

## Tracing Down Tablada's Archive

Jair Jáuregui Torres

Department of Spanish & Portuguese

For the past three years, which correspond roughly to the length of the global pandemic of COVID-19, I have researched the work of the Mexican writer José Juan Tablada (1871-1945). Some of those works include his ekphrastic poems from his early era, his art criticism of already established and up-and-coming artists, and more recently, his chronicles about international trips, including the one to Japan in 1900, with a brief stay in San Francisco, right across from where I currently study and live. Thereby, with the support of the Tinker Foundation and the Center for Latin American Studies, I embarked on the journey to Mexico City in search of Tablada's archive.

Three weeks before my departure, I contacted José Luis Martínez González, the director of Biblioteca Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, in the Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas at UNAM, where Tablada's graphic archive is preserved, to notify them of my visit. Martínez González notified me that this library would close its doors on June 30<sup>th</sup> for an administrative summer break and would resume their activities until July 21<sup>st</sup>. I immediately changed my plans to depart four days earlier and for this reason, I had the limited time of only three days to visit this archive. From more than 30 materials that I originally intended to consult, I decided to select the most relevant to my current research, those being approximately 12 materials from his 1900 trip.

Prior to this visit, I had seen digitized and printed photographs of some of those materials. However, those photographic reproductions, even mine,<sup>1</sup> do not substitute the sensorial experience of seeing them, a few inches away, and touching them carefully through a protective barrier. Right from the start, I noticed the true color palette of the watercolors that many cameras or scanners do not accurately replicate. I also paid attention to the quality and technique of the brushwork. For example, in the Japanese tea garden (fig. 1), the trees are made up of different layers and shades of green paint. These layers obviously give volume to the figures, but most importantly, they hint at Tablada's painting process. Each shade of green does not bleed with the other, suggesting that Tablada let them dry before applying another one or that he used a higher concentration of color and not much water.



Fig. 1. José Juan Tablada, *Puerta del jardín de thé en Golden Gate Park*. 1900. Archivo Gráfico José Juan Tablada, Biblioteca Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, UNAM.

Besides interpreting how Tablada could have painted these images, observing these materials also reveal their own materiality and lifetime. One example of such matters is the watercolor depicting the lodging. The photographic reproduction posted on the website appears with a yellowish tone (fig. 2, see image on the left), and is accompanied by a note stating that the watercolor contains “Dobleces, roturas y restos de cinta adhesiva.”<sup>2</sup> When I looked at the original, I noticed that the color palette is not too saturated, especially the color of the empty space, which in reality is more of a grayish tone (fig. 2, see image on the right). Additionally, two of the four corners unfortunately disappeared. At one moment, the right upper corner completely broke off and was safe from being lost forever by piecing it together with clear tape on the back. So many factors come into play for the lifetime of these images, including the materials themselves, the environmental and storage conditions, and most importantly, the handling by many people for more than a century. The staff of this library is already aware of their current state of deterioration and as a result, they present these materials to visitors inside a clear page protector, commonly used for a binder. Although photographic reproductions like mine might not record every single detail, they are another measure to produce a copy that can last for posterity.



Fig. 2. José Juan Tablada, *Mi casa en San Francisco California*. 1900. Archivo Gráfico José Juan Tablada, Biblioteca Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, UNAM. Image from the left was retrieved from the graphic archive’s [website](#) and the image from the left was taken by the author.

Another observation that I must note about my visit to this archive is that some of these materials still preserve the remnants of erased inscriptions. In various of the watercolors, written words, perhaps with a pencil, were erased. Although they are now illegible to the naked eye, they are visible by tilting the surface at a certain angle and might have left indentations that could be felt if the protector were to be removed. This act of erasure makes me question if they were removed by Tablada or by someone else, for example, an executor or researchers, and were those annotations related to the painted image or completely unrelated?

The second step of my search was the Fondo Reservado of Biblioteca de México, located in Plaza de la Ciudadela. Here I had more than a week to consult some of the books that once belonged to Tablada. On my first visit, I was surprised that not many staff members knew about the treasures preserved inside this library. Some librarians from the general collection thought that I was in search of books about Tablada. After some explanation, they finally redirected me to the Fondo Reservado. Once there, its director Elvia Huerta Barrera and the librarian Gabriel Huitrón García provided me with a folder recording all of Tablada's books housed there. I can now confirm a total of 91 books, varying in different topics and languages, from philosophy to visual arts. The books that stand out are the ones about China and Japan, two cultures that greatly impacted Tablada's literary career, even the latter motivated him to embark on a journey.

The first two books that I leafed through were by the French philosopher Jules de Gautier. The only signs of being owned by Tablada were a bibliographic stamp listing "J. J. Tablada" as the provenance and the year "1946," one year after his death. One variation of the provenance that appeared in other books was "C. Tablada," which could be Nina Cabrera de Tablada, his second wife. Finally, in J. Michelet's *La sorcière* from 1865, I saw the first ex-libris by Tablada, with a simplified composition made of only words that fulfill the objective of marking the writer's ownership (fig. 3). Interestingly, the ex-libris is surrounded by other stamps of institutions that had owned or preserved this book, including the Biblioteca de México, Biblioteca "Ibero-Americana," and Secretaría de Educación Pública.

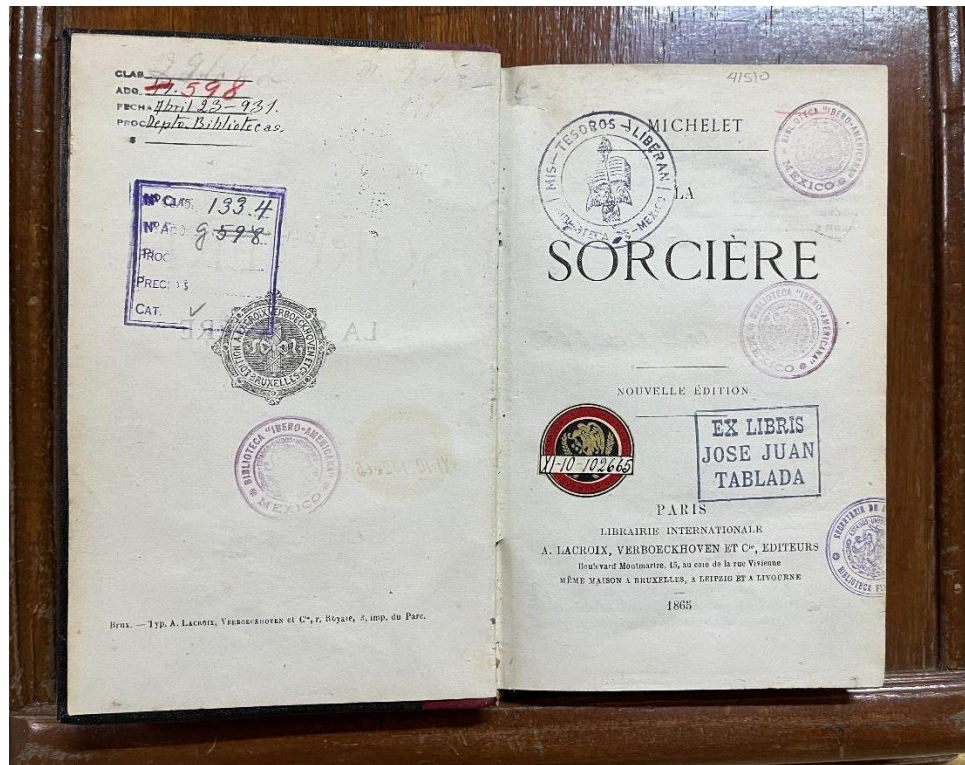


Fig. 3. A copy of J. Michelet's *La sorcière* (1865) that belonged to José Juan Tablada. Fondo Reservado, Biblioteca de México.

After encountering the first ex-libris, one after another appeared, either in the title page, the beginning of a chapter, or the margins. I found four of them, which many times also numbered the book as “No. J. \_\_\_\_.” They all vary in their size and design, from a simple stamp of black ink, made of only words (see figs. 3 and 4, a), to a stamp of orange ink that depicts a flower, possibly a lotus, surrounded by heraldic elements like a shield shape and scrolls (fig. 4, b). A third ex-libris represents a man dressed in black robes, perhaps a bonze,<sup>3</sup> with his head placed on his hands, while his arms rest on the surface of a low table (fig. 4, b). In all of these variations, this ex-libris was not stamped directly to the pages, instead on a square sheet of onionskin that was glued to the book. This version was also reserved for books of larger dimensions that were more luxurious in their material quality and content. Lastly, I found an ex-libris in a more geometrical form (fig. 4, d). The author’s initials are the most prominent features for their dimension and black saturation. They are piled on top of each other, forming a staircase. In the meantime, the word “ex-libris” has a smaller scale and its place on the left side. All of these different designs testify Tablada’s need to diversify and personalize his collection while they also reveal his aesthetic sensibility, from Asiatic motifs to avant-garde forms of design.



Fig 4. Four ex-libris by José Juan Tablada. Fondo Reservado, Biblioteca de México.

- a) Lafcadio Hearn, *Exotics and Retrospectives* (1905).
- b) Maude Rex Allen, *Japanese Art Motives* (1917).
- c) Kate Kerby, *An Old Chinese Garden: A Three-fold Masterpiece of Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting* (1922).
- d) Egan Mew, *Japanese Porcelain* (1909).

But the most surprising discovery occurred during my last visit to this collection: two manuscript poems hidden in the book *Masters of the Colour Print. VI. Hiroshige* (1929). Each poem faces the colored stamp that Tablada used as inspiration to write them. Like many other times, this is another case of ekphrasis at play by Tablada, but it stands out from the rest because he places the verbal representation right next to the visual representation. After reading the poems, I confirmed that only one researcher Michele Pascucci has written about these poems. As Pascucci states, these poems were not included in the celebrated anthology of Tablada's complete works edited by the UNAM in the 1970's.<sup>4</sup> Discovering poems after more than 50 years opens up the possibilities of discovering more hidden manuscript works within the pages of his books that are scattered in other collections in Mexico City, and allegedly further away in Cuernavaca, Morelos.<sup>5</sup>

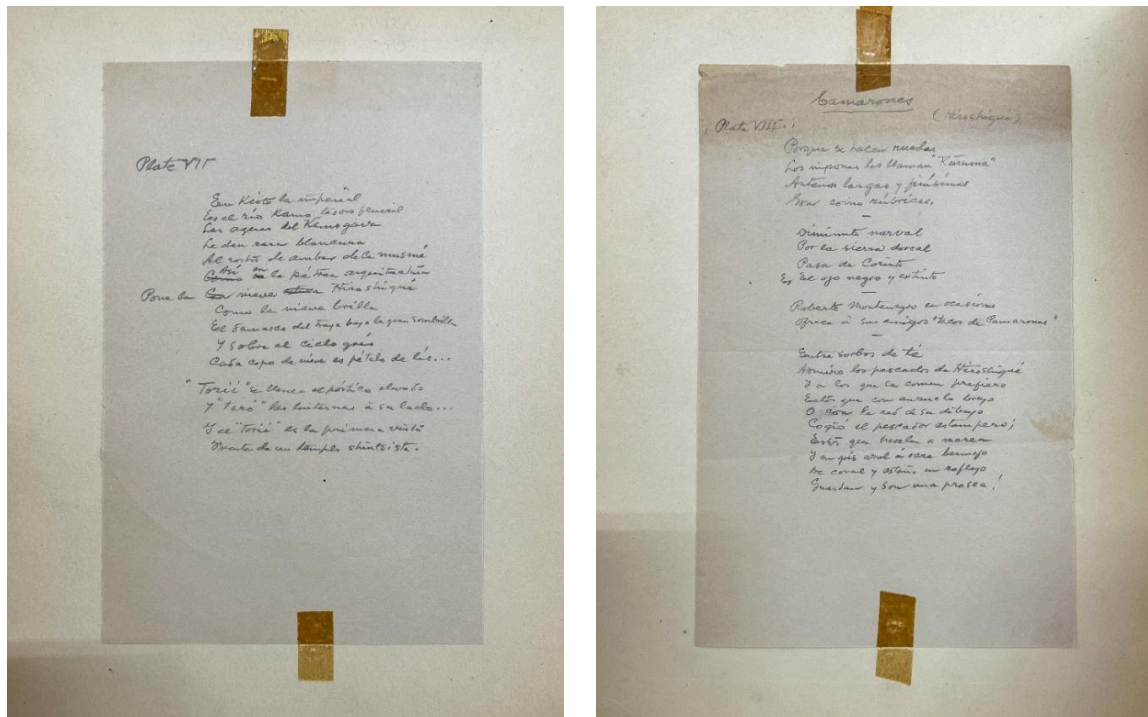


Fig. 8. José Juan Tablada, Two manuscript poems embedded within the pages of *Masters of the Colour Print. VI. Hiroshige*, with an introduction by Jiro Harada, published in 1929. Fondo Reservado, Biblioteca de México.

As I conclude this report, I consciously ask myself why Tablada, why do I feel so inclined to research his work and personal life? First, my proximity to him flourished during some of the most challenging moments of a global pandemic. He was my companion whose work transported me to past epochs far away from the current world outside the pages of the book. Fast-forward to this summer, I had an even closer approximation to him through the objects that he left behind. These objects undoubtedly reveal his authorship or ownership over them, but most importantly his pursuit of singularity and personalization. The watercolors and other drawings are one-of-a-kind and even though the books were mass produced, they were altered by his own handwriting that consequently made them irreplaceable. These fascinating discoveries and reflections prove to me that I will continue to work alongside Tablada since he has so much to offer, from the process of making images to the art of annotation.

## Notes

1. All images included in this report were taken by the author, unless otherwise noted.
2. Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, “Mi casa en San Francisco,” *José Juan Tablada*, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.iifl.unam.mx/tablada/interiores/iconoComp.php?pos=6&idTexto=1781&idColeccion=8>.
3. Michele Pascucci, “Hiroshigué versificado: dos poemas manuscritos de Tablada,” *Literatura Mexicana* 23, no. 1, (2012): 109.
4. Pascucci, 109.
5. Amaury A. García Rodríguez, “El Japón quimérico y maravilloso de José Juan Tablada. Una evaluación desde las artes visuales,” in *Pasajero 21. El Japón de Tablada*, ed. Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes (México: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2019), 63-99.