

Graphic design in Peru at the beginning of the 20th century: The *avant garde* posters by Elena Izcue, 1930-1940

Diseño gráfico en el Perú de inicios del siglo XX: Los carteles *avant garde* de Elena Izcue, 1930-1940

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Abstract: Elena Izcue is known for her artistic and graphic studies of the pre-Columbian art iconography. However, it is important to rescue and make visible her graphic proposals for posters made between 1930 and 1940, which moved away from the ingrained Peruvian iconographic concept to enter into a formal and compositional exploration taking as references the European artistic and graphic manifestations. That experience allowed her to make creative and innovative proposals that dialogued with the language of the avant-garde, which she later intertwined with the local visual language. It was an interesting process of visual transculturation in which the international avant-garde influenced Izcue through posters, which later gave her a sense of identity when she returned to Peru. **Key words:** Transculturation, avant garde, Peruvian graphic design, iconography, pre-Columbian art

Resumen: A Elena Izcue se le conoce por sus estudios artísticos y gráficos de la iconografía del arte precolombino. Sin embargo, es importante rescatar y visibilizar sus propuestas gráficas de carteles realizados entre 1930 y 1940, que se alejaron del arraigado concepto iconográfico peruano para adentrarse en una exploración formal y compositiva que tomó como referencia las manifestaciones artísticas y gráficas europeas. Esa experiencia le permitió hacer propuestas creativas e innovadoras que dialogaron con el lenguaje de las vanguardias y que luego entretejió con el lenguaje visual local. Fue un proceso interesante de transculturación visual en el que la vanguardia internacional influyó a Izcue a través del cartel y luego le dio el sentido identitario cuando regresó al Perú.

Palabras clave: Transculturación, vanguardia, diseño gráfico peruano, iconografía, arte precolombino

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Considerations in the context of the pandemic on design processes at the beginning of the 20th century

The context of the pandemic has had an impact on our daily lives and on various spheres of our personal and artistic lives. The social distancing has led us to the path of existential contemplation and to reflect on the fragility of human beings and their identity. In this direction, I stopped to rethink Peruvian graphic design and became aware that the historical study of this specialization has been very little systematized. Another relevant issue is the scarce visibility given to women designers and it is also necessary to reflect on what should be the proper approach to the history of Peruvian graphic design. In that sense, this article tries to outline an approach through the reflection on a genuine and significant representative of graphic design in our country, Elena Izcue.

To address the genealogy of Peruvian graphic design we refer to the contribution of Octavio Santa Cruz (2018), who placed the founding milestone of the discipline in the 1960s, from the convergence and influence of Swiss graphic designers who arrived in Peru and established a model with their disciples. However, the development of the discipline began in the early twentieth century, a period in which transatlantic negotiations of the visual image and the need to build its own characteristics and identity in a local and global context emerged.

The local-global dynamic of the Peruvian graphic image is evident in the disruptive book and magazine covers of the early twentieth century. José Sabogal and a group of women who were ungratefully made invisible are representatives of this great work. Making visible the contribution of a graphic corpus of Peruvian women contributes to the study and scaffolding of the discipline of Peruvian graphic design. Therefore, we intend to understand, know and value all the actors involved.

The influence of the avant-garde in Peruvian art is addressed by several local and global authors, such as Fernando Villegas Torres and Natalia Majluf, who analyze the development in Peru of a cultural and artistic identity program in the early twentieth century. Villegas Torres, in his book *José Sabogal y la escuela mestiza* (2020), adds a section in which he points out the relationship between the international avant-garde and the artist's praxis. He points out that Sabogal introduced the representation of nocturnes around the landscape (associated to Symbolism) in the cover of the book *Una Lima que se va* (1921) by José Gálvez. Through this and other works, relations between Sabogal and modern European trends were raised (2020, pp. 67-70). This approach expands the panorama and opens new transcultural dialogues of the artistic and graphic work of different authors from the Latin American continent with others from Europe.

The dialectic dialogues on the production of local graphics with global graphic and artistic movements are not only raised in the functional or aesthetic dimension but also refer to the cultural dimension, to the formal knowledge of visual representation, as well as to the communicative environment.

This perspective is evident when Majluf and Wuffarden (2019, p. 147) point out that "José Sabogal's graphics for Amauta (1926-1930) contributed a new perspective to the design process in the twentieth century." Likewise, in reference to Sabogal's graphic proposal, they argue that he was able to visually integrate vernacular identity graphic symbols in the context of indigenism to align them with the avant-garde movements of the time. The

authors point out that graphic design had already been in the making since the beginning of the 20th century.

On the other hand, Fernanda Beigel (2003) highlights the importance of the Latin American magazines of the early twentieth century as cultural identity devices, “as meeting points for individual trajectories and collective projects, between aesthetic concerns and those related to national identity, diverse articulations between politics and culture that have been a distinctive sign of Latin American modernization” (p. 106).

In this line of thought, Gutiérrez Viñuales and Silvia Dolinko analyze the process of the visual construction of images and engravings specifically as means of communication and social propaganda in the Latin American context. These mentions are pertinent, since magazines constitute a record of the evolution of graphic design and its historical and cultural links, although it was not only magazines, there were also posters, billboards, textiles, and objects that confirm this transformation.

Although we consider Octavio Santa Cruz (2018) as the pioneer in historicizing the discipline of Peruvian graphic design, we must point out the biased perspective of his thesis *El diseño gráfico peruano en Lima* (1960) for two fundamental reasons. First, because it determines the beginning of graphic design only in the 1960s and resorts to the justification that the discipline was professionalized at that time. Second, it does not mention the work of Elena Izcue as part of its antecedents.

Santa Cruz states that “the graphic design produced during the sixties was characterized, in fact, by an opening towards the international standard, whose most significant proposal was the aspiration for high-level artistic creation” (p. 281). I consider that this statement omits all the production prior to that time. In this sense, it can be shown that Elena Izcue also produced graphic art posters and billboards that, in Santa Cruz’s terms, were of a high level and that, above all, make visible a profound dialogue with European avant-garde aesthetics. These works of her production are little known and studied, despite the cultural value they had in their context between Europe and Peru.

The impact of the European avant-garde on Izcue’s work

In 1924, Elena Izcue published educational notebooks for children inspired by pre-Hispanic iconography; those two volumes are the compendium of the formal studies she made in watercolor of the large collections of pre-Hispanic archaeological pieces of the landowner Rafael Larco Herrera. The artist not only copied the pieces but also made a morphological and structural study of them, synthesized them, and generated different modular structures. This allowed her to build a typology of watercolor studies with pre-Hispanic motifs.

Three years later, Elena Izcue and her sister were promoted by the Peruvian State to study in Paris, according to the reference of art historian Gabriela Germaná (n.d.):

In 1927, thanks to a two-year allowance granted by the Peruvian government, Elena and her sister Victoria traveled to the French capital to consolidate their artistic studies. In various workshops and factories, they achieved a solid career in the field of decorative arts, by means of printed fabrics with designs inspired by pre-Hispanic art; their pieces were acquired by the prestigious House of Worth, fashion houses, and private clients.

As Germaná mentions, around 1927 Izcue embarked for Paris. “She studied in different Parisian workshops, she also had the opportunity to meet great masters such as Fernand Leger” (Paredes, 2015). It is there where she began her formal explorations with new artistic languages.

Europe gave Izcue a broad vision of what was art and design, as she stated in an interview conducted in 1928 by Oscar Miro Quesada: “In all of Europe there is a great ancient and modern culture”. It is important to focus on the word modern, because Izcue would be mentioning the avant-garde art of the time, such as expressionism, cubism, and constructivism. Movements that as defined by Frascara (2006) allowed “a proliferation of manifestos and publications, through which artists, designers, architects, and educators expressed their positions” (p. 42).

Frascara refers to the European movements that defined an artistic and design line, which showed a reaction against the predominant organicism and ornamentalist eclecticism of the time, and proposed a more bare and geometric style, which would exert a lasting and inescapable influence on the development of visual communication design in the twentieth century (p. 42).

In the interview with Miro Quesada, the artist highlighted something very important that unites art and design: engraving, which she defines as a more fashionable technique. She also pointed out that “all modern artists do wood engraving. In engraving they are very original in the personality of their technique, thus renewing a very ancient art” (Miro Quesada, 1928). This technique allowed the development and apogee of editorial graphic industries, such as illustrated cultural reviews, as well as the textile industry.

France was the cradle of many avant-garde cultural and artistic movements, and also the center where Latin American artists converged. As Greet (2018) notes: “Paris was a destination for cultural travelers and exiles from the far reaches of the globe, it held a special appeal for Latin American artists because of the city’s deep-seated Latin heritage and cultural history” (p. 5). It is not surprising, then, that with the enthusiasm of the diaspora, Latin American artists have been enriched by all the isms simultaneously. However, as Hunter-Stiebel (1979) mentions, France was the center of Art Nouveau and Art Deco. Once World War I ended, France gave way to Art Deco and displaced Art Nouveau.

Hunter-Stiebel (1979) points out that Art Deco was a post-war artistic expression linked to the production of decorative arts based on synthesized geometric forms and ornamentation. We can define that art deco was the social and cultural manifestation of a wealthy middle class that wished to tear away the pain of the ravages of World War I and focus on the acquisition and visibility of goods, such as clothing. Therefore, Art Deco was not the hegemonic movement, as mentioned by Frascara (2006). On the other hand, constructivism, cubism, and surrealism were indeed disruptive movements of the time (p. 42).

Izcue’s posters

Izcue, as a foreign artist, had a rewarding experience in appreciating the diverse visual manifestations that had a significant influence on her formation to discover new paths

and forms of visual expressiveness that enriched her works. Undoubtedly, everything she observed and learned in all the different workshops she attended was important.

In the early thirties, when she was already working for the House of Worth, she began to make interesting collages, based on plans that resemble cubist art. Villegas Torres makes a reflection on Izcue's collages with which I agree:

In addition to the education and the importance of the artist's identity or the insertion of the designs of ancient Peru in modern life, what we are interested in demonstrating is that her designs based on Peruvian iconography were a source of inspiration for her artistic process. An example of this is two untitled collages made in the thirties of the twentieth century. The first one is a representation taken from a kilim tapestry of the Chancay culture, which appears for the first time in a design template (ca. 1923). This model would be used in *El arte peruano en la escuela* (1926) (Figure 7) to later be taken up again in the collage Untitled (ca. 1931-1933), where the details of a plant are synthesized leaving only its form in black and green colors in the manner of a mottled marble. This shape was accompanied by geometric forms, such as a blue trapezoid of irregular shape and three circles in red, green, and yellow placed in rows. The incorporation of geometric forms occurs in a period in which Mondrian proposed neoplasticism. Thus, in this work, Izcue alternated geometry with the synthesis of Nazca design, to interpret a proposal clearly linked to the avant-garde of the moment. In addition, the use of collage, inserted as a practice from synthetic cubism, was common in groups such as Dada and Surrealism (2017).

Villegas Torres comments that the influence of Peruvian art was present in several of Izcue's collages. However, I believe that the poster proposals presented below move away from the pre-Hispanic symbolic value to enter into a dialogue between the viewer and the communicative intention of his posters and other elements that I will develop in the course of this article.

Figure 1 shows a composition of planiform and linear geometric elements with a juxtaposition between them based on the presence of lines that draw the synthesis of a cup that gives an ethereal sensation of transparency. Likewise, the succession of rectangular color planes at different levels makes the viewer perceive different vanishing points. In other words, there is a representation of different realities of perception in a single image, a basic principle of cubism.

This image probably comes from the observation of a still life that has been reinterpreted. It is as if she had to redefine an aesthetic based on other objects with the same principles of representation since it is observed that she is in dialogue with the cubist formal structures. The same representational dynamics can be seen in *Nature morte*², a silkscreen by the cubist artist Juan Gris from 1922.

In Gris' silkscreen printing, rectilinear planes of different colors and proportions are juxtaposed, and deconstructed structures are sketched through the lines, representing the

2 The image can be viewed in Juan Gris, Still life (Nature morte), 1922 [print]. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxybib.pucp.edu.pe/asset/AWSS35953_35953_30945843

synthesis of a guitar and a jug, accompanied by other elements that, due to their level of synthesis, translate into abstract geometric shapes. (Fig.1)

It is likely that Elena Izcue has assimilated and internalized the cubist aesthetic; what is interesting is that the final product manifests a permanence of the pre-Hispanic visual imaginary appropriated and reinterpreted. This visual discourse can be seen in the lower part: a quadrangular modular system with dots in the center that recall the tocapus of Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's drawings, and on top of this is drawn a stepped figure that refers to the structure of the ceremonial mantles of Pachacamac.

We can conclude from a formal point of view that in Figure 1 the aesthetics of the cubist movement and pre-Hispanic cultures converge with iconographic elements of the collective ancestral memory. In addition to this proposal, Izcue elaborated more collages with this same typology, in which the amalgamation of different local and global elements can be seen.

By 1933, Izcue was conceptualizing and producing a heterogeneous typology of advertising posters for different entities. Most of them remained as sketches. However, they represent the plasticity of Izcue's graphic work, whose common thread was experimentation and dialogue between the local and the global.

Figure 2 is a sketch for a poster made in watercolor. It can be seen that at a technical level she worked it as if it were gouache because of the large homogeneous areas of color, and there are several elements, both morphological and communicative. For this graphic proposal, Izcue applied conceptual principles of graphic design, such as the hierarchy of typography in relation to the graphic elements. In addition, we observe three levels of representation: abstract, due to the rectangular elements that correspond to the background; iconic, due to the linear synthesis of the pitcher, and, finally, a certain degree of naturalism with the orange slices.

The limited color palette, the permanence of the cubist aesthetics, and the eclectic degree of iconicity of the image dialogue with the Art Deco posters and advertising of the 1930s. In addition, the inclusion of the typography Citronnade Orangeade (orangeade lemonade) in the visual proposal is in a state of deconstruction and as a whole has a substantial value, as it sets the communicational tone between the represented image and its symbolic value. (Fig.2)

Izcue began working in the early 1930s for the House of Worth, one of the most important brands in the textile and fashion industry. However, the owners of the firm did not limit themselves to this field, as they also sold exclusive perfumes with a sophisticated and luxurious perspective.

The House of Worth, as a store positioned in the imaginary of the upper social class in Paris, stood out for providing innovative, disruptive, and avant-garde designs. The collections of silk scarves with pre-Hispanic iconographic reinterpretations with Art Deco aesthetics made by Izcue were preferred by the ladies of Parisian and later New York high society. Her creative work in the textile line was the most profuse and visible through different exhibitions, both in Paris and New York between 1930 and 1938, and the artist also developed proposals for posters for the Worth brand.

Dans la nuit (1924) was one of the most famous and sought-after perfumes in Paris and other cities, such as London and Berlin. Designed by René Lalique (Calzadilla, 2016), it was an original packaging for its circular shape and penetrating blue. Its permanence



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

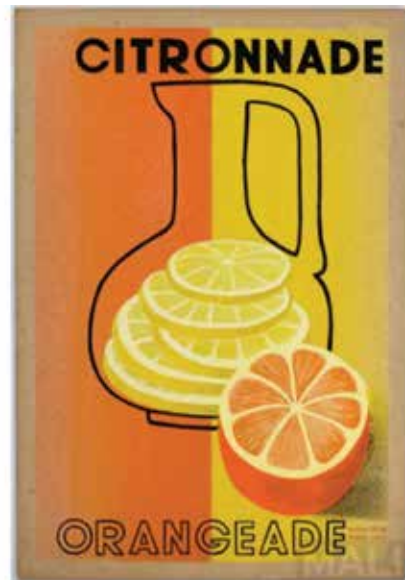


Fig. 3

Figure 1. Elena Izcue. Composition, ca. 1935. Watercolor on paper, 21,8 x 16,6 cm. Museum of Art of Lima. Donated by Elba de Izcue Jordán.

Figure 2. Elena Izcue. Sketch for the poster of *Citronnade*, 1933. Watercolor on paper, 51 x 35 cm. Museum of Art of Lima. Donated by Elba de Izcue Jordán.

Figure 3. Elena Izcue. Sketch for the poster of *Dans la nuit*, perfume by the House of Worth, 1934. Tempera on paper, 51 x 35,5 cm. Museum of Art of Lima. Donated by Elba de Izcue Jordán.

was projected for more than 50 years in the perfume market as a luxurious product of high reputation, therefore, the advertising posters were at the height of the perfume and its consumers.

Izcue prepared the sketch for *Dans la nuit* using the tempera technique. The composition is minimalist in that it contains few elements in the space: appropriate typography, the representation of the packaging, and a texture of stars. The color palette is monochromatic with a predominance of blues. The typographic hierarchy and the different visual tensions are clearly identified with the packaging as the most important element of the composition, located almost at the center of the space in both vertical and horizontal axes, which generates a subtle visual tension. The slight shift to the left breaks this tension and achieves a balance between the linear text distributed in a staggered way at the top and the other gray text at the bottom.

The linear typology of the text *Dans la nuit* at the top is light and blends in with the stars in the background. Izcue's skill in the precision of the drawing to represent the structure of the container down to the smallest detail stands out. The application of the monochromatic palette reveals the intention to emphasize the hierarchical visual construction, which generates the univocity of the vital elements of visual communication. (Fig.3)

The relevance of this analysis of the image, like the previous ones, is again to reinforce and make visible Izcue's knowledge, conceptualization, and application of certain principles of graphic design since this discipline was a consolidated industry in the thirties in Europe. In addition to *Dans la nuit*, Izcue made other poster proposals for the Blanc and dentelles brands.

Izcue worked not only at the esthetic level, but her resources were also at the service of communication and established a hierarchy between shapes, colors, and typography, elements that contribute to the development of an organized visual reading. Frascara (2006, p. 46) highlights three concepts: economy, simplicity, and coherence as the praxis of the designers (and our designer) of the 1930s.

Upon her return to Peru, Izcue had a busy schedule. As the person in charge of the creation of the National Workshop of Applied Graphic Arts, she made arrangements to "modernize design in Peru and turn it into a source of work. (...) Her teaching philosophy was compatible with that of the Bauhaus in terms of the theoretical, experimental and practical preparation of the student" (Gerbolini, 2005, p. 38). In addition, from the 1940s onwards, she developed different workshops with communities of craftswomen in southern Peru, in which she performed the design of straw weaving.

For the events of the workshops with women artisans, Izcue prepared diffusion posters that followed the functional, esthetic, and communicative principles required by the poster. She herself wrote one of her tasks: "To design and edit all kinds of graphic art compositions destined for national and international propaganda by the State, consisting of the illustration of books, magazines, pamphlets, sheets, posters, postage stamps, cards for anniversaries, Easter, New Year, etc.". Her perspective shows the knowledge she had of the discipline at a theoretical and practical level. Not only did she have the capacity for analysis and synthesis, but she also knew how to achieve a balance between functionality, aesthetic tension, and communicative intent directly related to the social context.

An example of this is the comparison we can make of two images of the artist. The first is a compositional proposal made in Europe to advertise the sale of footwear and the

second corresponds to a sketch from later years in Peru for a straw weaving workshop in the city of Celendín. In both cases, the compositional structure was the same. However, the communicative intent expressed through the symbols was defined by their context. (Fig.4) (Fig.5)

Figure 4 was a proposal made in Paris, according to the author in an interview upon her return (1939). She also mentioned that she developed various activities for the House of Worth and that in addition to her work as a designer she proposed innovative modular patterns inspired by pre-Hispanic iconography. She also mentioned that in her free time she was involved in creative and communicative proposals of propaganda and diffusion through advertising posters.

From her testimony, we deduce that Figure 4 was executed for the House of Worth. The artist, increasingly perfecting her tempera technique, created a compositional proposal with a central element: an elegant black shoe with gold details. In the second and third planes, letters constructing the phrase “mercredi soldes” (Wednesday sales) stand out in vibrant turquoise against a yellow background. The color palette has a high visual impact, applying Ittem’s color theory, which proposes a dominant color, a tonic color, and a mediating color.

The typographic proposal was very bold through different typologies of text: some filled letters and others linear, which generated several planes. The delineated letters, although they occupy all the space vertically, take a back seat, thanks to the artifice of their thinness. From a formal analysis, we can define this poster as a balanced composition in terms of the distribution of the elements in space, the text is legible both for its location and its different sizes. From a communicational analysis, it achieved a clear, synthetic, and direct message for its audience.

Figure 5 is a poster proposal that the artist made in 1944 after returning to Peru. As we can see, almost a decade later Izcue again executed a composition similar to the distribution of her elements in the space of the poster format, only that the motif was different. I deduce that the 1934 proposal marked deep learning in the graphic and communicative experience, and she applied the same knowledge in this new project for an exhibition of handcrafted pieces made by women and men from the city of Celendín.

Conclusions

The history of Peruvian art continues to be rewritten with new perspectives. I consider that a significant part of this is the history of Peruvian graphic design, which has been built and amalgamated with other disciplines such as art, anthropology and literature. Esthetic, cultural, avant-garde, and modernist movements also converged in this construction.

In this article, I have tried to establish the contribution and role of women artists, such as Izcue, whose work of pre-Hispanic iconographic rescue has been widely recognized, but her artistic and graphic work with avant-garde aesthetics through her posters of the thirties and forties has yet to be appreciated.

In this sense, I believe that broadening the view of artists allows us to demystify them or take them out of a certain paradigm in order to understand the complexity of the role of the artist in the discipline of graphic design during the turbulent 1930s of the twentieth century.

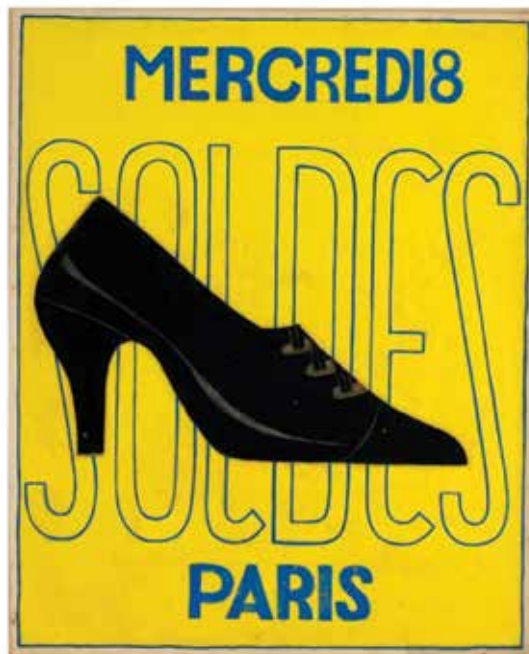


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Figure 4. Elena Izcue. Sketch for *Soldes Paris* advertisement, ca.1933-1938. Watercolor on paper, 31 x 24,8 cm. Museum of Art of Lima. Donated by Elba de Izcue Jordán.

Figure 5. Elena Izcue. Poster study for the exhibition of straw weavings, ca. 1944. Pencil on paper, 28,2 x 19,9 cm. Museum of Art of Lima. Donated by Elba de Izcue Jordán.

To make visible a legacy and a historical genealogy of Peruvian graphic design before 1960 means to place it on the same level of importance as the international graphic avant-garde. In this lies the interest of giving a new look at the work of women who had an impact not only on the art industry but also on the design industry in Peru. Therefore, I highlight the importance of the paradigmatic case of Elena Izcue in terms of graphic production through her posters made between 1930-1940.

I conclude that Elena Izcue is an artist who, in addition to being important for the history of Peruvian art, is also important for the construction of genealogy and history of modern Peruvian graphic design in the early twentieth century. It is not only for her rescue and reinterpretation of Peruvian iconography but also for her poster graphic work, that allows us to evidence her avant-garde facet with influences of Picasso, Gris, and Leger, as well as to establish formal links with other designers.

It is important to rethink and reclaim the history of Peruvian graphic design of the early twentieth century and highlight who made the cross-cultural and avant-garde esthetic connections of image and graphics. To make known the poster design work presented in this article on Elena Izcue is to build bridges with avant-garde aesthetics, in which a creative graphic continuum and heterogeneous exploration have been observed. It was a process of esthetic transculturation of the image in which a pact was formed between the content of the visual graphic image and the communicative conceptual proposal. This is a subject that has been little studied. Therefore, this article represents a contribution to future spaces, where discussions and research on the history of Peruvian graphic design are encouraged.

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