

Martín Chambi - visual historian (1895 - 1973)

Stephen Light

"I feel like a representative of my race; it speaks in my photographs."

Interviewed in 1936, in Santiago de Chile

The work of Peruvian photographers such as Juan Manuel Figueroa Aznar, Crisanto Cabrera, Miguel Chani, Alberto Ochoa and Abraham Guillén has left us with an eloquent record of life in Cusco during the first half of the twentieth century, but it fell to a man born far to the south of the erstwhile Inca capital to be hailed by posterity as the city's most important visual artist and historian...

His black and white images of Cusco and its people have been exhibited around the world, and postcards of his work are still sold in the bookstores around Cusco's main plaza, but the man whose work would be lauded by the most talented Peruvian writers and thinkers of his generation and eventually achieve global renown was born far to the south of Cusco, in the tiny village of Coaza, high in the mountains north of Lake Titicaca.

Like many *campesinos* in a country dominated at the time by foreign entrepreneurs, the Chambi family abandoned their fields, going to work for the English-owned Santo Domingo Mining Company, which extracted gold from Carabaya, where the Incas had themselves once mined.

It was at the mine that Martín, still a child, first encountered the genre that would make him famous, in the person of the mining company's official photographer. Chambi, it is said, asked the Englishman to take his photograph. This last may be apocryphal, but what is certain is that when not selling alcohol to the miners or helping them with their tasks, the boy began to learn the

rudiments of photographic technique, and it was this chance encounter that impelled him to leave the goldmines and try his luck in the big city.

In 1908, when still just twelve years old, Martín Chambi found himself in the southern coastal city of Arequipa, apprenticed to the well-known society photographer Max T. Vargas, in whose service he would remain for the next nine years. This period in Arequipa was essential to Chambi's development; he learned his trade there and for the first time breathed the same air as artists, writers and intellectuals. A thriving and prosperous city, Arequipa's wealth ensured a highly-developed photographic industry, as its well-paying elite sought to immortalize themselves on their salon walls. In 1917, after winning a bronze medal in his first exhibition, with a portrait of the Vargas family, Chambi decided to strike out alone and moved to Sicuani, a bustling market town high up on the barren *altiplano*, half-way between Puno and Cusco, where he opened his first studio.

Martín Chambi did not arrive in Cusco until 1920, when for a brief period he worked with the photographer and painter Juan Manuel Figueroa Aznar, before establishing the studio on Calle Marqués that would be his place of work for the next thirty years.

Although long-isolated from the rest of Peru, after its status as the nation's capital was usurped by the foundation of Lima in 1535, Cusco was nevertheless enjoying a period of great prosperity at the beginning of the twentieth century. The railroad had arrived from the south in 1908, allowing the fertile region to export its agricultural wealth to Bolivia and Argentina. While the Lima newspaper *El Comercio* took fifteen days to reach Cusco over treacherous mountain roads, the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación* arrived in just eight days by rail. (Less than a decade and a half later, Chambi's photographs would be published regularly in *La Nación*.)

Chambi quickly grew in prestige to become the favorite portrait photographer of the city's socialites. But Cusco's rich and famous had to share the Chambi studio with the poorest members of their desperately unequal society as, with consummate artistry, the photographer left behind his early Andean romanticism and began to record the previously unacknowledged dignity of the indigenous majority, through subjects like "The *chicha* carrier" (1924) and "The Paruro giant" (1929).

By all accounts, the young Chambi never went anywhere without his camera, and he photographed everything. Cusco's magnificent Inca and colonial edifices, humble workers and peasants, the city's European-descended elite; all were captured in his lens.

Chambi's finest images caught the spirit of the growing Indigenist movement, which sought social justice for indigenous Peruvians after four centuries of oppression. Although he wasn't politically active, Chambi's photographs spoke for themselves and he was, like many young men of his generation, certainly attracted by the outspoken socialist thinkers of his day, led by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre and José Carlos Mariátegui. For their part, other "Indo-Americanist", anti-imperialist intellectuals such as José Ugarte García and Luis Valcárcel saw in Chambi's work an eloquent illustration of their political beliefs. When the Indigenists saw the 1929 photograph known as "The Paruro giant", featuring a locally famous 2.40-meter-tall market porter, they saw the embodiment of the Andean man who, according to Valcárcel:

"For ten thousand years [...] has been the only worker in Peru. He raised with his hands the gigantic fortress of Sacsayhuaman, the Sacred City of the Sun, the Inca temples and palaces, the great continental roads, the canals, the reservoirs, the colossal aqueducts, the innumerable terraces, the subterranean galleries, the colonial cities with their massive cathedrals and convents, the bridges, the factories, the railways, the ports, the infernal shafts of the deep, multi-million dollar mines."

Today, the Chambi archive contains some 30,000 photographs taken between 1917 and 1963, when Martín, suffering from Parkinson's disease, stopped taking an active role in the Chambi family studio (although until his death in 1973 he would carry a small Leica with him at all times). His family continues his artistic legacy. Of his six children, three -Víctor, Manuel and Julia- have worked in the arts.

Julia, now in her eighties, still maintains the Martín Chambi Photographic Archive, while a grandson, Teo Allaín, was a founding member of the University of Lima School of Film and Television and has exhibited his own photos in Peru and Europe, most notably in Spain, where he has had four shows.

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