

**W H Y**

**L A T I N**

**A M E R I C A**

**M A T T E R S**

**– A collection of essays**

**Soledad Garcia Ferrari**  
**Hans Egil Offerdal**  
**Marta Alicja Kania**  
Editors



**CCLAS**  
Centre for Contemporary  
Latin American Studies

**THE UNIVERSITY**  
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AMERICA  
MATTERS

– A collection of essays

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Why Latin America Matters. A Collection of Essays  
Soledad García Ferrari; Hans Egil Offerdal; Marta Alicja Kania (eds.). Edinburgh: Centre  
for Contemporary Latin American Studies, 2021.

ISBN 978-1-912669-28-8  
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*Book Design:* Stephanie Crane De Narváez  
*Assistant Editor:* Amelia A. Bain

Supported by the Coimbra Group and La Asociación de Universidades Grupo  
Montevideo



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# 2

## Uncovering a Common Heritage: Latin American Academies of Fine Arts in the Century of the Independence

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### Abstract

During the nineteenth century, the process of nation-building in Latin America was accompanied by the creation of publicly funded art academies charged with the delicate task of forging new images for the newly independent countries. This essay intends to offer an overview of Latin American academic art by focusing primarily on the transatlantic mobility of artists and artworks during the nineteenth century. The training and experience that Latin American students of art could acquire during their prolonged sojourns in Europe allowed them to become familiar with new artistic languages and techniques and to intervene directly in the cosmopolitan debate about the role of art in modern societies. The new global turn in art-historical studies provides us today with the unique opportunity to look at the transnational dimension of nineteenth-century Latin American art through new conceptual lenses and to unravel new aspects of the shared cultural heritage that links Europe to Latin America.

### Resumen

*Durante el siglo XIX, el proceso de construcción de naciones en América Latina fue acompañado por la creación de academias de arte financiadas con fondos públicos y encargadas de la delicada tarea de forjar nuevas imágenes para los países recién independizados. Este ensayo pretende ofrecer una visión general del arte académico latinoamericano, centrándose principalmente en la movilidad transatlántica de artistas y obras de arte durante el siglo XIX. La formación y experiencia que los estudiantes de arte latinoamericanos pudieron adquirir durante sus prolongadas estancias en Europa, les permitió familiarizarse con nuevos lenguajes y técnicas artísticas e intervenir directamente en el debate cosmopolita sobre el papel del arte en las sociedades modernas. El reciente giro global en los estudios de historia del arte nos brinda hoy la oportunidad única de mirar la dimensión transnacional del arte latinoamericano del siglo XIX, a través de nuevos conceptos y de desentrañar aspectos emergentes en el patrimonio cultural compartido que une a Europa con América Latina.*

In recent times, nineteenth-century Latin American art has hit the art world quite remarkably. Names of artists, once known only locally, are now starred in international exhibitions, and their works, once relegated in the dusty corners of museum deposits, are now displayed in permanent galleries. Even the art market is showing a renewed interest in this neglected repertoire, overshadowed until recently by the feats of modernism. Today, nineteenth-century artists are increasingly featured alongside colonial, modernist and contemporary masters in stand-alone Latin American sales, offered yearly by leading international auction houses. Scholars, curators, art dealers and private collectors have learned to appreciate their art and role in the process of nation-building. These artists forged a new cosmopolitan image of their countries, then recently disenfranchised from colonial bonds, and contributed significantly to shaping the artistic landscape of the Americas.

I wish to be able to write such a celebratory statement in the near future. At the moment, despite some commendable pioneering efforts, this is regrettably not the case. Scholars, curators and art dealers show indeed an increased interest in nineteenth-century Latin American art, but this occurs only sporadically and almost invariably on a national level. Its transnational dimension is still largely overlooked by the general public. Of course, every Latin American country has its local hero. Brazil, to take one example, is rightly proud of Victor Meirelles (1832-1903), whose *The First Mass in Brazil* (1861) counts as an early manifesto of continental historical painting. However, one can legitimately wonder who, outside Brazil, is ready to acknowledge the artistic relevance of Pedro Américo or Rodolpho Bernardelli. The same could be said, to mention but a few, of Pedro Lira, in Chile; Ernesto de la Cárcova, in Argentina; Juan Manuel Blanes, in Uruguay; Ignacio Merino and Francisco Laso, in Peru; Juan Cordero, Santiago Rebull, and José Salomé Pina, in Mexico (Coli, 2005;

Romera, 1951; Malosetti Costa, 2001; Peluffo Linari, 1986; Ramírez, 1985; Ugarte Eléspuru, 1966).

The common thread linking these artists together was their cosmopolitan academic education, achieved at home and overseas. The need to forge and control new symbols of nationhood and become acquainted with a standard artistic language common to other modern nations spurred several Latin American countries to establish publicly funded schools of art. Expensive programmes of scholarships for students (*pensionados* in Spanish-speaking countries; *pensionistas* in Brazil) were embedded from the very beginning in the academic curriculum. Rome and Paris became the privileged metropolises of reference for many young Latin American artists and the centres in which they perfected their skills and produced their works. These prolonged moments spent abroad offered these *primeros modernos* with the unique opportunity to engage actively in the artistic debates of Europe. The felicitous formula *primeros modernos* or 'first modern artists', coined for the Argentinian case, could be easily applied to other Latin American contexts (Malosetti Costa, 2001).

We are now working in times in which an increased interest towards transnationalism and globalisation has changed the ways in which academic research is conducted. The global turn has dramatically affected also the fields of art history and museum studies (van Damme and Zijlmans, 2012; Belting et al., 2009; Elkins, 2010). One of the consequences of this new orientation has been the increased interest towards the phenomena of mobility, migration and transformation, as witnessed in the topics of special interest, formulated most recently by the CIHA, the International Committee for Art History: 'Motion: Transformations' (Florence 2019) and 'Motion: Migrations' (São Paulo 2020-21). This new approach also has been endorsed by the Getty Foundation with the 'Connecting Art Histories' initiative (2009-19), an ambitious programme of grants awarded to universities working on Asian, Latin American, Greater Mediterranean, Central and Eastern European projects. The general framework under which the Getty asked scholars to submit their proposals revealed a distinct focus on non-Western art. The dynamic exchange between Europe and Latin America during the nineteenth century remained somewhat untouched (Guzmán and Martínez, 2012).

This is a topic that matters: especially for Europe. The case of the Academia Nacional de San Carlos in Mexico City offers a paramount example. Funded by Fernando José Mangino and Gerónimo Antonio Gil in 1781, during the colonial period, the Mexican academy of fine arts was the first of its kind created in the Americas (Charlot, 1962; Báez Macías, 2009). After the independence from Spain in 1821 and the creation of the Mexican Republic in 1823, the new government sent as soon as 1825 five students to Rome to study painting, sculpture, engraving, architecture and botanical drawing. The names of these pioneers – Ignacio Vásquez, José María Labastida, José Manzo y Jaramillo, Alejandro Vicente Casarín and Francisco Xavier Arias – are largely unknown today, but their few preserved works offer an excellent illustration of the kind of art needed by the new nation. It suffices to mention, on this regard, the sculptures of the *Mexican Eagle* (1833-34) and the *Allegory of the 1824 Constitution* (1832), which Labastida carved during his sojourn in Rome, to have an idea of the national character linked to that mission (Cuadriello, 1989; Cracolici, 2021).

In 1843, the Mexican government decided to revive the Academy of San Carlos with funding derived from the national lottery. The new curriculum entailed, this time, a well-designed programme of scholarships to support six students in Rome for a period of four years, with an additional one to be spent in Paris. The first cohort included two painters, Primitivo Miranda and Juan Cordero; two sculptors, Tomás Pérez and Felipe Valero; and two architects, the brothers Juan and Ramón Agea. The pensionados in Rome were open also to indigenous Mexicans, as witnessed in the amiable token of affection that Juan Cordero painted in Rome, with the *Portrait of the sculptors Pérez and Valero*, intent to mould in clay the head of Homer (Fig. 1). The second cohort of students included pupils of the Catalan artists Pelegrín Clavé and Manuel Vilar, appointed in 1845 in Rome as directors respectively of painting and sculpture. This second generation of *pensionados* comprised the better-known painters José Salomé Pina and Santiago Rebull; sculptor Epitacio Calvo; and architect Ramón Rodríguez Arangoiti (Capitelli and Cracolici, 2018).

The achievements of these artists left an enduring mark in Mexico. Cordero's wall painting in the churches of Santa Teresa Antigua and Jesús y María in Mexico City, now severely damaged, have been rightly identified as the



Fig. 1: Juan Cordero, *Portrait of the sculptors Pérez and Valero*, oil of canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.

immediate precursors of the mural paintings by modernist artists such as José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera or David Alfaro Siqueiros. The fact that a pioneering study on Cordero and San Carlos came from the pen of Jean Charlot, a distinguished member of the muralist movement, proves once more the historical significance of that artistic tradition (Charlot, 1946). The route to Rome was not only beaten by *pensionados* sponsored directly by the Academia Nacional de San Carlos, but also by artists able to attract funding from other sources, such as Salvador Ferrando, sponsored by the government of Veracruz;



Miguel Martín Azparren, sponsored by the businessman Anselmo Zurutuza; or Jacobo Gálvez and Felipe Santiago Gutiérrez, who managed to partially self-fund their education in Europe (Capitelli and Cracolici, 2018).

Gutiérrez left us a vivid account of his Roman sojourn in his travelogues, dwelling in particular on its cosmopolitan atmosphere: ‘El periodo que dura el estudio [...] se pasa sin sentir, por lo agradable de la ocupación al lado de setenta u ochenta artistas ingleses, franceses, rusos, americanos, españoles, y en fin, de todas las naciones’ (‘The time spent studying passes without noticing, for the pleasure of working in the company of seventy or eighty artists of French, Russian, American, Spanish origin, in short, of all nations’; Gutiérrez, 1883, pp. 159-60). The cosmopolitan milieu portrayed in this sketch of artistic life in Rome is not all too dissimilar from the accounts that our Erasmus students could formulate to describe their international experience in our modern universities. This convivial atmosphere is also revealed in a group photograph sent by Mariano Fortuny to Claudio Lorenzale, where Mexican painters Salvador Ferrando and Santiago Rebull are featured in Rome alongside other pensionados from Spain, among which appears also the Argentinian Martín Boneo (Folch i Torres, 1962, p. 161, Fig. 2).

The presence and activity of Latin American artists in nineteenth-century Europe is an aspect that art history has studied only tangentially, paying little attention to the transnational dimension of the phenomenon. The centrality of Rome and Paris for the formation of artists is instead tersely expressed in a comment on the Great Exhibition of 1878:

“Presumimos que Roma es el cerebro artístico del mundo; pero París es su corazón [...] Roma sigue siendo el templo del arte; París es su mercado. En Roma se pinta por pintar; en París por vender. El arte sublime que se siente en Roma, en París se manufactura. Roma y París han sido las escuelas de nuestros modernos artistas” (Escobar, 1878, p. 367).

(“We believe that Rome is the artistic brain of the world; but Paris is its heart [...] Rome is still the temple of art; Paris is its market. In Rome one paints for the sake of painting; in Paris, to sell. The sublime art one can feel in Rome, in Paris is manufactured. Rome and Paris have been the schools of our modern artists”).

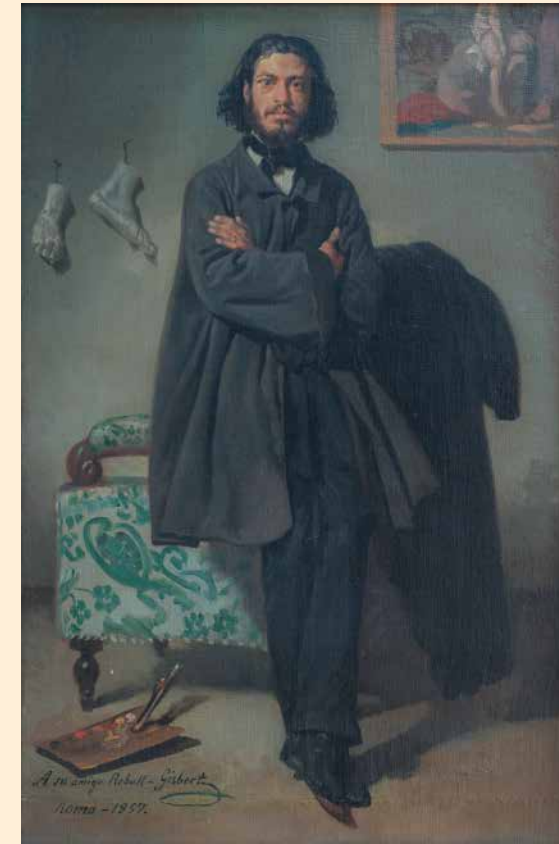


Fig. 2 Antonio Gisbert, *Portrait of Santiago Rebull in his Roman Studio*, 1857, oil on canvas, Private Collection, Berlin.

What Alfredo Escobar maintained here for the case of Spanish art equally applied to the emerging Latin American schools. It was almost invariably from the portfolios of those artists who had spent part of their lives in Europe that their governments selected the artworks to be exhibited in such defining events as the Great Exhibitions. The specificity of each country was conveyed in many cases by carefully chosen subjects, but the artistic language in which they were inflected used an international style acquired through a common academic curriculum.

The French and Italian models were seminal to launch in Latin America the first series of academic exhibitions. These were introduced as early as in 1829 in Brazil by Jean Baptiste Debret, who had travelled to Rio de Janeiro in 1816 as a member of the French Artistic Mission to establish, under the auspices of the royal court of Portugal, the Escola Real de Artes e Ofícios ('Royal School of Sciences, Arts and Crafts'), which became the Academia Imperial de Belas Artes ('Imperial Academy of Fine Arts') under Pedro I (1822-31; Cardoso Denis, 2000). In Rio, Debret worked closely with the French architect Grandjean de Montigny and painter Nicolas-Antoine Taunay, both winners of the Grand Prix de Rome. The Brazilian academy introduced a travel grant, the Prémio de Viagem, in 1845, after an early experiment in 1831, when Manuel de Araújo Porto-Alegre was sent to Paris. From 1845 to 1887 the Academia Imperial de Belas Artes conferred the Prémio de Viagem to Rome and Paris to artists such as the aforementioned Meirelles, Bernardelli and Américo, destined for brilliant careers in Brazil, but also Zeferino da Costa, Agostinho da Motta, Rodolpho Amoêdo and Oscar Pereira da Silva (Cavalcanti, 2001; Dias, 2020).

Regular exhibitions were introduced also in Mexico by Clavé and Vilar starting from 1848. These events were not only an occasion to display artworks sent from Europe by the *pensionados* but allowed also local artists, be they students of the academy or not, to show and sell their works. The academy equally promoted the envoy to Mexico of exemplary pieces by European masters, which enhanced the opportunity for artists based in Mexico to compare their works with the ones displayed in international exhibitions, opening new vistas on the genres, styles, techniques and tastes of the global art market. Such public displays of art had great impact on the burgeoning of an artistic and collecting culture among the Mexican bourgeoisie, who started to commission artworks from members of the academy (Romero de Terreros, 1963; Rodríguez Prampolini, 1997; Acevedo and Widdifield, 2002). Eugenio Landesio, the Italian professor of landscape appointed at San Carlos in 1854, and his best pupil José María Velasco obtained significant commissions from the owners of the wealthy haciendas and silver mines, marking a new starting point in the construction of an autonomous image of the Mexican landscape (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 José María Velasco, *The Metlac Ravine*, 1893, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.

A further aspect worth mentioning is the increased mobility of artists within the continent. The success of the San Carlos exhibitions encouraged artists of the Escuela de Dibujo y Pintura de San Alejandro in Cuba, founded in 1818 by the French painter Jean Baptiste Vermay, to send their works to Mexico. As early as 1795, the Italian painter Giuseppe Pirovani found his way from Rome to Philadelphia, where he decorated the interiors of the Spanish embassy, then to Cuba in 1804, where he painted three frescoes in the cathedral of Havana, and eventually to Mexico where he worked at San Carlos until 1829 (Rose-De Viejo, 2011; Niell, 2012). Alessandro Ciccarelli, a painter from Naples but formed in Rome, was invited in 1843 by Pedro II to Rio de Janeiro to act as court painter. In 1848 Ciccarelli moved to Santiago de Chile, where he established the first Chilean Academia de Pintura ('Academy of Painting'; Cruz de Amenábar, 2004; Berríos et al., 2009; Zamorano Pérez, 2013). Before him, the French painter Raymond Monvoisin had reached Santiago in 1843, after spending one year in Buenos Aires; in 1845, we find him in Peru, where he met Ignacio Merino, pupil in Paris of Delaroche and professor of painting in Lima at the Academia de Dibujo y Pintura ('Academy of Design and Painting'); in 1846, he was active at the imperial court in Brazil, where



he became Ciccarelli's friend, to finally spend eight years in Chile, before returning to France in 1856 (Dias, 2020, pp. 266-90).

The case of Monvoisin, however, is distinct from the one offered by other European traveller-artists, who flocked to Latin America in the wake of the ethnographic curiosity spurred in Europe by Alexander von Humboldt's explorations of the continent in 1799-1804. The artistic production of Johann Moritz Rugendas, for instance, the German traveller-artist who between 1831 and 1847 journeyed through Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, with his detailed views of landscapes and customs, is hardly comparable with the art of Monvoisin (Diener, 1996). Like Ciccarelli, Monvoisin travelled through Latin America as a cosmopolitan academic painter ready to engage with other cosmopolitan academic artists. Mexican, Brazilian, and Peruvian artists did not



Fig. 4 José Salomé Pina, *Pietà with Saint Charles Borromeo and Saint Bernard*, 1859, oil on canvas, Private Collection, Santiago de Cali.

limit their European travel to their study years, but also crossed the Atlantic later when their careers were well established. Ferrando, for instance, remained in Rome for about twenty-five years, where he opened a photography studio; Américo spent his most productive years in Florence; Merino left Lima in 1850 to settle in Paris permanently; and to paint his now regrettably lost Circular Panorama of Rio de Janeiro (1888), Meirelles went to Belgium (Coelho, 2007).

The mobility of artists chimed with the mobility of artworks. The case of religious paintings and monumental statues made in Europe adds a further element to the academic exchange between the two continents. The envoys of sacred art from Rome, but also from Germany and France, served to disenfranchise several recently independent countries from religious colonial bonds. The numerous altarpieces by prominent artists of the Roman Academy of Saint Luke sent to various churches in Santiago de Chile offer a paramount example (Capitelli, 2010, 2016; Capitelli et al., 2017). The renewal of religious iconography occurred also as the result of the implementation in Mexico, for instance, of the Roman academic curriculum, as shown in Pina's or Rebull's envoys from Rome (Fig. 4). On the secular side, monumental bronze statues depicting Simon Bolivar by Adamo Tadolini were placed in the main squares of Lima, Caracas and San Francisco; the ones of the same hero by Pietro Tenerani are in Bogota and in the Panteón Nacional in Caracas; the statue in marble of José María Morelos by Antonio Piatti in Mexico City is still in place today, although severely damaged (Hufschmidt, 1996; Gutiérrez Viñuales, 1997; Grandesso, 2003, 2018).

## Conclusions

This short excursus on nineteenth-century academic art and its transnational relevance for Europe ought to be complemented with a survey of those Latin American initiatives and institutions that in recent times have devoted special attention to this once overlooked repertoire: the Centro de Estudios del Patrimonio at the Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez in Santiago de Chile and Valparaíso; the Instituto de Artes at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín in Buenos Aires; the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City; the Departamento de Historia

del Arte at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá; the Departamento de História de Arte at the Universidade Federal de São Paulo. The collaborative network that these centres have developed with local museums and galleries, including private collections, is invaluable also for European researchers and curators. The Jornadas de Historia del Arte, organised by Chilean and Brazilian colleagues, have become over the past fifteen years an attractive forum also for European investigators.

This well-established network of international scholars is now in the process of consolidating their collaboration at the institutional level, through the creation of confederated programmes for postgraduate students. Like the artists enrolled in the fine arts academies of the nineteenth century, art and art history students of the twenty-first century need travel. The necessity to visit museums and galleries personally, to test different forms of supervision and postgraduate training, to become proficient in the languages considered particularly relevant in the art world – besides English, also Italian, French and German – elevates travel to an irreplaceable component of their education. The new global turn in the study of art history makes travel indispensable also for European students, for whom the routes to Latin America open new vistas on the global geography of art and its shared common heritage.

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