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INSIDE THE MASTER’S UNIVERSE
"We always saw this art as connected to the world," says Patricia Phelps de Cisneros, left, between two works by Brazilian modernist Willys de Castro from her collection: "Bесіо" (1945) and "Vertical painting Tabeau du Pampatar," 1954.
MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR PATRICIA PHELPS DE CISNEROS TO HAVE ASSEMBLED THE WORLD'S FOREMOST COLLECTION OF LATIN AMERICAN MODERNISM. SHE HAS AIMED TO DO NOTHING LESS THAN REDRAW THE ART HISTORICAL MAP.

BY LYLE REXER
As everyone who owns more than three of anything with a frame around it knows, art collecting can be a soul-destroying compulsion—"paranoid, imprisoned and vain," in the words of Adolpho Leimer, the great collector of Brazilian modernism. But inside even the most obsessively private collector there often lives an evangelist who is burning to convert the world to a different way of seeing, to beauties ignored and knowledge forgone.

That's precisely what Patricia Phelps de Cisneros has done. For more than 30 years, Patty, as almost everyone calls her, and her husband, Gustavo, have been assembling the world's foremost collection of Latin American art. More important, through their aggressive and global positioning of the Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros (cpc), they have brought the genre international visibility and acceptance. The map of modernism, which once charted only two capital cities—Paris and New York—now encompasses Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, as well. Indeed, artists, curators and collectors increasingly see the category "Latin American" as artificial and inadequate to represent the vast range of art of diverse origins, influences and impact. Cisneros has been instrumental in creating this shift in perspective. "What Patty has done with the collection," says Luis Enrique Pérez Orozco, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, "is to force the door of art history."

Cisneros did not set out to do away with the category of Latin American art, just the opposite: She wanted to reinvent it. "We always saw this art as connected to the world," she says,

**IF CISNEROS HAS COME TO SEE HER HOLDINGS ESPECIALLY IN THE CONTEXT OF PAN-LATIN TRADITION, SHE HAS ALSO MAINTAINED A PERSPECTIVE**

"But our main intention was to change narrow perceptions of what the category embodied—perceptions held by many Latin Americans themselves. Tinit and personable, the 65-year-old Cisneros conveys an unquenchable enthusiasm and a missionary zeal about the art she supports. She spoke recently in the New York office of the Fundación Cisneros. Based in her native Caracas, the foundation was established in 1994 to manage her and Gustavo's collection as well as to organize their myriad educational, philanthropic and cultural initiatives (information about the collection and traveling exhibitions may be found at www.coleccionciserors.org).

The couple is strongly identified with their home country. Patty is a Phelps, a prominent American mining and exploration family that established itself in Venezuela a century and a half ago. Gustavo has built a media and business empire in South America worth a reported $3 billion. The two met in the early 1960s while leaving a mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York and were married there in 1970. They began collecting international abstract art in the early 1970s, gradually widening their focus to include artifacts from the Amazon as well as Spanish colonial art (an important selection of their holdings in the latter category recently went on view as a long-term loan at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art). The couple's private passion quickly became a matter of regional pride. "We felt that what we collected was all part of our national heritage," Patty explains, "and few people were trying to preserve it."

If the Cisneroses came to see their holdings, especially the abstract works, as part of a pan-Latin tradition, they have also maintained a perspective that transcends national and even
continental borders. The couple and their three children divide their time among Caracas, New York, Madrid and Aspen, and over the years Gustavo’s professional interests have brought him into contact with many world leaders, from Ronald Reagan to Jordan’s King Abdullah. Patty’s frequent trips to New York as a child and her strong artistic interests drew her to the Museum of Modern Art, where her great-uncle Alfredo Boulous, an art historian, once chaired the International Council. It was at MoMA that Cárdenos laid the foundations of a global platform for her view of Latin American art. She was inspired by the example of her friend and longtime MoMA benefactor David Rockefeller, whose commitment to Latin American culture led to the establishment of a study center in his name at Harvard University. Patty has served on the institute’s advisory board since it opened in 1994.

Her fervor for this week’s “green organically,” she says, “I didn’t work from a plan. I just got involved.” She began as a donor and then became a member of the museum’s International Council, in 1982; she joined the board in 1992. The following year, Cárdenos lent key works by such artists as Alejandro Otero and Jesús Rafael Soto to the landmark exhibition “Latin American Artists of the 20th Century” and even sent out letters to solicit contributions from museum members—some of whom sent back no more than 50 to fund the show. John Elderfield, head of painting and sculpture at MoMA, credits her as the inspiration for the museum’s recent Armando Revoredo exhibition, which brought the eccentric Venezuelan master’s week to North America for the first time, to great critical acclaim. She not only loaned work to the show but also endowed a travel fund that makes it possible for curators like Elderfield to conduct research in Latin America. MoMA director Glenn Lowry calls her “a dream trustee” and “a catalytic force in Latin American art.”

The cpcp is diverse, but it is its holdings in Latin American abstraction that have redrawn the art historical map. Created across the region mostly between 1940 and 1970, the works display an inventiveness and optimism that captivated Cárdenos very early on. “Venezuela was one of the great centers of modernism,” Cárdenos says, recalling that while growing up in Caracas, she frequently saw the art of Carlos Cruz-Díez, Otero and Soto. For her, their art is Latin America.

To view this material is to be transported back to a midcentury moment. “The Geometry of Hope,” a selection of abstraction works from the collection that is on view at New York University’s Grey Gallery of Art through December 8, conveys a postwar sensibility different from the angst-ridden atomic-age vision of such American Abstract Expressionists as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. The artists displayed here were heirs of Mondrian who believed that awakening viewers to the play of pure color, geometric forms and intricate line patterns, could change not only the way people saw but also the way they lived. The same belief informs the works of the Buenos Aires–based Madi group. Launched in the late 1940s by artist Carmelo Arden Quin, it broke with the conventions of easel painting, experimenting with shaped canvases and even incorporating neon light into two-dimensional works, long before...
such techniques were used in North America. The paper cutouts of Lygia Pape and knotted weavings of Mira Schendel are just as power-ful today as they were in the late 1950s. So are those of other Brazilian Neoconcretists—a school that goes beyond abstraction to create interactive art—like Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Think of the dancing forms of Oiticica’s “Metametásomos” series and his subsequent hanging relatives—half-painting, half-sculpture, like colored flattened boxes thrown over a clothesline. Witness also Clark’s remarkable “Bichos” (meaning “animals” or “critters”) series from the ’60s, small hinged aluminum sculptures that could be reconfigured on a whim.

Gego, born Gertrude Goldschmidt, a German immigrant to Ceara, provides some of the exhibition’s most dramatic moments, with her spidery openwork metal sculptures and delicate wire “drawings without paper.” Her works, until recently rarely glimpsed outside Venezuela, display an intricate artistry.

Caminos will not say which piece in the collection is her favorite. “Which of your children is your favorite?” she asks in response. But while she came to Seto’s art first, her description of Gego in the definitive catalogue of the artist, published by the foundation in 2003, tips her hand. It also defines the spirit that she feels her collection embodies. “I believe that each Gego is a small model of the world as I would have it, a world of feelings that meshes like unimagined nets, enveloping us, protecting us in its starchy wire sky.”

“The world as I would have it”—the world evoked by this abstract world—is progressive, not to say Utopian, urban, European-inflected. What it is not, with a few exceptions, is manialist, magical, indigenous and populist—all traits used to characterize what Cinemis considers stereotypical conceptions of Latin American culture that are deeply entrenched. For many, Latin American art begins with two names, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera (their house in Mexico City is a veritable shrine), and ends with Fernando Botero and Rufino Tamayo. From Kahlo’s anguish, Botero’s squinting depictions of fat dictators, all their works are representational and seem to feed the popular perception that Latin America is “tragic, colorful, folkloric,” as Caminos puts it.

“After about 40 years of collecting, it dawned on me that we had a collection, one that told a distinct and different story,” she explains. “And with that went a responsibility to preserve it and educate people.” Caminos has been unrelenting in her fight against what she calls the “Chiquita Banana” image of Latin America and its art, even going so far as to declare herself the founder of an anti-“Frida Kahlo club.”

Other important collectors have sought to debunk the stereotypes. Adolfo Leitner has occasionally exhibited his holdings of Brazilian abstract art in his home country; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which recently acquired Leitner’s collection, presented it earlier this year and has plans for a bigger tour. Eduardo Costantini built the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA) in 1999 for his holdings, which include Latin American Pop art and Expressionist figuration, and the Zurich-based Dato Collection of contemporary Latin American art is opening a branch in Rio in 2008. But Caminos did something unprecedented: She decided that the best way to reach the most people was not to build an institution but to create a museum without walls, organizing traveling exhibitions and lending works, an approach that underscores the truly global reach of modernism.

The foundation has last weeks literally to some 155 institu-
tions around the world. More visibly, since 1968 its abstract holdings have been showcased in a dozen major cities. With each venue, the installation changes and a major catalogue is published. Overseeing this Herculean task are MoMA director Rafael Romero Díaz and chief curator Ariel Jiménez, a scholar of modern and contemporary art who has customarily visited many of the collection’s tours. He and advisers such as Pérez Ortiz, of MoMA, have helped Caceres find works of art that have fallen off the critical and commercial radar screen. She has also drawn on a who’s who of Latin American art-history experts, including curator Matt Carmen Ramírez, of the MFA Houston, and independent Brazilian curator Paulo Herkenhoff.

Under Jiménez’s direction, the itinerant exhibitions have challenged conventions wherever they have appeared. In Buenos Aires in 2015, for instance, MALBA hosted a show devoted to a rap on the nation’s cultural knuckles. "Geometricia" featured Argentinean artists such as Juan Mora and Raúl Rhofto, whose legacies at home had almost disappeared through neglect. At the same time, it demonstrated to notoriously snobbish porteños (residents of Buenos Aires) that artists in Caracas and São Paulo, not to mention Montevideo, had pursued experiments every bit as radical and beautiful as the Argentines’. In a Mexico City exhibition last year, examples from the collection might have sat comfortably in the modern confines of the Museo Rufino Tamayo. Instead, the works were shown in the grand, white marble Palacio de Bellas Artes, where they provoked dialogues about concepts of modernity with the architecture and the 1965 murals by Diego Rivera.

“There’s nothing comparable to what Patty has accomplished,” says Edward Sullivan, dean of humanities at New York University and an expert on Latin American art. “She has overcome the isolation of this art.” Indeed, in the “Geometry of Hope,” Latin America as a monolithic category virtually disappears. The show, which originated at the Jack S. Blanton Museum, in Austin, Texas, and was curated independently of the foundation by Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, presents the works city by city, demonstrating artistic links between Europe and New York and each of the great South American metropolises. Suddenly Caracas and Rio de Janeiro look closer to Paris than they do to each other. “Patty often talks about the battle she’s waging for Latin America,” says Pérez-Barreiro, “but it may be that battle no longer needs to be fought.”

The evangelist may in fact find herself preaching to the converted, as those once puzzled by her passion now praise her persistence. That’s fine with Caceres. “We needed to steady behind an idea, but now that geometric abstraction is established, we can go in many directions,” she says. She remains firmly against a permanent Caceres museum, preferring to concentrate on loans and education.

Recently Costa Rican president Oscar Arias Sánchez announced that “Think Art,” a visual studies curriculum for middle school students developed by the foundation, had been adopted for that nation’s schools. The foundation’s teacher-training program is active in Central America and is expanding across South America. Academic and research partnerships with the Blanton Museum, the University of Texas at Austin and Harvard are also being broadened. These initiatives dovetail with the efforts of Gustavo Caceres to expand his 24-hour free educational television network in South America.

“In the past, modern art was seen as transformative,” says Patty. “Latin American movements such as Universal Constructivism were seen as just that—universal. It’s the same spirit behind the digital revolution today. That is the spirit we continue to carry forward.”