

Latin American Painting
Comes into its Own

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After a lengthy period of neglect, painters of Latin America have at last come into their heritage. This previous neglect is not difficult to explain. Until recently theirs was an essentially colonial achievement, and like their colleagues in the United States they were, consciously or unconsciously, the imitators of European schools and traditions. They had nothing new to say and what they said was often badly said. At a time when critics almost universally condemned the Baroque style and its colonial developments, the Latin American painters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were dismissed along with Caravaggio, Rubens and Murillo. Moreover, there was no place in the post-war world for anything that spoke of sentimentality, and so the Latin American masters of the nineteenth century were ridiculed along with the rest of the Victorian painters.

Although standards of taste and critical judgment are now very different from what they were twenty years ago, we should probably still be ignoring Latin American painting had not an artistic revolution occurred in Mexico that has gradually had its effects in most of the republics of the hemisphere, our own not excepted. It is now fashionable to speak of a Mexican Renaissance which has been as important for the art of twentieth-century Latin America as was the Renaissance of Italy for that of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

When an aged painter is finally acclaimed by the critics and their public, his whole career is enthusiastically reviewed, his early work exhibited, his origins sought, his entire development traced with care. And so it is with schools of painting, and even, occasionally, with the art of nations. Having recognized the modern masters of Latin American painting, the critics are now investigating the origins and development of their art. Rivera and Orozco, and the men they have influenced in other countries, have told us that they are reviving pre-Columbian traditions. As a result, the critics have transferred the art objects of the Aztecs, the Incas, and the Mayas from the domains of anthropology and archeology to that of the Fine Arts, and our museums are staging an unprecedented series of exhibitions.

The next step for the critics is to discover earlier work. Again the leaders of the Mexican Revolution are helpful, for they have expressed admiration for the opulent art of their colonial predecessors. Consequently, there is a novel interest in the painters of New Spain, and the other viceroalties and audiencias. Gradual development must never be ignored, therefore attention is

paid to the influence of folk art on the work of the giants. And since there has been a revolution, we must know against what it was directed: the critics, dealers, and museum directors, led by a few adventurous scholars, are now exploring the virgin forests of Latin American nineteenth century art. Progress is slow through the jungle of long neglect, yet Latin American painting, like the aged Cézanne, has finally "arrived". Fame is about to enfold the good with the bad and we may shortly expect the triumph of a successful career, the attempted catalogue raisonné. Until that work is completed, however, it may be of value to attempt a brief digest of what is already known.

Painting in the Spanish colonies of the New World was essentially a religious art, a craft of fabricating altarpieces for the numberless churches, convents and private chapels that decorated the cities of the great viceroynalties. From its origins in the sixteenth century until its extinction in the neo-classicism of the early nineteenth, the colonial style followed closely the contemporary Spanish manners of painting.

Of the four major schools of Spanish America, the Mexican was the most highly developed, as well as the closest in its relation to the art of the mother-country. Mexico's sixteenth century convent frescoes come straight from the cold Valencian manner, a compound of Raphael and the late Flemish masters. The Indians who helped to paint them soon laid aside the traditions of the Aztec codices to follow the sterile mannerisms of Simon Pereyng and other Italo-Flemings who first established the European control of American painting.

In the seventeenth century, Balthasar Echave el viejo, the apostle of Ribera and Zurbarán, brought from Spain the high Sevillian style. His dramatic altarpieces and those of his Mexican followers were typical examples of the Spanish tenebroso painting which was to predominate throughout the century in the local schools of Mexico, Lima, Quito and Bogotá. These artists pandered to the universal taste for ghostly martyrdoms cruelly revealed in lurid light, for operatic saints in rich and voluminous draperies, whose studied gestures of celestial longing the preachers in their pulpits delighted to imitate. Working alone, Echave and his pupils could never have supplied the market created for such works in Mexico. Hundreds of these pictures had to be shipped yearly to New Spain from the workshop of Andalucía.

The subsequent taste for Murillo and Rubens is best reflected in Miguel Cabrera, a native of Oaxaca, who - by his imitation of the melting drawing of the one and the rich coloring of the other - set the standard for the mid-eighteenth century painters of New Spain. The Mexican female prodigy, the poetess Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, sat for Cabrera and a replica of this portrait is now in the Philadelphia Museum. About him flourished a number of lesser masters of the same persuasion, among them his teacher Juan Correa, the painter of great machines, chief fournisseur to the archbishopric of Mexico, and the gentler Juan Rodríguez Juárez, whose Virgins are a new rococo version of Murillo. This style was endlessly vulgarized by the painters of popular devotional pictures. But sometimes, as in the santos found in New Mexico and other back-waters, the anonymous artists remained faithful to the older traditions.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Mexican painters were divided into two camps. On the one hand were the few ambitious portraitists who crudely imitated the naturalism of Francisco Goya. On the other hand were those who espoused the principles of the newly established Royal Academy, the first of its kind in the New World, which was set up to teach the Mexicans the hard international classicism of Don Rafael Mengs. These artists were the Latin American

equivalents of our Copleys and Benjamin Wests, of our painters of historical episodes and allegories.

Over the whole school hangs the pall of mediocrity. Were it not for the persistent charm of all that descends from the great Baroque age, this painting would be dismissed as lifeless and dull. It was always inferior to the architecture that accompanied it. All over Mexico in the eighteenth century, churches were erected whose façades sparkle in bizarre forms. In new Spain the rich contemporary Churrigueresque style was embroidered by native craftsmen who somehow remembered the Baroque inventions of the late Aztec designs. A welter of strange patterns and glittering colors revives the glories of Indian feather work on the walls of these churches and their cupolas. Mexican architects, and their colleagues elsewhere, were not such faithful imitators as the painters; architecture was never so complete a slave to European models. But only in an occasional background, where some such building is vaguely represented, do the colonial paintings of Mexico reflect the splendor of these churches. Nor can we find an echo of this brilliant style in the official sculpture or the highly developed minor arts of the period.

At the close of the eighteenth century it was apparent that the conquerors had tried their best to bring to an end the great artistic tradition of the Mexican Indians. The prophecy implicit in the action of the Bishops Juan de Sumárraga and Diego de Landa, who shortly after the Conquest had burned the Mayan and Aztec picture books, was thus fulfilled. Their auto-da-fé had been directed against the religions that these codices represented, but it meant the wrecking of the native artistic culture as well.

Less complete was the loss in the other colonies of the Spanish crown. At Lima and Cuzco, a Peruvian school of mestizo artists, enjoying a happier fate than the Indian painters who produced the gloomy classic frescoes at Acolman, practised the most varied créoleries. The garments of the holy figures in the altarpieces are cut on Inca lines, their patterns are those of the Indian fabrics. The stiff hieratic qualities of the Cuzco votive Virgins can be traced back to pre-Conquest rituals; their dark complexions and gold ornaments are further reminders of the earlier people and their cults. This was also the spirit that dominated the school of Ecuador, where the atelier of Manuel Santiago supplied countless votive pictures for the far-away churches of Chile and Bolivia, and in Colombia disputed the tradition of the American Velásquez, Gregorio Vásquez.

In Brazil the first American landscapes were painted. The leader of the Dutch occupation of Pernambuco in 1637, Count Maurice of Nassau Siegen, took with him Frans Janszoon Post of Leyden to record the early seventeenth century countryside of the Brazilian nordeste. This painter soon developed an artificial formula, a stage-set of tropical flora and fauna with a background of luminous blue vapors, into which he painted with minute care every detail of plantation life in Brazil. In the portraits of his countryman, Albert Eckhout, the faces of the Negro slaves, adorned sometimes with rich turbans and feather hats, are preserved. These Europeans inaugurated the tradition of topographical and scientific painting that was to become an important element in the later art of Latin America.

Curiously, it was the Europeans who carried on this tradition in the nineteenth century. If at the beginning of the century the principal Iberian colonies of the New World gained their freedom from Spain and Portugal, they straightway lost their artistic independence to the French. In the wake of Latin America's victorious armies, the pupils of David, destitute at home after the fall of Napoleon, arrived to found academies of neo-classic art from Havana to Buenos

Aires, from Mexico to Santiago de Chile. It was one of these, Jean Baptiste Debret, who came to Rio de Janeiro at the invitation of the Emperor Don Pedro I in 1815. It was he who established the nineteenth century tradition of the Voyage pittoresque in Latin America. Traveling through Brazil from one provincial city to another, he painted water colors of the towns, and of the inhabitants of the countryside--whites, Negroes, and Indians--very much in the Post tradition. Subsequently lithographed and issued in albums, these paintings were executed in a picturesque style calculated to charm the foreign public. Occasionally they are sensational, recounting the harsh treatment of Negro slaves, or glorifying the degenerate Indian warriors. But generally they give the impression of a well kept tropic wonderland where charming ladies, gallant planters, colorful peasants, and beautiful birds and animals are comfortably at home.

Meantime Nicolas-Antoine Taunay was painting quiet landscapes of Rio and its suburbs that have something of the freshness of the early Corot, while in distant Chile an Englishman, Carlos Wood, was producing views of Santiago in the delightful manner of Belotto. Maurice Rugendas and Raymond Monvoison journeyed all over Latin America in the early nineteenth century, painting or lithographing now the waterfront of Buenos Aires, now a group of horsemen in top-hats and shawls beneath the balconies of Lima, now ladies promenading beside a fountain in a park in Mexico City, now an encounter of Chilean shepherds. They painted with great breadth and with no little decorative charm. Their European eyes were almost the only eyes that saw and pictured the everyday life of the Latin American republics. They left few native imitators: a rare Pancho Fierro whose Goyesque gouaches catalogue the characters of the Peruvian metropolis in the 1840's; the Colombian Ramon Torres Méndez, a good natured painter of bullfights and pilgrimages; and Ernesto Charton, a brilliant Chilean follower of Rugendas whose topographical paintings have left a valuable record of the mid-nineteenth century Chilean cities, and who organized the teaching of the Fine Arts in Ecuador. These were the nineteenth regionalists of Latin America.

This "picturesque current" is the aspect of Latin American painting most appealing to modern taste. It is the least affected, the frankest. It tells more of America and the Americans of that time than any other. It has the antique charm of our neo-classic views of cities and "primitive portraits" that are invaluable social documents of the same epoch. In South America, a generation of archaic limners also flourished in the early nineteenth century. The outgrowth of the Goya movement in Mexico, they are best represented by Antonio Salas of Ecuador, who painted all the liberators of Greater Colombia, and that Peruvian José Gil de Castro long resident in Chile, who portrayed all his subjects in the same formula, standing in stiff Empire dress beside a writing table, a small painting of the Immaculate Conception on the wall, a Baroque targe with genealogy below.

But this was a current apart from the main stream which, as in North America, was dull and academic. And in Latin America there were no Whistlers or Burners to break the monotony. Art was controlled by official schools, when it was encouraged at all, and these schools were almost invariably presided over by intransigent Europeans, men who did their best to develop in their pupils a fine imitation of the leaders of academic painting in Europe--of David, then Ingres, then Bouguereau. Throughout the continent, in spite of the enormous differences of landscape, temperament, and civilization, painting evolved in a uniform French mold.

A strained conservatism of subject matter, technique and color was the natural result of such an atmosphere. The lack of an immediate genuine tradition

of good painting precluded revolt. Throughout the century, the official painters of South America produced historical machines, and the minor masters followed them. The vogue enjoyed by the battlepieces of Meissonier was immense. All over South America, the armies of the Liberator marched across huge canvases, and every minor engagement found its patriotic recorder. Typical were the dashing military scenes of Pedro Americo and Victor Meireles in Brazil, and the cold grey Episodios nacionales of Diógenes Héquet in Uruguay. Religious painting, reduced to the level of the image vendors of St. Sulpice, was a mawkish parody of the Baroque tradition of the previous century.

Within the narrow bourgeois framework of this academic art, a few great painters did develop. It is hard to deny the solid merit of the meticulous tenabroso still-lives executed by the Brazilian Pedro Alexandrino. In Colombia, Epifanio Garay painted portraits of the dignified élite of Bogotá that have the technical excellence of Winterhalter's, without his pompous display. There is a restrained tragedy in the genre pictures of the Uruguayan, Juan Manuel Blanes. He produced one great symbol of the tragedy of the Brazilian-Paraguayan war, La Paraguaya, an Indian woman standing in deep meditation upon a rocky battlefield strewn with the corpses of the dead. For sheer painting he had no master in South America. This quality, translated to Impressionism, infuses the canvases of his great kinsman, Pedro Blanes Viale, the creator of the fine sketches in the Life of Artigas. Pedro Figari, the last of this Uruguayan trilogy, dared to satirize the life of Montevideo, in a curious doll-like style of distorted puppet figures vigorously alive. This manner is oddly paralleled in the work of the modern Pernambucan, Cicero Dias.

During the nineteenth century, Mexico maintained, among the republics of Latin America, the prominent place which she had won during the colonial period. This pre-eminence was the more extraordinary in that the arts in the Central American countries had fallen into such decay as hardly to exist. Nowhere in South America were the Fine Arts so carefully cultivated as in Mexico, and nowhere was there wider imitation of European fashions. The arrival in 1794 of Ximeno y Planes, a pupil of Mengs, and his subsequent decoration of the cupola of the Cathedral of Mexico, marked at once the last stage of colonial painting and the beginning of the new academic age. It was Neo-classic painting without pretense. Under his leadership, and seconded by the sculpture of Toisa and the architecture of Tresguerras, the Mexican painters were dedicated to a program of Greek nudes and Roman allegories. The old tradition of religious art, which had been supreme in Mexico since the burning of the Aztec books, was now irrevocably broken. Mexican art was laicized by Ximeno and his colleague, Charles Pringuet, another pupil of David.

From Neo-classicism the Mexicans were swept on to Romanticism, always under expert European guidance. The new innovator was a Catalan, Don Pelegrín Clavé, one of the most successful artists in Latin America. He taught a generation to paint scenes from the medieval history of France and Italy, and sentimental allegories of pretty ladies. With Maximilian's favorite painter and his own pupil, Santiago Rebull, he executed official portrait commissions, and thus won for himself the exalted title of the Ingres of Mexico. In 1867 he retired, well rewarded to Barcelona, leaving the country to a chaos of artistic revivals and artificial movements.

There was, as in Europe, a Baroque revival, in which the realists delighted in the gruesome Riberesque martyrdoms of Felipe Gutiérrez, who later went on to found the Academy of Bogotá, while the sentimentalists were charmed by the smooth allegories of Luis Monroy. Then there was a Naturalist revival, as the century

hastened on toward Impressionism. There was also a kind of Hudson River School, centered about José María Velasco and his vivid landscapes of the Valley of Mexico. It was a lurid regionalism of garish sunsets, gleaming snowcapped peaks, and radiant fields through which a locomotive screamed and roared. Far more attractive are the rare topographical studies by this same artist and by his pupils Carlos Rivera and Luis Coto, in which such scenes as the unloading of a stage-coach in the courtyard of a colonial inn, or the dome of Guadalupe glimpsed through a quiet park, are portrayed in the golden light of Mexico. As in South America, there were acres of historical canvas; Columbus was painted, Las Casas was painted, the Reyes Católicos were painted, miracles and revolutions were painted, all in an identical photographic style. Finally the Indians were painted.

Here the artificiality of the movement was most apparent. "Indianism" is a well known product of Romanticism throughout Latin America. The myth of the noble savage stalking through a perfumed jungle, and launching his skiff upon a crystal stream, had been everywhere exploited. In Brazil, Rodolfo Amoedo translated to canvas the bronze beings of the novels of José de Alencar; in Peru Ignacio Merino, Francisco Laso, and Luis Montero depicted the civilization of the Incas. It remained for Mexicans to reduce the Aztecs to such banal allegories as "The Discovery of Pulque". In all cases the Indian served as a vehicle for European academism. The Mexicans - like the Peruvians, the Brazilians, and our own painters - saw their subject through the eyes of Nicolas Poussin. The mystery and the dignity of the Indian were travestied due to a lack of understanding. A tradition had been broken, and a revolution cultural as well as political was necessary in order to reestablish it.

It was fitting that this revolution should begin in Mexico. When the gilded salons of the court of Porfirio Díaz were swept away by a popular movement of revolt, the tottering edifice of European art soon crumbled. In its place that American tradition which had first been attacked in Mexico reappeared, and slowly spread to other parts of Latin America.

It is difficult to say exactly how and when it was reborn. Thirty years ago, the sterility of the academic style was everywhere apparent. Dissatisfied young men were seeking some substitute in order to revitalize art. In Europe the simple splendid forms of primitive art were rediscovered and became the basis for a new tradition. In Mexico that tradition had never died. Throughout the centuries of official European art, the Indians had somehow guarded their ancient crafts. In their pottery and in their painting, the simple grandeur of forms, the pure and brilliant color, the mysterious stylized designs of Mayan and Aztec art had lived on beneath the surface of official art. The story of how a Mexican generation rediscovered this heritage, and used it to create a new American art, is now well known. We have seen how Orozco, Rivera, Charlot, and a host of well-trained artists created in their first frescoes of the early nineteen twenties a solid, vigorous, and indigenous style; how they based this style on the monumentality of pre-Columbian models and the special plastic qualities of the landscape of Mexico; how they vitalized it with a social and didactic message; how with it they broke a long foreign pictorial tradition.

Their work is too well known to be described anew. The Indian is the soul of it, its pattern and its form, its subject and its technique, its mystic life. This art has succeeded wherever the Indian tradition has existed and survived. In Peru a great national school, inspired by the Mexican, has grown up. José Sabogal and his pupils, Camilo Blas, Jorge Reinoso, Julia Codesido and Francisco González Gamarra have painted the Peruvian Indians in a style of simple heroic

s, vigorous patterns, and splendid color that replaces the awkward naturalism of their predecessors. In Ecuador, Camilo Egas has painted the Indian festivals of his country in a similar style, based on indigenous traditions, and Eduardo Kingman has shown their faces in his powerful woodcuts, a technique used with especial force by these new American Indian Painters. In Bolivia, Cecilio Guzmán de Rojas, in Costa Rica, Max Jiménez, have created the same majestic forms, in Guatemala, Carlos Mérida, and in Nicaragua, Carmen Sequeira, have evolved the same exquisite patterns from the Indian art of their countries.

But what of the Latin American republics in which strong traditions of Indian art have not survived? Brazil has found its own solution in the Negro. In São Paulo, where emigrants from Europe brought news of the European artistic revolution at the very time that the new Mexican school was born, Tarsila do Amaral, Di Cavalcanti and Lasar Segall laid the basis for a regional style which has culminated in the monumental frescoes of Candido Portinari. These artists eradicated the European tradition that had grown thin in misunderstood Impressionism. In its stead they employed the solid forms and persistent rhythms of the African Negro slaves. The results have been as successful, and as characteristic, as those achieved in the Indian lands, Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador. And their art has had as profound a social significance for their country. In Cuba, where the same elements of African culture were at hand, a related style has been developed, notably in the frescoes of the mulatto Peña and the tender watercolors of Gattorno.

But in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Venezuela, neither the Indian nor the Negro was a factor in the national culture. The art of these countries has remained at heart European, as untouched by the American or African tradition as our own contemporary painting. At present these lands would seem to be the artistic orphans of the New World. Aware of the evils of imitation, technically able, aesthetically sensitive, they have not yet succeeded in directing their own destiny. Their plight is symbolized by the story of Cesario Bernaldo de Quirós, who forsook his European studies to paint his own people, the Argentine Gauchos, only to picture them in the style of the Spaniard Sorolla. The art of these countries must remain a thing apart from the life of the people because they themselves are helpless to contribute to its real existence.

Such then is the development of Latin American painting. At the present time we can speak of no common school of Latin American art. In the colonial period and in the nineteenth century, there were common problems and similar products. But although the new Mexican style has been a source of inspiration for much of Latin America, the results have had the widest divergence. Rivera, Sabogal, and Portinari are very different the one from the other. In this variety of style lies the hope for the future of Latin American art. These artists have proved that Peru and Brazil can develop an art worthy of Mexico, yet independent of it and of Europe as well. They in Latin America have succeeded in doing what we in the United States cannot yet claim to have done.

