

UNESCO Regional Centers (1963-1967): General history of an international collaboration project in the field of cultural heritage conservation

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Abstract

A general and historical research is presented, based on primary sources of information about the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the League of Nations (SDN), United Nations (UN), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), etc., among others. The text addresses the development of the conservation discipline and its professionalization in Mexico and some other countries in the mid-twentieth century. This article emphasizes the importance of the program for Regional Centers for training and research, specialized in techniques and methods on cultural heritage conservation developed by UNESCO. A little over 50 years later, this article seeks to acknowledge the international and cultural initiative that became so important for the history of the discipline.

Keywords

UNESCO; Regional Center; International collaboration; human development; fundamental education; conservation.

The twentieth century started with major international conflicts that involved a large number of nations. After the First World War ended (1914-1918), with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles¹ in 1919, the League of Nations (SDN) was created. This treaty established clauses of territorial, military, moral, political and labor order, as well as sanctions for each of the countries involved in the War. Europe was war-torn and its nations prioritized specific sectors to rescue. The SDN

¹ Signed by more than 50 countries, this treaty culminated formally with the First World War. It stipulates the sanctions provided to the nations that formed the Central Powers block. In the first articles, the creation of this international organization was agreed on, focusing on avoiding international war conflicts and setting up to guarantee equal rights to the big and small powers" (Ibero-American Institute of Comparative Law, 1920).



worked for 27 years experiencing vicissitudes². The outbreak of Second World War confirmed, along with previous events, the inefficiency of this organization. Finally, on May 8, 1945, with Germany's "Act of Military Surrender" (German High Comand, 1945), this second international war was concluded, and with that, the SDN dissolved. This gave way to the creation of the United Nations (UN), an organization that still exists today, but whose shaping was first discussed on 1942.

Both wars destroyed entire cities and with them, an untold amount of cultural heritage was damaged.



Figure 1. Cathedral of Cologne.
Image: Public domain.

The creation of the UN and UNESCO

The UN is an international organization founded in the city of San Francisco, USA, in 1945, shortly after the end of the Second World War. Representatives of 50 nations from all over the world met with the intention of writing and ratifying the founding document of the organization. By the end of the same year, it already had agencies and departments to promote human development. One of its first agencies was the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)³.

² The SDN was never able to gather enough authority to impose mandatory resolutions on its members. While it was in force, it failed to avoid conflicts between nations, as the case of the invasion of Manchuria by Japan in 1931, among others. In addition, from the start, it presented stances that were not suitable for an organization that sought to ensure the peace between the countries. It denied the entry of Germany and the Ottoman Empire for representing the defeated part of the conflict, and it banned the Soviet Union for its communist character (Ibero-American Institute of Comparative Law, 1920).

³ The charter was signed on June 26, 1945. Subsequently it became effective on October 24 and in November of the same year, the first UN Conference related to education and culture was held (ONU, 2018a).

Both the UN⁴ and UNESCO⁵, within their creation charter and constitution respectively, express a direct commitment to the peacekeeping between nations. This is the ultimate and maximum goal of these organizations. Second, it sought to strengthen the ties between countries. At this point, it is possible to emphasize the work carried out by UNESCO, because the way to reach these goals is through human development in the areas of education, science and culture. An interesting topic that stands out on these texts is the international cooperation⁶, an action of fundamental importance that both institutions would further develop.

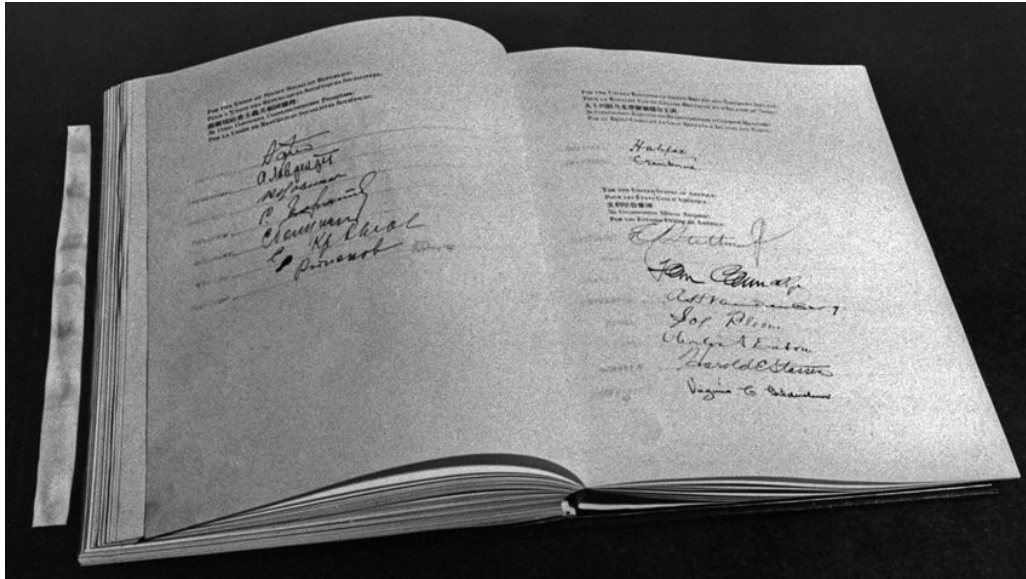


Figure 2. Charter of UN Foundation. San Francisco Conference. Image: ©UN, 2019.

UNESCO and its development

A year later, in 1946, the organization celebrated the first session of its General Conference in Paris, France. On this meeting, it began to organize its own structure, assigning a general director and establishing the fields of action where the work under its competence would be addressed (UNESCO, 1947). From this year onwards, UNESCO annually holds a General Conference to discuss problems related to human development around the world. Within the first General Conferences,

⁴ Article one of the UN Charter (Purposes): A) Maintain international peace and security. B) To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of people. C) To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. D) To be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends. (ONU, 2018b).

⁵ Article 1 of the UNESCO Constitution (Purposes and functions): A) To contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations. (UNESCO, 2014, pp.8-9).

⁶ Joint action to support the economic and social development of a country, through the transfer of technologies, knowledge, experiences or resources from the country with the same or higher level of development, multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations and civil society (Governorate of Boyacá, 2015).



the fields of action around the topic of Culture were defined, as well as the support mainly towards museums and libraries. Gradually the difference, as well as importance, between museum, monument, library, and archaeological site, among other terms, was established. Simultaneously, the relevance of the support and preservation of these cultural sites was agreed (*cf.* UNESCO, 1946-1958).

Julian Huxley (1894-1963), brother of the famous writer of “A Brave New World” (1932), was appointed as the first Director-General of UNESCO (1946-1948). Afterwards, the Mexican official and writer Jaime Torres Bodet was elected, promoting the development of culture from within the organization and strengthening the relationship between Mexico and UNESCO (1948-1952) (UNESCO, 2016).



Figure 3. Jaime Torres Bodet. *Image: © Nexos, culture and daily life, 2018.*

UNESCO and education

One of the guiding principles for this organization has always been education. Right from the start, in 1946⁷, it created the “Fundamental Education”⁸ program. A year later, the first pilot project based on it (literacy and basic education) was created for the Marbial Valley, in Haiti. At first, the project was highly questioned, but the medium and long-term results reflected the effectiveness of the plan. In 1951, Jaime Torres Bodet decided to recover the experience in order to launch a

⁷ Chinese educator Yan Yangchu describes the context that preceded the creation of this program by mentioning: “Three-fourths of the world’s population today are under-housed, under-clothed, under-fed and illiterate. As long as this continues to be true, we have a very poor foundation upon which to build the world. “A couple of years later, in 1949, when UNESCO began publishing the monographs of Fundamental Education, he declared that: “the aim of all education is to help men and women to live fuller and happier lives” (Boel, 2015).

⁸ Fundamental education is the minimum and general education needed to help children and adults deprived of the advantages offered by official education, so they can understand the problems that arise on their immediate environment, as well as their rights and duties as citizens and individuals, so they can participate more effectively in the social and economic progress of their communities.

new project aiming to generate a network of Regional Centers for Fundamental Education. The first one would be the Latin American Fundamental Education Center (CEFRAL) based in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, with the support of the Mexican Government (UNESCO, 1997). Subsequently, other Regional Centers⁹ for education were created in other countries such as Egypt and Peru (UNESCO, 2015). Apparently, the pilot program was a success; in the words of Boel (2015), the concept of “Fundamental Education” personifies the mission of UNESCO, which is to generate “a culture of peace” and “a new humanism”. In that sense, the political impact was of the utmost importance in this program, since the organization insisted among the Member States, that education is fundamental for development.

UNESCO and the conservation of cultural heritage

In the field of culture preservation, this organization created ties with governmental and non-governmental organizations of the Member States through technical assistance in the field of cultural heritage conservation. Likewise, the ninth General Conference (1958) stipulated the establishment of the International Center for the Study of Technical Problems for the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property in Rome (later known as ICCROM). Since its inception, one of its objectives has been to contribute to the training of experts in the field of restoration in the member countries. That is by providing technical advice regarding conservation, laying the foundations for restoration methods, participating in projects for the intervention of sites of interest, and support museums regarding conservation / restoration¹⁰ (Jokilehto, 2009: 18).

On the other hand, during the 1960s UNESCO conducted conservation missions along with the governments of some of the participating nations and their international specialists, mainly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These missions allowed the envoys to learn first-hand, and not only through Member States’ reports, about the situation of the archaeological sites and historical landmarks in other regions of the world. Some of the highlights were the activities carried out in Cusco, Peru (1951); Aswan, Egypt (1960); and Bonampak, Mexico (1961), to mention a few.

The actions of the organization regarding the support and preservation of culture were intense in that season. Another examples were the regional seminars that took place in Japan (1960), Nigeria (1963, 1973) and India (1966). In these, the discussion centered on the importance of museums and the development in the fields of museography, curatorship and cultural heritage conservation.

⁹A regional center is the initiative of UNESCO based on the establishment of a place destined for research, teaching and dissemination in the fields of education, science and culture, focused on social needs. This proposal is still valid today and it is based on international collaboration, mainly supporting developing countries. After the identification of a social problem in an international region in the aforementioned areas, UNESCO requests the collaboration of a country where the headquarters of the specialized center will be established. The rest of the countries within the region collaborate with resources for the maintenance and development of the Regional Center and, as a result, they can allocate people of their own nations to participate on the programs and professional courses taught by UNESCO’s specialists, to improve the conditions within their contexts.

¹⁰ The British Harold James Plenderleith (1898 – 1997) was appointed as the first director of ICCROM, and the Belgian Paul Philippot (1925 – 2016) as assistant director. Both men played a key role in the development of the discipline of conservation. In addition to founding and structuring ICCROM as the guiding center for conservation work in the world, they also played a role as inspector specialists who traveled around the world, identifying the problems and specific needs of each context in relation to the preservation of cultural heritage. These trips were decisive to select the countries where Regional Centers could establish. Some specialists who stand out, and who traveled and trained other conservators were Agnes Ballestrem, Sheldon Keck, Caroline Keck, Laura Mora and Paolo Mora, among others.



These precedents, along with the positive results obtained from previous experiences in the educational sector, motivated the creation of the Regional Centers for the preservation of cultural heritage. Throughout the 12th General Conference of UNESCO in 1962, the creation of the pilot program was agreed upon and finally, in 1963, the first Regional Conservation Center was founded in Nigeria¹¹.

Up until now, five Regional Centers have been identified: Jos, Nigeria (1963); New Delhi, India (1965); Honolulu, Hawaii, USA (1967); Mexico City, Mexico (1967-1968); and Baghdad in Iraq (date unknown)¹². These specialized centers worked in collaboration with the Member States close to their regions. The Member States provided resources and in turn, they were allowed to send candidates from their countries to learn from the expertise of specialists, and the use of specific instruments and methods for the conservation of cultural heritage¹³.

Mexico and the conservation of cultural heritage

As mentioned before, Mexico and UNESCO had a strong relationship from the start. Simultaneously, regarding cultural heritage preservation, Mexico already had an institution at a federal level destined to the safeguarding and study of the archaeological and historical heritage of the nation. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH)¹⁴ was established on February 3, 1939, and from its inception it focused on conducting, monitoring and regulating works of conservation of national heritage.

The INAH created its own agencies for the care and study of archaeological sites, museums, libraries and others (INAH, 2018). From the beginning, this Institute focused on actions that helped develop the discipline of conservation in the country, some of them were the creation of the restoration workshop of the Museo Nacional in 1952; the restoration section for archaeological materials of the Departamento de Prehistoria by the end of the 1950's; and later on, the Departamento de Catálogo y Restauración del Patrimonio Artístico in 1961 (Magar and Amaro, 2016). At this point,

¹¹ In 1974, Joshep A. Sawe wrote the "Report on The Regional Training Center for the Preservation of Cultural and Natural Heritage at Jos, Nigeria". On this document, the inspector mentions as an antecedent that: "Preservation of cultural and natural heritage is a subject that has received international recognition in both the Charter of the United Nations and the UNESCO Constitution as an important factor in international efforts for the preservation and maintenance of peace ". In addition, on the resolution 4.432, the director on duty (René Maheu) authorized the creation of the "Regional Pilot Training Center for the Museum technicians of tropical Africa" at Jos, Nigeria, in collaboration with the government of Nigeria. Member States participated in the activities in favor of the development of their museums, with the help of experts and providing support and equipment (Sawe, 1974, 3-7).

¹² This identification was accomplished by the thorough revision of the texts issued by UNESCO on the reports, proposals, commemorative books, journals, etc., which talk about the project of the Regional Centers. There are sources that mention the possible existence of other centers in Peru and Japan. The meticulous review of more texts to clarify this point is still ongoing.

¹³ Harold James Plenderleith wrote in 1967 the document "Hawaii. The Asia-Pacific program for the training of museum directors in museological techniques", where he gives testimony of the trip he made to evaluate the Regional Center on the island of Honolulu. There, he analyzes the antecedents from Jos, Nigeria, describes the administrative actions to be carried out based on the establishment of the center in Hawaii, as well as the contributions given by the participating countries of these centers, among other topics. In the body of this text, Plenderleith (1967) mentioned: "The Report shows that, as in so many new fields of human endeavor in the developing countries, the most important contribution made by the Regional Training Program is to have trained nationals from each country, served by the Center who can influence their governments and members of the public, in the overall national needs for protection and preservation of their cultural and natural property".

¹⁴ Founded under the government of President Lázaro Cárdenas and having Alfonso Caso as first general director with the presentation of the Organic Law of INAH. Its objective: to carry out research, conservation and dissemination of the archaeological, anthropological and paleontological heritage of Mexico.

the role played by Manuel del Castillo Negrete¹⁵ was fundamental in reconciling the relationship between Mexico (along with INAH) and UNESCO, in terms of the establishment of a Regional Center in the country. These actions do not imply that there had not previously been restoration projects, carried out with the knowledge and materials used at the time.



Figure 4. Departamento de Catálogo y Restauración del Patrimonio Artístico. Image: ©Fototeca CNCPC-INAH.

After the program of UNESCO Regional Centers for Mexico ended, the Organization of American States (OAS)¹⁶ picked up the project, focusing their efforts and resources in the Latin American countries. On the specific case of this center, called informally Churubusco, it is known that a group of graduates from Latin America and Africa, after getting trained in it, returned to their home countries to work on their own context's cultural heritage conservation.

Finally, after the international collaboration projects ended, INAH took over their results, aiming them at the conservation of Mexico's national heritage. In general, the aforementioned facts represent a milestone in the development of the discipline of Conservation in Mexico. This, after several decades of development, derived in what since the year 2000 is the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC), and the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía "Manuel del Castillo Negrete" (ENCRyM), both currently in operation (CNCPC, 2018).

¹⁵ Manuel Luis del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús Castillo Negrete (Coahuila, 1944) produced cultural programs for radio, television and cinema in the 1950s. He worked at the National Institute of Fine Arts (1957-1958) and later joined INAH in 1959 under the position of Expert on colonial paintings. In 1961, he founded the Murals Conservation Department of INAH. Later he opened the Center of Studies for the Conservation of Cultural Property "Paul Coremans" in 1965. He became friends with Paul Coremans, and this helped UNESCO to visualize Mexico as a candidate for the establishment of the Regional Center in Latin America (García, 2016).

¹⁶ The OAS is the oldest operating regional organization in the world. Its origin dates back to the First International American Conference, held in Washington D.C. from 1889-1990. Its structure was established in 1948 with the OAS Charter in Bogotá, Colombia, and it came into effect in 1951. On Article 1, the OAS Charter stipulates that "the international organization that they have developed to achieve an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence (OAS, 2018)".



Even when Mexico already had an interest in developing cultural policies focused on the conservation of cultural heritage, the link between UNESCO and Mexico allowed guiding and consolidating the professionalization and education regarding the discipline of Conservation in the Mexican context and Latin America¹⁷.

Conclusion

Although a general chronology was presented in a superficial manner, there are elements to consider for understanding the transformations and results of this pilot project. As a conclusion, it is important to consider:

- In an interpretative manner, in the mid-twentieth century with the support of the aforementioned institutions, the evolution of the discipline of Conservation-Restoration was promoted, generating training and specialization models, some of which are still valid in several regions of the world.
- The work of organizations such as UNESCO have sown and/or strengthened (in the same way as it did with the concept of education) the idea of the need to preserve cultural heritage for its importance as a legacy of humanity.
- In Mexico's specific case, after the support and collaboration obtained from international cooperation, the legacy of the project was adapted to the national necessities, not responding anymore to the "regional" demands of the extinct centers. However, Mexico continued generating proposals aiming for the dissemination, conservation, and research of cultural heritage through training programs, in order to continue educating people on the discipline.
- It will be important to revive and keep in mind the key principles of human development and peace, expressed over five decades, regarding the conservation of cultural heritage through international cooperation.

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¹⁷ Many of the graduates, both national and foreign, who have studied within the Regional Centers, have later served in positions of importance within the cultural sector of several countries.





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