carlos Orozco Romero, Raúl Quintero Parra, Elías Nandino, Gustavo Robles Cristo, Luis Barragán, Tórtola Valencia, Mimi Aguglia, and Dolores Olmedo.

Agustín Basave, José Guadalupe Zuno, and José D. Frías wrote groundbreaking texts about this work, which also inspired poets such as María Aurora and Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz, and the verses of Ramón López Velarde, María del Mar, and Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano.

In 2010, Carlos Monsiváis wrote that: “[...] several of his portraits are outstanding.”

Mexican sceneries and characters

Smarth was not detached from the aesthetics of the Mexican Revolution in the artistic depictions of rural sceneries and characters, but he added his personal touch: he locates his models in fictitious settings with backdrops created by the artist himself and sometimes he even manipulated the photography with lead pencil and oils.

He took risks in his bucolic sceneries and his work spoke to those in the know, his tribe: gays. A close inspection of the couple in *El ojito de agua* it is uncertain whether we are looking at a woman. The figure appears physically more male than female. In this context, it's important to view the illustrations that appear in *Viejos temas*, especially the ink of the birds on the title page: they are two male birds which like the text boxes are signed with an initial "S" that looks like the one in his signature on some photographs.

Given such images, we need to delve deeper into Smarth's professional and personal influences and relationships within his social and intellectual circles, which feature the painter Roberto Montenegro, the antiquarian and painter Jesús Reyes Ferreira, the bookseller Fortino Jaime, the poets Elías Nandino and Carlos Gutiérrez Cruz, and the politician Gustavo Robles Cristo. What impact did the dancer Tórtola Valencia make on Smarth when they met?

Mexican sceneries and characters that he made his own in the Mexican Golden Age of cinema.

Las bellas tapatías

In 1919, Smarth produced his most popular series of photographs (named *Las bellas tapatías* after the famed beauty of women from Guadalajara), and they were widely circulated in 1923. The models are dressed in the same elegant attire they would have worn at social gatherings to show off their refined culture: performing with musical instruments, dramatized readings, and *small tableaux vivant* on dance or theater.

The series of images of Margarita de la Peña—with six images in total, the most numerous we are currently aware of, five of which are exhibited here—is almost certainly thanks to Monsiváis for elevating him onto the same platform as the Czech photographer Frantisek Drtikol, while noting that “they would surely have never met.”

His delicate application of color in his photographs is remarkable. In these sets of images in particular, fine prints make him appear to be an exponent of Pictorialism, though the format of his images creates the impression of early homages to photography itself, placing him in the avant-garde.

Jesús Reyes Ferreira collected the *bellas tapatías*.

Another Jalisco

Smarth's male nudes are almost unique in Mexican photography and largely account for his fame after their discovery in the Estanquillo Museum in 2008.

There are at least four series and six different models. They are friends of Jesús Reyes Ferreira. One is a portrait of Ramón Puente, perhaps his lover. The antiquarian and the painter are not recognized as previously asserted, but the photographer himself does appear.

These are not clandestine or prohibited works, but images with a limited circulation for obvious reasons. The marks, creases, and dedications on some of them show how their owners must have been very fond of them, keeping them close, in their wallets.

A set of "photographic marvels" that more than a century ago were used for wishing people well: Happy New Year 1921!

New sensibilities

In the early 1930s, Smarth was an established artist who participated in the *National Photography Exhibition and in 11 Mexican Photographers*; his work was exhibited in Spain, and published in Cuba and possibly elsewhere.

Almost no information is available either about his photographs or personal life after this period; he disappears without trace. The Great Depression may have prevented him from being able to continue supporting himself as an independent artist.

The images in this section place him as one of the forerunners of Modernism, the new photographic movement that excluded him from its official history.

Better late than never, or so the saying goes, and in 1980, with some reservation, Manuel Álvarez Bravo said: Smarth is an artist. No one listened.

His contemporaries and ours

Librado García Smarth is representative, but not unique, in his absence from the annals of photography. Many of his contemporaries, and ours, were also overlooked.

For a brief context, we can cite the work of Ignacio Gómez Gallardo, José María Lupercio, Arturo Jorge González, Martín Ortiz, Gustavo Silva, Juan Ocón, María Santibáñez, and Eva Mendiola. They all shared spaces in newspapers, magazines, and exhibitions with Smarth, but we have yet to discover more about them and their photographs.

We can glimpse the glow of Librado García's photographs in the work of three contemporary artists: Óscar Sánchez Gómez, Valerio Gámez, and Juan Rodrigo Llaguno. To paraphrase Carlos Monsiváis, we could call them our own Smarths.

We conclude with something left or brought to us with Carlos Monsiváis' rediscovery of Smarth: catalogues, books, prints... and of course, the encounter with his photography's glow.