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Latin American art springs forth in California museums

In exhibits, exchanges and programs, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and other institutions are examining fresh topics and weaving the work into a global fabric.

By Suzanne Muchnic, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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It's only natural, given their proximity to Mexico and rapidly growing Latino constituencies, that California art museums would be engaged with Latin American material. But the robust lineup of exhibitions, exchanges and educational programs indicates that the days of focusing on historic "treasures" or romanticized figures such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera are over.

Museum directors and curators are talking about examining fresh topics and weaving Latin American art into a global fabric — in projects that require inter-departmental collaboration, international networking and community outreach.

From the classic to the grittily contemporary, Latin American art is just about everywhere this spring.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is gearing up for its April 1 opening of "Children of the Plumed Serpent: The Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Ancient Mexico," an exploration of independent kingdoms in southern Mexico that established a vast international trade network. The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego is planning its June 1 launch of "Santa Ana Condition: John Valadez 1976 to 2011," the first retrospective of the Mexican American artist's paintings, photographs and pastels. In San Francisco, the Museum of Modern Art is opening "Photography in Mexico" on Saturday and preparing a fall installation of Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's interactive video and sound work.

The action is most apparent at LACMA, where director Michael Govan has overseen a quickening parade of exhibitions covering a broad sweep of history. "Children of the Plumed Serpent" will accompany "In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States" in the Resnick Pavilion, in the space recently occupied by "Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World." "Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico" inaugurated the building in 2010. The recent "Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987," a landmark survey of Chicano performance and conceptual art, was part of the Getty-sponsored Pacific Standard Time celebration of Los Angeles' rise as an art center.

LACMA declared a stepped-up interest in Latin American art in 1997 with the acquisition of about 2,000

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Mexican modernist works from the collection of Edith and Bernard Lewin. Ilona Katzew, the museum's first curator of Latin American art, came aboard in 2000. Six years later, she joined forces with the late Virginia Fields, a scholar of early Mesoamerican art and archaeology, to establish the Latin American art department. But Katzew and Govan stress that Latin American art has not been put in a cubbyhole.

In Govan's words, "It's a fundamental, central core of our program. We are looking at it as a museum-wide awareness of and investment in our present and future audience and culture."

One result of the initiative, in the last five years, is the acquisition of about 2,000 works: pre-Columbian pieces from Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia; Spanish colonial painting and decorative arts; and modern and contemporary works, including "Burn, Baby, Burn," a monumental painting made in 1965-66 by Chilean-born Roberto Matta.

Among innovative outreach efforts is a series of shows organized by Jose Luis Blondet, an associate curator in the museum's education department, for the largely Latino student body of Charles White Elementary School, housed at the former home of the Otis College of Art and Design near MacArthur Park. Works in a current exhibition, "A Is for Zebra," grapple with alphabets and language in images, ideas, sounds and stories.

"It's a great starting point — first-grade kids in L.A.," Govan says. "In Los Angeles public schools, you have the challenge of teaching kids English as well as the subject matter. Art is a fantastic way to bridge those issues."

Many other institutions have exhibitions in the works. While Long Beach's Museum of Latin American Art continues to offer a steady flow of modern and contemporary exhibitions and performances, at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art, curator Alma Ruiz, is extending her lengthy list of Latin American projects with a traveling show of abstraction made from the 1930s to the 1970s; it's expected to open in 2014. Patrick Polk, a curator at UCLA's Fowler Museum, is studying interpretations of death in Latin American artworks for an exhibition, also scheduled for 2014. The USC Fisher Museum, under the leadership of Selma Holo, has its eye on Latin America as well.

Latin American art itself is an enormous bridge — most expansively defined as encompassing works from pre-Columbian times to the present, made by artists of South American, Central American and Mexican heritage. It isn't easy for general art museums to figure out where it belongs or for artists to deal with geographic labels.

Valadez, 60, a native of Los Angeles primarily known as a muralist and painter of realistic urban landscapes, doesn't like to analyze his work, much less "the whole Chicano thing," he says. "How do we fit with Latin American art? Or are we American artists? The stuff that's being talked about these days, I leave that up to other people. I am a picture maker. I'm interested in the dynamics of people."

For Hugh Davies, who directs San Diego's Museum of Contemporary Art, the retrospective of Valadez's studio work exemplifies the institution's commitment to serve under-recognized artists. "He is an incredibly talented artist who has not had the attention he deserves," says Davies, who is particularly impressed with the artist's seldom shown pastels.

While LACMA's Latin American push is a relatively recent phenomenon, the San Diego museum, which maintains facilities in La Jolla and downtown San Diego, has been engaged with Tijuana artists and Mexican border projects for more than two decades. About half of the works in "Strange New World: Art and Design From Tijuana," a 2006 show, are in the museum's collection. Davies is also proud of "Ultra Baroque: Aspects of Post Latin American Art," a critically acclaimed 2000-03 traveling exhibition that challenged

misperceptions and stereotypes, organized for the museum by Elizabeth Armstrong, its chief curator at the time.

"That show helped others in this country understand Latin American art as quite sophisticated and international," he says.

Such projects call for building long-distance relationships. Ilene Fort, LACMA's curator of American art, organized "In Wonderland" with Tere Arcq of the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City, where the show will travel — after an appearance in Quebec. Borrowing valuable Olmec objects from Mexico led LACMA to send 115 Indian artworks from its collection to the Museo Nacional de las Culturas in Mexico City. And that led to an expanded version of the show, opening March 12 at the Centro Cultural Palacio la Moneda in Santiago, Chile.

Stephen Markel, the head of LACMA's department of South and Southeast Asian art who suddenly became involved with Latin America when asked to organize the unexpected exchange of Indian art, views it as "a wonderful opportunity to share our collection" and provide both countries with their first exhibitions of ancient Indian art.

But physical displays can go only so far in spreading knowledge about art. The Internet is also essential. To that end, LACMA has taken charge of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies Inc. (www.famsi.org/), a major online resource for scholars. The museum will add its pre-Columbian collection to the existing databases and retool the website. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston — a powerhouse in Latin American art, where curator Mari Carmen Ramírez has established a research center — recently launched Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art, a digital archive of primary-source materials available free online to the public (www.icaadocs.mfah.org). The archive, which was created over the last decade with the help of a research team at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, is accompanied by a series of new books.

All of which helps the cause of Latin American art. But is it more than a first step?

Govan puts it this way: "Is museums' interest in Latin American art rising nationally? Yes. Is it rising at the same speed and with the same significance as the population? Not even close."

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