

## Book Review

– *Nelson Rockefeller y la diplomacia del arte en América Latina*, by Andrea Matallana, Eudeba, 2021

Based on extensive archival research, this volume contributes to a growing body of research on the history of a US wartime agency led by Nelson A. Rockefeller, which came to be known as the Office of (the Coordinator) of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA or OIAA). Established in August 1940, the OCIAA engaged in a wide variety of activities destined to ward off Nazi German and Axis commercial and cultural inroads into the hemisphere by improving inter-American co-operation and deepening US influence in Latin America. Much of the research published over the last four decades focuses, as does this volume, on policies and programs aiming at hearts and minds. Yet, whereas most of this research explores the more openly propagandistic activities of the OCIAA's film, radio, and press divisions, the agency's efforts to promote cultural exchanges in the field of fine arts, until recently, have attracted less in-depth attention and particularly when it comes to the agency's engagement with South America. While acknowledging the privileged position held by Mexican arts as a centre of attention in the United States, this study by and large concentrates on South America and, more specifically, the Southern Cone and Brazil, when it sets out to analyse how the OCIAA's art diplomacy worked on the ground, i.e., how it was received and interacted with relevant players in the realms of the fine arts and the public at large.

It is important to note that this is the first book-length study on the topic in Spanish, written by an Argentine author trained in sociology and history. More to the point, it addresses a wider audience that may not be well acquainted with the established historiography produced mainly by art historians in the United States. Thus, Matallana's explorations into the formation of the close-nit circle that shaped the OCIAA's programs in the field of fine arts may come as a surprise to readers, who associate Nelson Rockefeller with little more than being the scion of a family engaged in the exploration of the hemisphere's oil reserves. After all, some of Rockefeller's artistic inner circle, including Lincoln Kirstein, during the 1930s had raised hackles for curating exhibitions that, to more conservative quarters in the art establishment, smacked of bolshevism (p. 26).

Chapter 1 opens with a biographical sketch of the Rockefeller family and their interests in the fine arts which gave rise to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. As is well-known, MoMA would be the linchpin steering many of the cultural exchanges promoted during the war. Yet, while giving due attention to the East Coast establishment that coalesced around MoMA, in the following chapters Matallana highlights the importance of Grace Morley, the director of the San Francisco Museum of Art who, as an expert summoned by the OCIAA, comes across as the best prepared and most observant, if least studied, among the agency's advisors.

Chapter 2 sketches the historical context that gave rise to the OCIAA and to the conviction that to be effective, US foreign policies toward Latin America required to be complemented by more resolute efforts on the cultural front, not only to counteract the influence of Nazi Germany and her allies but also, and particularly in South America, as a means to wean artists and the public at large from looking toward Europe as the guiding star on the cultural horizon.

By and large, suggests Matallana, such efforts coalesced in a two-track strategy. The first focused on acquainting Latin American audiences with the distinctive artistic advancements of the United States, a strategy exemplified by two of the largest and most costly wartime endeavours in the field of modern art discussed in chapters 3 and 4: the travelling exhibition *Contemporary North American Painting* and Lincoln Kirstein's *American Ballet Caravan*, both of which circulated through various South American countries. Matallana's explorations into the difficulties encountered by the OCIAA's emissaries when preparing and executing these two major efforts to reach out to larger audiences add important nuances to our understanding of the varied rates of success they achieved in different locales.

The second strategy, explored in chapter 5, focused on a drive to systematically acquire outstanding Latin American works of art to be circulated in the United States, via MoMA and other avenues. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the selection of artists and artworks considered propitious to impress US audiences with the achievements and distinctiveness of Latin America's modernist culture was a contentious issue and resulted, as Matallana reminds us, in a rather uneven representation concerning the national origin of the artworks displayed. That is, the canon of Latin American modern art as promoted in the United States focused primarily on Mexico and, particularly, on Mexico's muralists (p. 144, 161). The exigencies of wartime politics, moreover, further complicated the selection process and became subject to considerable tensions among the OCIAA's art emissaries. The latter differed sharply, for instance, on the quality and originality of the abstractionist paintings of Argentina's Emilio Pettoruti and, more importantly, as Matallana suggests, on Pettoruti's political orientation. Whereas Kirstein, who in his visits to Buenos Aires preferred to network with artists and intellectuals with pronounced antifascist credentials (pp. 94-95), reported on Pettoruti as being a fascist (p. 122), Morley did her outmost to protect Pettoruti's reputation and secure a solo exhibition for him with MoMA. This

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indeed, took place, but not with MoMA. To Pettoruti's great disappointment, his solo exhibition came to be relegated to a venue of little prestige where it attracted few visitors (pp. 122-134). As Matallana insists throughout her explorations into the nitty-gritty realities of the agency's art diplomacy, the exigencies of wartime politics have to be taken seriously when it comes to understanding the peculiarities of the cultural exchanges promoted by the OCIAA.

The concluding chapter elaborates on the basic premise of this study, i.e., that US art diplomacy, intensified during World War II under the guidance of the OCIAA, was part and parcel of an exercise of power in the service of constructing an informal empire. At least to this reviewer, this seems to be a premise that is undeniable but would have benefited from a more sustained theoretical effort aimed at clarifying what exactly art diplomacy can do as a service to empire building.

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