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ARTS

Museums Turn Their Focus to U.S. Artists of Latin Descent

By ROBIN POGREBIN APRIL 24, 2018

When Scott Rothkopf, chief curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art, attended the U.S. Latinx Arts Futures Symposium at the Ford Foundation two years ago, the experience had a profound impact.

The organizers “wanted to draw people’s attention to the fact that Latinx artists were falling into neither category — they were not part of the growing interest in Latin American artists but also not seen as American artists,” Mr. Rothkopf said. “I left thinking that it was extremely important that the Whitney expand its thinking in this area and, by virtue of being a museum of the U.S., could do something unique by drawing attention to these artists as U.S. Americans — they could be part of the story.”

Mr. Rothkopf then proceeded to hire Marcela Guerrero to be the Whitney’s first curator specializing in Latinx, the gender-neutral word for art produced by artists of Latin descent who were born in the United States, or work produced by artists of Latin descent in the United States.

“We’re at a really important point in history where plural curatorial voices can show not just a survey,” Ms. Guerrero said. “We can now go deeper and start unpacking what Latino art really is.”

Quechua, Maya, Aztec and Taino. The Whitney is also re-examining its collection historically. “We’ll be looking back at the whole of the 20th century and saying, ‘Who did we miss because of our biases, because of our ignorance?’” Mr. Rothkopf said. “‘Why don’t we have a Luis Jiménez sculpture?’ We have to answer questions like that.”

The Whitney’s efforts, including Ms. Guerrero’s appointment, are emblematic of a growing recognition by museums of the importance of the Latinx category.

As the Hispanic population continues to grow and immigration has become an increasingly hot-button political issue, art institutions around the country are beginning to increase their exhibitions, curators and acquisitions in Latinx art.

It is one of the many ways that museums are rethinking the traditional canon, and trying to fill in historical gaps in their collections and programming while also hoping to reach more diverse audiences in the process.

Ms. Guerrero is among the prominent figures in the art world who will be addressing this issue at The New York Times Art Leaders Network conference this week in Berlin, which will include discussions about how museums can play catch-up in areas they have long neglected, namely Latinx.

“More mainstream institutions are focusing on it,” said Marina Reyes Franco, an independent curator from Puerto Rico. “It’s about time.”

To a large extent, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has led the way, hiring its first curator of Latin American Art, Mari Carmen Ramírez, in 2001 when it established a department of Latino art. And when the museum’s new Steven Holl-designed expansion opens in 2020, Ms. Ramírez said, Latino art will have a dedicated presence.

Other institutions, including the Pérez Art Museum Miami, in Florida, El Museo del Barrio in New York and the Smithsonian, have also made noteworthy strides.

In addition to starting a Latino Curatorial Initiative, the Smithsonian has hired Latino experts at its museums, including the National Portrait Gallery, Archives of

American Art, National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

And since E. Carmen Ramos became deputy chief curator and curator of Latino art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2010, the institution has doubled its collection of Latino art.

“Our focus is all about centering what had been a marginalized art community into the canon of American art,” said Eduardo Díaz, director of the Smithsonian Latino Center. “Latino art is American art, period.”

The Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum’s *Diseño* series focuses on design and Latino identity. “This has been an area which has been neglected for so many years,” said Christina De León, an associate curator.

She added that the Cooper Hewitt’s recent renovation and reopening offered an opportunity “to rethink” the collection’s focus and the museum’s direction. “In the end, we are here to serve the public,” Ms. De León said. “And if we can’t serve a diverse public, we’re not doing our job.”

To a large extent, the increasing attention to Latinx has been driven by demographics, those in the field say. “The United States is on its way to becoming a Latino-dominant population,” said Ms. Ramírez.

There are also diverse groups within that demographic, experts point out — be they Cuban-Americans in Miami, for example, Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles, or Puerto Ricans in New York.

In addition, institutions are recognizing the importance of acknowledging the influence of Latinx art on the rest of American culture. “In this historical moment, possibly the most urgent of all the contemporary art issues has to do with Latino and Chicano art,” said Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, a curator of “Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985,” which was part of *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* and recently opened at the Brooklyn Museum. “This is a political moment when it is absolutely necessary that we begin to truly understand how embedded Latino culture is in the very fabric of the United States.”

Still, many liken Latinx to where the Latin American art field was 20 years ago, given that it still lacks an effective infrastructure or sufficient auction house support.

“There are not that many collectors of that art — it’s an incipient market,” Ms. Ramírez said. “Museums need to take a step forward and start collecting this art in a serious way. It’s the only way you can create a class of collectors. When museums put their stamp of approval on this area, collectors will follow suit and the market will follow.”

When the Whitney presents its coming show curated by Ms. Guerrero, the museum will for the first time have wall text in Spanish as well as English. “This is, to me a long-term project — it’s not that we’re going on a short-term shopping spree or checking boxes,” Mr. Rothkopf said. “This is going to become part of the way we think as an institution.”

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