

John Angeline, "An Abstraction of The Americas"

By now exhibitions that seek to situate modernism in ancient or non-Western sources (usually labeled as Primitive art) have become so commonplace that an extended body of literature has developed on the practice and rarely do further explorations in this vein yield anything new. Too often the dialogue between Primitive and Modern is one-sided, usually (but not always) favoring the Modern and using the older works as sources and anticipations of an art that their makers never had in mind. In far too many cases, the older, indigenous artwork is justified and of interest only so far as it resembles or inspired some 20th century European work, and the connections between the two rarely transcend the superficial. With this in mind, North and South Connected managed in many ways to rise above the norm for this type of exhibition.

The curator, Cesar Paternosto - himself a working artist - has assembled a small but compelling group of works from which many intersections can be observed. As an artist, Paternosto has been very inspired by the architecture and textile arts of Peru's Middle Horizon Period (c. 500-800 AD), both in the intricacies of their physical construction and the geometric motifs that they display. Paternosto has done a great deal of research on this art, and he sees these patterns as being full of meaning, relating to the sacred in architecture. By choosing to see these geometric abstractions as more than just formal devices, Paternosto is able to make connections to modern art that surmount the merely aesthetic and look to a deeper understanding.

Some of the artists in the show are to be expected. Joaquin Torres-Garcia is of course given a sort of pride of place. Although his art, and that of members of his Taller, has been shown a great deal recently, the works selected here seem fresh and in their element. Far too often Torres-Garcia is seen in relation to Cubism and the School of Paris. This exhibition enables the viewer to actually see the indigenous South American aspects that he brought to his art, so that a painting like *Physique* of 1929 reads first and foremost as a Nasca abstraction or depiction of Incan architecture, and only as a cubist-derived composition lastly. Likewise, the inclusion of Adolph Gottlieb's *Pictograph* of 1944 tightens the connection between Torres-Garcia and Gottlieb, and therefore between Gottlieb and Meso-American art. This aspect of Gottlieb's art has never been so vivid and apparent. Some of the strongest aspects of the exhibition lie with artists who are less frequently connected in the literature to Pre-Columbian art. The outstanding artists in this vein are Josef and Anni Albers. While the Albers' trips to Central and South America were numerous and well-documented, their art is still consistently seen as an extension of technocratic Bauhaus geometric functionalism. Seeing their Works alongside these older tapestries and connecting their forms to Incan stone masonry adds a new dimension to how one regards their art. Similarly, Alfred Jensen's *Magic 4* and Louise Nevelson's *Dawn Column III*, seen in this context give us additional ways to consider artists whose works had seemingly been labeled and filed away some time ago.

Paternosto has managed a sophisticated exhibition that satisfies many needs simultaneously. He has made a strong and visually enriching case for the role that the textile arts and architecture from regions such as Peru and Mexico played on a disparate range of modern artists. He has also shed new light and understanding on how we can read and appreciate the older art. Thus we can actually map shared resonances between the works, rather than telling a simple story of cause-and-effect. By including contemporary artists from Latin America as well, we see how the dialogues are not unidirectional. We also get to see a body of art that has ties to indigenous art of the Americas which is not trying to look "naive" or appropriate a "folk" aesthetic. This exploration of related sympathies is what allows for many cross-connections and references that do not depend strictly upon shared techniques or appearance. Paternosto has moved beyond presenting a case of intergenerational imitation to actually get at the spirit that informs the work.

John Angeline

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