

## INTRODUCTION

In 1960, when, as Director of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, I undertook a selection of Latin American painting, my intention was simply to put together a good show. Accordingly, I visited relatively few painters, choosing wherever I could their most recent and significant works. The show, presented under the title 'New Departures: Latin America', featured five oils each by Manabu Mabe (Brazil), Fernando de Szyszlo (Peru), Alejandro Obregón (Colombia), Alejandro Otero (Venezuela), Ricardo Martínez (Mexico), and Armando Morales (Nicaragua). Argentina, already in artistic ferment and evidently on the way to establishing a clear hegemony, could no longer be represented by a single painter. I decided to include one work by each of five painters: José Antonio Fernández-Muro, Sarah Grilo, Miguel Ocampo, Clorindo Testa, and the Japanese Kazuya Sakai. The show turned out well. It was of even texture and managed to represent, if not the art of the continent as a whole, at least a selective sample of the mid-generation's most significant work in the countries I visited.

As an exhibition, 'The Emergent Decade' is probably less satisfactory to the eye, merely because the simple and somewhat artificial premise of the earlier show is no longer acceptable. In every respect, we set our sights higher this time. The show is more inclusive geographically, embracing Uruguay and Chile in addition to the countries previously covered. A special effort was made to include the work of the leading expatriates of each nation. More importantly, we deliberately sacrificed even texture (which would have been attainable had we adjusted the selection to an international norm) and emphasized rather than minimized the diversity of art in each country. The result is a very broad stylistic range in which figuration coexists with many kinds of abstraction. Both appear in their expressionist, constructivist, surrealist, and primitive manifestations – to use for purposes of quick identification these general and imprecise terms by which broad categories are described. Finally, the choice reflects a desire to focus on the various levels of creative maturity. In each country visited, I selected works by old masters of modern art, by mature contemporaries, and by the younger experimenters. Each category was treated according to its significance in the whole fabric of a nation's artistic development.

The selection was made in the course of two month-long trips taken to the east and west coasts of Latin America during the last half of 1964. I inspected hundreds of paintings, seeking them out in artists' studios with which I was already familiar or to which I was drawn by the recommendations of other observers, often the artists themselves.

The expenditure of so much time, money, and effort on a purely regional project is unusual in this era of globally oriented museums. Nevertheless, I must point to my endeavors apologetically rather than complacently, for they were clearly insufficient in light of the complexity of the task. When Latin American artists chide us for not coming to grips with the burdensome problems of our common concern, they are only partly wrong. For some of these artists, through their work, propose weighty issues which we have had to approach, I fear, with more sympathy than understanding. Thus, if it is pointed out that there remain countries unvisited and, within those visited, unrepresented painters of importance, I must sadly agree. If, further, it is stated that the media of sculpture and printmaking have been ignored, I must assent again, with the remark that the loss is smaller in sculpture, where works of distinction are very rare though not altogether lacking. If, finally, the objection is raised that the choice is an arbitrary one, my defense may still be only partially tenable. For admittedly every human judgment depends upon the texture, invariably imperfect, of the judge's own knowledge and perception – a texture that may be particularly porous in the area of contemporary art. Arbitrary, however, need not mean capricious. Rather it may signify the isolation of a particular, and hopefully valid, strain in order to illuminate a single area in a great realm of undefined possibilities.

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When trying to perceive broader currents in art, one always begins by examining individual works. In them we may seek levels of meaning that may be tested further as we move from the single work to the artist's total contribution. But only by studying a great many such sequences can we hope to arrive at a basis for a national or continental style.

The question whether there exists something that may rightly be called Latin American art is relevant to this pursuit. Of deceiving simplicity, the question prompts complex and equivocal responses. To answer in a sentence, Latin American art exists, in some sense, yes and no.

The existence of national and continental identities is self-evident. At the same time, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to render them intelligible by listing their attributes. It is easier to state what Latin American art is not, what it cannot possibly be.

To dispel the most primitive misconception, Latin American art can have no relation to the pictorial sentimentalities manufactured by tourist bureaus. These nostalgic scenes obviously have no meaning and merely confuse by their evocation of a long-discredited myth. Neither, on the other hand, can the essence of Latin America be conveyed other than through a form language that in some way bespeaks the thoughts and emotions, the concerns, problems, and issues, of its origin. An imitative, international style deprived of its indigenous substance will not do this. Therefore, both – picturesque unreality and its opposite, neutral abstraction – must be rejected.

A true Latin American art, if it exists, will be rooted in the realities of Latin American life. If these realities are coherent, their formal equivalents may emerge as a visually identifiable form language. A style, in other words, may come into being. Whenever art lacks such distinguishable features, it must be presumed that coherence either is lacking or has not been articulated in visual form.

The concept of a Latin American art must be rooted in a grasp of the Latin American identity. That identity, however, resists definition. An adequate definition would have to be impossibly comprehensive, for it would embrace geography, history, economics, religion, psychology, politics, and many other factors as well. Reason and emotion, facts and ideas, the past with its memories and its conditioning force, the present in all its fluid immediacy, and an indiscernible future foreshadowed in terms of vague aspirations would all need to be part of it. It would have to be applicable simultaneously to the individual and to the larger entities of family, nation, continent, and world.

Only the artist is equipped to evoke this identity. By means of intuition and by using the implicit language of forms, he is capable of epitomizing the various components of reality. The images he uses are, of course, the products of his own individual awareness and are always relative to a specific content. (One among many common elements of artistic consciousness in Latin America is the obsession with death, expressed in a curious mixture of the Indian and Spanish.) Yet the Latin American artist is committed to articulating not only the legacy of his culture but also those central concerns which he shares, regardless of geography or tradition, with his contemporaries. This simultaneous commitment to a continental frame of reference that is concrete but limited, and to another that is universal and largely unassimilated, produces a field of tension that demands creative release.

In this tenuous balance of superimposed identities, an accurate Latin American profile cannot be drawn in heavy lines. Its visual component, the artist's work, is varied and diverse, and not reduceable to an artificial uniformity. Such a diversity reflects that richness of ideas, of responses, and of perceptions that is as much a part of life in Latin America as it is of life in Europe or the United States. If a subtle unity asserts itself nonetheless, it is a unity that is not inconsistent with diversification, a unity that envelops a fragmented texture with a wholeness that is frail and transparent but nevertheless real.

Conditional recognition of a common denominator should not be taken to suggest that Latin American art is exclusively a regional phenomenon. On the contrary, the Latin American artist is clearly dependent upon the fundamental pictorial modes that hold sway everywhere today. Whatever their origin, the central concepts of our time, whether expressed in words or in forms, provide the guidelines for painters in Latin America, as they do everywhere else in the world. Such concepts are the standard of our age and constitute a legacy that exists whether it is wanted or not. In the end, the problem of the Latin American artist is to find an authentic posture, one that is equally distant from self-conscious isolation and rootless universality.