

BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF GALLERY

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Latin American Traveler Art Comes to Manhattan by Robin Cembalest

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A view of the Andes from Peru's Arequipa Valley, painted in 1877 by California artist Norton Bush, who cornered the local market for tropical landscapes. The sublime peak of Ecuador's Cotopaxi volcano, rendered in 1853 by Hudson River School master Frederic Edwin Church. A Caracas market scene that Saint Thomas-born Camille Pissarro began in 1854, during a stay in Venezuela, and finished in 1858, as a nascent Impressionist newly arrived in France. And the iconic Valley of Mexico depicted in the late 1800s by José María Velasco, the Mexico-born, Academy-trained artist who rendered geologic splendors as potent symbols of national identity.

Dazzling views of Latin America, rendered by an international mix of 19th-century artists (most of whom are not Latin American), are the subject of a pioneering show at the Americas Society and the Hunter College Art Galleries.

"Boundless Reality: Traveler Artists' Landscapes of Latin America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection" is the first exhibition to focus on an art genre that is just coming into focus as a field of study. Latin American Traveler Art documents a kind of "art rush" that occurred after the colonial era, when newly independent countries opened their borders, and painters and scientists from Europe and North America streamed in.

Some artists were in search of the sublime. Some came to classify and record in the spirit of the great Alexander von Humboldt, the



José María Velasco: Mexico Ahuehuete, c. 1870–75, oil on board, 12 ½ by 17 ½ inches. Courtesy Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros.

German naturalist and explorer. Some came to capture the growing market for views of the massive mountains, unfamiliar creatures and astonishing ruins of the continent. Often, it was all of the above.

For Venezuelan collectors Patricia and Gustavo Cisneros, building their holdings in the genre was a labor of love. Though the couple's other areas of focus—modern, contemporary, Latin American colonial and ethnographic objects from the Orinoco River basin—emerged more gradually, they made a conscious decision to begin acquiring Latin American landscape painting in 1996.

"There was no place in world I could go and see landscapes exclusive to Latin America," Patricia said, and there were few places to buy them, since they didn't fit within established market categories. "The hunt has been amusing," she added. The Cisneroses' criteria, a mix of artistic merit and descriptiveness, led them to a range of

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acquisitions, from Martin Johnson Heade's luminous *Sunset: A Scene in Brazil* (1864-65), to watercolors of Caracas by Admiral Michael Seymour of the British Royal Navy.

About 80 percent of the works in the show are on public view for the first time. For a Hunter College seminar led by Harper Montgomery, the professor who curated the show, M.A. and M.F.A. students researched the artists and considered the meaning of their artistic effort. The students contributed entries to a catalogue of the collection edited by Katherine Manthorne of the Graduate Center at CUNY, another partner in the show.

Tracking the movement of artists and images around the globe, the seminar explored the ways that artworks chronicled the unprecedented encounter of cultures and reflected (or not) the wonders of the unfamiliar continent. The show's title comes from Gabriel García Márquez, who remarked that words were not enough to describe the "boundless reality" of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Though traveler artists played an important role in European perceptions of Latin America, the genre itself was lost to art history. An unusual hybrid, it didn't fit easily in any particular category. While art history in Latin America tends to be told along national lines, the traveler artists moved around various countries in Europe, the Americas and beyond.

Even when landscape painting emerged as a tool of Latin American nationalism, its roots remained European. There are three Latin American-born artists in the show—Pissarro, Velasco, and Brazil's Marc Ferrez, whose photograph of the Cascatinha Taunay waterfall is on view at the Americas Society. Exploring the difference in the depictions by European and local artists can suggest new models for understanding their work. "Looking at how a European trope was used and changed by someone like Velasco helps us see him an interesting innovator in a global context," Montgomery says.

The landscape collection has inspired a new sort of journey for the well-traveled Cisneros family: they now make a habit of visiting the settings illustrated in the art. Their pilgrimage sites have included the Apurean plains (represented by an 1832 painting by Robert Ker Porter, British consul to Venezuela) and the Venezuela-Guyana border (tracing the path of Robert Hermann Schomburgk, who

documented the region for Britain's Royal Geographical Society). They also traveled the Orinoco, where French anthropologist Jean Chaffanjon and artist Auguste Morisot spent eight months searching for the river's source. Drawings and photographs from the expedition are on view at the Americas Society.

Twenty years after it was started, the Cisneros collection of Latin American Traveler Art has finally begun seeing an upswing in loan requests. An 1839 scene of Guadalupe by Émile Goury, a French artist, is in the Brooklyn Museum's "Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World." Several other paintings are in "Picturing the Americas: Landscape Painting from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic," a traveling show that opens at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark., on November 7.

It looks like Latin American Traveler Art is set to begin traveling once again.

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