**Conceptions and Representations of Latinos and Mainstream Museums in the United States**

*Museums are important venues in which a society can define itself and present itself publicly. Museums solidify culture, endow it with tangibility, in a way few other things do.*

Steven C. Dubin

*Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power.*

Gloria Anzaldúa

*Art exhibitions are privileged vehicles for the representation of individual and collective identities, whether they consciously set out to be so or not.*

Mari Carmen Ramírez

This paper focuses on the conceptions, interpretations, and representations of Latin Americans and Latinos as denoted by mainstream art museums in the United States. I believe that one cannot address these institutions’ practices with regard to Latinos without taking into consideration the treatment of Latin Americans, because attitudes about Latin Americans are often transferred onto Latinos and vice versa. Through an examination of the structures and practices that exist within government policies and U.S. mainstream art museums, I intend to illustrate the continued disparagement of Latin Americans and Latinos by these institutions.¹ I focus on the Smithsonian Institution’s collection and exhibition practices as a means to illustrate persistent subversive conventions affecting Latinos on a national level. I also analyze the Smithsonian’s exhibit *Arte Latino* as an example of one of the most recent attempts to represent Latinos in the U.S.

The United States has a long history of aggressive foreign policy with regard to Latin America.² This history attests to the colonial practices of the U.S. and emphasizes the regularized censure of Latin Americans. Propaganda associated with the U.S. government’s
operations in Latin America has created conceptions of Latin Americans and Latinos. The U.S.
government has exploited art exhibitions to further its own goals, while countering negative
responses to its activities in Latin America. Art and cultural events related to foreign policy
implies strong ties between mainstream art museums and the political, military, and corporate
powers in the U.S., henceforth referred to as the power elite. These types of events also
demonstrate how the power elite constructs what and how information is disseminated to the
North American public. This complex and conflicted relationship between the power elite,
mainstream art institutions, and the public leads me to question what the true functions of these
institutions are and who they are really meant to serve?

Whoever constructs and represents culture, affects the conceptions that are formed about
that culture. Art functions within a matrix between auction houses, art dealers, collectors of art,
museums, art critics, art historians, and universities. This matrix affects standards and practice
and manages art what the public has access to and how it is perceived.

Public museums have the power to form ideas about art and culture through their
collections and exhibitions. Ivan Karp explains: “The sources of power are derived from the
capacity of . . . institutions to classify and define peoples and societies. This is the power to
represent: to reproduce structures of belief and experience through which cultural differences are
understood.” The objective of exhibitions is disseminated through the display of objects (by
theme, the didactic information, color, arrangement of objects, etc), which direct the viewers’
experience. Display methods attempt to interpret for the viewer the message and intention of the
artist and object as perceived and interpreted by the curator(s). The issue that arises here is that
when an object or experience is displayed and interpreted, it is the interpreter’s perspective that
is presented and communicated. While this may be a virtually accepted cliché within the art
world, the general public may lack the knowledge and confidence to disagree or challenge
information presented; therefore what is dictated is accepted as fact.
The Smithsonian Institution is one of the largest museum, research, and educational complexes in the world. As a national institution the Smithsonian defines, through its collection practices and exhibitions, what is valid and valuable for North American culture and history. *Willful Neglect*, drafted in 1994 by the Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues asserts:

> The Smithsonian Institution almost entirely excludes and ignores the Latino population of the United States. This lack of inclusion is glaringly obvious in the lack of a single museum facility focusing on Latino or Latin American art, culture, or history; the near-absence of permanent Latino exhibitions or programming’ the small number of Latino staff, and the minimal number in curatorial or managerial positions; and the almost total lack of Latino representations in the governance structure.

Although improvements such as the development of the Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives have occurred, I maintain that most of the issues addressed by *Willful Neglect* have not.

Scholars and supporters of Latino art, as opposed to institutional initiatives, have made an impact on the inclusion of Latino objects within the Smithsonian Institutions various collections of objects. Marvette Perez played a key role in coordinating the acquisition of 3200 Puerto Rican objects from the Vidal Collection for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. Andrew Connors worked at the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) approximately between 1992 and 1999 and focused his efforts on the acquisition of Latino objects and the preparations for an exhibition of Latino art, which would later become *Arte Latino*. Connors created a wish list of artists and objects to be included in SAAM’s collection. Objects were targeted based on their historical significance within American history. In 1998 Helene Lucero joined Connors in the task of acquisitions of Latino objects for SAAM and the planning of the exhibition.

*Arte Latino, Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum* consists of many of the objects that Connors and Lucero worked to acquire for SAAM, yet neither was involved in
the exhibition’s final form. The U.S. tour of Arte Latino began in September of 2000 and will come to an end in January of 2003.\textsuperscript{11} Although the exhibition catalogue touts the importance of telling the story of America through the visual arts the viewer is provided very little information that would serve to contextualize the objects in the exhibition within their specific cultures nor within American society or history. Except for a video that is part of the exhibition, in which some of the artists speak about their work, there is nothing that reflects the hours of interviews Connors and Lucero had with artists in relation to their work and the piece acquired for SAAM. Most of the didactic information created by Connors and Lucero, which was meant to address issues of place, history and culture was not incorporated into the traveling exhibition. The catalogue briefly describes each artist and his or her work individually, but neither is related to the concept behind their acquisition or place within the exhibition.

The objects included in Arte Latino are relevant to the history and experience of Latinos in the U.S., but the public must be educated about their significance in terms of their place in U.S. history, in terms of the specific maker and their unique cultural heritage and experiences, and in terms of their being a part of a larger collective, which in this case is the exhibition and SAAM’s collection. Here was an opportunity where information could have educated the museum visitor, and addressed Latinos’ places in American history, but it was deemed unnecessary to provide.

Although the intended meaning or message behind Arte Latino may have been well intentioned, it is necessary to consider how the interpretive audience perceived and interpreted what was presented. It cannot be assumed that messages are received in the intended spirit they were projected, especially if these coded messages do not include enough information to form an independent and educated opinion. Since mainstream museums participated in the construction of misconceptions and negative portrayals of Latin Americans and Latinos over time, I maintain that it is now their responsibility to educate the North American public about the relevance and
contributions of Latin Americans and Latinos in the U.S.

Highlighting Latino art through an exhibition is a method utilized to (re)introduce Latinos to the North American public and acknowledge Latinos’ contributions to the arts, but is it a sufficient effort? Too often representations of Nuevo Mexicanos, Chicanos, Puerto Riquenos (to name a few) are offered and received as representative of the entire Latino population. Although Arte Latino is meant to: “. . . highlight more than 200 years of Latino art from across the United States,” the majority of the sixty-six paintings, sculptures, and photographs are works by artists that live and work primarily in the Southwest and Puerto Rico. The exhibition suggests through its title that the diverse reality of latinidad in the United States would be presented, when in actuality it would be impossible to do so when the objects shown are limited to artists from a very specific region.

Additionally, a temporary display of Latino art that travels around the country exposes the public to Latino art, but only for a brief period of time. These types of exhibitions neither provide nor guarantee a sustainable presence for Latinos within museums. It could also be argued that the separation of Latino art objects from other objects produced by North Americans reinforces that Latinos and their art are not considered part of the weave of the social fabric of the United States. Inclusion of Latino art in permanent exhibitions of U.S. mainstream museums would illustrate Latino presence in the U.S., which could educate the public and stimulate the recognition of Latinos’ contributions to this country. As Arte Latino is now at the end of its tour, I wonder how many of these objects will be incorporated into the permanent exhibitions at SAAM. Currently SAAM remains closed due to renovations, so we can only wait to see if and how Latinos are included in the story of our country.12

Cultural dynamics that may be foreign, both to those in the museum field and the audience must be acknowledged, incorporated, and made accessible if everyone is expected to benefit from the encounter.13 One possible method that could work to reverse the adverse
attitudes towards Latin Americans and Latinos is the establishment and development of Latin American and Latino art collections. Inclusion in U.S. mainstream museums collection and permanent exhibitions validates the objects’ historical significance. It creates a space in time for those objects and all that they represent. This is where and how the object, and the culture it represents, gains power. This is a space that Difference must occupy, yet is too often it has been devalued and eliminated.

That Latinos are not a priority on the agenda of the Smithsonian is evident, not only by limited exhibitions of Latino art, but also by the lack of Latinos in high-level program and management areas. Perhaps this is due to the low priority of Latino art on the agenda at the Smithsonian Institution, which may imply that administrators see no reason to hire Latinos for these positions. It is also possible that Latinos and those interested in Latino art are not drawn to apply to the Smithsonian because of its history and ideology, which implies limited professional opportunities.

The Smithsonian is directed and operated by individuals. It is these individuals that set policy. It is they that set the tone and establish the ideology put into practice. It is their conceptions and projects of interest that are endorsed. I maintain the Smithsonian Institution does not represent the nation, instead it demonstrates the ideology of its current staff. Which leads me to wonder, How can we expect change if the same people continue to operate in the same manner?

Who interprets, constructs, and presents art and culture is significant. Political and economic policies towards Latin America have stimulated fear and encouraged intolerance towards the peoples of that region, as well as towards Latinos. Currently most individuals in positions of power in museums, government, or corporations have been educated and conditioned by a model that promotes Euro-American superiority over that which has been defined as the “Other.” The emphasis on and privileging of Euro-American aesthetics
continuously produce a condescending approach to Latin American and Latino art. U.S. mainstream museums have bolstered these attitudes through their collection practices and the low number and deficient nature of exhibitions of Latin American and Latino art. None of this allows for a balanced consideration of elements and issues that are significant to non Euro-American cultures. When Latin American and Latino art is stereotypically categorized, presented as exotic or as an example of the “Other” it constructs and reinforces negative attitudes about those communities and their art.

Public art institutions assert their place in society as educational resources, but I maintain that what is taught does not necessarily correspond to the needs and reality of the community at large. This paper asserts that mainstream museums in the U.S. have and continue to serve as components of the communications apparatus of the political, military, and corporate powers’ of the United States. The power elite continue to manipulate these institutions as long as they continue to be managed by an administration that is educated and accustomed to operating within a structure that continues to favor the Euro-American model and aesthetics; as they continue to be directed by advisory boards who are most often of the power elite; as they continue to be dependent on private support, which most often comes from those in the power elite; and as they continue to become increasingly dependent on corporate sponsorship. Thus, that which is presented by mainstream art institutions more often than not represents the conceptions, attitudes, opinions, and interests of the power elite.

The deficient nature and numbers of Latin American and Latino art collections established in and exhibitions produced by U.S. mainstream art institutions have compounded the issue of the lack of support in the nation to educate and develop scholars and professionals interested in pursuing the fields of Latin American and Latino art. Although the Latino population is acknowledged as the second largest ethnic group in the United States, they have historically been discounted. Peter C. Marzio, director of the Museum of Fine Arts of
Houston, identified, in 1991 the absence of resources for scholarship and publications, the cost of preparation, and issues of revenue as reasons behind the deficient treatment of Latino art.

Marzio states:

> Since [Latino] art is not studied in many universities or reviewed in professional or mass-circulated periodicals, information about the artists and their works is not coherent or easy to locate. . . . [F]ew . . . museums have the funds needed to carry out basic research or to expand into new program areas. . . . [The] pressure to earn revenue has many ramifications for minority arts.  

The relative lack of interest in or acknowledgement of Latin American and Latino art in museums suggests that it is considered insignificant, which in turn minimizes its appeal and leads to an attitude of disregard. Following suit, most universities in the U.S. have not developed a curriculum related to interest in Latin American or Latino visual art. This perpetuates the lack of human resources in the field, which in turn undermines the development for support elements for scholars, such as publications and professional opportunities, etc.  

> Museums should work towards representing the complexity of culture in the shared space, as well as representing our shared and differing experiences in the United States. Yet the responsibility for higher quality exhibitions of Latin American and Latino art does not solely lie with museums. Latinos must get more involved in the representation of their culture! Gloria Anzaldúa writes:

> Individually, but also as a racial entity, we need to voice our needs. We need to say to white society: We need you to accept the fact that [we] are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the act that you looked upon us as less than human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect. We need you to make public restitution: to say that, to compensate for your own sense of defectiveness, you strive for power over us, you erase our history and our experience because it makes you feel guilty—you’d rather forget your brutish acts. . . . To say that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt. . . . And finally, tell us what you need from us.  

Exhibitions of Latin American and Latino art could prove to be a service and an educational resource to the cultural s they celebrate and explores, but more importantly to individuals who
are not part of those groups.

Ignorance breeds intolerance, yet through art, we can gain an understanding of the unique cultural beliefs and histories of the many different people that make up this planet. Art exhibitions that foster cultural awareness could stimulate dialogue that leads to understanding and acceptance of those who are different. Additionally, these types of exhibitions could serve as a necessary component of recognition that encourages self-pride.

Through this paper I attempt to challenge statements about the improvement in the treatment, conceptions, and conditions of Latinos in the U.S. How to dismantle the current model and how to integrate more culturally responsive and community building exhibitions is addressed, but by no means resolved. I work towards the rethinking of the representation of Latin Americans and Latino culture in the U.S. These groups must seek to educate themselves and others, through higher learning and then through the varied possible applications of the arts. We must assert our place in the institutions, in the Nation, and in the consciousness of those among whom we live.
Since the discovery of America we have wrestled with the issue of conceptions, interpretations, and representations of the indigenous cultures of the Americas by Euro Americans. I am aware that in the last thirty years scholars and professionals have written about the history of oppression of Latin Americans and Latinos in the U.S. referencing museums’ collection and exhibition practices as evidence. Mine is not a new approach, instead I hope to contribute to the current evaluation of U.S. mainstream art museums’ representation of Latin Americans and Latinos in the hope that if these issues are continuously brought to the forefront, they may be more difficult to deny, which might lead to change.


During the nineteenth century, an aggressive expansionism was added to the defensive paternalism of the Monroe Doctrine. . . . The United States came to believe that it had been singled out for a special mission: to carry its particular brand of economic, social and political organization initially westwards within North America and later throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The 1933 “Good Neighbor” Policy asserted the U.S. government’s opposition to direct intervention in Latin America and generated an exchange of art between the two countries. Jenny Pearce elaborates on the intention of the “Good Neighbor” policy, see Rossett and Vandermeer 1970, 108-109. The “Good Neighbor” Policy exemplifies the type of links that exist between politics and culture in the United States. The Rockefellers were directly involved with the development of the “Good Neighbor: Policy, and have a long history of interests affiliated with Latin America. See Waldo Rasmussen, ed., *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*; MoMA Exhibition Catalogue (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993) 12.

Nelson A. Rockefeller became a trustee of the Museum [of Modern Art] in 1932 and served as the Museum’s president from 1939 until 1941, when he resigned to work full-time as President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Coordinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs. (Later he would hold the office of Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs.) The Rockefeller family’s commitment to Latin American art and culture . . . coincided not only with their business interest in Latin American countries (Standard Oil of New Jersey’s operations in Venezuela and Mexico, for example) but also with the official United States wartime ‘Good Neighbor’ policy, which Nelson Rockefeller had a hand in elaborating through his government appointment. The policy was intended in large part to influence Latin American countries toward the Allies rather than toward the Axis powers. Among the projects undertaken by the Inter-American Affairs office were exhibitions of American art sent to Latin America and reciprocal shows of Latin American art circulated in the United States. The organization of a number of these exhibitions was contracted to The Museum of Modern Art.
The self-appointed task of the U.S. to protect the world from evildoers often coincides with capitalistic interest. I would argue that the interests of the Rockefeller’s in Latin America made it equitable to assist in the development of projects that would smooth relations between the U.S. and Latin America. Conveniently they were able to protect their financial interests in Latin America while appearing philanthropic through their own image salvaging efforts. Despite the Rockefeller’s possible good intentions towards Latin America, the negative impact on the communities of those nations related to their actions outweigh their intent.


John F. Kennedy conceived of the United States Alliance for Progress policy after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Through participation in the economic and cultural development the U.S. meant to prevent the spread of communism in Latin America. These efforts incorporated monetary support for the Organization of Latin American States (OAS), which aided the development of Latin American exhibitions in the U.S. The Organization of Latin American States (OAS), previously know as the Pan American Union, has provides Latin American artists an opportunity to show work in the United States and became an important place to show for those seeking international recognition. See Cancel, et al. 1988, 232


4 See C. Wright Mills, _Power Elite_, (Publisher Unknown, 1960s) 6. Mills explains the structure and mode of operation of the power elite:

Within American society, major national power now resides in the economic, the political, and the military domains. . . . Religious, educational, and family institutions are not autonomous centers of national power: on the contrary, these decentralized areas are increasingly shaped by the big three . . . Families and churches and schools adapt to modern life; governments and armies and corporations shape it; and, as they do so, they turn these lesser institutions into means for their ends. . . . And the symbols of all these lesser institutions are used to legitimate the power and the decisions of the big three.
Education and the media are other methods utilized by the U.S. government to spread propaganda and shape opinions of the masses. See Mills, 310-317.

Victor Burgin argues, “. . . the canon is what gets written about, collected, and taught; it is self-perpetuating, self-justifying, and arbitrary; it is the gold standard against which the values of a new aesthetic currenies are measured. Victor Burgin, The Endo of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1986) 159.


The Task Force formed as a result of the Latino Working Committee, which formed in the 1980s. The Working Committee consisted of employees from the Smithsonian that were upset about issues relevant to Latinos and the lack of representation of Latinos by the Institution. Andrew Connors, Personal Interview (4 October 2002). The Task Force was a citizens’ committee. Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues, Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institutions, May 1994).


SAAM’s purchased acquisitions of Latino art are a direct result of the efforts made by the Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues. The funds utilized to acquire many of the pieces included in Arte Latino were allocated by The Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives from their budget. Funds provided by the Center were also utilized to pay for the salaries of those working on Latino art oriented projects, such as Arte Latino. Helene Lucero, Personal Interview, 12 October 2002.

Arte Latino was intended to open at SAAM before going on tour. The version intended for D.C. would have been more inclusive of the nearly 500 Latino objects in SAAM’s collection. Due to unforeseen structural issues SAAM closed its doors earlier than planned for renovations and the show never opened in its intended form. Instead the traveling exhibition is the only version known and seen by the public. Andrew Connors, Personal Interview, 4 October 2002.

On the whole Latino art and Latinos continue to be discounted at the Smithsonian. They are left out of permanent exhibitions on display at the different museums that make up the Smithsonian complex. Presently there are few advocates for the permanent display of Latino art within the museums, thus the scenario promises to remain the same. Connors, 2002. See also Noriega 2000,45. Additionally, conversations regarding the Smithsonian’s collection and exhibition practices with regard to Latino art were a regular topic of discussion during the Smithsonian Institute Latino Initiative Two Week Summer Seminar in 2001.

Ramírez develops this idea:

A more accurate approach toward the representation of Latin American and
Latino art implies a thorough questioning of the centrality of prevailing curatorial practices and the development of exhibition criteria from within the traditions and conventions of the many countries that make up Latin America or the different groups that make up the Latino population of the United States. . . Such an approach, in turn involves expanding the expertise of museums with the incorporation of professionals versed in the Latin American [and] Latino heritage, experimenting with innovative exhibition formats and installations that will allow for the presentation of the points of view of those being represented, and ultimately revising the role and function of curators as mediators of cultural exchanges. (Ramírez 1992, 67)

Davalos describes the ways in which art critics and art museums describe “minority art”:

It is ‘emergent’ (implying that the cultural and artistic sensibilities are new and not a significant part of the nation’s past or art history), ‘colorful’ (suggesting it is exotic or fetish), ‘political’ (implying that the work is parochial), and technically inferior or lacking in aesthetic quality (claiming a standard beyond the artist’s reach and refusing to acknowledge that the standard is not universal). (Noriega 2000, 45).

Although modern Latin American art stems from Euro-American ideals, there is a personalization linked to identity and culture that occurs, which is completely unique to Latin America.


Perhaps a solution to the lack of knowledgeable individuals in the field of Latin American Art and the misinterpretation of Latin American art is to bring in curators and museum staff from Latin American countries who could be brought in as guest curators and educators.