

Exploring the Influence and Significance of Latin American Visual Culture in *Chicano/a Art, Movimiento y Más en Austen, Tejas 1960s to 1980s*

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In the discipline of art history, Latin America is traditionally defined in geographic and linguistic terms as a group of nations belonging to the regions of North America, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, whose residents predominantly speak Spanish or Portuguese. The notion that Latin American culture has evolved beyond modern political borders is not an established component of traditional academic training in Latin American art, despite there being a robust community of artists, writers, and scholars working on topics pertaining to the Latin American diaspora.¹ The dissonance is especially strong between the field of historical Latin American art and the contemporary art world.

The exhibition *Chicano/a Art, Movimiento y Más en Austen, Tejas 1960s to 1980s*, on view at the Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, Texas from April 8, 2022 until August 21, 2022 and still available to visit virtually, offers a rich body of work from which to explore the intersections between Chicana/o art and what is considered “Latin American” art. In this essay, I will review the references to Latin American art in the works included in the exhibition and examine the treatment of Chicano/a art in museum and art historical contexts through the lens of these cross-cultural references. I will then examine how these intersections are treated in museum contexts, both in collecting practices and in exhibition development. I aim to provide insight on

¹ See Rose Salseda, “Creating Equity in Academia for Latinx Art History.” In *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, Vol. 1, Number 3 (2019): 87–91; Ananda Cohen-Aponte and Elena Fitzpatrick Sifford, “Addressing Diversity and Inclusion in Latin American and Latinx Art History.” In *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, Vol. 1, Number 3 (2019): 60–71.

how the analyses of Latin American art historical references in contemporary art, specifically made by artists who identify as part of the Latin American diaspora, will impact the future of collecting and displaying Latin American and American art.

In assessing the references to Latin American art in *Chicano/a Art, Movimiento y Más*, I identified three general categories that had the greatest influence on the exhibition materials. The first grouping comprises glyphs and figures from the pre-conquest and early colonial-era Mesoamerican codices, or pictorial manuscripts. The second category includes imagery that references familiar sculptures from the pre-Hispanic Americas. The third category includes references to techniques and iconographies in the genre of Latin American popular art, also known as folk art.

The references to iconography from the codices are the most prevalent in the work from *Chicano/a Art, Movimiento y Más*. In Amado Peña's 1974 serigraph titled *La Raza*, the artist makes a direct reference to the Aztec Eagle Warriors, which appear in the early colonial-era chronicle known as the Florentine Codex (figures 1, 2).² Santa Barraza's poster for the Ballet Folklórico Aztlán features a figure at the far left-hand side of bottom register that shares a visual language with the early colonial codices, such as the Codex Mendoza (figures 3, 4).³ José Treviño's poster for the Galería Sin Fronteras's inaugural exhibit features an image of a figure dressed half in contemporary casual clothing, and half in Indigenous Mesoamerican garments; the figure is identifiable as an artist due to the palette and brushes he holds up in his right hand, and the tube of paint he squeezes out in his left hand (figure 5). The imagery included in

² Bernardino, de Sahagún, 1499-1590. *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Pdf. 1970. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667837/>. Book 9, page 31.

³ <https://codicemendoza.inah.gob.mx/inicio.php?lang=english>: fol. 58-71.

the figure, as well as his stance, references the iconography of the pre-Hispanic calendar codices of the Borgia Group (figure 6). This image has an additional layer of interest due to the artist's necklace, which mimics Mexica adornment in its form but features a pendant with the black eagle emblem of the United Farm Workers' Movement. The album cover for *La Voz de Aztlan* by Little Joe y La Familia from 1977 references colonial era representations of Nezahualcoyotl, the famous poet-king of Texcoco (figures 7, 8). Sylvia Orozco's work *Chicano Graffiti* from 1988 features a glyph in the middle of the composition that mirrors the glyph for the town of Ahuacatla(n), also known as the tooth tree glyph, from the Codex Mendoza (figures 9, 10).

The second group of references that I classified in the works featured in *Chicano/a Art, Movimiento y Más* are of well-known pre-Hispanic sculptures that the contemporary artists faithfully reproduce in their work. In Raúl Valdez's 1988 painting *Culturas*, the artist features an image of the Aztec deity Mitlantecuhtli from the Museo del Templo Mayor, as well as the inclusion of an Olmec colossal head like the San Lorenzo Colossal Head 6 on view at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City (figures 11, 12, 13). José Treviño's sculpture *Hombre Olmeca* references the facial features of jadeite Olmec figures from the Middle Pre-Classic period (figure 14).⁴ Luis Gutierrez's drawing *Tonatzin de Tepeyac* draws a direct reference to the sculpture of Teteoh Innan, an Aztec female deity within umbrella of Tonantzin's representations, from the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (figures 15, 16). The drawing captures the original sculpture's hollow eyes and elaborate headdress in an exacting

⁴ See <http://museum.doaks.org/objects-1/info/23117> for an example from the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection.

likeness. Luis Guerra's drawing *Canto Libre* from 1979 features a rendering of the Feathered Serpent tenon heads from the temple of the Feathered Serpent (Quetzalcoatl) at Teotihuacan (figures 17, 18). While most of the sculptures referenced are from Mesoamerican civilizations, one salient example clearly alludes to the ceramic traditions of the ancient Andean societies. Marsha Gomez's ceramic vessel *Untitled* is a direct reference to the forms of the double-spouted vessels of the Moche and Chimú cultures (figures 19, 20).

The third grouping of references in *Chicano/a Art, Movimiento y Más* encompasses both techniques and iconographies that are associated with the genre of popular art, an umbrella term for objects that fall outside of the formal context of "fine arts." Works of popular art may have deeply imbued spiritual or ritual functions, or may exemplify special styles of material culture within a community. In the exhibition, the patterns and colors that characterize works such as *40,000 squares* by Vicente "Chente" Rodriguez resemble embroidered textiles from southern Mexico and Guatemala (figure 21). One example of these textile techniques is the huipil worn by the subject in Ramón Cano Manilla's 1928 painting, *India Oaxaqueña* (figure 22).⁵ In Carmen Lomas Garza's work featured in the exhibition are directly influenced by *papel picado* traditions prevalent in Mexico since the nineteenth century (figure 23). There are also works in the exhibition that refer to devotional images that are commonplace in works of popular art, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe. Amado Peña's 1974 serigraph *Rosa Del Tepeyac* pulls imagery from traditional colonial-era representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe,

⁵ In my presentation preceding this paper, I included a huipil from Baja Verapaz, Guatemala from the Museo Ixchel (<https://g.co/arts/CvymYgoybR8uJSpd8>) and a Oaxacan ceremonial huipil from San Pedro Sochipan, part of the Museo Textil de Oaxaca's permanent collection (<https://g.co/arts/FvG4zX8WPYnDhRcU9>) as additional examples.

originating in the eighteenth-century painter Miguel Cabrera's famed portrayal of this Marian devotion (figure 24).

The identification of these references to Latin American art demonstrates the profound influence of material culture from the region on the development of Chicano art in the 1960s and beyond. Beyond asserting the impact of Latin American art history on this genre of American art, what can these references tell us about Chicano art in relation to Latin American art, specifically the ways that these visual references are used in Mexican Art? To answer this question, I refer to Victor Zamudio-Taylor's essay "Inventing Tradition, Negotiating Modernism: Chicano/a Art and the Pre-Columbian Past," where the author argues that,

"the ideology of *mexicanidad*, or Mexican Renaissance, which was informed by the project of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), served as the inspiration and model for the employment and articulation of the pre-Columbian past in Chicano/a art. Mexican nationalism exalted the past in order to highlight the role that Indigenous cultures had played in the making of Mexico as a nation... Chicanismo, the ideology of the Chicano movement, also deployed the pre-Columbian past to reconfigure a sense of cultural identity and place."⁶

Referring specifically to the presence of pre-Columbian or pre-Hispanic iconography in Chicano art, Zamudio-Taylor understands the inclusion of these visual cues as a way of asserting

⁶ Zamudio-Taylor, Victor. "Inventing Tradition, Negotiating Modernism: Chicano/a Art and the Pre-Columbian Past." In Fields Virginia M Victor Zamudio-Taylor, *The Road to Aztlan: Art from a Mythic Homeland*. 1st ed. Los Angeles, Albuquerque, NM: Los Angeles County Museum of Art: Distributed by the University of New Mexico Press, 2001. P. 123.

Chicanos' ties to the same cultural origins as Mexican people – not as a nationalist ideology, but rather as an ideology of a growing movement unified by the participants' cultural identity. Zamudio Taylor also asserts that mexicanismo was not an intrinsically a good model for Chicanismo because it was linked to state politics, and by extension, to the mainstream establishment in Mexico. He argues that Chicano/a art needed to adapt this model without being linked to the mainstream U.S. establishment, which he rightly implies is controlled by a white community that does not understand the immigrant experience or the Chicano experience.

One of the arguments to support the uneven treatment of Chicano art as compared to Mexican art examines the aesthetic differences in the approaches to reproducing historical references. Zamudio-Taylor presents an argument about the ways that Chicana/o artists engaged with pre-Columbian visual references, suggesting that the “romanticized” way that Chicano artists engaged with pre-Columbian motifs and imagery contributed to the negative reception of Chicano art. I counter this with the argument that Chicano art employing visual references tied to pre-Columbian histories engages with these references in myriad ways, which includes offering creative critiques of popular Mexican depictions of pre-Hispanic culture. Chicana artists' use of the Mexican artist Jesús Helguera's famed calendar images is a key example of this. Helguera's work *Grandeza Azteca*, which was the artist's interpretation of the legend of the volcano Popocatepetl holding the sleeping volcano Iztaccihuatl (both represented by Helguera as attractive, whitewashed Indigenous Mesoamericans), is flipped on its head in Santa Barraza, Sylvia Orozco, and Pio Pulido's 1984 serigraph *Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl*,

Reversed. In this work, the artists reverse the narrative by depicting the female Ixtaccihuatl carrying the male Popocatepetl (figure 25).

The work of revising the canon and the body of knowledge that forms the foundation of Mexican, American, and Latin American art histories is shared by Chicano/a artists and Chicana and Latinx scholars, who have written about this topic extensively. Some examples include Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's "Imagining a More Expansive Narrative of American Art", E. Carmen Ramos's *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art*, and *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino*, edited by Hector Olea and Melina Kervandjian. One poignant thought from Dr. Ybarra-Frausto's "Imagining of More Expansive Narrative of American Art" is his metaphor of Latino art as a three-legged stool. He develops a metaphor for Latino art as being like a three-legged stool. He states that,

"One leg of the equation is the canonical culture of the United States. Another is Latin American visual culture. And the third leg is Latino culture, which is the most wobbly. We still have to create the archives and write the narratives. For the metaphorical stool to become sturdy, all three legs have to be present: U.S., Latin American, and Latino components."⁷

In the realm of Latin American art, the lines that define "canonical cultures" are often unclear and antiquated. The collection plans of institutions that house Latin American collections have

⁷ Ybarra-Frausto, Tomás. "Imagining a More Expansive Narrative of American Art." *American Art* 19, no. 3 (2005): p. 10

generally not caught up to define American and Latin American art in more expansive terms. Despite these shortcomings, there have been recent museum exhibitions that explore the intersections between historical Latin American art and contemporary Chicano/a and Latinx art in productive ways. One recent example is the exhibition *Contemporary Ex-votos: Devotion Beyond Medium*, organized by the New Mexico State University (NMSU) Art Museum in the fall of 2022. This exhibition shed light on the understudied iconographic and ideological aspects of ex-votos, a type of small devotional painting depicting miracles painted on tin and found materials. The exhibition paired examples from the NMSU Art Museum's expansive ex-voto collection with commissioned works from a group of Latinx artists that address themes related to the historical paintings. Another recent exhibition that paired historical Latin American material culture with Mexican and Chicana/o art is *Traitor, Survivor, Icon: The Legacy of La Malinche*, organized by the Denver Art Museum in 2022. This exhibition linked iconographies of Latin American art that refer specifically to the story of La Malinche with contemporary work by Mexican and Chicana artists that speak directly to Malinche's legacy.⁸

As a steward of a Latin American collection, I recognize "Latin America" as a cultural construct that includes the Caribbean, diasporic communities around the world, and the Latinx cultures of the United States.⁹ With this definition in mind, museums with Latin American collections have the responsibility to engage more deeply with Latino and Chicano artistic legacies in our work. This responsibility includes increasing access to permanent collections and

⁸ La Malinche, also known as Malintzin, Malinalli, and Doña Marina, was an enslaved Indigenous girl who served as the linguistic and cultural interpreter for Hernan Cortés, the Spanish invader who was mainly responsible for the fall of the Aztec Empire.

⁹ SOURCE: https://arthist.net/archive/20086/lang=en_US (CFP for a special issues of *Arts*, 2019)

engaging further with artists who glean inspiration directly from permanent collections – an initiative that would also give museums further incentives to acquire more work inspired by permanent collections. *Chicano/a Art, Movimiento y Más en Austen, Tejas 1960s to 1980s* demonstrates the profound influence of Latin American art history on the visual culture of the Chicano/a movement, and this influence presents the need for Chicana/o art to form part of the study of Latin American art.

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