
Book Review: *Transatlantic Encounters*

Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists in Paris between the Wars, by Michele Greet. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. 296 pages. Hardcover \$60.00. Reviewed by Ana Magalhães.

Since the publication of Dawn Ades's reference book on Latin American art (fueled by the debate brought to light in the English-speaking context by Latin American curators and critics in the mid-1970s), greater attention has been given to the study of the visual arts in the region and a new group of experts emerged. As the first generation to engage in the art historical acknowledgement of Latin American art as key to understanding and broadening the discourse fostered in the context of European and North American research institutions, these researchers paved the way for the rich landscape of graduate programs that, in the last twenty years, have chosen Latin American art as their major field of study, especially in the United States. This reality has birthed a younger generation of US scholars who have taken their education in Latin American art history, and who are very eager to exchange and engage with their Latin American counterparts, collecting new evidence and new approaches to the narrative so far conceived.

One such contribution is that of Michele Greet in *Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists in Paris between the Wars*. The book resulted from the digital project organized by Greet as associate professor of Latin American Art at George Mason University in 2013, a database containing information on over three hundred Latin American artists who worked in Paris between the wars, followed by interactive maps of their studios and exhibitions (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/transatlanticencounters/>). The website has thus a life of its own and is certainly a precious source of information and reference on the subject.

While taking the database as her point of departure, Greet's research has major affinities with that of Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and her Artl@s database for the visual arts in the twentieth century. In fact, Greet previously published part of her research in 2015, in a volume on global art histories edited by Joyeux-Prunel, Catherine Dossin,

and Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann. In addition, chapter 6 was first published as an article in the magazine *Arteologie* (edited by Joyeux-Prunel's research group) in 2013. In this sense, Greet's research aligns not only with new approaches emerging from the debate on globalization and its impact on art historical research, but also makes use of tools and practices that have been developed from what is known today as the digital humanities.

The organization of the chapters also emphasizes a new way of dealing with Latin American art. Although embedded in the data gathered on Latin American artists' works, exhibitions, and reception in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, Greet chose to alternate chapters dedicated to specific art movements (in this case, Cubism and Surrealism) with others where she draws the first broad map of the Parisian art system in the period, opening up entirely new research topics. The data analyzed in chapters 4, 5, and 7 are particularly relevant. Here the author gives the reader a bird's-eye view of the presence of Latin American artists at the Parisian Salons and galleries (chapters 4 and 5), and being reviewed both by Parisian and Latin American critics in France (chapter 7). In a way, these topics seem very close to those studied by Brazilian art historian Marta Rossetti Batista in her doctoral dissertation, which focused on Brazilian artists in Paris in the 1920s. Although Batista's study dates back to 1987, it was only published in book format posthumously, in 2012. However, it is quite fresh in the way she chooses to analyze the presence of Brazilian artists in Paris between the wars, and it was also used as a reference by Greet in her book.

Comparing these two books and the way these two authors tackle their object of research is very interesting, even if Batista focused on Brazilian artists and Greet takes a larger scope, i.e., artists from Mexico to Argentina, Brazil included. With a time difference of over three decades, both Batista and Greet took Paris in the 1920s as the center of avant-garde and modernist debates, while

looking into Brazilian and Latin American artists, respectively, as being “influenced” by modernist Parisian trends.

For Batista’s generation of art historians (in Brazil and worldwide) “questions of influence” were often directly related to a kind of unilateral narrative of modern art, taking as a paradigm European, white, male artists’ works and careers, which has been problematized in the last twenty years. In such a narrative of modern art history, everything and everyone who was not the paradigm would have been necessarily derivative, and this hierarchy was then justified by the formal analysis of the work of art taken as the paradigm, in comparison with its derivation. Latin American artists were, then, just read as derivative and secondary imitations of the “great geniuses” of Parisian modern art. Greet tries to avoid going back to this univocal narrative by giving emphasis to some of the artists she studied (especially in the chapter on Latin American women artists). However, in her introduction she contends that “Experimenting with various European modernisms and seeking an artistic identity shaped much of their [Latin American artists’] early work. Questions of influence are thus paramount to understanding Latin American artistic production in Paris” (6; her footnote reference is Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, 1997). Therefore, the “question of influence” accompanies her readings of specific Latin American works of art throughout the chapters, sometimes diverting the reader to the most revealing aspects of her research. Three of them are worth pointing out.

First of all, the issue of national identity in the art criticism debate of the 1920s in the face of the diversity of Parisian experience, with immigrants coming literally from all over the world, emerges in her analysis of the art system in Paris. Greet points out that certain Salons became more protective of French artists, and the 1920s saw the rise of conservative voices defending French artistic output while attempting to guarantee their primacy in exhibitions and publications.

However, in the midst of these multiple exchanges, Latin American artists appear in the role of “students,” in many ways passively “receiving influence” from their French masters. Yet such encounters must be reconsidered in the light of the social networks of artists, critics,

and gallerists formed by the intellectual elites, both of France and of Latin American countries, where one can easily see that cultural diplomacy played a major role in the making of modernist experience. The case of the *Maison de l’Amérique latine* and the respective magazine they published is remarkable in this respect. Here, two Latin American countries (Brazil and Argentina) and their diplomatic agents were key to the promotion of Latin America as part of the Latin world, as fostered, on the other hand, by French-Italian diplomatic policies in the same period. Their goal was the spread of the notion of *latinité*, embedded in a classical/mediterranean tradition, and for which, it appears, South America was a desired zone of domination. Incidentally, Greet herself sometimes passes from one term to the other (South America and Latin America) without noticing their geographical, and more importantly, cultural specificities.

The second aspect is, of course, the insurmountable issue of primitivism and its various dialects and uses, both in Europe and in Latin American countries equally, to foster any notion of originality. In the context of neocolonialism, especially French recent colonization (and its “Expositions Coloniales” that took place at end of the 1920s, which were mainly criticized by surrealists), the so-called primitive traits served modernity as an intrinsic part of the epistemological domination of Europe over the world. The intertwining of primitivism and exoticism is an issue yet to be duly confronted by art historical research.

Thirdly, Greet discusses the long duration, so to speak, of academic trends, through which a major part of the studied artists made their careers in Paris, as late as the 1930s. The French academic system has also been under review in the last decade, and its relations with the modern art system revisited, as demonstrated by recent French historiography. It is high time the narratives of modern art in general looked more carefully into the long history of overlap between the two systems—which promises to tell us more about our experience of modernity.

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