

Dealers bone up on their Spanish as market develops

A new generation of collectors is emerging but it will take a couple of generations before the market gains depth

Miami may be in the US, but from an economic perspective it is best viewed as the capital city of Latin America's elite. Many of the continent's wealthiest families have sunk fortunes into mansions or luxury condominiums along the city's oceanfront, and even those without such prodigious pieds-à-terre know Miami intimately.

This Latin connection played a huge role in the choice of Miami as the site for ArtBasel's American offensive. Yet when the city's selection was announced in 2000, this seemed a pretty precarious justification to many art-market insiders.

Three years later, there is no question that the Latin American market for international contemporary art has expanded rapidly. Suddenly, European dealers have started boning up on their Spanish. When event coordinator Isabela Mora arranged a tour of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Buenos Aires this September, the group of A-list collectors, curators and dealers she assembled easily equalled that of the best gallery dinners in New York or London.

Four years ago, Ms. Mora recalls, it was a different story: "I was doing projects in Europe and had to convince people that Latin American collectors such as Eugenio Lopez or Juan Vergez were important. Now people would kill to have them present anywhere."

Most close observers agree the watershed event in

validating Latin America to the international market was the 2000 opening of Mr Lopez's La Coleccion Jumex in Mexico City. His peers saw that art-collecting conferred social status, galleries started opening, and Mexican artists began to pop up regularly in biennials. "International dealers now think of Mexico as a market with great potential," says Zelika Garcia, co-founder of Mexico City's MACO fair, the April 2004 debut of which included participants such as Happy Lion from Los Angeles, Arndt + Partner from Berlin and Michele Maccarone from New York. And though Mr Lopez has justifiably drawn the international spotlight, Ms Garcia's husband Enrique Rubio points out that the country also has a host of other major collectors, such as Agustin Coppel, Ignacio Garza-Medina, and Patrick Charpenel.

Recently, the country's second largest city, Guadalajara, has become a nexus of new collecting (and as reported in the December edition of The Art Newspaper, the city appears to have landed the Guggenheim's Latin American franchise after the expansionist museum's Rio efforts foundered). "A few years ago, only three people were collecting international contemporary art," recalls José Noe, a collector whose family ceramics factory has executed projects with artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jason Rhoades and John Baldessari. "Now there are 15 to 20 collectors and they

immediately started to collect beyond Mexican artist—artists such as Thomas Ruff, Jim Lambie, Angelo Bulloch, Jorge Pardo, Yang Fudong and Yutaka Sone." Mr Noe has actively promoted collecting among his peers, bringing them along to fairs and organising galleries such



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as New York's Casey Kaplan and David Zwirner, 1301 PE of Los Angeles and Berlin's Arndt and Partner to make private presentations to incipient Guadalajara collectors.

Such personal touches are critical in Latin America. "People in Europe and the US misinterpret Latin culture—they assume that because so much of it is sexy and sensual, personal relationships should be easy to establish," says New York art advisor Darlene Lutz, who has added several Latin American clients recently. "But business relationships

require a lot of time to build and a real effort to understand the culture, more so even than in Japan." Even in restaurants and hotels, Enrique Rubio points out, a certain level of attention, or even flirtation, plays a critical role in sealing the deal, and the Mexican market will surely favour dealers whose tactics might be considered pushy or presumptuous in, say, Germany or England.

While Mexico may be the flashpoint of the Latin market, Ms Mora points out that there are new developments across much of the continent. "Buenos Aires is changing a lot," she notes. "Juan Vergez is one of the most passionate collectors I have ever seen. He buys huge installations and installs them in his warehouses, in a really lively way. And now many of his friends are also getting involved."



Encouraging his fellow Mexicans to collect: José Noe

To Argentina's north, Brazil has the longest history of collecting on the entire

continent, including the Chateaubriands of São Paulo, whose Old Master collection underpins the MASP museum. Currently, the tax laws make importing international art onerous, but for collectors with lavish means, such as metals magnate Bernardo Paz, that is clearly no obstacle. Part of Ms Mora's September tour was the over-the-top opening of Mr Paz's Centro de Arte Contemporânea Inhotim, an arts complex erected in three years with major works installed from artists such as Albert Oehlen, Dan Graham and Janet Cardiff. "I can't understand a world divided into foreign and Brazilian artists," Mr Paz explains. "Humanity prevails over cultural differences, especially today in our globalised world."

Introduced to Paz by Roland Augustine, of Manhattan gallery Luhring Augustine, who has been active in Latin America for more than a decade, Berlin dealer Max Hetzler travelled to Brazil three times in the last three years. This year, he had three German artists in the São Paulo Biennial: Thomas Struth, Vera Lutter and Oehlen. He also imported work from Brazil, showing installation artists Ernesto Neto, Beatriz Milhazes and, soon, Marape. "I love the country for its culture more than for its art market," Hetzler says. "But I have to say that when I spoke with the dealers and collectors there during the São Paulo biennial, you could see a really heartfelt passion for contemporary art."

That said, German dealer Karsten Greve says he is still waiting for the promised surge of Latin collectors at ABMB. "There's no doubt Latin America has a huge potential, but I think if I wanted to really reach the Latin market, I would do better to go to São Paulo for a month during the biennial. Also, what I really miss here is the Latin American curators. I think for those who are not consulting private collectors, coming to the fair is too expensive, so maybe the fair should focus on inviting them." Then again, Greve's prices may simply be too high for many of the new Latin collectors, who may have to work up to buying pieces in the six-figure-plus price ranges common among classic contemporary art.

Indeed, despite the prominence of collectors such as Mr Vergez, Ms Lopez or Ms Paz, and the surge in art-market activity, it's important to keep things in perspective: the Latin market for international contemporary art still lacks depth. And it may take another generation or two for a truly substantial cohort to emerge. "Art collecting is fashionable now among the Latin American elite," observes 43-year-old collector Luiz Augusto Teixeira de Freitas, a Rio native. "Suddenly, it's trendy to have interesting artists at your home. But even among the very rich collectors of contemporary art remain a small minority, because the level of education and information on contemporary art remains so very different from places such as Germany."

Marc Siegler