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Rescuing the Stories Behind Latino Art

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Some of art history's most telling monuments don't end up under museum spotlights. They're found, when and if they're found, in desk drawers and office file cabinets that no one has cracked in years, or in library stacks, or in jumbles of personal papers boxed up in an artist's studio.

They include letters, doodles, lecture notes, essays, newspaper clips, exhibition posters, out-of-print journals and handwritten manifestos — physically vulnerable scraps and sheets that encapsulate the thinking of entire cultural eras but were never meant to last much beyond the time they first appeared.

The loss of such information-rich material is a chronic danger in any field, but especially so in the case of understudied art, which often means art originating in places short on archival facilities. Latin American art, until fairly recently marginalized by mainstream history, has long been in that high-risk category.

Finally, a decade ago, one institution, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, decided to tackle that problem by creating a digital database dedicated to preserving art-related ephemera — the letters, the clips, everything — from the Latin American world. Now, after years of planning and research, the database is up and running. It's called "Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art." It's on the Internet. Access is free. Type icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/. And hello, history.

Traditional museums are archives by definition, focused on conserving, displaying and augmenting permanent collections.

The Houston museum conforms to this classical model, but with its Latin American archive adds something to it. The archive itself is part of a larger initiative that began in 2001 when the museum's then-director, the late Peter C. Marzio, established a curatorial department of Latin American and Latino art, and along with it a research institute called the [International Center for the Arts of the Americas](#), or the I.C.A.A.

Since then, the department, led by the art historian Mari Carmen Ramirez, has done, superbly, what museum departments do. It has made important acquisitions and organized a succession of memorable shows. The sweeping "Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde in Latin America" in 2004 and

the recent “Carlos Cruz-Diez: Color in Space and Time” were, in particular, stunners.

The I.C.A.A., meanwhile, operated in think-tank mode, bringing scholars together from all over the Latin American world — Central and South America, Mexico, the Caribbean and the United States — to figure out ways to push a huge but neglected field forward. Everyone agreed that there was an urgent need for a digital archive to hold the kind of primary matter that all art history is built on. And everyone knew that setting up that archive would be a complicated and demanding task. And so it has been.

Neither “Latin America” nor “Latino” are unitary, containable, easily trackable categories. Both encompass multiple races, ethnic groups and types of communities, some stationary, some mobile and scattered over many countries. Researching them for the database has required the coordinated labor of hundreds of scholars, artists and critics in 16 cities on two continents.

Working in teams for the project, which is officially called the “Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art” initiative, they scoured everything from major libraries to family attics, then digitally photographed and annotated their discoveries.

The depth and difficulty of research varied from subject to subject. For certain aspects of Latin American modernism, such as the early 20th-century Mexican Muralist movement, significant gathering and sorting has been done. By contrast, almost no systematic investigation had been attempted on art produced by many Latino communities — Chicano, Cuban American and Puerto Rican — in the United States.

Similarly, access to different types of material varied. Essays published in magazines were relatively easy to locate and transfer to digital format. Certain letters, typed statements and other ephemera often came to light only after dogged sleuthing and were age-dimmed and fragile to the touch.

One huge advantage of digital technology was, of course, that it brought items into the archive while leaving them relatively undisturbed physically. Another was that it finessed the prickly matter of possession. A treasured manuscript or drawing never had to leave the hands of its owners to become part of the record. It could be photographed where it resided and left there. The I.C.A.A. and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, stated that they claimed no rights to anything found.

Along with salvage, there was other work. The archive was conceived as bilingual, so all the Spanish-language text has had to be translated. In addition, the project proposal includes the publication of a series of 13 printed anthologies to be called “Critical Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art.”

The books are compilations of historical and theoretical essays, most of them written in the Latin

American world in the 20th century, with a few earlier and later entries. Under the supervision of the historian Maria C. Gaztambide, each volume is organized by theme, with the individual entry keyed to its counterpart in the database and pertinent entries there.

The complete series will be phased in, one volume a year over the next dozen years. And judging by the first book, “Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?” released to coincide with the “Documents” project’s public debut in January, the series is an extraordinary editorial accomplishment. It is also, however, as it was intended to be, an extension of and supplement to the digital archive, which is the truly innovative feature of the Houston initiative.

What will you find there? Nearly 2,500 of the 10,000 documents that will be uploaded in stages during the next few years, with the initial batch concentrated on three areas: Argentina, Mexico and the growth of Latino art in the American Midwest — a subject little explored even by scholars of a little-explored field.

The entries from Argentina offer first-hand evidence of some of the most radical avant-garde art movements in South America — or anywhere — during the 1920s and into the 1960s, movements that developed in parallel to, and sometimes in advance of, comparable trends in Europe and the United States.

Start at almost any point in that history and you’ll find yourself heading toward total immersion. A search on the sculptor Gyula Kosice — a founder of the 1940s Madi Art movement in Buenos Aires, which tried to shake up modernist abstraction with outlandish forms and weird media — yields, along with printed texts, evidence of the artist’s graphic skills in the form of jazzily designed brochures.

The entry for the artists collective called Tucumán Arde (“Tucumán Is Burning”) offers few visual thrills, but its cluster of mimeographed statements and yellowed news clips brings to vivid life one of the 1960s’ most intrepid, if short-lived, art-meets-politics phenomena, a genuine proto-Occupy attempt, largely through the manipulation of mass media, to short-circuit the social and economic power of a military dictatorship.

And, in the nonlinear, one-thing-leads-to-another way of the Internet, this archive entry will lead you to others, notably sites touching on the careers of two Tucumán Arde participants, Graciela Carnevale and León Ferrari. Both are major figures in the history of the aesthetics of Resistance, and ones who all young artists today should know about.

The bulk of the material from Mexico dates from the first half of the 20th century. A lot of it is directly associated with the holy trinity of mural painting: Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. But also in the picture is a constellation of non-Mexican artists, writers and

intellectuals who lived in or visited the country, like André Breton, Leon Trotsky and Edward Weston.

From Trotsky comes an adulatory handwritten 1933 letter to Rivera, which the artist later kept under wraps: on the one hand, he didn't want his reputation sullied when Trotskyism became uncool; on the other, he wanted Trotsky's extravagant praise on the historical record. Given the preponderance of male ego in the Mexican entries, it's nice to find a tart comment by the painter Maria Izquierdo likening the plutocrat-disparaging, commission-hogging Big 3 muralists to "dangerous criminals just out of prison."

The trove of Latino documents from Chicago is a particularly striking example of how an archive can help break art-historical ground. While some attention has been given to art emerging from the barrios of New York City, Los Angeles and Miami in the 1960s and '70s, comparable developments in the Midwest have been ignored.

The oversight is on the way to being corrected with the group of dynamic items assembled by a project team at the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Latino Studies based in South Bend, Ind. A database search on the Association of the Latino Brotherhood of Artists, or ALBA, formed in Chicago in 1974 to campaign for exhibition opportunities for Latino artists, brings up some knockout graphics, as does a slightly earlier A.F.L.-C.I.O.-published booklet called "Museum of the Streets," with photographs of Chicago murals.

It's important to emphasize that the documents archive is still a work in progress and doesn't pretend to be otherwise. To navigate it, some experience with research databases is a help, if not required. Once you've signed on and set a password, simply check the images scrolling by as a continuous band on the home page and click on one that appeals, then off you go.

And it's important to re-emphasize that the "Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art" project is the creation not of a university or of a private foundation, but of an encyclopedic public museum identical in all essentials to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Primarily for economic reasons, such museums have, in the last few years, been turning inward to reconsider their own collections, a good idea. The documents project suggests a way in which the same museums could simultaneously look outward, not by a return to old break-the-bank loan shows but through a judicious alignment of art-historical need, Web-based technology and a growing pool of willing and able scholars in blossoming fields of art history.

Does it seem counterintuitive to spend a hard-earned bundle — Houston's Latin American initiative has cost \$50 million — on something you're giving away, like the documents archive? Maybe, but only in the short term.

Statistics tell us that by 2050, 25 percent or more of the United States population will be Latin American or Latino in origin. A high percentage of that population will want access to its history.

A percentage of that percentage will be artists, hungry to know who came before them, to know the art DNA they're carrying. I'd call the Houston museum's digital freebie a wise investment in, among many other things, an art institution's future.



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