

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN PAINTING

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Overview Painting in Latin America extends from the pre-history long before the emergence of the pyramid-building forgers of civilizations, the Maya, Aztec, and Inca. The earliest inhabitants of Latin America painted in the caves they lived and practiced religion in. Later, painting became a form of communication (hieroglyphics and pictograms). After that, it was used to communicate value systems, beliefs, and practices. Finally, art came full circle as it sought to deconstruct and destabilize a system of beliefs and aesthetics that it had, in earlier times, sought to unite church, state, and the hearts of men and women. Latin American art has both inspired and followed European traditions, even into the most contemporary art.

1. ANCIENT PERIOD

Cave paintings: Cueva de los Manos (Santa Cruz, Argentina) 13,000 – 9,000 years ago. Stenciled hand paintings (mainly left hands), 9,000 years old. Also, sun, geometric shapes, hunting scenes.

Petroglyphs: Pedra Furada, northeast Brazil. Iron oxide pigment, animals, hunters, geometric shapes. Carved 9,000 years ago. Altavista, Pacific coast of Mexico. Carved by the Tecoxquines (2300 – 2000 BCE). 56 petroglyphs representing rains, crops, religious rites. The petroglyphs in Chetcha, Peru feature animal, human, geometrical shapes.

Maya: The painting of the Maya was often expressed through their hieroglyphics, which were painted in their codices.

Moche: Predating the Incas, the Moche created elaborately decorated ceramics. Very little was known about Moche life except for their pyramids until the 1980s when explorers happened upon untouched tombs. In them, they found elaborate murals that depict everyday life. The ceramics are also painted. What is unique about the ceramics is that more than 500 are explicitly sexual and display not only giant genitals, but also human figures engaged in sexual acts, including intercourse between heterosexuals, intercourse between human females, intercourse between females and mythical creatures.

2. POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Inca: Incorporated painting in articles for daily life as well as for religious ceremonies. They dedicated a great deal of work painting with ceramics. Woven art, while not painting, also created meaning through colorful patterns that could be found in the textiles they created. The geometric shapes and colors had symbolic meaning. The finely woven textiles were used as currency.

Aztecs: The Aztecs painted to communicate, and much of their painting was in the form of brightly colored and detailed pictograms which appear in the Codices.

3. EARLY MODERN (COLONIAL) PERIOD

Indochristian Art: Arts of the Mission Schools: When the Spanish and Portuguese established missions in Latin America, their objective was to convert the Amerindians. At the same time, they needed to construct missions, churches, chapels, and other buildings. In using the converted Amerindians, a great fusion of indigenous and European traditions occurred. The Catholic priests brought in architects and artists from Europe, but they could not complete their work without the help of the local artisans. Indochristian art often incorporates the techniques of carving, sculpting, and uses the bright colors of the indigenous art.

Cuzco School: Cuzco, which was built on the foundations of a great Incan religious center, became known as the first center of European-influenced painting in the Americas. The Quechua artists, under that tutelage of European artists, became masters of the Andean Baroque, and developed their own ornate decorative styles. In addition, the artists included uniquely Andean elements, such as documenting the meeting of Atahualpa and Francisco Pizarro. Artists included Guaman Poma de Ayala, Jose Manso de Velasco, and Vicente Alban.

Casta Paintings: In eighteenth-century New Spain, artists often painted portraits that included placed the subjects within racial categories (castas). The titles of the paintings would record the racial category as well as the names; for example, the Peruvian casta painting entitled *Mestizo, Mestiza, Mestizo* which depicted a married couple and their child. Casta paintings were popular until the Nineteenth Century, when legal racial categories were abolished.

Botanical Drawings: Because so many of the Europeans arriving in the New World wished to chronicle their discoveries, there as a surge in still lifes and sketches that carefully depicted the fauna and flora. Many discoveries were made by such artists. Perhaps the most dramatic was that of John Lloyd Stephens, who, while drawing sketches of the flora, fauna, and landscape, discovered that the small hills were really vegetation-covered Maya ruins. Other examples include still lifes of fruits, painted by an Ecuadorian artist.

Art of Scientific Inquiry: In addition to still life paintings and sketches of flora and fauna, painters such as the Dutch-born Brazilian painter, Albert Eckhout painted detailed ethnographic representations of Brazil's inhabitants, still lifes of flora and fauna, and depictions of indigenous (Tupi) dance traditions. Painted in the tradition of Flemish realism, Eckhout's paintings provide valuable records of social life, flora, fauna, and ethnography in colonial Brazil. Frans Post was another painter who chronicled life in Dutch Brazil. Post was well-known for his sweeping landscapes.

Artisan and decorative painting: In a fusion of Spanish and indigenous traditions, designs were developed for painting on ceramics, tiles, furniture, and pottery, all for use in everyday life. One of the most celebrated examples is that of Talavera, which feature whimsical patterns, bright colors, and a distinctive thick glaze. Talavera pottery is a kind of maiolica pottery which was imported by the Spanish in the 16th century where it flourished in Talavera, Puebla (often referred to as Talavera Poblana to differentiate it from Talavera, Spain).

Baroque in Cathedrals: As mines were developed, and wealth acquired from the vast stores of gold and silver, funds were available to construct elaborate churches and cathedrals throughout Mexico. In addition to containing sculptures, the often included frescoed ceilings and walls. Excellent examples can be found in Puebla, Mexico, with its vaulting with frescos, and in Guanajuato, Mexico, all of which are characterized by pronounced chiaroscuro.

Ultrabaroque (or Churrigueresque). Examples of the highly ornate painting can be found in the Retablo de los Reyes (Metropolitan Cathedral, Mexico City).

4. NINETEENTH CENTURY

Self-portraits by indigenous and mestizo artists. The nineteenth century was a time of breaking away from Spain and Brazil, and also of creating a national identity. While the indigenous peoples were still denied access to the economy in significant ways, there was a tacit understanding that they were needed in order to attain critical mass in breaking away. They were also valuable soldiers and support in the battles for independence. There were also examples where the artists were able to obtain formal training, as in the case of Manuel Ocoranza, born in Uruapan, Mexico. His self-portrait shows influences of the philosophy of the Cuban Jose Marti, positioned as it is with the Castle of Chapultepec in the background.

Heroic depictions of battles. Romanticism began to supplant the neoclassicism of the colonial period. One of the most popular genres was that of the military painting, particularly that which showed valor in fighting for independence from Spain. Examples include Patricio Ramos Ortega's *Hand-to-Hand Fighting* (1862) (part of the Battle of Puebla series), and *Fusilamiento de Maximiliano, Miramon, y Mejia* (unknown artist, 19th century).

Costumbristas. Perhaps the most important artistic movement of the nineteenth century was that of the "costumbristas" whose focus was on the daily life and times in towns, villages, and among ordinary people. They were painted in realist style, and have come to be of great importance in understanding the social customs, traditions, and change of the societies of Latin America. The movement progressed in tandem with the development of the regional novel. Examples artists include Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz, Agustin Arrieta (Mexico), Juakin Pinto (Ecuador), and Prilidiano Pueyrredon (Argentina). Pueyrredón, whose father was the first president of the republic of Argentina, painted landscapes and portraits that capture the vastness of the Argentine pampas, and working people's connection to agriculture, ranching, and the construction of a dream.

5. TWENTIETH CENTURY

Avant-garde: All art is political and has an agenda that involves convincing the viewer of the validity of the world it represents. It may be produced to supplant existing belief systems, and also to illustrate social norms and aspirational goals (sometimes tangible in the here and now; but more often pointing to a glorious afterlife). Dramatic art production was also used to overwhelm the masses with the sheer sensory overload of the cathedrals and churches, to reinforce the spiritual and governmental powers. In the twentieth-century, art was charged with open subversion; social change that went far beyond the independence of the nineteenth-century, which left the church and the class system brutally in place. The anarchist (and later Bolshevik) political movements in Europe found artistic expression in Futurist, Vorticist and Dadaist art. In Mexico, the Mexican Revolution was accompanied by art that demanded action and also envisioned social justice.

Modernism in South America: In Brazil, 1922 was a pivotal moment in art, which reminds one of the impact of the Armory Show in 1909 in New York City. For Brazil and the rest of Latin America, modernist art was not tied to political activism but was more of a celebration of the arrival of technology, with important developments such as electricity, telephone communications, dams, transportation systems, and more. In that sense, they were perhaps more aligned with the Italian and French Vorticists who sought to represent machine and electric energy on a canvas. As a result, the elements one sees in South American modernist art are of then geometric shapes representing wire, electricity, transformers, gears, and machines.

Modernist Ethnographies on Canvas: Inspired by Europeans Paul Gauguin and Henri Rousseau, whose art explored the primal, the exotic and the world of the imagination, Latin American artists turned to their own cultures. Their work may be said to explore the exotic (as did the Latin American modernist poets), but above all, it affirms the “Otherness Within” – and constitutes an auto-exoticization, which is to say that it “makes it new” and imbues a procreative mythos into what was previously relegated to a lower social class. Examples include the Uruguayan painter Pedro Figari (1861–1938) who painted numerous canvases that explored the Creole traditions of his homeland. The Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949), who later studied and worked in Barcelona incorporated pre-Columbian motifs into his constructivist works.

Impressionism: Latin American impressionism was influenced by the French Impressionists, but it focused less on the effects of building up the surface by applying paint with small brush strokes, and more explorations of color fields. For example, Venezuelan artist Armando Reveron painted white-on-white to represent a coastal landscape suffused in harsh light and haze. He also sculpted dolls that he used as models. .

Mexican Muralism: The “big three” Mexican Muralists: José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949), Diego Rivera (1886–1957), and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), painted in a naturalist and representational genre that inspired many of the world’s reformist and utopian artists (Thomas Hart Benton is perhaps the distinguished in North America). The muralists were asked to paint murals on the walls of public buildings in Mexico in order to unite a fragmented post-Revolution Mexico, and to develop a coherent sense of Mexican identity. The philosophical underpinnings were spelled out in a 1921 manifesto published by Siqueiros, which suggests that public art should teach and engage (and in this sense is very much like the Renaissance philosophy of poetry – to delight and instruct - as expressed by Sir Philip Sidney)

Frida Kahlo: A talented diarist and artist and a passionate advocate of Mexican culture, Frida Kahlo dedicated herself to painting after she was gravely injured in a bus accident. She painted many self-portraits (55) as mirrors of her conflicted sense of identity as a Mexican woman. Her naive style, which some categorized as Social Realism, but which artista Andre Breton considered Surrealist, explored identity, gender, cultural heritage, life, death, myth and constructed narrative.

Abstract Expressionism: In Latin America, abstract expressionism took a different form, and began as Constructivism and then metamorphosed into two different movements: the “Concreto Invencion” (Concrete Invention), and then the “Neo Concretism” of Brazil and surrounding nations. Works from the later Concreto-Invención included shaped canvases by Carmelo Arden Quin (Uruguay), Lidy Prati (Argentina), and Tomás Maldonado (Argentina). Neo-Concretism emerged in Brazil with Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica as well as the kinetic and optical abstractions of Gego (Venezuela), Soto, and Carlos Cruz-Diez (Venezuela).

Surrealism: The most recognized Latin American surrealist painter was born in Barcelona, and moved to Colombia with his parents as a young child. Alejandro Obregon (Colombia) was unique among surrealists in that he explored the boundaries between surrealism and abstraction. Another surrealist, Roberto Aizenberg, was born in Argentina and his work is evocative of Andre Breton, Salvadore Dali, and Rene Magritte.

Abstract / Color Fields: Manabu Mabe (Japanese-Brazilian) began his work as an artist who painted silk ties. Later, he painted large canvases, becoming well-known for his bold brush strokes, dripping paint, bright colors and calligraphy.

Discussion/Questions

1. Being able to envision the gods, and to point out just how different they were from human beings was very important to the different groups of people who lived in Latin America before the arrival of the Europeans. Showing the people the consequences of the gods' displeasure was important, particularly in the case of the "Decapitator" gods of Tiwanaku, the Moche, and later, the Incas in the Andes. At the same time, the worldview extended far beyond the bounds of the earth, and incorporated depictions of calendars and celestial bodies. Explain how pre-Hispanic painting depicted beliefs and traditions, both religious and secular.
2. When the Spanish established their system of government, while they continued supporting the growth of the Catholic Church, they wanted to build a solid foundation of European-style art. To that end, they encouraged artists from Spain to travel to the New World and guide public works projects, as well as the construction of churches and schools. There were not enough artists, though, and it was necessary to recruit indigenous or mestizo artists and artisans. As a result, a new style emerged, which was a fusion. Describe the form and function of early Colonial painting.
3. When the spirit of independence began to inflame regions in Latin America, Simon Bolivar and others who shared his enthusiasm for the French philosophers' notions of liberty, equality, and brotherhood, sought ways to communicate the break from the past. Independence needed to look like heroic victory, although war rarely looks as glorious as it does in a painting or as a statue. Discuss how painting was used to express emerging national identities separate from Spain and Portugal during the nineteenth century.
4. The French influence Latin American culture in many ways during the nineteenth century. Not only did the spirit of revolution result in a torrent of Romantic work, it also focused on other aspects of society that were not considered worthy subjects of art by the NeoClassicists who bulwarked the monarchies. In France, writers such as Zola started to write about the working class and even the underclass. In Latin America, the same emphasis on realism could be found, with an emphasis on authenticity and cultural history. The paintings that depicted everyday life and the customs and activities came to be known as "costumbrismo." It was as much as a philosophical statement (a refusal to idealize) as an aesthetic exercise. Describe costumbrista painting styles.
5. The Mexican Revolution occurred after years of dashed hopes as the Mexican Independence in the Nineteenth Century did little to level the playing field, but simply reinforced the power of the colonial families. Coincidentally, the same frustration was felt in Europe as Russian and Italian Futurists created art that simultaneously celebrated technology (electricity, motors, film) as it embraced the anarchist, avant-garde spirit of the times. The Mexican Revolution's messages were reinforced by artists who embraced abstraction as well as the vibrant blends of typography, geometrical patterns, bold colors, and abstraction. Explain how political and artistic agendas merged in the twentieth century, and how Futurism, Vorticism, and Abstract from Europe merged with indigenous influences in Latin America.

Reading

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