

Do Portraits Speak and Tell Stories?

A Visitor Study of
Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Art

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Acknowledgement

Retratos: 2000 Years of Latin American Art, an exhibition of old and modern Latin American portraits, provided an interesting opportunity for inquiry. Staff from the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) interviewed visitors and learned about their experiences, reflections, tastes, and new and insightful ways of seeing and connecting to portraits. Most important, the staff's field of attention expanded to different levels of awareness. This awareness occurred as a result of a conversation with Marc Pachter, the director of the National Portrait Gallery. To him I am grateful.

I also wish to thank Andrew Pekarik and Ioana Munteneau, members of the OP&A staff, who interviewed visitors. Sam Williams, a high school intern, conducted several interviews, including one in Spanish. A special note of thanks goes to James Smith, a wonderful editor. In particular, I owe a great deal to Kathleen Ernst who also collected and analyzed the data and wrote this report. For taking the lead on this study and others, I express my thanks.

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Background¹

From October 21, 2005 to January 8, 2006, *Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Portraits*, was on display in the National Portrait Gallery's (NPG) temporary quarters in the International Gallery of the Smithsonian's S. Dillon Ripley Center. This was the fourth of five venues for the traveling exhibition, organized by NPG, the San Antonio Museum of Art, and El Museo del Barrio, New York, and underwritten by the Ford Motor Company Fund.

Retratos features approximately 115 painted and sculpted portraits drawn from the holdings of 76 Latin American, European, and U.S. museums and private collections. Most of the works – ranging from the ancient Moche of Peru to contemporary Latin American artists garnering international recognition today – have never before been presented in the United States.

According to the exhibition website, *Retratos*' aim is to show how, "as a group, these paintings and sculptures suggest not only common artistic threads but also provide important insights into the social and political history of Latin America." The exhibition also intends to highlight how portraiture provides a window into the lives and minds of the artist and the sitter, as well as their time and place.

Retratos is divided into five chronological sections that illustrate different aspects of Latin American portraiture:

Pre-Columbian. The works of the Moche and Maya cultures underscore the existence of portraiture in Latin America before the arrival of the Europeans.

Viceregal. The colonial period (1492-1810) demonstrates the adaptation of European portrait styles to depictions of the era's secular and religious leaders.

Independence. As countries in the Americas established their independence from European rulers during the 19th century, indigenous artists produced portraits of the new secular and social leaders of the day. Many of these native-born artists went to train in Europe and continued European stylistic traditions.

¹ The information on the content and design of the exhibition comes from the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition website <http://www.retratos.org/>.

Modern. Portraits of the first three-quarters of the 20th century underscore both the internationalism of Latin American art as well as its strong nationalistic impulses.

Contemporary. Portraits done from 1980 to the present demonstrate the vitality in the work of today's Latin American artists living in Latin America and in the United States.

The National Portrait Gallery's director asked the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct a visitor study of *Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Portraits*. The director was interested in finding out what experiences visitors had and what they thought about when they were in the exhibition – what they learned, what moved them – and ultimately, what larger meaning, if any, visitors came away with from the exhibition. Did the portraits speak to them and tell them a story?

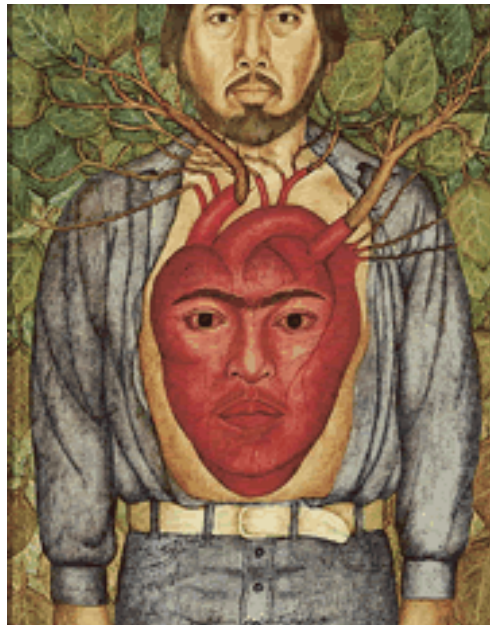
Methodology

The study team determined that the issues in which the director was interested lent themselves best to qualitative, in-depth discussions that would provide a suggestive window into visitors' thoughts and impressions about the exhibition in the broadest terms, rather than the precise data on pre-defined issues that a well-designed survey could provide. The strength of the qualitative methodology is that visitors are able to express their thoughts in their own words, thus providing nuanced and deep insights into how some visitors saw *Retratos*. However, because of the methodology employed for this study, the OP&A team wishes to caution the reader that inferences about the views of the overall population of exhibition visitors cannot be drawn from this study.

During the time *Retratos* was on display in the Ripley Center, three OP&A staff members and one high school intern conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with visitors exiting the exhibition. In conducting the interviews, staff used an interview guide, but permitted visitors to talk about whatever was on their minds about the exhibition. Random sampling was not attempted, but interviewers talked with a variety of visitors. The study team taped and transcribed the interviews. Some features of the interviewees are as follows:

- € A total of 40 individuals participated in 28 interviews.
- € An equal number of males and females were interviewed.
- € Slightly over half of the interviewees were white non-Hispanic; the others were white Hispanic (11), African American (3), African American/Hispanic (2) and Afro-Latino (1).
- € Six interviewees were from Latin America (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Uruguay) and another eleven had lived in or visited Latin America.
- € Ages ranged from 20 to over 70.

In addition to the exit interviews, the study team encountered a class of high school juniors and seniors from Harrisonburg High School in Harrisonburg, Virginia who were seeing the exhibition as part of their class on *Civilizations and Cultures of Spain and Latin America*. The students were asked to answer four questions about their experiences in *Retratos* as a follow-up to their visit; subsequently, the study team received 11 responses, most of which were received in Spanish and translated by OP&A (see Appendix A.)



Findings

Introduction

I: Would you recommend this exhibit for other people to come see?

R: I would tell my wife to get on a plane and come here.

Overall, interviewees had a positive opinion of *Retratos*—in some cases, very enthusiastically positive. In part, this can be attributed to self-selection. The majority of the interviewees with whom the study team spoke were visiting the exhibition because of personal interest in the subject matter—whether a general interest in art/portraiture, a particular interest in Latin American art, or a personal connection to Latin America through birth, travel, or ethnic heritage. Since many of the interviews were done soon after a review in *The Washington Post* generated positive publicity for the show, the interviewees may have been more favorably inclined visitors.² The remote location in the underground International Gallery favored people who were seeking it out. This differs from the situation at some of the larger Smithsonian museums, which tend to draw a much higher proportion of casual visitors.

The study team found that for those it interviewed, the portraits did indeed speak to them, tell them stories, and provoke personal reflection and thinking about a wide range of topics. Comments indicated that visitors were learning about Latin American art, history, and culture through portraiture; reflecting on the dynamic intercultural exchanges that occurred in Latin America; interpreting the influences on and changes in artistic style over time; and seeing differences between, as well as similarities among, the cultures and artistic styles of the various countries. The show understandably elicited a strong sense of cultural identity with people of Latino birth or heritage; perhaps less anticipated was the positive racial identity that African American visitors felt with the Afro-Latinos depicted. Some visitors thought deeply about the meaning of the exhibition for them, for instance drawing comparisons between Latin America's retention of a shared cultural identity and the United States' move toward multiculturalism.

² Paul Richard. *The Washington Post*. A Distinguished, Serious Look at the Latin American Face. October 22, 2005; C01

Time and Geography – 2,000 Years and over 15 Countries

Almost everyone had something to say about *Retratos*' ambitious presentation of Latin American art over a great time span, as well as about the wide geographic representation of artists. The broad approach had its plusses and minuses—lending insight into the sweep of history and multi-national influences bearing on Latin American art today, but leaving some visitors yearning for more focus in certain areas or inclusion of eras or artists they found missing. Positive reviews included, "It really gave a taste of the 2,000 years. It summed up everything, all of the melting pot that is Central and South America. It shows in all of the portraits and sculptures in there." However, for others, such as one young male visitor, "It was scattered because there's over 2,000 years... It wasn't focused." As one woman explained, "It's like an enormous hors d'oeuvres platter. It just makes you want to eat more of this and more of that. And it's frustrating in that, but it's wonderful to see it all put together."

The Missing Years

A number of visitors were bothered by what they felt was a misrepresentation in the title that claimed coverage of 2000 years. As one commented, "I came in thinking that it was really going to be 2000 years' worth of art, and it turned out to be a couple of examples of Pre-Columbian and then a dominant collection of colonialism forward... so I felt cheated by that, the title, the '2000 years of art' thing." Another visitor said, "I remember it surprised me halfway through the exhibit when I saw the title again. And I thought, well, it's really not, because it's 300 to 400 years, plus the sweeping glance back into the past." A third visitor had more to say on the title:

If it's not really 2000 years of art, just don't say it. The Pre-Columbian should be on its own, in a collection that is big enough to enjoy it. I think I might have had that in the back of my mind... and that's what the portraits turned out to be, pottery. So it's kind of misnamed. And that's fine, [the Pre-Columbian] is a good part of the [show], but the naming should be more accurate.

Selection

A number of visitors commented favorably the quality of the selection, saying, for instance, “They are the crème.” Visitors appreciated seeing artists they had not heard of before and finding out “that there were other people doing wonderful things, instead of just the name brands you get all the time.” Even the well-initiated found much that was new; one who claimed familiarity with more than half of the portraits said, “A lot of the 19th century paintings I didn’t know at all, so that was a great surprise and pleasure.”



Based on the frequency of mention, several works stood out as the most thought-provoking and emotionally stirring in the show, including *Los Mulatos de Esmeraldas* by Adrian Sanchez Galque (1599) and *Double Reflection of the Other* by Adriana Varejão (1999). The portrait that most delighted visitors was *Fray Francisco Rodriguez, Padre de Cocula* by Abundio Rincon (1853). Comments included, “That priest with the dark glasses – I couldn’t believe that was painted in 1853 – it had this contemporary feel;” “He has that really whimsical expression on his face like he sees through everything;” and “He was so cool. I almost thought that it was a modern play on an old style. But it wasn’t. It was just real. He seemed like a cool monk. He was probably the most liberal at the monastery.” Among other favorites were the miniatures; the Pre-Colombian

pottery (“always knocks my socks off, amazing stuff”); *The Brave Sailor Simão, Coalman of the Steamship Pernambucana* by Jose Correia de Lima (1857) (“such a beautiful portrait, just a lovely, lovely work”); and *Joachim Jean Aberbach and His Family* by Fernando Botero (1970), with one student observing, “Botero’s painting meant the most because he is Colombian, and was the most humorous and realistic; but at the same time people aren’t that fat.”



Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were by far the most recognized artists and Kahlo's *Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940) was very popular, inspiring such imaginative reviews as:

You know... The monkey was her beloved pet and then the cat, I thought it was kind of like the devil and the angel sitting on her shoulders, and the cat really wanted to eat the hummingbird, which it said was the symbol of love in Latin American countries. And the monkey was just toying with her necklace. I really liked the detail and I really loved the symmetry, and the colors were so vivid against the background...the lush green and the purples were so bright, they just jumped out at you...

Because *Retratos* purported to be representative of the countries that make up Latin America, it raised questions about choice with some visitors: "I don't know what guided the decisions because it seems like there are a lot of other artists that could have been highlighted too." One married couple thought it was "too heavy on Mexico... too [much from] Central America. Where is Uruguay? There are good Uruguayan painters... There are not many Chileans... [and only] a couple of Colombians. [There are] a couple of Brazilians, but Brazil is so huge and rich; whereas Mexico isn't so big and is everywhere." Conversely, one interviewee said there was "not much representation of Central America at all... one from Guatemala." Interviewees conceded that "you can't have it all," but nevertheless recounted their individual wish lists: more photography, more on Cuban artists, more ceramics besides the Moche and Peruvian ones, more indigenous untaught artists, more sculpture, more Afro-Latino perspective, etc. One person wanted more recognition of Sor Juana Inestio Truex, "who's a very, very important figure in the advancement of women in education." Another suggested the addition of sound – from the old, traditional music to contemporary.

Discerning Artistic Influences; Linking Old and New

"Seeing it all put together"—along whatever pathway they chose to take—encouraged some visitors to see historical patterns. As one person described it, "I did the chronological walk and it was very exciting to see the changes – particularly from the colonial period, which shows very formal portraits of very important people – and then it's more down-to-

earth, more local people, and at the end the contemporary part was really fun.”



A number of visitors were surprised and pleased to see the early Peruvian ceramics as a starting point. As one woman mused, “I liked looking at the pre-Columbian... it is interesting how art evolved so differently in totally different areas of the world before everything got so global and before international commerce and before the European influence came over.” Others saw links between art of different eras, for example in Frida Kahlo’s self portrait, “with the thorns around her neck, and she’s bleeding from it. So I guess it’s kind of a mix of the old religious themes with the new.”

One interviewee observed that “there was one portrait artist who was mainly impressionist but then there were cubist background pieces, so it was like an homage to two different schools... That is part of what interests me about Latin American culture in general – it mixes things of different influences.” Another visitor said, “I was thinking about the influence of Spain versus what is there now. The left is Spain and Europe and the right is a mixture of everything else. And so the right is of course so rich and the left is so wooden...what happened? The tension between the two is superb.”

Several visitors spoke eloquently about how the exhibition demonstrated for them the different historic and cultural influences on Latin American art, and the resulting changes in artistic style over time. For one man, the sightlines of the exhibition design enabled him to see connections he otherwise would not have discerned:

The way you have it set up is fantastic because one side is the colonial overlay – very formalistic, very standard, all of the same genre, of the same style in a sense, once you get beyond the original pottery. The other side is sort of an expression of what happened when the Spaniards went away, or were taken over, or forced out, or lost power. They lost political power but they also lost control over the art. The art just flourished in all kinds of different ways. And somehow it’s connected... now I don’t know why, I’m still thinking about how it’s connected. I’ll be thinking about this show for a long time. But the way you have it set up emphasizes the connections because of the windows. You stand in front of the picture of the Puerto Rican artist from the Institute of Chicago with the sky, looking up at this heaven

with his mouth bound. And you look through right past him... in the back is this other giant portrait of some old style viceroy standing there in all his glory with a sword and coat and powdered wig. And it's all the same Latin America; it's just 150 years difference. And so, what happened between the two? Because of the setup, you're asked that question frontal. Because of the way it is set up, because of the windows, and the way the windows are put, you actually connect the two in ways you wouldn't otherwise begin to connect, or it would take you a long time to connect them. I thought it was wonderful.

For another man and his mother, the historical perspective changed their preconceived notions about Latin American art:

I: Did you come away with something you didn't know before?

R1: Yes, a different historical perspective of the development of art, because the notion of Latin America is such a construct in colonial terms. [You] see that thread woven through the entire continent, and then almost unravel at the end. You see that in the independence era, folks were trained in the European style and [brought] that home; then [you see that] the development of what can now be called a modern Latin American style is a result of the culmination of hundreds of years of colonialism and cultural exchange.

I: So what is it that unraveled?

R1: It comes together and then it unravels at the end. You have the idea of Latin America, the vice-regality of it; then the post-colonial with the European influence throughout; and then as that unravels, the modern artists—Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera—take it in their own direction. And then some of the more abstract pieces in there, like the metalwork and the photography and the sugar pictures and the DNA – [they are] just radical modern art with no classical training.

R2: And at the end you start to see the American influence on Latin American art – people who went to college here and got a different perspective.

However, for some visitors the influences and connections were not so clear. For example, one woman said, “I’ve seen exhibitions where they keep your interest by comparing the old and the new with the influences. Sometimes it feels like the new artists are working in a vacuum but obviously they are not, so I would have liked to have seen that [kind of comparison] a bit more towards the end.”

Artistic Style: “The Color and the Vibrancy of It”

Another common observance of interviewees was on the bold use of color in Latin American art. One visitor compared *Retratos* to what he had just seen at the Freer: “The Whistlers were very much just portraits and didn’t have much movement to them. But I liked this because it has its own attitude and I really appreciated that. I’m not sure how I would describe it, but it is sort of an exciting cultural experience. The colors were much more festive. I like the way that they weren’t shying away from bright, vibrant colors.”

Another visitor, a man in his forties who had lived in Latin America, was also most struck by the intense colors:

Well, one of the words I kept using all the way through, mostly to myself, and that I thought was appropriate, is the boldness of Latin American art—the striking contrasts and color. I’m thinking of the priest way down at the end with the dark glasses and the one closer to the front with the two huge red crosses, the red against the black. And I think that seems to be somewhat characteristic of Latin American art in general. Of course we’re talking about so many countries, I realize, but I welcome that, it’s so dramatic! The power of it, you know! ... So I think if there is a kind of overriding motif or message for me I would say the daringness, the boldness of the painting.

However, one man thought the portraits lacked the bold color he was accustomed to seeing: “It has a nice big timeline and it shows the difference in what’s done, but I don’t see any of the vivid colors used that some other artists use in the Latin American geographic area. The closest is the one where the individual has the mirror of herself and the one next to it with the gentleman who has the blue face.” A woman of Hispanic heritage in her thirties felt “a somberness to the art; that worrisome-ness in some of the pictures... There is an overriding angst in Latin American art, for all its bright colors. There isn’t a lot of *joie de vivre* is there? It has to do with a sort of soul searching, identity crisis.”

Ethnic/Racial and Cultural Identity

The study team found that *Retratos* was personally relevant to visitors of Latino birth or heritage, prompting them to recall personal experiences or reminisce about their childhood. For example, a Latino man in his mid-thirties described the *Retratos* exhibition as “powerful.” When pressed on this, he explained, “I don’t know. With some of the older people I felt tenderness remembering my own family. With the

historical [portraits] I felt a sense of identity.” A sixty-year-old man of Hispanic origin talked about *El Nino Manuel de Cervantes y Velasco* (1805) as follows:

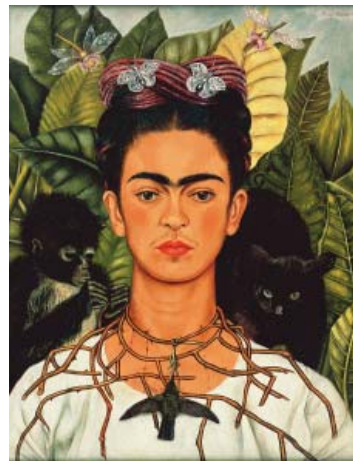
The portrait of the dead child, early on, where [he’s] dressed in finery, with wings and a little caption that said it’s a tradition, a history, of taking pictures of dead children to remember them by. I’ve got pictures of dead relatives in my family albums at home. They take pictures of the open coffin, which is kind of unheard of nowadays. So that struck me, that portrait of the child.

Likewise, a young woman from Bolivia said,

I felt a lot of familiarity with the exhibit. For example, I saw one of Simon Bolivar, who is the founder of Latin America. I thought one of the paintings was interesting – one of the images of the virgins was very indigenous – and I thought that was very rare because in general all the religious images are done in the European mold. So I thought that was very interesting and kind of exceptional within the whole theme.

Two visitors, a female college student of Mexican heritage and a native Ecuadorian man living in the United States, had strong cultural identification experiences upon “seeing the real thing” – particular art works that were for them cultural icons. The female college student was rapturous about seeing Kahlo’s *Self Portrait*:

Yeah, like when I saw Frida, I almost started crying because I was like, ‘Oh, I have to stop using my Maybeline, I’m so gorgeous without it, you know.’ It just brings certain thing out of you that you have there but it’s like day by day you start letting your guard down. And seeing something like that really reaffirms everything. It’s very different seeing Frida in an art book and then seeing her right here... like I was this close to Frida. It’s just incredible to think that she actually painted that, her hands



touched that; that she looked at herself while doing this. It’s a very strong connection. Especially with works you are familiar with, the connection is so much stronger. I just felt like I could feel her energy there, because that’s her; she’s painted herself. She’s baring her soul to whoever is seeing this. And you are just like, wow, could I ever do that? Oh my God. I really started crying when I saw that one. I was too emotional.

The Ecuadorian male visitor had come to Washington on business but had also come specifically (and repeatedly) to see *Los Mulatos de Esmeraldas*:

I came to Washington on business, but I also came to see this picture on Esmeralda's Maroons, which is a painting that few people from the Pacific coast get to see, because it is no longer in our country and this is the opportunity we have to see it. That's why I've come a few times to this exhibition... that painting is very important to me because it is of my ancestors, so I had to come and see it here because Spain is too far away. Living in Ecuador there were people of African origin, European origin, and of other origins. But that painting is of African origin, and that's why that one interested me the most.

A number of the people with whom the study team spoke were intrigued by the portraits in the show that featured Afro-Latino subjects. These paintings were especially poignant for some African American visitors interviewed. For example, one African American female in her fifties said she was very pleased to see so many portraits of Afro-descendents, including high status people: "I was expecting the usual: a bunch of white folks. Maybe some dead but noble savages, some indigenous people; you know, standard stuff. But I know this is the 21st century and I know there is progress [laughter] and this is such a good example of such progress... the real nature of the Americas is made visible here." She further articulated her response to these portraits:



As an African American I can certainly identify with the Afro-Esmeraldenos and with the Afro-Brazilian woman with the gold jewelry on and the fact that the gold jewelry is said to be made with West African technology. I am very interested in the links between Africa and the African Diaspora, particularly African knowledge brought to the Americas. So I was very pleased to see African descendents from various countries, from Peru, from Brazil, from Ecuador, as well as to see that allusion to the fact that African knowledge was visible in the woman's jewelry.

An African American man in his fifties visiting alone experienced a similar pleasant surprise:

I noticed that there were some artists who had painted some black subjects. I thought that was interesting because that was from Latin America and South America, and I saw there were some Ecuadorians—the three people who were from Ecuador. I was surprised that they were black and the influence they had on that area and how they had come there, apparently shipwrecked from Africa... and how they had acquired wealth and gained a nice life there. That was interesting.

Beyond mere identity, *Retratos* instilled a sense of pride and belonging with some Latino and African American viewers. A high school student “personally felt very proud and honored to see one of [Frida Kahlo’s] paintings.” Two women – one of Mexican heritage and one African American – expressed similar sentiments of ownership:

I enjoy the fact that they chose to show Latin American portraits. Because I don’t think people in general – the American public – have a lot of exposure. And for me it was a sense of pride that they were showing Latin American art in Washington. It’s obvious that Washington has visitors from all over the world, and they have various different exhibitions, but I think it’s good that they chose this theme in particular.

[The exhibition showed] that a lot of different kinds of people built the Americas and if you are going to talk about portraits of the Americas, if you are going to be honest, then you need to show that. For example, the African descendents are often portrayed as the “victims of” as opposed to people with agency such as those three wonderful guys from Esmeraldas. The fact of showing an Afro-Brazilian woman in a very dignified pose... Wow! And who doesn’t have a rag on her head. To show a Puerto Rican teacher. I think it is saying ‘Hey! There is a lot more to learn about these Americas and maybe we are going to start helping you out.’



Reflective Experiences that Transcend Culture



Having reflective experiences did not depend on whether visitors had any direct connection with Latin America per se. The portraits also spoke to interviewees of universal customs and aspects of the human condition – marriage, death, prejudice – which they related to their own lives. For instance, one visitor exclaimed, “The marriage ones, like the one with the married couple; when I saw that one I was like, ‘Oh my God, they still look the same today when they get married... serious face, like, hey, we just got together.’”

Two visitors interviewed on different days – a female African American college student and an African American man in his fifties – remarked on the relevance to them of *Double Reflection of the Other* by Adriana Varejão (1999).

There's one artist in there, I can't remember her name, but on one side she's a woman and she's turned to the side and then on the opposite side there's a big slash... but she struggles with ethnicity in American culture because she's Puerto Rican. And I think that's a really good one. There's a book called When I was Puerto Rican and the author's name escapes me, but I think that is a really good portrait because that's the book that I immediately thought of when I saw the portrait.

The one thing that I felt connected to... was the self portrait of a young lady. It was two portraits -- it was herself and then it was a smaller portrait where there was a slash through her head that looked like blood. I read the caption and it said something to the effect that it was showing the inner turmoil that she had. I felt a connection because all of us may look normal, but inside all of us have issues about different things. And that caught my eye.

Learning Experiences

In addition to making connections with the familiar, some visitors were captured by the unfamiliar in the portraits and came away with new knowledge about Latin American history and culture. As one interviewee observed, “I think portraits speak a lot of the culture as well. You can see in the more colonial portraits—the style, the writing, [and] the things that people wear...[they] speak of how class conscious people were, and you can just tell a lot of things from the art itself.” In particular, interviewees commented on the portrayal of rites of passage, such as the death portraits, portraits celebrating important events (such as the one of the man with his thesis), and again, the depictions of Afro-Latino subjects:

Although I knew some things, I was very surprised that there were paintings of dead children.



One thing I didn't know was that they commemorated nuns going into the convent, or upon their death, with paintings like that. And I wished I could read Spanish so that I would know what they were saying about the person on the ones with writing.

Some of the symbols in the portraits I would identify right away and say, 'This is part of my [Mexican] culture.' Or I would look [at] different countries and say, 'I didn't know this,' and 'Maybe this means something else for Brazil or Peru.' Because even though Latin America is culturally similar in terms of language, it is very culturally diverse, too. So there are things I didn't know about other countries.

There was another portrait of a black girl and she was dressed with a lot of gold jewelry... I had the impression that all blacks at the time were slaves [and] I thought it was rare that she was shown dressed in upper class, high class clothes and jewelry. And then, when I read the explanation, I thought it made sense.

In addition to learning something new about Latin American history and culture, several interviewees took it one step further by drawing comparisons with cultural norms or trends in the United States. For example, one interviewee was struck by the different attitudes about death and dying:

I was trying to get into the mindset of their society and I noticed that a lot of the paintings seemed to be of funerals of people who have died. Because [Latin Americans] have such a strong draw to the Day of the Dead and this fascination with death, it really came across as a more romanticized view than the view of contemporary Americans, [who see it] as a negative and wouldn't want to paint something like that because it wouldn't be deemed beautiful. It really fascinated me that they have this open acceptance of the mortality of people and can find that beautiful and focused enough for an entire piece. That sort of cultural way of thinking really captivated my imagination ...that it wasn't a sad parting; it was just another step in the natural process of life, something that needs to be accepted and embraced rather than feared and kept hidden.

Another interviewee compared Latin America's strong cultural identification with the United States' multiculturalism:

I: What do you think is the main message of this exhibition, if there is one?

R: I think it's the melding of the years and that they still have a unified base, [whereas] America...[has] lost this sort of "nativism" as a group of people in ourselves, because we have so many [cultures]. ...I would say it would be an embracing in a unity [across] the years that I really found captivating and insightful.

Several interviewees commented on, or alluded to, the benefits of simply gaining a better understanding of other peoples and cultures. Asked why he said the exhibition was "good," a Latino male in his thirties responded, "It makes more people aware of Latin American culture and the differences and connections between the different countries." Another visitor said that the overall message, "very simply and elementally is 'diversity is good.'" Yet another person said the overall message is that "We tend to put down Latin America; they're the poor cousins to the South. And I think this shows what a rich artistic heritage there is."

Challenging Preconceptions of Portraiture

For some interviewees, *Retratos* challenged their pre-held notions about portraiture. Most often mentioned were the Pre-Columbian pieces at the beginning of the exhibition:

The fact that pots are called portraiture is, I think, very positive because in history there are a lot of ways in which we embody human likenesses that we don't think of. [When] we think of a portrait, we either think of someone posing for a camera or posing for a painting and we don't think of other forms... I liked that; it kind of opened my mind.

Another often-mentioned piece was the DNA portrait, *Carter, Anna, and Daryl* by Inigo Manglano-Ovalle (1998): “I thought that was a very insightful and interesting interpretation of the word ‘portrait’.”

One visitor’s reflection on the nature of portraiture was inspired by the empty frame in the outside hallway:

I like this frame on the way in. We played around and did our own portraits there. It's cool because you felt that you're looking at portraits... you sort of have that experience. You get a sense of time, the passage of time, and people's views of what should be preserved, whether it is the priest or the actress. Who gets painted? Why would they paint who she is? Well, she's a famous actress. So you [say] “well, we're going to paint this nun” in 1700, but by the 1940s you paint the cute actress. And it is people painting themselves. You know, who gets painted changes as the artists themselves change.

Interpretive Information

The interviewees that the study team spoke to were divided as to their satisfaction with the amount and kind of information found on the labels and elsewhere. A number felt that it was just the right amount of information. Several commented that they enjoyed reading more than cursory information about the artist and especially about the subject: “Some of [the labels] had a little bit on the person’s personality and one or two things about their experiences, so that way you could see it in the artwork itself.” Those who wanted more information mentioned a Spanish speaking docent to lead tours that school groups could reserve in advance, a take-away (or online) list of the artists and paintings, an Acoustiguide, and more about the intent of the exhibition – for example, why certain

paintings were brought together in the same room. Still others thought that the curators had gone too far in their interpretation:

There was one in particular where the caption was talking about what this female artist was trying to convey in the picture. It was a woman by a window in a wall with figures on it... it talked about how it was supposed to signify inner feelings or turmoil or something like that. It's there, but not everybody is open to that kind of representation or interpretation.

The people the study team interviewed, many of whom as noted above were from, or familiar with, Latin America, appreciated the bilingual labels:

R1: I liked your Spanish here... this is beautiful Spanish. It's very stylized, lovely Spanish.

R2: However, I found two mistranslations. The town in Argentina is not Rosary in English, it's Rosario... And in Bolivia, it's not Cochamba, it's Cochabamba.

R1: But do you know what that says? That says they wrote it in Spanish first, and then they went to English. That's cool. That's OK. This is really elegant Spanish...

A high school teacher said the bilingual labels were wonderful and that his students read much more than they would have otherwise.

Design and Layout

Several interviewees praised the size of the exhibition, calling the space intimate and comfortable. However, some were confused by the introductory room of *Retratos*; for example one person observed, "I think the first room with that contemporary portrait, the Pre-Columbian piece, and those other portraits... I know they were trying to show all the time periods, but it doesn't come off somehow." Interestingly, people were able to make sense out of the order of presentation even when they took opposite pathways; as one person said, "We went the wrong way but maybe it was the right way... we started with the modern and ended up in the middle age, 19th

century... I thought that was excellent.” Some who turned to the left commented favorably on the chronological layout, while others found merit in starting on the right:

I really liked the way that it transitioned. I went off to the right first and it seemed much more contemporary, and then I came along to this religious side. I thought that was interesting because religion is such a big part of their culture and their history—it was a neat to have it secluded off by itself [so that there was a] full immersion [in the realization that] this is something very big to them.



Conclusions and Observations

For those people the study team interviewed, the learning experiences envisioned by the exhibition curators were met. The high school teacher said, “Many of the themes we discussed [in the course on *Civilizations and Cultures of Spain and Latin America*] were evident in the exhibit – racial mixing, indigenous influences, colonial society, the place of art in society, realism/surrealism, and more.” Several visitors that the study team spoke to had very strong, emotional object experiences (especially with the Frida Kahlo and *Los Mulatos de Esmeraldas*). The portraiture also evoked a great deal of introspection and reflection.

At least part of the interviewees’ enthusiasm for the exhibition and positive outcomes had to do with self selection.

My experience in the Portrait Gallery has been a bunch of portraits on a wall, which is ok but a little boring. This said so many things. This is set up in a way that just spoke of all kinds of things, in addition to the portraits.

I myself skip portraits, because I think they’re boring historical portraits. Sometimes I learn about the history of it. Sometimes I look at the people and say, ‘well, they’re wealthy people and I’m not very concerned about them.’ I don’t relate to them. But this, the way it was set up, I really enjoyed it and I enjoyed learning about these characters, so it did make me think about portraits in a different way.

These two interviewees – a man from Uruguay and woman of Mexican heritage – had a different, more positive experience in *Retratos* than they had in other exhibitions of portraiture. Why? It is unlikely that the exhibition design made it work for them – it was well done, but not unusual. What the study team noticed was that the interviewees were *very* interested in the subject of Latin American portraiture – it was their predisposition and self-selection that contributed to *Retratos*’ impact of changing the way they thought about portraits.

Some people (especially those of Latino and African heritage and those with an interest in Latin America) can be especially appreciative of an exhibition that recognizes ethnic/racial diversity. It is especially important for U.S. national museums to present exhibitions that appeal to and reinforce the self-identity of the country's diverse ethnic/racial groups. Exhibitions of portraiture such as *Retratos* are excellent vehicles since the portraits have a human dimension and can "speak to the visitors and tell them a story" about cultural traditions and historical events.

A chronological format, especially one that allows links between time periods, can lead people to reflect on history and change. But it is impossible to know what kinds of meanings people will derive from different formats, as evidenced by the people who did not follow the chronological pathway.

The selection and arrangement are very important. People draw conclusions from side-by-side comparisons and similarities (whether the exhibition makes them explicit or not). This exhibition seemed to have a number of provocative paintings that sparked the imagination of particular individuals. Having iconic artists Rivera and Kahlo was key.

There is a case for title and concept pretesting. A number of interviewees were bothered by the "2,000 years" in the title, which did not take into account approximately 1,000 years of art. Did this make them suspicious of the exhibition in general? Audience pretesting on the title could have alerted exhibition designers to this source of dissatisfaction.

Appendix A

Evaluation of Phil Yutzy, teacher, and 11 junior and senior students from Harrisonburg High School, Harrisonburg, Virginia, who visited *Retratos*.

Some students commented on the entire fieldtrip – we went to the *Celia Cruz* exhibit, the *Museo de Oro* exhibit, *Retratos*, and the National Gallery of Art.

My class discussed five Spanish painters – el Greco, Velazquez, Goya, Picasso, and Dali. We also looked at the work of Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Fernando Botero. I presented a little about Carmen Lomas Garza as well. Our class was on *Civilizations and Cultures of Spain and Latin America* – so our plate was very full. They saw films on Goya (from Spain full length movie) and Kahlo (documentary). The students did several PowerPoint presentations and several chose artists.

Retratos fit in wonderfully with our class. It couldn't have come at a better time. I particularly appreciated the inclusion of pre-Columbian pieces – we spent a good deal of time talking about the Aztecs and Mayas. Sor Juan Inez de la Cruz was another person we mentioned – her portrait was particularly interesting to one of our Mexican students because he had heard about her since grade school in Mexico. Many of the themes we discussed were evident in the exhibit – racial mixing, indigenous influences, colonial society, the place of art in society, realism/surrealism, and more.

It would have been even more helpful if we could have had a Spanish speaking docent lead us through the exhibit and tell us more information about the paintings. A docent did help some of us in English. Perhaps you could have a Spanish speaker that school groups could reserve in advance.

The bilingual information was wonderful – they read much more than they would have otherwise (most teenagers don't read much in museums).

Thank you very much for the effort in putting together this exhibit. It was very important for my students – their reactions were very positive.

Gracias, Phil Yutzy

Email from Phil Yutzy, February 22, 2006

Responses of Harrisonburg High School Students

Question 1: Background: Do you have an interest/background in Latin American art and culture? Please describe.

- € I learned about art in two art classes that I took. Also, I learned about art from my father, because he is very interested in classical art.
- € In my Spanish class I learned about the art of Frida Kahlo and Botero.
- € A little, not much.
- € Yes. Well, what I know about art or my interest in it is how artists express themselves. It is a form of expression that is the desire to give or know something and to make you think.
- € Yes, I have interest, but I don't really know much background.
- € Yes, before we had studied some of the painters like Botero and Frida Kahlo.
- € Yes. I'm very interested in the pre-Colombian era.
- € Yes. I am interested in studying the history of all Latin American countries. It is very interesting to learn how today's countries were affected by past events.
- € I am interested in art and culture because I want to know more, how they thought, what games they played.
- € Yes, I am very interested in the portraits like those of Frida Kahlo.
- € I had never stepped in an art museum before this occasion. I had an interest in seeing this exhibit because we had learned a little bit in Spanish class about Diego Rivera, Picasso, Goya, Salvador Dali, and many more. I was interested in looking at the arts personally.

Question 2: Exhibition experience: What did you experience in the exhibition? Did anything surprise you? Did you learn anything new?

- € I really enjoyed getting to know the work of Botero, and of Frida. I would never have thought about art.
- € I had an interesting time at the exhibition because I never thought that there were so many portraits by famous artists in the museum. I also learned that art is very interesting.

- € A good time, interesting.
- € Well, yes, because seeing them in person is more interesting than looking at them in some book, and you can see all the colors so well.
- € It was really interesting. This exhibition really caught my attention. For the first time I actually looked at everything and read its information.
- € I think that although I knew some things, I was very surprised that there were paintings of dead children.
- € It was very cool to get to see some famous paintings that we had studied in class before.
- € I like it, but expected to be able to spend more time admiring the artwork. I wasn't able to get through the whole exhibition.
- € What I liked was the art museum, because you can see the paintings and how big they were.
- € I had a good experience because it was the first time that I went to a museum in Washington. One thing that surprised me was the man that was painting or copying one of the paintings. I didn't know they could do that.
- € Everything was a new experience, and frankly I liked the exhibit.

Question 3: Evaluation: Which painting(s) meant the most to you in the exhibit? Was there anything that could have been done better?

- € Botero's painting meant the most because he is Colombian, and was the most humorous and realistic, but at the same time people aren't that fat.
- € The most significant paintings for me were Frida Kahlo's.
- € None.
- € Well, because the truth is that there were a lot, and I can't say which grabbed my attention or not.
- € The painting that meant the most to me was Frida Kahlo's. Personally I felt very proud and honored to see one of her paintings.
- € It feels nice to have an exhibition about your own culture and to see other cultures admire that work.

- € Perhaps Frida Kahlo's, because she is Mexican. But at the same time, I really liked the paintings of the little children.
- € One painting I really liked was one from Frida Kahlo.
- € I enjoyed seeing Goya's and Frida's paintings. The only thing that would have been better would be if there were more paintings by them.
- € I most liked the Botero painting.
- € I like the one Picasso painting. It was titled the Lover. I also liked the one of the woman who had a small wound in front and later it appeared in another one.
- € I liked all of them.

Question 4: Meaning: Is there an overall message in the exhibit? Do you feel something or think something as a result of visiting the Retratos exhibit?

- € I really liked the way they expressed themselves. Like Botero, who painted fat people. And Frida liked to paint realistically but also with imagination.
- € I didn't feel anything, but I thought about what inspired those artists to paint those paintings.
- € No.
- € Yes. It is very interesting and makes you think about a lot of things.
- € I think it shouldn't be a teaching tool because unfortunately not many young adults know how to appreciate the art.
- € I think it is interesting to know more about what we already know, and in truth it was a really good exhibition.
- € No....
- € No, I don't believe there was a single message. I believe that the people who organized the exhibit only wanted to teach the different styles. Maybe if the paintings had been placed in chronological order, there would have been a clearer message.
- € I would visit the portrait museum but it would have to be bigger with more paintings.

- 
- € I felt that through these paintings they had something they wanted to say, through the form in which the painters expressed themselves.
 - € I have an overall idea about paintings. I'll know what people are talking about when they talk about paintings.

Image Captions

Cover Page

La Máscara

The Mask

Angel Rodríguez-Díaz (Puerto Rican, b. 1955)

Oil on paper on canvas, 76 x 61 cm (29 15/16 x 24 in.), 1993

Private collection, San Antonio, Texas

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Doña María Mercedes de Salas y Corvalán

Unidentified artist (Chilean school)

Oil on canvas, c. 1780

Museo Histórico Nacional, Santiago, Chile

Page 3

Frida de Mi Corazón

Frida in My Heart

Nahum Zenil (Mexican, b. 1947)

Oil on wood, 20 1/2 x 15 3/4 in., 1991

Private collection, courtesy of Galería de Arte Mexicano, Mexico, D.F.

Page 6

Fray Francisco Rodríguez, Padre de Cocula

Abundio Rincón (Mexican, active 1823-1885)

Oil on canvas, 245 x 120 cm (96 7/16 x 47 1/4 in.), 1853

Page 6

Joachim Jean Aberbach y Su Familia

Joachim Jean Aberbach and His Family

Fernando Botero (Colombian, b. 1932)

Oil on canvas, 1970

Susan Aberbach, New York

Page 8

Stirrup Spout Head Vessel

Unidentified artist (Peruvian, Moche culture)

Earthenware, c. A.D. 100–600

Mr. and Mrs. Lindsay A. Duff, Texas

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Autoretrato con Collar de Espinas y Colibrí

Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird

Frida Kahlo (Mexican, b. 1907)

Oil on canvas, 1940

Art Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Page 12

Mulher de Bahía

Woman from Bahía

Unidentified artist (Brazilian school)

Oil on canvas, mid-nineteenth century

Museu Paulista da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil

Page 13

La Escuela del Maestro Rafael Cordero

The School of the Teacher Rafael Cordero

Francisco Oller y Cestero (Puerto Rican, b. 1833)

Ateneo Puertoriqueno, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Page 14

Matrimonio Hernandez a Devocion de San Miguel Arcangel

The Hernandezes Honoring Their Devotion to the Archangel Saint Michael

Unidentified artist (Mexican school)

Oil on canvas, 91 x 73.5 cm (35 13/16 x 28 51/16 in.), 1818

Museo Soumaya, Mexico, D.F.

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El Niño José Manuel De Cervantes Y Velasco

Autor anónimo (escuela mexicana)

Óleo sobre lienzo, 1805

Colección particular, México, D.F.

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Madre María Encarnación Regalado

Unidentified artist (Quito school)

Oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 17 1/2 in., c. 1860

Monasterio de la Concepción, Quito, Ecuador