

## Latin American Collection Overview

One is astounded by the depth and diversity of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's collection of Latin American art. Launched in the late 1950s when the SBMA received a core group of objects from Dr. MacKinley Helm, the pioneering scholar of Mexican modernism, the Museum's collection of Latin American art was long defined by premier examples of modern Mexican art. Acquisitions made during the 1990s, however, reflect an institutional decision to extend the collection beyond the borders of Mexico and into the contemporary period.

These works by a range of Latin American painters, sculptors, printmakers, and photographers address the various formal and social concerns of Latin American artists who have actively participated in international modernism from its early formulation in the 1910s and 1920s through its redefinition in terms of the postmodernist debate of the 1980s and 1990s.

David Alfaro Siqueiros's *El Esteta en el drama* (The Aesthete in Drama), a signature work of 1944 from Gordon and Suzanne Johnston, and two important canvases of 1959 by Ricardo Ramos Martinez from Henry and Gloria Rubin are special gifts, as are those from the late Charles A. Storke, a long-time Santa Barbara resident, successful business leader, and revered philanthropist.

During Mexico's post-Revolutionary period of the 1920s to 1940s, Mexican artists applied new forms of visual language spawned by modernism to the creation of a nationalist, public art that furthered the democratic ideals of the Revolution. Guided by an activist ideology, Mexico's new leaders—President Alvaro Obregón, and especially his minister of education, José Vasconcelos—championed large-scale public murals as the selected mode to educate and provide an art form “for the people”.

Empowered by the spirit of modernity and the sponsorship of a progressive government, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, soon known as *Los Tres Grandes*, or “The Big Three” of Mexican muralism, set the agenda for a modern art in the service of profound political and social change. Many of their preparatory studies for murals or related graphic are based, for the most part, on the history of Mexico's colonization and subsequent revolution, including ideas for radical transformation that shaped the post-Revolutionary period.

### What is Latin America?

Succeeding the designations “Ibero-America” and “Hispanoamerica”, the term “Latin America” was coined circa 1850 by French political scientists to encompass the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies from the Rio Grand in North America to Cape Horn, and the French- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

As a geographic region encompassing Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, “Latin America” was defined by colonialism, which, including its aftermath and permutations, has been a defining experience that has shaped many aspects of this vast and complex region ever since. In modern times the result in phenomena of repression, resistance, revolution, and reform have marked in different ways the various nations that comprise this area. From the beginning of this century to the present moment, artists of the region have addressed this volatile experience in manifold ways, with realism and its variants being the most prevalent. Integral to this ongoing concern has been the search for personal identity, which artists have navigated by crossing the span between the indigenous and the colonial, the regional and the international.

Artists throughout Latin America have been part of the defining art movements of the twentieth century, from Cubism, Surrealism, and Constructivism to Lyrical, Geometric, and Expressive Abstraction, and recent developments of the past three decades. They have actively engaged in international modernism, filtering their interpretations of current aesthetic concerns through their particular artistic, social, and political worldviews.

Like their counterparts in the United States, modern Latin American artists sojourned in Europe, seeking to become involved in the radical art movements that transformed the visual arts in the early decades of the twentieth century. Wilfredo Lam and Matta both lived and worked in Paris before World War II, each becoming involved intimately with the European Surrealists. A native of Uruguay, Joaquín Torres-García also actively participated in the Parisian avant-garde between the two World Wars, but within Constructivist, rather than Surrealist, circles. At the same time, Latin American modernists also participated in the cultural life of the United States. Forced to leave Mexico in 1932, David Alfaro Siqueiros settled in Los Angeles for a brief period, where he painted three important murals. In 1936 he established the Experimental Art Workshop in New York City that influenced a younger generation of painters, including Jackson Pollock.

Whether at home or abroad, Latin American artists of the twentieth century have contributed significantly to the artistic vanguard. Coupled with the invigorating influences of international aestheticism, the unique identity of Latin American modernism is defined by a desire to tap the powerful artistic legacies of Latin America's indigenous cultures. These alternative formal and symbolic vocabularies particularized modernist expression throughout Latin America as artists sought to inflect international directions with the specifics of native histories and cultures. The resulting artforms can be understood as neither purely cosmopolitan nor purely regional, but rather appreciated as an inventive blend of both innovation and tradition.

### **Indigenism/Americanism**

The concept of indigenism was as significant to Mexican modernism as was nationalism and its prevalent theme of revolution. Reacting against years of European influence that characterized the preceding government regime of Porfirio Díaz, Mexican artists of the post-Revolutionary period embarked on a fervent search for national identity by rediscovering the value in the indigenous arts and culture of Mexico. As an intellectual and political idea, indigenism's roots reach back to Europe's Enlightenment and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concepts about anti-rationalism and anti-intellectualism. In turn, these concepts fueled the cult of the "primitive" that captivated European artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

If basic parallels can be drawn between Latin America's indigenists and Europe's primitivists of the early decades of this century, important differences must be noted as well. Most critical among them is that while European artists like Pablo Picasso practiced a primitivism that drew inspiration from peoples outside their cultural and physical boundaries, Latin American artists, like Alfredo Ramos Martínez, gained a newly romanticized appreciation for the indigenous populations of their native countries.

- SBMA Wall Text, *From Azaceta To Zuniga: 20th Century Latin American Art*,  
Diana DuPont, Curator, 11-5-2000

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## **Latino Legacy: Photographs from the Permanent Collection**

Latin American photographers provide a special and distinctive perspective rooted in their cultural history. Encompassing magical rituals and traditional customs, political realities and everyday moments, the images—unadorned yet powerful—made by photographers in their native countries derive their strength from the real events and mores and attitudes of real people in the Latin American world.

Unique cultural references that distinctively embody universal human experiences emerge from the varied and rich imagery. A characteristic feature surprising to non-Latin eyes is the pervasive presence of symbols, some of which are easily read—skeletons and skulls, for example—and others which have complex cultural and ritualistic meanings, but hold us through their sheer iconic power. They reveal their secrets and subtle meanings only as one explores the individual context of each image. A unifying thread is connectedness to the earth and the indigenous people, yet the fabric and texture of each photographer's vision is distinct.

- Karen Sinsheimer, Curator of Photography, Santa Barbara Museum of Art