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VISUAL ARTS

Rich gems of Latin art struggle for fans, funds

Americas museum to exhibit a vibrant, dazzling niche of abstract geometrics

BY STEPHANIE MERRY

The Art Museum of the Americas might be called the Miss Havisham of the Washington art scene. It's rich with assets but concealed from public view. You could even say the museum's clock stopped in the 1980s, freezing the make-up of the collection and the state of the Spanish-style building at 18th Street NW and Constitution Avenue.

Now the museum is attempting to publicly reassert the significance of its 2,000-piece permanent collection with "Constellations," a display of more than 40 Latin American works of 20th-century geometric abstraction.

It's a timely moment to send up this flare of a show with its pops of color, retro-futuristic aesthetics and audience-engaging optical illusions. This mid-century niche is on fire. Exhibitions have popped up across the country, including the Hirshhorn Museum's recent "Supra-sensorial," a massive, vibrant look at the Light and Space movement, which came to Washington after debuting at the

AMERICAS CONTINUED ON E7



THE ART MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAS

STRAIGHT UP: Juan Carlos Liberti's painting "A Frank Lloyd Wright" is part of the "Constellations" exhibit.

A dazzling collection is on shaky footing

AMERICAS FROM E1

Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Record-setting auctions have followed.

Yet the Art Museum of the Americas, a one-time trailblazer with a coveted collection, seems to be in a predicament.

"It's an auspicious moment for the museum," said Abigail McEwen, the University of Maryland professor who is curating the show. "I hope that the [Organization of American States] recognizes the collection's significance and makes the museum a priority."

The D.C.-based OAS is the alliance of 35 member nations, from Canada to Chile, that owns the museum. It funds the salaries of the museum's seven employees, but there is no budget for programming or curating, conservation or restoration, and there have been cuts made across the organization.

This has been problematic. The small staff and frequent restructuring make planning difficult, which diminishes

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possibilities for outside funds. McEwen managed to turn around "Constellations" in less than four months, even though the institutional norm is closer to three or four years, which allows time for loans of additional works, fundraising, corporate sponsorships and academic research. But a few works she hoped to include in the show were not in presentable condition.

Although the full collection hasn't been appraised in years, recent sales suggest that the museum and the OAS are sitting on a valuable stockpile.

At a Christie's New York auction in May, "La Revolte des Contaires" by Chilean artist Roberto Matta sold for \$5 million. Only two works by Latin American artists have ever sold for more at auction (a piece by Rufino Tamayo and one by Frida Kahlo). The museum has a comparable work, according to McEwen: the 1948 painting "Hermala II."

Scholars, who might be less impressed with price inflation than art's historical

significance, have also offered praise.

The museum has "representative examples of probably all the most well-known Latin American artists," said Michele Greet, who serves on the museum's advisory board and teaches at George Mason University. "They have wonderful pieces by Roberto Matta, by Wilfredo Lam, by Amelia Pelaez, Pettoruti."

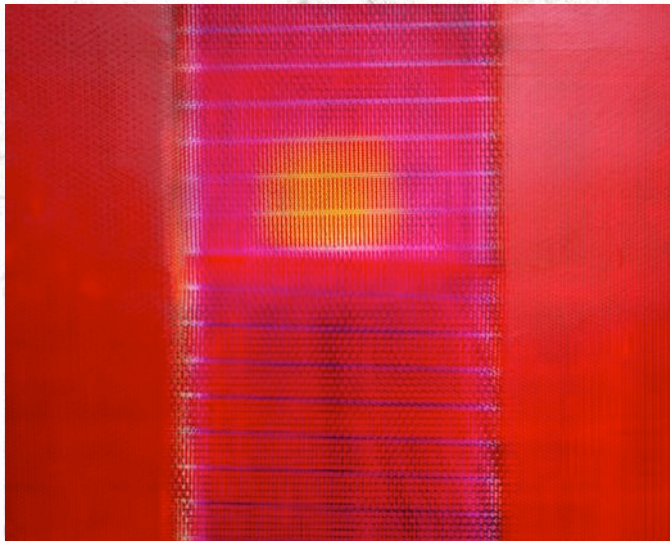
While the OAS, and its predecessor the Pan-American Union, has invested in culture for years, it clearly has pressing concerns beyond the value of its art, which makes the parent-child relationship all the more incongruous. Over the years, the group has made a Cold War-era pledge to fight communism, responded to regional coups d'etat and human-rights issues, and established free trade within the Americas.

"If you compare art right now to security, for instance, usually people are going to put more attention into security," said Alfonso Quiñónez, secretary for external relations of the OAS. "But if you put it into the right context, where you can have art and culture as a mechanism for social cohesion, that makes it a very important part of what we're trying to achieve in terms of security or development or democracy."

The museum itself was an instrument of diplomacy when it opened in 1976, a gift from the Latin American nations to the United States on the occasion of the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. Yet the collection started growing long before that. In 1946, Jose Gomez-Sicre, the Cuban protege of Alfred Barr Jr., the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, joined the Pan-American Union's visual arts unit. Gomez-Sicre was an imposing man, both in stature and demeanor, who had a gift for spotting artistic up-and-comers. At a time when few museums were displaying Latin American art, Gomez-Sicre traveled widely to seek out hidden talent, according to Alejandro Anreus, who chairs the art department at William Paterson University in New Jersey and started his career as an archivist assistant at the Art Museum of the Americas in 1979.

"He promoted Latin American art in the U.S., I think, more than anybody," Anreus said. "He went everywhere to lecture, organized exhibitions. He knew museum directors and got them to buy work like [Jose Luis] Cuevas, [Alejandro] Otero, [Alejandro] Obregon, the artists that today are household names in the history of modern art."

He also brought his new discoveries back to the Pan-American Union and, later, the Art Museum of the Americas, giving them their first solo shows in the United States. The artists left pieces of



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ART MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAS

BRILLIANT: Rogelio Polesello, who was born in Argentina in 1939, painted "Naranja sobre Magenta," or "Orange on Magenta," in 1961.



AVANT-GARDE ABSTRACT: "Constructive Composition," a 1943 oil painting by the Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres-García, is the centerpiece of the show. It came from the collection of Nelson Rockefeller.

their work with Gomez-Sicre out of gratitude. With a small acquisitions budget — in the \$2,000 range annually from the 1950s until the 1980s — the OAS managed to acquire its collection through donations from grateful artists and collectors because of Gomez-Sicre's far reach and connections, which extended to the Rockefeller family.

In fact, the centerpiece of "Constellations," Joaquín Torres-García's arresting pictograph-inspired abstraction "Constructive Composition," was a gift from philanthropist and politician Nelson

Rockefeller. The Uruguayan artist's "Grafismo Universal" recently sold at auction for \$1.4 million.

"In the '50s and '60s, everybody knew that there was this place — not even a museum then, it was the visual arts section — but that the visual arts section at the OAS was a central place in the art of Latin America, just like Mexico and Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo," Anreus said. According to Anreus, Gomez-Sicre had the green light to choose the art he wanted to show, which gave him some independence from the parent organization. He retired

from the museum in 1983.

Since then, the Art Museum of the Americas has found itself in a bit of a conundrum. Although the OAS doesn't provide funding for exhibits, the group has exerted more control over programming.

The head of the museum is Andres Navia, a former project manager for cultural projects at the OAS who ended up at the helm of the museum after a February restructuring.

"My role here, since my background is not in museums, is to integrate the museum and the cultural activities of the OAS into the agenda of the OAS and vice versa, connecting more the museum to development issues and social and political issues that are at the core of the agenda of the institution," Navia said.

Although the onus of additional funding falls on the museum, an air of concern tends to surround the annual fundraiser, Art After Dark, which transforms the museum into a party space with drinks, art installations and live music.

"The [OAS's] requirement of keeping an image of being very sober and low-profile and diplomacy-oriented makes it difficult to have fun activities oriented toward the young professional crowd, as other museums can," Navia explained.

Navia is doing what he can with the limited resources, including planning exhibitions further in advance; partnering with other organizations, such as Washington Project for the Arts and the Hirshhorn Museum; and seeking out private funds to build a simple addition that could provide state-of-the-art storage as well as exhibition space for the permanent collection. Greet, meanwhile, has been working on an archives documentation process, in association with the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, to scan key documents for researchers. That could help raise the profile of the once-renowned collection.

Of even greater urgency is finding a way for the museum, including staff salaries, to become self-sustaining. Although there have been no explicit threats of closure, there has been pressure to find outside money to fund operations. That could mean teaming up with another organization, university or museum.

"We need a partner to survive," Navia said, adding that the museum undoubtedly has something of value to exchange. "We have a wonderful permanent collection, we have a wonderful location two blocks away from the White House, and the Latin American and Latino communities are growing like crazy."

Whether Navia can find that partner is a question that bears not only on the museum's status as a hidden gem or well-known destination, but also perhaps on its existence.

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"CONSTELLATIONS"

Through Sept. 23. Art Museum of the Americas, 201 18th St. NW. 202-458-6016. www.museum.oas.org. Free.