PHOTOGRAPHY WITHOUT BORDERS: MAX T. VARGAS’ IMPACT AS A STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHER, ARTIST AND ENTREPRENEUR IN SOUTHERN PERU

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Maximiliano Telésforo Vargas – better known as Max T. Vargas – is thought to have been born in the southern Peruvian city of Arequipa in around 1873. There is no documentation indicating where he trained as a photographer or in which studios he may have worked as an assistant before setting up his own atelier in Arequipa in 1896.

In October 1900, as a young, independent photographer, Vargas accompanied the Bishop of Arequipa, Manuel Segundo Ballón, on an expedition to erect a cross at the summit of Misti volcano, the landmark of the city. All of the local newspapers reported on the expedition and Vargas successfully used his ascent to the summit to promote his flourishing studio. He exhibited the photographs of the volcanic crater in his atelier, which attracted plenty of curious visitors, further boosting his profile.

It was very important for Vargas to set himself apart from other photographers and build up a large, wealthy clientele as he was not the only studio photographer in Arequipa with a growing artistic reputation. In 1903 he moved his photo studio to premises in a central location, ushering in a new phase of artistic production and commercial success. One of his photographs depicts the new studio, which was located on a corner of the main square of Arequipa. Its advertising billboard – reading Post cards and views of Peru and Bolivia – was mounted high above the rooftops, within clear view of locals and travelers far and wide.

Vargas placed great value on the quality of his technical equipment and the aesthetic design of his premises, whose furnishings were inspired by the most exquisite studios in Lima and Callao. He soon gained a reputation as a pioneer in southern Peru for his luxurious fittings and unique studio space. A magazine article from 1910 on Vargas’ cultural activities, which was illustrated with his images, describes the incredible appeal of the photographs that were displayed in the studio’s show window and how they caught the attention of passers-by on the Plaza de Armas. In his article, the author Pedro Paulet praised the luxurious photo studio, which “was the largest in Peru” when it first opened its doors “and is still the most artistic to this day”.

In addition to his main studio in Arequipa, in around 1907 Vargas opened a branch in Bolivia, located on the Plaza Murillo, the main square in La Paz. He had numerous employees in his studios, who represented him while he was away and also assisted him in every stage of the production process.

Max T. Vargas took many pictures of affluent, resplendently decked out families and individuals. They came to his photo studios in Arequipa and La Paz to be photographed in front of lavishly painted backdrops and noble furnishings with the aim of showing themselves in their most flattering light. These images bear testament to Vargas’ extraordinary technical skill and his artistic finesse as a photographer. The portraits can mainly be found in family albums, private collections and antiquarian bookstores in Peru and Bolivia. Their outstanding aesthetic qualities and use of the most modern equipment available at that time, plus highly innovative techniques to
The photo studio of Max T. Vargas in Mercaderes Street 2-4, Arequipa (between 1890 and 1915)
retouch the photographic negatives and/or positives, set them apart from other work of this period.

Alongside his work as a studio photographer and portraitist, Vargas had a particular passion for travelling with the camera. His vistas fotográficas (views) were for the most part taken outside the studio and could be purchased as photographs or postcards. In Vargas’ repertoire, the term vistas was used to describe panoramic shots of urban and rural areas in Arequipa, Mollendo, Cusco, Puno, Tiahuanaco and La Paz, images of buildings, squares and pre-Hispanic ruins, stereotypical depictions of particular groups of people (known as tipos) and photographs of traditional occupations and customs. The discourses of the local elite shaped the production, circulation and reception of these images, which played a role in the construction of social identities and the portrayal of urbainity, modernity and tradition and influenced how people viewed visual records of pre-colonial history and the presence of the indigenous population.3

Vargas’ frequent travels to different countries and his early acquaintance with photographer Manuel Moral y Vega in Arequipa, who had founded a number of illustrated journals and newspapers in Lima and often used Vargas’ photographs in these publications, helped his work reach a wide audience across many regions during his artistic heyday between 1900 and 1915.

Vargas had an entrepreneurial flair and a keen eye for trends. This meant that he not only photographed a wide range of subjects, but also had a varied product portfolio and a broad customer base, which included German academics from various disciplines who were conducting research in the Andes. This fact is illustrated by the approx. 50 photographs and 81 postcards in the image archive collection of the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institute, IAI) which can be attributed to Vargas’ photo studio. Diaries from the papers of archaeologist Max Uhle reveal that he knew of the studio in Arequipa and recommended it to participants of a field trip during the International American Studies Congress in 1910. This point is further demonstrated by the papers of Eduard Seler and his wife, which contain various photographic materials by Vargas. His large-format photographs can also be found in the papers of geographer Hans Steffen. All three compilations of papers and manuscripts are part of the IAI’s special collections.

Other material also demonstrates that Vargas’ contacts and the circulation of his pictures went far beyond the Andean region: the inscription on the back of a number of postcards from a series on southern Peru and the Bolivian highlands state that they were manufactured in Germany.4 This may appear odd at first, yet it is not particularly remarkable as Germany was the global hub of the picture postcard industry up until the First World War. The large printing houses sent middlemen to far-flung countries to acquire new customers for the German printing presses.

Arequipa played a seminal role in the history of photography in Peru and was the birthplace of well-known artistic developments in and around Cusco from the 1920s onwards. Peru’s most renowned photographer worldwide, Martín Chambi (1891-1973), has often been described as the pioneer of artistic portrait photography in southern Peru, the archetype of the commercially successful studio photographer and the figure who led the way in the publication of postcards in Peru. What many do not know, however, is that from 1908 a young Chambi spent several years as an assistant in Vargas’ studio and learned the tricks of the photographic trade from Vargas: how to run a photo studio, plus technical and artistic practices and skills. He thus had some of his most important and earliest experiences at the studio in Arequipa, a fact that Chambi was quick to point out himself.5
Picture postcard captioned “Tipo indijeno, Cuzco” (between 1890 and 1915)
Chambi liked to be described as a poeta, maestro or mago de la luz – as a poet, master or magician of light. Many scholars have pointed out Chambi’s use of light and shadows as a compositional device to highlight contrasts and structures, as if he were creating a landscape or a portrait with the tools of a painter. This skill is already apparent in photographs by his teacher, Max T. Vargas, who used various lighting effects while taking his shots and a range of techniques to process the resulting exposed glass-plate negatives and to retouch the prints.

When taking the studio photograph of an elderly, indigenous man, he opted for contre-jour, which particularly accentuates the man’s striking profile against the blurred backdrop. The play with light and shadows also emphasizes the lines on the man’s face and the structure of the rough fabric of his simple garments.

Vargas used editing techniques to dramatic effect on a photograph of Arequipa cathedral, which was taken between 1890 and 1906. In order to bring out the structure of the clouds and in particular the snow-topped mountain peaks, Vargas exposed the top part of the photograph for a longer period than the lower two thirds. He accepted the fact that the cathedral’s towers would appear darker than they actually were and was able to achieve a compositional balance by including the dark flowerbeds in the foreground.

Many of the subjects in Vargas’ photographs gain their particular aesthetic qualities through the use of reflections, lighting effects and perspectives that create compelling images, balanced compositions and complex haptic structures and surfaces. A large number of Vargas’ motifs, such as the narrow street “Loreto” in Cusco, also featured in Chambi’s work. Vargas’ shot of this street uses a portrait format, an extreme vanishing point perspective and a low-lying vantage point to make the black silhouettes of passers-by in the center of the picture appear particularly tiny next to the Incan walls, which soar upwards on either side.

Vargas’ commercial success was short-lived. From 1915 onwards, he was faced with ever greater financial and personal problems, especially due to his marriage, which appears to have broken down around this period. In 1920 he moved out of his grand studio on Arequipa’s Plaza de Armas and left Arequipa altogether a short while later. He is believed to have spent the following years in Bolivia. He later came to Lima and worked as a photographer for studios in various locations until well into the 1950s. Vargas died in 1959, stricken by ill health and impoverished and soon fell into obscurity.

The mid 1990s saw renewed interest in his work. However, conducting research is a challenging task, as the archive of his glass-plate negatives has yet to be located and may even have been destroyed. In light of this, the discovery of Vargas’ photographs at the IAI can play an important role in exploring the work of this multi-faceted artist and entrepreneur.
Elderly man (between 1890 and 1915)
His biggest rival was Emilio Díaz, a young photographer around the same age who opened a studio in Arequipa at almost the same time as Vargas and already had several prizes to his name, including the silver medal from the Centro Artístico de Arequipa, which he won in 1893 and 1899.

“Vargas, como todo técnico y como todo artista verdadero es tenaz y, á pesar de mil dificultades, y, saben los dioses son cuantos, sacrificios logró en 1903 realizar uno de sus primeros deseos, instalarse con decencia. Fué así como se vió [...] abrirse en pleno centro de la ciudad, con amplitud, y con lujo, un espléndido Studio fotográfico, el más grande entonces del Perú, el más artístico aún hoy día” (Paulet 1910: 537).

For a detailed analysis of the wealth of motifs and the visual omissions and compositional techniques of Vargas’ vistas, as well as the production, circulation and reception of his images, see Buchholz 2012 and Buchholz 2014.

Imprint: “Edición propia de Max T. Vargas, Arequipa y La Paz. Printed in Germany.” The six-figure serial number of the postcards produced using the collotype process indicates that they were manufactured for the Peruvian market at the beginning of 1907 by the Leipzig-based printing company C. G. Röder. Each year, C. G. Röder produced some 35,000 picture postcards for customers around the world. I would like to thank Mr. Helmfried Luers for drawing my attention to this detail.


The octagonal flowerbed was planted around the historical central fountain in 1860. The square underwent extensive remodeling work between 1906 and 1908 and the fountain was removed and put into storage in order to give the main square a modern, European flair.

Bibliography


Arequipa cathedral (between 1890 and 1906)
Incan walls, Cusco (between 1890 and 1915)