

ART

Decades of Latin-American Artists In a Contemporary Hispanic Setting

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

THE BRONX

ESTABLISHED in 1971, the Bronx Museum of the Arts spent its first 11 years tucked away in the rotunda of the County Courthouse. It was a modest operation, but it seemed to do the job, which was to bring culture to a poor community. One of the shows of that era that lingers was of the originals for science fiction illustrations; another was of contemporary abstractions painted entirely in black. Both were well attended.

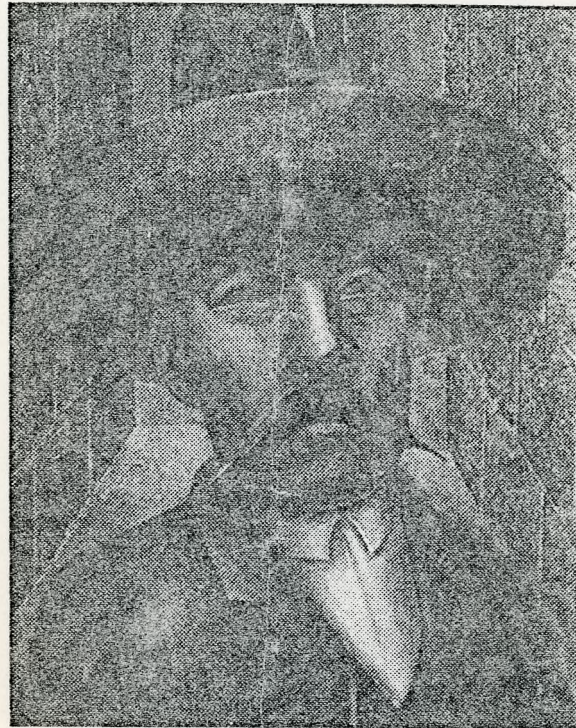
Since acquiring its present premises at 165th Street and Grand Concourse, in 1982, the museum has taken on an institutional dignity and has built an ambitious program of exhibitions. But despite this and its brand-new atrium, it keeps faith with its constituents, whom it defines as 1.5 million people living in the nation's poorest Congressional district.

Many of those people are of Hispanic origin, and that, coupled with its sensitivity to the needs of all ethnic groups, makes the Bronx Museum the best possible setting for "The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970." The show, a selection of 220 works by 136 artists from Central and South America and the Caribbean, is the work of the museum's director, Luis Cancel, an American of Puerto Rican descent who writes about his subject in the catalogue with a remarkable combination of insight and disinterest.

The survey of 20th-century Puerto Rican art that was making the rounds earlier this year was made memorable by a catalogue that contained as much information about the island as about its art. Still, this is as nothing when compared with the 343-page book complementing the Bronx show, which does more or less the same job for Mexico, explores the "Latin American presence," its contributions and responses to art developments in New York City before and after World War II and includes a substantial chapter on Puerto Rico, which it calls "a special case."

A random sampling indicates that this book, too, is very readable. But though there's no attempt to rewrite history, some contributors, in the effort to give Hispanic artists their due, may have rushed to the other extreme. Writing about Conceptualism and Performance Art, Carla Stellweg makes much of a mattress eviscerated and then burned by Rafael Montanez-Ortiz, in 1961, but gives not so much as a nod to Robert Rauschenberg, who had attacked a mattress a year or two before, although probably more in playfulness than fury.

Those interested by who did what first will find plenty to keep them busy, but there are more compelling reasons for catching this show. Among them is the chance to see a photograph of Diego Rivera's sketch for the Rockefeller Center mural (later destroyed) and to wonder how his patron managed to sniff out Lenin's head among all the others. Another is the sizable gouaches that make it seem as if the Afro-Cuban painter, Wilfredo Lam, appropriated African forms from Picasso then added something of his own that made them more African. All the Frida Kahlos are unforgettable in a nasty way. But the artist, who was the wife of Diego

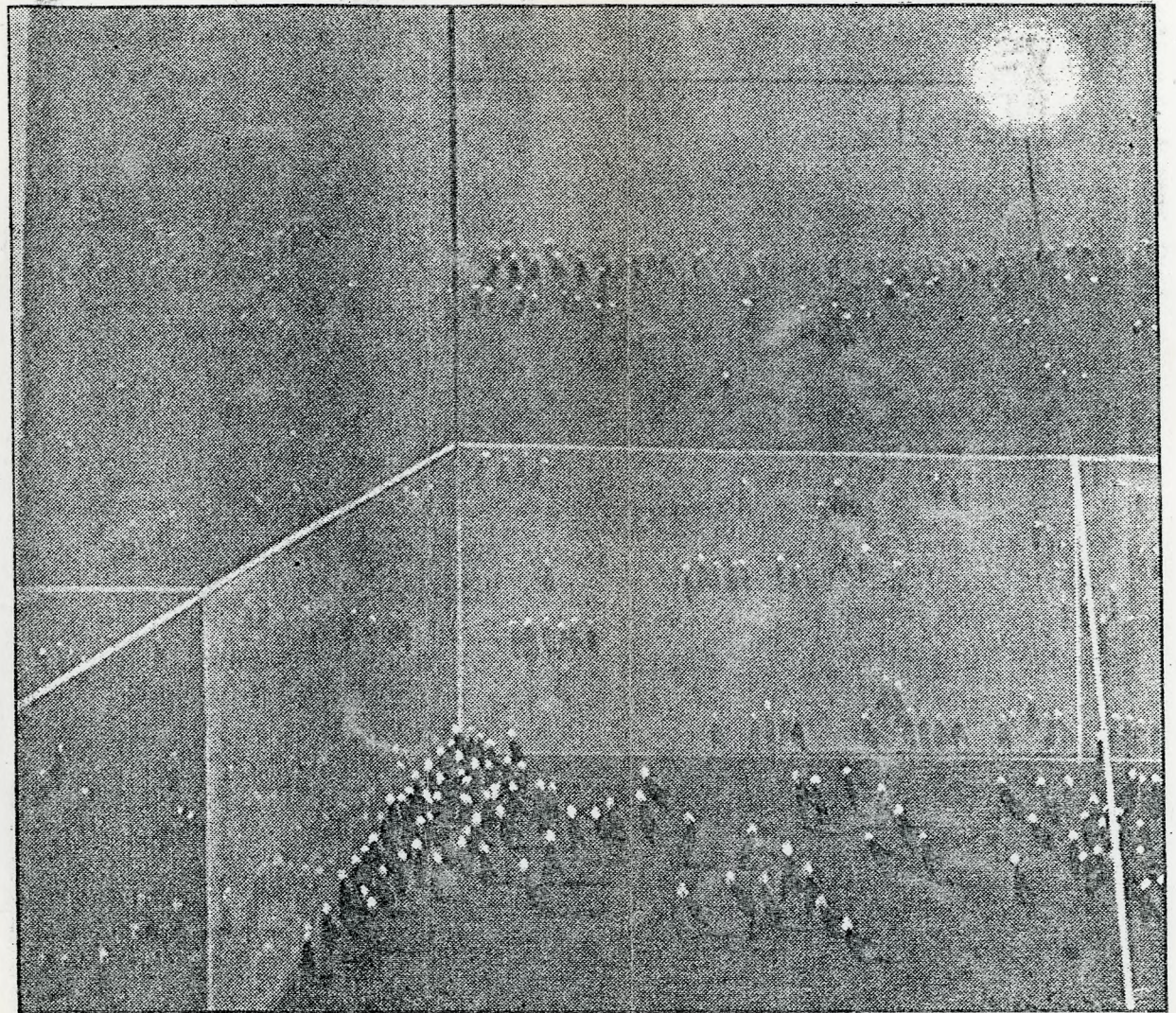


"Zapata," painted in 1931 by David Alfaro-Siqueiras, a Mexican artist.

Rivera, outdoes herself when commemorating the suicide of Dorothy Hale by showing the subject first as a small body falling out of a Hampshire House window, then, larger and upside-down, as she plummets through small fluffy clouds and finally as an open-eyed, blood-spattered corpse, wearing a little black dress and a white corsage.

Rufino Tamayo is represented by two large canvases that are atypical and beautiful for being painted not in the artist's usual syrupy hues but in dour and dirty yellows, black and grays. A more or less monochromatic scene of nude and robed men stoning Saint Stephen speaks for José Orozco; a portrait of Zapata in his sombrero for David Alfaro-Siqueiras. Of Mexico's three-star muralists, Diego Rivera gets the most space, but the most amazing of his images is a picture of C. Z. Guest, who was a blonde socialite from the 1940's through the 1960's. Titled "In Vinum Veritas," it features the subject lying nude among garlands on a bed, with a noticeably red face that may be somehow connected with the glass of wine parked alongside her.

Fernando Botero, Marisol and Matta are in the lineup, so are Mauricio Lasansky and José Luis Cuevas. A little editing would have helped the Hispanic cause but then again, lumping all these artists together sometimes obliges the visitor to reconsider, if not necessarily reha-



"New York, New York 10008," a 1961 work by Nemesio Antuñez, part of "The Latin American Spirit, Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970."



"The Pinzon Family," a 1965 painting by Fernando Botero.

bilitate, mediocre talents. In any case, the purpose — and the achievement — of the show is to bring out for better or worse the full extent of the Hispanic-American contribution and perhaps to dent the obliviousness of the "gringo" public.

A discovery that gives the reviewer much pleasure is "New York New York 10008," done by the Chilean artist, Nemesio Antuñez, in 1961. In this small canvas swarm countless little black and white creatures that could be humans or moths, foregathering around the high gauzy wire fences dividing a sports ground. It's an unsettling, unforgettable picture.

After leaving the Bronx on Jan. 29, the exhibition, the best of its kind seen by the reviewer, begins a tour that takes it to Texas, California, Puerto Rico and Florida. Museum hours are 10 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Saturdays through Thursdays and 11 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Sundays. ■