

Latin American Art is Booming, But Museums Struggle to Attract Latino Audiences

By Robin Cembalest

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The Latin American art market jumps into high gear this month. At Sotheby's auction house in New York, offerings include Rufino Tamayo's mouthwatering Watermelon Slices, estimated to sell for up to \$2 million. Christie's has paintings by Diego Rivera, Fernando Botero, Wifredo Lam, and other big names. Meanwhile the Pinta art fair, opening Thursday across from the Empire State Building, hopes to entice buyers with classic Latin American modernism as well as the latest works by well-known (and emerging) contemporary figures. The five-year-old fair makes a particular commitment to helping art museums acquire these works—in a special program, it offers them up to \$250,000 in matching funds.

Museum schedules are also packed with Latin American art this season. In Baltimore, the Walters Art Museum will showcase pre-Columbian masterpieces from a recent gift. L.A. Xicano, a series of five exhibitions in Los Angeles, chronicles the Chicano art movement. In New York, the Museum of Modern Art is re-uniting the murals that Diego Rivera painted there in 1931, along with other works from that era, on themes of Mexican history and social injustice.

And the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is presenting two groundbreaking exhibitions about Latin America's colonial era. Both shows aim to challenge the myth that the Aztecs, the Incas, and the other great Latin American cultures withered away after the Spaniards arrived, exploring the ways their traditions thrived and evolved in the 16th and 17th centuries—and beyond.

Focusing on the great capitals of Tenochtitlan and Cuzco, "Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World," which opened Sunday, uses a stunning array of paintings, sculptures, feather collages, textiles, queros (Andean drinking vessels), and more to look at how indigenous people made art, appeared in it, transformed Christian imagery to reflect their own traditions, and claimed miracle-working images like the Virgin of Guadalupe.

"Children of the Plumed Serpent," opening next April, examines the legacy of the city-states in southern Mexico, dominated by Nahua, Mixtec, and Zapotec nobility who largely resisted Aztec and Spanish subjugation. With codices, polychrome ceramics, gold, turquoise, shell, textiles, featherwork, and other precious materials, the show examines how these societies influenced culture all over Mexico in the centuries that followed.

These blockbusters will inevitably lure scholars from all over the world. But will they be seen by the immigrants from the countries where the treasures were made? That's not so apparent. As art museums invest an increasing amount of resources to buy and showcase examples of Latin American heritage, programming directed at Latin American audiences lags far behind.

A recent study by the American Association of Museums estimates nonwhite museum visitors at 9 percent—a figure that's spectacularly low when you consider the urban locations of many top art museums. But you don't need statistics—just visit any museum gallery and it's clear that the art-going audience doesn't match the general population.

Cost is one reason. Museum admission can be as high as \$25 dollars per adult, the price of entry at MoMA. Though most museums have free-admission times, these are often on weekday evenings, hardly a convenient slot for working parents and their families. And though more and more museums offer Spanish-language tours, they don't coincide with the free-admission times. (And good luck finding them listed on museum websites.)

But other obstacles are cultural. Many immigrants who lack a museum-going tradition don't feel comfortable or welcome in art museums, studies have found. And though children of immigrants often visit museums through school programs, they don't often return on their own, or with their families.

That's why the Denver Art Museum is creating a new position, Latino Cultural Programs Coordinator, that is among the most ambitious in the field. Along with creating bilingual initiatives including tours, programs, and games, the responsibilities include "implementing strategies that increase comfort and a sense of feeling welcome for Latino audiences."

This means thinking about how the museum feels to visitors who walk in off the street—where they see and hear Spanish, for example, says Heather Nielsen, the museum's head of community and family programs. Or making sure the restaurant offers seating for Latin American family groups. The aim is to increase minority audience from 14 percent to a figure more in line with the city's demographic, almost 50 percent.

At the Queens Museum, located in the nation's most diverse county, attendance is more than half nonwhite, says Director of External Affairs David Strauss. He credits an "institutional dedication to reaching out to the Spanish-speaking population." Spanish-language offerings include the New New Yorkers Program for new immigrants, with courses in web design, digital photography, and sound editing; art therapy; and events for families with children with autism, who often feel doubly isolated because they don't speak the language, Strauss points out. "There's a real hunger in the Spanish-speaking population," he says. "They've never been invited to any other museum in the city the way we're trying to invite them in." The museum is also sponsoring Tania Bruguera, a Cuban-born performance artist whose project is an immigrant service center in Corona. And it will soon become the second major museum with a Spanish-language twitter feed, joining @enlacma from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

For audiences to truly reflect the community, Nielsen concurs, museum strategies need to be diverse as well. "You need to think about your exhibition schedule, how are you using your permanent collection. Who is on staff, at the front door, on the board of directors. That takes a huge commitment from the entire institution."

Developing such initiatives might not always be as alluring to museum curators – or patrons-- as spending big bucks on a painting or organizing a high-profile show. But nine percent is just not good enough. The population in this country is changing fast. Museums need to change faster.

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