

Introduction

Art + culture are military weapons in a political sense . . . and should be handled with the love and care with which delicate mechanisms are built.

LINCOLN KIRSTEIN TO NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER,
AUGUST 16, 1942

Well before modern art became a weapon in the Cold War arsenal of democracy, there was another war, another region. Already in August 1940 the United States was in the initial stages of a concerted and deliberate cultural defense effort that would utilize American modern art as a strategic instrument of national security in a context of war preparedness. Not surprisingly, when president Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave the “Arsenal of Democracy” radio fireside chat on December 29, 1940, by now he counted on American modern art to play a significant role in the nation’s efforts to prepare for a conflict that loomed large on the horizon. Art had figured in his New Deal policies of the mid- and late 1930s with innovative job creation programs for visual artists that spawned great creativity, fostered aesthetic experimentation, and pushed the levels of artistic growth, all under federal sponsorship. In the course of this extraordinary government action, art was imbued with the values of democracy and freedom that Roosevelt’s administration was struggling to restore in an ailing nation under the dark shadow of the Great Depression. By the fall of 1940, an invigorated and emerging American modern art was set to enlist in the service of the United States to fight on a new cultural battlefield.

Although the engagements of modern art with American political ideology, national identity, and self-representation and -fashioning, and its role as a military weapon have usually been discussed in connection to

the Cold War and the vanguard art movement of abstract expressionism,¹ I posit that, rather than this being the first time modern art served as a weapon of democracy, there exists an early carefully crafted strategic model of American modern art in cultural defense that shaped the contours of subsequent interventions. In reframing and expanding the narrative, this study rethinks the origins of U.S. cultural policy and the Cold War modern art model, placing it in the historic period immediately preceding World War II and in the geographical space of South America circa 1940–43. Defining modern art as contemporary and innovative modernist art by living artists and the ancestors of the modern movement since 1880,² I draw attention to its role as a strategic instrument of national defense during a moment in history in which the public and private sectors converged for the first time to develop a large-scale economic and cultural program that targeted South America.

As a point of departure for this exploration of how war preparedness and national security were enmeshed with modern art, I examine the activities of the crucial yet rarely acknowledged Art Section of the Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics (henceforth, the Office), a temporary, emergency wartime agency established by executive order in August 1940 under the Council of National Defense.³ Renamed the Office of the Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs (CI-AA) and placed under the president's Office of Emergency Management in July 1941, the agency's commercial and cultural defense activities, war objectives, and structure nonetheless remained mostly unchanged until May 20, 1946, when, as part of the reconversion of war agencies to peacetime needs, it ceased to exist.⁴

Boasting a prominent “cultural relations” in its initial name, the Office engaged in the formulation of the general principles of the first large-scale U.S. cultural defense program abroad. At the heart of its mandate was the concerted unilateral effort to make American art and culture known in the Western Hemisphere. It implemented a strategic mission to carry out a U.S. cultural and commercial penetration in a South America mostly unfamiliar with its art and cultural developments while attempting to change dominant cultural values in a regional societal structure considered to be at high risk of being infiltrated by Axis ideology and governance. To accomplish this mission, its specific intention was to export the quintessential American values of democracy, modernization, and progress that were

tied to a meritocratic and individualistic “American Dream” way of life and societal model of a modern industrial capitalism defined by economic prosperity and consumerism in a new American century.⁵ Even though it has been assumed that the rise in the U.S. government’s interest in modern art in the late 1930s and 1940s in the Western Hemisphere was the result of the implied goodwill of the Roosevelt administration’s Good Neighbor policy, this particular position tends to obscure its origins and reasons. Indeed, the Good Neighbor has been a popular lens in various studies of the Office and CI-AA, including its Communications Division, which hosted the Motion Picture Division. But, as I demonstrate in chapter 2, this was not the philosophy FDR or Nelson A. Rockefeller as coordinator used in the establishment of the Office or CI-AA or the Cultural Relations Division and the Art Section, the focus of this study.⁶

Although the policy ultimately became associated with Sumner Welles in the early 1940s, it in fact dated from the 1920s, when Henry L. Stimson formulated it in response to the public uproar in the United States over the U.S. invasion of Honduras in 1924. It also addressed a military intervention in Nicaragua in 1927 to protect property owned by U.S. corporations and U.S. citizens abroad. President Roosevelt adopted a reformulated yet ambiguous and inexplicit one-sentence world policy of being a good neighbor when he first came to power in March 1933, in the midst of the worst global capitalist crisis of the twentieth century. He stated, “In the field of world policy I would dedicate this Nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others—the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors.”⁷ This allowed him to concentrate on the more pressing national challenge of reconstructing and rebuilding both the state and the nation, rather than on foreign relations. What guided his U.S. foreign policy and international relations with Latin America was the policy of nonintervention agreed upon at the Seventh International Conference of American States in Montevideo in December 1933, along with the Convention on Rights and Duties of States, which provided a declarative definition for both “state” and “sovereignty.”⁸ In 1936, Pan-Americanism also entered U.S. foreign policy at the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace in Buenos Aires. Defined as [a] principle of international law . . . understood . . . [as] . . . a moral union of all the American Republics in defence [*sic*] of their com-

mon interests based upon the most perfect equality and reciprocal respect for their rights of autonomy, independence and free development,”⁹ it further solidified the close ties of an Inter-American System established with the first Inter-American conference in 1889–90.

Until 1938, cultural relations in the United States had been part of an internationalist movement that espoused ideas of moral disarmament and peace, though it was inextricably linked with philanthropy and placed solely in the hands of the private sector. At the heart of these early U.S. cultural exchanges of people were the realization of a global interconnectedness and philanthropic internationalism of industrialists Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and the Guggenheim Family through the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Rockefeller Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and other minor organizations as a way to increase global thinking and international intercultural understanding in a joint effort to eliminate prejudice and hate among nations.¹⁰ For example, The Carnegie Endowment and Carnegie Corporation first focused on Europe to facilitate the exchange of scholars, students, and publications; the translation of books; and the teaching of English as a foreign language in other nations. During World War I they shifted part of their efforts to Latin America and the Far East to spread modernity, democracy, and democratic institutions universally. This coordinated transnational system of intellectual cooperation promoted U.S. cultural affairs, global interests, and values without state or official foreign policy involvement.¹¹ However, the interest of Latin American countries in formalizing this area of cultural interchange with the United States government as part of an Inter-American System brought the private structure of cultural relations in the United States into question.

Responding both to requests from Latin American republics with long-standing governmental traditions in international cultural relations as well as to the ratification of the Convention for the Promotion of Inter-American Cultural Relations at the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance, Preservation, and Establishment of Peace held on December 1–23, 1936, in Buenos Aires, the United States finally entered the field of cultural relations.¹² Its initial forays were limited to the establishment of a Cultural Relations Division at the Department of State in 1938 for the administration of short, annual educational-exchange fellowships for two teachers or graduate students of each signatory country to advance what was then

deemed the “greater mutual knowledge and understanding of the people and institutions of the countries represented and a more consistent educational solidarity on the American continent.”¹³ The new department became an information clearinghouse working closely with the private foundations and academic institutions that were familiar to the division chief, Benjamin Mark Cherrington.¹⁴ A professor of international studies and director of the Foundation for the Advancement of the Social Science at the University of Denver, Cherrington fiercely opposed any political messages or propaganda methods so as to avoid imposing a particular cultural view on other nations.¹⁵ Given his experience at that time, he was convinced of the “futility, even the absurdity of the export of culture by any government.”¹⁶ In addition, the Office’s budget of \$72,000 made it a secondary protagonist to the well-established and amply funded private foundations.¹⁷ Cultural relations and cultural power thus remained in private hands.¹⁸

It was not until the summer of 1940 that the United States would realize the full potential of cultural relations in a hybrid public-private model, not as diplomatic exchange but, as I argue and demonstrate, as a cultural defense initiative that would have long-lasting repercussions in future developments of global modern art. I thus approach the role of modern art and the U.S. government’s elaborate hemispheric visual program of exhibitions, contests, short animated films, and art acquisition not from a diplomatic, international relations point of view but as a national security and defense strategy under conditions of war that predates any other U.S. official art initiatives.¹⁹ In doing so, I reveal how modern art became a strategic instrument for the U.S. government and the U.S. private sector in South America, and demonstrate the intricacies and nuances of this early cultural penetration model through the discourse of democracy.

I posit that both modern art and the formation of new hemispheric cultural circuits and networks were grounded in national security, defense, trade, and commerce under conditions of war preparedness. Modern art, in its various genres, became a unilateral means by which the U.S. government sought to familiarize countries in South America with U.S. culture. Beginning with introducing the modern trends of U.S. American society, culture, art, and visuality that had yet to come of age, the ultimate goal was to replace South America’s perceived cultural dependence on Europe with a stronger association to a uniquely American philosophy—both aesthetically and politically. I argue that these interventions of both the public

and private sectors of the United States in the region at this particular moment—with shifts in diplomacy, power, hegemony, and world order—laid the foundation for a modernist infrastructure. At the same time, these interventions planted the seed for a hemispheric cultural shift through propaganda programs that facilitated and created cultural flows and networks to disseminate American cultural ideology, industries, and aesthetics in the region.

This study examines modern art and culture, power, the origins of U.S. cultural policy in national defense, hemispheric modern art circuits, and modern art global networks by which ideas, meanings, images and artworks, people, and ideology circulated at a time of societal change and cultural turn in the Americas. At this historical moment, the United States sought to position itself as a world power while South America entered a new phase of modernization and capitalist industrialization with a new markedly U.S. orientation. Given the context of commerce and culture, war preparedness and defense, I take into consideration the political, social, and economic forces that shaped this early model of modern art as an instrument of national security and cultural defense.

With limited existing references to the Office's Art Section, for this study I rely on the archival method of using primary source material to delve and probe into the activities, actors, ideological underpinnings, and programs of the Office. I depend on primary documents such as minutes from meetings, memoranda and other written office communication, museum exhibition files, art reports, correspondence, existing oral histories, and interviews to reconstruct the history, thought, and action of the Office and Art Section and those involved in developing it.

In considering modern art and its hemispheric circulation, the role of U.S. museums, public and private patronage, and an incipient art market and canon formation for South American modern art, this study is informed by a global modernisms history of art methodologies interested in geographies of modernism beyond a Eurocentric model that expand and enrich the understanding of the various artistic engagements and more encompassing responses to aesthetic modernities.²⁰ It is in this way that it makes a historiographic contribution to the recent trends that emphasize the internationalization of American art history.²¹ From this global modernist art historical perspective, I reveal the complexities in constructions of modern art, ideas about visual modernity, and national identity in the

United States and South America at the time. I elucidate how U.S. culture and U.S. modern art were perceived in the region during these years and assess the critical responses to the various positions of U.S. artists in relation to modernism.

It is the intersections of art history, culture, and the globalization of culture that inform this volume's multidisciplinary approach to art history and globalization theory. I engage the Circuit of Culture method of analysis, which looks at "structure, strategy, and culture"²² through a story or a biography of the object—in this case, modern art and the Office's Art Section. Conceptualized by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negus, it consists of five processes of regulation (control), production (imbuing meaning), representation (form and meanings encoded), consumption (by audiences), and identity (dominant identity) that overlap and intertwine in complex ways, with the articulation, or what connects these processes, being where meanings are found. I consider this theoretical method important for the analysis of constructed ideas in which processes are interconnected and mutually interact with one another in a nonlinear way. In the particular case of American modern art (versus European modern art), I analyze its construction in the United States in response to specific U.S. contexts and factors and the ways it was presented in South America in 1941.

To reveal and fully understand American modern art's construction, production, and circulation of meaning, therefore, I complement du Gay's analytical tool with Peter Dicken's concept of networks, a significant contribution to globalization theory. Although Dicken developed his networks concept to look at global shifts at the turn of the twenty-first century, the theoretical methodology lends itself well to thinking about the period of World War II, another moment that saw the reshaping and redrawing of a new world order. Dicken defines networks as "the process connecting actors or agents (firms, states, individuals, social groups, etc.) into relational structures at different organizations and geographical scales."²³ He notes that using a network-based approach allows us "to think in terms of *connections* of activities through *flows* of material and non-material phenomena, of the different way that networks are connected, and the power relations through which networks are controlled and coordinated."²⁴ With the idea of an early globalization moment, I utilize a cultural flow approach to denote flows on transnational state-regulated paths/circuits where modern

art and culture circulate. Just as the Roosevelt administration was drawing up the blueprints for the financial architecture of globalization in the Bretton Woods Accord and Institutions, long-term cultural diplomacy and relations were being built through new cultural flows and networks with the explicit goal of “Americanizing” South America.²⁵ This penetration was possible thanks to the technologies of the day—airplanes, telex, radio, and film—that facilitated a systematic, fast, and efficient saturation of the American way of life with the underlying values of modernity present in all its endeavors. Given that the Office focused on both commercial and cultural defense relations, I consider the nexus of commerce and culture in the cultural flows and networks that it connected as the origins of the contemporary globalization or Americanization of culture in South America.

From a standpoint of a global history of art, I reveal the engagement of South American artists with definitions of modernity and modern art and their own artistic strategies and styles. I engage in formal analysis, periodization, and the iconography of some key artworks and look at curatorial issues of aesthetic judgment and preferences in the selection of artworks for the exhibitions of American and Latin American modern art in the early 1940s. This is a period that due to the war has not benefited as much from in-depth exploration as other later ones. As it concerns the field formation of Latin American art history, I look at its germinal stage in the United States with the New York and San Francisco World Fairs of 1939 and 1940, where the U.S. construction of a modern Latin American art and, specific to this study, South American art began to take root. This interest would blossom in the war years, with New York and San Francisco as important nodes in the cultural initiatives of the government and private sector. Moreover, I expand the perception of the unique role that Alfred H. Barr, Jr., director of MoMA from 1929 to 1943 and director of collections after 1943, played in the early development of the field. Instead, I draw attention to the seminal roles of a cast of young figures, including Rockefeller, Grace L. McCann Morley, John E. Abbott, Eliot F. Noyes, Caroline Wogan Durieux, Stanton Loomis Catlin, Lewis Riley III and wife Rosamond Margaret Rosenbaum Riley (later Bernier), Lincoln Kirstein, René d’Harnoncourt, and Porter McCray, whose interventions proved critical for the initial foundations.

This study contributes to the expansion of knowledge about the art of South American countries in the early 1940s with the exploration of the

dynamic of art, ideology, patronage, and power in the emerging field of Latin American art history. Despite being inclusive of all Hispanophone and Lusophone countries and artists in the Americas, it has concentrated heavily on the United States–Mexico axis during the years 1940–43 producing an extensive body of knowledge but almost nothing to show for South America. Latin American art has previously been and continues to be analyzed within the confines of a rhetoric of the Good Neighbor policy as well as within a modernist perspective of MoMA espoused by Barr. His construction of an early 1930s diagram scheme of the ideal evolving modern art collection as a torpedo navigating through the sea of change with Mexican art at its nose does not include the art of South American countries.²⁶ This is a view of modernism in art that only leads to yet another complex assumption that Mexican art represents all of the modern art production of Latin America. This simplistic, one-size-fits-all model takes into consideration neither the historical nor the geographic context in which modern art was produced.²⁷ The Good Neighbor–MoMA–Barr discourse fails to take into consideration complex global circumstances, contexts, events, and forces that came together to shape this interest and the cultural ideology of the moment. It also obscures key private individuals and institutional contributors such as museums, corporations and foundations, and the state and its federal agencies.

Within a larger frame of economics, commerce, and art, this period of study is important to other fields beyond art history, such as history and international relations, to consider new perspectives on the intersections of art, power, and culture and the origins of industrial modernity that took hold in the region. New processes of global thinking, unitary ideas, and a new world order, with the United States at the helm of power, started to emerge. Key to solidifying that hegemony was the exportation of the American Dream as a new societal model for modern industrial capitalism, with a consumerist middle class as a symbol of expanding democracy and freedom.

In the following chapters, I examine modern art and its evolving meanings in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s in case studies that highlight exhibitions and in narratives of sponsoring museums; the social identities imbued in its construction; its consumption in the West, East, and North Coast countries of South America and the United States; and the regulations that determined its production, distribution, and consumption.