The title of this essay comes from the header of a letter from Hugo Brehme to one of his nieces. It reads: “Hugo Brehme / photographer / Mexico City / specialty: views of Mexico, postcards, enlargements / services for amateur photographers / importer of industry items” (Nungesser 2004b: 23). When he wrote this letter in 1946, Brehme, who was born on 3 December 1882 in Eisenach, was a successful small businessman in the photography industry with his own studio in the historic center of Mexico City. Reaching this point had, however, been a long journey.

At the end of the 19th century, Brehme trained as a photographer in Erfurt, but quickly realized that he faced huge local competition and his chances of success were very slim. As a result, he decided to join an expedition to the German colonies in Africa (1900-1901) and firstly traveled around Mexico from 1905 to 1907. After marrying Auguste Hartmann, he emigrated to Mexico in 1908. Here he was taken on by the German photographer Brinckmann and is thought to have later worked at Agustín Víctor Casasola’s photo agency. By 1912 he had already opened his first photo studio (Frost 2004: 44).

In 1923 he decided to self-publish his first two volumes of photographs and spent an extended period in Germany overseeing the printing process: Das malerische Mexiko (Picturesque Mexico) and the Spanish edition México pintoresco (Nungesser 2004a: 56). Two years later, the Ernst Wasmuth Verlag in Berlin published Brehme’s volume Mexiko. Baukunst, Landschaft, Volksleben (Picturesque Mexico. The Country, the people and the Architecture) which also appeared later that year in Spanish, English and French. In 1928 Brehme bought a workshop and set up the studio “Fotografía Artística Hugo Brehme”. The name of the workshop is indicative of how Brehme saw his identity as a photographer: he viewed himself as an artist – at a time when the artistic character of photography was still very much up for debate. At the same time, he saw no contradiction between his aesthetic aspirations and the extensive marketing of his pictures in an age where it was possible to mechanically reproduce artworks. It should thus come as no surprise that Brehme produced volumes of photographs which displayed incredible artistic skill and marketed his images (some retouched or cropped) to journals and newspapers, such as the National Geographic Magazine, while also manufacturing huge numbers of postcards, which he mainly sold to tourists.

From 1929 Brehme’s artistic ambitions began to pay off: he was awarded various prizes at events such as the world fair in Seville and the photography competition of Portland cement factory. In 1930 part of his body of photographic work was destroyed in a fire in his workshop; many of the images, however, were preserved for posterity in the volumes he had published. In 1951, Brehme became a Mexican citizen. He died in Mexico City three years later. In 2003 the Brehme collection at Mexico’s Fototeca Nacional (National Photo Library) was incorporated into UNESCO’s “Memory of the World” programme. Today, there are a whole host of institutions that house negatives and prints of Brehme’s photographs. The most significant holdings are stored at Mexico’s National Photo Library, which is home to several thousand photographs,
Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City (c. 1932)
the Franz Mayer Museum in Mexico City, the Swiss Foundation for Photography in Winterthur, the Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg and the Ibero-Americanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institute, IAI).

Hugo Brehme’s photographic oeuvre encompasses a range of genres. It focuses on architecture, landscapes and documentary and street photography, although his street shots were limited by the technology available at that time: they are often staged scenes and do not have the spontaneous feel of later work in this genre. It is assumed that Brehme also produced a large portfolio of portrait and studio photographs – if only to make a living – yet the holdings contain relatively few pictures of this genre. As previously mentioned, his chief focus was “views of Mexico”, both the country’s geography and its architectural attractions (pre-Columbian ruins; colonial era churches; modern buildings in Mexico City), everyday scenes on the streets or in the world of work, and studies of the social environment in a predominantly agrarian, pre-industrial country.

His landscape shots and – to a lesser extent – his photographs of pre-Columbian and colonial-era architecture, have many of the trademarks of Pictorialism, portraying a timeless, ahistorical space, which is further heightened by the sepia tone used in his volumes of photographs. The images of Mexican volcanoes, which were a favorite subject in Brehme’s work, illustrate this particularly well. Whenever people grace Brehme’s photographs, they serve to highlight the enormity of nature, thus creating an image of an eternal, unchanging, almost mystical Mexico, which was also reflected in European and American literature in the first few decades of the 20th century. (Schmidt-Welle 2011). However, it should be noted that the staged look of many of the people portrayed in his pictures was due to the technology of the time, i.e. the need for long exposure times.

Brehme’s visual language aimed to convey an exotic view of Mexico (Rodríguez 2004: 28) and he was by no means alone in this respect. On the contrary, his work was inspired by photographs of Mexico from the late 19th and early 20th century and – indirectly – by European orientalism, which had particularly flourished following Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt. He appropriated “the foreign” in his images with a seemingly romantic idealism – yet always steered clear of conveying erotic fantasies of conquest, unlike other orientalist photographers, such as Brehme’s immediate predecessor Charles B. Waite. Despite Brehme’s love of the country to which he owed almost all of his professional success (only a fraction of his images preserved today feature non-Mexican motifs), his photographs demonstrate a certain distance to the local population, which cannot be solely attributed to the technical requirements of staging the shots: differences in mentality may also have played a role here.

Brehme was not a political photographer and his images did not aim to highlight social grievances, even if they sometimes became apparent as he documented the world around him. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to say that he failed to depict social reality, as claimed by virtually all critics of his work to date. His numerous portrayals of the Mexican revolution in Mexico City and in the states of Morelos and Veracruz demonstrate most clearly of all how his photographs addressed this reality. They bear striking testimony to the military conflicts and the destruction caused by the revolution. The photographs of the revolution recently reached a wide audience as part of a traveling exhibition through Mexico (2009-2010) (Cabrera Luna et al. 2009). In April/May 2014, they were also displayed at the Ibero-American Institute.

In these photos, too, Brehme maintains a certain distance to his subjects. He took very few photographs of dead people and the images of charred bodies – so popular
Street in Amecameca, Estado de México (c. 1925)
among other contemporary photographers who documented the events of the *Decena trágica* (“Ten Tragic Days”) in February 1913 in Mexico City – do not feature at all in Brehme’s work. To this day, his photos of the revolution are still less well-known than his shots of landscapes and architecture. This is partly because he did not include these images in the volumes of photographs he published in the 1920s. Another reason is that it was not as easy to market these images to tourists and this target group formed the core of his business, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s when the world’s fascination with Mexico had reached its peak.

His portraits of a number of revolutionary heroes (the Zapata brothers, Francisco “Pancho” Villa, Francisco I. Madero) were the only images that quickly reached a wide audience. The most famous portrait of Emiliano Zapata, which achieved cult status and has sold millions of copies in Mexico – without any reference to the photographer – was long attributed to Brehme. However, Mayra Mendoza (Mendoza Avilés 2009) recently established that it is not Brehme’s work; the photograph was taken by an American photographer. At that time, however, it was common for photographers and agencies to buy photographs and reproduce them for commercial purposes under their own names without mentioning the author (and mostly without paying the author a fee). A large number of Brehme’s photographs were thus marketed under name of the agency Casasola, and Brehme himself published images by other photographers (including pictures by Sumner W. Matteson). Brehme did not shy away from occasionally applying retouching or even montage techniques to his photographs of the revolution, once again demonstrating how he viewed himself as an artistic photographer. The aesthetic components of his images clearly took precedence over producing a precise, historical record. Brehme by no means considered himself a reportage photographer.

Hugo Brehme’s photographs – particularly from his early period – display an incredible level of technical skill for his day. This was due on the one hand to the excellent cameras and film material he used, which he mostly imported from Germany. On the other hand, Brehme handled the material with extreme care and knew a great deal about the process of photo development. His images are not only technically outstanding, however: Brehme also had an excellent “photographic eye” and was skilled at finding diverse and interesting subjects and creating aesthetically pleasing compositions. Many of his pictures were composed and staged with utmost precision, following the rule of thirds or the golden ratio, which gives them a balanced and harmonious air. Brehme’s exterior shots, which formed the core of his body of work, are in a different league to his few studio portraits. He was far more skilled at working with the light outdoors than in the studio, a fact demonstrated very clearly by his available-light portraits. Brehme’s indoor photographs of archaeological objects seem rather lackluster next to his shots of pre-Columbian architecture.

Brehme developed a thoroughly unique visual language rooted within the tradition of Pictorialism, yet always remained geared towards the need to market and sell his work, which he achieved with great success. Brehme was acquainted with avant-garde photographers, such as Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, who bought some of their materials from his studio. In the early 1920s, these photographers took a radical departure from the prevailing approach to photography inspired by impressionist painting and adopted the photographic realism of straight photography. Brehme, however, remained faithful to the principles of Pictorialism. Images such as the picture of the revolutionary leader Salazar (Cabrera Luna et al. 2009: 127) or the shot of some grounds in Mexico City in which the light creates abstract
The volcano Ixtaccíhuatl viewed from Amecameca (c. 1925)
forms, could be interpreted as a sign of Brehme’s interest in this new movement, yet they remained the exception.

Pictorialism’s popularity began to wane soon after the First World War and following World War Two its demise continued unabated. Brehme remained loyal to this style throughout his life. As a result, his reputation faded over time, yet he remained economically stable thanks to the other branches of his business, even when sales of his postcards dropped. He did not make the transition from black-and-white photography to color, nor did he use the new 35 mm film and miniature cameras, which sparked a boom in reportage and travel photography after the Second World War. The transition to color film would be left to his only son Arno, who specialized in commercial photography and discontinued the postcard business after his father died (Frost 2004: 54).

The Ibero-American Institute’s collection of photographs by Hugo Brehme contains some 500 (glass-plate) negatives and prints. The holdings include vintage prints, yet it is difficult to establish exactly which prints they are, as none of the images are dated. However, Brehme’s book publications and the date the institute acquired the materials make it possible to narrow down the period in which the photographs were taken. They were mainly produced in the 1910s and 1920s. The institute also houses the photo books Brehme published himself, plus catalogues from later exhibitions and secondary literature. The IAI holdings comprise a broad thematic cross-section of Brehme’s work, yet they feature very few images of the Mexican revolution. The collection is a valuable resource and not only for cultural and architectural historians: it contains a wealth of technically outstanding shots and aesthetically striking compositions which can also provide fascinating material for photo enthusiasts and photography historians.

1 Author’s own translation.
Forecourt of the church on the Pyramid of Cholula, Puebla, looking towards the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccíhuatl (after 1925)
Bibliography (selection):


Sports field (Mexico City?) (1920s)