

# Latin Art Gets a Big Look-in at Last

EUROPEANS and North Americans are getting an overdue education in the culture of the often-overlooked half of the New World south of the Rio Grande.

All sorts of revelations — inspiring and dispiriting alike — are to be gleaned from an exhibition of 20th Century Latin American art first held in Seville, Spain, and now in New York after stops in Paris and Cologne.

With more than 300 works by 90 artists, this is biggest show of its kind ever assembled. Most countries in South America are represented and Mexico has a strong presence. Despite the virtual absence of Central American artists, curator Waldo Rasmussen has presented a truly comprehensive, almost encyclopedic survey of the region's artistic achievements from 1914 to the present day.

Rasmussen, the director of the international programme at New York's Museum of Modern Art, seems determined to compensate, all at once, for the Western art world's long indifference toward Latin work. But the sheer size of the show tends to blunt its impact and blur the distinctions between great and ordinary paintings. Many viewers will experience optical and intellectual exhaustion long before reaching the final room.

It is not clear why the museum waited until now to acquaint audiences with what has been happening in Latin American art for the past 80 years. The museum has had a pan-American outlook since its founding in the 1930s. Some of the finest work in the current show is drawn from its own collection.

One explanation is that the US and European art establishments, although taking pride in being cosmopolitan, have only recently begun to overcome their narcissism and cultural arrogance. Instead of gazing almost exclusively at pieces produced in a few Western cities, critics and curators are at last looking southward and acknowledging the contributions of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Most Third World artists of this century have found it impossible to avoid the pervasive influence of Europe and North America. That is immediately apparent in the Latin show. It

**Kevin J Kelley**  
writes from  
**New York**

The Western art world has long been indifferent towards Latin work. Even North America has tended to overlook that half of the New World that lies south. Now a huge exhibition of 20th century Latin art has come to New York's famed Museum of Modern Art. Its size is liable to cause intellectual exhaustion, reports Gemini News Service, whose correspondent has just paid a visit.

begins with Cubist paintings by Mexican artist Diego Rivera, who was associated with Picasso, Chagall and other early modernists during the years (1914-17) he lived in Paris. Rivera gave Cubism his own stylistic and political interpretation.

*Zapatista Landscape* — The *Guerrilla* uses a rifle and scarp as part of Rivera's semi-abstract homage to the Mexican revolutionary. *Ship of Emigrants* (1923), a large-scale Expressionist painting by Lasar Segall, shows how this German-born artist brought along a European sensibility when he himself emigrated to Brazil. Several other artists in the show were also immigrants from Europe, further reinforcing the Old World's cultural grip on the Americas.

Europe's influence, however, was by no means overwhelming or strictly conservative. In fact, the avant-garde trends coursing through Paris, London and Berlin helped sweep away the stodginess and provincialism of Latin American art academies. And at the same time, painters like Uruguay's Pedro Figari and



MY AUNT, A LITTLE FRIEND, AND I  
Painting by Maria Izquierdo on show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York exhibition of Latin American artists.

Collection: Private

Venezuela's Armando Reveron developed a distinctively Latin style even as they followed European models.

The innovative quality of Latin American art is dramatically demonstrated in the section devoted to Mexican muralists Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and the prodigious Rivera. The emotionally charged works by these three activist artists are among the century's most effective examples of social-realist painting.

Political concerns are meanwhile informed with personal

and psychological insights in an accompanying group of portraits painted by Rivera's lover, Frida Kahlo, and her contemporary, Maria Izquierdo.

The ability to integrate indigenous traditions with international art movements is readily evident in the work of Wilfredo Lam. This Cuban painter, part of the Surrealism group in Paris and the Abstract Expressionist school in New York, used elements from both styles in compositions imbued with Afro-Caribbean religious themes.

Similarly, the Uruguayan

modernist Joaquin Torres-Garcia borrowed liberally from European sources but still produced a completely original body of work. The samples of Torres-Garcia's art in this show buttress the claims of those who regard him as at least the equal of any North American painter active during the inter-war years.

A number of the modern artists represented in the show are familiar to the New York art scene. Although citizens or natives of Latin American countries, some spend as much time in Manhattan as in Buenos Aires, Rio or Bogota. And their work often closely resembles the overheated offerings displayed in fashionable New York galleries.

Guillermo Kuitca of Argentina, for example, is a celebrity in European as well as North American art circles. This ascending 32-year-old art star is represented in the show by plastic mattresses on which have been painted road maps — not of Argentina, but of Germany.

Here in full view is one negative aspect of the homogeneous world culture that has emerged during the past two decades. Local histories and national traditions are being forgotten as the global village becomes a reality.

But there are still those who doggedly create within a distinctive ethnic and cultural context. A few younger artists in this show have assembled mixed-media constructions that are unmistakably Latin American in their spirit and references. This piece often harkens back to the political art of Rivera and other Mexican muralists.

Bernardo Salcedo of Colombia has inserted bullet casings over the faces of military officers in a photo taken at a 1942 graduation ceremony.

Electrodes are attached to a pile of potatoes in an installation by Argentina's Victor Grippo, thereby paying homage to the thousands of civilians tortured and killed by dictatorships throughout Latin America.

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## Blue

Look at the sky  
It is no longer blue  
Even the clouds are clumsy  
Like the ordinary glue.  
Look at the sea  
It is also not that blue  
To find the reason if you try  
You may not get any clue.  
See with a little intent  
The so-called modern society  
You might find the 'blue'  
With which it lost its decency.

## The Gist of My Poem

The nature synchronized  
With my thoughts,  
As if I made an unuttered fact  
With the trees, birds, rivers  
Mountains, etc.  
And afterwards  
The nature betrayed me  
In its own course.  
Is the nature as helpless as I am?  
May be yes, may be no  
Who the hell knows?

## Do Not Dream

Dreams are only  
The beginning  
of a nightmare  
The more you dream  
It comes closer and closer  
Engulfing your body and soul  
For dreams are  
But mirages  
you could never  
Clutch to your heart.

**Two Poems**  
by Gazi Sadeq

## To the Lovers of Van Gogh

Christine, Katchell, Margot —  
Did not you people know a single lullaby  
Or some hardcore songs  
To make Vincent sleep  
In a golden afternoon  
In golden wheat field  
Or in a clumsy bed  
In a clumsy night  
And let him dream a lovely nice dream.  
To keep the clumsy sunflowers  
Out of his sight?

**Two Poems**  
by Akhtar Ahmad

## The Essence of His Mission

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are conditions and opportunities for proportionate moral and spiritual growth. Material needs have no doubt to be met, but at the same time moral and spiritual excellence cannot be any means be lost sight of. A comprehensive philosophy, with a synthesis of matter and spirit, is equally missing in the East and the West. For instance, the East with its noble spiritual heritage bothered little about material prosperity, while the West in its limitless craving for material well-being was totally oblivious of spiritual values. The need of the hour was a synthesis of these two extreme outlooks. Material prosperity is necessary, but not enough; it has to be backed by moral and spiritual values.

Vivekananda visualised a world order based on equality, freedom and justice. But he noticed with deep regret that his own country was far away from this ideal. The great national sin, he lamented, 'is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well-educated, well-fed and well-looked after.' He calls for that comprehensive love which embraces all, especially the weak and the downtrodden. Hence he attaches that utmost emphasis on services to others which he rates higher than personal liberation. No one, he says, can be happy until all are

happy. 'When you hurt anyone, you hurt yourself, for you and your brother are one'. It is owing to this conviction that Vivekananda expresses his readiness to forgo his own liberation and face trials through many births for the sake of the poor and the oppressed.

Vivekananda's distinctive greatness lies in his eagerness to bring down Vedanta's exalted idea of the unity of man and creation from the solitary cave to the open air of work-a-day life. He picked up the essence of all religions and philosophies and thus tried to establish an equilibrium between faith and reason, matter and spirit, science and religion and similar other warring forces of life. He believed earnestly and declared unmistakably that man's future lies not in strife but in unity, not in dissension but in agreement. He thus observed optimistically: 'Upon the banner of every religion will soon be written in spite of resistance, help and not fight, assimilation and not destruction, harmony and peace and not dissension.'

Ours is an age of amazing development in science and technology. Man has now entered into what is called the atomic age, and is fast-moving towards conquering space. But what about his position here on earth, especially in respect of human values? Maxim Gorky rightly observed: 'Man has no doubt learnt how to fly freely in the sky like birds, swim at ease

in water like fish, but has hardly learnt how to live peacefully in his own home on the earth. There is thus no peace and happiness, but tension and dissension everywhere, as much in poverty-stricken Bangladesh as elsewhere in the otherwise affluent countries of the East and the West. The million dollar question, therefore, is: Is mankind going to survive, or fall victim to its own weapon of mass destruction? To my mind, if we seriously want to alley the material and moral miseries of men around the globe, foster a sense of solidarity in all irrespective of caste and creed and, above all, if we mean to save humanity from utter destruction, then we have no alternative but to preach and practice the perennial philosophy of universal love which is also the underlying gospel of all religions. It is this brand of humanitarian philosophy to which Swami Vivekananda drew the attention of his audience in Chicago one hundred years ago, and it is for this that the 'cyclonic monk' lived, moved and died. For our part, we would like to conclude by urging that what we need, and what the world leaders should and must strive for, is not war but peace, not dissension but unity and amity of the widest possible scale.

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# The Triumph and Tragedy of Telengana

Vidhyarthi Chatterjee writes from Calcutta

A veteran Socialist leader, freedom fighter and a hero of the legendary Telengana peasants uprising, Ravi Narayana Reddy, died in Hyderabad some years ago. Mr Reddy, who was 84 at the time of his death, had been one of the major figures in the historic Telengana armed struggle by peasants against the oppression of landlords during the Nizam's rule in the erstwhile princely state of Hyderabad in present-day Andhra Pradesh.

Born at Bollepalli in Nalgonda district, the hub of socialist activity for decades, Mr Reddy's contribution to the people's movement in general and to the amelioration of peasant problems in particular, is the stuff of which folklore and lullabies are constructed. Such was his popularity among the rural masses that in the country's first general elections in 1952, Mr Reddy won from his Nalgonda parliamentary constituency by a majority that exceeded that of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Perhaps somewhere in that verdict was an element of poetic justice, for the Indian National Congress's largely bourgeois and often Western-educated leadership had espoused the

cause of the Telengana peasants only to betray it in course of time. In fact, things came to such a pass after independence that it was difficult to distinguish between the glorious role of the Congress leadership and

the exploitative methods of the Nizam and his coterie.

Being basically a student of cinema, this writer's mind, even as it recounted the events in the life of the departed revolutionary, travelled back to a film

vate conversation.

As much was proved once all over again when the film was shown on the national network of Doordarshan one afternoon some time ago. Despite the poor quality of telecasting and the



A still from 'Maa Bhooni' (Telugu, 1979), directed by Goutam Ghose.

## A Way of Life in Dhaka

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rights of the rickshaw puller. Nothing is said about the maximum share the owner may demand from the puller's income. Only in a limited of cases rickshaw pullers' strikes have had some effect. Some years ago the Government had decided to close the main business centre of Motijheel, for rickshaws. The measure was abandoned when thousands of rickshaws closed off Motijheel from the rest of the city. Another result of the rickshaw organisations activities is that after a lot of pressure the Government has agreed to establish a lending scheme for rickshaw pullers in practice this programme does not work. The application for the loan is so complicated and bureaucratic, that only very few rickshaw pullers have the courage and patience to apply for it.

Although all rickshaw organisations propagate that the pullers should own their rickshaws, the results of their efforts are limited. The relative

high investment, lack of security, mismanagement in the provision of licences and lack of Government support make rickshaw ownership by the drivers beyond their reach. Even an organisation as the Grameen Bank only provides loans for second hand rickshaws. Still with lower import taxes on parts and more local manufacturing of these parts in the country, much could be done to reduce the existing manufacturing costs.

Bhuyan, head of a rickshaw cooperative in Dhaka, is not optimistic that the Government will change its present policy. 'The transport authorities are obsessed with modernisation of the existing transport system. They do not understand the importance and potential of rickshaw transport. They want Dhaka to become a second Bangkok or Jakarta, two of the most traffic congested and air-polluted cities in this part of the world.'

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made more than a decade ago on the subject of the Telengana uprising by the Bengali director, Goutam Ghose.

*Maa Bhooni* (Mother Earth, Telugu, black and white, 35mm, 1979) was an inspired and inspiring rendition on celluloid about individual tragedies in the backdrop of a mass movement for freedom and justice that captured the imagination of an entire nation on the throes of independence.

Cinematically speaking, *Maa Bhooni* had some of the rough edges that one normally associates with a first film, but these were more than offset by the young, self-educated director's involvement in his subject as also by his artistic will to prove himself in his inaugural endeavour. Contrary to what many urban intellectuals seem to think, the public is quick to recognise a genuine work of art when they see one; and in the case of *Maa Bhooni*, audiences throughout Andhra Pradesh supported it vigorously, as indeed did their counterparts in other regions of the country, notably Bengal where echoes, albeit faint receding echoes, of Telengana are still to be heard in both public debate and pri-

even more unfortunate fact that some important passages were unilaterally left out, the film was a focal point of discussion among film-lovers, political activists and others for several weeks to follow.

Goutam Ghose is said to have grown from strength to strength since *Maa Bhooni*. But, honestly, I have my doubts. Perhaps he has made more visually attractive films, but to my mind none as convincing and moving as his first fictional feature which, relying as it does on a wealth of details based on actual happenings, carried the look of a documentary almost all through its duration.

At this point, one is reminded of the saying that every lofty theme has generated a waste of countless lousy films and a wealth of one or two that has done the theme — and the medium — proud. It is unfortunate beyond words that the person who scored the music for *Maa Bhooni*, wrote the lyrics and also provided a part of the money to make the film, himself directed a film on the Telengana theme a few years ago that didn't exactly cover him in glory.

*Dast* (Telugu, 35mm, 94 mins, colour, 1988), directed by B Narsing Rao, is set in the 1920s when the Nizam of Hyderabad ruled the province of Telengana; and one of the local chieftains under the Nizam was Jayasimha Rao whose word was law in Narayanapuram. In those days young girls were bought from poor peasant families by the rich as bonded labour — *dasts*. They were often sent along with the daughter of the house as part of her dowry when she was married. *Kamalakshi* was one such *dast*, sent to Narayanapuram with the dowry of Janaki, the beautiful, comfort-loving wife of Jayasimha Rao.

The film is almost wholly about the sexual exploitation of *Kamalakshi* without any intelligent attempt at placing her plight within a broader framework of mass social and economic abuse. Thus it is that the audience is taken on a seemingly endless journey of titillation that one gets bored with, naturally, after a while. It speaks volumes about the cerebral qualities of people who sit on juries and committees that *dast* won a number of national awards and, prior to that, had been included in the Indian Panorama, the showcase of experimental and innovative cinema that is said to be one of the important sections of the annual international film festival of India.

In conclusion, political movements of great significance, such as the one that swept Telengana or the *Tebhaga* Andolan in Bengal, are thematic lodes with rich human undercurrents that, to my mind, ought to be taken up only by artists with a grasp of both art and politics. Unfortunately, the case is often quite different. Poorly equipped people with, at best, a half-baked consciousness of mass politics often jump into the fray of film-making, thereby only serving to enhance the interests of reactionary elements.

People like Narsing Rao have no business to be meddling with such an immediate and important medium as cinema. There ought to have been some indications in the film of the beginnings of popular upheaval that, with time, exploded in a ball of fire to ignite the minds and hearts of all right-thinking citizens of this sub-continent.

## The Preacher of Harmony

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for Swami Vivekananda in which he mentioned, 'Swamiji is a wonderful, eminent representative full of qualities. His scholarship is more than that of all the professors in our university. And like the sun to rays of which required no praise.' The Professor was always very kind to him and bought a ticket for him from Massachusetts to Chicago and gave some funds to him.

### Religious Harmony

The Parliament of Religions was held at the famous Art Institute of Chicago on the 11th September, 1893 and Swami Vivekananda was present there as the youngest representative speaking on Hinduism. All the learned representatives of various religions were delivering their speeches stressing on the supremacy of their respective religions one after another. Everyone spoke nicely. On the other hand, Swami Vivekananda rose to speak and addressed the audience: 'Sisters and Brothers of America'. This hearty address created a thrill touching the heart of the listeners. The excited audience was charmed at his speeches. Overnight, he became a very respectable speaker in the conference. The audience

wanted to listen to him only and was not interested to listen to others. He in his first speech uttered: 'We believe not only in tolerance but also we ensure all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations on the earth.' Swami Vivekananda said in one of his speeches expressing his feeling: 'The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.' He also said 'sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant fanaticism have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroying civilization. I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions, with the sword and with the pen and of all uncharitable feelings between persons warring their way to the same goal.' Swami Vivekananda made it clear to the audience — the harmony

and the unity will not come into force if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, but upon the banners of every religion will soon be written in spite of resistance: Help and not fight; Assimilation and not destruction; Harmony and peace and not dissension.

Swami Vivekananda is a new path finder among the religious thinkers in the modern world. The Parliament started on the idea — one religion is superior to the other, but ended with the idea that all religions are equally true. It is a hopeful indication to the whole world. Swami Vivekananda contributed largely to establish this truth. He preached, 'If one religion is true, then all religions are equally true.' This truth was felt by all present there. But still today religion often is being used to satisfy the ulterior motive for both individual and the group, which in turn results in violence and miseries for the mankind. Thus the views expressed by Swami Vivekananda in the Parliament of Religions can bring well-being and peace for the humanity.

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## Philosophy for Man

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one's goal. This reveals the life-oriented nature of Vivekananda's philosophy. The Western philosophical scholars in general, except a few, have been practising philosophy as intellectual exercise rather than looking it upon as an integral part of life. While they use it as an instrument for argument, in many cases they do not believe what they say. Vivekananda, bearing the tradition of oriental outlook, had a life-oriented attitude towards philosophy. He preached a philosophy which is to be followed and implemented in practical life. In doing so, he generously absorbed the best fruits from

Western schools of thought and integrated those to the oriental philosophy.

Since messages of all religions are great and intended to bring welfare to mankind, their outward differences are futile. Vivekananda desired to bring mankind to 'a world where there is an outcome of integration of Vedas, Bible and Quran.' Vivekananda expressed his utter abhorrence towards using religion as an instrument for fulfilling narrow interests. He even went to say to the extent that atheism is better than distorted religion.

Preacher of the message of peace and harmony among na-

tions, Vivekananda was truly a nationalist Indian. As a man glorified by his own nation's tradition, enriched both spiritually and materially, he was shocked to see its miserable condition during his contemporary period. He realised that a nation characterised by reluctance to work, dependence on others, caste system and disgrace of humanity, backwardness of female community can never see the height of progress. His great messages were inspiration for the nation to be awakened and engage in work to build itself up. He showed that caste system and lower status of women were only outcome of social abuses and can never be related to religion. Rather any type of discrimination among mankind is contrary to the great message of religion.