



Building Identities: Ancient Legacies and Modern Visions in Architecture of the Americas

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Review of *Antes de America: Fuentes originarias en la cultura moderna*, an exhibition at the at Fundación Juan March, Madrid, Spain, 6 October 2023–10 March 2024, curated by Manuel Fontán del Junco, María Toledo Gutiérrez, and Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales. This exhibition explored the artistic and architectural connections between Spain and the Americas, focusing on the reinterpretation of the forms and meanings of ancient Indigenous cultures of the American continent from the late 18th century to the early 20th century. It also highlighted the fascination with 'the ancestral', a paradigm that has significantly influenced the aesthetics of both the recent past and the present.

Keywords: exhibition; architectural revival; national identity; Ameridian cultures; modern culture



The Indian critical theorist and scholar Homi K. Bhabha has remarked that ‘nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time [...]. Such an image of the nation—or narration—might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the West’ (1990:1). This insightful reflection resonated in the exhibition *Antes de America: Fuentes originarias en la cultura moderna* hosted from 6 October 2023 to 10 March 2024, at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid, Spain (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1: Panoramic photo of the exhibition. © Dolores Iglesias, Fundación Juan March.

The exhibition delved into the myth of time and the construction of identity in American nations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paying particular attention to identity formation in the wake of independence. It highlighted both the role of colonial, Spanish influences and of the revival of the languages, forms, and meanings of Amerindian cultures and also staged the reinterpretation of these aesthetic elements in the arts and architecture. The exhibition not only elaborated in the construction of identity in American nations at this critical point in time but also showed how the aesthetics of indigenous cultures continue to influence contemporary aesthetic conceptions (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2: Héctor Gresbelin and Luis Perlotti, model for the independence monument project in Quebrada de Humahuaca, 1925. Plaster model with a patinated wood base. Luis Perlotti Sculpture Museum, Buenos Aires. © Dolores Iglesias, Juan March Foundation.

Directed by an impressive curatorial team, the exhibition included over 600 works by nearly 300 artists staged within a 500 square-meter area. The exhibit showcased a diverse collection of pieces and documents, including paintings, sculptures, drawings, graphic works, architectural designs, photographs, models, furniture, decorative items, scenographies, ceramics, books, magazines, posters, and record covers and was accompanied by a catalog, available in both Spanish and English. This publication features an introductory text by the curators that outlines the main themes of the project, its methodology, and potential future directions.

The diverse array of material and audiovisual supports was organized into four thematic periods. The first, titled ‘Rescue and Staging of the Pre-Columbian (1840-1910)’, portrayed a romantic vision of the American continent as recorded in the visual records of European travelers and scientific explorations, records that created an extensive ornamental archive that significantly influenced architectural styles that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second segment, ‘First Modernity: The Invention of an ‘American Art’ (1910-1970)’, constituted the core of the exhibition and demonstrated how American nations reinterpreted Amerindian aesthetic languages. They integrated them through national policies in school education, arts and crafts schools, and universities, a process that culminated

in an architectural practice grounded in formal Indigenist roots. The third segment, 'Geometry, Sign, and Amerindian Color (1940-1970)', focused on how the exploration of archaeological sites contributed to a visual register that resulted in the incorporation of ideas of Amerindian urban spatiality into architectural projects. The final segment, 'A Multidirectional Era: Variations of Half a Century (1970-2020)', featured works influenced by both elite and mass cultures exemplified by a postmodern architecture that revisited Amerindian aesthetic elements in order to forge new identities (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Emilio Rodríguez Larrain, *Refugio de los Andes 1*, 1985. Mixed media on canvas, 140.3 x 130 cm. Museo de Arte de Lima. © Contemporary Art Acquisitions Committee, 2011.

Visitors to the exhibition were presented a range of works attempting to understand and revive the aesthetics of Amerindian cultures. While architecture was not the central focus of this exhibition, it played a significant role in the first two thematic sections, tracing an important journey from 1840 to 1970. This part of the exhibition showed how, in line with Bhabha's ideas, an initial exotic fascination informed the architecture of this period, a preoccupation that then evolved into a political quest for identity. The impact of the Amerindian revival can be seen in the works of Frederick Catherwood and Frank Lloyd Wright, both of whom were inspired by Mayan culture and significantly influenced this new architectural style. In South America, it was characterized by a return to Inca or Tiwanaku aesthetics in Peru and Bolivia, as exemplified by the designs of Polish architect Ricardo Jara Malachowski for the Larco Herrera Archaeological Museum (now the Museum of Peruvian Culture), the mining exhibition building in Lima by Peruvian architect Héctor Velarde in 1924, and the Posnansky House (1917), now the National Museum of Archaeology in La Paz, designed by Arturo Posnansky.

These examples underscore the profound impact of the Amerindian revival on the architecture of the Americas. The exhibition was unique in its integrating this architectural revival into an artistic universe that responded to the aesthetic demands of a specific period in the history of architecture. Its afterlife will have a deep influence on the development of our discipline, not only because the exhibition documented in great detail both Amerindian and colonial revivals, the result of years of research by Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, but also because it challenged our discipline to engage with Indigenous cultures through innovative theoretical and political approaches that showed how these cultures were active participants in redefining architectural understanding and how they offer alternative solutions to the crises posed by the Anthropocene and Capitalocene in the built environment.¹

Note

¹ Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales is a professor at the University of Granada specializing in modern and contemporary Latin American art. See <https://www.ugr.es/~rgutierr/publicaciones2.html> for a list of his publications.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

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