

INTRODUCTION TO ART IN LATIN AMERICA

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Art in Latin America has an interesting history and engaging evolution. To understand this we need to have a minimal notion of the past. After all the present is a consequence of the past. For example, the European influence and the reaction against it is palpable in every moment of the history of art in Latin America.

We can define different periods in the history of Latin American art: pre-Columbian art, colonial era, the formation of the identity of each nation and the contemporary era. In this way we can see the evolution of art and how it went through different stages and its function was different in each.

Personally I think that when speaking of Latin American art we must begin with the art of native cultures, before the arrival of the Spaniards. Much has been discussed whether we can consider the production of this period as works of art. Reaching a level of international academic agreement to consider all the productions of man, regardless origins, equivalents is not easy. From vases, all kinds of containers, ritual items, carvings, sculptures, paintings and architecture. The differences in this respect between local and international historians are many. From the consideration of the terms to describe them to the space assigned in a museum. We can ask ourselves why a pre-Columbian Toltec civilization wood carving is displayed in an anthropology museum while a European example of the same period is exhibited in the Museum of Fine Arts.

Dividing the history of art in Latin America in those four periods we mentioned before, we see the abrupt change suffered by the original societies at the time of the European conquest. In this period the evangelization began and with it the process of abolition of most of the traditions that the inhabitants of the “New World” had. The pre-Hispanic art was closely associated with religious rituals, so by eliminating their beliefs and replacing them with new ones there was a significant loss of identity.

However this also created interesting examples of syncretism. The Spanish strategy in some cases was not to eradicate all indigenous symbols but trying to change its meaning and shift them to Christianity to explain dogmas as the Trinity or the Holy Spirit, which are difficult concepts to understand for someone who has no notion of Christianity. The same happened with certain special dates in the calendar native had that were replaced by Christian holidays. The idea was not to deprive them of the time of celebration but replaced the object of worship. We can see this

in “The Virgin of the hill” an anonymous painting of the seventeenth century preserved in Potosí, Bolivia. This work demonstrates the influence of Spanish American Baroque but as a expression of the characteristic of the region that synthesizes the history, religions of the new world and the conquerors, customs and even nature. The Coronation of the Virgin Mary is represented inserted into the Cerro Rico, whose wealth in silver gave origin to the combination of two cultures in all its aspects. They even include the Inca sun god (Inti) and Moon (keel) in the representation. In painting and sculpture in the early stages of colonization often consisted of imported European works of art, mainly Spanish, Italian and Flemish, but soon after they started the local production of paintings, inspired in European models, but incorporating logos of pre-Columbian culture again. So not only European art works were taken to be use to evangelize but also to make native people copy them and start changing their style into a more European.

The arrival of the conquerors was a great revolution especially in the field of architecture, with the translation of various types of European style buildings, mainly churches and cathedrals, given the rapid development of the work of evangelism of the Native American peoples, but also secular buildings like town halls , hospitals , universities and palaces and private villas. In the religious field, many churches were built on old indigenous temples. Still, there was often a synthesis between the colonists and the ancient pre-Columbian styles manifestations, creating a symbiosis that gave a peculiar and characteristic appearance to the original European types. Thus, we see that the main examples of colonial art occurred in the two more important Geographic centers in the pre-Columbian era: Mexico and Peru.

After this period with the independence of the Spanish crown and the beginning of the formation of the modern states, art suffered a new transformation. Already with the heritage of fine arts academies set up by the European colonies and a European-style art, it was transformed in a part of political propaganda tool or the formation of the identity of each nation. To qualify as a nation these new states had the need for patriotic symbols and define their cultural identity. In this period Aboriginal identity is completely eliminated in order to build a completely new identity. Using European influence not as an element to abolish a culture but from which to build a new one.

Given these three important changes in the conception of art we can start thinking of contemporary art. In the case of many Latin American artists we will see a great influence of the continent’s history in their art, that is why it is necessary to have a basis of the history to understand contemporary art. Starting in 1960 we can see the beginnings of contemporary art in Latin America. The exponents in each country are many and their influence exceeds the Latin territory. Globally in this period the epi-

center of art was no longer Europe. After World War II New York emerges as a new center for art where most of the great exponents are concentrated. However in Latin America other cities were also centers of art: Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo and Mexico are the main. Art becomes social, exploring subjects as native historical revisionism to both local and international political issues. In this period it is difficult to classify some artists since the variety of inspirations and means are such that they can not be classify, this is a typical feature of contemporary art.

Art is no stranger to globalization, considering it as a economic , technological, social and cultural process of planetary scale consisting on the growing communication and interdependence between different countries uniting their markets, societies and cultures, through a series of social, economic and political transformations that give a Global character. However we see that many times the countries that once were considered “periphery” somehow remain with that status. This is evidenced by the presence at art fairs and biennials where the role of Latinos, African and some Asian countries is always in the background.

Something similar can be seen in the art market. We have to keep in mind always that art even though can be seen as a cultural expression and a transformer of society, is also part of a market worth millions a year. It was not until the 1990s that Latin art was consider seriously at international auctions such as Sotheby’s or Christie’s. This is a clear example that marks how today still somehow Latino artists are relegated. However in this year edition of ARCO art fair (Madrid, Spain) the Latin American presence is one of the biggest ever. In oder words ARCO decided to stand out as a reference for Hispanic creation and avoid to be just another of the 220 art fairs held around the world each year. Also in order to make Madrid an indispensable meeting point between Europe and the Americas. Even though this is highly positive for latin american art market it also shows that still there is a lot of work to do in favor of promote latin art outside the continent and ironically once again in Spain the intermediary.

Looking at the map of American continent (do not confuse America - USA- with the American continent) we can not miss the “Giant of the North”, USA, and his great influence not only in art but also in politics of the Latin countries. Many are the Latino artists based in USA and have managed to leave a mark on the history of art there too. Whether through scholarships like the Guggenheim or necessity as in the case of Cuban artists, USA has always been a place that attracted the attention of many artists from the 60s on. In addition to the large number of Latinos living in the main centers of USA, it is impossible to miss the Latin influence in USA. So much that many private and public collections have great examples of Latino art and many institutions

such as the Smithsonian, MoMA, LACMA Museum of Fine Art in Houston are performing exhibitions and exchanges with various Latin museums.

Brazil is a paradigmatic case when its compared with the rest of Latin America and deserves to be analyzed separately. The differences can be many or few when we compare it to any other country in the region. Today we can see how, thanks to an apparent economic growth and strong incentives from the government, leads in the art market. Brazilian artists are the most sought internationally. One example of their importance in this field is the São Paulo Art Biennial (since 1952), which is the second oldest art biennial in the world after Venice Biennial (since 1895). It features both Brazilian and international contemporary art, giving the chance to people to see one of the largest exhibitions in the world every two years.

Either if we analyze latin american artists, their works or their role in the art market we will find a rich history, full of ups and downs but interesting enough to keep us awaiting on how it will develop in the near future.

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