

Culture and Identity

LATIN AMERICAN PORTRAITS

by Gail Leggio

Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940) has a striking face at the center of the composition. In creating a painted persona, she exaggerates elements—such as the heavy eyebrows—that go against conventional notions of femininity, yet Kahlo was clearly aware of her own beauty and willing to capitalize on it, in her work and her life. The picture was painted for one of her lovers, Nicholas Muray, and she presents herself in a kind of secular icon as a martyr to love, with a necklace of thorns that pricks her skin and draws blood. Her hairstyle, braided with cords and piled on top of her head, is specifically Mexican, and the big tropical leaves of the background signal her New World setting. So does the bestiary that accompanies her: the hummingbird hanging from her necklace, the sleek black cat on her shoulder that eyes the bird predatorially, the spider monkey (Kahlo's pet Caimito del Guayabal) that toys with the necklace. Kahlo's paintings are chapters in a secularized auto-hagiography, leavened by humor and a certain ruthlessness in confronting the physical torments of a difficult life. She is perhaps the most high-profile name in a new exhibition filled with fascinating portraits, introducing us to remarkable individuals across Latin America and through the centuries.

"Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Portraits" is, as the subtitle signals, an ambitious project. With 115 paintings and sculptures from more than fifteen Latin American countries, much of the work never before seen in the United States, this is the first comprehensive exhibition of its kind. Organized by El Museo del Barrio in New York City (where it opened), the San Antonio Museum of Art and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., the exhibition is divided into five chronological sections. The curatorial team has not attempted an exhaustive overview. Pre-Columbian art, a dazzling field to which lifetimes of scholarship have been devoted, forms but a prelude here, represented by some fine ceramic portrait vessels from ancient Peru and a striking Guatemalan *Portrait of a Nobleman* (700). The head, stucco with traces of paint, projects both timeless elegance and strong personality. Huge ear spools and fragments of the headdress testify to this individual's status, but the face also captures classic Mayan beauty with almond-shaped eyes, an aquiline nose and full, slightly parted lips. The show then jumps to the Viceregal period (1500–1820), and a remarkable story unfolds, of conflict, assimilation and transformation. The story continues through the nationalism of Independence, the extraordinary flowering of Modernism, with artists such as Diego Rivera

Unidentified artist
(Guatemalan, Mayan culture)
Portrait of a Nobleman, A.D. 700

SAN ANTONIO MUSEUM OF ART, TEXAS



and Frida Kahlo, into Contemporary. We see people exploring their identity, class, gender and self-image in often breathtakingly inventive ways. A dozen

scholars contributed to the excellent catalogue. As Dr. Marion Oettinger of the San Antonio Museum writes in the introduction, “portraits have been used to preserve the memory of the deceased, provide continuity between the living and the dead, bolster the social standing of the aristocracy, mark the deeds of the mighty, advance the careers of politicians, record rites of passage, and mark symbols of the status quo.”¹

In recent years scholars have been focusing on the colonial period, examining how indigenous people modified, reinvigorated and sometimes subverted the iconographical traditions imposed upon them by Europeans. Conversion had a complex dynamic, as Christian saints were conflated with local deities and syncretic rituals emerged. This transatlantic cross-pollination was the subject of the Brooklyn Museum’s 1996 exhibition “Converging Cultures: Art and Identity in Spanish America.” Among other topics, the catalogue authors considered the elaboration of cults of the Virgin Mary in the Andes, as “a kind of defensive appropriation” through which a foreign religion was translated into the spiritual life of the local people.²

While religious art per se is not the focus of “Retratos,” the exhibition features striking works in related genres such as ecclesiastical portraiture. A late-eighteenth-century *Crowned Nun* by an unidentified artist belongs to a uniquely Mexican image category, *monjas coronados*, commissioned on the occasion of a nun taking her final vows. The subject wears the white habit and blue cape of the Conceptionist order, open only to those of Spanish descent, and the richness of her regalia testifies to the wealth of her family. At the same time, every element in her ensemble is freighted with religious meaning. The picture



Unidentified artist
(Chilean school)
*Doña María Mercedes
de Salas y Corvalán*,
c. 1780, MUSEO
HISTÓRICO NACIONAL,
SANTIAGO, CHILE

has the slightly overburdened glamour of an Italian Renaissance wedding portrait, which proclaimed the wealth and status of the husband while celebrating the beauty and virtue of the bride. The nun's profession was, in fact, a kind of wedding ceremony, a mystical marriage to Christ, as she acknowledged in the words of the rite: "I am the bride of Him whom the angels serve, of Him in whose beauty the sun and the moon are reflected."³ Her regal crown suggests the coronation of the Virgin Mary, while the outsized shield on her chest, the *escudos de monja*, depicts the Immaculate Conception, alluding to the name of her order. The attributes she carries add to the iconographic complexity. The flowering palm foreshadows the saint's heavenly victory. The doll-like statuette of the Christ child she cradles holds the orb of sovereignty and wears a jeweled crown. Images of the Christ child were elaborately dressed and lovingly cared for, not only as altar statues and processional figures but also as devotional objects for individuals. There is a fetishistic quality to this piety, as well as a poignant reminder of the child she will never have. This is not a generalized image but a portrait of a distinct individual, an intense personality caught up in an act of religious theater. Like the mannequin she holds, she has the iconic

stiffness of an effigy carried in a religious procession. These effigies continue to be part of public ceremonies throughout Mexico and South America.⁴

A later portrait of a nun by an unidentified Quito School artist perpetuates the conservative tradition. *Madre Maria Encarnación Regalado* (c. 1860) conflates different phases of her career. Probably painted after her death, the portrait gives her an almost childlike sweetness—she most likely entered the convent between the ages of ten and thirteen—but shows her carrying the crozier signifying her later position as abbess. The most visually arresting part of the composition is her colorful cape, with its flat field of patterning. Pattern plays a notable role in another, more intriguing portrait of the same period, Abundio Rincón's *Fray Francisco Rodriguez, Padre de Cocula* (1853). The bright op-art squares of the rug in his gray-walled room establish perspective, creating a convincing interior space, while registering as jazzy elements on the picture plane. A charming painting of a regional Franciscan church and outbuildings hangs on the wall, and books indicate the village priest's credentials as scholar and teacher. Slightly dwarfed by the tabletop crucifix beside him, his intelligent eyes peering at us through deep blue glasses, Fray Francisco has an idiosyncratic edge that makes the picture seem modern.

Richly iconographic paraphernalia is not limited to members of religious orders. *El Niño José Manuel de Cervantes y Velasco* (1805), by an unidentified Mexican artist, commemorates the death of a little boy. (Portraits of deceased family members continued to be made well into the twentieth century, in photographs, a custom observed in a variety of ethnic traditions.) The *leyenda*, or text, at the bottom of the image informs us that José lived less than a year, but he is depicted as a sturdy toddler, laid out in the costume of Saint Michael the Archangel. His boots, heart-shaped shield and wings are encrusted with bits of jewelry, and the lace of his robe and the bier is delicate. A rich red brocade backdrop suggests an altar frontal. This poignant image brings the power of ritual to a personal loss. Blurring the line between sacred and secular, such images testify to the imaginative energy with which New World artists appropriated Old World iconography. In contrast, the Chilean painter José Gil de Castro depicted five-year-old *José Raymundo Juan-Nepomuceno de Figueroa y Araoz* (1816) not as a saint but as a military cadet, perhaps more in keeping with the unsettled times. Between 1808 and 1824 the Ibero-American vicerealties severed their ties with the Old World in varying degrees, and three centuries of Spanish and Portuguese rule drew to a close. Little José Raymundo died after traveling to Spain with his father, a royalist who didn't even make it there. The widow was left with this memento of her child, in his scarlet and blue uniform, stiffly holding a book and a ball, items he himself chose for the sitting, according to the inscription on the pillar behind him. Not all the images of children here are so specific. *Manuela Gutiérrez (Girl with a Doll)*, 1838, by the provincial Mexican painter José María Estrade, could pass for an example of North American folk art. Curly-haired and barefoot, she cradles a fashion-

plate doll and gestures to a lamb-like white dog. Coral jewelry and a diaphanous white dress lend a touch of elegance to her enfant charm.

Historically, portrait painters have faced the challenge of accommodating the expectations of patrons who see their images as instruments of social status. In this exhibition, questions of national identity complicate that dynamic. The upper classes liked to see themselves in European trappings; fashion was one component in an overall strategy for maintaining power. But such hierarchy generalizations are open to local and individual exceptions, and the whole structure evolves over the centuries. Compare two portraits of socially prominent women from the eighteenth century. *Ana María de la Campa y Cos y Ceballos* (1776), by the Mexican painter Andrés de Islas, stands in front of a conventional drapery swag and holds a flower with exaggerated daintiness. The Marchioness—with her pearl jewelry, elaborate lace gown and *chiqueador* (artificial beauty spot)—seems to be aspiring to inhabit a painting by Joshua Reynolds or Thomas Gainsborough. *Doña María Mercedes de Salas y Corvalán* (c. 1780), by an unidentified Chilean artist, probably comes from a more provincial milieu. She is also a much more compelling personality. Her dress is just as elaborate but more original, with chandelier earrings, pearls around her throat and in her hair, and a wonderful wide, rose-embroidered, gold and lace-trimmed hair ribbon. All of this is used to set off her extraordinary beauty, the haunting dark eyes under Frido Kahlo-ish eyebrows dominating the composition.

With the severing of political ties with the Old World, European-trained artists became a diminishing presence. Locally trained and self-taught artists painted portraits of less aristocratic people. When twentieth-century modernists such as Rivera were looking for indigenous artistic traditions, they found models in some of these vernacular painters. You can understand their excitement looking at *Woman from Puebla with Small Bouquet of Roses* by an unidentified mid-nineteenth-century Mexican artist. The plump, smoothed-out forms of the arms and shoulders instantly suggest Fernando Botero, represented in this exhibition by the amiable group portrait *Joaquín Jean Aberbach and his Family* (1970). But the graphic strength of the features establishes both a Mexican type and an individual woman, a face economically composed with a mole on the upper lip, a red, slightly downturned mouth and clearly defined eyebrows. The crisply articulated petaled sleeves of her blouse are a delectable design element, and the artist shows real skill in capturing the gold filigree of her earrings. A boldly undulating frame shapes the canvas.

Méxicanidad, appreciating indigenous culture as a wellspring of cultural identity, was a cornerstone of the artistic renaissance that followed in the wake of the 1910 Revolution. But this exhibition included works that testified to a keen awareness of ethnic diversity over the centuries. *The Mulattoes of Esmeraldas* (1599) by Andrés Sánchez Galque depicts Don Francisco de Areobe and two companions, part of an elite that ran the coastal settlements of what is

Unidentified artist (Mexican school)
*Woman from Pubela with Small Bouquet
 of Roses*, mid-nineteenth century
 MUSEO NACIONAL DE ARTE,
 CONACULTA-INBA, MEXICO, D.F.



now Ecuador. These converts to Christianity are shown dressed in European finery, probably for official ceremonies in Quito, but they also carry spears and wear tumbaga jewelry, traditional ear and nose rings of gleaming gold. *Indian Lady, Daughter of a Cacique* (1757), by an unidentified Mexican artist, depicts a sixteen-year-old *mestizo* on the verge of entering a convent for indigenous women, although there is nothing specifically religious in her attire or the setting. A standard red drapery swag testifies to the family's importance; her father was a provincial governor, identified on the escutcheon on the wall. She wears European garments ornamented with pearls and other jewels over a *huipil*, a traditional Mexican blouse, and holds a flower and a fan. An even more striking portrait depicts a mid-nineteenth-century *Woman from Babí*, by an unidentified Brazilian artist. Probably a slave in a wealthy household or the free daughter of slaves, this beautiful young Afro-Brazilian wears an off-the-shoulder, European-style evening dress in glossy plum-black and white gloves, but her profusion of gold jewelry is West African in construction.

The Latin American modernists turned away from academicism, like members of the avant-garde everywhere, but they also had a nationalistic agenda. European models were rejected in favor of local history, ancient artifacts and vernacular culture. Yet, if these sophisticated artists were anti-hierarchical, they were never naïve, and their celebration of their homeland was not rooted in isolationism. Diego Rivera, for example, spent a decade in Paris absorbing a range of cosmopolitan influences. His epic portrait of his countryman *Adolfo Best Maugard* (1913) was a highlight of last year's exhibition "The Cubist Paintings of Diego Rivera: Memory, Politics, Place."⁵ The splendid machinery of a giant Ferris wheel in the background recalls the Eiffel Tower



Unidentified artist (Mexican school), *El Niño José Manuel de Cervantes y Velasco*, 1805
PRIVATE COLLECTION, MEXICO

paintings of Robert Delauney. The Barrio exhibition includes a more overtly fractured work of the same year, *The Painter Zinoviev*, a portrait of the Bolshevik painter that has a warmth and physical solidity closer to Juan Gris's brand of Cubism than Picasso's.

Rivera's 1946 *Elisa Saldívar de Gutiérrez Roldán*, in contrast, has the bold, simply modeled forms more familiar from his murals. Green drapery is pulled aside to frame the figure of an attractive woman, the wife of an important collector, seated on a low green stool that, for all its simplicity, suggests a throne. It's a sophisticated portrait that asserts Mexican identity through a number of elements: the traditional braided upswept hair (similar to Frida's but without the cords), ruffles on a full skirt, straw-soled, ankle-wrapped sandals. Another portrait of the same woman decades later, *Elisa Saldívar de Gutiérrez Roldán* (1969) by Rufino Tamayo, has a very different feel. The emphasis is on flat, geometric shapes on the picture plane. The warmth of the skin tones blurs into the russet of hair and into the brownish void of the open doorway behind her. Her sleeveless blue-grey dress is a simple column of color; a pearl earring and ring are neat little circles of cloudy white. The features, even more simplified here than in Rivera's picture, are still arresting, but the overall composition seem to be moving toward a more sun-burned version of a Diebenkorn.

One of the finest Mexican modernists, Maria Izquierdo, is represented here by a major work, *Mis Sobrinas* (1940), painted specifically to be exhibited

at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. A woman in a nineteenth-century-style ensemble is flanked by the nieces, little girls in modern dresses. As Cristina Laporta remarks, the background of lush, stylized vegetation simultaneously alludes to Henri Rousseau, an artist Izquierdo admired, and “to the fake nature backdrops of nineteenth-century photography studios.” Both sophisticated and vigorously vernacular, Izquierdo’s image is fueled by a warm palette of ochers and magentas.⁶

With all this weight of history, the contemporary section seemed something of an afterthought. (Photographic portraits, both high art and vernacular, would make another fascinating exhibition illuminating Latin American culture.) The most striking contemporary work in this show was Nahum Zenil’s *Frida of My Heart*, a hieratically frontal self-portrait in which Frida’s iconic visage appears on Zenil’s bare chest. Frida’s face has morphed into an oversized, anatomical heart, not a sweetly symmetrical valentine, and sprouts branches that send out rich verdant foliage. It carries a wealth of associations, especially devotional images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, wrapped in thorns, and the Virgin Mary’s, pierced with swords. The picture is a powerful homage to a vital spiritual and artistic tradition. El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10029. The exhibition continues at the San Diego Museum of Art through June 12, 2005, and travels to the Bass Museum of Art in Miami (July 23–October 2, 2005), the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. (October 21, 2005–January 8, 2006) and the San Antonio Museum of Art (February 4–April 30, 2006). The exhibition Website is www.retratos.org

NOTES

1. *Retratos: 2,000 Years of Latin American Portraits* (San Antonio Museum of Art, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, El Museo del Barrio, distributed by Yale University Press, 2004), p. 17.
2. Carolyn Dean, “The Renewal of Old World Images and the Creation of Colonial Peruvian Visual Culture” in *Converging Cultures: Art and Identity in Spanish America*, edited by Diana Fane (New York: Brooklyn Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), p. 178.
3. Kirsten Hammer, “*Monjas Coronados*: The Crowned Nuns of Viceregal Mexico” in *Retratos*, p. 91.
4. Two recent New York City exhibitions—“Brazil: Body and Soul” (2001) at the Guggenheim Museum and “The Colonial Andes: Tapestries and Silverwork, 1530–1830” (2004) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—included ritual objects and paintings of historical events, along with contemporary film footage of the living tradition.
5. The exhibition appeared at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., April 4–July 25, 2004, and the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, September 22, 2004–January 12, 2005.
6. I am grateful for these insights to Cristina Laporta, whose manuscript “Imagining Mexico: The Art of Maria Izquierdo, the Delusions of Antonin Artaud” is in preparation for publication.