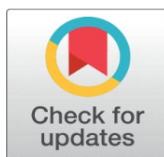


# BUILDING ART DIPLOMACY: THE CASE OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ART EXHIBITION IN LATIN AMERICA, 1941

Andrea Matallana <sup>1</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Professor, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, Buenos Aires, Argentina



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## Corresponding Author

Andrea Matallana, [amatallana@utdt.edu](mailto:amatallana@utdt.edu)

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the construction of the visual narrative expressed in the exhibition Contemporary North American Painting in 1941. During the II World War, the U.S. government recovered the initiative to build a strong tie with Latin American countries by relaunching the Good Neighbor Policy. Cultural diplomacy was an important branch of this policy. With the purpose of winning friends in the continent, the government created the Office of Inter-American Affairs, led by Nelson Rockefeller, and he sent artists, intellectuals, and exhibitions to make North America known in the other Americas. The Contemporary North American Painting projected an image of the United States as a modern and industrialized society to South Americans. This narrative was one of the devices developed by the U.S. government as part of the soft diplomacy carried out in the 1940s.

In this article, we delve into the construction of the visual narrative about the U.S as part of the Good Neighbor exhibition complex, and we will analyze how the exhibition process was thought of as part of representational and ideological machinery.

The article was based on reading, analysis, and cataloging of primary sources. The sources were letters, catalogs, photos, and notes from the main characters of the Office of Inter-American Affairs. Likewise, the exhibited works of art were operationalized.

**Keywords:** Goodneighbor Policy, American Art, OCIAA, Nelson Rockefeller

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) to encourage cultural diplomacy in Latin America. At the head of this office was Nelson Rockefeller, who steered the agency towards strategic and propaganda objectives. From our perspective, this office carried out two central strategies intending to consolidate its arrival in South America. The first was to exhibit, which involved constructing a complex of art, ballet, music, advertising, and films to inform the idea of a culture common between the two Americas. The second was collecting art from Latin America. Since the beginning of the 1940s, there was an increasing interest in completing the exhibition center in order to introduce Latin

American art through a series of exhibitions for Americans to appreciate South American Art.

In 1940, when the risk of war was confirmed, the American government decided to send public figures from the culture, mass media, and art fields in an effort to build a better relationship with Latino America. Franklin Roosevelt's new policy was also an answer to the private sector philanthropists who thought a more inclusive approach was paramount for the United States to be accepted. The political impact was double. On the one hand, due to the widespread introduction of culture as a foreign policy tool and Roosevelt's unique style, which distanced itself from the *realpolitik* that argued that the government only had to worry about taking care of the economy and military forces. According to Frederick Pike, the Good Neighbour policy eventually became successful for both sides: "Latin Americans probably got as many advantages from this bond as the Americans" (1995: XXV).

However, more than relying on accurate information about Nazism penetration, this policy developed specific cultural imperialism strategies. Many authors argued that the informal American empire worked through artistic or intellectual networks. Regional elites join it and become part of the informal empire process [Salvatore \(2006\)](#). Cultural diplomacy played an essential and complex role, even though some of the ideas on American identity promoted by the government were not always accepted. The concept of American culture for exports and Latino culture for domestic consumption in the United States was developed through diverse interactions.

The U.S. government's fundamental purpose could be divided into two strategies. The first involved assembling an exhibition center whose main goal was "showing." In order to describe this experience, we will focus on a critical exhibition in the cultural exchange experience by the United States in South America, which is the "Contemporary North American Painting" exhibition. It was held in 1941, and some of the most outstanding Fine Arts academics participated.

We will also analyse the composition of the exhibition and the curatorial role of Grace Morley, in charge of contacting South American museums that would participate in the show. Also, we will discuss the ideas and meaning of the narrative of progress and modernity as a central topic of the exposition.

## 2. EXHIBITING THE NATION

From the OCIAA point of view, that art exchange was part of the defence of the Western hemisphere. They believed that the exchanges based on culture, history, and art would inevitably lead to a level of understanding and cooperation with the United States. As was expressed in a memorandum, "in order to win this battle, more than political and diplomatic cooperation between governments and more than the economic cooperation between our industries and productive agencies, we need to feel that we are neighbours closely and personally" [Rockefeller Family Archives \(1942\)](#).

To meet this goal, the OCIAA's Art Committee was created. It was run by John Abbott, secretary of the MoMA, who invited art representatives from museums such as the Whitney, Brooklyn Museum, the MET, and the American Museum of Natural History. Grace Morley was the only member of the Committee that belonged to an institution outside of New York. She was the one that determined the feasibility of the exhibition and planned its circuit. As she explained to Edward Dodd, the Committee chose her for being "the only one in the museum with expertise in Latin

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American art, who spoke the language and had the necessary connections" (G. Morley to E. Dodd, 1941).

One of the primary purpose's American art exhibition policies was to show that there was no such thing as German or Italian cultural superiority. Rockefeller's cultural envoys knew that much of the art produced in Latin America was based on a Eurocentric conception, where the concept of the high culture was centered on Europe and was indifferent to North American art.

The OCIAA, through Nelson Rockefeller, influenced the American high culture network; consequently, many museums began working on the government's cultural projects. The American Alliance of Museums decided to support hemispheric solidarity and cultural exchange initiatives. Moreover, it tried to forge alliances with other institutions like the Pan- American Union and encourage cooperation between museums in North, Central, and South America.

All the cultural exhibition apparatus arranged by the government mainly aimed to prove that the United States could produce Fine Arts with refinement and their own personal traits and had no need to copy European avant-gardes. The New World, as Rockefeller claimed, had the vitality and the dynamism to shape the future. In his letter to Edward Dodd, Morley stated that in Latin America, "everyone is convinced that we build skyscrapers and cars too well to be able to produce any type of art" (Morley to Edward Dodd, April 25, 1941). That is why arranging the exhibition posed a considerable challenge since it was about revealing American art and forging long-lasting bonds with the artists of the other Americas. By the beginning of 1941, Morley's project was approved. In Rockefeller's political circle, there was a substantial certainty that their chosen strategy was the right one, even though some members of the academic elite were not so convinced. Alfred Barr asked her in a letter if an exhibition on American painting had 'any real value.' She replied before the Committee that she had reasons to believe that the exhibition would attain a key geopolitical goal to ensure the United States' position since:

"It is a very critical time in South America and there is great pressure from the Axis countries which are spending tremendous sums to gain cultural as well as economic and political ascendancy. When the 4th centenary of Santiago was celebrated, Germany gave a huge collection of facsimiles of prints ... Italy did something important too, but all Britain did was to present a portrait of an Englishman connected with the history of Chile". (Morley, Minutes: 1941).

The report seemed to confirm Nelson Rockefeller's suspicions and agree with his goal that the exhibition was a propaganda tool that would tend to assimilate the Americas culturally.

Grace Morley travelled for a second time to close cooperation agreements. Between January and March of 1941, she visited the capitals and the main cities and arranged the South American museums' itineraries to offer three series of painting exhibitions from the United States. The project was based on the idea of showing "the kind of American art that Latin Americans would be interested in seeing as part of the exhibition projects" (Morley, Minutes: 1941). She also claimed to have analysed all the options to get Latin American art and spread it throughout the United States and reached out to the leading museums and collectors to present an exhibition on American contemporary painting that would paint an accurate picture of the leading artists.

Grace Morley was an enthusiastic participant in the Latin American art exchange. From the beginning of the Good Neighbour Policy, she showed great interest in fostering a successful relationship. When she presented a Latin American art exhibition project before the Art Committee, she said: "We are ready to

undertake the organization of a contemporary artwork exhibition. I am trying to get watercolours from Ecuador and Chile, and I hope that, in time, my friends will support this initiative" (Morley, Minutes: 1941). She tried to bring some Latin American painters such as Luis Acuña, Oswaldo Guayasamin, and others to an extensive exhibition. In Argentina, she met with Argentine senator Antonio Santamarina, the Fine Arts Commission president, who asked her to include a historical section of North American art in the contemporary exhibition. She argued that she could not go through with it for financial reasons but assured him that "the contemporary exhibition had an extraordinary quality" (Morley, 1941, d.). It is an example of how Morley efficiently combined her talent and political correctness. She could be enthusiastic and, at the same time, deter her interlocutor from specific ideas that would take her away from her central purpose.

Morley was cautious in her relationship with the politicians and diplomats of the countries she visited. Sometimes, she was also critical of the role the OCIAA intended to fulfil. She disagreed with Rockefeller's point of view, who was confident that introducing art as a weapon was the best way to do politics. However, she believed it was a long-term process that entailed building a relationship between countries. Morley's lifelong commitment to Latin American art developed during her two-month trip on behalf of the OCIAA and the North American art (Morley, 1941 e).

During her trip, she discovered a great interest in an exhibition on American painting, so she informed the Art Committee. She was in charge of choosing the venues where the exhibition would take place and the best settings to advertise it. In her opinion, they had to avoid imposing an American point of view without clearly knowing each country's conditions. She did not trust what she called "wholesale exhibitions," that is to say, unique ones designed without taking into account the divergences of the areas as well as the cultural and demographic characteristics. Nevertheless, this opinion was not considered when the Committee planned the exhibition.

The showing was divided into three exhibitions, and each one of them had a representative that could be with her and give explanatory interviews and conferences in different places. The **Western exhibition** travelled to the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago, the National School of Fine Arts in Lima, and Universidad Central del Ecuador in Quito. The **Eastern exhibition** was held at the National Museum of Fine Arts of Buenos Aires, the Gallery of the Solís Theatre in Montevideo, and the National Museum of Fine Arts of Rio de Janeiro. Finally, the **Northern exhibition** was hosted at the National Library of Bogotá, the National Museum of Fine Arts of Caracas, and the Salón de Pasos Perdidos of Havana's National Capitol building. The Northern and Eastern exhibitions started traveling overseas in July of 1941. In contrast, the Western exhibition began a month before June, and the three exhibitions ended in December. The aim is to host the exhibition in three circuits simultaneously, with a one-year limit.

When the "Contemporary North American Painting" exhibition started its tours in June of 1941, the United States had not entered the war yet. Morley was interested in developing long-lasting relationships with art professionals in South America and the Caribbean. From her standpoint, the project was "the beginning of an exchange," the first step towards "a constant communication with professionals from museums, artists, art critics as well as institutions and organizations" (Morley, Minutes: 1941).

Due to the risk that the artistic and the political area went separate ways, Alfred Barr advised Morley to cooperate with American ambassadors and colleagues

during her trip so that this rift drove a wedge between traditional diplomacy and the cultural envoys would not grow. Nevertheless, she insisted on working with local artists and art professionals, and she explained her point of view to Abbott: "Barr's idea was to work through Americans in each place. Mine is not, but to put the whole responsibility on the professionals in charge. It is much more dignified it seems to me, and I think it will get us farther" (Morley, 1941, f). She firmly believed that the best way to advance an understanding through art was to relate with the best-qualified people to find common ground and similar interests. She aimed to build a cooperation network and not just devise export strategies: "rather than simply to export culture through ambassadors and consuls (...) The cultural export," asserted Morley, "must be carefully avoided" (Morley, Preliminary Report, 1941). When she returned from her trip to Latin America and had a meeting with the Art Committee to voice her impressions and recommendations, the kind of questions that the Committee asked her about the continent and its population proved how little they knew about it. Helen Appleton Read, a well-known critic, artist, and author, who would later write an art essay on the exhibition, asked "if it would be possible for the South Americans to keep to the schedule." this was a significant concern. Juliana Force (director of Whitney Museum) asked: "how she thought [Latin Americans] would handle the pictures and whether they would understand their value" [Potter \(2017\) 152](#). All those questions revealed the prejudice experts held about Latin America. There seemed to be some points of disagreement in how the expert and the Committee regarded regional art. For the Committee, Latin America was understood as homogeneous geography and culture.

In contrast, Morley believed they were different countries with various cultural traits and could then have diverse views on the exhibition. This is what she told Edward Dodd: "We say, very glibly, South America or Latin-America, but the one thing I know well from knowing the countries to the South of us a little— probably a little better than anyone else in the art field just now—is that each country is distinct, has its character, its own personality and that there is as much difference between country and country as there is in Europe" (Morley to Dodd, 1941 b). She understood South America as a continent and not as an artistic unit.

One of the envoys in charge of one of the exhibitions, Stanton Catlin, agreed with her and described the general lack of knowledge among the museum professionals as follows: "we were so naive at that particular time that we had no idea about the size of South America.... some still are. I guess the majority of us were like that back then" (1941).

In this first step of artistic connection between the United States and South America, Grace Morley had an outstanding role in the organization of the tour and the data she could gather on Latin America's artistic conditions. Subsequently, her participation on the Committee faded as she started to get disappointed with its policy, even though she honoured her commitment to supporting Latin American artists and promoting the knowledge of modern Latin American art in the United States. Consistent with her point of view on the public's diverse approaches to art, Morley used a strong title for the conference she gave at the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, California, in 1941, "Latin America: a diversity, not a geographical unit, in terms of people and artistic background" [Potter \(2017\) 15](#).

The "Contemporary North American Painting Exhibition" was considered the first one of a series hosted in South America. It sought to exhibit North American contemporary art samples and express the country's set of cultural ideals. The Committee emphasized in the catalogue that "art is the best ambassador we can send to show our feelings about our country and the serious economic, intellectual

and social issues that all the countries of the world face today” 24. The curators claimed that the paintings chosen to stage the exhibition aimed to show the different scenes of American everyday life, not only those light or funny aspects but also those that could portray a nation with a social message. The exhibition consisted of two hundred and fifty-five paintings structured in three different exhibitions. According to Helen Appleton Read, the exhibition had a double purpose: it was mainly about presenting a general view of art, but it was also crucial to understand “the political, social and spiritual forces that have created the American Civilization of 20th century”. (Preliminary Study, 1941, p. 5) Almost all of the paintings belonged to living authors. It was a selection of 112 artists from different trends in an effort to represent the different regions of the country, traversing the coasts of Maine, Chicago, San Francisco, etc. The show sought a “national flavour” regarding the artists’ birthplace and topic selection.

This project expressed the Rockefeller team’s hard work to educate the Latin American audience. The team had their minds set on the idea that confrontation between the Axis and the Allied powers took place not only on the battlefield but also in the cultural scene. It included the cinema, the radio, publications of all sorts, and arts. In 1941, the American Association of Museums presented a conference titled: “Art museums and emergence.” It signalled the active role that art museums would play in the cultural battle.

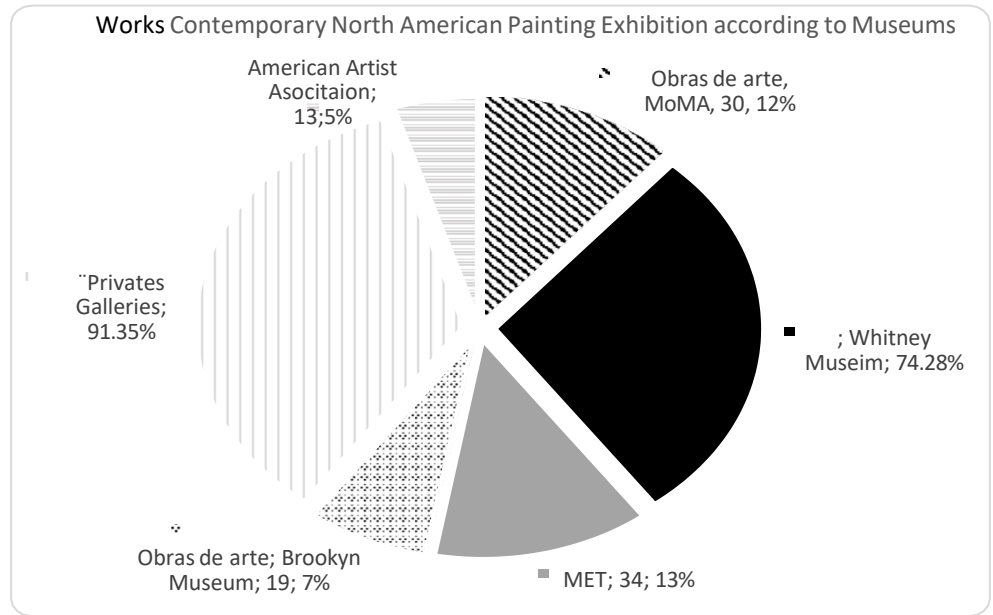
### **3. CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN PAINTING EXHIBITION**

Even though we cannot reconstruct an accurate tour of the exhibitions, a catalogue analysis can give us some clues about the type of art that was exhibited and the aim of the exhibition. First of all, it should be stressed that a significant number of the participating authors reflected modern life experiences: bustling, sometimes puzzling, and challenging. Although they rested upon this rich tradition, they chose to deal with something different from traditional European painting topics. These artists sought a new visual language that could do justice to the realities of their countries and cities.

In the second place, the paintings featured in the different exhibitions told the history and the fights of the United States as a country growing with its own traditions, communities, and landscapes. The population painted on those figurative works mainly were poor workers; in some cases, there was a sharp contrast between poverty and growing prosperity. There was a certain glorification of its people’s hard work and industriousness in this selection.

The corpus of the exhibition had to be composed very quickly, so many of the materials came from east coast museums, with a decisive intervention of private galleries and individual collections representing 38% of the works. The art galleries that intervened were some of Manhattan’s most representative: Downtown

Gallery (whose owner Edith Halper was one of the leading contemporary North American art dealers), Kraushaar Art Gallery, Grand Central Galleries, Weyhe Gallery Julie Levy, among many others. Except for the first two that collaborated with 13 and 8 works, the rest moved from 2 to 5 pieces. The Whitney Museum contributed 21% of the paintings, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoMA with 13%. Few museums sent materials: Cleveland, Pennsylvania, Boston, and Chicago. The tendency of the exhibition was twofold: on the side, the works mostly belonged to institutions in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and New Jersey, and another bias of the exhibition was artistic composition.

**Figure 1****Figure 1 Source** American Contemporary Art, Catalog. 1941.

Regarding the first bias, it is clear that Nelson Rockefeller's social network was mobilized, so in the world of art collectors and gallerists, the positive response was remarkable and demonstrated the commitment of those who were part of Rockefeller's office. Somehow, everyone got to work to educate Latin American audiences. In 1941, the American Museum Association offered a conference under the title "Museums of Art and Emergency," pointing out the active role in the contest as a cultural war.

The exhibition was filtered by assuming what Latin American audiences could appreciate and understand. No country would see the whole because the corpus was divided into three sections; the election was already fragmented.

Another exciting and contradictory aspect is that the catalogue was general, unifying the three sections in the same book without distinguishing which works made up each section. Moreover, further dissolving the peculiarities of the sections, the catalogue presented the works sorted alphabetically by artist. There was no aesthetic vision of the set or what had been shown in each section. In Argentina, the catalogue's cover, a painting by Gifford Beal entitled Fishing, seemed to recall the advertising of the sale of tuna cans, so a comic effect was achieved.

Specialists and personalities of the fine arts environment on the East American coast were in charge of cultural agents, mediators, and diffusers of U.S. rule. In this sense, it could be said that they carried out the mission of enlightening and conquering (this time through culture) Latin Americans. The exhibition was one of the devices (or representational machine) that would attempt to spread a coherent and civilizing image of North America in the southern region.

Artists represented a substantial part of the Ashcan School and The Eight. Pieces by Henri, Pendergrast and other painters that represented the local art of the nineteenth century were also included. The aim was to exhibit art related to the direct experience of the typical constant urban change in the United States. Therefore, many of the works portrayed the feeling of haste and liveliness of New York workers. North American modernism brought about a new visual sense. They

were interested in new ways of seeing and being seen in modern New York City: people walking in parks, hookers in the streets, fireworks in boxing venues, and vaudeville reviews, a significant bloom of images due to advances in publications and mass media.

The inclusion of these works provided a sense of report since they caught the scene of a modern, expanding metropolis. These forms of realism expressed the fast and daring changes in urban life, trade, and social transformations. Due to these artists, the exhibition was highly vibrant. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this trend was a challenge for its time. Far from thinking of the city as an elite, they introduced new landscapes and urban and working-class characters of all ages and genders. For the experts, not only did they re-conceptualize art but also the city in itself since they had banished the golden girl in the garden, replacing her with an urban realism [Slayton \(2017\)](#).

A group of works took the urban environment, technological advances, and characters from the working world as the central theme. Factories and skyscrapers were symbols of modern American identity. Paintings by Edward Hopper, one of the most influential XX Century artists, produced seemingly worldly but mysterious and troubling images of American life. His compositional style and emphasis on architectural structures about human figures distinguished him from his contemporaries. One oil painting and watercolour were brought, *Early Sunday Morning* from 1930, where he shows the sidewalk with stores on the ground floor and a home on the first floor wholly lonely and derelict. The author claimed afterward that this painting was almost a literal translation of the Seventh Avenue, insisting on the symbolic image of the city he had portrayed in detail.

In the same way, George Bellows' works, which caught the city's energy as epic forces in play, were included. His oil painting, *The Sand Cart* (1917) and *Dempsey and Firpo* (1924) featured. Bellows was a renowned realist painter of modern urban life who depicted New York City and its inhabitants in paintings, drawings, and engravings. The second oil painting was the famous boxing fight between Jack Dempsey and Argentinian Miguel Angel Firpo in New York Polo Grounds. He managed to show the energy and dynamism through a scene of the most famous sport of that time. It had a particular reference since it was a famous fight with a local boxing idol in Argentina.

Another renowned painter was Ernest Lawson with *High Bridge*, who introduced human presence in architecture and tools as the means to structure the world. The emphasis was on the immediacy of the experience of the modern city insofar as intense and demanding. Lawson focuses on the presence of bridges as symbols of American progress. An example of this symbology is the Brooklyn bridge painting looking onto Manhattan, where a group of buildings of the 1860s takes center stage, including the Fulton ferry terminal. There were contradictions between the nostalgic footprints of the past that faded and became the technological present.

This same view can be found in Edward Laning's work, *Under the bridge*. Laning was one of the essential regionalists of American scene painting artists. He studied in Chicago but later moved to New York to the historic Union Square neighbourhood, where he often portrayed everyday local scenes. He worked for the WPA commission in the Great Depression for many years, painting a mural on Ellis Island immigration and a series of murals in the New York Public Library. All his work was characterized by depicting social conflicts –particularly those of the working classes.

In addition, there was Reginald Mash's artwork, known for his representation of Manhattan as an ordinary, chaotic place. Mash was a renowned urban realist of the



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Great Depression, who created vibrant images of the most sordid aspects of life in the big city, often centering on the worlds of entertainment and leisure. Gairy Burlesque –which framed these concepts– was featured. Also, among those portrayals of the world of work, Raphael Soyer's *Office Girl* (1936) was included.

However, it was not just about the city. Some paintings told the history of the rural world. The workforces in the countryside could be observed in Ogden Pleissner's *Railroad Ranch*, where farmers with cowboy hats build a vast and imposing hayloft. Thomas Hart Benton's painting, *Roasting Ears*, a pioneer mural artist known for his representation of agriculture at a large scale, the industry, Western landscapes, and essential episodes from U.S. history, was also included. Benton sold this work of art to the MoMA in 1939. It is an example of American regionalism that shows the beauty of ordinary people's work. The image shows an Afro-American young man picking a corn cob with a high and green stem, an old tree in the background, and a small cabin further.

Images of the working world filled the exhibition: from the fishers on the pier of Zoltan Sepeshy's work to Joe Jones' farm scene. Probably, the most unmistakable evidence of the effort to show progress was John Kane's oil painting *Prosperity's increase* (1934), which represents steel factories, industrial chimneys, and a towbar for riverboats called "prosperity." and hills with tiny houses looking onto the river can be distinguished at the back.

The glorification of industry, progress and trade was typical in all the exhibitions, and critical works were included like *The Millionaire* (1938) and *The Syndicate* (1939), painted by Jack Levine. At first glance, they look just like portraits of wealthy men or high-class nightlife, but as we pause to observe closely, we can see how their bodies wrinkle and melt as if they were deflated. *The Syndicate* is a trio of characters with wrinkled faces and holes instead of eyes. Species of caricatures reveal a social criticism of the upper class's empty, greedy side. Some critical subjects were linked to the Great Depression period, such as Alexander Hogue's 1934 work, *Drought-Stricken Area*. This work depicts the decline of farming areas, the drought, and dust storms that have almost consumed the farm, which would seem to be in the middle of a desert. Some birds of prey are hovering over the area, and a cow with its ribs vast open stretches out its neck towards dried-up water well. The painting portrays hardships endured during the Great Depression and the risks all farmers were exposed to due to their hard work.

In light of these compositions that featured all sorts of working classes, the only exception that showed the life of the upper class was William Glackens' *Girl in black and white* (1914). It was the portrait of an upper-class girl with a nonchalant attitude sitting on a couch. Like the flower arrangements, her bright dress, a crystal vase, and a tablecloth with tassels point to her high social status.

The exhibition included just a few abstract compositions, such as *My Egypt* by Charles Demuth (1927) or *House and Street* (1931) by Stuart Davis, which were part of the Eastern circuit. Finally, two of the most daring artists featured in this exhibition were Paul Cadmus and Jared French. Cadmus with *Venus and Adonis* (1936) was described in the catalogue as "a heartless and satirical observer of contemporary life. Flawless as an expert, he leads the group of realist youngsters." [Rainey \(1941\) 14](#). By that time, Cadmus had done some erotic representations of masculine figures with satirical and dramatic elements, such as *The Fleet's In*, where a group of sailors and prostitutes interacted with homosexuals. In the particular case of the work included here, the author seems to have based himself on Peter Paul Rubens' work, on canvas, with the same topic, circa 1635- 1640. The modern

Adonis plays tennis and holds a racquet in his right hand and two balls in his left hand, while he rejects Venus and the crying baby.

Finally, one of Jared French's oil paintings was included. *Summer's Ending* showed a group of youngsters at the beach. Two women were at the forefront and in the background, a group of boys and another woman. Against the bluebird sky, the sun was going down, and the clouds heralded the end of the summer. The leftovers of a picnic (a bottle of wine) could be seen on a side while the muscled men played, and the women apparently started to leave. By mid-1941, exhibitions began to be mounted in various countries.

The three-section gathered 119 painters and 290 works in total. The artist more represented were the following:

Charles Burchfield	7
Edward Hopper	7
Reginald Marsh	6
Charles Demuth	5
John Marin	5
Maurice Prendergast	5

In the case of Burchfield paintings, two belong to the MET, two to the Whitney Museum. In the case of Edward Hopper arts, three belong to the Whitney, one to MOMA. Finally, the Reginald Marsh paintings belong to Burchfield and Hopper depicted the rural and urban vernacular architecture and also the sense of loneliness. Hopper painted American cityscapes and public and semi-public places where people gathered and interacted. However, the sensation of loneliness and individualization remains. His empty streets, storefronts, and isolated figures evoke a powerful sense of mystery and alliance that seem to transcend their particular time and place.

Finally, Reginald Marsh had six works. The social spaces of Harlem represented the possibility of interracial contact. Marsh's paintings depicted a city fundamentally altered by the presence of the black people that embody progressive modernity.

#### 4. RECEPTION IN LATIN AMERICA

Generally speaking, criticism in South American countries seemed satisfied with the exhibition. The reception confirmed the objective proposed by the OCIAA, which was to "reveal the life and thought of the United States, reflected by the work of [its] painters" and promote "an atmosphere of mutual understanding" (Catlin, 1941). However, there were critical voices. In Montevideo, the response was cordial in arguing that the exhibition had put modern painters at the center of cultural attention. However, the Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres García critically examined the sample's message. The artist, who had lived for several years in New York, noted that the quality of the exhibition was regular and that the poor quality of much of the work was due to the artists adopting European criteria or reacting to the influence of Europe created a false Indo-American art. The new American man and the invention of abstract forms that reflect his moral and intellectual character was not seen" [Ramirez et al. \(2012\)](#). At a conference, Torres García affirmed:

*[...] the collection includes unforgivable defects, and it is undoubtedly a shame that the selection process has not insisted on a higher standard. We can see a wide range of contemporary art produced by our northern friends, which we could not have done if only the best examples of their work had been shown here.*

Torres García pointed out in the American artists that what some critics saw in Argentine or Chilean sustaining works were insipid art that followed the modern trends in Europe. He did not talk about a cultural convergence in American and European art: pointing out the aesthetic similarities between U.S. and European painters but a lack of authenticity and the idea of art with a national specificity.

From another perspective, poet Ernesto Pinto (1941) noted with joy the absence of European themes in the exhibition:

*Without foreign themes, without streets of Paris, without Roman landscape, without Vienna coffee (...) instead, one finds that the whole theme arises from the vital substance of the country. Even in the most abstract composition, we can see the constructive elements that serve the people and machines of everyday life in the United States.*

He did not share the opinion of Torres Garcia, and he exalted the flexibility of the American canon during this period. There were a variety of 'streams' of American aesthetics: a little abstraction, there were examples of the variety of trends: surrealism, realism, regionalism, personal work, social content, criticism, etc.

The Western Section contained 125 paintings (oil and guaches), travelled to Lima, Mexico, Santiago de Chile, and Quito, and was accompanied by Stanton Caitlin.

Stanton Catlin reported many newspaper clippings that accounted for their reaping praise. Newspapers in Peru sustained that this was the "first step towards better Inter-American relations by the United States, whose activities so far in this direction had been a mere exercise in rhetoric" (El Tiempo: 1941). Although not all were praised, deeper analyses tended to see too much European influence in the exhibition and too many impressionist works. In Chile, the newspapers emphasized the value of the exhibition: "Paintings from all America worth millions, will be exhibited in Santiago" or "A valuable exhibition of contemporary art" were some of the titles (1941). However, some critics as Antonio Romera, reported acids opinions saying that, while in the National Gallery Mr. Mellon had amassed works by Giotto, Velázquez, the Greco, which the Americans could appreciate, they sent South America a clean painting aura, without pictorial tradition: "Artists seem disoriented or subjected to the tyranny of multiple American life. Either thing is possible because they both lead us to the same result." (El Nacional, 1941). The reasons for modernity, industrialization, and everyday life were seen as puerile, repetitive, and vain.

In Brazil, José Lins do Rego (1941) was satisfied because the industrial themes were the central part of the exhibition: "[...] this expresses the realism of a people who are not only masters of mass production but are excellent for their sensitivity and for their efforts to express themselves as true creators."

Generally speaking, critics celebrated that the paintings showed contrasts and not just an optimistic and happy vision of American life. The exhibition fulfilled its purpose of carrying a wide range of American pictorial models and influencing a judgment on artistic merit. In some cases, it was judged that the quality was uneven. However, while some flattered American artists for their conceptions of techniques and colours, others, as in Cuba's case, had an adverse reaction to the show judged, in many cases, as a disappointment. The disparity in criticism was due to some essential factors in the context of the sample. In the case of the North section, it was smaller because the spaces could not house more than 39 paintings, while in the southern countries (eastern and western sections), they had the capacity for more than a hundred paintings. The North travelled to La Habana, Caracas, and Bogotá, and probably the small size involved a limited selection of artists and styles. Lewis

Riley, who travelled with the exhibition, felt that the show's unfavourable reception in Havana was due to "some natural sense of competition influenced Cuban writers towards a more critical than normal attitude." (Report, 1942). Cuban critics argued that realistic and regionalist paintings in the United States are "more conventional and less entrepreneurial" (Report, 1942).

The Eastern exhibition was supervised by Caroline Durieux, an American lithographer, who also advised and helped with the exhibition's staging. Durieux had worked with Siqueiros during the 30s and knew some Latin American art trends. The show travelled to Río de Janeiro, Montevideo and Buenos Aires. In Buenos Aires, the opening was attended by Argentinean vice-president Castillo, the chargé d'affaires of the United States, and the justice ministry, among other government officials. In the Museum of Fine Arts of Buenos Aires, 123 works were exhibited, including Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, Stuart Davis, and Thomas Hart Benton, among other painters. *La Nación* stated, "The New World tried to find itself in the millennial experience it comes from, and it took rules and examples from it, apart from other pragmatic elements of domestic and immediate use (...) North America longed to be known. Together with a huge economic and industrial development, it asserts other values by shedding a pleasant light derived from the spirit of its material greatness" (1941). The president of the National Commission of Fine Arts, senator Antonio Santamarina, started his speech by stressing that "a representative exhibition of contemporary pictorial art in the United States held in our city at times when the American brothers try to strengthen their natural sentimental bonds and turn into reality their common feelings and longings of mutual understanding, which go far beyond the limits of artistic events and make this ceremony extraordinarily moving" *La Nación* (1941). He seemed to make a correct political assessment of the exhibition, even though no one knew if that would tilt the government balance to favour the United States.

If one of the purposes of the U.S. policies was to appear in the South American press linked to culture, it had been achieved. All major national newspapers echoed the art exhibition, regardless of their opinions about its quality.

If the purpose of the exhibition was to build a visual narrative about the United States, the idea of modernity and progress were the predominant elements.

On the other hand, the exhibition was also a strategy of the U.S. government to improve the inter-American relationship. The OCIAA also tried to obtain information on the political situation of the countries in which it was carried out. Those in charge of the sections submitted reports on the local political situation in this context. Thus, for example, Caroline Durieux completed some ideological reports on the characters she met during her visit. In her final report, she reported the political tendencies of the artists and art representatives with whom she was associated. Grace Morley did not share the idea that the cultural mission overlapped with political information assignments that many envoys were fulfilling by gathering information from sensitive sources.

Very different was the vision of Grace Morley on this subject. She wrote a letter to Mr. Philip R. Adams, executive secretary of the Office of the Coordinator of the National Défense Council, claiming that knowing that "one of the functions of the Office of the Coordinator is fostering more Latin American artistic relationships in this country. It has always stroke me as one of the most reliable means to lay future foundations and foster understanding now."

In June 1942, the exhibition returned to the United States. The government estimated a total had seen of 218,089 people in Latin America. The figures were considered significant. Six presidents and 33 editorials had attended the

inauguration. Furthermore, 454 articles on the exhibition were written. (NYT 1942). John Abbot pointed to the success of the project and the importance of having installed American art in neighbouring countries. The criticisms that the exhibition had aroused had been left behind, and, with renewed power, Nelson Rockefeller was preparing to redouble his commitment to culture by sending to South American countries a man of his trust: Lincoln Kirstein, to lead the task of collecting Latin American works of art to form a section at MoMA.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The case that we analysed was the first of many projects to build art diplomacy in times of WWII. In the case of Contemporary American Paintings, the intention was to document the distinctive qualities of American culture. The subject matter and style of the paintings on view confirm that the purpose of the exhibition was to articulate the idea of North America as a modern and peaceful nation. The works that composed the exhibition are signs of the times. They show an entire American period with images of factories, docks, gas pumps and turbines, of new skyscrapers. The representational American Scene, Social Realist, and Regionalist styles dominant during the Great Depression were a substantive part of this representation of the American nation.

Despite curators' ambitions for the exhibition, despite its inclusion into a larger, still-forming canon of American painting, and despite its use as a political instrument, the choice of works shows that this was foremost an exhibition intended to visualize the values styles of lives and exceptionalism of American Society. In the same sense as publisher Henry Luce urged the nation to embrace a "vision of America as a world power which . . . will guide us to the authentic creation of the 20th Century – our Century" (Luce, 1941, p. 65), the exhibition invoked the extension of the American influence, inspired by democratic ideals and the promise of prosperity and formulated a definition of national purpose that demonstrated the wider struggle to celebrate the nation's virtues and to reclaim its past.

To Grace Morley, the only art specialist on Latin American art, a proper authority on the matter, her aesthetic decisions and recommendations helped in the construction of a Latin American Art canon. Convinced of the value of these works and their potential for the future, she understood Rockefeller's policies as an opportunity to create a bridge with the continent's art. It was difficult for her to stick to the goals of the government's strategy, as it did not share the idea of the direct political use of these projects. Despite some misunderstandings, her collaboration on the good neighbour policy project was invaluable. The political intent of locating cultural convergence in American and Latino American art: by pointing out the aesthetic similarities between the Americas impulse the discussion on the internationalization of American art. Employed as diplomatic agents, the artworks were part of the political strategies to build good relationships with other Americas.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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