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### ART & DESIGN

## Gabriel Figueroa: A Cinematographer's Luminous Art

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Credit Hiroko Masuike/ The New York Times

**Under the Mexican Sky** “Idilio Salvaje,” a montage of videos featuring work by the Mexican cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, in this retrospective at El Museo del Barrio.

Painting with light is one way to define the cinematographer's task; making the work of directors and actors shine is another. A director tells actors “go there, do that.” A cinematographer, who is the eye behind the camera, creates a visual atmosphere that can turn even the simplest action into drama. Sometimes an eye develops an atmospheric style so distinctive as to make any film its own.

Such was the case with Gabriel Figueroa (1907-97), the Mexican cinematographer who, [over a 50-year career](#), rose from assistant cameraman to cinematic auteur. He collaborated with some of the finest directors and actors of his day and still emerged an international star. In his homeland he was more than just a film artist. He was a national hero, the supreme painter-in-light of Mexicanidad.

How do you put this particular kind of art across in a museum, art that is as much about time as it is about material, as much about movement, flux, as it is about fixity? [“Under the Mexican Sky: Gabriel Figueroa, Art and Film” at El Museo del Barrio](#) gives a persuasive answer. Arranged in a sequence that more or less follows the path of Mr. Figueroa's career, the show mixes film clips and film stills — pictures

that move and others that don't — with work by several of the great Mexican painters and printmakers of the early 20th century. And it lets the back-and-forth play of influence among very different media tell a story of its own.



Stills from the video “Idilio Salvaje,” which includes the bridal image at left from the 1962 film “Días de Otoño” (“Autumn Days”), directed by Roberto Gavaldón. At right, Gabriel Figueroa at work.

Credit Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Most of the artists were Mr. Figueroa's contemporaries; some were close colleagues and friends. They shared a goal. In the clamorous decades after the 1910 revolution, they were creating a new national image of Mexico: a brand, basically, with all the advantages and limitations that implies. This project naturally required cooperation, and everyone borrowed from everyone else. If you want an example — almost impossible to imagine today — of how Mr. Figueroa was born in Mexico City, and apart from a few journeyman stays in the United States, he rarely strayed far from it. Orphaned young, he taught himself photography, and set up practice as a studio portraitist. With his flair for Hollywood chic and expressive lighting, he soon attracted models and actresses in need of head shots. We see dozens near the start of the show: stock 1930s faces — penciled-on eyebrows, marcelled hair — which Mr. Figueroa floated, powder-white but brushed with shadows, on a romantically misty ground.

Essentially, this is the formula he would elaborate on and refine in his film work, which began as an extension of portrait photography. In 1932, he landed a job shooting posed promotional stills from a film-in-progress called “The Shadow of Pancho Villa.” The results were the quick-and-dirty products of many hands, but a few were strikingly staged: panoramic tableaux of peasant-revolutionaries, their faces half-hidden by sombreros, standing in low-horizon landscapes under towering, cloud-filled skies. They looked better than anything in the film itself. A new talent had arrived.



A video, right, features a montage of color films he worked on mainly in Hollywood.  
Credit Hiroko Masuike/ The New York Times

People noticed. In 1934, the American director Howard Hawks, after arriving in Mexico to make his own Pancho Villa movie, gave Mr. Figueroa an apprentice position behind a film camera. A year later, on a Mexican government grant, Mr. Figueroa went to Hollywood for a mentoring year with Gregg Toland, Orson Welles's preferred cinematographer. Back in Mexico in 1936, Mr. Figueroa shot his first feature film, "Out on the Big Ranch." His contribution to it was singled out for praise at that year's Venice Film Festival. He was on an upward track that reached a long, fruitful high point in 1943, when he made his first film with the director Emilio Fernández.

Mr. Fernández, nicknamed El Indio, was a handful, a swashbuckler-type, ex-boxer, actor, military hero and avid patriot. But professionally he and the lower-key, self-disciplined Mr. Figueroa clicked. Together they made some two-dozen movies that combined soaring visual grandeur with dips into dramaturgical bathos, and that captured on film an aesthetic of national identity-building long associated with monumental painting.

Mr. Figueroa knew and admired the famed mural painters: José Clement Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The regard was mutual; Rivera referred to the cinematographer as the "fourth muralist." And the exhibition's curator, Alfonso Morales of the Televisa Foundation in Mexico, gives the subject of influences passed across disciplines careful attention.



Images of movies shot by Mr. Figueroa. Credit Hiroko Masuike/ The New York Times

He begins by placing Mr. Figueroa's romanticizing film images in the context of 19th- and 20th-century landscape art by Mexican natives like José Maria Velasco and visitors like the photographers Edward Weston and Paul Strand. He then pushes the idea of mutual exchange harder by installing on opposite walls of one long gallery further films by Figueroa and pieces by Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros.

Appropriation from art to film is never in doubt. Rivera's well-known paintings of market women carrying lilies are the obvious visual prototypes for the main character in one of the first Fernández-Figueroa collaborations, "[Maria Candelaria](#)" (1943). Elsewhere the cinematographer lovingly recreates an Orozco drawing of mourning peasants, shadows and all.

At the same time, what's apparent is how original and powerful so much of Mr. Figueroa's art is, with its repeated images of vastness and violence, of Edens coming into flower and landscapes going up in flames, of scintillating modern cities and urban lives snuffed out. Mr. Fernández had a weakness for rhetorical bombast, which Mr. Figueroa managed to soften, or complicate, or simply override time and again. Their partnership slowed and eventually ended. Mr. Figueroa, institutionally much honored was in demand. In 1950 he shot "Los Olvidados" for Luis Buñuel, then in exile in Mexico. This led to several more films with that Spanish surrealist. Hollywood expressed serious interest, but in the end nothing happened. A multipicture contract offered by Samuel Goldwyn entailed moving away from home, which Mr. Figueroa didn't want to do. The director John Ford made a similar proposal, but Mr. Figueroa, known for his leftist leanings, couldn't get a United States visa.

In late career, his work changed character. By the 1960, post revolutionary Mexico, with its social consciousness, sanctities and stereotypes, was over. Popular culture in films, which once meant black peasant shawls and religion, now tended toward go-go boots and pot parties. To keep himself limber, Mr. Figueroa signed on with experimental young directors, to whose projects he brought enthusiasm and the weight of prestige. He did zany farces, as he had in the 1950s with the film comic *Cantinflas*. He took on gigs with television soap operas. These might have seemed an



ignoble conclusion to a great career, but Mr. Figueroa approached them as a new frontier, one that would let him learn how to film expressively — always the bottom line — in color.

Like the artist, the exhibition that honors him is very much a Mexican product. It's a collaboration between the National Council of Culture and the Arts (Conaculta) in Mexico City and Televisa, which maintains the Figueroa archive. Most of the film material on view is from the archive; many of the paintings and drawings are on loan from Mexico, too, where the show was widely seen before traveling to Europe and the United States. To say it's Mexican is to say that its both culturally specific and fully cosmopolitan. The description certainly extends to Mr. Figueroa himself and his luminous art. And it applies to El Museo del Barrio, which, with its cultural smarts and expansive vision, brings us what no one else can or will.

“Under the Mexican Sky: Gabriel Figueroa, Art and Film” continues through June 27 at El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, East Harlem; [elmuseo.org](http://elmuseo.org). A version of this review appears in print on March 27, 2015, on page C21 of the New York edition with the headline: The Latin Aesthetic, at Home on Any Horizon.