

An Eagle and a Quiver that Have Highly Offended the Mexican Nation

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Translated by Richard Addison

ABSTRACT

It is said that elements of the sculpture *El Caballito* by the sculptor and architect Manuel Tolsá—a quiver, under one of the horse's hooves, and an eagle, which was supposedly chiseled out—symbolize great offence to the Mexican nation. My paper's proposal, based on information obtained during the conservational work and through the analysis of technological choices and of *chaînes opératoires* and behavioral chains, is that the eagle was not part of the original sculpture, but rather integrated as an external intervention during a short time, and that the quiver, in the neoclassical context, aims to depict the king as the ideal of a good Apollonian ruler, not as one who humiliates the people he rules.

KEYWORDS

Tolsá, *El Caballito*, quiver, eagle, interpretation

INTRODUCTION

El *Caballito*¹ is an iconic copper alloy equestrian sculpture made by the genius architect and sculptor Manuel Tolsá (1757-1816) in honour of the Spanish King Charles IV (1748-1819). It has survived several misfortunes, including an un-

¹ The colloquial name that is used to refer to the equestrian sculpture of *Charles IV*. The translation would be "Little Horse", of course it does not refer to the size of the sculpture.

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professional and abusive intervention in 2013, which severely damaged its surface with a nitric acid solution. On that occasion, after several negotiations, the involved authorities agreed that the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH, National Institute of Anthropology and History) would handle its restoration with funding from the Government of Mexico City (Contreras & Jáuregui, 2019, p. 70). With that decision, the controversy arguing that it was wrong to invest in the preservation of an effigy of a Spanish king, who in a humiliating act steps on a “Mexica eagle” and a quiver that symbolized the “Mexica Empire”, grew ever more feverous, as could be seen in numerous comments across the media, social networks, and even vocalized passers-by who shouted at the conservation team as they began the work.

While neither the overall controversy, nor the true meaning of the quiver or even the alleged existence of the eagle influenced the decision to carry out the conservation work on the sculpture, since it was deemed an important artistic and cultural asset dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, it is nonetheless understandable that there are those who believe that it is wrong to preserve a sculpture whose purpose is to offend and humiliate.

The following article aims to contribute to the interpretation of the sculpture based on less biased and more thorough information about the presence and possible meaning of the eagle and the quiver, based on observations made during the diagnostic and conservation works carried out during 2016 and 2017, and a subsequent investigation of the work and its environment from material and historical-cultural perspectives through the analysis of its technological choices and its *chaînes opératoires* and behavioural chains (Contreras, 2021).²

THE OUVRE

El Caballito, made between 1796 and 1803, is a technological milestone for the region since it was the only equestrian sculpture of its kind made using a single casting on the American continent. It shows the Spanish king, represented in the Roman style (Figure 1), with a discreetly ornamented armour, *pteruges* skirt, a *paludamentum*—cape—, which reaches down to his knees, and *campagus*—sandals—with feline masks and the *fleur-de-lis*. He wears a crown of laurels with undulating hair, and has a cylindrical element

² Thesis titled *Metodología para la construcción de decisiones de restauración. La escultura “El Caballito”*. (Methodology for the Construction of Conservation Decisions. The sculpture “El Caballito”).

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in his right hand, held up high, while in the left hand he carries the bridles; he rides only on a blanket which has vegetal motifs. Likewise, the horse is supported on three points and appears to be advancing; the left front hoof is raised while the rear right one rests on a quiver from which the feathers of arrows can be seen to be protruding; there is a mantle tied across the chest showing the mask of a gorgon in the centre (Uribe, en INAH, 2017).



FIGURE 1. Left, Model for the equestrian statue of *Charles IV*, ca. 1789-1798. Private collection exhibited at the Museo Nacional de Arte (Munal, National Museum of Art). (Source: [Museo Nacional de Arte](#), INBA, Facebook, 2016). Right *El Caballito* in June 2017, as seen, its image is faithful to the project. Neither piece includes any eagle, although the quiver does (Photograph: Francisco Kochen Beristáin; source: INAH, 2017).

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The sculpture was installed in 1803 in Mexico City's Plaza *Mayor*, today known as Plaza de la Constitución. A few years later, due to the struggle for independence and its eventual victory, the effigy of a Spanish king was frowned upon, and there were those who demanded its demolition and smelting. Some intellectuals and politicians, such as Lucas Alamán, avoided this on the grounds of its artistic value, covering it up in 1822 and moving it, in 1824, to the patio of the Real y Pontificia Universidad de México (Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, 1553). During the process, the pedestal, also designed by Tolsá,³ was lost.

In 1852, it was moved to what is now known as *Paseo de la Reforma*, where the architect Lorenzo de la Hidalga designed and built a new pedestal on which he included two marble plaques describing its making and history. One of them justifies the preservation of the image of a king that at some point symbolized a foreign dominion: "Mexico preserves it as a monument of art".⁴

In 1979, it was moved to what is now known as *Plaza Tolsá*, its current location, in front of another of its author's great achievements, the *Palacio de Minería*.

THE PROBLEM

According to what could be verified, it was the lawyer, writer, and politician Carlos María de Bustamante (1774-1848) who was the first person to mention in writing that the sculpture's quiver represented the ancient Mexica empire and that it also featured a downed eagle that was later removed by force of chisel.

In this same attitude, the Mexican nation was highly *offended*, for the horse was stepping, with its left foot, on the eagle or quiver, the coat of arms of the ancient Mexican empire. This sign of contempt irritated those who observed it with reflection... even in the midst of public rejoicement one sought to irritate a nation worthy of a different fate! Today that dejected eagle has been removed from the bronze statue by the blow of a chisel, but it has not been possible to do the same with the quiver since the foot of the horse rests upon it [Bustamante, in Cavo, 1852, p. 221].

³ Although over time the original pedestal has been attributed to numerous people, the fact is that it is also Tolsá's work, as confirmed by both the design sent to Charles IV in order to obtain his permission to make it and by a letter he sent to Ferdinand VIII in which he wrote [...] until leaving it placed [On] its Pedestal and Marbles that I also directed [...] (Tolsá, ca. 1816, Le 13-8-1). Hereafter, the italics I apply, both in quotes and in the text reflect dubious forms of the originals I transcribe.

⁴ Editorial translation. All quotes are translations from the original texts in Spanish.

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The interpretation of the sculpture's humiliating intention could clearly influence both its appreciation and, in the future, decisions regarding its conservation—as has already happened in different places with sculptures representing rulers, explorers, and conquerors—, but this was expressed in 1836, 33 years after its inauguration, when it was in the University's courtyard. It is intriguing and somewhat confusing that the eagle and the quiver were initially mentioned as the same element and later, that one was removed and the other remained. It is also interesting that none of the numerous descriptions of the sculpture, even the previous one made of wood (also by Tolsá [ca. 1816]; Tamarit, 1842; Alcántar and Soriano, 2014; Contreras, 2021), inaugurated in 1796 before the departure of Viceroy De la Grúa Talamanca (1748-1819), or the metallic one, made any emphasis on either of these elements.

Hypothesis

The eagle that, it has been said, *El Caballito* stepped on in a humiliating manner was not part of the original sculpture, but was integrated, for a short period, as part of a careless intervention and, although the quiver and arrows are part of Tolsá's work, they do not necessarily represent a humiliation to the ancient empire, since the association of the arrows with the gorgon and the crown of laurels are attributes of the solar god Apollo and could have instead had the intention of representing the king as the ideal of the enlightened good ruler, typical of neoclassicism.

METHODOLOGY

In order for the conservation to fulfill its objective, which is to recreate the *ideal state* of any artifact or cultural heritage, the one that holds the most relevant meaning, for which it is valued and promote the best possible interaction with the community that gives them meaning (Appelbaum, 2007; Contreras, 2021, p. 133), it is necessary to reach a complete understanding of the artworks and their environment. Consequently, the conservation decisions for *El Caballito*, after the damage suffered in 2013, were constructed by a critical interpretation of the information obtained during both the 2016 and 2017 intervention works and from other similar artworks; including bibliohemerographic sources and archival documents, among others, through the analysis of technological choices and *chaîne opératoire* and behavioural chains. Although such analysis was comprehensive, the current reflection focuses only on the eagle and the quiver.

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Technological choices are ways of working based on the previous experience of the artisans and their perception of what is technically possible and socially desirable, “[...] albeit within the potential of the local environment and the cultural context” (Sillar & Tite, 2000 p. 9; see Schulze, 2008, p. 68). The *chaîne opératoire* or operational sequence is a framework concept, an analytical tool with heuristic and semantic value, and a methodological element, proposed by the French ethnologist, archaeologist, and historian André Leroi-Gourhan (1911-1986), which identifies and organizes, as a syntactic sequence, the operations needed to transform natural resources into functional and culturally significant artifacts as a consequence of technological choices (Leroi-Gourhan, 1965; Dobres, 1999; 2010; Schulze, 2008, p. 68).

French ethnologist and anthropologist Pierre Lemonnier (1948) describes the technical activity of making as resulting from the interaction of five elements: 1. Matter, 2. Energy, 3. Objects, artifacts, tools or means of act or work, 4. Gestures or labor, and 5. Specific technical knowledge; and proposes that it is possible to understand sequential operations, decision-making strategies, and specific technologies to produce cultural goods through their analysis and integration (Lemonnier & Pfaffenberger, 1989; Lemonnier, 1989; 1992, pp. 4-11; 2011, p. 299; Dobres, 1999, p. 125).

The German archaeologist Niklas Schulze (1969) explains that operational sequences can also be exploited in the broader context of the use and history of the artifact (Schulze, 2008, pp. 72-73) to integrate the interactions between materials, people, and the environment of the object’s biography into the analysis. This work and concept was called ‘*behavioural chain*’ by the American archaeologist Michael Schiffer (1947)—after the proposals of Binford (1965)—(Schiffer, 2011).

STABILITY, THE QUIVER AND THE ABSENCE OF THE EAGLE

The *chaîne opératoire* of *El Caballito* was estimated of a sequence of 18 activities, each of which involved technological choices.⁵

⁵ The *chaîne opératoires* of *El Caballito* consists of the following activities: 1. Design of the work, 2. Constitution of the work team: artisans, 3. Selection and procurement of raw materials: modelling/moulds/casting, 4. Adaptation of the space for modelling and casting, 5. Modelling in final dimensions, 6. Design and fabrication of the supporting frame, 7. Making of the multiple pieces mould or first mould, 8. Obtaining the wax positive, 9. Casting of the core, 10. Retouching of the wax positive, 11. Placement of the casting system, 12. Second mould/loam mould, 13. Wax burning/mold drying, 14. Metal smelting, 15. Pouring/casting, 16. Extraction, 17. Finishes, 17': Application of chromatic finishing and protective finishing, 18. Transport and placement.

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The position and number of supports of the horse obey the material possibilities given by the chosen casting technique, the available technology, and the skill of the bronze-founder, determining the qualities of the plastic possibilities and limits. This is directly related to the presence of the quiver.

All sculptures made from lost wax that reach a certain size require a wrought iron frame to give them stability, and the equestrian sculptures of sovereigns were fundamental in the recovery of lost wax casting technology in the West. The first modern equestrian sculpture was the *Condottiero Gattamelata*—from between 1444 and 1453, located in Padua, Italy—, by Donatello (1386-1466), who in addition to being a great sculptor was also a bronze-founder (Schenker, 2013, p. 211; Fémelat, 2013, p. 141) and who solved the balance of his sculpture by designing the horse in a secure posture supported by four legs: three of them firmly on the ground and the fourth, a raised front hoof, resting on a cannonball, which hides one of the iron spikes.

The stability of later equestrian sculptures⁶ was typically achieved using three points; one of the front hooves would usually be raised without a support like the one used by Donatello. For his equestrian statue of *Henry IV* (1618)—located in the Place *Dauphine*, in Paris, until it was destroyed, and today a copy of which is in the Pont Neuf. Pietro Tacca (1577-1640) dared to support the horse on two legs, raising the left front hoof and the right rear hoof; but his greatest boast was the sculpture of *Philip IV* (1640)—a sculpture located today in front of the Royal Palace in Madrid—, in which the horse has the front legs raised in prancing posture. Galileo himself famously helped to solve the balance issue, by devising, along with Tacca, an internal Y-shaped iron structure that crosses the tail and that is firmly anchored to the pedestal, as well as by loading most of the weight towards the rear by making its walls thin at the front and much thicker at the back (Matilla, 1997; Barrio & García 2009, p. 289).

However, all these equestrian sculptures of sovereigns were made in parts and were rather light until 1699, when the sculptor François Girardon (1628-1715) and the founder Balthazar Keller (1638-1702) fulfilled Leonardo da Vinci's dream, achieving the technical feat of casting his equestrian sculpture of *Louis XIV* in a single casting; a technique involving much greater weight and difficulty (Welter, 2014; Contreras, 2021). This sculpture was placed

⁶ Such as the *Colleoni*, by Verrochio (1496); the *Cósimo I*, by Giambologna (1594); the *Ferdinando I, of Medici*; also by Giambologna, but completed by Pietro Tacca (1608); and the *Philip III* by Giambologna, cast by Pietro Tacca (1616).

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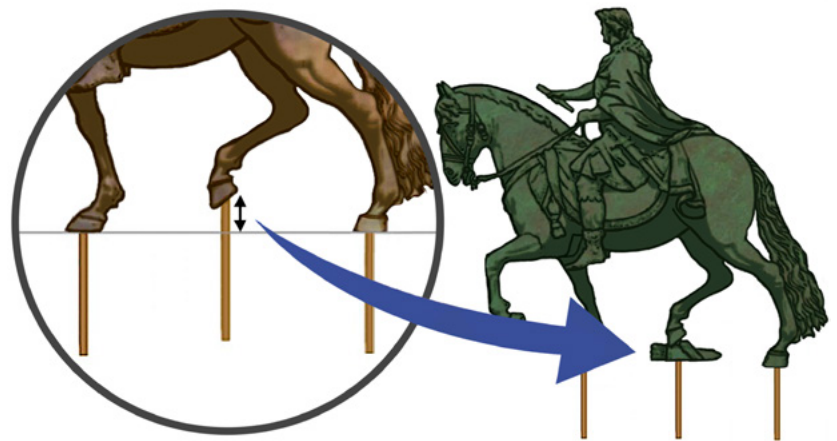
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in the Palace *Vendôme* in Paris and was later destroyed during the French Revolution.

In single cast sculptures, the iron framework also helps to support the materials used in the various casting operations: the heavy clay core that would otherwise fall when the wax burns—lost wax technique—and to resist the immense pressure generated by the liquid metal during casting (Rama, 1988, p. 211). After casting, parts of the framework must be removed, being careful to retain those on which the stability of the sculpture depends, such as those that pass from one side of the horse to the other, those that descend from the tail, and those that pass through the legs and extend up to a meter beyond the hooves to anchor themselves to the pedestal (Diderot & D'Alembert, 1771, plaque III).

The posture of Girardon's horse and of *El Caballito* is similar to that of Tacca's *Henry IV*, but the enormous weight of sculptures made in a single casting prevents the raised hind leg from going into the air, so the wrought iron spike that crosses it must be concealed. For the *Louis XIV* a shield was used, for *El Caballito* Tolsá the quiver was chosen; and in others, phytomorphic elements or stones were used (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Tolsá had to integrate an element to conceal the iron spike that crosses the third support of the horse and chose the quiver (Drawing: Jannen Contreras, 2022).



In the equestrian sculpture of José I (1775) (Figure 3), placed in Commerce Square in Lisbon by the sculptor Joaquim Machado de Castro and the founder Bartolomeu da Costa, which was also made in a single casting, the sculptor describes placing a set of snakes under one of the rear hooves to represent the struggles overcome by the king during his government (Gomes, 2017, p. 615). However, in the case of *El Caballito*, there is no reference that Tolsá ever expressed himself about the significance of the quiver,

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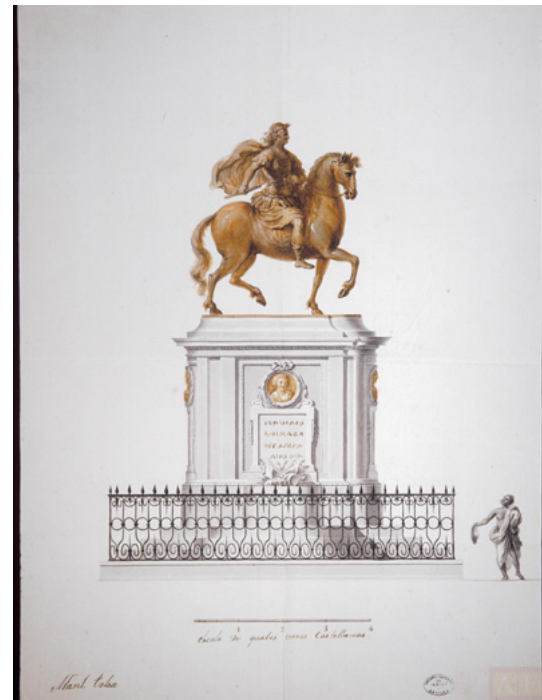
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and as can be seen in the design sent to Charles IV for his approval (Figure 4), it is so irrelevant that it does not even appear... much less so does an eagle.



FIGURE 3. Left. Design for the equestrian statue of *José I* by Joaquim Machado de Castro (Source: *Descrição analytica da execução da estatua equestre erigida em Lisboa `a glória do Senhor Rei Fidelissimo D. José I*, 1810). Right. The sculpture in the Commerce Square, Lisbon (Photograph: Jannen Contreras, 2022).

FIGURE 4. Design of the equestrian statue and monument to *Carlos IV*, projected for the main square of Mexico, sent to the king for his approval. In the original project the lateral ornaments were to bear portraits of the royal family, but instead the king approved the placement of representations of the four parts of the world (Source: Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla. ES.41091. AGI//MP-ESTAMPAS, 34).



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In *Cantos de las Musas Mexicanas* [...], the quiver is mentioned briefly: “The quiver and arrows enhance his greatness” (Sánchez de Tagle, in Beristáin, 1804, p. 59). In this text, an eagle is mentioned on three occasions; the first, to praise the monarch; the second, also to refer to the legend of the eagle and the valley of Anáhuac, and the last, to praise Tolsá (Beristáin, 1804, pp. 44, 59 and 129). At no time an attitude of humiliation is perceived, even when humiliating the previous order would have been permissible from the political perspective of that time.

It has been presumed that the downed eagle must have been present in the temporary wooden sculpture, but not in the metallic one; however, most of the representations of the sculpture at the Plaza Mayor—engravings and paintings—correspond to the wooden sculpture, and none of them depict an eagle (Figures 5 and 6), nor does it appear in Tolsá’s original designs or models, unlike the quiver, which does and which we can still be seen today in the sculpture.

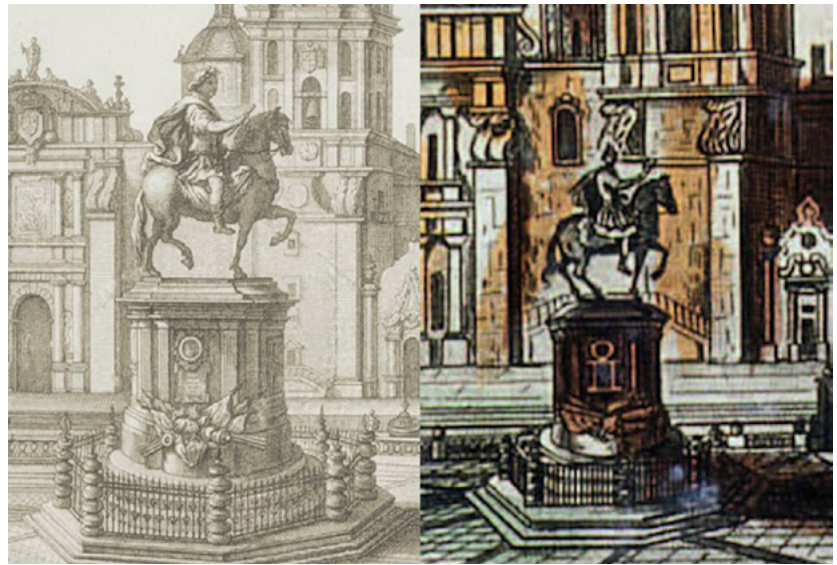
FIGURE 5. Detail of the view of the *Plaza de México Newly Adorned for the Equestrian Statue of Our August Reigning Monarch Charles IV* by Fabregat y, Ximeno y Planes. The downed eagle is not seen, although neither is the quiver. (Authors: Rafael Ximeno y Planes; engraver: José Joaquín Fabregat, 1797; source: [Google Arts and Culture](#); courtesy: Museo Soumaya, Carlos Slim Foundation).



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FIGURE 6. Left. Detail of the view of the Plaza Mayor de México (Source: [Google Arts and Culture](#)). Right. Detail of the view of the Great Place of Mexico ca. 1800 (Source: [Wikipedia](#), 1830). In neither case does the quiver appear, but neither does the eagle: they were non-important elements for the representation of the sculptur.



The reflection of art historian and great connoisseur of Tolsá's work, Eloísa Uribe (Uribe, in INAH, 2017, pp. 206-207) regarding the quiver is that its inclusion is mostly practical since it is used to cover the support spike, and that Tolsá did not allude to the traditional conventions of European artists. Regarding the eagle, she cites Bargellini (1987, p. 213) and points out that those who claim that the quiver was accompanied by an eagle may be confusing the two elements because they both relate to the iconography of America, which reinforces her view that such claims lack the support of any type of document.

From the sculpture's material evidence, it can be said that the bronze base had three preparations, inverted cones at the lower part, to support the iron spikes of the horse's three supports, as well as several casting corrections, but none of them are evidence of a downed eagle. This would have implied having planned a space in the legend chiselled on the vertical profile of the bronze base, and yet it appears continuous.⁷ The only unusual element is a screw on the front, so intrusive and of such poor quality compared to the rest of the work that it must have come from a later intervention (Figure 7) (which may even have been linked to the eagle mentioned by Bustamante), as will be explained later on.

⁷ The legend written on the wall of the bronze base reads: MANUEL TOLSÁ CASTED THIS ROYAL STATUE AND DIRECTED ALL OTHER OPERATIONS, UNTIL ITS VERIFIED PLACEMENT ON DECEMBER 9, 1803.

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FIGURE 7. Location and detail of the screw at the front of the bronze base during the cleaning process. (Photograph: Francisco Kochen, taken from INAH, 2017. Right, Photograph: Jannen Contreras, 2017).

PROPOSAL

The Eagle

Considering the material and documentary evidence of the sculpture and its cultural environment, my research proposes that the eagle described by Carlos María de Bustamante must have come from a later intervention and was not a part of Tolsá's original work. In the detail of the paintings of *El Caballito* in the patio of the aforementioned University, the quiver can be seen, and, in front of the sculpture, there is an element with the same color, presumably also made from copper alloy—as can be seen in the detail of Figure 8—, yet it cannot be clearly identified even in the famous daguerreotype of Jean Prelier (Figure 9), nor does it appear in the previous representations seen at Plaza Mayor.

The element described by Bustamante could have referred to an eagle present within the circular medallions representing “the four parts of the world”: America, Europe, Africa, and Asia (Description of the New Plaza, Pedestal and Statue, September 17, 1796), which were separated from the pedestal in 1822, when the monument was removed from the Plaza Mayor. The latter could have been fixed to the front of the sculpture but, it can be assumed, it was removed with a chisel, as Bustamante reports, because the interpretation of the eagle as a symbol of a humiliated Mexican nation must have indeed been the cause of much outrage and offence.

Thus, as the result of an intervention without documentation or intention, there is no need to theorize about any possible meaning

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FIGURE 8. Detail of the courtyard of the Real y Pontificia Universidad de México P. Gualdi, 1840. Oil on canvas.

In the image, the precision of the portrait is striking, suggesting that the element in front of the sculpture must have been there, although it is not possible to identify its precise form (Author: Pietro Gualdi 1840; source: IISUE/AHUNAM/ Colección Bienes Inventariados como Patrimonio Universitario 1557-2009/Núm. Inv. 08-715050).



FIGURE 9. Monument to *Charles IV: El Caballito*, courtyard of the Real y Pontificia Universidad de México, Jean Prelier, circa 1839-1943. The original image is mirror-flipped, but here it was placed according to the actual position (Daguerreotype: Jean Prelier, 1839-1843; source: G. Cromer Collection, Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York).

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that Tolsá may have given to the eagle since he had nothing to do with it, as the placement of such an element wouldn't have been done until at least six years after his death.

THE QUIVER

On the other hand, Bustamante's interpretation of the quiver's meaning seems to be personal, or else, obtained from the *vox populi* of his time, without documentary support. Unfortunately, it has been taken up on numerous occasions, even by academics, causing animosity towards the sculpture and towards Tolsá himself. Something that at some point could be significant for both the conservation of *El Caballito*—as has already happened with other sculptures— as well as for the artist's reputation.

The author's proposal is that the gorgon on the horse's chest, the king's crown of laurels, and the quiver were used by Tolsá as attributes of Apollo, god of the sun, the arts, poetry, beauty, music, and light, and with them he sought to show Charles IV as an enlightened and rationalist monarch interested in the arts, not as one who humiliates the people he governs.

The quiver and arrows are associated with Apollo as symbols of love and war and as a reminder of his feat of slaying the serpent Python, because of which he gained access to the oracle of Delphi and became the deity that was called upon for knowledge of the future and as guidance for good decisions (Arcella, 2013).

The representation of Charles IV using attributes of a Roman god was logical in the historical-cultural context of Neoclassicism, especially in the authorship of Tolsá, the most important exponent of that style in what now is Mexico, the Academy Professor that had among his missions the renovation and implementation of neoclassical *good taste*, understood as the only art capable of expressing the tendencies of rationalist thought (Vargaslugo, 1969, p. 330).

While the association of monarchs with Roman gods and specifically, with Apollo was common during that period, the associations with Charles IV were even more so since he was a Bourbon monarch. As a few contemporary journalists and writers have pointed out, the reign of Charles IV relaunched "the Golden Age". The humanist and philologist José López de la Huerta (1743-1809) pointed out in his ode *The Bourbon Era* that the arrival of the Bourbons put an end to the impious generations and marked the arrival of a *Magnus Annus* announcing the reign of Apollo (Lomné, 2006).

After signing a treaty of peace with France, called the *Peace of Basel* in July 1795, which brought the Roussillon War to an end, this

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Bourbon Apollo was undoubtedly Charles IV.⁸ In a somewhat heretical, but profoundly neoclassical courtship, during the Madrilenian celebrations, Carlos IV was called Apollo, his prime minister, Manuel Godoy was called Janus—Roman god of beginnings, gates, and thresholds—, and the Queen María Luisa, Isis or *Mater Magna* of the nation (Lomné, 2006).⁹

It should not be forgotten that Viceroy De la Grúa Talamanca, who asked Tolsá for the production of the sculpture, was the brother-in-law of the prime minister, Godoy, and was perfectly aware of the political movements and trends in Spain. Tolsá obtained royal approval for his design in 1796, the year after the signing of the Peace of Basel, in a political and cultural environment that exalted Charles IV and praised him as an Apollo in Spain, New Spain, and other Spanish-dominated territories.¹⁰

At that time the most admired sculptural model of this deity was the *Apollo Belvedere*, from between 360 and 320 BC, placed in the Vatican Museums in 1511 thanks to Johann Joachim Winckelmann (Figure 10, left, 1717-1768), the great theorist of neoclassicism, referred to it as embodying the highest ideal of art: Apollo is shown standing as a young archer—who has just shot some of the arrows that killed the serpent Python—whose hair, flowing in curls, is surrounded by the symbolic band of gods and kings. He is naked, except for his sandals and the cape of the generals, and carries his quiver over his right shoulder. Engravings of this sculpture were plentiful and circulated widely, inspiring sculptors to create other works, such as Antonio Canova in 1801, with his work *Perseus Triumphant*, also considered one of the greatest neoclassical sculptures (Figure 10, right) (Navascués, 1982).

⁸ Thanks to the Peace of Basel, the French Republic returned occupied territories to Spain in exchange for the territory on the island of Hispaniola, today known as the Dominican Republic.

⁹ Similarly, on the marriage of the Infante Antonio Pascual, brother of Charles IV, to his niece, the Infanta Maria Amalia of Lorraine, and that of the Infanta Maria Luisa to her cousin Louis of Parma, King of Etruria, Madrid was filled with symbols of Venus and Apollo (Lomné, 2006).

¹⁰ As seen in the text *Cantos de las Musas Mexicanas con motivo de la colocación de la Estatua Ecuestre de Bronce de Nuestro Augusto Soberano Carlos IV* (*Songs of the Mexican Muses. On the Occasion of the Installation of the Bronze Equestrian Statue of Our August Sovereign Charles IV*), 1804, or also the text *El triunfo de Carlos en el carro de Apolo. Loa para el festejo que en la feliz exaltación del señor Don Carlos IV. (que Dios guarde) al trono de España, hicieron los dos Gremios de Pulperos y Panaderos de la ciudad de Veracruz en 12 de Febrero del año de 1790* (*The triumph of Charles in the chariot of Apollo. Loa for the celebration that in the happy exaltation of Don Charles IV. (that God keeps) to the throne of Spain, made by the two Guilds of Pulperos and Bakers of the city of Veracruz on February 12 of the year 1790*), of the priest Diego Benedicto Valverde.

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FIGURE 10.
Left, *Apollo*
Belvedere, 360
and 320 BC (Photo:
Livioandronico,
2013, source:
[wikimedia](#)). Right,
Perseus Triumphant,
1801 (Source:
[Labyrinths of Art](#),
2018).



In this same cultural and stylistic environment, Apollo was the central motif on the fountain commissioned by Charles III as part of the rearrangement of the Paseo del Prado¹¹ in Madrid, which was inaugurated to mark the marriage of who would later become King: Ferdinand VII: *The Fountain of Apollo or the Four Seasons*¹² (Navascués, 1982). This sculpture shares features with *El Caballito*: gorgons, laurels, and a quiver, as well as the mantle and hair arrangement. It was made at the same time—between 1780 and 1802—that Tolsá trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando and in parallel to the production of *El Caballito*, so he would have been aware of its design.

It is plausible that Tolsá sought to represent Charles IV as an Apollonian monarch, one who supports his decisions in rationality and the arts, represented by the careful arrangement of arrows contained in a quiver and, therefore, not as a symbol of a humiliating domination, because even, as can be seen in Figure 11, they do not appear dejected on the ground, nor defeated under the weight of the horse and its rider.

On the other side, the Gorgon, was a frequent element on the façades of Apollo's temples, on figureheads, on the armor and shields of warriors and emperors, as a protection against the unknown, in voyages of discovery and in wars (Aguirre, 1998, p. 6).

¹¹ It also included the placement of the *Puerta de Alcalá* and the fountains of *Cibeles* and *Neptune*.

¹² It is the work of Ventura Rodríguez, Manuel Álvarez and Alfonso Giraldo Bergaz (Cruz, 2015).

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FIGURE 11. Elements for the representation of Apollo: the hair arrangement, the laurel crown, and the quiver, indicated with the blue arrow. Left. Details of two recognized Baroque paintings (Source: Museo del Prado, [P001861](#) and [P001171](#)). Center. Details of the *Fountain of Apollo* or the *Four seasons* (Photograph: Jannen Contreras, 2022). Right. Details of *El Caballito* (Photograph: Francisco Kochen, taken from INAH, 2017).

Figure 12 shows sculptural gorgons in a classical Roman work and two neoclassical works, including, of course, the one shown on *El Caballito*.



FIGURE 12. Faces of gorgons. Left. On the chest of the armour of the emperor *Antoninus Pius* (Source: Museo del Prado, [E000123](#), 2023). Centre. On the *Fountain of Apollo and the four seasons* (Photograph: Jannen Contreras, 2021). Right. On the chest of the *Caballito* (Photograph: Francisco Kochen, taken from INAH, 2017).

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It would be plausible, then, that Tolsá sought to represent an Apollonian monarch who moves forward leaning on the quiver, while being protected by the gorgon.

It is also necessary to consider that although Tolsá was always loyal to the Crown—to the point of casting cannons for the royalists—he supported the training of children and young people without prejudice based on racial or ethnic origin: “Many hundreds of workers that I have trained and a multitude of skills that I have taught, maintaining for many years at my own expense more than forty orphans daily for this purpose” (Tolsá, ca. 1816), and also that the Academy of San Carlos, where Tolsá served as director of Sculpture and Architecture, was one of the first secular institutions that accepted indigenous¹³ students, such as Juan Fortis or, the closest to Tolsá, Pedro Patiño Ixtolinque.

Patiño, like other scholars, joined the insurgency during the struggle for Independence, was in the ranks of Vicente Guerrero and is believed to have made Morelos’ death mask (Alcántar and Soriano, 2014, p. 12). It is difficult to imagine Tolsá and Patiño working on an element that was intended, as Bustamante noted: to offend “highly the Mexican nation”.

IMPACT ON THE CONSERVATION

While neither the presence of the eagle at some point of the sculpture’s biography, nor the quiver were relevant for the conservation work developed between 2016 and 2017, the rest of the screw at the front of the bronze-base with which the element of the eagle could have been fixed remained there, as there was no point in getting rid of it; on the contrary, removing it would have allowed water to enter under the bronze-base, it remains for future observation and evaluation by anyone interested in investigating it.

CONCLUSIONS

The research that sought to understand the sculpture as integrally as possible in order to best propose its *ideal state* and make decisions for the conservation done between 2016 and 2017 also allowed the core proposal of this text and is an example of

¹³ One of the purposes of Viceroy Martín de Mayorga when he created the Academy of San Carlos de México was that students from the lower classes had access to education, so he created awards, such as medals and pensions: four in painting, sculpture, architecture, two in engraving, and two in etching, and, among all these, at least four had to be *pure Indians*. The scholarships were awarded by competition and lasted 12 years (Rodríguez, 2006, p. 42).

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how conservation can contribute to the knowledge and history of works.

Hodder (1994, p. 401) pointed out that even if the objects cannot answer, if adequate procedures are followed, there will be room for data, different levels of interpretation and a dialectical enrichment of the interpreter, while facilitating their plausible understanding. This was the purpose of this work when analyzing the material and documentary evidence regarding the quiver and a supposed downed eagle; as described by Carlos María de Bustamante, which has been the cause of animosity against the *El Caballito* sculpture and Tolsá himself.

The evidence indicates that the eagle must have been part of an intervention made during its placement in the courtyard of the ancient University, possibly an ornament that, after its removal from the pedestal, was placed in front of the sculpture, a piece that, in effect, must have been removed “with a chisel” after causing offenses foreign to both the design and the intention of its author.

Moreover, Bustamante’s interpretation of the meaning of the quiver as a symbol of the ancient empire, or the Mexican nation, has no documentary support, and is most likely incorrect as a result of the work carried out without the rigor shown today by professional historians.

The representation of the king was already enough evidence of the Spanish government in this territory, and here it is proposed that Tolsá sought to represent Charles IV as a monarch who embodied the neoclassical ideal of a good ruler, enlightened and rationalist, thanks to the use of the attributes of Apollo: the crown of laurels, the gorgon on the chest of the horse, and the support on a quiver with arrows carefully contained and not dejected on the ground or deformed under the weight of the quadruped.

Considering, on the one hand, Tolsá’s own biography and, on the other, that the Academy of San Carlos was one of the first non-religious training institutions to integrate indigenous students, and, finally, that Tolsá’s closest collaborators, Juan Fortis and Pedro Patiño Ixtolinque were indigenous students, it seems unlikely that they worked on elements that sought to offend or humiliate. Unfortunately, Bustamante’s version has often been considered without a question, causing animosity toward the sculpture and Tolsá himself.

There are those who believe that much good is done for the culture and identity of a country by being outraged by this work, but it would have a much better effect to try to understand and respect our cultural variety and identity, including, of course, women, indigenous peoples, and the many dissidences that make up Mexico.

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El Caballito is a product of its time and political landscape, which probably never sought to offend or humiliate the Mexican people. It would be good to understand it as a work of art—the reason why it is preserved—and as an important historical and technological document.

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