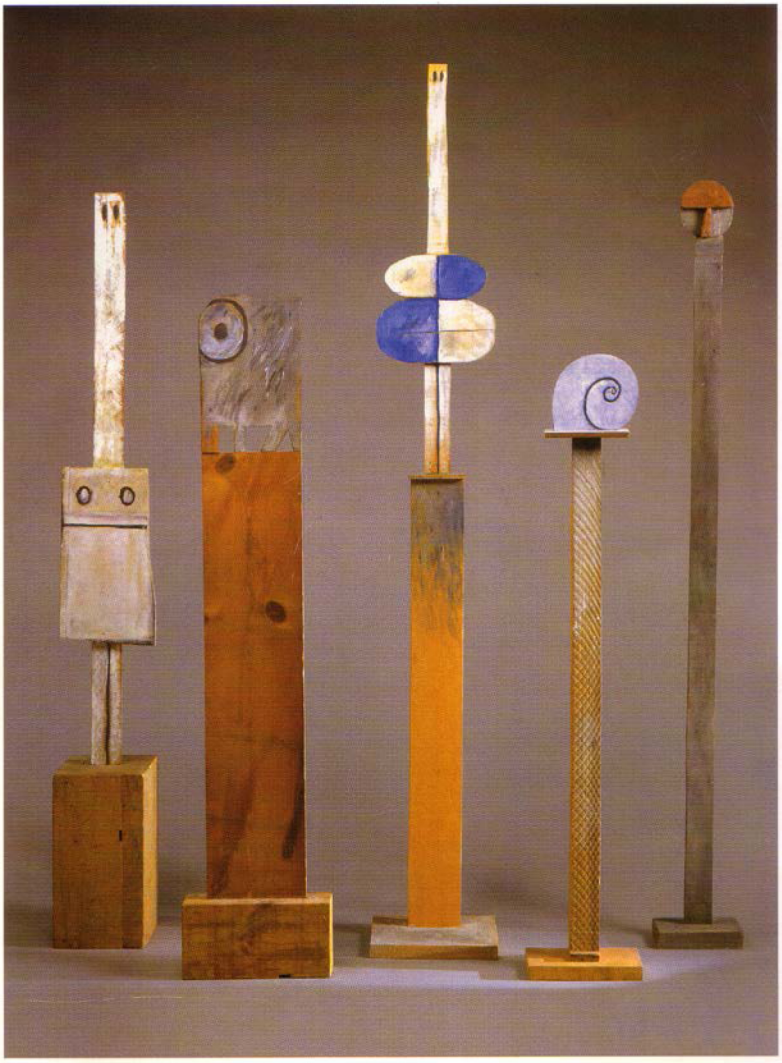
The Wall Street Journal

Opening Our Eyes to Latin American Art

By
WILLARD SPIEGELMAN
Updated Aug. 31, 2004 12:01 a.m. ET



Some of what the world has been missing: "Totems" (1979) by Francisco Matto

Houston

Artistic canons, like other kinds of fashion, come and go; nothing is set in stone. For decades Latin American art has been the poor cousin in the house of academic art history departments. Few universities offer an introduction to Latin American art on a regular basis. Asia and Africa have always received more attention, in part because of the ways their art was absorbed by European and American artists in the 19th and 20th centuries. What would Picasso and Matisse be without tribal masks, Oceanic sculpture and Japanese prints? Like American art and literature before World War II, Latin American culture has received less respect than it deserves.

Peter Marzio wants to change all this, not exactly single-handedly but with the considerable backing of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and its International Center for the Arts of the Americas, which was founded by the MFA in 2001 and has received additional funding from the Getty and Rockefeller foundations, the Bruce T. Halle Family Foundation and the Brazilian oil company Petrobras. Dr. Marzio arrived at the MFA as director in 1982, by no means a Latin American scholar, but with an abiding interest in the American immigrant experience: "I'm a New Yorker from an Italo-American family; early in my career I assisted the late Daniel Boorstin in his Pulitzer Prize-winning 'The Americans: The Democratic Experience.'"

When Dr. Marzio came to Houston, the largest non-Anglo population was, as it still is, Mexican-American. In the mid-1980s, the NEA sent him on a trip to study the museums of five Latin American countries, where he says his eyes "were opened" to artists like the Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García and the Argentinian Jorge de la Vega. (Torres-García, who lived in Barcelona, New York, Paris and Madrid, before returning to Montevideo in 1934, combined the geometry and abstraction of constructivism with indigenous South American motifs. De la Vega, of a later generation, worked in mixed media on canvas, and was a master of collage.) The experience was revelatory and inspiring: "Where had they been all my life?" Kept under wraps or more or less ignored by North American museums, scholars and collectors.

Traditional shows of Latin American art, in this country and abroad, have featured pre-Columbian work, Spanish colonial (read: Baroque), and folk art. Mexico has overwhelmed its neighbors to the South. Everyone knows the Mexican left-wing muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros, and Frida Kahlo now occupies the place on college dormitory walls formerly held by Chagall and Klee. It is Dr. Marzio's intention to bring all of Latin America into the consciousness of serious art lovers, and his ICAA has already made considerable strides in this direction. "Our goal," says the director, "is to make Latin American art a core field in the U.S."

Five years ago, the Gus & Lyndall Wortham Foundation endowed a curatorship in Latin American art. Three years ago, Mari Carmen Ramírez filled the position. The center sponsored the first major U.S. retrospective of the German-born Venezuelan artist Gego (née Gertrud Goldschmidt, 1912-94), whose delicate hanging-net

series of stainless-steel wires merge sculpture and architecture in compelling, intricate ways. The museum has acquired major works by Gego, Torres-García, and the 1979 "Totems," geometric wooden sculptures by Uruguayan Francisco Matto.

At least as important as the traditional activities of acquisition and exhibition, the ICAA has initiated a project called "Recovering the Critical Sources for Latin American/Latino Art." "This is the kind of thing that universities, rather than museums, have traditionally handled," says Dr. Marzio. Eventually 14 teams of North and South American scholars will locate important documents, manifestos (South American artists have always been more manifesto-prone and -driven than their European counterparts, for interesting political reasons), catalog essays, and literary reviews and record the archival data and prepare it for publication. Each team will represent a single geographical region -- the first four will be in Argentina, Mexico, Chile and Houston -- and the scholars will be connected to museums, foundations, libraries and research groups within that region. The project will begin with the 20th century and may move both backward and forward from there. The materials will be assembled, translated and made available as handbooks, in print form and on the Internet, for primary readings in Latin American art history courses.

The center plans on raising $40 million within the next 10 years without a formal campaign, but through a combination of Latin American foundations and corporations, and private and corporate North American sponsors. Eventually, the MFA wants a third building to house 20th century and contemporary art, which will offer "a broad narrative" telling a world-wide story involving all the continents.

Meanwhile, the ICAA will continue with shows like the current "Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America" (through Sept. 12), which occupies two vast floors of the Caroline Wiess Law Building here. The title is a bit misleading: There's nothing from the Andean countries or from Paraguay. But what there is -- over 200 pieces by 67 artists -- is pretty impressive. Latin American artists developed and maintained an avant-garde tradition both connected to, and separate from, those in the States and Europe. The show features copies of books and manifestos (which will all find a place in the "Critical Sources" project) alongside paintings and sculpture, as well as mixed media and other installations. Viewers might be legitimately skeptical of the somewhat arbitrarily

confected six "constellations" into which Dr. Ramírez has arranged her materials, as well as of the overblown prose of the wall labels and catalog copy, which smacks of academic jargon at its most ideological and heavy-handed.

Instead, they should use their eyes to absorb the often astonishing work by artists they have probably never heard of before. Gonzalo Fonseca, Xul Solar, Jesús Rafael Soto, Alejandro Otero, Armando Reverón, Lucio Fontana, Julio Le Parc: It is a brave new world indeed, especially when you consider that the fluorescent sculptures of Le Parc ("Oh, it's Dan Flavin!" someone might exclaim) antedate by 15 or 20 years the comparable work of American artists north of the border.

The ICAA and the MFA, Houston, have their work cut out for them. "It's a big and sometimes frightening enterprise, but we intend to go about building this field one step at a time," says Dr. Marzio. If they build it, we should come.

Mr. Spiegelman last wrote on a J.M.W. Turner exhibit.