

Exploring continental connections at the Lowe Museum of Art

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Painted in New York in 1964, Colombian artist Fernando Botero's "Las frutas" embodies his signature style and satirizes modernist reinterpretations of traditional still lifes. Part of "Pan-American Modernism: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America and the United States" exhibition at the Lowe Museum of Art through Oct. 13

When museums mine their permanent collections, the results can often be nuggets or even veins of discovery for visitors. That is certainly the case with two new exhibitions at the University of Miami's Lowe Art Museum.

Pan-American Modernism: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America and the United States showcases the depth and breadth of the Lowe's collection and uses it to examine the interaction between modern artists in North, Central and South America. On display are works by 50 Latin American artists paired with works by 21 artists from the United States, many many of which had been in storage and not previously exhibited.

Kara Schneiderman, assistant director at the Lowe, explains that "the subject is one we wanted to look at, and it provided the opportunity to bring out parts of our collection that are not often seen as well as to collaborate with the university faculty and students."

Viewed together—and with a more than a cursory reading of the informative labels -- the paintings and works on paper created between 1919 and 1979 make a persuasive case that cultural influences moved in both directions between North and South America and that the post-war development of New York as the center of the modern art world drew on Latin American sources as well as European ones.

Dr. Nathan Timpano, the exhibition curator and an assistant professor in UM's department of art and art history, says he was "looking at a narrative of modernism across the Americas, not of the United States versus Latin America."

In broad strokes, the first part of the exhibition displays how the Mexican muralists influenced social realism in the United States; works by African American artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden show a debt to Rivera, Siquieros and Orozco.

Likewise, seeing work by Frank Stella side by side with Venezuelans Jesús Soto and Carlos Cruz Diaz, or Adolph Gottlieb next to the Uruguayan master Joaquín Torres-García, illustrates how geometric abstraction followed parallel tracks in both northern and southern hemispheres.

The north/south dialogue that Timpano sets up often is as much personal as stylistic.

The cultural exchange was especially fertile in the 1920s, 30s and 40s when artists in the Americas were beginning to emerge from Europe's shadows. Alice Neel was married to the Cuban painter Carlos Enriquez; while living in Havana in 1920s, Neel was embraced by Cuban [avant-garde](#) artists who influenced her psychologically charged portraits. Before achieving fame in his own right, social realist Ben Shahn in 1934 worked as an assistant to Diego Rivera on the now infamous Man at the Crossroads murals at Rockefeller Center. Even Abstract Expressionism arguably has a pan-American accent: In 1941, Robert Motherwell was traveling in Mexico with the Chilean surrealist Roberto Matta, both of whom are in the exhibition, when he decided to pursue a career in painting.

An ample selection of photography—that most modernist of mediums—offers perhaps the strongest evidence of the two-way cultural exchange between the Americas.

During the 1920s and 30s as well, pioneering American modernist photographers found inspiration in Latin America: Walker Evans, best known for his Depression-era photographs of Appalachia, also photographed in Cuba. Paul Strand and Edward Weston both did some of their strongest work in Mexico—and Weston is credited with encouraging the great Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo to explore photography, a career choice that made him arguably the foremost Latin American photographer of the 20th century.

A print from Strand's Mexican Portfolio is included in the exhibition, as well as two of Alvarez Bravo's most famous photographs, *Obrero en huelga, asesinado* (Striking Worker, Assassinated) and *La buena fama, durmiendo* (Good Reputation, Sleeping). Completing documentation of this artistic exchange is a portrait of Alvarez Bravo taken by Arnold Herman Crane, a trial lawyer turned photographer, for his 1997 book, *The Other Side of the Camera*.

If Pan American Modernism can be denoted as mining a vein of discovery from the Lowe's collection, then additional nuggets are also to be found in a tightly focused exhibition that explores similar issues of stylistic influences, albeit between pre-Columbian and indigenous art in Panama.

From Ancient Art to Modern Molas: Recurring Themes in Indigenous Panama is part of the Lowe's Art Lab program, which lets University of Miami faculty and students organize exhibitions from its permanent collection. UM students traveled to Panama to discuss molas—hand-stitched cotton panels and blouses made of multi-colored and multilayered cotton cloth—and the meaning of the designs with Guna artists on the San Blas islands.

These colorful textiles are noted for rich stories they tell about traditional Guna life. Most of the exhibition is comprised of molas that show the continuity and changes of their design elements over the last century. The designs derive from aspects of traditional indigenous life, but sometimes the designs are highly abstract with obvious connections to designs found on the

pre-Columbian pottery of Panama. Molas drawn from the Lowe's extensive collection are supplemented by examples of pre-Columbian pottery from Gran Cocle and Chiriqui cultures that employed some of the same designs.

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