The Andean People in the Work of Martin Chambi

Andrés Garay Albújar
Moritz Neumüller

Martin Chambi (1891–1973) was undoubtedly one of the most prominent photographic figures in the first half of the 20th century in Latin America. He was born into a life full of hardships in Coaza, a mountain village near Lake Titicaca. Nonetheless, he was able to use these circumstances in his own way and became one of the most important photographers of the country, and even the continent. His father worked in the Santo Domingo Mining Company and this was where young Chambi was first exposed to photography, through a chance meeting with a British photographer. The teenager became fascinated with the medium and spent two years panning for gold in order to save enough money to travel to Arequipa and learn the photographic trade from the local masters. After nine years in the renowned studio of Max T. Vargas, he left Arequipa for the small but prosperous provincial capital Sicuani where he founded his own studio. Two years later, however, he moved on to Cuzco, the legendary capital of the old Inca Empire, a tourism magnet, famous for the then newly discovered Machu Picchu sanctuary. Martin Chambi soon became the most distinguished photographer of the city and – through his publications and exhibitions abroad – a photographic reference of the continent. However, there is still a lack of in-depth research on Chambi’s life and work. His craftsmanship and mastery are often presented as the peculiar ingenuity of an exceptional talent,
This isolated view may be misleading as it does not account for the photographically quite well-developed landscape in the Southern Andes at the beginning of the 20th century. While primarily concentrating on Chambi’s images of the Andean people, we want to contribute to a broader vision on this celebrated photographer: One that takes both his artistic training in the European tradition, and the cultural context of the Andean region in the 1920s and 30s into account. We see this approach as a step towards giving Chambi his place in the general history of photography, without neglecting his special origin, context and artistic value.

By means of his photography, Chambi introduces us to the socially and historically complex scenario of a region split into politically independent (and often belligerent) nations, within a continent that was looking for its own cultural identity founded on the heritage of the high cultures of the past: the Mayas, Aztecs and, of course, the Incas. Therefore, looking at Chambi also means looking at Cuzco, the Andes, its history, its cultural mix, its people and their environment, which the artist portrayed throughout his lifetime. Another unavoidable fact in the analysis of Chambi’s work is his biographic duality: Chambi combines indigenous and Western influences; he spoke Quechua, but also Spanish. He was an elegant city man, who could also easily fit into the social substratum of the Inca communities. It was perhaps precisely this tension that made him a modern man, a successful photographer, and an influential artist whose visual language was – and still is – unique. Without being particularly cultured, he used the camera as a vehicle to be introduced into the upper social circles of Cuzco. Together with his family and his assistants, he ran a business that covered all technical aspects of the studio portrait, as well as commissions for weddings, social gatherings, family portraits, parties, and so on. This diversity of clients and situations required a set of standard solutions in terms of

Figure 2
Martin Chambi, Self-portrait with glass negative, Cuzco, not dated, glass plate, 10 x 15 cm. Archivo Martin Chambi, Cuzco.
image frame, illumination and developing, which made it possible to resolve the majority of possible cases that could come up.

His mastery of the medium is, in part, due to his apprenticeship in Arequipa. Since the mid-19th Century, Arequipa had been strongly influenced and shaped by the cultural and social impact of its European immigrants. By the 1890s, the city had become a centre of photography, both in terms of studios and travelling photographers who usually came from Italy, France, the USA, Bolivia, Spain, Portugal, Germany and England. The society had a strong European component and a Western-style taste, yet its substrate was mainly criollo. This was where Chambi acquired his knowledge of the technical and aesthetic aspects of photography. When he settled in Arequipa in 1908, the photographic scene was dominated by two studios, those of Emilio Díaz and Max T. Vargas: two local photographers who were the state of the art and fashion, especially when it came to artistic portraits and outdoor scenes. Max T. Vargas, nearly twenty years older than Chambi, had visited Europe and ran two photography studios, one in Arequipa, and another one in La Paz, Bolivia. In his work, he covered architectural and archaeological heritage, and made representative studio portraits. Early 20th century society in the Andean region was characterized by strict class-consciousness and a constant search for identity. Hence, there was a strong demand for portraits. The concern was less the preservation of a likeness for posterity. Rather, the customers came to the studio to obtain a document to certify a certain status in the social hierarchy. Photographers such as Vargas – and later Chambi – were well aware that they were asked to endow their portraits with a reality that did not always correspond to that of the model, the location or the social context. In this sense, the client “went to the studio, not in order capture his personality but to insert his face into an image that might be unreal, but visually pleasing. […] The retouching pen and knife complete and shape the photographically obtained image.” Both Vargas and Chambi used large format cameras, a rather simple studio setting with only one background, few props, and straight-

---


forward lighting to flatter their clients. This simplicity gave their portraits a certain natural quality. In the case of Chambi, the curtain is often substituted by a selective focus and very low depth of field, and a distinctive lighting that Chambi referred to as the Rembrandt Effect, which he also applied to some of his self-portraits, such as figure 2.

Another key idea that Chambi took over from his teacher Max T. Vargas was the notion of Peru as a country constructed on typically Andean aspects including the people and their customs, the landscape and cultural heritage. These were the subjects that Vargas used for his postcards, some of which were printed in Germany, or self-published in “Arequipa & La Paz”. Chambi later transferred the same practice to Cuzco, both for subject matter and target

---

6 This technique was made popular in Peru by the American photographer William Kurt in the 1860s and consists of a variation of what is called “short lighting” in portrait photography. However, as mentioned in an article published in 1914 (“Rembrandt”, in La Fotografía, Madrid, July 1914, 5), the name was used soon after in a very general way, designating studio lighting that plays with strong light/shadow effects, cf. Andrés Garay, Martín Chambi por si mismo, Universidad de Piura (Peru), 2006, republished by Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 2010, 86-91.
costumers, i.e. tourists and locals. Max T. Vargas’ assistants included many photographers who later made a name for themselves. His studio acted as a magnet for aspiring artists and was very influential in the development of photography in the region. Towards the end of his nine-year apprenticeship, Martin Chambi won prizes, presented his works in exhibitions, and established personal relationships with local photographers including the Hermanos Vargas, Emilio Diaz, and Enrique Masías, the painters Vinatea Reynoso, Martínez Málaga, as well as with writers, intellectuals and poets. If Chambi later (e.g. in an interview in 1947) claims that

7 In this sense, the case of Vargas and Chambi supports Enrico Sturani’s claim for a new view on the postcard industry in peripheral regions: Enrico Sturani, ’Das Fremde im Bild. Überlegungen zur historischen Lektüre kolonialer Postkarten’, in: Fotogeschichte, vol. 79, 13-24.
8 Chambi won bronze medals in 1916 and 1917, and his work was exhibited in the Centro Artístico de Arequipa, cf. Garay and Villacorta 2007 (reference 4), 19-22.

Figure 6
Martin Chambi, Gendarmes from Cusco in Saqsaywaman, 1928, glass plate, 15 x 10 cm.
Archivo Martin Chambi, Cuzco.

Figure 7
August Sander, Customs Officers, 1929, gelatin silver print, 26.0 x 16.7 cm.
© Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur - August Sander Archiv, Cologne; VBK, Vienna, 2011.
“my art is Arequipenian, because this is where I learned to make landscapes and portraits”, he also refers to a style that can be described as clearly European, or rather, Europeanized, despite its regional influences. Vargas’ architectural views, his postcards and studio portraits (some of them also show the indigenous populations, such as the Beggar (fig. 3) epitomize this Europeanized style, as do the works of the Italian-Bolivian photographer Luigi Domenico Gismondi in his studio portraits of indigenous people, for example. In one of them (fig. 4), we see Gismondi’s own son dressed up as an indigenous girl (sic!), a masquerade that shows the clear distance of the photographer from the exotic world he depicts. Chambi, on the other hand, develops a style that is based on an often daring visual language and a truly authentic relationship to the subjects. While taking over the achievements he had been taught in Arequipa quite directly in his commercial work, he considerably adapted and extended them for his lifetime project of documenting the Andean People, their cultural heritage and their present-day way of living. This project already started in Arequipa, but it was in the ancient capital of the Inca Empire that it fully developed.

After arriving in Cuzco with his family in 1920, Chambi swiftly became integrated into the new environment. His collaboration with the already established photographer-painter Juan Manuel Figeroa Aznar was short-lived, and he soon had his own studio that served a wide range of social strata. The 1920s was a time of ideological tensions in the ancient capital when it underwent, according to Jorge Flores Ochoa, its “first modernisation”9, which caused in

---

9 Jorge Flores Ochoa, personal interview with the authors, Cuzco, June 2010. Flores Ochoa also underlines the importance of the train connection between Cuzco, La Paz and Buenos Aires, which supplied the southern Andes region with the latest publications, trends and visitors from Europe, weeks before they arrived at the capital, Lima, by boat.
important changes in the traditional feudal structures. The social classes suffered, in consequence, unexpected adjustments that strongly contrasted with the rural heritage. An urban proletariat formed and defended its rights by means of trade unions and interest groups, which led to social contrasts and juxtapositions. Chambi documented this shift with a sharp lack of determination to denounce injustice more feverously.

12 José Uriel García, in his article ‘Martin Chambi, artista neoindígena’, in: Excelsior, August-October 1948, praises Chambi’s works but laments his
and modern eye, and through the means of a personal, non-dramatized vision; something quite rare in the circles of the artists and intellectuals of the period. In this context, the debates around concepts such as “indigenous”, “land”, “history”, “identity” and so forth were echoed in the majority of publications that blossomed during the romantic indigenous crusade in Cuzco. It was Luis Valcárce who led the Indigenismo movement and preached the renunciation of the “moribund European Civilization”; for example, in his *Glossary of the Inca’s Life* he writes: “Only if we go back to the land, can we be purified from the bad habits of our false urban democracy. […] The simple peasant’s life will restore the confidence and cheerfulness of a life that we have lost due to our servile imitation of everything foreign.”

It was precisely from Europe, however, that the same romantic ideas and claims for a reengagement with the rural past swept over. Lily Litvak points out that it was from these premises that the archetype of the farmer as the incarnation of the people arose, endowed with his elemental qualities: “simplicity, patience, constancy, linked to the immemorial past by collective experiences, integrated with the land by rituals and customs, and transmitter of a telluric wisdom”. Photographs such as Rudolph Koppitz’ *Heavy Burden* (ca. 1930) symbolize this reversion to the soil, and show interesting parallels to Chambi’s melancholic images from the same years. The fact that the indigenous people of the Andes actually do have a strong link to the land and to the past was underlined, and then politically used, by the Indigenists. Martin Chambi’s work must be seen in this socio-political context, but not as part of it. In fact, Chambi’s search for his own artistic, not political, language was criticized by the dominant tendency of the Indigenismo, which demanded a return to the Andean roots and the re-creation of the Inca Empire. Chambi’s works have been described as a visual expression of this political movement, because they depict a vision of the Andean people that celebrates the past glory of the Andean culture on the one hand and do not avoid showing the crude postcolonial reality on the other. However, his images also bestow a certain dignity to the subjects. When he depicts a major’s family (fig. 5), gendarmes (fig. 6) or a band of musicians (fig. 1), they seem to express a great solemnity, even pride, in their posture, clothing and expression. Formally speaking, they are treated in nearly the same way as his upper-class clients that paid for their portraits to be taken in the studio or an exterior setting.

In an announcement for the *Gran Estudio Fotográfico de Martín Chambi e Hijos* in a magazine in 1934 we can read that it “has achieved, among other things, making the marvels of architecture, landscape, types, customs, etc. of the land of the Incas known in the five parts of the world”. In his solo exhibitions, however, Martin Chambi mainly concentrates on the historic riches of his culture, landscapes and architecture, which he refers to as a *mestizaje Colonial*. As can be judged from the vintage prints that have been reacquired by the Chambi Archive in Cuzco, these works – mounted on cardboard for hanging on the wall – are carefully composed,
often have dramatic lighting effects and are mainly tinted in the colours red, blue, green and sepia, in keeping with the taste of the time (fig. 8). Free of the fear of being overly pictorialist (this discussion did not exist in Peru) or “decorative and oversentimental”15 (this judgment is the fruit of our modern view), he uses his imagery to disseminate the beauty of his country. His pictures show both colonial and indigenous architecture, both white and “bronze-coloured”16 people, both the city and the rural environment. These pictures are documents, but do not use documentary language to denounce the crude reality of the dispossessed rural population. It has been claimed that he chose this rather melancholic, inoffensive approach “in order not to hinder his recent access to the middle class and the possibility to provide his family with a status and an education far from the rural precociousness”17 he came from himself. However, we are more inclined to see an artistic intention behind this decision to stay clear of a direct political and judgmental documentary practice, and to describe his people in terms of a somewhat monumentalized dignity and melancholy, by means of balanced compositions, diffused natural lighting and the harmonious distribution of the pictorial elements.

As part of his intention to document Peru’s cultural heritage, Chambi also showed a great interest in music and instruments (both autochthonous and imported by the colonizers), for costumes and dresses, rites and celebrations, but also for new inventions, such as tennis clubs, cars and motorcycles. Yet, it is really the people that capture his interest. By convincing his compatriots to pose for the photograph in their mother tongue, he created a spontaneous and direct relationship with the photographic subjects and avoided the colonizing attitude of his many photographer colleagues who came from the capital or other countries to capture exotic views of the Andean region. Even if Chambi did look for characteristic motifs for his postcards and magazine-illustrations, he still captured them with a certain kind of natural spontaneity. However, he did not hesitate to arrange people and find the right camera angle in order to create a balanced composition in a group portrait (fig. 9), or to counterbalance architectural elements for a postcard.18

17 Castellote 2008 (reference 1), 11.
18 Jorge Latorre, Santa María del Villar, Fotógrafo Turista, Instituto Príncipe de Viana, Gobierno de Navarra, Pamplona, 1998, 147-149.
Sometimes, he takes people from the street to his studio portraits and photographs them using the same technique, decor and illumination as in his commissioned portraits. These documents, such as figure 10, do not get retouched or manipulated in any way. They represent types and customs in the European tradition of the Volkstypen and the picturesque portrait. In this sense, Chambi’s Chicha-carrier, as well as Max T. Vargas’ beggar, follows the...
same logic as the Romanian photographer Carol Szathmari’s farmers and gypsies\textsuperscript{19}, or the Albanian photographer Kel Merubi’s double and group portraits (fig. 12). A comparison between Chambi’s Gendarmes and August Sander’s Customs Officers show a surprisingly similar composition, enactment, and even posing (figs. 6 and 7). Chambi’s portraits, however, do not share the ethnomorphic focus of the ‘albums’ published since the mid-19th century in Europe, nor do they follow the strict ratio of Sander’s life-project. Rather, we encounter sensitive and magical moments of a relationship between the photographer and his subject, in the setting of a commercial studio, but without the self-representational habitus of the paying client, and without any intention other than capturing the essence of the Andean People, the light on their faces, the tone of their skin, the texture of their clothing. If we look at the portrait of the so-called Giant (fig. 11), it is clearly a photograph of a curiosum, a distinctive person of extraordinary size, much taller than the average Peruvian, and thus a somewhat “extravagant” image. However, the dissemination of this photograph was practically nil, except for a publication in October 1925.\textsuperscript{20} In fact, Martin Chambi did not include this photograph in any of his exhibitions or publications. It can be argued that this anecdote underlines what can be seen more directly in Chambi’s best images of the Andean People: That he was not interested in the otherness of the subject, but rather in the commonness, a symbolic, emotionally charged relationship of a concrete to a universal meaning. In his non-commissioned work, Chambi was not an anthropologic or ethnographic collector of images, but a portraitist looking for a dignifying and meaningful representation of his vis-à-vis. Furthermore, his natural and direct engagement with the people helped him to stay clear of overly political messages that the Indigenistas (many of them intellectuals who did not even speak any of the indigenous languages) claimed. He was an artist who combined, in life and work, the autochthonous Andean culture with imported European Modernism. This bipolar identity furnished his images of the Andean people with a magical power and a universal aesthetic that goes beyond his own lifetime.


20 The photograph was published in La Crónica and in Variedades, cf. Herman Schwarz, ‘¿Gigante de Paruro?’; in: El Peruano, Lima, 14 de noviembre de 2000, 14.

Note: The glass negatives have been made available in digital format by the Studio of Juan Manuel Castro Prieto, Madrid.