



FROM LIMA TO CANTON & BACK

Nineteenth-Century
Chinese Watercolors
for Peru

BY BARBARA ANDERSON ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY BLAIR CLARK

In 2003 the Museum of International Folk Art was given eleven watercolors on pale, fragile paper with blue silk borders. The donors, Maurine and Frank Iklé of Albuquerque, inherited the set in the 1940s from Mr. Iklé's grandfather, a Swiss collector who, the Iklés believed, had purchased it in Spain.

Each sheet depicts a street vendor or other denizen of nineteenth-century Lima, Peru, wearing typical costume and representing various classes and ethnic types, or *tipos*, of that vibrant city, then in the throes of all the exhilarations and travails of a capital of a newly independent nation. All were executed in a style similar to that of Francisco Fierro (Lima, ca. 1808–1879), an iconic mulatto artist who worked in Lima for much of the nineteenth century. Fierro produced thousands of images of typical *limeños* and their customs for the many Europeans and North Americans allowed in Peru for the first time after the restrictive Spanish monarchy, to invest in and construct railroads, mines, and other public works projects.

The lively and detailed figures belong to the genre known as *costumbrismo*, the artistic representation of common regional types, a category that flourished in Europe, China, and Latin America in the nineteenth century, satisfying a thirst for knowledge of exotic folkways. The *costumbrismo* genre became a favored subject of painting and literature around the world, especially in Spain, where the denizens of various cities and provinces were the subject of encyclopedias, such as Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz's *Las mujeres españolas, portuguesas y americanas* (Madrid, 1872), and novels into the twentieth century, for example, Miguel de Unamuno's *De mi país* of 1903. In Peru, as elsewhere in the Americas, it was an integral part of the construction of collective identities beginning with the earliest accounts by colonizers in the sixteenth century and continuing unabated through the mid-nineteenth. Over time, the standard visual format for these representations evolved to concentrate mainly on single sheets of figures rendered in watercolor on a stark white ground. Later, in the 1860s, photographic versions of *costumbrismo* paintings and prints also began to circulate, eventually eclipsing in popularity these handmade one-off watercolors and the prints made after them.

The most important recent contributions to our understanding of this genre as it developed in Peru have been made by Natalia Majluf, director of the Museo de Arte de Lima, particularly in a groundbreaking exhibition held in 2006 at the Americas Society in New York, entitled *Reproducing Nations: Types and Costume in Asia and Latin America ca. 1800–1860*. In her two catalogue essays, Majluf charts the evolution of the form from its beginnings with the late eighteenth-century scientific illustrators who specialized in watercolor depictions of the

Opposite: *Woman in White Poncho on Horseback in Lima, Peru*, by an unknown artist working in Canton, China in the mid-19th century. Watercolor on pith paper, with silk ribbon. 11 ½ × 8 ½ in. Gift of Frank and Maurine Iklé, Museum of International Folk Art. ■ On view in the exhibition, *Folk Art of the Andes*, opening April 17, 2011 at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe.

characteristic flora and fauna of the region, through the artists in the nineteenth century who recorded life in the capital. The latter began with Francisco Javier Cortés (Quito, Ecuador, 1775–Lima, 1839), chair in botanical drawing at the Medical College of San Fernando in Lima. Cortés trained in draftsmanship while on an important expedition to the Viceroyalty of New Granada (roughly the current countries of Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela), and then served in the local arm of a monumental undertaking to record and publish all *flora*

peruviana. By the 1830s Cortés was drawing tipos of the sort that were picked up and expanded by his younger contemporary and possible student, Francisco Fierro.¹

Fierro, popularly known as Pancho, began by producing sober and crisp representations like those of his mentor, but later shifted to lighthearted satire and looser brushstrokes. Although originally produced for tourist consumption, Fierro’s paintings were also avidly collected by Lima elites who viewed the images as part of their emerging national culture. Fierro and his contemporaries rendered a variety of social and occupational types, not always the result of direct observation of reality. Generalized types were intended to embody the exotic identity of Peru. Images of rugged indigenous commoners largely replaced those of the royal Incas, who represented Peru throughout the colonial period, but an emphasis on brilliant colors and textile patterns that had characterized the depictions of Incas continued to be hallmarks of Peruvian cultural identity and are among the delights of the Iklé examples.

The subjects in the Iklé set are typical of this period, with the various ethnic types seen in Lima, such as Indians from the hinter-

lands, mestizos (racial mixtures of European-born or Creole whites and Indians), blacks, and mulattoes (mixtures of whites and blacks), all in the city to sell their wares or services. The Iklé figures are closely related to many originals by Fierro, for example, one in the Getty Research Institute, *Woman with a Bundle on Her Back*, which is quite similar to the *Woman with a Bundle on Her Back* from the Museum of International Folk Art’s collection of Iklé watercolors.

Fierro’s white limeños and limeñas are generally from the upper classes. The most popular of Fierro’s types is the *tapada*, or veiled woman, copied by the artist of the Iklé watercolors illustrated here. The mysterious tapadas were known at least since the seventeenth century in Spain, and became the iconic representation of Peru in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. In Lima they were aristocratic women who dressed in the long *saya*, or skirt; the decorative, multicolored *pañuelo*, or scarf; and the black manta, or shawl, covering the upper body and face except for one seductively exposed eye—a kind of subversion of the original style, in which the shawl covered the lower faces of modest Muslim women in North Africa and Spain. Hidden under the manta, tapadas in Lima were free to wander the streets in anonymity, flirting in public with impunity. The French-Peruvian Flora Tristan, outspoken champion of women and workers (and the grandmother of Paul Gauguin), described the rebellious women in her book, *Peregrinations of a Pariah* (1838): “When the women of Lima want to make their disguise even more complete, they put on an old bodice, an old manta and an old saya which is falling into rags and losing its pleats; but to show that they come from good society, they wear immaculate shoes and stockings and carry one of their finest handkerchiefs.”



Above: Francisco “Pancho” Fierro, watercolor of a Lima woman with a bundle on her back, mid-19th century. *Gutierrez collection of maps and images of the Americas*, courtesy Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. ■ Fierro produced thousands of images of typical limeños and their customs for the tourist market.

Opposite: *Woman with a Bundle on Her Back in Lima, Peru*, by an unknown artist working in Canton, China in the mid-19th century. Watercolor on pith paper, with silk ribbon. 11½ × 8½ in. Gift of Frank and Maurine Iklé, Museum of International Folk Art. ■ The Chinese artist probably worked from the Fierro watercolor.

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In addition to the indigenous Fierro, there were numerous foreign, mainly European, artists, such as Sir David Stewart (active ca. 1820) and André Auguste Bonnaffé (French, ca. 1820–ca. 1870), who traveled to Peru, capturing in art the people and customs of Lima, often using the same poses and styles as Fierro, but sometimes using a darker, more condescending tone. But rather than selling their works in Lima, they took them back to Europe, where they were reproduced in prints by publishers who had never left that continent, and sold to fascinated armchair travelers.

The Iklé watercolors are different. Although typical of the Peruvian tourist watercolors in terms of subject matter and style, and sold in Peru—probably to the same tourists who purchased Fierro’s originals—these images were not, in fact, produced in either Peru or Europe, but rather in China. While they, like other similar sets, were for many years assumed to be Peruvian made, recent research reveals that they cannot have been produced there because pith paper (a spongy tissue from the *Tetrapanax papyrifera* tree, native to China and Taiwan) was unknown in the Americas, and blue silk ribbons were never employed as decorative borders in Peru. Both pith and blue silk ribbon borders were characteristic only of watercolors made in China, exclusively for the export market, mainly in Europe and North America from the late eighteenth through the late nineteenth century. Not as well known, as Majluf has observed,² trade between China and Peru was common, and by the 1830s, watercolors and lithographs of Peruvian tipos were sent to China, copied by Chinese artists, and then exported back to Peru to the same foreign buyers eagerly snapping up the Fierro originals.

Decades of confusion over the place of manufacture may have been caused by the scarcity of surviving Chinese examples still in Peru—Majluf knows of only one set that was definitely sold there in the nineteenth century. The structure of pith causes the watercolor or gouache (the denser and more opaque form of watercolor commonly used for these images) to sit on the surface, creating a smoothness, detail, and delicacy of effect not possible with wove paper that absorbed pigment and was typically used in European or American watercolors, including those of Fierro. Pith is extremely sensitive to humidity, and Majluf thinks that the paucity of surviving sets in Peru may be due to Lima’s high humidity. There are numerous sets elsewhere, however, including two albums of twenty-two Peruvian subjects in watercolor on pith paper by the Canton artist Sunqua that were sold at Sotheby’s in 2001.³ They were inscribed “Costumes de Lima, 1839, Peints en Chine sur des [illegible] . . . qui envoyes de Lima” (“painted in China on . . . who sent from Lima”), suggesting that they were bought in Lima by a French visitor. Chinese watercolors do not seem to have been copied from other Latin American tipos for export back to those countries, although they could still be hidden among Latin American collections, unrecognized as Chinese, as were the Peruvian examples until recently. Majluf has seen some Argentinian examples mixed in with Peruvian ones in the Lilly Library at Indiana University. There is obviously much still to be learned from these images about the international trade in art, as well as the spread of costumbrismo around the globe.

The thriving export watercolor industry was carried out mainly on the waterfront of Canton (now Guangzhou), where, according to early observers, thousands of artists were employed in buildings called hong, built especially for foreign manufacturing and trading. Unlike Fierro and his Peruvian contemporaries, who produced their paintings and lithographs alone, the Chinese artists worked in rigidly organized and specialized shops, where each artist concentrated on one type of form: figures, flowers, trees, etc. The most popular subjects for foreigners were Chinese, and fell into several categories, including cityscapes, especially of the Canton waterfront itself; botanical

Opposite: “*Tapada*” *Woman in Lima, Peru*, by an unknown artist working in Canton, China in the mid-19th century. Watercolor on pith paper, with silk ribbon. 11½ × 8½ in. Gift of Frank and Maurine Iklé, Museum of International Folk Art. On view in the exhibition, *Folk Art of the Andes*, opening April 2011 at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe.

■ The tapada style developed from the dress of modest Muslim women in North Africa and Spain. In Lima, aristocratic women, hidden under the manta, were free to wander the streets in anonymity. The Peruvian artist, Francisco “Pancho” Fierro created many images of the tapada, and this painting is probably a copy from Fierro.

SEE THE IKLÉ WATERCOLORS ONLINE

The complete set of eleven Iklé watercolors in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art is presented in an online exhibition at El Palacio’s website, elpalacio.org.

Opposite: *Woman with Embroidered Shawl on Burro in Lima, Peru*, by an unknown artist working in Canton, China in the mid-19th century. Watercolor on pith paper, with silk ribbon. 11 ½ × 8 ½ in. Gift of Frank and Maurine Iklé, Museum of International Folk Art. ■ Like the other Iklé watercolors, this is probably based on the mid-19th century work of Fierro, however the embroidery style on this shawl was popular in Peru in the 1820s, perhaps suggesting that this watercolor was copied from an early-19th century Peruvian work. The blue silk ribbon border is a clue that the Iklé watercolors were created in China, not in Peru.

Editor's Note: The fragile pith paper of these watercolors has deteriorated over time. Conservators have addressed some damage but some remains, which we have toned down, but not eliminated. A poor tissue paper repair in the lower corners of *Woman with Embroidered Shawl on Burro* will be corrected by conservators and has been removed for our illustration.

illustrations; scenes of Chinese customs; and individual figures. Non-Chinese subjects, though not as common, were also portrayed, including a few British landscapes and important political figures of the day, such as Napoleon and George Washington, all based on foreign prints.⁴

The single Chinese figures were, like the Peruvian tipos, representative of everyday life. Also like the Peruvian examples, they were often artfully placed in the center of a blank white page, with only a suggestion of ground, and were often bound into albums. In addition, both Chinese and Peruvian watercolorists adopted a broader and more whimsical style in later phases of the genre, the Chinese in the 1860s and 1870s. The approach is so similar in both (and closer to each other than to early European examples), it is tempting to speculate that the Chinese subjects, which seem to have established themselves earlier, made their way by the early nineteenth century to Lima, where they influenced the Peruvian artists to produce Peruvian versions, which were then sent to China, copied, and sent back to Peru. In a study of a Mexican genre of tipos, known as *castas* for their systematic depiction of racial mixtures in eighteenth-century colonial society, Ilona Katsew suggests that the visual source for such representations of tipos in Mexico is likely the book *China Monumentis*, published in 1667 by Athanasius Kircher, a bestselling Jesuit polymath at the Jesuit College in Rome, where Jesuit missionaries returned or at least spent time after their assignments in Asia and Latin America.⁵ The book, which catalogued Chinese customs and costumes, was popular in Mexico, and could have been on Peruvian bookshelves as well.

There are no surviving watercolors on pith dating before the 1820s, the period of great expansion of foreign trade with China. According to Majluf, the Chinese copies of Francisco Javier Cortés were made predominantly in the 1830s and 1840s, while those based on Fierro were copied later. The Iklé set is probably based directly on Fierro, although not enough examples by Cortés survive to eliminate the possibility that he originated this type, so it was probably copied no earlier than the 1840s (although one Iklé watercolor, depicting a young woman riding a burro and wearing a shawl with early nineteenth-century gold embroidering, could have used a Peruvian source from the 1820s, when those motifs would have been fashionable in Peru). But there is still a great deal left to be discovered. The Iklé watercolors remind us that globalism was thriving long before the term was coined in this century. They represent an intriguing and charming, but as yet little understood branch of art that flourished worldwide in an era in which nations were attempting to define themselves in visual terms, to themselves as well as to outsiders. ■

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Folk Art of the Andes opens on April 17, 2011 at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, and continues into 2012.

NOTES

- 1 Natalia Majluf, *Reproducing Nations: Types and Costume in Asia and Latin America ca. 1800–1860* (New York: Americas Society, 2006), p.19.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 3 London, July 20, 2001, Lot 260.
- 4 Carl L. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings, and Exotic Curiosities* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Antique Collectors' Club, 1997), Chapter 6, "Genre Painting and Copies of Western Art," pp. 156–71.
- 5 Ilona Katsew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in 18th-century Mexico* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 81 and 91.

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