

## *Mexico's Interamerican Biennials and the Hemispheric Cold War*

### *Las Bienales Interamericanas de México y la Guerra Fría en el hemisferio*

Artículo recibido el 30 de julio de 2020; devuelto para revisión el 12 de enero de 2021; aceptado el 23 de febrero de 2021; <https://doi.org/10.22201/iee.18703062e.2021.119.2762>

**Fabiola Martínez** Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus, [fabiola.martinez.1@slu.edu](mailto:fabiola.martinez.1@slu.edu),  
**Rodríguez** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2172-9234>.

**Lines of research** The political agency of the Mexican School and its activism through the Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas, on both sides of the Atlantic; the Interamerican and Hemispheric politics of the Cultural Cold War; the transnational networks of the Taller de Gráfica Popular with special attention to the visual discourses that underline their political activism.

**Líneas de investigación** La agencia política de la Escuela Mexicana y su activismo a través del Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas, en ambos lados del Atlántico, y las políticas interamericanas y hemisféricas de la Guerra Fría; las redes transnacionales del Taller de Gráfica Popular, especialmente los discursos visuales que promovieron y la agencia de sus imágenes como herramientas de resistencia y solidaridad.

**Abstract** In 1957 the Mexican government decided to embark on the organization of high profile Interamerican biennials. Although successful in convening a broad representation of countries in the continent, only two biennials successfully opened in 1958 and 1960. By situating these exhibitions, together with the Sao Paulo Biennials and the Bienales Hispanoamericanas in the complex geopolitics created by the Iron Curtain, this essay analyses the role that Mexico's Biennials played in the hemisphere's Cultural Cold War. In an effort to challenge US economic and cultural hegemony in the continent, the Interamerican Biennials became one of the last battlefields for Mexico's famed revolutionary artists, and ultimately an important, if largely neglected, chapter in the history of Latin America's Cold War.

**Keywords** Mexican School; Taller de Gráfica Popular; Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas; Cultural Cold War; Sao Paulo Biennials; Bienales Hispanoamericanas; Pan American Union; José Gómez Sicre; Jack Levine; Mauricio Lasansky.

**Resumen** En 1957 el gobierno mexicano decidió dedicar dinero y recursos a la organización de Bienales Interamericanas. Aunque la mayoría de los países invitados aceptaron enviar obras, sólo dos de estas costosas bienales se llevarían a cabo: la primera abrió sus puertas en junio de 1958 y la segunda en septiembre de 1960. El presente estudio analiza la historia de estas bienales con relación a las Bienales de Sao Paolo, y las Bienales Hispanoamericanas con el objetivo de situarlas en el complejo territorio de la Guerra Fría, y de resaltar el importante papel que éstas tuvieron en las guerras culturales del hemisferio.

**Palabras clave** Escuela Mexicana; Taller de Gráfica Popular; Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas; guerra cultural; Guerra Fría; Bienales de São Paulo; Bienales Hispanoamericanas; Unión Panamericana; José Gómez Sicre; Jack Levine; Mauricio Lasansky.

FABIOLA MARTÍNEZ RODRÍGUEZ  
SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY, MADRID CAMPUS

## *Mexico's Interamerican Biennials and the Hemispheric Cold War*

**R**ufino Tamayo's *Homenaje a la raza india* (1952) was the centerpiece of an exhibition organized to celebrate the work of Mexico's great "Fourth Muralist" during the second, and last, Interamerican Biennial in 1960. While Tamayo publicly expressed his dislike of this title, the government was keen to promote his work alongside that of José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros in an attempt to water down the political outreach of *Los tres grandes*. On this occasion, Tamayo also received the Premio Internacional de Pintura, the most prestigious prize awarded by the jury—an accolade which represented the official backing of international modernism and abstractionist trends. Two years earlier, Francisco Goitia, one of the most revered artists of the Mexican School had been given this important prize and Tamayo, who was then living in Paris, refused an invitation to participate. The contrast between the jury's choices, one celebrating Goitia's revolutionary spirit and social realism, while the other praised Tamayo's brand of *indigenismo* which combined Mexican referents with formalist experimentation, point to important differences between the First and Second Interamerican Biennials. By situating these exhibitions, together with the Sao Paulo Biennials and the Bienales Hispanoamericanas in the complex geopolitics created by the Iron Curtain, this essay analyses the role that Mexico's biennials played in the hemisphere's Cultural Cold War.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to challenge us

1. There is no comprehensive study of Mexico's Interamerican Biennials and no publications exist that focus specifically on these exhibitions. They are often mentioned in passing in texts

economic and cultural hegemony in the continent, the Interamerican Biennials became one of the last battlefields for Mexico's famed revolutionary artists, and ultimately an important, if largely neglected, chapter in the history of Latin America's Cold War.<sup>2</sup>

### *An embattled Mexican School*

Although successful in convening a large representation of countries in the continent, only two biennials successfully opened: in 1958 and 1960. Both events generated a great amount of controversy, underlined by the debates between figuration and abstraction and their political affiliations. These costly Biennials were financed by the government in its continuing efforts to present the Mexican School, led by the muralists, as the visual and material evidence

---

looking at Mexican art at mid-century, for example: Shifra Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Leonor Morales, *Arturo García Bustos y el realismo de la Escuela Mexicana* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1992); Mary K. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums and the Mexican State* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2012). Or works on Rufino Tamayo, who was given a special exhibition in the Second Biennial in 1960. See Ana Torres, *Identidades pictóricas y culturales de Rufino Tamayo* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2011); Ana Torres, "Políticas culturales en tiempos de desplazamientos estéticos y políticos: arte mexicano 1950-1970," in *Nuevas Lecturas de Historia* (Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, 2016), 11-86. Besides these studies Daniel Montero Fayad has also undertaken an analysis of the First Biennial regarding its aesthetics and art criticism. His research was presented in the symposium *Historia de las Exposiciones en México*, Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 22-23 May 2019. My study is based on research done at the Archives of American Art, and the archives of the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington D.C. thanks to a grant from the Smithsonian American Art Museum. I would like to thank Carmen E. Ramos for her encouragement and support. Most of my information comes from these archives, from the catalogues of the Biennials, and from newspaper articles contemporary to these exhibitions. This research, however, was greatly enriched thanks to Guillermina Guadarrama's archives of the Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas (FNAP), held in the Centro de Investigación, Documentación e Información de Artes Plásticas (CENIDIAP). I am deeply grateful for her generosity and kindness.

2. See Claire Fox, *Making Art Panamerican. Cultural Policy and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013); Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: the Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

of its revolutionary credentials; something that, by the end of the 1950s, was merely a façade trying to hide the reality that the Mexican Revolution had all but failed to fulfill its socialist utopia.

The 1950s is therefore an important period in the history of the Mexican School as it tried to reassert its revolutionary agency through national and international exhibitions. And while many of these artists depended on State patronage, some of its key members became increasingly critical of the government believing that their work was the only lasting hope of the Revolution. This put the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) in a difficult bind. On the one hand, the government needed the cultural capital garnered through the international acclaim of the Mexican muralists to legitimize its one-party rule; while on the other, the communist militancy of its members and the explicit socialist content of their work was becoming increasingly difficult to accommodate in its developmentalist projects.<sup>3</sup> The complex dynamics between the Mexican School and the government need to be understood in the context of the early Cold War—dominated by McCarthyism and increasingly aggressive US foreign policies. In her book *Mexico's Cold War* Renata Keller explains how the political situation in the country was marked by the intersection between foreign and domestic affairs.<sup>4</sup> This situation meant that Mexico was far from a peaceful haven but rather “an active battleground where multiple groups debated, spied, schemed, and struggled for influence”.<sup>5</sup>

Keller's study tries to unpack the interplay between national and foreign interests, placing at the center the revolutionary mythologizing undertaken by the government in order to legitimize its rule. This is examined in the chapter “The Institutionalized Revolution” where Keller looks at the political tensions and social unrest provoked by a government intent on furthering the economic gains of post-revolutionary elites, rather than alleviating endemic poverty and exploitation.<sup>6</sup> This created a strange paradox, with the government harshly repressing homegrown political activism while granting exile to foreign

3. See Rita Eder, ed., *Desafío a la estabilidad. Procesos artísticos en México 1952-1967* (Mexico City: Turner, 2014). This work is very important to understand the artistic, cultural, and political context of this period, as well as the tensions between the Mexican School and the *Ruptura*.

4. Renata Keller, *Mexico's Cold War. Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 5.

5. Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*, 5.

6. Carlos Fuentes book *La región más transparente* published in 1958, provides a brilliant

revolutionaries (most notably Jacobo Arbenz, Fidel Castro, and Ernesto “Che” Guevara). In this way the PRI continued to pay lip service to the ideals of the Revolution hoping to dispel criticism from the left, thus making evident the contrasting agendas of its domestic and international politics.<sup>7</sup> Keller’s insightful study of Mexico’s Cold War highlights the complicated political arena of Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s, when domestic problems became tied to global hegemonic struggles; but most importantly it brings to the fore the way in which the Mexican Revolution and its socialist utopia became entangled with the cultural politics of the Cold War.

As the country modernized, propelled by foreign investment, the post-revolutionary government sought to reconcile its troubled colonial and postcolonial histories. It did this through a careful staging of *mexicanidad*, both in Mexico and abroad,<sup>8</sup> and by promoting an official narrative that highlighted the triumphs of the Revolution. In this history the muralists and the Mexican School occupied center stage. As Shifra Goldman<sup>9</sup> and Mary Coffey<sup>10</sup> have shown, this was the period when muralism became institutionalized, and the principles of the Mexican School were enforced through art education, federal commissions, state run museums and cultural institutions —most significantly the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA) created in 1946.

Although critical of the failings of the PRI the muralists relied on state patronage, and this dependency created a complicated relationship with the so-called revolutionary party. As a result, they were criticized for pandering to the government’s need for revolutionary propaganda, for limiting the artistic expression of young artists, and for controlling state funded patronage. As Octavio Paz noted, in his 1978 essay “Re/visiones: la pintura mural,”<sup>11</sup>

---

literary critique of the post-revolutionary government, and the superfluous lives of the new urban elites.

7. The complicated relationship between Mexico’s influential intellectuals and artists who openly criticized US imperialism and the PRI is examined in Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*. This book also reveals the tensions between Mexico’s Left and the government through figures like Lazaro Cárdenas and Vicente Lombardo Toledano.

8. Fernando Gamboa became one of the most important promoters of Mexican art and the Mexican School from the 1940s to ’60s. For a study of his curatorial vision see for example Carlos Molina, “Fernando Gamboa y su particular visión de México,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* XXVII, no. 87 (2005), <http://dx.doi.org/10.22201/iiie.18703062e.2005.87.2194>

9. Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting*.

10. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*.

11. “El arte público de Rivera y Siqueiros fue con frecuencia la apología pintada de la dict-

revolutionary art must be free from the censorship of patronage, and from programmatic stylistic or ideological dictums. In Paz's view, the movement became part of a corrupt and authoritarian State which used muralism as propaganda for a revolution that had failed to fulfil its promises. While acknowledging the experimental art of Siqueiros, Paz criticized the content of the muralists' work stating that: "The public art of Rivera and Siqueiros was often the painted apologia of the ideological dictatorship of an armed bureaucracy."<sup>12</sup> But while the symbiosis between Mexican muralism and Mexican Revolution justified its status as official art, the socialist politics behind this work became increasingly problematic for the government.

The Mexican School's alignment with Marxism and the Left was particularly difficult during the 1950s, in the context of McCarthyism, the rise of Mao's China, and the Korean War. And while the government maintained a policy of neutrality, Rivera's and Siqueiros' unremitting loyalty to the USSR was clearly an affront to US imperialism, and a source of discomfort for the PRI. There were also important demonstrations against the Guatemalan Coup d'état in June 1954, led by Siqueiros, Rivera and Frida Kahlo. This would be Kahlo's last public appearance. A few weeks later during the wake of the artist held at the Palacio de Bellas Artes (between July 13-14, 1954), Kahlo's casket was covered with the communist flag – costing Andres Iduarte, director of INBA his job. This situation created a complicated and tense cultural atmosphere that led to the gradual de-politicization of muralism and its eventual decline at the end of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

During its heyday, in the 1920s and 30s, muralism cemented the connection between realism and revolutionary art which came to embody the precepts of the Mexican School. The difficulty of embracing international trends that eschewed narrative figuration, in favor of formal experimentation, can be seen through the work of Rufino Tamayo who left Mexico for New York in the mid-1930s looking for a more open and experimental art scene. During the 1950s, however, the government began to promote his work in national and

---

adura ideológica de una burocracia armada," in Octavio Paz, *Obras completas*, vol. 7, *Los privilegios de la vista II. Artes de México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994), 188-227.

12. In Paz, *Obras completas*, 214.

13. See Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art*; and Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting*. Both of these books provide important studies of Mexico's artistic sphere in the 1950s and '60s, and the context that led to the decline of muralism. Both authors also provide an insightful discussion of how Mexico's artistic production was part of the Hemispheric Cold War.

international exhibitions presenting him as the “Fourth Great muralist”. It was during this period that Tamayo’s work gained national recognition, becoming a role model for artists of the *Ruptura*, who openly attacked the chauvinism of the Mexican School. As Coffey explains, Paz’ championing of Tamayo’s work contributed to the depoliticization of muralism by promoting a less parochial art that highlighted the universal and essential elements of *mexicanidad*.<sup>14</sup> The dispute between figuration and abstraction was hence mainly centered around Siqueiros and Tamayo, whose works were seen to represent the opposing ideologies of the US and the USSR.<sup>15</sup> But the reality was much more complex, as the scholarship on Tamayo has shown.<sup>16</sup> Their differences, however, turned them into outspoken rivals, and tensions between them grew as Tamayo’s fame increased. Siqueiros attacked Tamayo’s *arte puro*, complaining that it was art for art’s sake and unpatriotic, indicative of Tamayo’s lack of political commitment and respect for his country. Tamayo, on the other hand, attacked Siqueiros’ art as pictorial demagogy lacking in aesthetic value. He believed Siqueiros’ work was superficial, propagandistic, and harmful by not allowing foreign or international influences to reinvigorate Mexican art.<sup>17</sup>

Siqueiros and artists aligned with the Mexican School defended their position, believing that their art and political activism represented the last hope of the revolutionary project ignited in 1910. The political activism of the Mexican School was channeled through the Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas (FNAP) created in 1952.<sup>18</sup> This organization, through its links with INBA, was largely responsible for setting the aesthetic and ideological objectives of the First Biennial in 1958.<sup>19</sup> As a significant precedent of Mexico’s Interamerican Biennials it

14. Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art*, 73.

15. Irene Herner’s scholarship on Siqueiros presents the most thorough and authoritative study of his life and work, see for example Herner, *Siqueiros, del paraíso a la utopía* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 2010).

16. See Diana Du Pont, ed., *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007); Torres, *Identidades pictóricas*; and Ingrid Suckaer, *Rufino Tamayo. Aproximaciones* (Mexico City: Praxis, 2000).

17. See Torres, *Identidades pictóricas*.

18. There are very few publications that look at this organization in any detail. Most mention the FNAP in relation to the Taller de Gráfica Popular or the Mexican Biennials. The most in-depth study is by Guillermina Guadarrama, *El Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas, 1952-1962* (Mexico City: Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información de Artes Plásticas, 2005).

19. Morales’ book *Arturo García Bustos* talks briefly about this, but most of the information

is important to note that, between 1955 and 1956, an exhibition of Mexican art and prints toured various cities in the Eastern Block culminating in China in the summer of 1956.<sup>20</sup> The organization of this ambitious project was undertaken by FNAP putting to test its logistical and representative power.

During its ten years of existence this organization provided an independent platform for the promotion of Mexican art in the country and abroad, working hard to present a unified front of artists intent on keeping alive the national and revolutionary spirit of the Mexican School. The time frame of its short existence is central to understanding the aesthetic and political agendas of FNAP. This was a period of heightened tension in Latin America's long struggle against US imperialism, and a time marked by violence and military interventions—starting with Guatemala in 1954. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution in January 1959, would be key to the geopolitics of the 60s and 70s, turning attention from the Mexican to the Cuban Revolution. This shift coincided with the decline of muralism and increasing governmental support for abstractionist trends.

Members of FNAP saw the First Biennial as an opportunity to reinstate the political agency of muralism, and to challenge the increasing political and economic influence of the US in the Americas. Above all, they believed, these biennials would show that abstraction was decorative and superficial—a fad promoted by American capitalism—unlike the superior values of realism based on humanist and humanitarian principles. Doing so would also underline the significance of the Mexican School, and the muralist movement as one of the most original and important revolutionary art movements from the Americas. In a series of roundtables organized by FNAP, just a few months before the First Biennial opened, Chavez Morado<sup>21</sup> compared Mexican

---

regarding the connection between the FNAP and the Biennials can be found in newspaper articles published at the time of the exhibitions. Many of these can be found in the digital archive of ICAA (<https://icaa.mfah.org/es/page/home>). See also Raquel Tibol, *Documentación sobre el arte mexicano* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974). This book contains very helpful primary sources for the study of the FNAP.

20. See Guadarrama, *El Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas*, 13-16. For the Chinese exhibition see Shengtian Zheng, *Winds from Fusang: Mexico and China in the Twentieth Century*, exhibition catalogue (Pacific Asia Museum, 2018), [https://issuu.com/uscpam/docs/8804\\_pam\\_catalog\\_pdf\\_proof](https://issuu.com/uscpam/docs/8804_pam_catalog_pdf_proof).

21. José Chávez Morado was one of the most important members of the Mexican School and a member of the Mexican Communist Party.

muralism to anti-colonial struggles taking place in Asia and Africa.<sup>22</sup> There is a sense of urgency in the discussions that took place during these three days of talks.<sup>23</sup> At stake was the socialist utopia of the Revolution betrayed by the increasing conservatism of the PRI, and its links to US economic and political interests.

The Mexican Biennials would therefore promote the political agency of the Mexican School and reinstate the centrality of Mexico City as one of the main art capitals in the Americas. From this position they could present a challenge to the Sao Paulo Biennial and its penchant for abstract art—and to the Bienales Hispanoamericanas organized by Franco in the 1950s—presenting a hemispheric challenge to the latter's colonialist nostalgia. But perhaps most significantly, they could defy the dominance of the New York School and the imperialist agendas of the Pan American Union through its agent provocateur José Gómez Sicre.<sup>24</sup> As the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Pan American Union and its Visual Arts program were viewed with deep distrust by artists, intellectuals and critics linked to FNAP.

### *The Brazilian and Spanish Biennials*

On October 12th, 1951, General Francisco Franco opened the first Bienal Hispanoamericana in Madrid. This symbolic day and location was chosen to give historical legitimacy to his regime's call for Hispanic unity in a needed effort to overcome many years of autarchy. Eight days later, the first *Bienal da Sao Paulo* opened in Brazil's most industrial and affluent city. The Sao Paulo and Hispano-American biennials ran parallel during the 1950s, competing for international participation and prestige. While promoting national artistic and economic interests, these biennials came to play an important role in advancing the anti-communist agendas of the US.

Spain and Brazil in the 1950s presented contrasting economic, political and cultural landscapes. A multi-cultural and multi-racial Brazil was experiencing an economic boom and rapidly becoming one of Latin America's most

22. In Tibol, *Documentación sobre el arte mexicano*, 106.

23. See Tibol, *Documentación sobre el arte mexicano*, 103-135.

24. For a comprehensive study of José Gómez Sicre and his work as Director of the Visual Arts Section, see Fox, *Making Art Panamerican*. This work is very important for understanding the role of the Pan American Union during the Cold War.

prosperous and modern nations. This modernization was made visible through the glass, cement and concrete buildings of its most renowned architects, Oscar Niemeyer and Luis Costa, and through the constructivist abstractions of its famed Concrete artists.<sup>25</sup> Its advanced art and architecture was attracting international attention, making Brazil one of the most progressive cultural centers in the Americas. It is thus no surprise that the Sao Paulo Biennial quickly became one of the beacons of artistic modernity in the continent.

Conversely, the Spain of Franco was trying to recover after a long period of autarchy and economic hardships. Its enforced isolationism in the 1940s was the result of international condemnation following the establishment of a far-right (*falangista*) government. The 1950s, however, was a period of *apertura* when Franco sought to dismiss associations with Hitler and Mussolini in order to revive Spain's diplomatic status. During this decade cultural diplomacy became central to the foreign policies of his regime, and much effort and money was spent in the representation of Spanish art abroad.<sup>26</sup> Financial recovery was fueled by the *Pacto de Madrid*, a military agreement signed between Spain and the United States in September of 1953. This pact brought us military bases to Spain, in exchange for generous loans and grants which helped to strengthen its economic base and improve its military defense. Their alliance was made possible thanks to Franco's staunch anti-communism and commitment to fight Soviet expansionism. Two years after this pact Spain was re-admitted to the United Nations, marking the official end of its international isolationism.

Like Spain, Brazil was also enmeshed in the politics of the Cold War, and the Sao Paulo Biennial became one of the battle fields where the cultural war waged by the us was fought. While these biennials were not limited by geographic location, during the 1950s the works sent by participating countries were separated into two pavilions, the Pavilion of Nations and the Pavilion of States. The Pavilion of States was technically the Pavilion of the Americas since only works from the continent were shown. As Adele Nelson explains, this term followed that of the Organization of American States created in 1948

25. The scholarship on South American Geometric Abstraction is an expanding field, and many important works have been published on Brazil's modernist architecture and concrete art by curators and scholars. A lot of the current scholarship builds on important exhibitions like *The Geometry of Hope* (2007), and *Inverted Utopias: Avant Garde Art in Latin America* (2004).

26. See Miguel Cabañas, *Política artística del franquismo* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1996).

to fight communism on the continent.<sup>27</sup> The division is interesting in that by presenting the Americas under one roof the organizers hoped to present a Hemispheric front, not unlike the continental unity that Mexico's Interamerican Biennials would later promote. The Sao Paulo Biennial was conceived and funded by the Paulista industrialist Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, better known as Ciccillo Matarazzo, who had very close ties to Nelson Rockefeller and MoMA. He was also responsible for the creation of the Museo de Arte Moderna in Sao Paulo, inaugurated in 1948, and which had a collaborative agreement with MoMA. Of the web of interests culminating in the Sao Paulo Biennial, Nelson writes:

The United States, via Nelson Rockefeller and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, had been directly involved in shaping Brazil's modern art institutions and was viewed by Matarazzo as an important strategic partner in his ambitious goal to transform Sao Paulo into a world-class artistic center.<sup>28</sup>

While MoMA made sure that us art in the Biennial promoted the American values of freedom and democracy, the representation of Latin American art fell largely under the control of Gómez Sicre, director of the Visual Arts section of the Pan American Union since 1946. Thanks to the work of Alessandro Armato, we know that during the first five editions of the Biennial the cultural arm of the OAS controlled the Latin American sections through the curatorial work of Gómez Sicre. The organizers relied on his extensive networks, and on his recommendations for invited artists, even though as Armato explains, the Biennial's recommendations were often seen as an imposition, and governments found ways to by-pass them. A more effective way to enforce Gómez Sicre's taste and preferences came in 1955 when a Pan American Union section was introduced under his directorship (he led it until 1967). He also recommended the creation of a prize for the acquisition of works by Latin/American artists, and influenced the collection of Latin American art in Matarazzo's Museum of Modern Art.<sup>29</sup> Through Gómez Sicre's and Matarazzo's bonds with

27. See Adele Nelson, "Monumental and Ephemeral. The Early Sao Paulo Biennials," in *Constructive Spirit. Abstract Art in South and North America*, ed. Mary Kate O'Hare (Newark: Newark Museum, 2010), 129-135.

28. Nelson, "Monumental and Ephemeral," 134.

29. See Alessandro Armato, "Una trama escondida: la OEA y las participaciones latinoamericanas en las primeras cinco Bienales de Sao Paulo," *Caiana*, no. 6 (2015): 33-43.

the us, the formalist credo of MoMA came to dominate the aesthetic agendas of the Sao Paulo Biennial, making abstraction the crowning achievement of the Americas. The antithesis to this being, of course, the figurative art of the Mexican School which represented a socially committed art contaminated by politics. Gómez Sicre openly attacked the Mexican muralists (except Orozco), hoping to weaken their influence in the continent, and waged a war against nationalist or political art. In his artistic crusade Gómez Sicre gathered like-minded artists and critics whom he helped and promoted. At the heart of his aesthetic and curatorial choices was a belief that art should be cosmopolitan in form and Latin American in essence. Examples of this being the work of Rufino Tamayo, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Carlos Mérida. The strong influence of his ideas in the Sao Paulo Biennial may explain why Tamayo was awarded the first prize in painting, along with Alfred Menessier, in 1953.

In Franco's Spain the Bienales Hispanoamericanas were organized by the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica (ICH) and were fraught with tensions from the start.<sup>30</sup> Both the ICH and the Biennials were seen as propaganda tools of the Franco regime, and many exiled republicans and supporters of the Republic launched systematic attacks to discredit them. The Bienales Franquistas, as they came to be known, gave rise to many anti-biennials and open letters were signed by influential artists and intellectuals in the Americas. Most of these were in support of Picasso's call to resist Franco and his cultural crusade. In his quest for Hispanic unity Franco presented Latin America as a junior partner in need of guidance and support, as was made clear by the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica in 1951:

The *Instituto* is —essentially— a foreign policy organization aimed at establishing closer links between Spain and Hispano-America, while strengthening, reestablishing and defending the reality of Spain —both historical and present— in America, fostering —upon pre-existing bases— the creation of a sense of community in those nations that must recognize Spain as a guiding and directing entity.<sup>31</sup>

30. For the rules and jury regulations see *I Exposición Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte, Estatutos* (Madrid: Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, 1951).

31. "El Instituto es —esencialmente— un organismo de política exterior al servicio de la vinculación de España con Hispanoamérica, destinado a fortalecer, restablecer y defender la realidad de España —histórica y actual— en América, fomentando —sobre bases pre-exis-

From this statement it is clear that Franco's Spain needed Latin America,<sup>32</sup> and the Biennials became key to the propaganda tactics of his regime.

The first Bienal Hispanoamericana was followed three years later by the Bienal de La Habana, and then shortly after by one in Barcelona, in the winter of 1955.<sup>33</sup> There were plans to organize a fourth biennial, which would have coincided with the Bienales Interamericanas in Mexico, and one may assume that both organizing committees were aware of this. The fourth biennial, however, never came to fruition. Thanks to the work of Miguel Cabañas, we know that Franco's government hoped to organize this fourth biennial in Caracas, to open in June 1958,<sup>34</sup> the same month that the First Interamerican Biennial opened in Mexico City. Spain's organizing committee underlined the geopolitical significance of Venezuela and claimed that the future of Latin/American art rested in the Caribbean. Perhaps advised by Gómez Sicre, the officials tried to undermine Mexican art, saying it lacked originality and suggested "the possibility of an American originalism of which the Caribbean would be the catalyzing center".<sup>35</sup> It seems, however, that the government of Venezuela was not convinced, and their attention turned to Ecuador.

Aware that the next OAS conference would be held in Quito, the organizers began negotiations with the Ecuadorian government (the previous OAS gathering was in Caracas in 1954). This connection is important, as Cabañas explains, since "there was a political interest in exploiting the Biennial for the purpose of forging a closer association of Spain to the meetings of the OAS and Latin-American political life".<sup>36</sup> As expected, Gómez Sicre was asked to organize

---

tentes— la creación de un sentimiento de comunidad en los pueblos que deben tener a España como orientadora, rectora y dirigente," in Cabañas, *La política artística del franquismo*, 156.

32. It is interesting to note that the Museo de América was created under Franco in 1941, and the neo-colonial building that houses the collection opened in 1954. The architects designed the museum to look like a Catholic convent reflecting the "civilizing" mission of the conquest—a narrative that suited Franco's neo-colonial ambitions.

33. The organizers hoped that the biennials would alternate between Spain and hosting countries in the Americas. This proved very difficult, leading to long delays in the opening of the Second Biennial.

34. Cabañas, *El ocaso de la política artística americanista*, 50.

35. "la posibilidad de un originalismo americano del que el Caribe sea el centro catalizador," in Cabañas, *El ocaso de la política artística americanista*, 47.

36. "existía el interés político de utilizar la Bienal para procurar la asociación y cercanía española a las reuniones de la OEA y la vida política latinoamericana," en Cabañas, *El ocaso de la política artística americanista*, 57.

a selection of works to represent the Pan American Union, but many of the artists he promoted refused to take part, including Tamayo, José Luis Cuevas, Alejandro Otero, Mario Carreño and Fernando de Szyzlo. In a letter to the committee, Gómez Sicre wrote that: "Without these artists that I have mentioned it is not possible for me to prepare any section that could carry our stamp (*rótulo*) because at the present moment these are the figures of greatest importance (*proyección*) in the continent."<sup>37</sup>

It seems that widespread resistance from artists and pro-Republican organizations may have forced the Spanish government to give up hopes of organizing another exhibition in Latin America. One may ask, however, to what extent Mexico's Interamerican Biennials could have contributed to their demise? After all, most of Mexico's leading artists and intellectuals were vocal critics of Franco's regime, and the government welcomed many Spanish refugees remaining loyal to the Republic.

While both Spain and Brazil forged collaborative exchanges, participating in each other's Biennials, the Sao Paulo Biennial was more successful at promoting American abstract trends. In the Mexican section, however, visitors would have been able to see works by the Mexican School and the Taller de Gráfica Popular.<sup>38</sup> As for the Spanish Biennials, Cabañas explains that the ICH had very much hoped to include works by Mexican artists in its first edition: "Mexican participation, among that of the American artists, was one of the most eagerly awaited attractions at the Madrid Biennial and thus one of those which had most strongly to be insisted on."<sup>39</sup> But their efforts to secure them were always thwarted. A front of Mexican artists, led by Siqueiros and Rivera,

37. "Sin estos artistas que le he mencionado no me es posible preparar ninguna sección que lleve nuestro rótulo porque en el momento actual son las figuras de mayor proyección en el continente," en Cabañas, *El ocaso de la política artística americanista*, 75.

38. A close analysis of Mexico's participation in the Sao Paulo Biennial during the 1950s would be beyond the scope of the present article, but a quick review of the catalogues reveals the following: Mexico participated for the first time in 1953 with a room dedicated to Rufino Tamayo and the rest was organized by the TGP; in 1955 Carrillo Gil sent works from his collection including Tamayo, Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros; the 1957 edition did not include a Mexican section; and in 1959 the exhibition was organized by the Museo de Arte Moderno with works by José Chávez Morado, José Luis Cuevas, Francisco Goitia and Guillermo Meza.

39. "la participación mexicana, entre la de los artistas americanos, era uno de los alicientes más esperados en la Bienal madrileña y, por tanto, una en las que más debía insistirse," in Cabañas, *La política artística del franquismo*, 384.

and exiled republicans mounted a strong resistance against this Biennial. Their outrage was plainly stated in a letter published by *El Popular* on October 1951:

Francisco Franco's fascist and bellicose regime and his so-called Institute of Hispanic Culture, which is a body dedicated to the diffusion of the ideas of fascism and to the corruption of artists and intellectuals, are preparing for October 13th the inauguration in Madrid of a so-called Hispano-American Art Exhibition.

Our responsibility as artists and as Mexicans obliges us to point out that the purported Hispano-American Art Exhibition is a crude maneuver organized by Francoism with the aim of dissimulating the true situation of Spain, the hunger of the Spanish people, the discontent of the greater part of the nation and the shameful surrender of the country to the American warmongers.<sup>40</sup>

Their absence was noted by Rafael Santos Torroella in the catalogue of the First Biennial,<sup>41</sup> and their works were often compared to those of Portinari, Cavalcanti and Guayasamín —whose paintings were included in the Spanish Biennials. Guayasamín was in fact awarded the most prestigious prize in painting (Gran Premio de Pintura) during the III Biennial in Barcelona<sup>42</sup> (something which

40. “El régimen fascista y guerrero de Francisco Franco y su llamado Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, que es un organismo destinado a la difusión de las ideas del fascismo y a la corrupción de los artistas e intelectuales, preparan para el día 13 de octubre la inauguración en Madrid de una llamada Exposición Hispanoamericana de Arte: nuestra responsabilidad de artistas y de mexicanos nos obliga a señalar que la pretendida exposición Hispanoamericana de Arte es una burda maniobra que el franquismo realiza con el fin de ocultar la verdadera situación de España, el hambre del pueblo español, el descontento de la mayoría de la nación y la vergonzosa entrega del país a los guerreristas norteamericanos,” in Cabañas, *La política artística del franquismo*, 389. It was signed by Rivera, Siqueiros, Leopoldo Méndez and Chávez Morado.

41. *I Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte: catálogo pintura, escultura, arquitectura* (Madrid: Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno, 1951), 1-4.

42. In her book *Beyond National Identity* Michelle Greet provides an insightful analysis of Guayasamín's work in the context of WWII and the early Cold War. She explains how his work shifted from narrative indigenist content to a more symbolic and formalist approach drawing the attention of Rockefeller —who bought works by him in 1942 (Michelle Greet, *Beyond National Identity. Pictorial Indigenism as a Modernist Strategy in Andean Art, 1920-1960* [Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Univ Press, 2009], chapter 6, 166-167). As a result of his support Guayasamín travelled to the US in 1943 where he would have had the opportunity to see the work of the Mexican muralists, and he acknowledged the influence of Tamayo, Orozco and Siqueiros (Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 174). Greet's book untangles the complexities of

apparently particularly angered Tapiés).<sup>43</sup> José María Moreno Galván praised the *mestizaje* of Ecuadorian artists like Guayasamín, Kingman, and Mena Franco, and said that the next school would be the school of the Americas. He also urged Spanish artists to be more open and encouraged them to stop being Spanish in order to become Hispanic.<sup>44</sup> This was too radical, however, for an *España franquista* intent in recovering the purity of its Catholic Golden Age.

During the Third Biennial an important exhibition of American art from the collections of MoMA was put together by Renee D'Harnoncourt, then director of the museum. In his text for the catalogue, he thanked the United States Information Agency for its help, and justified the participation of the US highlighting the important cultural and economic ties it had with *Hispanoamérica*.<sup>45</sup>

To the outrage of Mexican artists, this last Biennial also included a section with works by some of the representatives of the Mexican School. These had been secured thanks to loans from private collectors. In a letter to the director of *Novedades*, the Chairing Committee of FNAP expressed their anger, stating that this Biennial attempted to disgrace the universal prestige of revolutionary Mexican painting.<sup>46</sup> The letter also included a press release, sent by FNAP to Mexican newspapers on July 1955, declaring that: “the Bienal Hispanoamericana represents a political act by the fascist dictatorship of Francisco Franco, repudiated by all the peoples of the world and in particular repudiated by the regime of the Mexican revolution and by all the progressive forces of our country”.<sup>47</sup>

---

Latin America's indigenist painting in the US, unravelling the artists' complicated relationship with American patronage.

43. It is important to note that Guayasamín collaborated with the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica as a cultural ambassador hoping to encourage broader participation and broker a deal with the government of Ecuador. See Cabañas, *El ocaso de la política artística*, 41. Cuevas and Tamayo criticized Guayasamín for accepting this prize saying he had compromised his political integrity, see Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 194.

44. *III Bienal Hispanoamericana de Arte. Catálogo oficial* (Barcelona, 1955), 77.

45. *El arte moderno en los Estados Unidos. Pintura, escultura, grabado, arquitectura. Selección de las colecciones del MoMA de Nueva York* (Barcelona: Palacio de la Virreina, 1955), 9.

46. CENIDIAP, FNAP, Guillermina Guadarrama Archive, “Carta al director del diario *Novedades*,” 24 October 1955. This letter was in response to Tamayo's open letter “Carta abierta a los pintores demagogos de México” where he accused them for participating in the Biennial.

47. “la Bienal Hispanoamericana representa una acción política de la dictadura fascista de Francisco Franco, repudiada por todos los pueblos del mundo y particularmente desconocida

This press release/manifesto closed with an impassioned plea for international solidarity:

The Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas denounces this Francoist Biennial as a swindle against the good faith of American artists, and makes an urgent and energetic/vigorous call to the artists of Mexico and the Americas as well as all intellectuals, whatever their area of specialty, to join this protest and to declare publicly their intention not to participate in this political maneuver. This is required by the human dignity of men and women who by their art serve with honesty and loyalty the democratic cause of the people, and fight against the Spanish dictator who has betrayed Spain and has been decisively judged by all honorable people of the world.<sup>48</sup>

It was now Mexico's turn to show its revolutionary credentials and use the Biennial format to challenge and resist the corrosive financial and economic influence of its northern neighbor.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Mexican Interamerican Biennials*

On June 6, 1958 the Primera Bienal de Pintura y Grabado opened with an inaugural speech by Miguel Álvarez Acosta, director of the National Institute of

---

por el régimen de la revolución mexicana y por todas las fuerzas progresistas de nuestro país," in CENIDIAP, FNAP, Guillermina Guadarrama Archive, "Sr. Director del Diario Novedades".

48. "El Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas denuncia esta Bienal Franquista como una estafa a la buena fé de los artistas americanos y hace un llamado urgente y enérgico a todos los artistas plásticos de México y de América, así como a todos los intelectuales, cualquiera que sea su especialidad, para que se sumen a esta protesta y declaren públicamente su propósito de no participar en esta maniobra política. Así lo exige la dignidad humana de los hombres que con su arte sirven con honestidad y lealtad a la causa democrática de los pueblos, y combaten al dictador que ha traicionado a España y ha sido enjuiciado definitivamente por todos los seres honrados del mundo," in CENIDIAP, FNAP, Guillermina Guadarrama Archive, "Boletín de Prensa" Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Comité Directivo.

49. For a historiographical study of Biennials see Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, *Biennials, Triennials, and documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2016). For a more specific analysis of what has become a growing academic field see Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, "Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global," *Third Text* 27, no. 4 (2013): 442-455.

Fine Arts (INBA). Government officials and diplomatic dignitaries were invited to the ceremony which took place in the foyer of the Palacio de Bellas Artes. This iconic building housed the most important works of the Mexican muralists, and extensive reforms were made to the Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas to accommodate the 625 paintings and 350 prints sent by the 22 participating countries in this Biennial.<sup>50</sup> The exhibition was convened through diplomatic channels. Each country was invited to select 20 painters and 20 engravers, and was responsible for selecting a committee to oversee its representation. The costs of shipping and insurance, however, were covered by the Mexican government making this an extremely costly enterprise. Both of these decisions were strongly criticized in the press by artists and critics who believed that the money would be better spent on art education.<sup>51</sup> Some critics also argued that giving governments the responsibility over the selection process would result in a mediocre exhibition of officially sanctioned art.<sup>52</sup> The reviews of the exhibition varied, with most of the criticism coming from artists and art critics associated with the *Ruptura*.<sup>53</sup> In their view, this Biennial was clear evidence of the nepotistic policies of INBA, and lack of opportunities for artists working outside the precepts of the Mexican School. Many also complained about the xenophobic undertones of the Biennial, which excluded work from foreign artists resident in Mexico.<sup>54</sup> There were also important absences of avant-garde artists

50. For detailed information about the organization of this Biennial see *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. Memorias de labores 1954-1958* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1958), A-9 to A-87.

51. See Raquel Tibol, "Primeros truenos en la tormenta de la bienal," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 21 May 1958 (reprinted in Tibol, *Documentación sobre el arte Mexicano*, 91-95); and Carrillo Gil, "Nuestra pueril, onerosa bienal de artes plásticas," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 18 May 1958.

52. See Elena Poniatowska, "La juventud rebelde se erige en juez y entierra a sus muertos," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 22 June 1958; Rosa Castro, "Juicios sobre la Bienal," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 29 June 1958; and Carrillo Gil, "Nuestra pueril, onerosa bienal".

53. See José Luis Cuevas, "Desde Caracas: J.L. Cuevas satiriza la Bienal y traza con ácido corrosivo la caricatura de Siqueiros," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 6 July, 1958; Rufino Tamayo, "Tamayo: No puedo luchar contra el grupo que se ha impuesto en la bienal..." *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 8 June 1958; and Elena Poniatowska, "La juventud rebelde."

54. See Cardoza y Aragón, "Un eminente crítico de arte habla de la Bienal y de sus premios," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 29 June 1958; Elena Poniatowska, "La juventud rebelde"; and Rosa Castro, "Juicios sobre la Bienal."

in the Americas, who were either not selected by their government's officially appointed committees or declined invitations to take part. All of this resulted in a fairly average collection of works, which failed to meet the standards of influential critics like Alvar Carrillo Gil,<sup>55</sup> Cardoza y Aragón,<sup>56</sup> Margarita Nelken,<sup>57</sup> and Dore Ashton.<sup>58</sup> Even the Mexican section was not very favorably reviewed, either because many artists were excluded<sup>59</sup> or due to the perceived mediocrity of the works on display.<sup>60</sup>

Like the Sao Paolo Biennials and the Bienales hispanoamericanas, the Mexican exhibition had to navigate a complex artworld divided by the Iron Curtain, and an incredibly fractious artistic scene in Mexico. To try and solve this, a series of parallel exhibitions were organized in private galleries and government spaces showcasing the work of artists not included in the Biennial.<sup>61</sup> This provided a more comprehensive panorama of artistic production in Mexico making visible the contrast between the socially committed work of the Mexican School, with artists from the *Ruptura*, or abstractionists like Mathias Goeritz and Carlos Mérida.<sup>62</sup> Despite these efforts, a nationalist aesthetic that celebrated the *mestizaje* and *indigenista* narratives of the Revolution prevailed. This was evident in the Mexican section of the Biennial and reinforced through the "Exposición paralela oficial de pintores mexicanos" which became the Primer

55. Carrillo Gil, "Nuestra pueril, onerosa bienal".

56. Cardoza y Aragón, "Un eminente crítico".

57. Margarita Nelken, "La Bienal," *Excélsior*, 22 May 1958; "La Bienal," *Excélsior*, 20 June 1958.

58. Dore Ashton, "All American Biennial," *The New York Times*, 27 July 1958.

59. These exclusions led artists to organize "anti-biennials" in private galleries. See "La Bienal Bis se abre el lunes: sigue el juicio contra Rayón y Flores," *Últimas noticias de Excélsior*, 4 June 1958; and Salmón Agustín, "Solamente extranjeros en la Bienal Bis: Bellas Artes habla sobre la bienal de los descontentitos," *Últimas noticias de Excélsior*, 5 June 1958.

60. See Carrillo Gil, "El director del INBA falta a la verdad dice Carrillo Gil," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 8 June 1958; Rosa Castro, "Juicios sobre la Bienal"; and Socorro García, "Los pintores realistas deben buscar otras formas de expresión aunque se expongan a ser llamados 'traidores a la patria,'" *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 13 July 1958.

61. See *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes*, A-21 to A-22; and Justino Fernández, "Catálogo de las exposiciones de arte en 1958," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas VII*, no. 28 (1959): 24-38

62. The Galería Proteo, for example, organized an exhibition of works by Bartoli, Leonora Carrington, Goeritz, Remedios Varo, Germán Cueto, Cordelia Urieta, Tamayo and Vlady. See "La Bienal Bis".

Salon Anual de Pintura y Grabado.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the unquestionable symbiosis between revolutionary nationalism, and the aesthetics of social realism was promoted as the only way to resist us imperialism and capitalist exploitation. For this purpose, the organizers designed Salas de Honor for Orozco, Siqueiros, Rivera, and Candido Portinari—a Brazilian artist whose work presented a challenge to the abstractionist trends promoted by the Sao Paulo Biennial. Also important to the aesthetic and political agendas of this Biennial, was to highlight the key role that the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP) played in promoting the social reforms of the Revolution. By concentrating on painting and printmaking the organizers brought to the fore the connection between the socially committed work produced by the TGP and the Mexican School.<sup>64</sup>

It should be noted that the First Interamerican Biennial coincided with the Mexican Pavilions at the Venice Biennial, and at the Brussels International Exhibition. In Venice the Pavilion was curated by Miguel Salas Anzures, then Head of Visual Arts in INBA, and also the chief curator of the Mexican Biennial. In line with official cultural policies, “Salas Anzures presented a collective exhibition with 18 paintings by artists described as ‘social realists’; disciples of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros; and heirs of Mexican muralism”.<sup>65</sup> Fernando Gamboa was in charge of the Mexican Pavilion in Brussels where he presented an overview of Mexican art and culture from precolonial to modern times. The art section was dedicated to the work of Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros and Tamayo.<sup>66</sup> Together, these events underscored the complicity between INBA, the Mexican School, and the political ambitions of a government which needed the cultural capital of the Revolution to legitimize its long-lasting rule. This peaceful coexistence, however, was beginning to crack due to the ongoing militancy of artists like Siqueiros who was excluded from the exhibition “Fifty Years of Modern Art”. This retrospective show was put together by a

63. For this exhibition a jury was also formed and prizes awarded. See *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes*, A-22 to A-24.

64. See Humberto Musacchio, *El Taller de Gráfica Popular* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007); and Helga Prignitz, *El Taller de Gráfica Popular en México 1937-1977* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1992).

65. Carolina Nieto Ruiz, “Retelling the History of the Mexico Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia,” *Storie dell’arte contemporanea*, no. 4 (2019): 385.

66. See Diana Briuolo Destéfano, “Guerra Fría en Bruselas: México en la Exposición Universal de 1958,” *Agora*, no. 13 (July-December, 2009), <http://discursovisual.net/dvweb13/agora/agodiana.htm>

group of international art critics who were asked to select artworks from the pavilions in Brussels. They chose three works from the Mexican section: one by Rivera, Orozco, and Tamayo —leaving Siqueiros out. To add salt to the wound, they placed the paintings of Rivera and Orozco in the section dedicated to socialist realism.<sup>67</sup>

“Fifty Years of Modern Art” clearly exemplifies the formalist apologies of post-war aesthetes intent on vilifying Mexican realism *vis-à-vis* Euro-American abstraction. This push to marginalize their work was certainly one of the main objectives driving the curatorial projects of José Gómez Sicre. Concerns that his political and aesthetic bias could interfere in the organization of the First Interamerican Biennial were clearly voiced by FNAP. In a letter sent to Álvarez Acosta (March 4 1958), the National Committee requested that representatives of FNAP and the TGP be included in the Advisory Committee of the Biennial. This was in order to ensure that the exhibition would be impartial and act as the “tribune of Mexican Revolutionary painting,”<sup>68</sup> adding that it was the government’s responsibility to promote a national and revolutionary art led by the Mexican School.<sup>69</sup> They justified this request by voicing their suspicion that INBA was collaborating with Gómez Sicre, a suspicion that was not unfounded. In a letter to the Cuban critic (August 20, 1957) Salas Anzures requested information regarding artists, art schools and organizations in the continent.<sup>70</sup> In response to Gómez Sicre’s advice, Salas Anzures explained that it was not possible to send individual invitations (as was the case in Sao Paolo and Venice). Most importantly, however, this second letter (October 25, 1957) reiterated Salas Anzures’ hope that the Visual Arts Section of the PAU would collaborate in this endeavor.<sup>71</sup> Yet FNAP’s efforts paid off. Representatives of this organization, along with the TGP, would come to play a very important role

67. See Luis Suárez, “Cincuenta años de arte moderno,” *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 17 August 1958. Carrillo Gil also lamented the exclusion of Siqueiros stating this was due to “intolerancias políticas del jurado de admisión”. See “Carrillo depone su actitud bélica y elogia sin reservas el expresionismo abstracto de los Estados Unidos,” *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 6 July 1958.

68. “la Bienal debe ser la tribuna de la pintura de la Revolución,” en CENIDIAP, FNAP, Guillermina Guadarrama Archive, “Sr. Lic. Miguel Álvarez Acosta,” 4 March, 1958.

69. CENIDIAP, FNAP, Guillermina Guadarrama Archive, “Sr. Lic. Miguel Álvarez Acosta,” 4 March 1958. He modificado esta cita.

70. José Gómez Sicre archives in the Art Museum of the Americas (hereafter cited as AMA) in Washington D.C.

71. José Gómez Sicre archives, AMA.

in the selection of Mexican artworks included in the Biennial, and the international jury who would adjudicate on the coveted prizes. The precise nature of their involvement was clearly outlined in the "Report presented to the public by the FNAP regarding its participation in efforts corresponding to the first Biennial Inter-American exposition of Painting and Engraving."<sup>72</sup> This 8 page document leaves no doubt as to their concerns regarding Gómez Sicre's and the OAS' pernicious influence in Latin America, making explicit the Biennial's role in the political and cultural battles of the Cold War. They also denounced the discrimination that figurative artists experienced (giving as examples the Sao Paulo and Venice Biennials), and lamented the absence of Antonio Berni in Mexico, who was not included by Romero Brest, a "prejudiced anti-realist and pro-abstract organizer".<sup>73</sup>

In a letter published from Cuba, in July 1958, Gómez Sicre responded to the accusations of interference:

Apparently, the absence of the most important artists of America in this Biennial has motivated the Mexican Communist Party, through its spokesman David Alfaro Siqueiros, and the aforementioned front [FNAP], to hold me responsible as due to this section. At no time have they thought that in all probability the non-participation of the good artists of international prestige can be attributed to the attitude of orthodox intolerance that the communist artists maintain when faced with any expression not adjusted to realism of social content, which is the only form of expression recognized by them.<sup>74</sup>

72. CENIDIAP, FNAP, Guillermina Guadarrama Archive, "Informe público que presenta el FNAP acerca de su participación en los trabajos correspondientes a la primera exposición Binal Interamericana de Pintura y Grabado." Since FNAP also received a lot of strong criticism for their involvement, this lengthy document presented an apology justifying their decisions. See also Armando Arévalo Macías, "Debe aplazarse la Binal de Pintura," *Novedades*, 14 March, 1958.

73. "organizador prejuiciado antirrealista y pro abstracto," in "Informe público que presenta el FNAP," 7.

74. "Al parecer, las ausencias de los más importantes artistas de América de esta Binal ha motivado que el Partido Comunista mexicano, por medio de su vocero David Alfaro Siqueiros, y del Frente mencionado me las achaque como obra de esta Sección. En ningún momento han pensado que probablemente la no concurrencia de los buenos artistas de prestigio internacional pueda deberse a la actitud de intolerancia ortodoxa que los artistas comunistas mantienen frente a toda expresión que no se ajusta al realismo de contenido social, que es la forma de expresión única de ellos," in "El jefe de la sección de artes visuales de la Unión Panamericana,

This is the context that prompted Cuevas to write an open letter known as “La Cortina del nopal” (The Cactus Curtain), published by the newspaper *Novedades* on April 6, 1958 —just two months before the inauguration of the First Biennial.<sup>75</sup> It is important to remember that Cuevas rose to prominence during this time thanks to the support of Gómez Sicre, and that this letter may have been co-authored, as Clair Fox believes.<sup>76</sup> Cuevas was invited to take part in one of the parallel exhibitions, but he refused. In an open letter, written from Caracas, he equated nationalism with totalitarian regimes, and accused the FNAP and Siqueiros of controlling the biennial, turning it into a nepotistic event devoid of artistic value.<sup>77</sup>

There were many other important absences of Mexican and international artists —including Wifredo Lam and Rufino Tamayo, both of whom had been officially invited, Lam as jury member and special guest, and Tamayo as honorary artist with his own solo exhibition. Tamayo refused the invitation for similar reasons to Cuevas, accusing Salas Anzures of representing the interests of Siqueiros and FNAP.<sup>78</sup>

The predominance of figurative art and social realism in this Biennial was reinforced by the special exhibitions, as well as the prizes given by the Jury.<sup>79</sup> The most prestigious prize went to Francisco Goitia for his painting *Tata Jesucristo* (1926), once again reinforcing the allegiance between the Mexican School and FNAP —Goitia was a founding member and first president of this organization. But two of the most important prizes went to artists working in the United States —Jack Levine for painting and Mauricio Lasansky for print making— received prestigious awards by the National Institute of Fine Arts. Both of them attended the closing ceremony as special guests. These artists

---

Gómez Sicre, expone su posición ante la “Primera Bienal de México,” *El Avance Criollo* (La Habana), 21 July, 1958. Clipping found in the archive of José Gómez Sicre, AMA, folder Mexico.

75. Dated New York, 20 March 1958.

76. See Fox, *Making Art Panamerican*, 152.

77. Cuevas, “Desde Caracas.”

78. Tamayo, “Tamayo: No puedo luchar.”

79. There were many complaints in the press regarding the jury and its perceived lack of objectivity. See for example Raquel Tibol, “Primeros truenos en la tormenta”; Rosa Castro, “Juicios sobre la Bienal”; “Habla el jurado: Siqueiros”; Cardoza y Aragón, “Un eminente crítico”; O’Gorman, “Sólo molestias me ha causado: Juan O’Gorman,” *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 8 June 1958; “¡Que hable el diablo!”; and “Antonio Rodríguez Luna: como jurado y como pintor no podía estar con su arte deshumanizado y servil,” *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 6 July 1958.

were suggested by Siqueiros, who was one of the jury members, together with Salas Anzures, and Leopoldo Méndez (one of the leading artists of the TGP). The international jury included Amalia Peláez from Cuba, Cardoza y Aragón from Guatemala, and Helmut Hungerland from the United States.<sup>80</sup> Hungerland, who was Professor of Philosophy and Aesthetics at California College of Arts,<sup>81</sup> voted for Mark Tobey, indicating his preferences for non-political art. Hungerland's choice was more concordant with the majority of works on display in the US section of the Biennial, where some of the most important members of the New York School were represented.<sup>82</sup>

Levine's paintings presented a challenge to abstractionists trends, indicating that social realism was still being produced in the US, in spite of what the government promoted through MoMA. It is noteworthy that Levine's *Welcome Home* (fig. 1), one of the paintings shown in Mexico, was also sent to Moscow for the US art show in 1959.<sup>83</sup> Painted in 1946, this was one of Levine's most controversial works. With crude irony the artist depicts a returning US army general with an arrogant face and a trophy wife sitting next to him — a well fed and self-satisfied man whose medals betray the sacrifice of thousands of men who died in the war.<sup>84</sup> The swift shorthand of Levine's realism is reminiscent of Orozco's works, their visual parody blurring the boundaries between political cartoons and social realism — in the vein of Honoré Daumier.

Levine's other painting was *The Turnkey* (or jailer, translated as "El Carcelero") from 1956 (fig. 2). This work depicts Francisco Franco, sitting alone and confidently staring into the distance, also overfed and clad with medals; it is unclear whether this room is his cell or fortress. Mauricio Lasansky, who had been awarded the "Guadalupe Posada" prize for printing, showed a related

80. See *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes* for information about prizes, members of the jury, and competition guidelines.

81. Originally from Germany, Hungerland emigrated to the US in 1938. He was Associate Editor of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* where he published some of his essays. For a short biography see Peter Falk and Audrey Lewis, *Who was Who in American Art 1564 – 1975* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1999), vol. 1.

82. According to Carrillo Gil the exhibition was organized by Mr. Gordon from the Brooklyn Museum. See "Carrillo depone su actitud bélica".

83. *The New York Times* published a short article about this, titled "Russians Flock to Painting Disliked by Eisenhower," 14 August 1959.

84. It is important to remember that Jack Levine served in the army between 1942 and 1945, and that this experience informed this painting and his dislike of military elites.



1. Jack Levine, *Welcome Home*, 1946, oil on canvas, 101.4 x 152.2 cm. Brooklyn Museum, New York, John B. Woodward Memorial Fund, 46.124. D.R.© Jack Levine/VAGA/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP/MÉXICO/2021.

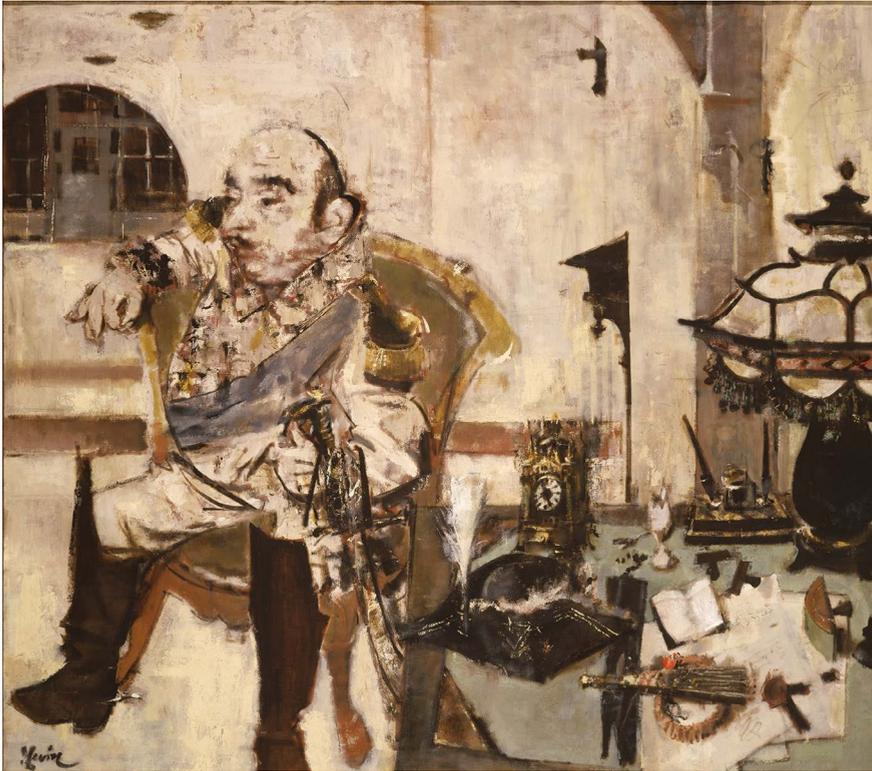
work, entitled *España*, also from 1956 (fig. 3).<sup>85</sup> This engraving conveys the miserable living conditions endured by many in Francoist Spain. Both works confront the US government, which in its bid to fight communism had turned a blind eye to Franco's despotic regime.<sup>86</sup>

Lasansky was born in Argentina in 1914, where he began his studies in art and printmaking. In 1943 he received a Guggenheim grant to study in New York and remained in the US for the rest of his life —attaining citizenship in 1952.<sup>87</sup> In 1953 Lasansky received another Guggenheim grant, this time to study

85. These were not the only works denouncing Franco's regime. Visitors to the Galería Tusó (a collective parallel exhibition), would had been able to see Bartoli's *La familia del dictador hispanoamericano*. See "Exhibición colectiva simultánea a la Bienal," *Excelsior*, 17 June 1958.

86. Eisenhower visited Madrid in 1959. Other US artists were also openly critical of Franco's regime, most notably Robert Motherwell with his series *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* and *At Five in the Afternoon*.

87. Lasansky's arrival in the city coincided with a gathering of very important European artists and intellectuals escaping the horrors of WWII. Jacques Lipchitz, the Cubist sculptor,



2. Jack Levine, *The Turnkey*, 1956, oil on canvas, 137.2 x 152.6 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D. C. Gift of the H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966. Photo: Lee Stalsworth. D.R. © Jack Levine/vaga/Artists Rights Society (ars), New York/somaap/méxico/2021.

for one year in Spain and France. As a result of that trip the artist was able to experience life in the country under Franco, and deepen his study of Spanish art. In a biographical essay, the critic Carl Zigrosser wrote that Lasansky:

---

become a life-long friend, and introduced him to non-Western Art. Lasansky was given a position to teach printmaking at the State University of Iowa in 1945, where he taught for the rest of his life. Biographical information used in this essay comes from Rory Lasansky and documents found at the Archives of American Art (hereafter cited as AAA). See American Federation of Arts records, 1895-1993, bulk 1909-1969, box 41, folder "Mauricio Lasansky".

Was profoundly moved by the tragic plight of that country, for which he felt an attachment through his early cultural ties and in spite of his hatred for Franco. He was so wrought up about it that he could not sleep. Eventually he found a certain catharsis for his obsessive preoccupation in such plates as *Vision* and *España*, the latter to my mind being one of his most moving compositions.<sup>88</sup>

This catharsis can be gleaned in his print *España* through the stark contrasts of light and shades, and the ghost-like figure which rises from a horse that seems too small to support his weight. Similarly to most of Picasso's political works, narrative is here replaced by visual clues that evoke rather than explicitly convey its political intent.

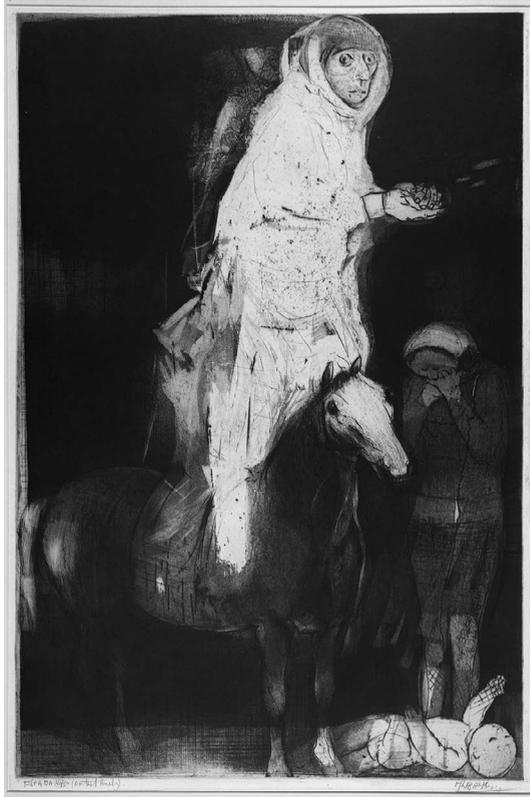
Born in a poor neighborhood in Boston, in 1915, Jack Levine first rose to prominence while working for the Works Progress Administration under the New Deal in the 1930s. At the age of 22 he achieved national recognition when MoMA acquired his painting *The Feast of Pure Reason* (1937). This notorious work makes evident the connection between power and corruption by showing a businessman, a policeman and a politician making a deal. His critical and political commentary continued until his death, making him an exception in mid-Twentieth-Century American Art.<sup>89</sup> Levine's and Lasansky's figurative art was for many a breath of fresh air in an art world dominated by abstraction—a style which came to represent the debased values of US capitalism. This position was certainly welcomed in Mexico, where both artists were invited as special guests and given solo exhibitions (*salas de honor*) in the second and last Interamerican Biennial.

While also organized under the auspices of INBA, and the leadership of Salas Anzures, the Second Biennial presents some interesting and marked differences to the first. These have to do with domestic and international events linked to the Cold War. While the First Biennial coincided with a period of rapprochement between the US and the USSR, Eisenhower's and Khrushchev's diplomatic efforts came to an end after the U-2 incident that led to the failed

88. Document found in the AAA. Carl Zigrosser wrote this text for a catalogue of Lasansky's work to accompany a traveling retrospective exhibition organized by the American Federation of Arts (hereafter cited as AFA) between 1960 and 1961. See the AFA records, 1895-1993, bulk 1909-1969, box 41, folder "Mauricio Lasansky".

89. For a study of Levine's art and politics see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

3. Mauricio Lasansky (American, born Argentina, 1914-2012). España, 1956. Intaglio (mixed technique) on heavy wove paper, plate: 32 x 23 3/4 in. (81.3 x 60.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 59.12. © Lasansky Corporation (2021)



Four Powers Paris Summit in May 1960. Tensions between the superpowers also began to brew as a result of the Cuban Revolution that would lead to the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, and the Cuban missile crises in 1962. In Mexico the government of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) pretended to be populist but was in fact extremely repressive. Railroad strikes in February 1959 were violently repressed, and leaders of the Mexican Communist Party and other left-wing organizations arrested. According to Renata Keller's *Mexico's Cold War* this was the point at which Mexico entered the Global Cold War. In her study Keller argues that while there were important labor and social movements in the 1950s that disrupted the government's neoliberal ambitions, it was the Railroad Movement,<sup>90</sup> and the Cuban Revolution, that "marked the beginning of

90. The movement was led by the Union leaders Demetrio Vallejo and Valentín Campa,

the transition to a heightened Cold War atmosphere, in which Mexico's leaders began to fear that foreign influences were subverting the national order".<sup>91</sup> As a result, Mexico came to play a more significant role in the Hemispheric struggle for cultural hegemony directed from Washington and Moscow.

The Second Biennial coincided with the 50th anniversary of the start of the Mexican Revolution, putting to test the revolutionary credentials of the government. Only Lázaro Cárdenas, however, through his enduring commitment to socialist principles, and influence in Mexican politics, kept alive the hope of revolutionary ideals.<sup>92</sup> The victory of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, added to a growing disenchantment with the PRI, making more apparent the failings of its revolutionary project: democracy, agrarian reform, and worker's rights.<sup>93</sup> Mexico's non-interventionist stance, and its "friendly" relations with the US's political enemies, however, preoccupied the government in Washington, which complained about the lenient attitude of the government, and worried about the scale of Soviet operations taking place in its embassy.<sup>94</sup>

This was evident in the First Biennial when the Mexican School was presented as the cultural arm of the Revolution, and FNAP, under the auspices of INBA, directed its attack against abstraction. But, like the PRI, throughout the 1950s the Mexican School and FNAP faced charges of institutional decadence and opportunism. Accused of its inability to defend realism and becoming corrupted by foreign influences, FNAP underwent a thorough reorganization in the summer of 1959. Aurora Reyes blamed them for not allowing women to receive commissions for public murals, and accused them "of a conspiracy against the Mexican school of painting directed from abroad, but enjoying the complicity of Mexican painters and galleries with alien tastes and inclinations".<sup>95</sup> They were also slated for not defending Siqueiros when his mural at

---

and gathered the support of many other important labor movements in the country, including the petroleum, telegraph, and electrical Unions. Keller, *Mexico's Cold War* stresses the importance of the Railroad Movement as one of the most serious challenges to the government since the Mexican Revolution.

91. Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*, 49.

92. See Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*; and Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom*.

93. As Keller points out, this started in the 1940s when influential writers and intellectuals began to publish scathing criticisms of the government claiming that the Revolution was dead. Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*, 28.

94. Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*, 38-39.

95. "una conspiración contra la escuela pictórica Mexicana, dirigida desde el exterior, pero contando con la complicidad de pintores mexicanos y de las galerías extranjerizantes de

the Asociación Nacional de Actores (ANDA) was censored by the government.<sup>96</sup> While Gómez Sicre was one of the agents behind this campaign of discredit, he was not the only one. Other influential art critics like Clement Greenberg, Leonello Venturi, and Herbert Read were promoting a Modernist canon that had no room for political or social content. Read's aesthetic bias had in fact led him to exclude the work of the Mexican muralists from his *A Concise History of Modern Art*, published in 1959.<sup>97</sup> Read justified this decision in the introduction, stating: "Like some of their Russian contemporaries, they have adopted a propagandist program for their art which seems to me to place it outside the stylistic revolution which is my exclusive concern."<sup>98</sup>

As the geopolitics and artistic landscape of the early Cold War changed, it was no longer possible to follow the one-path directive of Siqueiros, and the Second Biennial welcomed many artists who had been excluded from the first. This time a Consejo Consultivo was formed with representatives from many organizations covering a wide gamut of ideological and aesthetic positions.<sup>99</sup> But in spite of its greater inclusiveness, the Biennial was ridden with criticisms and internal conflicts that threatened its inauguration. This was partly due to the fact that in August 1960, just one month before the Biennial was due to open its doors, Siqueiros was detained and sentenced to eight years in prison.<sup>100</sup> His arrest was justified under article 145, which defined the crime of social dissolution as: "spreading ideas, programs, or forms of action of any foreign

---

nuestra ciudad," in Lautaro González Porcel, "Reorganización total en el Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas," *Últimas Noticias*, 8 June 1959. CENIDIAP, Biblioteca de las Artes, Archivo Vertical, FNAP.

96. González Porcel, "Reorganización total en el Frente."

97. Interestingly, Read was also a member of the Committee who selected the works for the exhibition *Fifty Years of Modern Art*. See Briuolo Destéfano, "Guerra Fría en Bruselas."

98. Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), 8.

99. See *Segunda Bienal Interamericana de México*, José Gómez Sicre archive, AAA. This small publication lists all the people involved in the Biennial; it also states that it will become permanent and expanded to include architecture, photography, theater and cinema. See also "Segunda Bienal Mexicana. Comisión consultiva del departamento de artes plásticas del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes," CENIDIAP, FNAP, Guillermina Guadarrama Archive. This document also states that for this Biennial all the works were selected by the Head of the Visual Arts Department of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.

100. For a study of Siqueiros' ties with the Mexican Communist Party and his arrest see Olivier Debrouse, ed. *Otras rutas hacia Siqueiros* (Mexico City: CURARE, 1996).

government which disturb the public order or affect the sovereignty of the Mexican State".<sup>101</sup> Siqueiros' arrest was a clear warning from the government that communist activities would not be tolerated, leading to fractures inside FNAP and the TGP, where some members campaigned to boycott the Biennial.<sup>102</sup>

The telegram that FNAP sent to the president clearly exposed the hypocrisy of a government sustained by a rhetorical demagoguery empty of revolutionary intent:

The Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas protests against the detention of the great painter David Alfaro Siqueiros: an extraordinary act in view of the impending Second Interamerican Biennial and the anniversary of Mexico's Independence and Revolution. We respectfully demand his liberty and the withdrawal of authorization from this McCarthyist campaign against men of advanced democratic thinking.<sup>103</sup>

After many heated discussions some artists withdrew their works in protest, but many others took part, and the exhibition opened with an inaugural speech from president López Mateos on September 5, 1960. The location was the same as the previous one, though this time the organizers included sculpture. There were a total of 465 paintings, 225 prints, and 65 sculptures sent by the 19 countries who participated on this occasion.<sup>104</sup>

Reviews of the exhibition indicate that abstract art dominated the Biennial, but that many of its most important representatives in the Americas were absent. In her article "La bienal de los ausentes," Rodríguez Prampolini also noted that the US sent mediocre works by representatives of the New York

101. In Keller, *Mexico's Cold War*, 23.

102. Prignitz, *El Taller de Gráfica Popular*, 176-178.

103. "FRENTE NACIONAL DE ARTES PLASTICAS protesta detención gran pintor David Alfaro Siqueiros, inconcebible ante Segunda Bienal Interamericana y aniversarios Independencia y Revolución. Respetuosamente demandamos su libertad y desautorización campaña macarthista contra hombres pensamiento (*sic*) democrático avanzado," in CENIDIAP, FNAP, Guillermina Guadarrama Archive. "Sr. Lic. Adolfo López Mateos," dated 12 August 1960. This archive also contains a letter that FNAP sent to Celestino Gorostiza urging the release of Siqueiros, dated 13 August 1960.

104. Rafael Anzures, "Segunda Bienal Interamericana de México," *Artes de México*, no. 34 (1961): 2. To my knowledge there was no official catalogue. This publication is very important as it includes detailed information about the jury, prizes, invited artists, list of participating works, plus some black and white illustrations.

School, and complained that Mexico was not taken seriously enough to merit good quality works in its exhibitions.<sup>105</sup> In the Mexican section, critics lamented the absence of Siqueiros, but praised the inclusion of young artists working with abstraction and non-narrative figuration. In a lengthy review, the critic Rafael Anzures noted that works from artists of the *Ruptura* were of great value, and regretted their exclusion from the First Biennial.<sup>106</sup> This time the international jury was more diverse, with only one Mexican, Justino Fernández, taking part. The other members were: Quirino Campofiorito (Brazil), D.W. Buchanan (Canada), Bernard S. Myers (us), and Juan Manuel Ugarte Eléspuro (Peru). The artists chosen as honorary guests with special exhibitions were either figurative or abstract-figurative. These were Rufino Tamayo (Premio Internacional de Pintura), Leopoldo Méndez (Premio José Guadalupe Posada), Raul Soldi, Marina Núñez del Prado (Premio Internacional de Escultura), Emiliano di Cavalcanti, Oswaldo Goeldi (Premio Internacional de Grabado), Oswaldo Guayasamín (Premio México para un Pintor Extranjero), Levine and Lasansky.<sup>107</sup>

That the most prestigious prize in painting this time went to Tamayo left no doubt as to the different political and aesthetic agendas of this Biennial, indicating important changes in official patronage.<sup>108</sup> The centrepiece of his solo exhibition *Homenaje a la raza india*, is a portable mural that Tamayo made for an exhibition of Mexican art in Paris in 1952. This large work presents a very different celebration of *indigenismo* from that of the Mexican School. Here, in a pastoral scene, an Indian woman is depicted with baskets full of vivid red fruits or flowers and stylized white birds flying around her. Her monumental body, a synecdoche for the Indian race, stands for the ethos of the mestizo nation. The figure stands alone against a hazy atmosphere created by the beauty of Tamayo's colors, as if suspended in time and space, or the ethnographic present that the primitive inhabits in the modernist imagination. As in most of his works, Tamayo here fused international modernism with Mexican referents to transform the local into a universal aestheticism that suited the agendas of post-revolutionary elites. Critics applauded Tamayo's prize seeing it as a long awaited victory over the Mexican muralists, and as a symbol of freedom

105. Rodríguez Prampolini, "La bienal de los ausentes," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 2 October 1960.

106. Anzures, "Segunda Bienal Interamericana de México," 5-7.

107. Anzures, "Segunda Bienal Interamericana de México," 14.

108. See Torres, "Políticas culturales en tiempos de desplazamientos estéticos."

and democracy in the country.<sup>109</sup> An anonymous editorial published by *Excelsior*, and its response by members of the Mexican School, provide a very clear picture of the conjunctural terrain that gave art such poignancy during the Cold War:

Yesterday the Republic experienced two moments of high culture. One was the inauguration of the General Conference of Universities; the other, that of the *universal* jubilation unleashed by the triumph of Rufino Tamayo over the clique of the so-called “revolutionary painters” and the supposed “left intellectuals”, who for several years have formed not only a vulgar and hence execrable “mafia”, but also a society of mutual eulogy. The triumph of Tamayo, together with that of Marina Núñez del Prado and Osvaldo Goeldi, (...) [represent] a high and valuable stimulus to the liberties that in art, literature and thought, have made the golden ages of all peoples; because nothing else but *the esteeming and guaranteeing of individual freedom...* [my emphasis].<sup>110</sup>

The signatories of a letter sent to *Excelsior* in response to this editorial, shrewdly noted the fallaciousness of this claim, stating that Siqueiros’ arrest, and the censorship of his mural in ANDA, was clear proof of the lack of civil liberties and freedom of expression in the country. They attributed Tamayo’s prize to the pernicious influence of foreign trends, and closed by avowing to continue the fight for the liberation of Mexican art.<sup>111</sup>

109. See Bernardo Ponce, “Perspectiva,” 2 September 1960; Margarita Nelken, “Premios de la Bienal,” *Excelsior*, 7 September, 1960; and Anónimo, “Rufino Tamayo ganador del primer premio de pintura,” *Novedades*, 6 September, 1960. All these were found in the Centro de Documentación-Hemerografía, Museo Rufino Tamayo (henceforth MRT).

110. “Dos momentos de alta cultura vivió ayer la República. Uno fue la inauguración de la Conferencia General de Universidades; otro, el del júbilo de Rufino Tamayo sobre la camarilla de los llamados ‘pintores revolucionarios’ y de los supuestos ‘intelectuales de izquierda’, que constituyen desde hace varios años no solamente una ‘mafia’ vulgar y por lo mismo execrable, sino también una sociedad de elogios mutuos. El triunfo de Tamayo, junto con el de Marina Núñez del Prado y de Osvaldo Goeldi (...) representa, por otra parte, un alto y valioso estímulo a las libertades que en el arte, las letras y el pensamiento, han hecho las edades de oro de todos los pueblos; porque no otra cosa, *sino el realce y garantía de la libertad individual...*” in MRT, Anonymous, “Triunfo de Rufino Tamayo,” *Excelsior*, 7 September 1960.

111. MRT, “La pintura de Rufino Tamayo,” *Excelsior*, 17 November 1960. The signatories of this letter were: Salvador Rodríguez, Rosendo Méndez Rodríguez, Manuel Salinas, Adolfo

Oswaldo Goeldi's and Leopoldo Méndez's prizes in the section of print-making, however, seem to indicate that this medium was judged differently, vindicating its agency as a tool for social critique. Another important prize was given to Oswaldo Guayasamín—who, it will be recalled, received an important award in the third Bienal Hispanoamericana. As Carrillo Gil noted in his review, Tamayo's and Guayasamín's prizes reflected the government's attempts to reconcile figuration and abstraction by choosing a middle road between the two.<sup>112</sup>

Jack Levine's work, however, stood firmly on the side of social realism. In response to the request of Salas Anzures, the American Federation of Artists (henceforth AFA) was given the task of organizing his solo exhibition.<sup>113</sup> It is likely that Salas Anzures approached this organization knowing the difficulties that this would present if it went through government channels or MoMA. Levine's defense of social realism in the midst of Abstract Expressionism made his work marginal and an unlikely candidate for government support. AFA, however, had released a Statement of Artistic Freedom in 1954 which stated that an artist's work should be valued irrespective of his "political or social opinions, affiliations or activities". In spite of this AFA faced some problems gathering works for the exhibition. Four of the paintings requested in the list sent by Salas Anzures were at MoMA, but only one was approved for loan: *The Passing Scene* (1941). On this list was also *The Feast of Pure Reason*, for which the museum gave no strong reasons for rejecting the request,<sup>114</sup> and *Election Night* (1954), another controversial painting which mocked the political elites and their decadent lifestyles.<sup>115</sup> That this decision was based on ideological grounds is confirmed by Levine who, in an interview during the Second Biennial, complained that MoMA did not like sending his paintings abroad.<sup>116</sup> In spite of this, his work was well represented by other important paintings

---

Mexiac, Arturo Estrada, Francisco Becerril, Gutiérrez y Ángel G., Jorge Tovar S., Arturo García Bustos, Rina Lazo, Ma. de Jesús González V.

112. Carrillo Gil, "Guayasamín: el nacionalismo le otorga un premio por sus perfectas imitaciones de lo nuestro," *México en la Cultura. Suplemento cultural de Novedades*, 2 October 1960.

113. Correspondence between Salas Anzures and AFA can be found in the AAA, AFA records box 69. It contains all the information related to the organization of Jack Levine's exhibition including reviews of the Second Biennial.

114. MoMA was happy to lend this painting for the exhibition of American Art in the III Bienal Hispanoamericana in Barcelona.

115. This list can be found in the AAA, AFA records, box 69.

116. Luisa Mendoza, "Jack Levine en dos movimientos," *Excelsior*, 18 September, 1960.

like his *Gangster Funeral* (1953), and *Welcome Home* —the former also a clear indictment of power and corruption.

When asked about abstract art, Levine's opinions were similar to Siqueiros and artists of the Mexican School, namely that it was a fad, linked to commercial interests, devoid of meaning or relevance to the world.<sup>117</sup> Art, he maintained, must be linked to society, be humanist, and have content like that of Rembrandt or the great European masters. "My interest in pictures", he said, "is my interest in human beings."<sup>118</sup> When asked about Mexican art and the Biennial, Levine praised efforts that challenged the dominance of the New York art world (critics, museums and commercial galleries), and said that the work of Siqueiros, Rivera, and Orozco encouraged him to continue the fight.<sup>119</sup> He also regretted the absence of Siqueiros, and mentioned that a group of artists had written a letter requesting to see him —but had received no response. Like Siqueiros he also believed that realism and figuration were the art of the future, stating that MoMA's recent exhibition "New Images of Man" (Fall 1959) was proof of that.<sup>120</sup>

Levine's radical stance would certainly have been uncomfortable for US government agencies, like the United States Information Agency. This may explain why Clifford Hill (curator of the US section) decided to organize an impromptu solo exhibition of Franklin C. Watkins.<sup>121</sup> His portraits and modernist-inspired works would have proved that non-ideological figurative art was also produced in the US, hopefully watering down the effects of Levine's critical realism.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, in a letter from Henry Clifford to the Director of AFA, the curator noted that the American press did nothing to cover Levine's exhibition in Mexico, and that neither the State Department nor the Embassy in Mexico had taken any interest in the event.<sup>123</sup>

117. See Rosa Castro, "El arte mexicano frente a una encrucijada. Jack Levine comenta y juzga la segunda bienal," *Siempre*, 19 October 1960; and Fergus, "Levine, voz del convencimiento," *Excelsior*, 25 September, 1960.

118. "On the Defensive," *Art Digest*, October, 1951 (clipping found at the Hirshhorn Museum, Jack Levine Artists Files).

119. See Mendoza, "Jack Levine en dos movimientos."

120. See Castro, "El arte mexicano frente a una encrucijada."

121. Rafael Anzures mentions that this exhibition was organized "sin previo anuncio", "Segunda Bienal Interamericana de México," 4.

122. Watkins was also known for his religious paintings, which were unusual for modern painters at the time. In 1950 MoMA organized an important retrospective exhibition of his work. See Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, *Franklin C. Watkins* (New York: MoMA, 1950).

123. Letter in AAA, AFA records, box 69.

The rising prominence of Tamayo in Mexico during the 50s and 60s reflects the ascendancy of non-figurative art, and the gradual displacement of the Mexican School, signaling the defeat of social realism and its concomitant communist utopia. This cultural shift was necessary to promote a discourse of modernity that embraced cosmopolitanism (associated with the US), rather than a revolutionary nationalism that locked Mexico into the orbit of the USSR. The decision to herald the work of Levine as one of the most important artists working in the US, while celebrating the work of Tamayo, however, presents an interesting question. Why promote an “apolitical” Mexican artist while honoring the œuvre of an American painter whose work was clearly politically charged? Perhaps Levine’s exhibition was a way to critique American politics and capitalism using one of their own as a rallying voice, and hence allowing the silenced voice of Siqueiros to speak. While there are many speculative reasons for this, it is certain that Lassanky’s and Levine’s honorary positions, in both of the Inter-American biennials, defied the ideological and aesthetic schism that divided the world, thus presenting a much more complex arena for the cultural battles of the Cold War. ❁

N.B. This study is part of an international research project titled *Decentralized Modernities. Art, politics and counterculture in the transatlantic axis during the Cold War*. It is an I+D project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science (I+D HAR2017-82755-P).