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## *SlideGuide* © 2003

Item # SJ166025, Set of 25 Slides     **20th Century Latin  
American Art**

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To claim that there is a single typical style common among all Latin American artists would be a tremendous understatement at the very least. In fact, it is fair to say that the only thing common among artists of the Latin American world is a terrific diversity of style, technique, and medium. Encompassing all of both Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean islands, Latin America reaches from Cuba, just a few miles off the coast of south Florida; to the tip of Argentina, which is separated from Antarctica by the Drake Passage; to Mexico, just under the Southwestern United States. Cultural variations throughout Latin America are naturally, therefore, tremendously varied.

Through the centuries that have passed since initial contact with the European world, the traditional customs of Latin America's native peoples have been combined with the later influences of foreign conquerors and colonists. All of these influences have left their marks. Brazil, for example, speaks Portuguese as a result of its colonization by Portugal in the early sixteenth century, while the culture of Mexico is strongly flavored by its own ancient heritage, with many of its words borrowed from the Aztec Nahuatl language. In the twentieth century artwork created by Latin American artists, we find everything from abstraction to Surrealism, from socially critical works to intensely personal autobiographical ones.

Born in Cuba, Wifredo **Lam**'s unique multicultural heritage and interest in the Afro-Cuban Santería religion became central themes in his work, as did the tragic loss of his wife and son to tuberculosis. The child of a Chinese father and a mother of mixed African, Indian, and European descent, Lam's travels brought him in contact with such diverse influences as Gothic European art and the work of Pablo Picasso, who helped mentor the young artist. In *Femme Violet* (**Lam Slide 601J**), a geometric, masklike quality is evident, and the somber colors and stark lines evoke a sense of sadness, drawn perhaps from the painful memory of his late wife.

Eventually Lam made his way back to Cuba, and his *La Jungla* (**Lam Slide 602J**), painted in 1943, is considered one of his most powerful works. Cuba has no jungle; in the Santería religion “the jungle” is a sacred space used for worship. Among the bamboo and sugarcane stalks lurk masked figures; the woman-horse, according to the Afro-Cuban mythical traditions with which Lam was fascinated, represents spiritual communication with the natural world.

More autobiographical still is the work of Mexican painter Frida **Kahlo**, whose art reflects her difficult life. Kahlo’s images are both realistic, yet charged with a dreamlike, magical quality. Stricken with polio at an early age, she was later seriously injured in a bus accident and suffered multiple operations and terrible pain for the rest of her life. An easel was set up in her bed, with a mirror that allowed her to paint her own image while recuperating. In 1928 she met Mexican muralist and painter Diego Rivera, and a year later they married. According to Kahlo, Rivera was the second of the two terrible accidents in her life, for their relationship was troubled and full of turmoil.

Kahlo was the daughter of a German Jewish artist, had planned to go to medical school at one time, and was quite politically active in the Socialist causes of Mexico. But Rivera’s own fame and titanic personality always loomed too large. Her self portrait with her husband, *Frida and Diego Rivera* (**Kahlo Slide 611P**), shows Kahlo dressed in the heavy jewelry and traditional costume and hairstyle of the native Tehuana people that she wore to please him, in spite of her sophisticated, cosmopolitan background. *The Dream* (**Kahlo Slide 604P**) is characteristic of Kahlo’s work in that it incorporates the theme of her own physical suffering, as well as inspiration from Mexico’s long tradition of mythic, magical portrayals of the world of spirits and dreams.

Rufino **Tamayo**’s early career as an artist led him to being appointed the head of Ethnographic Drawing at Mexico City’s National Museum of Archaeology, where his responsibilities included drawing the artifacts from Mexico’s pre-Columbian history. After moving to New York City in 1936, the forms and colors of the stone artifacts, which had influenced his previous work, found expression in a more modern idiom. *New York from the Roof Garden* (**Tamayo Slide 603P**), set off with touches of brilliant crimson, evokes a world of possibilities for a new immigrant. *The Lovers* (**Tamayo Slide 601P**) uses the same gray palette, with glowing red and orange to suggest the warmth of emotion between the pair clasping hands. In the late 1950s Tamayo spent some time living in Paris, and the birdlike *Woman in Grey* (**Tamayo Slide 602P**), as with the work of Lam, owes something of its inspiration to the pioneering figural art of Picasso. *Woman in Grey*’s gray tones and the sculptural quality of the figure are certainly related to Tamayo’s long relationship with the ancient artifacts of his native Mexico.

Among the strongest proponents of Mexico’s native customs are members of the **Linares** family, who continue the craft tradition called *cartonero*, or papier-mâché. The Day of the Dead festival is celebrated throughout Mexico between October thirty-first and November second, during which time the souls of the dead are made to feel welcome by loved ones still on earth. Families set up colorful altars laden with gifts for the departed,

and *calaveras*, or skeletons, are a familiar sight, appearing as wooden sculpture, in *cartonero*, and even as candy, as a way of celebrating the dead and the afterlife itself. Miguel Linares' *Skeleton Vendor* (**Linares Slide 601S**) shows a *calavera* making her way to market, hat on her head and baby strapped to her back. Apparently, even in the afterlife there is no rest from hard work.

Brazil today is the sixth most populous country in the world, with some nineteen million people living in São Paulo alone. It was “discovered” by the Portuguese explorer Pedro Cabral in the early fifteen hundreds. Its eventual colonization by Portuguese sugarcane farmers led to the import of African slaves to work the plantations, alongside native peoples or “Indians.” The Portuguese colonists, African slaves, and members of native tribes intermarried quite freely, and today one of the most remarkable facts about Brazil is its degree of cultural integration. This integration is a great part of what is called its “Brazilian-ness.” In the early twenties, author Oswald de Andrade wrote a book of poems dedicated to this Brazilian-ness and called it *Pau-Brasil*, or Brazilwood. Brazilwood, used in making red dye, was Brazil’s first export, before the gold Cabral sought, before sugar, before coffee.

Oswald de Andrade’s wife, Tarsila do **Amaral**, is considered Brazil’s most important artist of that period. Amaral adopted the idea of expressing Brazilian-ness in visual art, and her paintings associated with the *Pau-Brasil* period are among her most collected and esteemed. *Urutu* (**Amaral Slide 601P**) is a kind of snake, a member of the dangerous viper family, native to Brazil. The deep shadows and glowing surface of the white egg [*O Ovo* (*The Egg*) is an alternate name for the piece] give a sculptural feeling to the surface, and the clear, bright colors and plain shapes create a simple, strong composition that suggests the traditions of the native people of Brazil.

Virtually straddling the border of Brazil and Uruguay is the city of Rivera, where Uruguayan artist Carmelo **Arden Quin** was born. Along with several other Latin American artists, Arden Quin helped found the MADI art movement in the late forties. MADI, which does not necessarily have a meaning as an acronym, claims adherents to its whimsical, exuberant style even today. Though MADI was not officially founded until 1946 or so, Arden Quin began experimenting with some of its basic ideas as early as 1936. *Dada* (**Arden Quin Slide 601K**), presenting us with the bright, pure colors and geometric forms that typify the MADI style, uses a polygonal shape instead of the more usual rectangle. In particular, MADI artists sought to break out of the traditional picture-plane shape in favor of more interesting, irregular forms.

The *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square) group, founded by fellow Uruguayan artist Joaquín **Torres-Garcia**, sought to bring the Russian movement called Constructivism to Uruguay. Constructivism is based on non-representational forms, a true break with previous art forms which emphasized depiction of actual things - people, trees, tables, fruit - however innovative the style. Torres-Garcia’s *Elliptical Constructive Painting* (**Torres-Garcia Slide 601P**) is one of more than fifteen hundred paintings he produced in the Constructivist style; its lines seem to suggest certain images to the viewer without ever overtly describing actual objects.

In the early twentieth century, Argentina developed the reputation as the most conservative of all the countries in South America. Artist Alejandro Xul **Solar**, having ventured to Europe in 1924, returned to join with Argentina's avant-garde to bring its artistic heritage to a more modern standard. Though many Latin American artists were part of loosely organized movements such as MADI, Xul Solar's work defies categorization. His diverse interests included subjects like astrology, pre-Columbian mythology, magic, philosophy and mysticism from around the world, and linguistics. During his lifetime, Xul Solar invented two original languages and a new form of chess, among other things. Self-taught, his colorful paintings have an almost childlike sense of fantasy. *He Swears by the Cross* (**Solar Slide 6012**) portrays in multi-layered colors a figure seemingly sprinting through both space and time. The sun and moon shine down from a yellow sky over *World* (**Solar Slide 6022**), which includes flags from countries around the globe: Italy, Peru, Ireland, Brazil. Beyond, a kind of idealized international community completes Xul Solar's unique vision.

Antonio **Berni** also struggled against the confines of a conservative Argentina. Like so many Latin American artists, Berni went to Europe to experience its rich artistic culture firsthand. When he returned in the nineteen-thirties, he became a painter of social issues, using his work to make people aware of poverty and injustice. His *Portrait of Juanito Laguna* (**Berni Slide 601K**), made as a collage of such urban refuse as cardboard, corrugated metal, and bits of string, is one of several that chronicle the everyday struggle of an archetypal boy from the slums. By creating the character of Juanito Laguna and giving him a history, Berni was able to use his fictional biography as a symbol of all who were oppressed by the upper classes.

Despite its early conservative ideas about art, Argentina soon became home to an influential movement known as neofiguration, or as it was called in South America, *Otra Figuracion*. This new approach attempted to incorporate the human figure into art in new ways or through new depictions. Jorge de la **Vega**'s neofigurist paintings use bright colors and abstract shapes, and sometimes include objects attached to the surface in a kind of collage technique. *Story of the Vampires* (**Vega Slide 6012**) is from de la Vega's so-called "bestiary" period of the early sixties, in which animals served as metaphors for humans. The dripping red lines of paint seem to indicate blood, while a tiny blue bat hangs in the lower right of the painting. A wolf shape is suggested by the fine patterns of black lines on the stark white ground.

*Otra Figuracion* spread beyond Argentina into other South American countries. Jacobo **Borges**, a Venezuelan, used his neofigurist paintings to denounce the ruling class, much like the paintings of Berni in Argentina. In *The Show Has Begun* (**Borges Slide 601P**), Borges uses traditional archetypes of good and evil in bright, harsh colors to imply that the values of the bourgeoisie were too narrow and simple-minded. A prostitute represents political corruption, while the military figures and the prelate or priest supply conventional symbols of authority and moral uprightness.

Roberto **Matta** Echaurren spent his early adulthood in training for a career in architecture, but acquaintanceship with Surrealists, including Salvador Dalí, convinced the young Chilean to become a painter instead. Though he abandoned his study of architecture, space maintained an important presence in his art, both in a cosmic as well as a pictorial sense. *Listen to Living* (**Matta Slide 601P**) produces a just-out-of-reach sensation in the viewer: the swirling colors and suggested forms imply that recognizable shapes are in the scene if only the eye could focus more sharply on the barely perceptible figures in the landscape. *Spherical Roof Around Our Tribe (Revolvers)* (**Matta Slide 010T**) is sharper, noisier, and more energetic, but has the same tantalizing amorphous quality. Matta's painting points to a scene of attack and defense, perhaps a metaphor for violent uprising, but it is so ambiguously rendered that it could refer either to a specific battle or to all battles at once.

The inflated, pillowy-looking figures that people Fernando **Botero's** paintings seem to defy categorization, but they do reflect larger trends in Colombian art of the 1950s. These trends included a reliance on European old-master paintings as paragons to be emulated; and a tendency to distort actual objects in interesting ways, such as still-life bowls of fruit or flowers. Botero expressed these trends in his own way, using the much-lauded Leonardo portrait as his basis for *Mona Lisa, Age 12* (**Botero Slide 6012**). The sale of the painting to the Museum of Modern Art made Botero's reputation in New York, where he lived from 1960 until the early seventies. The essential features, such as the lips and eyes, remain unchanged but Botero gives her a rounded, pudgy face and clasping little-girl hands.

*Mona Lisa*, painted in 1959, uses very evident brushstrokes to give the painting texture and dimension, but *La Familia Presidencial* (**Botero Slide 601P**) of 1967 shows Botero's mature style, which features a very smoothly finished surface. It was unfashionable at the time but today this is one of Botero's most characteristic techniques. *La Familia Presidencial* takes its cue from Spanish artist Francisco de Goya's *Family of Charles IV*, painted for the king in 1800. Many scholars find Goya's portrayal of the Spanish royal family to be almost a parody of nobility. Botero's painting parodies the presidential family in much the same fashion, relying on stereotypes of Latin American leaders for effect. The first lady is painted as rather vulgar and common, wearing her fur stole in an attempt at opulence. A daughter, far too large for the lap that holds her, plays with a toy airplane, oblivious to the volcano in the background. The overly decorated president, in military garb, stands next to the family priest and an overfed pampered cat. Like Goya, Botero painted himself into the scene, at the left behind his easel. In Botero's words, they "wallow happily in their own plump sensuality." Despite its cheerful rounded quality, it seems to foreshadow a disturbing late twentieth century trend in South America. Military governments were at their most repressive and rigid between the late sixties and early eighties. In countries including Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile, the permanent disappearance of protestors was generally suppressed from the media, but even today reports of such occurrences continue to trickle out.

The sculpture of Marisol Escobar, called simply **Marisol**, is both critical of society and humorous at the same time. Born in Venezuela, Marisol moved to Paris at age nineteen

and moved permanently to New York City in 1950. Her early sculptures were small-scale figures that she combined with drawings and other objects in glass-fronted compartments. By the sixties she began creating life-sized figures, often incorporating cast replicas of her own face and limbs. *The Bicycle Race* (**Marisol Slide 602S**) gently, subtly implies that the race between the sexes still leaves women a bit behind, perhaps weighed down by the extra cargo of domestic responsibility. A sculpture of Lyndon Baines Johnson, *L.B.J.* (**Marisol Slide 603S**) imagines the former president as a literal blockhead, holding the miniature forms of three tiny women in the palm of his hand.

Late twentieth century Latin American art retains the essential diversity that characterizes earlier examples. Antônio **Dias**' work is broad in scope and finds expression in paintings, films, video and sound recordings, and books. Originally from Brazil, Dias' early work owed a debt to the Constructivism of Joaquin Torres-Garcia. After a visit to Nepal in the late seventies, his art grew increasingly symbolic, demanding an interaction with the viewer. Many of his later paintings, like *Economy* (**Dias Slide 6012**), rely on puns and wordplay to involve the audience in the art. The word "Economy" seems to suggest that the painting itself is economical, that it sends its message with a minimum of color, shape and form.

The colorful history of Argentina inspired artist Luis **Benedit** to explore traditional themes in new ways. The conquering Spanish made use of native populations to herd cattle on the fertile *pampas*, or open grasslands, of Argentina. Having been taught to ride by the Spanish settlers, the *gauchos* used the *boleadora* to maintain control of the herds. *Boleadoras*, or *bolas*, a pair of small but heavy stones suspended from leather strips, are traditional weapons that work very like slingshots. When wound and flung by a practiced hand, they can be used with deadly accuracy in war or, when used more gently, can bring stray cattle back to the fold. *Bolas (A)* (**Benedit Slide 601D**) is a pencil drawing from an installation piece that incorporates watercolor, small sculptures, and actual *bolas* from the artist's own collection. *For F.M.C. (Heating the Oven) No. 3* (**Benedit Slide 601W**) also refers to longstanding native traditions of Argentina. In an angular, geometric approach, Benedit portrays a man and woman in a rural environment, preparing to light the fire in a clay oven for the day's cooking. These "report-works," as Benedit called them, were created expressly to relate Argentine history to the viewer.

The nations of Latin America have both sophisticated urban centers, and rural areas that retain traditional folkways; they have both artists who rely on established forms of artistic expression, and those who break new ground with their works of art. Though united by a common tongue, it is the artistic language that allows Latin America to speak in as many and diverse ways as possible.



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Item Code	Artist / Period	Slide Title
MA51601P	Amaral, Tarsila do	Urutu. 1928, Private Collection
MA52601K	Arden Quin, Carmelo	Dada. 1936, Private Collection
MBA9601D	Benedit, Luis F.	Bolas (A). 1990, Benzacar Galeria, Buenos Aires
MBA9601W	Benedit, Luis F.	For F.M.C. (Heating the Oven) No.3. 1989, John Good Gallery, NY
MBB0601K	Berni, Antonio	Portrait of Juanito Laguna. 1961, Private Collection
MBB1601P	Borges, Jacobo	The Show Has Begun. 1964, Fundacion Galeria de Arte, Caracas
MBB26012	Botero, Fernando	Mona Lisa, age 12. 1959, Museum of Modern Art, NYC
MBB2601P	Botero, Fernando	La Familia Presidencial. 1967, Museum of Modern Art, NYC
MD476012	Dias, Antonio	Economy. 1989, Collection of the Artist
MK31604P	Kahlo, Frida	The Dream, 1940, Private Collection
MK31611P	Kahlo, Frida	Frida and Diego Rivera. 1931, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
ML58601J	Lam, Wifredo	Femme Violet (Woman in Violet). 1938, Private Collection
ML58602J	Lam, Wifredo	La Jungla (The Jungle). 1943, Museum of Modern Art, NYC
ML59601S	Linares, Miguel	Skeleton Vendor. Mid 1970's, San Antonio Museum of Art, TX
MM20602S	Marisol	The Bicycle Race. 1962-3, Private Collection
MM20603S	Marisol	L. B. J. 1967, Museum of Modern Art, NYC
MM42601P	Matta, Roberto	Listen to Living. 1941, Museum of Modern Art, NYC
MM42010T	Matta, Roberto	Spherical Roof Around Our Tribe (Revolvers). 1952, Museum of Modern Art, NYC
MS956012	Solar, Xui	He Swears by the Cross. 1923, Private Collection
MS956022	Solar, Xui	World. 1925, R. Adler Gallery, NY
MT02601P	Tamayo, Rufino	The Lovers. 1943, San Francisco Museum of Art, CA
MT02602P	Tamayo, Rufino	Woman in Grey. 1959, Guggenheim Museum, NYC
MT02603P	Tamayo, Rufino	New York from the Roof Garden. 1937, Private Collection
MT41601P	Torres-Garcia, Joaquin	Elliptical Constructive Painting. 1932, Private Collection
MV256012	Vega, Jorge de la	Story of the Vampires. 1963, Rhode Island School of Design, Museum of Art