

LATIN AMERICA:  
CENTER OR PERIPHERY?

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Latin American culture has always been viewed as peripheral to a center whose geographical location has varied according to the influence it has exerted as a generator of new ideas or new artistic tendencies. From this standpoint, Latin America has been a consumer, rather than a producer, in the realm of culture. A "center" creates what is recognized as the "international style"; the periphery merely copies it.

Assertions of this type have constituted a denial, particularly on the part of the cultural "centers" of the existence of a truly Latin American culture. It is claimed that Latin America evidences no autochthonous cultural evolution, independent of the influences of international art centers. The only unquestionably acknowledged exception is constituted by the Mexican Mural Movement. And, among individual artists, Joaquin Torres Garcia has won recognition for the originality of his concept of Universal Constructivism.

A curious situation is presented by outside critics and historians of Latin American art who take advantage of the subject to promote opportunistic interests or provocative ideas. They view Latin American art as "central" or "peripheral" in their accordance with their concerns of the moment. For instance, in this year 1992, thanks to the emphasis upon the Columbus Quincentennial and the vast number of opportunities that have been presented to curate exhibitions, to write books, and to publish magazines connected with that event, there has been a sudden flowering of so-called

Latin American specialists in both Europe and the United States. Recently Latin American art has come to be considered the product of a "center" in the New York market, and the high prices commanded by a goodly number of Latin American artists means that they can no longer be consigned to the third world. The question of whether Latin American art is to be assigned to the center or to the periphery depends on the interests of the manipulators of the concept. Mestizo art and art based on the fantasie or "magic" have created stereotypes which appeal to a good-sized public in Europe and the United States, as well as to many in elite circles at home. These aspects of Latin American activity are therefore declared to be the product of a "center". A good example is provided by the work of Frida Kahlo and her multitude of imitators, which sell very well in the U.S. market.

Generally speaking, the terms "center" and "periphery" lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. At one point in time a continent or a country may be a "center"; at another it may be relegated to the periphery. It all depends on what is to be understood by the two words. The relationship lends itself to argument difficult to resolve. In the end it boils down to who or what decides what is a center and what is the periphery.

Since as regards folk culture every country is a center, the difference which concerns us relates to "styles" or to art regarded as international in character. Latin America has not been absent from the international current.

It is well to recall at this point the words of Alfonso Reyes:  
"The culture developed by the New World is unique in

systematically ignoring national and ethnic boundaries." In many cases the Latin American artist has drawn on himself and on others to produce work the precise nature of which he but dimly perceives. His compositions can be categorized as representative of what is called "the aesthetics of conflict." In applying the term broadly to Latin American art, one diminishes neither its originality nor its contribution to the world civilization, witness the achievements of such creative figures as Joaquin Torres Garcia of Uruguay, Rufino Tamayo of Mexico and Jesus Soto of Venezuela, to name a mere three.

When Alejo Carpentier defined Latin American culture as "lo real maravilloso americano" (the marvelous American reality), he was pointing out the difference between that world and the European. He tried to look upon certain common characteristics of identity, based on the background of its culture and on the mestizo quality of the people. That would be the case of Wiferdo Lam of Cuba. He exists as a Latin American artist "who taught us the magic of tropical vegetation the unbridled creation of form in our natural setting", without being a projection of European art. Lam as well as Joaquin Torres Garcia, of Uruguay, Armando Reveron and Jesus Soto, both of Venezuela, have produced works which can be considered advanced in artistic terms and began to make Latin American art part of the mainstream modern art world.