

• JANUARY 18, 2012

Derivative Works No More

By [JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI](#)

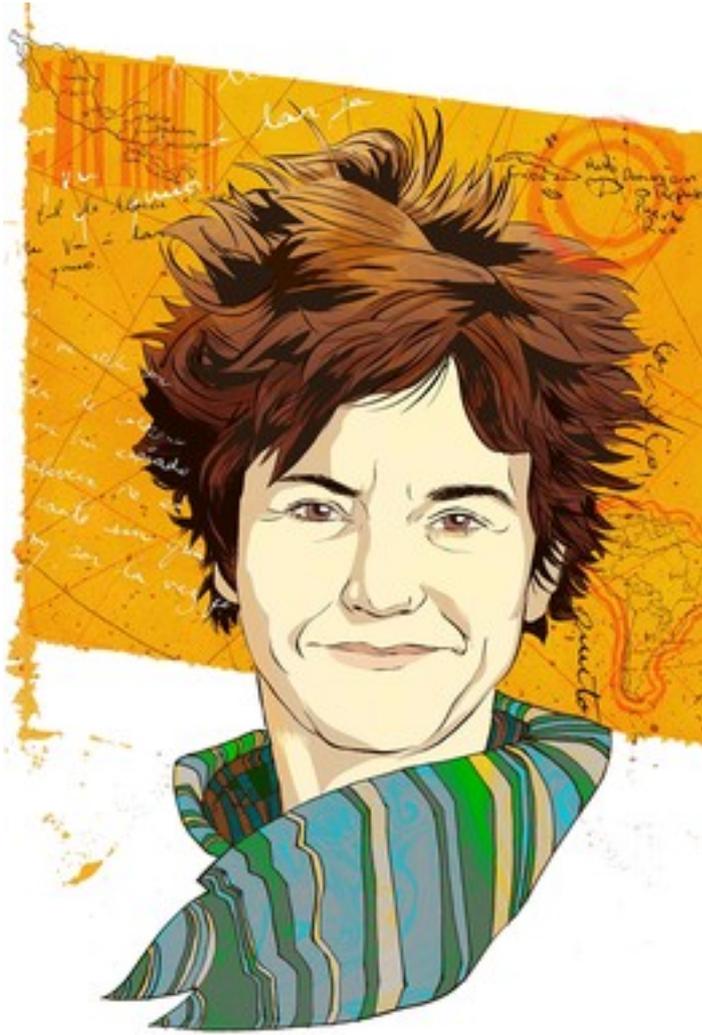
Houston

With her spiked, streaked hair and rapid-fire, exhortatory way of speaking, Mari Carmen Ramírez, the curator of Latin American art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, could easily have been a political agitator. And in her own way, she is. Ms. Ramírez wants to shake up the politics of art history, to prove that Latin American art, far from being derivative, has had its own identity, its own breakthroughs.

What is known around the world about Latin American art, she says—the Mexican Muralists like Diego Rivera, the surrealists like Roberto Matta, the overappreciated drama queen Frida Kahlo, and a few contemporary stars like Gabriel Orozco—is shallow and artificially dictated by the art market. "Certain movements sell," she says, "but 80% to 90% of Latin American art is not well known." Few people know that León Ferrari pioneered written-word paintings, she says by way of example, or anything at all about Grupo Madi, which created a geometrical abstract-art movement.

And when she brings up the recent trend by many artists in the Spanish-speaking world to call themselves "global," she snaps, "that's a red herring. It's because Latin American art is in a subordinate position to Europe and the U.S."

On Thursday, Ms. Ramírez is unleashing her corrective: The museum's 10-year-old International Center for the Arts of the Americas, which she heads, will launch a digital archive of artists' notes and other primary-source materials that scholars around the world will be able to tap to study the ideas, personalities and culture of post-1900 Latin American art. The center will also preview a book she co-edited, "Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?"—the first in a planned 13-volume anthology series called "Critical Documents of 20th-Century Latin American and Latino Art" and co-published by the MFAH and Yale University Press. And the next day, Ms. Ramírez will welcome scholars to an international symposium called "Mining the Archive: New Paths for Latin American/Latino Art Research."



Ryan Inzana/Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

All three are the fruits of an effort, costing \$50 million so far, to catalyze the advanced study of Latin American art—and which constitutes, for Ms. Ramírez, "my life" for the past decade.

A native of Puerto Rico with a doctorate in art history from the University of Chicago, Ms. Ramírez says she brought the idea for the research institute with her when she was hired by the MFAH in 2001. "Peter embraced it," she says, referring to the late Peter Marzio, the museum's director from 1982 through his death in December 2010. The two came to it from different positions, though. Ms. Ramírez, always interested in Latin American art, nevertheless had to start out studying a different area, German art, because no American universities offered a course of study in art from south of the border when she was in graduate school in the 1970s. She was frustrated by that.

Marzio was simply looking around him. "Houston," Ms. Ramírez says, "is almost 40% Latino; 56% of the children in Houston schools are Latino; Latinos are a targeted community of this

museum." Marzio hired her to step up the exhibition and collecting of Latin American art knowing full well that "you cannot have an ambitious program without a research component," she says.

Other museums collect contemporary Latin American art, of course—dating back at least to the 1930s, when the Museum of Modern Art, under its first director, Alfred H. Barr, took an interest. Since 1979, when Sotheby's held the first auction specifically for this category, a class of collectors has led others into Latin art. But none have been as bold as the MFAH.

In an odd way, being a 21st-century institution has helped the International Center for the Arts of the Americas, which is gathering materials from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and U.S. as well as South America for the archive. "Technology was on our side," Ms. Ramírez says. "We didn't have to acquire any documents." Rather, they had only to negotiate the right to digitize them. "Only a few families said no," she says, adding that all the documents in the archive are watermarked and "there are all sorts of disclaimers" about credit and reuse.

Still, Ms. Ramírez says, there was no roadmap, no model. There was only the enormous goal and a sense of urgency, a fear that much documentation would disappear if it weren't captured soon. But when the MFAH gathered 35 scholars to discuss creating an archive, everyone realized that they couldn't do a complete archive of Latin American art even if the start date for artists' inclusion was 1900. "It was humongous," she says. Instead, the museum decided to "do it as an editorial program. We are not digitizing everything; we focused on what's useful for teaching." As a practical matter, at least for now, the center also excluded some smaller countries, including Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and those in Central America.

Then the Center established teams of researchers in 16 cities, from Buenos Aires and Valparaiso to Los Angeles and New York. Partnering with local universities or foundations, they scoured local archives and repositories owned by artists, their families, universities or museums, to identify, scan and catalog the primary source documents, selectively, for inclusion in the archive. Not that this was easy. For one thing, "every country has a different legal system," Ms. Ramírez says. And when the center supplied computers to various teams, some got stuck in customs because no one had checked up on import duties.

"We made some mistakes," Ms. Ramírez allows, adding that "the first two or three years were the hardest," just keeping the effort alive logistically and administratively. But during the decade, the teams jelled, and the Center has held project conferences from time to time. Already, scholars have gained insights. For example, the Chilean team had tried with difficulty to track artists that, they learned from the California team, had migrated to California and further into the U.S. during the Pinochet regime. And initially, Ms. Ramírez

had asked a team from the University of Notre Dame to be part of the California project. "The Notre Dame people said no, we think there's an important group of documents here," she says. They were right, even though "it's been difficult for them because they had to track down documents artist by artist. There are no scholars like there are for the Chicano movement in California."

This week, at the launch, some 2,500 documents from Argentina, Mexico and the American Midwest, all in English and Spanish, will go live. More tranches will follow over the next three years from Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and around the U.S., for a total of 10,000 documents by 2015. "Then we'll discuss what happens next—it's infinite," Ms. Ramírez says, mentioning that the archive could expand to other countries.

"There is a real need for these materials because many universities do now teach Latin American art," Ms. Ramírez says. "They've been using exhibition catalogs as textbooks."

The new scholarship that ensues, Ms. Ramírez strongly believes, will surprise art historians, not to mention the public. "We are still a long way from recognizing that Latin American artists have made original contributions to art," she says. "This project will be a key to that—people will have access to what these artists were thinking."

Ms. Dobrzynski writes about the arts for many publications and blogs at www.artsjournal.com/realcleararts.

Copyright 2011 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com