

North American Museums and Latin Countries: Can International Civic Engagement Exist?

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In 1998, the Board of Directors of the American Association of Museums began to explore the potential for a renewed dynamic engagement between museums and communities through its *Museums & Community Initiative*.¹ In the mid to late 1990s, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York established significant arts-education programs in New York public schools and Latin American schools. The schools in New York and Latin America have been able to use art as a common language and create civic connections between North American and Latin American institutions through the museums' methodologies and curricula. Can the civic mission of the two American museums be a catalyst for civic dialogue and relationships between the North and Latin American communities? This paper will examine the international civic bonds between these two United States museums and Latin American schools, and the regional civic cooperation amongst Latin American communities that have consequently emerged.

The Guggenheim and MoMA had established innovative, respected, and well-grounded arts-education programs in New York City public schools for over a decade before they built new social networks and affiliations with organizations and communities abroad. Through the Guggenheim's *Learning Through Art* (LTA) program and MoMA's *Visual Thinking Curriculum* (VTC), civic conversations between Latin American school officials, corporate sponsors, private collectors, and U.S. museum educators took place in both New York and Latin American communities in the mid- to late-1990s. In 1995, the Guggenheim's LTA program secured international program partnerships with Mexico City and Quito, Ecuador. In 1995, the *Aprendiendo a Través del Arte* (AAA), the Guggenheim's cross-cultural arts-education program was established.² As stated in the *2000-2001 Annual Newsletter*, one of the Guggenheim's primary goals for these partnerships was "to offer students outside of New York the opportunity to 'learn through art,'" and to allow "for a cross-cultural exchange between students in different locations."³ Students in New York City, Mexico City and Ecuador have engaged in art-exchange projects continually since the initiation of the AAA program.

The Guggenheim facilitated a healthy forum for civic cooperation between New York and Latin American community members through its arts-education program. An international civic dialogue began during the initial launch of AAA in Mexico City, soon after the program won approval from the Secretary of Public Education in March 1995.⁴ As reported by Abigail Diner in the Guggenheim's *1998-1999 Assessment Report for Mexico's AAA Program*, multiple civic meetings were held during the 1995-1996 school-year between local teaching-artists, classroom teachers, the Guggenheim's Education Director, Mexico City's Vice Minister of the Secretary of Public Education and Culture, and the cultural advisor and former attaché of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico.⁵ All of these diverse community members of international communities attended meetings that involved civic conversations related to the issues of the AAA program's funding, curriculum approval, and teacher training program in the Mexican elementary schools. Through these meetings classroom teachers, teaching artists, and officials of the Secretary of Public Education

learned about LTA's methodology, artist-teacher collaborative planning, and program operations.⁶

Ecuador's AAA program, part of the *Integration Program of the Ministry of Education and Culture*, was approved by its Secretary of Public Education and Culture, and has been supported by both the Guggenheim and a major Ecuadorian corporate funder, Fundación El Comercio.⁷ El Comercio provided ample free press for the program in its regional newspaper and affiliated magazines. Press articles included illustrations of the children's artwork, positive testimonials of teachers, parents, and children about the program's importance and productivity, upcoming community events, and a call for *Padrinos* or patrons willing to share their resources and support the program on an annual membership of \$60 dollars.⁸ Additionally, participants of the LTA program helped maintain the program by generating supplementary funds from the printing and selling of Christmas cards with images of children's artwork from the AAA program.

Following a similar path, MoMA's VTC program was an "inquiry-based method of exploring art" and aimed to "develop students' thinking skills by looking at and discussing art."⁹ The program specifically targeted students in grades 4 to 6, and was adopted in schools in Caracas, Venezuela in 1998, and in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2001, as *Programa de Pensamiento Visual* (PPV). Instead of having children express their creativity by making art, as in the Guggenheim's LTA program, students in the VTC program learned to observe, describe, interpret, and discuss the art slides of works from their local museums' collection. Questions such as, "What is going on in this painting?" and "What do you see that makes you say that?" provided a forum for discussion by the students of an artwork.¹⁰ The program was observed and evaluated by Shari Tishman of Harvard University's *Project Zero* in 1999, and she assessed that the VTC program ultimately strengthened the students' observation and analytical skills.¹¹

As in Mexico City and Ecuador, the civic cooperation present in the Venezuelan and Argentine communities was evident from the new partnerships that developed among communities' local and national museums, cultural centers and private collections. The PPV program in Venezuela was fully endorsed with the sponsorship of the private art collection administered by the Fundación Patricia y Gustavo Cisneros.¹² Civic bonding began in Venezuela when MoMA educators met repeatedly with the director of the Colección Cisneros, Rafael A. Romero, and with curators and educators from Venezuela's national museum Galería de Arte Nacional. Besides training local teachers with PPV's methodology, MoMA educators created an entirely new curriculum to integrate Venezuela's art collection and fit the existing curricula of their schools. According to MoMA's Education department files, members from each Venezuelan art institution were eager to have their art collections used for slide discussion in the PPV program. Venezuelan art institutions furthermore collaborated in the writing of the PPV curriculum for their elementary and middle schools.¹³

In Argentina, the PPV program was initiated by the president of the Fundación Arte Viva, Frances Reynolds Marinho, who had been intrigued by MoMA's VTC program. Civic collaboration was present in 2000, when both Marinho and MoMA's Education Director met with Buenos Aires school officials, museum and foundation directors, and educational professionals to integrate the PPV program into the Argentine schools.¹⁴ The Secretary of Education and Culture approved the program in 2001. Museums participating in the PPV program include the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Museo de Arte Moderno and Museo de Artistas Argentinos.¹⁵ As part of a special request from Argentina's National Secretary of

Education, MoMA planned to further expand its PPV program to the rest of the country, beginning with the northeast region of Argentina. According to Argentina's 2003 PPV *Annual Report*, the program's nationwide approach included the provinces of Cordoba, Mendoza and Buenos Aires.¹⁶ MoMA planned to work with more public schools, the government's Education Office, and local museums in each of these areas.

Both the Guggenheim's and MoMA's arts-education programs have created forums for civic cooperation and civic dialogue between New York and several Latin American countries by using art as a common link. What began as local civic collaboration between these museums and their immediate geographic communities has developed into an international civic dialogue with Latin American communities. Although both museums implemented the structure of their U.S. programs in the Latin American elementary and middle schools, Latin American countries ultimately used their own national art collections, teachers, teaching-artists and educators for the programs, and customized program formats for the needs of each particular school. As a result of these international partnerships, institutions in both U.S. and Latin American countries have formed lasting relationships. The Guggenheim's and MoMA's decisions to build new social networks and affiliations with organizations and communities abroad has benefited more people than ever imagined. One can only hope that more North American museums become involved in extending their arts-education programs to more Latin American communities.

¹ American Association of Museums Board of Directors, "AAM Board of Directors: Museums and Community Resolution," American Association of Museums, <http://www.aam-us.org/initiatives/m&c/resolution.cfm>, accessed June 11, 2004.

² Abigail Diner, *Assessment of School Year 1998-1999: Aprendiendo A Través del Arte, Mexico, An Educational Program Partner of Learning Through Art/The Guggenheim Museum Children's Program*, Department of Education Files, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, August 1999, pp. 4-5

³ "The Guggenheim's Museum Children's Program: Learning Through Art," *Annual Newsletter* 11 (2000-01 school year), p. 16.

⁴ The LTA program was proposed by Mexico's *Centro Mexicano Para la Filantropía* (Mexican Center for Philanthropy), which strongly suggested that local teaching-artists be used for their Mexican elementary schools. Diner, p. 4-5.

⁵ Ibid..

⁶ There were also several fund-raising meetings in September of 1995 between the Cultural advisor, the former attaché of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, foundations and corporations to determine support for the AAA program. At this time, the MIRA Foundation made a one-time grant of \$25,000 to support the pilot program. According to a conversation in November 2003 with Sharon Vastky, Senior Education Manager at the Guggenheim Museum, the Education department, together with the museum, has to raise at least \$20,000 every year for the AAA program in Mexico City. In addition, the museum provides all artistic materials to all the schools in the program.

⁷ "Programa Aprendiendo A Través del Arte," *Familia*, Ecuador, May 25, 2003, p. 13.

⁸ "Una Ventana Abierta para la Imaginación," *El Comercio*, Ecuador, May 30, 2002, p. B6;

"Padrino de Arte, por USD 60," *El Comercio*, November 6, 2002, p. B6; "Aprendiendo A Través del Arte Prepara su Gran Exposición," *El Comercio*, May 12, 2003, p. B12; "Programa Aprendiendo A Través del Arte," *Familia*, May 25, 2003, p.12-13; "Los Niños y el Arte en AAA," *El Comercio*, June 5, 2003, p. B4; "Los Niños Demuestran que la Medida del Arte es la Honestidad," *El Comercio*, June 29, 2003, p. C7.

⁹ Shari Tishman, *Investigating the Educational Impact and the Potential of the Museum of Modern Art's Visual Thinking Curriculum: Final Report*, Harvard Project Zero, November 1999, p. 1.

¹⁰ Cynthia Nachmani, "School Programs at The Museum of Modern Art," *MoMA Magazine*, September 1998, p. 6. See also "Program Overview, 1992-93," in the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Education Archives Pamphlet File, pp. 1, 4.

¹¹ Tishman, p. 1.

¹² Education, International Program, "Programa Pensamiento Visual, Venezuela," The Museum of Modern Art, <http://moma.org/education/venezuela.html>, accessed June 14, 2004.

¹³ "The Programa de Pensamiento Visual, Venezuela (PPV)," Department of Education Files, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹⁴ Education, International Program, "Programa de Pensamiento Visual, Argentina," The Museum of Modern Art, <http://moma.org/education/argentina.html> (accessed June 14, 2004).

¹⁵ "Programa de Pensamiento Visual, Buenos Aires, Argentina: 2003 report," *Annual Report*, Department of Education Files, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.