

LATIN AMERICA AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:
CONTRIBUTIONS TO WESTERN CULTURE

After three centuries of Spanish and Portuguese colonial rule, followed by a century of passionate political conflict, at the beginning of the twentieth century the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean entered on a period of artistic openness, seeking for a mode of expression peculiarly their own. They were strongly aware of a need for national identity--an identity which would justify their claim to a place in Western culture as representatives of an area of civilization which owed its origin to the encounter between two powerful, splendid worlds, one the colonizer, the other the colonized. Although composed of a goodly number of countries, each with its own traditions, varying in their degree of cultural development, speaking differing languages, the area has nonetheless known a common history. The pre-Hispanic period which came to an end in 1492, the three-hundred-year colonial period which followed, the nineteenth century which brought the establishment of independent republics, and our own twentieth century all bear witness to the creative powers of the inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere. Their artistic achievements, deriving from widely varying social and cultural conditions, permit of multiple, often contradictory readings.

It is precisely the differences and similarities among the countries of the area which have made of Latin America and the Caribbean an important, even fundamental component of Western culture. It has often been said that world civilization remained incomplete

until the discovery of America. From that time on, the contributions of the New World have been many and far-ranging. We do not propose to place Latin America on the same footing with Europe, whose cultures run much farther back. Unquestionably, however, Latin American civilization has been underestimated, owing to the fact that the area was first viewed as a mere supplier of colonial products, and in more recent times as a dependency of extraregional centers of economic power.

Still, the countries of Latin America--underdeveloped, in process of development, or what you will--have a place of their own in the history of humanity. Their history reflects a "Latin" reality, with characteristics all its own, strongly ^{Hispanic} telluric, and charged with spiritual and human values inherited from the great pre-Hispanic civilizations which spread over large areas of the continent. Despite material difficulties, Latin America has kept fully up with developments in Western culture. In this regard I recall an observation by a great Latin American artist, Fernando de Szyszlo of Peru, who holds that while Latin America is classed as part of the Third World, from the cultural viewpoint it belongs to the First World.

There is no getting around the fact that Latin America entered the twentieth century as an area of underdevelopment and will leave it in the same state, despite all the efforts that have been made to improve the situation. With specific regard to cultural development, one cannot fail to note that it has almost always come about with but marginal reference

to economic and social conditions which have affected the region during the course of the century. This means that cultural activity--of all types and in all areas--is innate to the peoples of Latin America. The region has placed great emphasis on economic development, neglecting the social and cultural aspects so important to advances in the path of civilization. Development has not been an overall process.

At the end of the twentieth century, the region finds itself in a state of crisis. The economic models adopted in pursuit of development have proved a failure. Insufficient attention was paid to cultural needs in moments of relative prosperity. As a result the nations of Latin America are confronted with a situation of extreme difficulty, for which there is no foreseeable remedy, from which there is no easy escape. Fortunately, there is continuous and increasing cultural activity. It is precisely this activity which, now as in the past, makes of Latin America a vital, dynamic force on the world stage. While the product may not find acceptance among United States and European theorists, it assures the region of a position on the highest level of development. This has been rendered possible by the fact that, no matter what the political, social, and economic conditions/^{that} have prevailed, there has always been freedom of creative expression in Latin America. This freedom has been exercised by creative talents without prejudice of any kind. Latin American culture is the summation of all the results and products of this creative activity. The contribution Latin America is making to Western civilization

today in literature, music, and the visual arts cannot be denied. Although they are clearly recognizable, recognition is not easily granted, since history tends to be written from the economic viewpoint, taking as a premise that only developed or industrialized countries are capable of producing "good" or "pure" art. (It would be difficult to conceive of chemical purity in the art area!) By definition, cultural development or evolution is an open process, which permits of all types of mixtures, influences, appropriations, and juxtapositions. It is vital and dynamic; change and enrichment come about through encounter with other civilizations, different or similar in character. This is the way it has been in Latin America; this is the way it has been in other parts of the world. Visual art, literature, and music, as produced in Latin America, are Latin American in nature, and, like their counterparts in other areas of the world, they derive from minglings, from worldwide conjunctions of cultural circumstances, from appropriations, and from rejections. They are individual creations which reflect the vitality of an area rather younger than some others.

A few names suffice to indicate the original contributions which Latin American creative geniuses have made to world culture. We have Rubén Darío, the great Nicaraguan poet; Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian winner of the Nobel Prize; Jesús Soto, the Venezuelan originator of kinetic art; Joaquín Torres García, the Uruguayan theorist and painter responsible

for the doctrine of Universal Constructivism; the three great Mexican muralists--Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clement Orozco; and Brazil's celebrated composer Heitor Villa-Lobos. One could go on for long enumerating the creative spirits who have enriched the cultural history, not just of Latin America, but of the whole Western world.

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