Manuel de la Cruz Gonzalez: Transnationalism and the Development of Modern Art in Costa Rica

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MANUEL DE LA CRUZ GONZÁLEZ: TRANSNATIONALISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT
OF MODERN ART IN COSTA RICA

by

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

MANUEL DE LA CRUZ GONZÁLEZ: TRANSNATIONALISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN ART IN COSTA RICA

Advisor: Professor Anna Indych-López

While scholars are increasingly scrutinizing twentieth-century Latin American art and inserting it into the canon of modern art history, studies of the region usually leap from Mexico to South America, skipping Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Belize, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. This is not due to a lack of dedicated artistic effort in the isthmus, but rather to poor cultural infrastructure, which made being a modern artist in the region particularly challenging, and the underdeveloped state of local art histories, which have yet to traverse national borders. This oversight of Central American art makes it difficult to grasp the full scope of Latin America’s adaptation of, and contribution to, international modernism. My dissertation counteracts the privileging of art from North and South America and introduces Costa Rican art history to an international audience by examining the art and life of Manuel de la Cruz González Luján (1909-1986), one of Costa Rica’s most influential modern artists. It emphasizes the importance of the transnational cultural currents that influenced González and his colleagues, and systematically discusses two fundamental phases of artistic growth in the country, the 1930s and the 1960s. By placing González’s artistic production within the socio-historic, cultural, and aesthetic contexts of Costa Rica, this dissertation is a groundbreaking case study of the development of modern art in this Central American nation.

González prodded the boundaries of the provincial Costa Rican art world and moved beyond local frameworks to take part actively in the spread of modernist trends. He embraced regionalism, modernismo, and Latin American impressionism while in Costa Rica, and
surrealism and geometric abstraction during the ten years he spent abroad in Cuba (1948-1950) and Venezuela (1950-1957). Upon his return, he shared his knowledge and experience of international modernism, but was faced with an unprepared and unpropitious artistic setting that neither accepted nor encouraged his geometric abstract art. What his story shows is that in order for a transnational style or idea to take hold in a country such as Costa Rica, which could be any “ex-centric” location, it is necessary to have a receptive context. This analysis of González’s career thus highlights the tension of being a provincial artist, attuned to transnational cultural flows, yet challenged by the limitations of his environment.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The motivation behind my research on Costa Rican modern art history began with a question I posed to Professor Edward Sullivan at the Institute of Fine Arts. I was enrolled as a consortium student in his seminar about abstract art in the Americas and asked him, during office hours one day, why Costa Rican (or for that matter, Central American) art is excluded from the canon of Latin American art history. He challenged me to seek the answer myself, and from that moment on the issue became pivotal to my graduate work. I wrote my first paper on Manuel de la Cruz González in his class, and thereafter Professor Sullivan constantly encouraged my dedication to the topic of Central American art. I continued to research and write about González under the guidance of my dedicated advisor, Professor Anna Indych-López, whose rigor I have always admired. Her effort was instrumental in the successful completion of this project, and it would not have been possible without her clear and specific feedback through digital communication, necessitated by my mid-dissertation move to Costa Rica. She, more than anyone, has helped improve my academic work, and I will forever be grateful to her for it.

Throughout graduate coursework, I was also inspired by Professors Romy Golan and Eloise Quiñones-Keber, whose courses on European modernism and Pre-Columbian/Colonial art, respectively, helped round out my knowledge as a modern Latin Americanist. I thank them both for their willingness to serve on my committee, despite my dissertation topic being outside of their specialties. I also must thank Professor Quiñones-Keber specifically for her kind support and encouragement, which began with her acceptance of a seminar topic on colonial Costa Rican art history (a relatively non-existent field), and culminated in her guidance during the early
stages of my dissertation. In many ways it was she who led me to follow the academic path best suited to my goals.

Much of this project depended on the generosity of Mercedes González Kreysa, daughter of the artist, who lent me custody of González’s archive for long enough to organize and document its contents. The material in his archive is invaluable, yielding information about the artist and his context, as well as providing me with a sense of direct contact with González himself. The investigation for this dissertation was also conducted at several archives and institutional libraries that graciously opened their doors to allow for my research. These include the Archivo Central del Museo Nacional de Costa Rica, the Archivo Institucional del Teatro Nacional, the Archivo Nacional, the libraries at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana and the Museo de Arte Costarricense in San Jose, the Biblioteca Nacional "Miguel Obregón Lizano," and The Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami. I am particularly grateful to Maria Enriqueta Guardia for sharing her knowledge of Costa Rican art and the PINCEL database of Costa Rican art despite it not yet having been inaugurated publicly.

The years of being a graduate student are economically, intellectually, and emotionally trying, and I want to extend my gratitude to the Mellon Mayes Undergraduate Fellowship program for being with me throughout it. Knowing that “Once a Mellon, always a Mellon,” gave me confidence to forge through the challenges of graduate school, and the different incentives, from stipends to the Dissertation Writing Retreat, were enormously beneficial.

I want to thank my friends in the Art History department at the Graduate Center. I deeply appreciate Assistant Program Officer, Andrea Appel, for her encouragement and help in facing the administrative challenges of being a graduate student. I also appreciate feeling that I am part of a true cohort of Latin Americanists that includes, among others, Miguel Arisa, Nandi Cohen,
Arden Decker-Parks, Elizabeth DeRose, Ellie Fitzpatrick Siffford, Sarah Holian, Maya Jiménez, Marisa Lerer, Renee McGarry, Alberto McKelligan, Penelope Ojeda, María-Laura Steverlynck, Lorena Tezanos, and Lawrence Waldron. We shared many conversations, helped each other in our professional endeavors, and continue to maintain contact. I am deeply grateful to Miguel Arisa, in particular, for his friendship, generous spirit, and his help in celebrating my victories. He also helped me start the writing process when the panic of beginning was overwhelming, and he gave me useful and straightforward advice throughout my graduate education.

Upon moving to Costa Rica at the end of 2010, though I had “contacts,” I did not feel professionally connected to the country’s cultural community. This quickly changed, as I became involved in various art-related organizations. I want to extend my gratitude to my colleagues from AccionArte, Fundación ARDE (Arte para el Desarrollo), and ICOM Costa Rica. I would like to name Lil Apestegui, Felicia Camacho, Maria Elena Carballo, Amalia Chaverri, Maria Jose Chavarría, Rossella Matamoros, Hugo Pineda, Pilar Quirós, Antonieta Sibaja, Daniel Soto, Jody Steiger, and Gabriela Villalobos, all of whom have helped me feel welcome and comfortable in my new role as cultural agent. I also am grateful for having been given the opportunity to participate in several workshops at the Fundación Teor/éTica. Together all of these experiences have helped me to better understand and feel part of the Costa Rican art world.

Certainly, my deepest and most heartfelt gratitude is for my friends and family who have shown me support and love throughout this difficult dissertation process. My dear friends Diego Arce, Maren Barbee, Sivan Ebril, Mariajosé Gavilán, Jesse Mockrin, Julie Haas Brophy, Merylis Herz, Amy Laiken, and Olivia Skiffington listened, commiserated, and helped me get by during tough times. Midge LaGuardia and Rolande Cicurel welcomed me into their home in New York like a member of their family. Midge’s steadfast faith in my abilities, her true friendship, and her
love fortified me and moved me through undergraduate and graduate school. My soul was truly touched by Midge and I will always be grateful that she shared her world with me.

While many of my extended family members encouraged me throughout graduate school, I am particularly grateful to Nayiba Bonilla, Walter Niehaus, Rebecca Plant, Rand Steiger, and Ana Teresa Romero for their support and interest in my progress. I deeply appreciate Rebecca for her speedy editing of my final draft during her vacation. She suggested improvements to my style, making this dissertation a more pleasant read and teaching me tips about academic writing. She also provided feedback that gave me greater confidence with which to enter my defense.

Last, and possibly most important, I am forever obliged to my parents, Carlos Bonilla and Jody Steiger, and my husband, Zohar Merchav. My both parents have been a constant support throughout my entire education. They have always believed in me, accepted my choices, and aided me in every way possible. I am particularly indebted to my mother, Jody Steiger, for the countless hours she dedicated to discussing and helping me work through my ideas. She read and copyedited every draft of this dissertation, unconditionally, and was even willing to read it to me aloud so that I could hear what it sounded like. She helped me face my fears, held my hand, and walked with me during the entire dissertation writing process. I acknowledge that Zohar, my love, had to bear the brunt of my graduate career. He had to deal with my numerous disappearing acts so that I could study and get my work done. He put up with my moodiness, esteem problems, depression, and shortcomings, and stood by me throughout, always offering nuggets of sheer brilliance that helped me face the next day. When my mind was saturated or I was feeling my worst, he helped me keep everything in perspective by taking me hiking through the jungle, explaining every detail of our growing farm, and connecting me to the nature that I love.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CBA: Centro de Bellas Artes Athenea de Maracaibo
CCSS: Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social
CEPN: Centro para el Estudio de los Problemas Nacionales
DGAL: Dirección General de Artes y Letras
MCJD: Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deporte
OAS: Organization of American States
PLN: Partido Liberación Nacional
UCR: Universidad de Costa Rica
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation probes the artistic evolution of the painter Manuel de la Cruz González Luján (1909-1986) as a means of tracing the development of modern art in Costa Rica, as well as the flow of transnational styles and ideas that impacted an area of Latin America that has gone relatively unstudied.\(^1\) González was both innovative and influential within his environment, and he aimed to prod the boundaries of his art and his surrounding. Throughout his career, he experimented with a variety of painting styles including impressionist, expressionist, lyrical and geometric abstract, and neo-figurative. The multiplicity of González’s styles and his activity at the forefront of modern art during two important periods of artistic development in Costa Rica, the 1930s and the 1960s, make him an ideal protagonist for my study. By focusing on him, it is possible to illuminate the historical, political, social, cultural, and stylistic factors that shaped the broader development of modern art in this Central American country. In other words, I track the emergence of modern art in Costa Rica by using González as my lens; the artist is discussed specifically, the socio-historic context more broadly.

González’s known body of work is extensive and varied and attests to his many inclinations and interests. This dissertation, therefore, is not a comprehensive study or catalog of

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\(^1\) Though Latin American art history has expanded in recent decades, Central American art has been largely overlooked. Rationalizing her exclusion of Central America from her survey *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*, Jacqueline Barnitz states that her choice was “dictated by the fact that before the 1970s, the art of these countries offered no new paradigms.” Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), i. This perspective echoes Marta Traba, influential Argentinean art critic of the 1960s and 1970s, who suggested that art from Central America, a “closed” cultural area, was less substantive than that of “open” areas (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela). Whereas artists in “open” areas were abreast of modernism, those from “closed” areas were disconnected from it, unoriginal, disloyal to their own ideas, and constantly shifted artistic styles due to personal insecurities. Marta Traba, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas, 1950-1970* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Siglo XXI Editores Argentina, 2005). It is thus important to acknowledge Edward Sullivan’s text, *Latin American Art in the Twentieth-Century*, the only survey of Latin American art that includes an essay about Central American art by Monica Kupfner. Edward J. Sullivan, *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Phaidon Press, 2004), 51–79.
the artist’s work; the emblematic works I discuss represent only a small percentage of the artist’s oeuvre. While other artists could have been chosen—I am not arguing that González is the most representative Costa Rican modern artist—their limited artistic trajectory and/or the continuity of their style makes them less suitable for a work that aims to shed light on the broader topic of art in Costa Rica and its varied pathways.

The direct access I had to González’s archive was also a primary factor that led me to work on this monograph. I first came in contact with his archive in 2007, when his daughter, Mercedes González, lent me his documents for my research. Because the archive was in complete disarray, I was given custody of it to organize as I saw fit. In a few weeks time, I sorted, organized, and digitally documented the bulk of the material, which included personal and professional correspondence, photographs of artwork, people, and landscapes, handwritten notes, typed lectures, hundreds upon hundreds of newspaper clippings, magazines, books, an assortment of invitations to gallery exhibitions, brochures, catalogues, cut-up images, film strips, film reels, receipts, bills, and other paraphernalia. Aware of the lack in scholarship and institutional resources for art history in Costa Rica, which could hinder a dissertation about modern Costa Rican art, I knew that this collection would help me to fulfill my ambitious goal of inserting Costa Rica into the larger canon of international art history. Throughout the research and writing process, I continuously mined this source for information and clues about González’s career, as well as the cultural context in which he lived.

In 2009, the centennial of González’s birth, the artist began to receive greater attention. Several exhibitions, some with accompanying catalogs,² as well as musical, literary, and public art projects relating to the artist elevated his status as an important and polemical historical

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figure. Though González is increasingly acknowledged locally, outside of national parameters he is virtually unknown. This is also the case for the majority of Central American artists, except perhaps Guatemalan Carlos Mérida and Costa Rican Francisco Zuñiga, who are known primarily because of their connection to Mexican modernism. Other Central American artists, while seminal in local art histories, have not been absorbed into the canon of Latin American art and do not factor into survey texts on the topic, a major lacuna that needs to be filled. As such, the main contribution of this dissertation is to introduce González, and Costa Rican art history more generally, to an international audience.

The exclusion of Central American art from the history of Latin American art history is the result of two main factors, neither of which is a lack of valuable artistic creation. First and foremost, art historical scholarship in Costa Rica, as in the rest of Central America, remains quite limited. Costa Rican art history exists primarily in survey form, providing a unilateral reading of the country’s cultural evolution based on oft-repeated facts (dates, events), newspaper clippings, and interviews with artists and cultural agents. Unfortunately, the first of these provides little insight, the second lacks depth, and the third is often not an accurate source of information. In

3 Among contemporary artists, curators and critics, this disregard has proven detrimental to fostering dialogue within the region. Brazilian art historian and critic Paulo Herkenhoff acknowledged that such oversight is problematic. "We could ask what real interest does Brazil have in the art produced in Bolivia or Guatemala. It seems that we cast the same vague glance upon the art of many of our neighbours as the one that historically we seem to have experienced on the part of the USA and Europe in relation to Brazilian art. The victim of prejudice may turn into its agent." Paulo Herkenhoff, “The Void and the Dialogue in the Western Hemisphere,” in Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 70.

the past two decades, Costa Rican museums have been responsible for publishing most art-related texts in the country. The Museum of Costa Rican Art has published several abbreviated surveys by curator and artist José Miguel Rojas. These works tend to be limited in scope, repetitive, and illustrated by the same works of art, reflecting a museological practice that lacks critical depth.⁵

Beyond these surveys, a few important thematic studies have surfaced. Costa Rican art historian Eugenia Zavaleta has written about the National Salons of 1928 to 1937 and the inception of abstract art in Costa Rica (1958-1971); both of her texts contain substantive primary research and are frequently cited throughout this dissertation.⁶ Finally, particularly in recent years, the many monographs published that accompanied individual exhibitions are also valuable additions to the literature on Costa Rican art.⁷ What has yet to be done, however, is to contextualize Costa Rican art within the broader framework of international art history. For the most part, when authors mention international modernism, it is to draw what are often superficial comparisons that lead to derivative readings of Costa Rican art. This dissertation is but an initial appraisal of the subject in light of international modernism, and much more work is needed in order to advance and complicate our understanding of Costa Rican art history.


The underdeveloped state of Costa Rican art history is entangled with a second problem. By the mid twentieth century, the countries of the isthmus shared a number of traits that inhibited cultural growth: weak government and civil infrastructure to support the arts and artistic education, political upheaval, general poverty, and minimal access to the innovations of modernity. The modern artistic communities that emerged in these countries were thus small in scale and lacking in encouragement. Central American artists had little opportunity to develop at home, and few had the luxury of travelling and studying abroad. Those who did returned with a subjective understanding of the international art world, which colored the knowledge they shared with their colleagues at home that served as a main source for artistic innovation. Within Central America, artists also entered into dialogue with international ideas through scant foreign publications that transmitted information about European or Latin American art. The development of modern art within the region is thus bound by an existing, though limited, transnational system of cultural exchange.

Analyzing the flow of information through geographic space has been pivotal to studies of globalization and modernism. Post-colonial anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes, “It seems impossible to study these new cosmopolitanisms fruitfully without analyzing the transnational cultural flows within which they thrive, compete, and feed off one another in ways that defeat


9 Foreign journals found in González’s archive or mentioned in interviews with Costa Rican artist Francisco Amighetti include Martín Fierro and Madi from Argentina, Forma from Mexico, Amauta from Peru, Gaceta Literaria from Spain, and L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui and Art d’Aujourd’hui from France. Articles about modern art were also reprinted in Costa Rican journals like Repertorio Americano. Francisco Amighetti, “Arte de vanguardia: Contestando al Sr. Solano,” Diario de Costa Rica, March 4, 1928; Rafael Angel Herra Rodríguez, El desorden del espíritu: conversaciones con Amighetti (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1987).
and confound many verities of the human sciences today."¹⁰ This dissertation pinpoints specific sources of “cultural flow” such as journals, travelling exhibitions, artists’ libraries, and foreign visitors to Costa Rica like Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, José Gómez Sicre, José Luis Cuevas, and Marta Traba.¹¹ Because of the nascent stage of the field of Costa Rican art history, it is, as of yet, impossible to assert with certainty the impact any of these foreign sources had on the country’s modern artists. For example, there is no way of knowing when González came in contact with the journals and books found in his archive, which may very well have been years after their publication date. Much more meticulous research needs to be conducted to address fully the question of influence and to determine the visual sources to which González and his

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, Modernity at Large (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 49. I have been informed by studies of cultural transnationalism that pay particular attention to post-colonial societies. These consider how foreign ideas are absorbed or rejected within cultural contexts and the manner in which societies respond with revived interest in “local” identity. Jesús Martín Barbero stresses the importance of transforming scholarly research and writing to include a more democratic appraisal of creative identities and human heterogeneity, which involves “decentering of the researcher’s voice with respect to the multiplicity of voices and experiences.” In Minor Transnationalism, editors Francoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih, introduce their text by explaining the complexity and importance of studying the effects of transnationalism on minority cultures, which allowed me to consider Costa Rican culture as a minority within the larger scheme of Latin America. Juan Carlos Godézzi reminds his readers of the importance of considering “the matrix of the coloniality of power” as well as the forces of globalization when studying Latin American societies, which has reinforced my choice to use a socio-historical methodology for this dissertation. Other texts as well, some of which are cited below, helped me formulate my approach to the subject from a less locally-oriented reality, to a more global appreciation of the phenomenon of transnational, cultural transformation. Jesús Martín Barbero, “Between Technology and Culture: Communication and Modernity in Latin America,” in Cultural Agency in the Americas, ed. Doris Sommer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 37–51; Jesús Martín Barbero, “Intervening from and through Research Practice: Meditations on the Cuzco Workshop,” in Cultural Agency in the Americas, ed. Doris Sommer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 31–36; Néstor García Canclini, Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Juan Carlos Godenzz, “The Discourses of Diversity: Language, Ethnicity, and Interculturality in Latin America,” in Cultural Agency in the Americas, ed. Doris Sommer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 146–166; Francoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih, “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in Minor Transnationalism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–23; Nelly Richard, “Postmodern Disalignments and Realignments of the Center/Periphery,” Art Journal 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 57–59; Peter Wollen, “Into the Future: Tourism, Language and Art,” in Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1105–1110; Gwendolyn Wright, “Building Global Modernisms,” Grey Room, no. 7 (Spring 2002): 124–134.

¹¹ Information about the spreading of new ideas from foreigners or Costa Ricans who had been abroad, and the sharing of their libraries is available in interviews with Claudio Carazo, Fabio Fournier, and Francisco Amighetti, in Eugenia Zavaleta Ochoa, “Las ‘Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas’ (1928-1937) en Costa Rica” (Masters Thesis, San Jose, C.R.: Universidad de Costa Rica, 1998), 425, 467, 484.
colleagues had access. My primary concern has been to explain the effect of transnationalism on the modern art created in Costa Rica. For González, his access to information and travels resulted in an undefined amalgam of styles and ideas that he absorbed somewhat unconsciously and at a distance from the place where the ideas and styles originated. Thus, he provides a case study to ask the following question about globalization and transnationalism: what aspects of international modernism were so relevant and valid for expressing the modern experience that they became a global force with which artists had to contend? This dissertation offers a study of the condition of an artist who was clearly influenced by international modernism, yet inevitably restricted by the limitations of his context. In what ways and to what extent did González, the artists in his circle, and their audiences absorb these new ideas and styles? How did this international influence prod investigations and exaltations of the autochthonous? Such questions and ideas loom in the background of this project, and though they are not always explicitly stated, they provide the argumentative context and framework. An analysis of González’s art, and Costa Rican art history in general, shows us that it did not always develop in a strategic way, but at times it meandered from one style to the next, in what could be described as an accidental manner. This dissertation attempts to grapple with the difficult questions that haunt the production of art in locations referred to by curator Mari Carmen Ramírez as “ex-centric”—how can we understand and assess Gonzalez’s practice and his contributions in light of his regional and transnational contexts?

This dissertation adopts a socio-historical methodology, providing a broad synthesis of the periods under discussion. The undeveloped nature of Costa Rican art historical literature,

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12 From the outset, Michael Baxandall’s *Painting in Fifteenth Century Italy* influenced my research approach. His concept of “cognitive style” acknowledges the varied nature of perception, and the diversity of viewers’ skills and experiences that affect the reception of visual objects, and consequently the production of new objects. Processes of
combined with my goal of constructing a more holistic comprehension of the production and reception of modern art in Costa Rica, required an interdisciplinary approach. Costa Rican history, journalism, literature, and political science have thus been essential building blocks in constructing the framework for analyzing González, his artwork, and his audience. As a result, though fundamentally art historical, this study will be of wider interdisciplinary interest.

The original and primary goal of this dissertation is to create knowledge about Costa Rican art history and González’s contribution to it. Throughout the process, the socio-historical and interdisciplinary approach I have pursued has led me to expand my aim. My hope now is that this work may inform readers about Costa Rican cultural studies and social sciences, both past and present, and from a local and global perspective. Deemed an exception or an anomaly in the region, Costa Rica has had no army and has maintained a strong democratic tradition since 1949, despite being surrounded by violent dictatorships. In the past few years, the country has gained recognition for ranking at the top of The New Economics Foundation’s Happy-Planet Index. Literacy is high, healthcare is widespread, eco-tourist and high-tech industries have become primary sources of revenue, and the currency has maintained a low inflation rate despite the global economic crisis of 2008. Within this context, the Costa Rican contemporary art world has

perception are based not only on the information that light casts upon the retina, but also on the knowledge, experience, and visual training of the spectator. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988).

13 The historians Iván Molina and Steven Palmer comment on Costa Rica’s exceptionalist character in their introduction to *The Costa Rica Reader*. “On the more formal end of the intellectual spectrum, the notion that Costa Rica is a historical freak, or ‘outlier,’ allows social scientists to dismiss the country’s relevance for understanding patterns of development in Latin America and elsewhere. If we adjust our lens a bit, the exceptionalist picture of Costa Rica blurs very quickly…We resist the temptation to see the country as an exception, yet we do insist on the distinctiveness of its past and present.” Iván Molina Jiménez and Steven Paul Palmer, *The Costa Rica Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2–3.

14 Costa Rica has ranked #1 on the Happy Planet Index since 2009. “Costa Rica’s HPI score reflects a high life expectancy, high levels of experienced well-being, and a moderate ecological footprint.” “Costa Rica Achieves a Happy Planet Index Score of 64.0 and Ranks #1 of All the Countries Analysed”, 2014, accessed January 26, 2014, http://www.happyplanetindex.org/countries/costa-rica/.
thrived, in no small part due to the efforts of artist and curator Virginia Pérez-Ratton (1950-2010), founder of the country’s Museum of Contemporary Art and Design and the Teor/éTica Foundation. The country’s economic, political, and social stability, paired with the dedicated and historical effort of artists like González to renovate and bolster national art, have laid the ground for today’s energetic art scene. To better analyze and critique the state of Costa Rican art at present, it is essential to comprehend the route taken by artists in the past.

Chapter 1, “The Origins of Modern Art in Costa Rica: Nationalism and Shifting Traditions,” provides an overview of Costa Rican cultural history, beginning with the colonial period (1502-1821) and ending with the 1930s. Historically, the country had a weak tradition in the visual arts, which the artists of the Generation of the 1930s made a monumental effort to alter. For nine years (1928-1937) they coordinated the Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas, yearly fine art salons held at the National Theater. These events stimulated artistic production, generating healthy competition, art criticism, and a greater appreciation of Costa Rican visual art, particularly among the elite. The urban-dwelling artists, who incorporated a modern style in their painting, sought to describe Costa Rican life following the traditional identity myth of an idyllic, rural Costa Rica populated by hardworking, independent citizens. Drawn particularly to the campesino (peasant) and the adobe home, this generation of artists established an iconography of Costa Rican identity and set a standard for national art that would not be challenged until the 1960s.

Elaborating the topic of the Generation of the 1930s, Chapter 2, “Modernizing the Nation: González’s Images of Costa Rican Landscape and Society,” focuses specifically on González’s active role in promoting modern art in Costa Rica. Stylistically, he pushed the parameters of artistic practice in the country. He distorted the figure; abstracted, fragmented and
flattened the image; and utilized an expressive technique and palette. He remained thematically fixed to the national identity myth expounded by the *liberales* leaders of the late nineteenth century, a nostalgic narrative of a country built by diligent, peace-loving, honest individuals. Yet González shifted his approach. Rather than idealize the landscape and the people as had artists in the past, González portrayed Costa Rican society in a realist manner. He highlighted the intensity of the sun (rather than a placid tropical arcadia), the population’s *mestizo* (rather than European) heritage, and stoicism in the face of hard work (rather than carefree joviality) as a defining national characteristic. Though not outwardly political, as was the case with some contemporaneous vanguard authors, González challenged his audience by recreating the image of the iconic. This changed perspective came about in the 1930s and 1940s, tumultuous decades in Costa Rican history that culminated in the Revolution of 1948. This six-week civil war pitted the unlikely trio of the republican elite, the communists, and the Catholic Church, against the social democratic, middle-class, modernizing opposition. González adhered to the former, and when the opposition won he went into exile in Cuba.

Chapter 3, “Modernist Shifts in Exile: González in Havana and Maracaibo,” covers the decade that González spent abroad in Cuba and Venezuela. The vibrant cultural community of Havana introduced him to new expressions of culture, from Afro-Cuban rituals to the work of a thriving artistic vanguard. Analyzing González’s experience within the Cuban context allows for a comparative study of the Cuban and Costa Rican artistic communities. Establishing commonalities and differences between the two creates knowledge about Costa Rican art beyond the local perspective. In Cuba, González was exposed to experimental investigations of national identity and surrealism, with its methods of conjuring the latent spirit of a people, leading him to turn away from the realism of his earlier work. He abstracted and stylized the figure,
reconsidered the role of color, and simplified the setting, aiming to render universal feelings related to the human condition. Upon moving to Maracaibo, Venezuela, in 1950, the artist became involved in the city’s small but committed cultural community. He was a founding member of the Centro de Bellas Artes de Maracaibo, a venue that offered him room to paint, teach, exhibit, and lecture. During his tenure in Venezuela he was exposed to the tenets of concrete art and became acquainted with Venezuelan artists at the forefront of geometric abstraction, such as sculptor Lia Bermúdez and painters Mateo Manaure, Alejandro Otero, and Jesús Rafael Soto. Although the artist had shown an inclination for abstraction in the past, it was not until 1956 that he relinquished the figure entirely. At first his geometric abstraction retained an aspect of his earlier expressionist style, but in 1957, his final year in Maracaibo, his painting was smooth, angular, and hard-edged. At that time he began to formulate his theory of “cosmic art,” unfortunately never published, based on an art of timeless and universal appeal.

González returned to Costa Rica at the end of the 1957 equipped with experiences, knowledge, an entirely different artistic style, and a desire to once again renovate the country’s visual arts. The country had undergone vast political change after the Revolution of 1948. Chapter 4, “González’s Return to Costa Rica: State Patronage and the Challenges of ‘Cosmic Art,’” discusses the new socio-historic context, placing particular emphasis on the state’s new role in fostering the arts. González marked his presence with his landmark exhibition of non-figurative painting in 1958. Throughout the 1960s, he was a leader of the artistic vanguard that transformed the Costa Rican cultural environment and was affiliated with the Grupo Ocho and the Grupo Taller. During these years his work vacillated between the figurative and the non-figurative. This chapter analyzes only the latter, paying special attention to the ideas of phi and cybernetics, concepts that directly impacted the artist’s painting. Despite his commitment to
abstraction, González was unable to retain an enthusiastic following for geometric abstract art. He abandoned the mode entirely after the Central American Biennial of 1971, a direct response to the rejection of his work by the jury, on which sat influential Latin American art critic Marta Traba. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Traba’s role in skewing Costa Rican art in the 1970s toward a neo-figurative style that was locally, not universally, engaged. Perhaps feeling out of step with the times or irrelevant in the Costa Rican context, González acquiesced to Traba’s rhetoric and returned to painting the themes he had developed in his youth: the Costa Rican landscape and workers.

Together, these four chapters tell the story of Manuel de la Cruz González’s life and analyze the major transitions of his art. Simultaneously, they track the history of modern art within Costa Rica and its relation to an increasingly international and interconnected world of art and culture.

This dissertation has repeatedly pointed out the challenging situation artists faced in the country, particularly those with modernist inclinations. It has exposed the tension that exists, and which needs to be further explored, in the provincial artist who is affected by transnationalism, but is ultimately limited by a restrictive environment. What it also shows is that, in order for a transnational style or idea to take hold in a country such as Costa Rica, which could be any “ex-centric” location in the world, it is necessary to have a receptive context.

In Costa Rica, foreign innovations in art arrived and were adapted decades after they surfaced in Europe: Cubism was debated in the 1920s, the first modern mural (by González) was painted in the mid-1930s, and non-figurative art was not exhibited until the late 1950s. Furthermore, the environment did not encourage artists; they had to commit to fighting this lack of interest in their work. When González first exhibited his painting in the late 1920s, it virtually
was unheard of to be an artist, and those who attempted to professionalize enjoyed very few opportunities for development within Costa Rica. Only in the 1960s did the government begin to show a concerted interest in fostering the visual arts.

But sixty years later, in 1980, González had a large-scale retrospective of his work in the newly-founded, public Museum of Costa Rican Art; it took artists in the country half a century to stake their place in Costa Rican society. In the 1960s a fundamental socio-cultural shift significantly paved the way to transform the country’s contemporary art world. Today, Costa Rica boasts more than 40 museums and a vibrant contemporary art scene. Art is more a part of daily life for Costa Ricans, especially in San Jose, than ever before. But the trajectory, impact, and significance of Costa Rican art has yet to be analyzed and fully grasped.

What we need first is a comprehensive survey of the field of Costa Rican art. It is necessary to establish a repository of information that will enable future scrutiny; there is much ground to cover. First, an in-depth bibliography of all art historical writing about Costa Rican art must be compiled. I then envision a massive research project, with multiple art historians working together to produce a chronological Costa Rican art history. Within this structure, key topics and events can be fleshed out and investigated independently, such as institutional histories and their effects on artistic patronage after the Second Republic; the importation of foreign, cultural periodicals; the availability of artistic texts in public libraries; the significant exhibitions and their impact, such as the 1932 show of modern German prints. This could also be complemented by thematic research, such as an investigation about women artists of the 1930s and the feminist movement. This chronological/thematic approach would shed light on periods that are rarely discussed, such as the early decades of the twentieth century or the 1940s. Future
monographs will be more incisive and more interesting when the foundation of the field is firmly established.

Costa Rican art history is still in a nascent stage, and certainly, my proposal for future research is ambitious. This dissertation provides the reader with a preliminary understanding and contextualization of the development of modern art within Costa Rica through the figure of González. During two pivotal phases of artistic development in the country, González was a leader of modern art whose work was innovative and polemical within its environment. By tracing the transnational contexts in which he worked and the reception of his art in the region, this study also sheds light on Central American art history more broadly. It is now time for more art historians to engage in research on the modern art history of the countries of the isthmus, which are both a geographic and a cultural bridge between the Americas.
Chapter 1

THE ORIGINS OF MODERN ART IN COSTA RICA: NATIONALISM AND SHIFTING TRADITIONS

The first major salon of fine arts in Costa Rica took place in 1928 at the National Theater, in downtown San Jose. The country did not have a strong tradition in the visual arts and it was not possible for such an event to take place until that time. After visiting the exhibition then Costa Rican president, Cleto González Víquez, pronounced:

I never thought, upon my arrival at the National Theater, that I would encounter an exhibition of this nature. I confess that I was pessimistic with respect to art in Costa Rica. We are a bit slow of imagination, and furthermore, we are somewhat lazy; but it was to my great surprise to find myself with more than two hundred paintings all of which revealed that there is art in Costa Rica.\textsuperscript{15}

It is easy to understand why the president had such a perspective about art in his country. Before the 1930s, Costa Rica never was considered a nation of visual artists, and there were few artists in the country prior to this point. What prompted this shift in the late 1920s? This study seeks to address the question of what led to the surge of an artistic will to modernize, which countered the conservative and lethargic state of the visual arts in the country. In particular, it focuses on the development of modern art in Costa Rica, providing a context for understanding the evolution of the first solidified generation of artists in the country, referred to as the Generation of the 1930s, of which the painter Manuel de la Cruz González was a pioneering member.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} "No pensé nunca al llegar al Teatro Nacional, que habría de encontrarme con una exposición de tal naturaleza. Confieso que era pesimista respecto del arte en Costa Rica. Somos un poco tardos de imaginación, y además un poco perezosos; pero fue para mí una muy grande sorpresa el encontrarme con más de doscientos cuadros todos ellos reveladores de que hay arte en Costa Rica." “El señor Presidente de la República nos habla de la Exposición del ‘Diario de Costa Rica’,” \textit{Diario de Costa Rica}, November 14, 1928.

\textsuperscript{16} It has now become the norm to refer to the group by this name, though this generation of artists is also referred to as the Nationalist Generation and \textit{Nueva Sensibilidad} (New Sensibility).
In the 1930s, modern art influenced a small circle of artists in San Jose, the capital city of this peripheral nation located high in the mountains at a distance from the ports. Though this emerging group was limited, in no small way due to its unpropitious setting, its goals were ambitious. The intention was to advance national culture, to insert a modern visual style within the national consciousness, and to expand opportunities for artists in Costa Rica. This generation of visual artists laid the foundation for a new artistic practice in the country and helped propel Costa Rica into the modern age by virtue of its willingness to break with tradition.

The chapter begins with an overview of colonial and nineteenth-century cultural history to provide a sense of the country’s conservative environment at the beginning of the twentieth century and the experience of artists within it. This is followed by a description of the turn-of-the-century, literary and intellectual vanguard that began to question the hegemonic values set forth by the nation’s leaders and cultural elite. The second half of the chapter is dedicated to the emergence of the Generation of the 1930s, placing particular emphasis on the organization and motivation behind the yearly, fine art salons held between 1928 and 1937. In short, the ultimate goal of this chapter is to provide contextual background for a study on González and his role in the emergence and development of modern art in Costa Rica.

The Cultural Legacy of Costa Rica's Colonial History

Costa Rica is often discussed as an exception within Latin America for a variety of reasons. In colonial times (1512-1821), the lack of a strong imperial and Church presence and the absence of indigenous slave labor shaped Costa Rican history in profound ways that impacted the nation socially, culturally, and politically. It was considered one of the most remote places in the Spanish Empire prior to independence, which was collectively granted to the
provinces of the Viceroyalty of Guatemala in 1821. Any Spanish landholder who settled in Costa Rica was aware, or quickly learned, that there was neither a strong imperial presence that would establish “civilized” living, nor the benefit of indigenous slave labor that could provide a significant profit. The original count of 400,000 natives fell to 10,000 by 1611, and as few as five hundred were paying tribute by 1675. This decimation of the indigenous population led to the so-called “white myth,” which claims that Costa Rica is primarily made up of European settlers, though, in fact, the country is predominantly comprised of mestizos (mixed race of Spanish and indigenous blood) and mulattos (mixed race of African heritage).

Costa Rican historians Iván Molina and Steven Palmer point out another, more complex myth that claims Costa Rica was “a society of homogenous yeoman farmers without any meaningful class or racial divisions…[that] constituted the humble but sound origin of the ‘rural democracy’ that remains the core of nation-state to the present day.” This notion contains some elements of truth. The lack of an easily exploitable labor class and rich natural resources, which had caused disinterest in Costa Rica among prospective colonists as well as the Spanish Crown, meant that most settlers became subsistence farmers who counted on bartering for whatever goods they were unable to provide themselves. This, in turn, led to a strong sense of individualism. Over time, what developed was a system in which those with a strong commercial

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19 According to figures from 1777-78, the Costa Rican population was 60 percent mestizos, 18 percent mulattoes and blacks, 12 percent Indians, and only 10 percent Spanish (both peninsular, born in Spain, and criollo, American-born with a pure racial lineage to Spain). Ibid., 11.

20 Ibid., 9.
vocation achieved economic distinction, bearing the root of class difference.\textsuperscript{21} The wealthy held power by their standing within market relations, not by the use of brute force and violence, a possible factor contributing to Costa Rican pacifism.\textsuperscript{22}

The general poverty and remoteness of Costa Rica made it nearly unfathomable to develop a European-based urban system like those in the larger cities of Latin America. When the first conquistadors arrived in Costa Rican territory there was neither a centralized location to conquer, nor the benefit of a sophisticated society that had learned to engineer structures and roads that could withstand extreme environmental threats, as in Mexico City or Cuzco. In those cities, Spanish colonizers settled into the heart of thriving civilizations where pre-existing caste systems yielded a large labor force accustomed to working for a master. The reason for this difference can be traced to the social reality of Costa Rica before the conquest. Numerous indigenous tribes with small populations were in constant conflict with each other. Though farming was practiced for centuries, the groups rarely remained in one place for long. The only permanent structures were small-scale ceremonial centers where tribal leaders met, rituals were held, and the deceased were buried. They did, nonetheless, develop a vibrant tradition of portable objects during Pre-Columbian times. When the Spanish arrived, the native populations, who never acquiesced, viciously fought the conquistadors. The few surviving members either retreated deep into the jungles, or were forced to live among the Spanish in individual households, no longer in the communal setting to which they were accustomed.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Patricia Fumero Vargas, \textit{Centroamérica: Desarrollo desigual y conflicto social, 1870-1930} (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 2009), 16.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 6–7; Molina Jiménez and Palmer, \textit{Historia de Costa Rica}, 51.

The near-total eradication of indigenous culture affected Costa Rica differently when compared to other places in Latin America where indigenous culture endured, leading to rich cultural syncretism. In places like Mexico and Guatemala to the north, or Peru and Ecuador to the south, a new kind of artistic tradition flowered during the colonial period at the hands of native artisans who applied their indigenous technique to European themes and styles. Instead, Costa Rican colonial society practiced predominantly Hispanic and Catholic customs due to the nearly complete severing of indigenous traditions, religion, and crafts. The Catholic Church, however, did not have a strong hold over the region. Few Franciscan missionaries lived in Costa Rica and they were under the loose supervision of the archbishop of Nicaragua, who visited Costa Rica only eleven times during the 300 years of colonial life. A strong division between Indian and Hispanic communities in Costa Rica did not develop, as was the case in the rest of Central America and in Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. Once a region with a rich indigenous artistic tradition, Costa Rica quickly lost much of its native culture, as tribal life was obliterated. Visual culture came to a standstill. This stunting of tradition, combined with the country’s general poverty, led to an overarching disinterest in the arts that persisted until the early twentieth century.

Little evidence remains of a weak colonial artistic tradition in Costa Rica, and virtually no scholarship exists on the topic. The small churches built by missionaries quickly came to ruin because of the harsh tropical weather and frequent earthquakes. Presently, only two colonial

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structures, the churches of Orosi and Nicoya, remain. Their simplicity attests to Franciscan modesty in colonial Costa Rica. The temples have little external embellishment, as there was neither the money nor the need to impress the scores of newly baptized Indians, as required in places like Mexico City or Cuzco where Catholic structures had to rival the lavish, pre-existing temples. Decoration was minimal within the small churches of Costa Rica and nearly all of the religious adornments were donations that came from Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Quito, and Cuzco. The lack of wealth in Costa Rica was too widespread for such luxury.\textsuperscript{26} The only ornamental objects created locally were polychrome wooden altars and frames, painted in hues that mimic the lush environment.\textsuperscript{27}

During colonial rule, Costa Rica settled into three main regions: cattle ranches in the Central and North Pacific, cacao plantations in the Atlantic manned by black slave labor brought from the Antilles in the eighteenth century,\textsuperscript{28} and small-scale farms in the fertile Central Valley (an area that is actually a plateau between two mountain ranges that run the length of the country). Most of the population lived in the Central Valley region, and it was the leading families of this area that provided the political foundation for the emergent nation upon independence.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{26} Echeverría, \textit{Historia crítica del arte costarricense}, 27–28.

\textsuperscript{27} A well-preserved example of this kind of woodwork can be seen on the altar and in the small museum of colonial church at Orosi.


\textsuperscript{29} In 1824, four-fifths of the 64,000 people that lived in Costa Rica inhabited the Central Valley. To this day, the majority of the country’s population, now approximately 4 million, is located there. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, 11. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, \textit{Historia de Costa Rica}, 43–45.
The Culture of Costa Rican Independence

Prior to independence in 1821, the cabildo system, a colonial administrative council of appointed and elected representatives, had fostered participatory rule among male landowners and led to the overarching preference for “consensus over conflict.” Costa Ricans were accustomed to coming together to voice their opinions and concerns, thus cementing the foundation for one of Latin America’s strongest democratic societies. The general state of neglect by Church and Crown, along with the regional market’s exploitation of Costa Rica’s constant economic hardship, led to a contentious relationship with the other provinces in Central America. As a result, despite efforts to unite the isthmus into a single nation after independence—with attempts from 1824 to 1838—Costa Rican leaders were motivated by an overarching desire for autonomy. In San Jose, the country’s capital since 1835, the ruling class emerged from among the oligarchs who had engaged in the coffee trade since the early decades of the century. Although petty political disputes between ruling families were common, and elected officials were frequently deposed through bloodless coups, peace and economic prosperity were the norm due to an influx of capital from the coffee trade.

Positivist ideology influenced the nation’s leaders during the nineteenth century. They were anti-militarist and emphasized the importance of civil justice and education. The Casa de Enseñanza de Santo Tomás (Saint Thomas House of Learning) opened in 1814, evolving into the

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country’s first university in 1843.\textsuperscript{33} The late introduction of the printing press, in 1830, transitioned Costa Rican society from an oral to a print culture.\textsuperscript{34} Taste in food, attire, and books was increasingly Europeanized, as the coffee trade with Europe grew stronger.\textsuperscript{35} As revenue increased, there was a boom in infrastructure, building, and public services available in the four, metropolitan areas of the Central Valley: San Jose, Cartago, Heredia, and Alajuela. San Jose, the capital, saw the most drastic changes as two-story buildings were erected and sidewalks and streets were paved. San Jose was the first Central American city to install public street lighting and a growing number of pharmacies, specialty shops, and cafes were opened to meet the needs of increasingly cosmopolitan city dwellers.\textsuperscript{36}

A push toward modernization occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century, during the dictatorship of Tomás Guardia (1870-1882) and his successors Próspero Fernández (1882-1885) and Bernardo Soto (1885-1889). Known as the Olimpo group, the liberales (liberalist politicians), though heavy handed at times to keep coup attempts at bay, welcomed reforms that would forever alter the course of the nation: railroads (used primarily for industry but also for the newfound custom among the wealthy of national tourism); improved means of communication; a new constitution that would stay in place for nearly 80 years; the abolishment of the death

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Molina Jiménez and Palmer, \textit{Historia de Costa Rica}, 61.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Within four years, four printing presses were established. By 1936 there were 17 newspapers, and over 100 books and pamphlets were published. Fumero Vargas, \textit{El advenimiento de la modernidad}, 2–6; Molina Jiménez and Palmer, \textit{Historia de Costa Rica}, 59–61.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Costa Rican historian Ana María Botey argues, “The coffee bourgeoisie and the liberales ascribed without reserve to European cultural patterns and scorned literary and visual production inspired by the landscape, daily life of the pueblo and cultural values that appreciated the autochthonous.” “La burguesía cafetalera y los liberales adscribían sin reparos los patrones culturales europeos y menospreciaban las producciones literarias y plásticas que se inspiraban en el paisaje, la cotidianeidad del pueblo y en valores culturales que apreciaban lo autóctono.” Ana María Botey Sobrado, \textit{Costa Rica entre guerras: 1914-1940} (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 2005), 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Fumero Vargas, \textit{El advenimiento de la modernidad}, 8–9.
\end{itemize}
penalty; the incorporation of the metric system; the approval of new civil and penal codes; an increase in civil service and police posts; the creation of birth, marriage, and death registries; and, by far the most important, the establishment of a free, secular, and obligatory primary education system for all children. The *liberales* set these developments in place with the intention of “civilizing” the masses, establishing a secular national identity, and furthering the central role of the beneficent state. The aim was to form citizens who were, in the words of cultural historian Rafael Cuevas Molina, “Healthy, hygienic, instructed, patriotic, respectful of the law, faithful to the liberal ideology and enterprising men that looked after themselves and ascended the social scale thanks to their own effort: *self made man.*”

The *liberales* were spurred by wealth, progress, and order, to the detriment of intellectual and artistic cultivation. They encouraged practicality and a secular morality to mold a society free of colonial superstition, and believed in science, reason, and capitalism.

In his “Introduction” to *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawn defines “invented tradition” as the “formalization and ritualization” of practices or objects, “characterized by reference to the past,” that are intended to represent membership in an institution, club, group, or

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38 “Saludables, higiénicos, instruidos, patriotas, respetuosos de la ley, fieles a la ideología liberal y emprendedores hombres que se valían por sí mismos y ascendían en la escala social gracias a su propio esfuerzo: *self made man.*” Rafael Cuevas Molina, *Tendencias de la dinámica cultural en Costa Rica en el siglo XX* (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 2003), 5.

39 Guardia, longest in power, was an astute leader, but not an entirely cultured man. It was only upon a trip to France, being greatly impressed by the Baroque wonders of Versailles, that he became aware of the political power of art. There he had his portrait painted and returned with the intention of edifying national culture. He proposed the separation of artisans from their Church patron and hoped to build a National Theater with a statue of himself in front. In the end, the only artistic endeavor completed during his governance was the composition of his funeral march in 1882. Luis Ferrero Acosta, *Sociedad y arte en la Costa Rica del siglo 19* (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1986), 46–47.

nation. These invented traditions are “not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so.”

The Olimpo leaders underwent this process establishing a national identity for Costa Ricans through the press, education, and a system of national symbols and statuary. The intention was to single out Costa Ricans from the rest of Central Americans for their characteristic “laboriousness, peaceful countenance, status as land owners, and, in particular, belonging to the white race.”

The government also founded institutions essential to the construction of a nationalist discourse, among them the National Archive (1881), the National Museum (1887), the National Library (1888), the National Monument (1895), and the National Theater (1897). The formation of these institutions bred pride, particularly among the wealthier classes, as attested in an 1897 newspaper article.

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43 “Su laboriosidad, su índole pacífica, su condición de propietarios y, en particular, pertenecer a la raza blanca.” Molina Jiménez and Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica, 72.

44 Before the National Museum, there were National Exhibitions, held yearly since 1885, which were organized “in order to prepare the country for taking part in the Paris World’s Fair of 1889, and other similar events that were held shortly afterwards.” Once founded, the museum initially focused on the collection, classification, and exhibition of wildlife, historical, and archaeological objects. Not until the 1950s did the museum specifically dedicate galleries to the exhibition of art. Christian Kandler, National Museum of Costa Rica: Over One Hundred Years of History (San Jose, C.R.: National Museum of Costa Rica and The Neotropical Foundation, 1987), 16–18, 42.

45 The liberales commissioned this neo-classical statue from French artist Louis-Robert Carrier Belleuse, revealing the politicians’ stylistic preference. Erected in the National Park, it commemorates the Costa Rican victory over an invading mercenary army from the United States led by William Walker in the war of 1856-57. Cuevas Molina, Tendencias de la dinámica cultural en Costa Rica, 6–8.

46 The National Theater, a small replica of the Palais Garnier (Paris Opera House), was completed nearly a decade before the Teatro Municipal in Rio de Janeiro, which is also based on the Palais Garnier.
If the advances of a people and their progressive spirit are measured and appreciated both by the multiplicity of its educational institutions as the number of children that they educate and instruct, Costa Rica, which decidedly promotes public education, and devotes to this the majority of its strength, effort and care, has a perfect right not only to be judged very favorably in this respect, but also to reasonably expect that the realization of their noble aspirations for prosperity and culture are in a not too distant future.\textsuperscript{47}

The ideology put forth by the Olimpo leaders in their texts emphasized the importance of a patriarchal order steeped in tradition. Alvaro Quesada Soto, Costa Rican philologist, expands on this idea.

The Olimpo texts were based on identification with patriarchal authority, consecrated by tradition, as a receptacle of moral values and national identity. The literary discourse of the Olimpo drew from tradition its unequivocal authority and would not recognize in its national image of reality any other discourse, any other voice: other voices were exotic and alien—foreign or marginal—whose expression, freed from traditional control, introduced dissonance, disorder and decay.\textsuperscript{48}

Improved communications systems brought more foreign correspondence and international publications, which supplemented the prevailing positivist thought. Information disseminated through the press and in private tertulias\textsuperscript{49} or in San Jose’s new spaces for socialization, such as

\textsuperscript{47}“Si los adelantos de un pueblo y su espíritu progresista se miden y se aprecian, tanto por la multiplicidad de sus establecimientos docentes como por el número de niños que en ellos se educan y se instruyen, Costa Rica que impulsa de una manera decidida la instrucción pública, y que consagra á ésta la mayor parte de sus fuerzas, sus desvelos y sus cuidados, tiene perfecto derecho no sólo para ser juzgada del modo más favorable á este respecto, sino también para esperar fundadamente en la realización de sus nobles aspiraciones de prosperidad y de cultura en un porvenir no lejano.” \textit{La Prensa Libre} VIII, no. 2393 (March 17, 1897).

\textsuperscript{48}“Los textos del Olimpo partían de una identificación con la autoridad patriarcal, consagrada por la tradición, como receptáculo de los valores morales y la identidad nacional. El discurso literario del Olimpo recogía de la tradición su autoridad unívoca y no reconocía, en su imagen de la realidad nacional, ningún otro discurso, ninguna otra voz: las otras eran voces exóticas y ajenas—extranjeras o marginales—cuya expresión, liberada de los controles tradicionales, introducía la disonancia, el desorden y la descomposición.” Alvaro Quesada Soto, \textit{Uno y los otros: identidad y literatura en Costa Rica 1890-1940} (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1998), 115.

\textsuperscript{49}A tertulia is a relatively informal gathering, usually at the end of the day, during which participants discuss current events, foreign news, politics, religion, the arts, or any other given topic. Tertulias originated in Spain and spread throughout Latin America with both a political and cultural emphasis. The first known tertulias in Costa Rica began in 1822. Instituted through government decree, the Tertulias Patrióticas de Centroamérica were influenced by eighteenth century Enlightenment salons. These instructive gatherings offered a space for discussion, often political, and were a convenient method for spreading new ideas during a time of high illiteracy. For more on these early tertulias see, María de los Ángeles Palacios Robles, \textit{La formación del ciudadano costarricense de 1821 a 1886} (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 2005), 10–14.
hotels, restaurants, bookstores, and cafes.\textsuperscript{50} The main issues discussed regarded politics, law, and education, all of which pressed for greater centralization of government and cohered with a hegemonic national sentiment.\textsuperscript{51} The masses were expected to conform to this vision of the state and to incorporate it into their daily reality. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as those in power introduced modern innovations into Costa Rican life, “The populace was encouraged to adjust their daily lives to the calendar and the clock, to control passions and vices, and to identify with the bourgeois ideal of the nuclear family as the basis of morality and prosperity.”\textsuperscript{52}

Beyond literature, visual art and culture factored little within this influx of Western ideas, information, and customs. Among the intellectuals, coffee oligarchs, and \textit{liberales} interested in the formation of a more modern state, music was the most respected and fostered art form.\textsuperscript{53} The visual arts were rarely acknowledged as an important facet of a progressive and liberal nation. In his book \textit{Sociedad y arte en la Costa Rica del Siglo XIX} (Society and Art in XIX Century Costa Rica), essayist and intellectual Luis Ferrero suggests that visual art was considered opulent and, therefore, a luxurious custom that had no place in Costa Rican society, which emphasized practicality above all attributes.\textsuperscript{54} Portraiture was uncommon and as early as 1848 those who

\textsuperscript{50} As a result of widespread reforms, literacy increased countrywide. By 1920, 87 percent of city dwellers and 58 percent of rural people had the basic ability to read and write. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, \textit{Historia de Costa Rica}, 69–70; Fumero Vargas, \textit{El advenimiento de la modernidad}, 3–9; Ferrero Acosta, \textit{Sociedad y arte}, 42–43.

\textsuperscript{51} María Pérez Yglesias, \textit{La prensa costarricense al ritmo del mundo: el reto continua} (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1997), 154–156.

\textsuperscript{52} “Los sectores populares fueron alentados a ajustar su vida cotidiana al calendario y al reloj, a controlar pasiones y vicios, y a identificarse con el ideal burgués de la familia nuclear como base de la moral y la prosperidad.” Molina Jiménez and Palmer, \textit{Historia de Costa Rica}, 70.

\textsuperscript{53} Fumero Vargas, \textit{El advenimiento de la modernidad}, 18.

\textsuperscript{54} Ferrero Acosta, \textit{Sociedad y arte}, 28.
wished to have their likeness recorded opted for the less expensive alternative of photography.\textsuperscript{55}

The general public saw art only in churches and just a small portion of the wealthy owned decorative religious artifacts in their small home chapels. Well-to-do families hung photographs or prints of famous European artwork on their walls. Citizens were expected to be pragmatic and civic minded and artists did not fit the mold of the ideal member of society. As Ferrero asserts, “According to elite interpretation of Positivist doctrine, the Costa Rican painter was a ‘bohemian,’ a ‘useless being for himself and for the country’, and a ‘disgrace for his family.’”\textsuperscript{56}

While native-born artists faced contempt by their countrymen, European artists were viewed favorably for their first-hand experience of European culture, considered superior to local culture by society-at-large.

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, Costa Ricans had no opportunity for academic training in the arts. German artist D.F. Schellsinger attempted to set up a fine arts academy in 1857, but that attempt was short lived. In the 1870s, some primary and secondary schools offered drawing lessons open to the public, as advertised in newspapers. Then, in 1879, the Instituto Nacional Costa Rica (National Institute of Costa Rica) began to offer four kinds of drawing courses: linear, geometric, topographic, and natural, the last being the only one with an artistic bent. Nonetheless, these classes were sporadic and taught by second-rate instructors.\textsuperscript{57} Other than the few who believed it was a fundamental building block for any successful artist, drawing was primarily considered either a preparative tool for practical careers like architecture or

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\textsuperscript{56} “Según interpretaban los grupos elitistas la doctrina del Postivismo, el pintor costarricense era un ‘bohemio’, un ‘ser inútil para si y para el país’ y un ‘deshonor para su familia.’” Ferrero Acosta, Sociedad y arte, 9–10.
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\textsuperscript{57} Zavaleta Ochoa and Vargas Cullel, Echandi, 14.
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engineering, or a skill for society ladies who needed to draft designs for their handicrafts. Beyond drawing, the only artistic instruction available to Costa Ricans was private lessons taught by foreign painters.⁵⁸

Despite this vacuum in artistic training and the general repudiation of fine art, Costa Rica was the first country in Central America to establish an art academy. A government decree on March 14, 1897, established the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (National School of Fine Arts), which was considered an indispensable step toward national progress. Spanish painter Tomás Povedano de Arcos (1857-1943), founder of the Academy of Fine Arts in Cuenca, Ecuador, in 1891, established the institution and served as its first director. He ran the school in strict academic fashion, emphasizing drawing from plaster casts and lithographs brought from Europe.⁵⁹

Enrique Echandi (1866-1958), the first European-trained, professional Costa Rican painter, had proposed establishing a fine arts academy in 1892, but the government rejected his idea claiming that there was no budget for such an institution.⁶⁰ And yet, five years later, the institution came into being. As in all art academies established in Latin America, the school’s director was a European artist brought to the country specifically for that purpose. Echandi, as did many Costa Rican artists after him, resented this fact; the government’s choice highlighted

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⁵⁸ Ibid., 16; Ferrero Acosta, Sociedad y arte, 54.

⁵⁹ The original collection of plaster casts included 352 copies ranging from full figures to anatomical parts, reliefs to architectural models. Most of the objects can be traced to originals in French collections. These, as well as the drawings, were in Costa Rica by the time of the institution’s inauguration in 1897. There remain 163 plaster casts, 27 of which have been restored, and they continue to be used as fundamental tools in the instruction of art students at the School of Fine Arts, now part of the University of Costa Rica. Laura Raabe Cercone, “Los antiguos yesos de Bellas Artes,” Semanario Universidad, June 24, 2009, sec. Suplemento Forja, 6–7.

⁶⁰ While there were other Costa Ricans who painted during the nineteenth century, no one else had a European, academic formation, and none focused exclusively on their craft, painting only as a hobby. Ferrero Acosta, Sociedad y arte.
the fact that Costa Ricans considered national artists of less merit than Europeans.\(^{61}\) Echandi’s biography reveals that he had a difficult time as an artist at home. He was not invited to create any paintings for the National Theater, the interior of which is covered in frescos and fresco-like wall and ceiling canvases, all of which were either brought from Europe or made by European artists in Costa Rica.\(^{62}\) Yet the hardest part of being an artist in Costa Rica at the time was the inadequate artistic environment, pointed out by Roberto Brenes Mesén (1874-1947), a leading Costa Rican author, in an article about Echandi from 1900.

We will have no true masters but with the lapse of many years. Nobody encourages anyone; the ignorant manage art criticism and an insignificant reporter becomes the arbiter of the reputation of valuable men... Nonetheless, literati and musicians can make a life here: masterpieces of Literature and Music reach us. It is the painter who is to be pitied. There is no school, no collection of copies, and no suitable criticism because the only ones that understand, due to the regularity of their trade, usually do not write; without an educated public, the artist, no matter how much talent he has, is reduced to his own strength and is compelled to live in the shadows or to succumb.\(^{63}\)

The fact that Echandi was the first professional artist in Costa Rica is telling of how behind the times Costa Rica was in relation to the visual arts. His story is like that of most Latin American artists, only that it happened to him many centuries or decades after the earliest artists from Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Mexico, or Peru. Born into a wealthy family from San Jose, Echandi enrolled in the drawing classes offered by the Instituto Nacional in the 1870s. The following decade he took private painting lessons with the British artists Henry Etheridge and

\(^{61}\) Echandi met again with government rejection when he proposed, in 1914, the idea of creating a museum of paintings. Zavaleta Ochoa and Vargas Cullel, *Echandi*, 44.


\(^{63}\) “Es decir, no tendremos maestros verdaderos sino con el trascurso de muchos años. Nadie estimula á nadie; los ignaros manejan la crítica de arte i un cronista insignificante llega á hacerse el árbitro de la reputación de los hombres de valor…No obstante, los literatos i músicos tienen aquí condiciones de vida: las obras maestras de la Literatura i la Música pueden llegarnos. A quien hay que compadecer es al pintor. Sin escuela, sin que exista un colección de copias, sin crítica idonea porque los únicos que entienden, por lo regular del oficio, no escriben; sin público educado, el artista por más talento que posea, queda reducido á sus solas fuerzas i se ve compelido á vivir en la sombra ó á sucumbir.” Roberto Brenes Mesén, “Enrique Echandi,” *El Fígaro*, November 27, 1900.
Henry Twight (d. 1884), residents in Costa Rica. He then left to study art in Germany, first in Leipzig and then in Munich. Upon his return in 1891 he became one of the few portraitists for the country’s elite, profiting from the recent trend among the wealthiest of Costa Ricans (fig. 1.1).

Echandi also created many drawings of rural Costa Rica with an emphasis on its inhabitants and their daily routines. In *Untitled* (fig. 1.2), a drawing from one of his many sketchbooks, he drafted two scenes. On the right, a pious group of well-dressed people head toward a church; on the left, a fashionably dressed woman walks across a path just traversed by a hunched *campesino* (peasant) as a gentleman rides on his horse beyond. These images are visual parallels to the *costumbrista* stories written at the time by authors like Manuel González Zeledón (“Magón,” 1864-1936), González’s second cousin, and Aquileo J. Echeverría (1866-1909). They are nostalgic renderings of a “golden age” of Costa Rican life, where wealthy families lived amid a loyal and submissive populace that remained within the parameters of the established social order. Echandi’s simple drawings of agrarian life paired with the spreading practice of portraiture exemplifies the manner in which turn-of-the-century artists in the country aligned with the official mindset of the *liberales* and effectively aided in constructing the national identity paradigm.

**Birth of the Costa Rican Vanguard**

The social development brought about by the *liberales* in Costa Rica, originally instated to maintain control over a “dignified” populace, ultimately spurred class conflict. The *liberales*

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65 Quesada Soto, *Uno y los otros*, 41–42.
retained control over the masses while maintaining themselves at a distance. Empowered by education and expanded voting laws, the working class, aided by a small but dedicated vanguard community, learned about their rights. Proponents of change, intellectuals like Brenes Mesén, Omar Dengo (1888-1928), and Joaquín García Monge (1881-1958), emerged in the early twentieth century. A new generation of nation builders, they were born into the dominant class but diverged from their predecessors, feeling that greater solidarity with the masses was an essential step toward national progress. They advocated improved education, which they considered a tool for self-betterment. Building on a nationalist sentiment, they believed that a more conscious citizenry would yield a population aware and capable of fully enjoying its freedom, a birthright of all Costa Ricans. Both Tolstoy’s asceticism and José Enrique Rodó’s arielismo influenced their idealist stance. This generation of vanguard intellectuals was optimistic that human reason and moral consciousness, when aided toward fulfillment, could improve social ills. This attitude went directly against the liberales with their homogenous rendering of national identity, which was prohibitive of free will, and their system of government, which maintained a dominant oligarchy at the head of the state and excluded women, the poor, and the working class from fully participating in civic life. Quesada Soto points out that these intellectuals, whom he refers to as the “segunda promoción,” or “second generation,” accepted diversity while still respecting the traditionalist sentiment set forth by the


67 Luis Ferrero Acosta, Explosión creadora: Roberto Brenes Mesén, Joaquín García Monge, Omar Dengo (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 2004), 55–57; Quesada Soto, Uno y los otros, 140.

68 Arielismo was a predominant ideology among Latin American elitist intellectuals at the turn of the century. Rodó, an Uruguayan philosopher, set up a dichotomy in his essay Ariel, published in 1900, based on the Shakespearean characters of Ariel and Caliban. “Ariel is the ideal of wisdom, beauty, spirituality, the values of civilization to be transmitted by the new generation of the elite. Caliban is the gruff materialism and utilitarianism of vulgar North American capitalism that is threatening the values of true civilization.” Philip Swanson, “Civilization and Barbarism,” in The Companion to Latin American Studies, ed. Philip Swanson (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 73.
liberales.\textsuperscript{69} They intended to give the marginalized a voice, allowing them to break free from the stereotype assigned to them by the oligarchy. Through their writing there came to exist “two codes, two visions, two sources of meaning.”\textsuperscript{70}

During World War I, Costa Rica faced economic hardship and a growing deficit. The government of Alfredo González Flores (1914-1917) responded to these problems by instituting bank and tax reform. Feeling threatened by the restructuring, the oligarchy, banking and business sectors, and foreign investors (primarily the United Fruit Company run by Minor Cooper Keith) backed a coup led by Federico Tinoco Granados in January 1917. Though initially favored by many, the rule of Tinoco and his brother, José Joaquín, quickly lost support. This led to the government’s rampant use of espionage, persecution, unjust detentions, and violence, and the loss of freedoms of assembly, speech and press. After several attempts to bring down the dictatorship, Tinoco abdicated power in 1919, in large part due to the riots in San Jose led by trade group workers.\textsuperscript{71}

The desecration of civil liberties in Costa Rica came as a shock to citizens who took pride in their country’s traditions of social justice and democracy. Increasing class tension in subsequent decades served to further shake the basis of the national character as promulgated by the liberales and artists of the previous generation. During this period, a marked shift began to take place in literature, which not only went against the state-decreed vision of the nation, but also specifically contradicted it. Fueled into action by an awareness of the struggles and successes of the Mexican and Russian revolutions, the vanguard authors and intellectuals

\textsuperscript{69} Quesada Soto, \textit{Uno y los otros}, 140–141.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 115–116.

\textsuperscript{71} Botey Sobrado, \textit{Costa Rica entre guerras}, 89–92.
defended moral laws regardless of class and fought for the individual rights of citizens. Although
the protests in Costa Rica were rarely violent, they signified a shift in the guiding principles of
those who shared and spread the philosophies of thinkers such as Victor Raul Haya de la Torre
and Jose Carlos Mariátegui from Peru, José Vasconcelos from Mexico, or Waldo Frank from the
United States.\textsuperscript{72} They embraced heterogeneity and believed in the power of fighting for their
convictions through peaceful negotiation and the creation of reformist political parties.\textsuperscript{73}

The leading role played by the labor class to reinstate democracy in 1919 strengthened
the popular reform movement, promoted by left-wing intellectuals like Dengo, García Monge,
Carmen Lyra (1887-1949), and Mario Sancho (1889-1948), who were concerned with the
corruption of the bourgeoisie and the meager living and working conditions of the poor. Their
ideas of nationalism differed from those of the progressive\textit{ liberales} of the late nineteenth
century: they emphasized solidarity with, rather than paternalist domination of, the masses,\textsuperscript{74}
Latin American unity against the imperialist United States,\textsuperscript{75} and a range of educational

\textsuperscript{72} The Costa Rican vanguard had access to the writings of such intellectuals primarily through the \textit{Repertorio
Americano}, an important periodical published in San Jose edited by García Monge between 1919-1958.

\textsuperscript{73} Quesada Soto, \textit{Uno y los otros}, 126–127. In 1923, the assembly of the \textit{Confederación General de Trabajadores
(General Confederation of Workers)} founded the Reform Party and named the military general and priest Jorge
Volio as their candidate for the election of 1924. Upon the victory of Ricardo Jiménez, Volio was named vice-
president and many of his initiatives were adopted into law. Botey Sobrado, \textit{Costa Rica entre guerras}, 94; Molina

\textsuperscript{74} For the intellectuals, solidarity with the masses translated into the establishment of unions that had the ultimate
goal of peaceful resolution to working class conflicts. Díaz Arias, \textit{Construcción de un Estado moderno: Política, Estado e

\textsuperscript{75} This is in reference both to internal affairs, namely the increasing power of the American corporation, United
Fruit Company and affairs abroad, particularly the not-too-distant invasion of the United States army in Nicaragua.
In 1927 a coalition formed in Costa Rica called the \textit{Liga Antimperialista de las Américas (Anti-Imperialist League
of the Americas)} that promoted a sense of solidarity with their neighbors and Augusto César Sandino’s cause to
opportunities tailored to empower the laborer. To a certain extent, this generation of intellectuals continued a tradition already in place; individual rights, autonomy, and education were national building blocks under the *liberales*, but they did so with defiance, specifically against the paternalist model. Drawn together by an enthusiasm for new ideas and the revolutionary victories abroad, the intellectuals and laboring class sought to debunk convention and institute change that would benefit the majority of Costa Ricans, not the minority of rich oligarchs.

Artists, intellectuals, and reformist leaders met in *tertulias* in private homes, schools, parks, offices, or shops, like the tailor shop, *Sastrería Valenzuela*, or the bookstore, *Lectura Barata*. Some of the ideas discussed at these gatherings led to initiatives of social reform adopted by the government throughout the 1920s. President Julio Acosta García (1920-1924), who had largely opposed the Tinoco dictatorship, instated the eight-hour workday and increased the minimum wage. His successor, Ricardo Jiménez Oreamuno (president three times: 1910-1914, 1924-1928, and 1932-1936) was an advocate of popular reform and the welfare state, and

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76 Since the turn of the century there were public libraries for the masses, the opportunity for evening study, and an increasing number of popular publications and texts about socialism that were shared among members of the working class. The creation of the University of Costa Rica in 1940 was an ultimate educational accomplishment meant to democratize learning and the spread of professional opportunities. It filled the gap left in higher education after the closing of the Universidad de Santo Tomás in 1888. Cuevas Molina, *Tendencias de la dinámica cultural en Costa Rica*, 16; Juan Rafael Quesada Camacho, *Estado y educación en Costa Rica: Del agotamiento del liberalismo al inicio del Estado Interventor, 1914-1949* (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 2003).

77 By this time, tertulias benefitted from the immediacy of news that came through the telegraph and periodicals from abroad, now more efficient due to the liberales’ modernization projects. Joaquín Vargas Coto, “Las tertulias de hace 40 años,” *La Nación*, May 21, 1955, accessed June 1, 2012, http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1757&dat=19550521&id=3rccAAAAIBAJ&sjid=TXoEAAAAIBAJ&pg=863,7119965. Among the most significant gatherings for the cultural sector were the tertulias held in Echandi’s home during the 1910s and 1920s. Though predominantly dedicated to music they were among the few social settings for conversation about art and artists. Echandi coordinated similar events, as the president of the Fine Arts section of the conservative association *Ateneo de Costa Rica*, with the objective of ridding the public of its general apathy towards art. Zavaleta Ochoa and Vargas Cullel, *Echandi*, 55–56; Zavaleta Ochoa, *Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas*, 36.
he instated the secret ballot in 1925. Jiménez also instated some of the opposition’s reformist proposals, increasing spending on education, health, retirement, and public works. His government also established the first national insurance agency (Banco Nacional de Seguro, present-day Instituto Nacional de Seguros), the Secretaría de Salubridad Pública y Protección Social (1927, Secretariat of Public Health and Social Protection), and a Ministry of Labor (1928). The economic prosperity during Jiménez’s government resulted from an increase in the price of coffee and bananas, which helped the country recuperate from the trauma of the dictatorship that had affected Costa Rican morale.

Modern Art Arrives in San Jose

During this time, news about modern art in Europe and the Americas filtered slowly into Costa Rica, limiting the advancement of local art. As Costa Rican cultural critic Carlos Francisco Echeverría asserted, while Cubism and Dada developed in Europe, and Mexico began its muralist movement, “Costa Rican painting languished with flower vases, still lifes, landscapes, and portraits.” The sporadic nature of the information that arrived made even the slightest incursion highly influential. In 1909, shortly after Tommaso Marinetti published the Futurist Manifesto, two Costa Rican magazines, Virya (under the direction of Povedano) and Páginas Ilustradas, published critical responses to Marinetti. Written in Costa Rica, both were negative

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78 Jiménez had pressed for the direct vote in 1913 and it was put into practice during the 1914 elections. Botey Sobrado, Costa Rica entre guerras, 89.

79 For more on the specific laws established by Volio see, Mora Rodríguez, Historia del pensamiento costarricense, 152–154.

80 Botey Sobrado, Costa Rica entre guerras, 93–97; Molina Jiménez and Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica, 90.

and cried out against artistic innovation. Neither periodical published a counter-argument defending a vanguard stance. Nonetheless, both Marinetti and Futurism were introduced to the Costa Rican readers of cultural gazettes, an early step that prepared the artistic sector for future debates about modern art.82

By the early twentieth century, many other periodicals were printed in Costa Rica, including *Cultura, Ecos, Liberación, Pandemonium,* and *Renovación,* all of which claimed a cultural bent, yet they seldom published articles about modernism and the visual arts. These journals, as well as major newspapers like *Diario de Costa Rica,* were among the meager motivating forces for artists, writers, and intellectuals in the country. Their pages served as a source for reprinted international texts and offered space to national authors, poets, artists, and intellectuals to publish their ideas and make proclamations about politics, society, and culture at large. Print was the preferred tool to challenge conservatism, as well as the main means for traditionalists to push back against avant-garde thrusts.

The *Repertorio Americano* was by far the most significant periodical during the first half of the twentieth century. Edited by García Monge between 1919 and 1958, this repository of cultural, educational, scientific, and political writing maintained its audience abreast of the ideas at the forefront of intellectual thought circulating in Latin America. It featured information such as the state of democracies in the Americas, the Mexican Revolution, Puerto Rican independence, education and labor reforms, women’s suffrage, literature and poetry, American interventionism, and, occasionally, essays about visual art and illustrations by modern artists.83 García Monge, who had lived in New York where he met members of the Latin American

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82 Zavaleta Ochoa, *Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas,* 70.

vanguard, developed a long-distance relationship with many eminent Hispanic intellectuals. Gathering an impressive list of contributors who came to respect García Monge’s uninterrupted enterprise, Repertorio soon had a widespread readership and became one of the most important journals in the Americas, featuring authors such as Alejo Carpentier, José Carlos Mariátegui, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, José Ortega y Gasset, and José Vasconcelos. Costa Rican authors and artists who submitted to the journal had a national and an international outlet for their work. Through his efforts, García Monge was largely responsible for spreading new ideas and uniting the older and younger members of the Costa Rican avant-garde who met in theory on the page and in person in his office.

Articles about the visual arts were infrequent in Repertorio. Artists waited with anticipation for avant-garde journals such as Martín Fierro from Argentina, Forma from Mexico, Amauta from Peru, and Gaceta Literaria from Spain. Visiting foreigners or Costa Ricans who had the opportunity to travel brought news of what they had witnessed and

84 Within its pages there are also articles by or about Teresa de la Parra, Rubén Darío, José Enrique Rodó, Ramón Valle-Inclán, Waldo Frank, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, José Juan Tablada, Victoria Ocampo, and Alfonso Reyes, and Walt Whitman among many others. There were illustrations by foreign artists like Tsuguharu Foujita, Ernesto García Cabral, Francisco Rivero Gil, Conrado Massaguer, Paco Hernandez, Paco Rodriguez, Lluis Bagaria, as well as national artists, like González, Max Jiménez, Emilia Prieto and Francisco Amighetti. Most of the illustrations were portraits of the featured authors.

85 Among the older generation were García Monge, Carmen Lyra, Teodorico Quirós, Juan Rafael Chacón, and Carlos Luis Sáenz. Among the younger: Abelardo Bonilla, Francisco Amighetti, Juan Manuel Sánchez, Gilbert Laporte, Francisco Zuñiga, Manuel de la Cruz González, Yolanda Oreamuno, Fabián Dobles, Joaquin Gutiérrez, Fernando Luján, and Eunice Odio. Ibid., 114, n.26. For more on the social nature of these gatherings see, Quesada Soto, Uno y los otros, 158–160. In 1928, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre visited Costa Rica. Inspired by this eminent guest, members of the intellectual vanguard formed a Costa Rican branch of the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA, American Popular Revolution Alliance) under the leadership of García Monge. Botey Sobrado, Costa Rica entre guerras, 87–88. Aprismo was a political movement that aimed to resolve the difficult political issue of mixed identity in the Americas, believing in the benefit of unity of all identities, each bringing forth its best values and attributes. Miguel Rojas Mix, Los cien nombres de America eso que descubrió Colón (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1997), 286.

87 Amighetti, “Arte de vanguardia.”
experienced abroad. Books about classical and modern art, limited as they were in number in the country, were extremely important sources of information, and were shared by those who had libraries like the Irish cubist Doreen Vanston (1903-1988), who had lived in Costa Rica during the 1920s, or the Costa Rican artist Max Jiménez (1900-1947), who had spent time in the United States and Paris. Yet news about modern art remained scant and outdated.

More detrimental than this lack of updated information, San Jose had no galleries and few spaces where artists could exhibit their work. Occasionally, the School of Fine Arts held a National Exhibition, but most works displayed were mediocre copies of European originals. Prestigious San Jose high schools like the Liceo de Costa Rica and the Colegio Superior de Señoritas also coordinated exhibits; but, as was the case at the School of Fine Arts, attendance was limited to those with a direct connection to the exhibiting artists. For the most part, artists either kept their paintings in their home studios where few ever saw them, or, like Echandi, they hung their work in shop windows for scarcely interested viewers not willing to pay for original works of art. The few artistic outlets and the small, inexperienced, and mostly uninformed audience hindered growth in the artistic community. The general prosperity of 1920s Costa Rica expanded to cultural life in general, yet the few modern artists remained isolated. Quesada Soto points out:

Although there appears in San Jose, in the late 1920s, a qualitatively distinct cultural life, marked by searches denoting the emergence of a new historical-literary consciousness, more complex and more critical than the official models, it is also true that the cultural life of these authors occupies a very restricted setting within Costa Rican social life, and

88 Information about the spreading of new ideas from foreigners or Costa Ricans who had been abroad, and the sharing of their libraries is available in interviews with Claudio Carazo, Fabio Fournier, and Francisco Amighetti, in Zavaleta Ochoa, “Las ‘Exposiciones de Arte Plásticas’,” 425, 467, 484.

89 Zavaleta Ochoa, Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas, 47–48.

that the development of a critical consciousness augments a sense of isolation and hostility in the creator toward his social surrounding. 91

These problems were not unique to Costa Rica. Argentinean anthropologist Nestor García-Canclini states that both issues were present in Latin America at the forging of modernism. “In all histories, individual creative projects are thwarted by the paralysis of the bourgeoisie, the lack of an independent art market, provincialism (even in key cities like Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Lima and Mexico City), arduous competition with academicism, colonial attitudes, naïve Indianism and regionalism.” 92 Beyond these troubles, what differed is that Costa Rica had virtually no established visual tradition and a socially inherited philistine attitude toward art.

The Costa Rican modern artists fought this unfavorable setting and managed to provoke a pivotal change toward the end of the 1920s. By 1928, there was enough information about modernism circulating in San Jose to prepare the field for a protracted debate about modern art, set in motion by the publication of a cubist portrait of the Mexican poet Rafael Estrada drawn by Edmundo Cono. The illustration, printed in the Diario de Costa Rica, the first, major independent newspaper in the country, unleashed a wave of articles, some supporting and others opposing the style. The artist Francisco Amighetti (1907-1998), who would soon emerge as a primary vanguard figure among the upcoming generation, published the most open-minded of these responses. He began, “To question where the beauty lies in this Cubist caricature is like

91 “Si bien es cierto aparece en San José, hacia finales de la década de 1920, una vida cultural cualitativamente distinta, signada por búsquedas que denotan el surgimiento de una nueva conciencia histórico-literaria, más compleja y más crítica con respecto a los modelos oficiales, también es cierto que la vida cultural en la que participan estos autores ocupa un lugar muy restringido en el conjunto de la vida social costarricense, y el mismo desarrollo de la conciencia crítica aumenta la sensación de aislamiento y hostilidad del creador hacia la vida social circundante.” Quesada Soto, Uno y los otros, 160.

asking where the beauty is in crystallized quartz.” His fundamental argument in this article was that art did not have to represent reality, the aspect of modern art that appears most to have irritated the defenders of classicism in the country.

By the late 1920s, various painters and sculptors led by Teodoro “Quico” Quirós (1897-1977) banded together to break with conservative themes and open a space for a new kind of art in Costa Rica. Quirós, who had studied engineering and architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, returned to Costa Rica in 1921. Although a practicing architect, he was an avid painter and he motivated artists, who had until then created art in obscurity, to unite. As had Mexican artist Alfredo Ramos Martínez in his Barbizon School of Santa Anita (founded outside of Mexico City in 1913), Quirós encouraged his contemporaries to do open-air painting, which he exercised regularly. They were not the first to depict the Costa Rican countryside. The previous generation of artists had looked to the environment for inspiration, like the self-taught, and somewhat naïve, Costa Rican artist, Ezequiel Jiménez Rojas (1869-1957), Echandi, or the German born and trained painter, Emil Span (1869-1944), all who painted the landscape in a soothing manner reminiscent of Corot and the Barbizon School. For example, Span’s painting of Turrialba (1912, fig. 1.3) is a picturesque view of a valley from atop a hillside. In the foreground is a field with a single cow. Beyond it are cattle grazing fields and a small village, with structures

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93 “Preguntar en qué consiste la belleza de esta caricatura cubista es como preguntar en qué consiste la belleza de una cristalización de cuarzo.” Amighetti, “Arte de vanguardia.”

94 For a lengthier discussion about the printed debates of 1909 and 1928, as well as several others, see Zavaleta Ochoa, Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas, 70–75.

95 For González, Quirós was the leader in breaking with art from the past. When Quirós passed away, González proclaimed, “Painting in Costa Rica has two distinct stages: before Quico and after Quico.” “LA [sic.] PINTURA EN Costa Rica tiene dos etapas definidas: una antes de Quico y otra después de Quico.” “Teodórico Quirós: Falleció un gran pintor,” La República, July 28, 1977.

96 Jiménez, referred to as “el plenarista” (“the plein-airist”), grew up alongside Magón and Aquileo J. Echeverría. Ferrero suggests that Jiménez was the Costa Rican artist responsible for starting the tradition of painting the adobe house. Ferrero Acosta, Sociedad y arte, 201.
along two country roads, and, in the distance, a mountain range. Overhead, the sun shines and a tree, its branch jutting into the upper-right corner (the only modernist innovation in the painting), shades the artist’s vantage point. But the sky over the mountains is covered in light gray, emotionless clouds, neither ominous like Ruisdael, nor pleasant like Constable. Despite being an observation of the landscape, this placid vista conveys none of the specific flora, fauna, extreme weather conditions, or structures of Costa Rica.

Quirós’s landscapes were pioneering because, within them, the artist discerned specific icons of national identity and conveyed his emotional response to them by using a modern, expressive style. While the previous generation may have begun to create a visual typology of their surrounding, the Generation of the 1930s depicted quintessential details of Costa Rican life. Rather than maintain the distance that the liberales had with the countryside and its people, Quirós got close to his subject matter and was more daring in his use of color, light, and contrast, attributes that endow his painting with greater emotion. In Esquina de Escazú (Corner of Escazu, 1936, fig. 1.4), the viewer walks the streets of the pueblo, stopping at a corner to consider the play of light and shadow on the whitewashed walls of the adobe houses. The diffuse light is indicative of an imminent thunderstorm, the kind that crashes down daily during the 8-month-long, rainy season. Escazu is a town on the skirt of a mountain outside of San Jose where rainwater rushes down the sloped streets and gathers in gutters, like the one in the painting that runs down the center of the cobblestone street. The conduit line leads the viewer’s eye into the background, through the open windows of the house on the other side of the park, to the mountains on the opposite side of the Central Valley. This painting highlights Quirós’s principal objective, which he impressed upon his colleagues: move away from traditional and imported subjects and embrace the vernacular in a modern manner. Rather than paint the landscape from
afar, as did Span, or make observational sketches, like Echandi, Quirós inserted himself into the local and painted the motifs that embodied the nation (the *campesino*, the oxcart, the adobe house) in a way that broke with academic precepts.

This kind of imagery, iconic in the country to this day, forged Costa Rican cultural identity in the 1930s in a more forceful and deliberate continuation of the *costumbrista* genre begun in the late nineteenth century. The Generation of the 1930s took part in the invention of tradition because their paintings became a visual account of Costa Rican identity. They played a role in what Hobsbawm refers to as socially, rather than politically, created tradition. This occurs, he argues, when “social groups, environments, and social contexts called for new devices to ensure or express social cohesion and identity and to structure social relations.”

The first generation of modern artists in Costa Rica, without necessarily intending to do so, established a new vision of the country in the midst of a changing landscape, one that rapidly was acquiring the marks of modernization. Quirós, Amighetti, González, Luisa González de Sáenz (1899-1982), Jiménez, Fausto Pacheco (1899-1966), Emilia Prieto Tugores (1902-1986), Juan Manuel Sánchez (1907-1990), and Francisco Zuñiga (1912-1998) combed the national landscape in search of imagery that they identified as part of reality, the lived experience of Costa Ricans. In so doing, they aligned with early twentieth-century Latin American *modernistas*, such as Mexican Saturnino Herrán (1887-1918), Ecuadorian Camilo Egas (1889-1962), and Peruvian José Sabogal (1888-1956). As discussed by Jacqueline Barnitz, pioneering Latin American art historian:

One of modernismo’s contributions to painting was to make artists aware of their need for an art that expressed their own culture and experiences as Latin Americans. They began to take a closer look at their own daily lives, the things that surrounded them, the local

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people, landscapes, and contemporary life, in more personal and subjective ways than the previous generation had. They examined their immediate surroundings at close range instead of from a distance.  

The protagonists of modernismo were not the heroes of nineteenth-century academic history paintings, but rather, the indígena (Indian), the mestizo, and the campesino. Three portraits of rural, working class men from Costa Rica, Mexico, and Argentina exemplify the modernista genre (figs. 1.5, 1.6, and 1.7). Painted by Zuñiga, Herrán, and the Argentine Cesáreo Bernaldo de Quirós (1881-1968), all three depict hardy men that challenge the viewer with their stern gaze. They are defined by what they hold and by their setting, as minimally as it may be represented: a boyero (ox-cart driver) with his prodding stick on a road before an adobe wall capped with tejas (clay roof tiles); an old Indian in a serape holding a cock in front of a cock-fighting ring; and a gaucho with his lasso, the open pampa beyond. These are all characters from the countryside that the artists deciphered and represented as quintessential members of the nation. Unlike the Mexican example, in which attire denotes the man’s indigenous heritage, the Costa Rican campesino is comparable to the gaucho from Argentina in that neither man is identified as an Indian, but rather of mixed cultural heritage, the result of being from Latin American countries where there is a minimal indigenous presence. Similar too is the manner in which Zuñiga and Bernaldo de Quirós glorified the two men. Broad chested, both men have rolled up sleeves exposing muscular arms and a classical contrapposto stance, exuding confidence and ease. The upward angle further emphasizes each man’s dominance in these scenes. Herrán’s figure, on the other hand, bares no skin other than his face and a bit of his hand, which shows beneath the feathered cock he holds. The artist has not glorified this character, and the non-specific mass of his body seems sinister because of the downcast viewpoint. Here there

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98 Barnitz, Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America, 14.
is an important distinction between these works. The Argentine and Costa Rican characters, heroically represented, are manifestations of the nationalism and nostalgia inherent in the *modernismo* of those two countries. Herrán and his contemporaries like Dr. Atl and Fernando Leal were somewhat more critical when observing and depicting their surroundings, an attribute indicative of the greater maturity of the Mexican visual vanguard. Despite this disparity between the *modernistas* of Latin America, what does unite the region is the choice of down-to-earth subjects that codified types in an updated version of *costumbrismo* that challenged academic style.

Stylistically, *modernistas* were linked by *facture*, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European tendency to display the artist’s hand. Loose brushstrokes provided visible documentation of the skill and working process of the artist. No longer aiming to copy reality, these artists highlighted the characteristics of their medium and the process of their creation. They also broke with convention by using light and color as emotional mechanisms in their painting, not as a means of naturalistically or theatrically emulating reality. Also appropriated from European modernism, further betraying the academic standard, *modernistas* flattened space and preferred close-up, at times even awkward angles for their images, instead of distant views that convincingly rendered perspective and depth of field. These stylistic choices paired with their specifically Latin American, rather than European motifs, served as the basis for the avant-

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99 Within the glossary definition of *Art since 1900* the authors state in their definition of “*facture*,” “While *facture* played a great role in judgments concerning painterly techniques until the end of the nineteenth (already challenged by Seurat’s mechanical facture in divisionism), if not until the beginning of the twentieth century, its status as criterion vanished with the rise of collage aesthetics in Cubism. But even during the time of its validity, *facture* underwent dramatic changes: from the conception of painting as an act of manual bravura, and a display of virtuosity and skills, to the modernist insistence (beginning with Cézanne and culminating in Cubism) on the almost molecular clarity in making every detail and passage of painterly execution transparent in terms of its procedure of production and placement.” Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 684.
garde movements that surged in the coming decades in key locations, like Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Havana, Montevideo, and Caracas.

The intellectual stand of the Generation of the 1930s in regard to European heritage was not defiant, as in larger centers of culture in the Americas. In Latin America, avant-garde groups of the 1920s and 1930s formulated new ideas about art in their countries: the Mexican Muralists (José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siquieros), anthropophagia in Brazil (Tarsila do Amaral), martinfierrismo in Argentina (Xul Solar and Emilio Petorutti), and indigenismo among artists of Mexico, Peru (José Sabogal), and Ecuador (Eduardo Kingman). In a rift that can be considered post-colonial, Latin American modernistas (excluding the Argentines) were against the artistic hegemony of Europe more than they were against the bourgeois institution of art, as was the case among European vanguardists. Latin American artists, particularly those who returned to their countries after lengthy sojourns in Europe, wished to be free of this secondary status and liberated from the Western narrative that drove cultural creation- and destruction- in Europe. Motivated by the search for autonomy, the Latin American vanguardia movements aimed to create something unique to the Americas that fed off their own reality and idiosyncrasies. Their art displayed the landscape, architecture, people, and spirit of the New World, at times accompanied by an idealized dream of creating a better humanity, and always in search of cultural independence from Europe.\textsuperscript{100}

In contrast, the modern artists of Costa Rica, those at the forefront of the country’s cultural creation, did not insist on this rupture with European tradition; in fact, they were openly guided by and borrowed from it. American art historian Robert Storr makes an important

distinction between modern art and modernist art, which is useful when considering Costa Rican art from this period. As he simply states, “Modern art is the art produced in the modern era.” He continues,

Modernism…is that art that takes itself—its compositional techniques, methods of image making, physical presence, and constructive or destructive relation to the traditions of art—as its primary subject. Before modernist art is about anything else—an image, a symbol, the communication of an experience—it is about the logic and structure of the thing that carries meaning, and about how that thing came in being.¹⁰¹

In this sense, the Generation of the 1930s was modern, but not modernist. Their work takes on some of the technical, formal, and spiritual attributes of modernism, a result of being produced in the modern era, but it is not inherently modernist. There was no cannibalism among these artists, no attempt to devour European conventions, techniques, and styles to produce a completely new art form unique to the Americas, as suggested by the Brazilian, vanguard poet Oswaldo de Andrade in his *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928).

For Costa Rican artists, the fight was against their own country’s lack of commitment to national art. This was not a break with an established artistic tradition as in other modernista movements. They did, nonetheless, counter the liberales who, since the nineteenth century touted their aversion to the folkloric in preference of European, especially French, cultural patterns. Artists faced an audience filled with contempt for the local, who unthinkingly admired anything carrying a European stamp. Costa Rican artists needed to create a domain for the visual arts in Costa Rica and foster an appreciative audience willing to respect and enjoy the local. This left the Generation of the 1930s with little, if any, concern for global recognition, and they never attempted to generate an original and distinguishable artistic movement outside of their own country. They were neither radical nor revolutionary: no manifestos, no cohesive band of artists

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or declared -ism, and no specific commitment to socio-political change. But they did effectively transform the image of Costa Rica from a country of white people in an idyllic landscape to a mestizo population living in a less-than-harmonious setting.

The shift in national self-image is exemplified in González’s Paisaje (1936, fig. 1.8), which depicts a less-than-ideal, urban setting. Inverting the stereotype of San Jose as a beautiful and orderly city, this painting emphasizes the crowding taking place in the first half of the twentieth century. Here is urban sprawl growing around the edges of the church, a depiction of the unpleasant result of modernization on the capital. The eye is drawn to the bright blues, greens, and oranges González used, which, at first, project a joyful mood. As the viewer’s eye moves around the painting, it becomes bogged down by the compression of space. The eye cannot traditionally “enter” and move throughout the image. Apart from the bushes painted in the left foreground, with only enough space to crawl beneath, the artist has left no opening through which the gaze can traverse the painted surface. All of the windows in the buildings are black. The streets are not visible. Buildings overlap, stacked in flattened space. They vary in structural soundness, ranging from the massive and erect solidity of the golden-toned church above, to the meager and badly roofed lean-to with clothing hanging out to dry, emphasized by its positions toward the center of the painting. The awkward composition breaks with convention and the image is further abstracted by brushy strokes and dabs of paint, revealing the artist’s working process. Light is employed to convey the exuberance of the tropical weather; the sharp

102 According to Molina and Palmer, “San Jose at the beginning of the twentieth century was qualified as ‘a miniature metropolis’ by a visitor from the United States…The capital impressed foreigners with its national institutions (the Archive, the Library, the Museum, the Theater), its schools and high schools, its parks, boulevards and statues, its department stores and books stores, its bohemian life, its growing and diverse press and its cultural activity.” “El San José de comienzos del siglo XX fue calificado de ‘métropoli en miniatura’ por un visitante de Estados Unidos. (…) La capital deslumbraba a los extranjeros con sus instituciones nacionales (el Archivo, la Biblioteca, el Museo, el Teatro), sus escuelas y colegios, sus parques, paseos y estatuas, sus almacenes y librerías, su vida bohemia, su prensa creciente y diversa y su activo quehacer cultural.” Iván Molina Jiménez and Steven Paul Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1985), 66–69.
contrasts of shade and sunshine on the foliage and on the buildings bounce the eye across the surface creating movement. The contrast between the bushes in light at left and those in shade at right mimics the disparity between the sunny blue sky at right and the dark-gray rain clouds at left. In this regard, some “rules” of composition are still in place. But, overall, though certainly behind the times of international modernism, the style of this painting was one of the most progressive proposals within its context, and its maker, González, one of the more daring artists in Costa Rica at the time.

The challenge this generation imposed on their environment was precisely that they created “high art” based on their vernacular experience and not from inherited or appropriated European culture (though following the stylistic trends of European modern art), breaking with the pervasive cultural norm. In this sense, the Generation of the 1930s was rebellious because they insisted on their right to exist, unapologetically, in a society that did not embrace the Costa Rican visual artist, let alone national folklore or local custom. They adapted an impressionist and post-impressionist artistic style not only out of an interest to align themselves with the currents of international modernism and to further set themselves apart from the traditional academic artists, but also as a mechanism to prove that art was not merely a source of entertainment and edification for young society ladies. Through their art they aimed for cultural affirmation, not in the eyes of the rest of the world, but in the eyes of their fellow Costa Ricans, who tended to perceive national culture in a derogatory manner.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the necessary forces coalesced to lay the foundation of a vanguard community that would begin to revolutionize, albeit slowly, the Costa Rican cultural panorama. A new sense of self and a desire to participate in the formation of modernity in their country prompted a new conception of what their reality could be. The
following paragraphs from cultural historian Carlos Francisco Monge’s *La vanguardia literaria en Costa Rica (The Literary Vanguard in Costa Rica)* are worth citing at length as they effectively summarize the spirit and the predicament of the Costa Rican vanguard toward the end of the 1920s.

Until the publication of *El arte moderno* [Moisés Vincenzi, 1937], there had been few comments on the innovative artistic trends of the 1920s. The nomenclature itself was vague: modern art, modernist art, ultra-modern school, *nueva sensibilidad*, current manifestations, poetry of our time, schools of avant-garde modernism. With the exception of «Futurismo» by [Guillermo] Andreve [1909], the comments about new literary and plastic forms merely made reference to the vanguard movements, which were already news and practiced in other countries. That did not prevent the emergence of various forms of critical thought, which adopted themes and concepts of avant-garde debates: the questioning of dominant and outdated aesthetic paradigms, a critique of rationalist rigidity, a new cosmopolitanism, disagreement with forms of power (political, economic or cultural), a discrediting of bourgeois morality associated with tradition and the *establishment* [sic.]. There is willingness to challenge and dissent in politics and aesthetics, which leaves a fertile ground for a generation that unwittingly transformed the Costa Rican literary-artistic activity under the very shadow of the isms overseas.

It was spoken and published about with some frequency, and over two decades, on issues as varied as politics, fashion, art, religion, developments in cinematography, social customs, personal prophylaxis or the latest inventions; almost always comments and reflections pointed to two main themes: the aspiration to transform the conditions of the present, and the awareness that to embrace the new was inescapably a challenge.

These two ideas shaped the thinking of art in Costa Rica. The writings of Max Jiménez, Francisco Zuniga, Francisco Amighetti, Abelardo Bonilla and Manuel de la Cruz González offered an interpretation of art in Costa Rican society as two major aspects: a critical testimony of the circumstances and a creative representation (image). A to say and a to do.103

103. “Hasta la publicación de *El arte moderno* [Moisés Vincenzi, 1937], habían sido escasos los comentarios sobre las novedosas tendencias artísticas de la década de 1920. La nomenclatura misma fue imprecisa: arte moderno, arte modernista, escuelas ultramodernas, nueva sensibilidad, manifestaciones actuales, poesía de nuestro tiempo, escuelas vanguardistas, vanguardismo. Con la excepción de «El Futurismo» de [Guillermo] Andreve [1909], los comentarios sobre las nuevas formas literarias y plásticas apenas hacían referencia a las escuelas de vanguardia, que ya eran noticia y práctica en otros países. Eso no impidió la aparición de variadas formas de pensamiento crítico, que adoptaron temas y conceptos propios de los debates vanguardistas: la puesta en entredicho de paradigmas estéticos dominantes, ya caducos; la crítica a la rigidez racionalista; un nuevo cosmopolitismo; la disconformidad con las formas del poder (político, económico o cultural); el descrédito de la moral burguesa, asociada a la tradición y al establishment. Hay una voluntad de impugnación y disentimiento en la actividad política y estética, que deja un fértil espacio a una generación que sin proponérselo transformó el quehacer artístico-literario costarricense, bajo la misma sombra de los ismos de ultramar.

Se habló y se publicó con alguna frecuencia, y a lo largo de dos décadas, sobre asuntos tan variados como la política, las modas, el arte, la religión, las novedades cinematográficas, las costumbres sociales, la profilaxis personal o los más recientes inventos; casi siempre los comentarios y reflexiones apuntaros principalmente a dos
The Exhibitions of Visual Arts 1928-1937

The *Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas* (Exhibitions of Visual Arts) were a definitive turning point for visual art in Costa Rica. Up until then, few Costa Ricans were aware that there were artists in the country aside from Echandi, Povedano, Span, and the Italian-trained, Costa Rican sculptor Juan Ramón Bonilla. The first *Exposición* was a resounding success: thousands of visitors (within the first five days 3,000 spectators attended, a remarkable turnout considering that San Jose had just over 62,000 inhabitants at the time), gallery hours until 11 pm, extended exhibition dates, and prestigious guests, including the United States president Herbert Hoover during his visit to Costa Rica in 1928. In her exhaustive study of these exhibitions, Costa Rican art historian, Eugenia Zavaleta Ochoa argues that the direction of national art was altered irrevocably as a consequence of this event, as it opened a pathway for modern artists to produce a new kind of art never before made or seen in the country.¹⁰⁵

An exhibition of Argentine art, held at the National Theater earlier that year, inspired the idea of holding the *Exposiciones*. The paintings on display were primarily landscapes, urban and coastal scenes, and the sculptures were mainly busts and figural groups. Among the artists of greater renown were Fernando Fader (1882-1935), Enrique Policastro (1898-1971), and Benito

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grandes temas: la aspiración a transformar las condiciones del presente, y la conciencia de que adoptar lo nuevo era un ineludible desafío.

Estas dos ideas forjaron el pensamiento de vanguardia en Costa Rica. Los escritos de Max Jiménez, de Francisco Zuñiga, de Francisco Amighetti, de Abelardo Bonilla o de Manuel de la Cruz González ofrecen una interpretación del arte en la sociedad costarricense según dos grandes aspectos: como testimonio crítico de la circunstancia y como representación (imagen) creadora. Un decir y un hacer.” It is interesting to note that of the five names mentioned in the above quote, four are primarily recognized for their role as visual artists. Monge, *El vanguardismo literario en Costa Rica*, 50–51.

¹⁰⁴ “Día a día aumenta el entusiasmo por la Exposición Artística organizada por el DIARIO DE COSTA RICA,” *Diario de Costa Rica*, November 16, 1928.

Quinquela Martin (1890-1977).\textsuperscript{106} Though the works exhibited are unknown – titles of works and a few black-and-white installation shots are the only remaining documentation—the artists can be categorized as Latin American impressionists. In Latin America, impressionism and post-impressionism amalgamated into a single style, usually referred to simply as impressionism. Fader, for example, painted in this mode throughout his career. In an activity reminiscent of Claude Monet, Fader created a series of paintings of his farmhouse created at different times of the day (fig. 1.9). He was a founding member of the short-lived Nexus group in Buenos Aires formed in 1907. Composed of artists who had recently returned to Argentina from Europe, the Nexus group created landscapes in an impressionist style that retained an element of naturalism. Fader continued to. This was not uncommon. As Barnitz points out, “Impressionists from Latin American countries, like their early French counterparts, generally worked outdoors. But instead of focusing only on the fleeting atmospheric effects typical of the French impressionists, many Latin American impressionists sought to retain the solidity and tonal qualities of naturalism as well.”\textsuperscript{107} By the time of the Costa Rican exhibition, the impressionists were considered Argentina’s conservative artists whose work sold in the bourgeois art market of Buenos Aires.\textsuperscript{108} None of those whose work was shown in San Jose belonged to the 1920s vanguard Grupo Florida, of which modernists such as Xul Solar and Pettoruti were a part, and only Quinquela-Martin was a member of the contemporary, social-realist Grupo Boedo.

\textsuperscript{106} Other artists that were exhibited include Alberto M. Rossi, Cupertino del Campo, Santiago Eugenia Daneri, Luis Cordiøvila, Victor Cunsolo, and César Pugliese. Among the sculptors were Emilio Sarniquet, César Sforza, Luis Perlotti, Juan Yramain, Claudio Sampere, Nicolás Lamanna, José Foiravanti, Manuel Vercelli, Antonio Gargiullo, Pedro Tenti, Pablo Toste, and Rogelio Yrurtia. Ibid., 11; “Ecos de la primera exposición de arte argentino en Centro América: Cuatro palabras,” Diario de Costa Rica, May 3, 1928, 10.

\textsuperscript{107} Barnitz, Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America, 23.

It is not possible to assess the precise degree of impact that the exhibited Argentine art had on Costa Rican artists, as there are few statements that specifically address the issue, yet the style and genre are similar in the work by the Southern Cone artists and the modern Costa Ricans. Zavaleta argues that the influence of the Argentine exhibition on Costa Rican artists was minimal and that it supplied few innovative ideas.\(^{109}\) She also suggests that the nature of the work on display must have been conservative due to the fact that Povedano, head of the academic painters in the country, praised the exhibition.\(^{110}\) Zavaleta underestimates, however, how groundbreaking the opportunity was for Costa Ricans to see impressionist art in person. In 1932, the catalog from the fourth *Exposición*, which contained a brief summary about the trajectory of art in Costa Rica, states that impressionism was first shown in the country at the Argentine art exhibit. Although no longer innovative elsewhere, the effect of a compilation of more than one hundred works in an Impressionist style displayed before an insular and inexperienced art world should not be so quickly discredited.

The Argentine art exhibition may also have served as inspiration for the parallel subject matter that developed in Costa Rica, pointed out above in the comparison of *Boyero* and *El pialador* (figs. 1.5 and 1.7). The *gaquo* like the *campesino*, was the relatively independent


\(^{110}\) Povedano’s response reveals a conventional approach to art and an effusive condemnation of modernism, as he had done on many other occasions: “Nowadays, Art is going through a period of transition in which everything is trial and error, daring and incomprehensible audacity, from within which, here and there, flames and admires all that in which the real numen, the irreplaceable hand of the Genius, would imprint its brilliant mark…Finally, may I congratulate the Republic of Argentina for the valuable support they provide to the Fine Arts, a clear demonstration of progress and outstanding culture and source of legitimate pride for its homeland, Spain, fecund mother of so many and so powerful maintainers of effective beauty, efflorescence of civilizations.” “Actualmente pasa el Arte por un período de transición en el que todo son tanteos, atrevimientos y osadías incompresibles, de entre las cuales acá y allá flamea y admira todo aquello en que el verdadero númen, la irremplazable mano del Genio imprimiera su brillante huella…Para terminar, séame dable felicitar a la República de Argentina por el valioso apoyo que le presta a las Bellas Artes, demostración palmaria de su progreso y cultura sobrasientes, y motivo de legítimo orgullo para su patria de origen, la España, madre fecunda de tantos y tan poderosos mantenedores de la belleza efectiva florescencia de las civilizaciones.” “Ecos de la primera exposición de arte argentina.”
national character of Argentina; and the pampa, like the tropical terrain of Costa Rica, was the setting that came to define the nation. Like the artists of Argentina, who could not look to a vast indigenous population with deep-set traditions for inspiration, the Costa Ricans created iconic images based on their experience of an autonomous agrarian society of mixed race in a lush and luminous environment. The boyero, often an independent campesino who supplemented his income by transporting goods with his ox cart, was an integral component of the Costa Rican export system. 111 During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most export goods, the most important being coffee, were produced in the highland area of the Central Valley. The only way for these goods to get to the ports was by means of caravans of boyeros. At the end of the day they would stop to rest and repair their carts, and these sesteos (rest stops) in time were developed into settlements and towns, many existing to this day, leading to the expansion of populated areas in the country. Along the few roads, eventually cobbled, and the many rivers, eventually spanned by bridges, lines of boyeros made their way down the mountains, through the jungles, and to both the Pacific and the Atlantic coasts where the goods they transported were received and then shipped overseas. Zuñiga’s selection of the boyero can be understood as an act of pinpointing one of the most important members of the Costa Rican social system who likely did not get the attention deserved by those whose fortune was made by the boyero’s labor. Without the boyero the trade that helped to financially build the country would not have been possible, and a branch of Costa Rican customs would not exist. 112 Like the early modernistas in

111 Carmen Murillo Chaverri and Yanory Alvarez Masís, La ornamentación de carretas en Costa Rica: orígenes y tendencias (San Jose, C.R.: Ministerio de Cultura y Juventud; Centro de Investigación y Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural, UNESCO, 2009), 34–43.

112 “The oxen, the cart, and the boyero, were a trio that for many years were a constant element along the roads of the country. The long trips made for a strong relationship between the oxen and the boyero, just as a there was a fraternal relationship and camaraderie between the boyeros, who shared a code of ethics and were a support to each other in hard times.” “Los bueyes, la carreta y el boyero, conforman un trío que sería durante muchos años, el elemento constante en los caminos carreteros del país. Los largos viajes hacen que se de una fuerte identificación
the rest of Latin America, Zuñiga and his contemporaries looked to the local experience. They did so from a more open perspective, less hinged to the *liberales*’ idealized notion of Costa Rican identity. By incorporating an expressive style, a colorful palette, and a freer handling of paint, the Generation of the 1930s rendered a different set of observations about their country and created a modern air for their reality.

The exhibition of Argentine art brought various sectors of society together in the name of a cultural event. Entirely funded and coordinated by Dr. Enrique Loudet, ambassador and head of business relations between Argentina and Central America, it was the first time a statesman touted the art of his country as a means of fostering transnational trade. The initiative was a diplomatic success appreciated by throngs of attendees. Octavio Castro Saborío, administrator of the National Theater, stated:

> The significance of Argentine art has been well understood by our intelligent public...Certain that nothing like art, nothing like the spirit and nothing like feelings are capable of the miracle of uniting, despite the distance of seas and mountains, the generous souls of people...we the Costa Ricans have understood once again the enormous progress of all kinds and conditions reached by our glorious Older Sister...never has a cultural effort awakened so much enthusiasm in this city...This is how the soul of our people is constructed and edified, this is how mutual affection is awakened and this is how we will one day achieve the dreamed of spiritual unity of the Indo-American race.\(^{113}\)

Loudet’s exhibition served as a model for future exhibitions. High visitor turnout (over 6,000 visitors attended the exhibition) and the appeal of the location, the elegant foyer of the

\(^{113}\) “Y este alto significado del arte argentino ha sido bien comprendido por nuestro público inteligente...Seguro de que, nada como el arte, nada como el espíritu y nada como los sentimientos son capaces de hacer el milagro de unir, a despecho de las distancias de los mares y de las montañas, el alma generosa de los pueblos...Hemos los costarricenses comprendido una vez más los enormes progresos de toda clase y condición alcanzados por esa nuestra gloriosa Hermana Mayor...Nunca, una obra de esfuerzo cultural ha despertado en esta ciudad tanto entusiasmo...Así se construye y se edifica en el alma de nuestros pueblos, así se despiertan los mutuos afectos y así hemos de lograr algún día la soñada unidad espiritual de la raza indo-americana.” “Ecos de la primera exposición de arte argentino.”
National Theater, generated the impulse necessary to organize a similar event for national art. Initially the democratically elected president, Cleto González, had offered to sponsor the *Exposición*, considering it the country’s duty to aid culture. The government soon withdrew its support, however, forcing the event’s organizers to find funding from the private sector. Noé Solano (1899-1971), an entrepreneurial though somewhat conservative caricaturist (he was of the opinion that the Cubist portrait of Estrada was a disgrace), approached Sergio Carballo Romero, head of the *Diario de Costa Rica*, to ask that the newspaper sponsor the exhibition.¹¹⁴ Romero accepted and the event that forever altered the Costa Rican art world began to take shape.

The *Exposición* of 1928 was the first time modern Costa Rican art was publicly exhibited, displayed alongside traditional works of art. Unsurprisingly, academic art won the awards that year. The jury separated the first prize into two distinct categories, a general painting category open to both national and international artists, and a first prize in painting only for national artists. The division, common in Latin American art competitions, reflects the jurors’ belief that Costa Rican artists were incapable of competing with the foreigners. Two German painters, Span and Eginhard Menghius, split the general prize. Two female painters, Carlota Brenes Argüello (1905-1986) and Ángela Castro Quesada (1884-1954, fig. 1.10), who had trained with Povedano at the School of Fine Arts, shared the prize for first place among national artists.¹¹⁵ Despite academic art winning the competition, modern art did garner attention. Max Jiménez, one of the few Costa Rican artists who had first-hand experience of the European avant-garde, wrote favorably of the modern art exhibited and lauded the innovative approach in

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¹¹⁴ The 1920s was a period of economic prosperity in Costa Rica, particularly due to the increase in the banana and coffee trades. This increased wealth stimulated commerce in the country, primarily in the Central Valley, and may have been one of the reasons that president González Viquez originally supported the idea of these national salons. Zavaleta Ochoa, *Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas*, 13.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 77–79.
the art of Prieto, Quirós, and Amighetti. According to Jiménez, their work was modern because it departed from a naturalistic style; these artists instead exploited color, line, light, composition, and the characteristics of their medium to break with convention and create art that was more emotionally expressive.

Despite the jury’s initial preference for conservative art, emerging modern artists were bolstered by the opportunity to exhibit their work, join with like-minded contemporaries, and meet with an interested audience. A few days after the inauguration, a price list for the works on display was available to visitors and printed in the Diario, making it possible for exhibiting artists to sell their work. While the European vanguard vehemently opposed the commodification of art, the Costa Rican modern artists were not afflicted by the notion that the sale of their work was a bourgeois endeavor. Original art rarely sold in Costa Rica and there was no institutionalization of art, as there were no art museums. Thus, Peter Bürger’s common definition of the vanguard in Europe as challenging the institutionalization of art and bourgeois frameworks does not actually apply when considering the constitution of the first artistic dissenters in Costa Rica.

The desire to instigate an art market was one of the major concerns among the artists who organized the Exposiciones. In the coming years, emerging artists increasingly sold their work to both national and tourist buyers, yet it was a near impossibility for artists to make a living through the sale of their art, forcing most to supplement their income with other jobs. Though intrigued by the energy of the youthful artists, the taste of the general public remained

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118 González, for example, unable to make ends meet as a painter, secured an income as a radio show host.
This did not impede the growing prevalence of modern art, however; with each passing year, even as the older generation continued to exhibit their work and serve as jury members, the amount of modern art submitted to the *Exposiciones* increased. By the second *Exposición*, the jury awarded the first place prize in painting to Quirós and in sculpture to Juan Manuel Sánchez, both considered modern artists. For emerging artists, the difficulty of selling their art made the cash prizes a definite incentive, but the exposure did help them market their work. Given Costa Rica’s unique historical, political, and economic circumstances, it is worth considering how important it was for this generation of artists to sell their work in a country where it was not the custom to collect art. The sale of art, however fractional, was a fundamental step in developing a Costa Rican audience that would collect and eventually learn to look more critically at art.

The organizers of the *Exposiciones* were aware that, in order to draw the members of society with purchasing power to the exhibitions and thus improve their chances of selling their art, it was necessary to coordinate accompanying social events that would attract the distinguished and wealthy members of Costa Rican society. They held dances, concerts, poetry readings, and beauty pageants. Particularly popular were recitals with enactments of *tableaux vivants* by young society ladies under the direction of participating artists. For example, as part of the closing events of the third *Exposición*, González recited poetry by the Spaniard

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120 “Each year, the competitions were held at the National Theater…Said theater converted into a meeting place for artists and spectators as, for example, the President of the Republic, ex-presidents, secretaries of State, diplomats, deputees, ‘the most distinguished ladies of our society’, students and people from the provinces. Furthermore, the shows generated other social activities in the capital: the selection of a queen of the ‘Exposición de Artes Plásticas’, evening events, and tea dances.” “Cada año, los certámenes se llevaron a cabo en el Teatro Nacional…Dicho teatro se convirtió en un espacio de reunión de artistas y espectadores como, por ejemplo, el Presidente de la República, expresidentes, secretarios de Estado, diplomáticos, diputados, 'las damas más distinguidas de nuestra sociedad', estudiantes y gente de provincia. Además, las muestras generaron otras actividades sociales en la capital: la elección de la reina de la 'Exposición de Artes Plástica', veladas y tés danzantes.” Ibid., xviii.
Luis Fernández Ardavarín, in a performance titled Salón de Retratos. Accompanying his oration were five young ladies in elaborate costume enacting artwork by five famous Spanish painters, including Velázquez and Goya.\textsuperscript{121} These kinds of gala events complemented the Exposiciones and elevated the rank of artists, particularly the young and Costa Rican born, in the eyes of the elite.

The formation of a patron class for national art was as important as the increase in art-related press surrounding the Exposiciones. This surge was likely because the Diario sponsored the event; the success of the Exposiciones was a success for the newspaper. The continuous publication of art criticism, exhibition reviews, controversies over awards, and interviews with artists and organizers of the Exposiciones carved a space for visual arts in the minds of a wider audience. Regardless of class or location, newspaper readers became aware that a modern artistic movement was developing in their country.

Artists exhibited both modern and conservative art at each Exposición. At first the older generation dismissed the younger, viewing its attempts at being modern simply as signs of creative uneasiness and a naïve desire to create something different. The stance of the older generation, held most fervently by Povedano, was that art must be classical and dedicated to the search for beauty.\textsuperscript{122} Remaining true to the deferential character of the Costa Rican (a trait emphasized by the liberales who encouraged the nuclear and patriarchal family dynamic), the younger generation who coordinated the Exposiciones remained respectful of their elders. They acknowledged the status of the established artists through jury namings and rarely attacked

\textsuperscript{121} Unfortunately, there is not more information about this performance. The titles of the enacted paintings were: Cuadro de Velasquez; Cuadro de Goya; Cuadro de Vicente Lopez [Portaña? 1772-1850]; Cuadro de [José de] Madrazo [1781-1859]; Cuadro de [Juan Antonio?] Benlliure [1859-1930]; Cuadro de [José] Moreno Carbonero [1858-1942]. “La gran fiesta de esta noche en el Teatro Nacional,” \textit{Diario de Costa Rica}, October 24, 1931.

\textsuperscript{122} “Ecos de la primera exposición de arte argentino.”
academic art publicly. Nonetheless, the younger artists, inspired by modern art, considered traditional art static and dull; for them art should engage the intellect and be about the present. In his review of the sixth Exposición, Abelardo Bonilla (1898-1969), vanguard author and intellectual, described his transition through the gallery space from academic art to modern art: “We were out of an ancient world that oppressed our chest, (sic) Now we were facing life, facing the century. The dark tones, the dead perspectives, the static figures were now light and movement.” Costa Rican modern artists, Bonilla seems to say, were liberated from the past. Their images did not seek classical beauty or attempt to copy reality. Though not fully modernist in an international sense, the Generation of the 1930s was modern because its members broke with tradition. The sheer presence of dozens of national artists in the theater being embraced by their community, rather than shunned for being “bohemian,” was a major accomplishment for artists in Costa Rica. By absorbing information about international art and experimenting in their environment, the Generation of the 1930s developed a new national art that portrayed the local in a modern manner. They looked at their country from a different perspective and expressed what it meant to them. In exhibiting this work to a growing audience, artists like Zuñiga, Quirós, and González effectively stimulated cultural growth in the Costa Rican visual arts.

**Conclusion**

The artists of the Generation of the 1930s paved a path for future artistic creation in Costa Rica, a country historically with little tradition in visual culture. Although their art was not excessively radical, politically or aesthetically, it was staunchly anti-academic. They never

attempted to establish a new –*ism* or attached themselves to a populist movement, like the Muralists or *indigenistas*. Echeverría wrote, “There is no pomposity, no exhibitionism, no pretensions of changing the world with a set of brushes.”

Rather, this generation of artists remained within the confines of what they could realistically accomplish in a restrictive setting. They spurred an enthusiasm for national art that had never existed, a lack pointed out in 1917 by the poet and journalist Rogelio Sotela (1894-1943), under the pseudonym “Eugenio de Triana,” in his review of that year’s National Exhibition at the School of Fine Arts.

Almost all the paintings on display are copies and mostly of foreign themes. While the work of the copyist is also great, we need to ‘nationalize’ ourselves and we must strive for originality in what is ours. Why should we resort to landscapes from abroad when our countryside and our skies and all that we have here is wonderful? Moreover, Costa Rica needs it, we all need it.

It would take over a decade for Costa Rican artists to band together and join the continental search for cultural originality. They did so by observing their environment and creating an art that was innate of their lived experience in a modern style. González, among the most active of this generation, freely expressed himself, going against convention and helping promote modern art in a country dominated by cultural skeptics. The following chapter will look specifically at his work from this period and will highlight both his formal innovation and his particular approach to iconic national imagery.

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124 “No hay ampulosidad, no hay exhibicionismo, no hay pretensiones de transformar el mundo con un juego de pinceles.” Echeverría, *Ocho artistas costarricenses*, 14–19.


MODERNIZING THE NATION: GONZÁLEZ’S IMAGES OF COSTA RICAN LANDSCAPE AND SOCIETY

The *liberales* leaders and *costumbrista* authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had actively spread the idea that Costa Rica was a peaceful, democratic country of hardworking, healthy, and educated citizens. The intellectual vanguard of the 1930s and 1940s, however, questioned this idyllic vision of the nation, writing about sickly, undereducated, miserable citizens who lived in shacks and depended on an exploitative class of agro-industrialists and foreign investment.\(^{127}\) The visual art of the Generation of the 1930s represents something of a middle ground between myth and social critique, in that it was neither an expression of political protest, nor an idealization of Costa Rican society intended to construct a national identity. Painters established a new image of the nation—one of tropical sunlight and colorful, expressive landscapes. This chapter focuses on González’s painting from this era by placing it within these social and aesthetic contexts, juxtaposing it in relation to vanguard literature as a means to analyze early modern art as part of Costa Rican cultural history more broadly.

In 1926 the Costa Rican intellectual Omar Dengo argued in a conference paper, “We must put an end to the legend that we are essentially a cultured people, that we live in the Central

\(^{127}\) Ivan Molina and Steven Palmer point out the paradox that, although the civilizing efforts of the *liberales* led the majority of Costa Ricans “to read and write, accept national values and symbols, and participate in electoral campaigns,” the progressive ideal waned in the early decades of the twentieth century. “The community of artists, writers, intellectuals and scientists, which rose between 1860 and 1890, dedicated its efforts to legitimize the coffee republic, usually with nostalgia. The generation of the decade of the 1900... discerned beneath the grain of gold a sharpened 'social question': corrupt and selfish bourgeois, and poor workers in urgent need of redemption through an appropriate education.” “La comunidad de artistas, escritores, intelectuales y científicos, que ascendió entre 1860 y 1890m dedicó sus esfuerzos a legitimar la república del café, usualmente con nostalgia. La generación configurada a partir del decenio de 1900...avizoraron debajo del grano de oro una agudizada 'cuestión social': burgueses corruptos y egoístas, y trabajadores pobres a los que urgía redimir mediante una educación apropiada.” Molina Jiménez and Palmer, *Historia de Costa Rica*, 87–88.
American Switzerland, that this is the best of democracies, and that San Jose is a small Paris.”

Heeding this call, authors in the following decade, such as Carlos Luis Fallas (1909-1966), the artist Max Jiménez, and Mario Sancho (1889-1948), criticized Costa Rican society in stringent terms. While the visual artists of the Generation of the 1930s did not offer a similarly acerbic view of their country, they did challenge tradition in a still heavily conservative and provincial environment by adopting a modern style inspired primarily by impressionism and expressionism.

Among the more stylistically daring members of the Generation of the 1930s, González introduced a new aesthetic paradigm of a vibrant palette, expressive brush strokes, abstracted landscapes, exaggerated proportions, and flattened space. Like his counterparts, he was aware of European modern art through the limited number of foreign periodicals that arrived in the

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128 “Hay que poner fin a la leyenda de que somos un pueblo esencialmente culto, de que vivimos en la Suiza Centroamericana, de que esta es la mejor de las democracias, de que San José es un París chiquito. Hay que torcerle el cuello, que no sé si es cisne o serpiente, a esas leyendas engañosas.” Omar Dengo, “Contratos....,” in Omar Dengo, ed. Emma Gamboa (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1990), 169.

129 González was one of the few Costa Rican artists of the Generation of the 1930s whose painting achieved a degree of international recognition toward the end of the 1930s. In 1939 Manuel de la Cruz González was selected to exhibit in the New York World’s Fair representing Costa Rica in the “Contemporary Art from Seventy-Nine Countries” exhibition sponsored by the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM). His painting, *Caballo* (Horses, 1938), was awarded an honorary mention, and González received a bronze medal from the IBM commission that bears the inscription, “For a notable contribution to the art of the world.” The current location of this painting is unknown. Other Latin America artists included were Héctor Basaldúa and Cesáreo Bernaldo de Quiros (Argentina), Cécile Guzmán de Rojas (Bolivia), José Pancetti and Oswaldo Texeira (Brazil), Pablo Burchard (Chile), Salvador Salazar Arrué (El Salvador), Alfredo Gálvez Suárez (Guatemala), Carlos Zuñiga Figueroa (Honduras), Federico Cantú, Jesús Guerrero Galván, and Roberto Montenegro (Mexico), Ernesto Brown, Jr. (Nicaragua), Humberto Ivaldi (Panama), José Sabogal (Peru), Carmelo de Arzadún (Uruguay), and Luis Alfredo López Méndez (Venezuela). “Arte contemporaneo del Hemisferio Occidental: Colección permanente, International Business Machines Corporation”, 1941. After the World’s Fair exhibition of 1939 their work formed part of the IBM collection, the bulk of which was auctioned off in the mid-1990s. Carol Vogel, “Inside Art: I.B.M.’s Collection,” The New York Times, August 5, 1994, accessed April 5, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/1994/08/05/arts/inside-art.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm; Manuel de la Cruz González Luján: Exposición Monográfica 1928-1976 (San Jose, C.R.: Museo Nacional; Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deporte, 1976). The following year the artist’s work was again featured in an international forum, this time at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. It is unclear how he was chosen for these exhibitions, but correspondence from his personal archive attests to his connections with various entities and individuals abroad. In 1934 he was featured in the Who’s Who in America Guide (Yale University Press). This probably led visitors from the United States to visit González in his studio, after which he often served as cultural guide throughout San Jose. A letter dated March 21, 1937, from a Mrs. Ruth Kreps (address 40 E. 38th St., New York, NY) thanks González for his attentive company during her trip to Costa Rica. There are also several letters from Dr. Grace McCann-Morley who had selected González’s work for the San Francisco exhibition in 1940, and who later served as Head of Museums for UNESCO. González Archive.
country, as well as at the libraries and lectures of colleagues who had been abroad, like Teodorico Quirós and Jiménez.\(^{130}\) This helped González, who had never actually seen work by modern artists like Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, or Picasso, relinquish his naturalistic, neoclassical beginning for greater abstraction.\(^{131}\) González countered convention and developed a personal style by adapting various modern trends. He applied lines and strokes liberally and daubed paint thickly to the canvas. He used color impressionistically and expressively rather than mimetically. He fragmented and flattened the image, experimented with composition, and distorted the figure.

Despite the stylistic break with convention, González and his generation mostly chose themes aligned with the dominant discourse of Costa Rican identity: agricultural landscapes, ox carts, adobe houses, and laborious campesinos, and an elegant elite.\(^{132}\) Many of González’s depictions of the Costa Rican landscape and society conformed to the conservative values set forth by the turn-of-the-century liberales and their republican successors, who espoused an oligarchic idealism that combined paternalist power and a sense of responsibility for the social well being, health care, legal rights, and education of the citizenry.\(^{133}\) Though his paintings were embroiled within the Costa Rican myth, that tropical arcadia of humble and hardworking

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\(^{131}\) González never admitted to being influenced by any specific artist or movement, but he claimed to have been inspired by the following modern European artists: Courbet, Manet, Picasso, van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse, Braque, Kandinsky, and Mondrian. Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, “Pétain antigua gloria de Francia, Picasso gloria eterna de la humanidad,” *Diario de Costa Rica*, May 27, 1941; A.R.S., “Encuentro con Manuel de la Cruz,” *Panorama*, November 13, 1957; Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, “¿Ha entrado en coma la pintura de caballete?,” *La Nación*, December 1, 1970, sec. En la ruta.


\(^{133}\) Díaz Arias, *Construcción de un Estado moderno: Política, Estado e identidad nacional en Costa Rica, 1821-1914*. 
citizens, the artist was a realist, omitting the idealizing and heroicizing tendencies of the costumbrismo practiced by artists during this period. His was a poetic realism, a stylistically new and expressive, realist vision of society, which neither glorified nor vilified Costa Rican life. By painting the typical, he staked a socio-political stand that paid homage to the vernacular during a period of significant socio-historical change in the country. In images of Costa Rican people, he investigated the individualist and egalitarian traits characteristic of the country’s national identity.

Breaking with Convention: Light, Color, and Exaggerated Proportions

The autodidactic artist Manuel de la Cruz González was born into a distinguished family in the nation’s capital of San Jose. He attended the city’s two most prestigious schools, the Catholic Colegio Seminario and the Liceo de Costa Rica. Upon graduating, he hoped to travel to Italy to study architecture—Costa Rica had no universities at that time—but his father’s sudden death in 1928, which left the family in financial distress, derailed his plans. He instead began working as a draftsman to the architect and artist Teodorico Quirós, who encouraged him to paint. In the 1930s, González actively participated in the artistic movement in San Jose, exhibited in seven of the nine Exposiciones (1930-1937, excluding 1933), helped to organize the exhibitions in 1933, 1934, and 1935, and won awards in 1931 (silver medal), 1932 (1st silver medal), 1933 (silver medal), 1934 (1st silver medal), 1935 (silver medal), 1936 (grand prize), and 1937 (1st silver medal).

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134 González Kreysa, Lacas inéditas: La colección de Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, 5. Regarding his lack of a formal education González said, “I never went to art school, but the passion and respect for these [art related] things made me study and become an unrepentant observer and reader. I also had a rebellious temperament that made it impossible for me to adapt to the rigorous methods necessary of an academic education.” “No fui nunca a escuelas de arte, pero la pasión y el respeto por estas cosas me hizo estudiar y convertir en un observador y lector impenitente. Tenía además una rebeldía temperamental que hacía imposible mi adaptación a la metodización rigurosa que supone una enseñanza académica.” A.R.S., “Encuentro con Manuel de la Cruz.”

135 His older brother was by then studying law in the United States. González Kreysa, Lacas inéditas: La colección de Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, 6.
medal), 1934 (2\textsuperscript{nd} place), and 1937 (2\textsuperscript{nd} place and a cash prize of 200 colones, approximately 40 United States dollars).\textsuperscript{136} His involvement within the artistic community began as the result of his close relationship with Quirós, with whom he travelled to the outskirts of San Jose and beyond to work \textit{en plein air}. In this way, González’s artistic education began with the Costa Rican landscape. He developed a personal style intuitively, informed by his reading of foreign art books and periodicals, and from his observations of light and color in nature.

At first González painted in a naturalist style, skillfully rendering subtle transitions in light and texture and aiming to blend the paint seamlessly. In \textit{Arco cerca de La Sabana} (\textit{Arch near La Sabana}, fig. 2.1) of 1928, the artist employed a traditional approach, depicting his subject matter from a distance and with a conservative vantage point aligned with the horizon. The artist painted the edge of a lake in San Jose’s large recreational park, La Sabana, with no people in the scene, just a tall arch near the bank, and a tame forest beyond. The palette is somber, primarily ochre, dark green, and gold. With small and wispy brushstrokes, González rendered varied textures for different kinds of foliage, the sky, the water, and the masonry. He paid close attention to the afternoon sunlight; the cast rays are reflected convincingly on the ground, the tree trunk, and the stalks growing out of the water. Neo-classical in style, this painting points to the influence of older, European-trained generation of artists in Costa Rica, like Tomás Povedano (director of the School of Fine Arts), Emil Span, and Enrique Echandi (figs. 1.1 and 1.3). Yet the painting’s compositional awkwardness reveals González’s lack of formal training. He made certain strategic formal choices that an academic painter would not make: vertical orientation of the image, no easy visual entry, no concern for the eye’s navigation

through the painting, ignorance of the “rule of thirds,” mixing pigment with black and white paint for value.

González painted freely, without the burden of rebelling against academic precepts; none of its limitations were instilled in him. He quickly relinquished naturalism, and by the early 1930s, his painting had evolved toward greater simplicity. In *Paisaje* (Landscape, fig. 2.2), from 1933, the artist used thicker strokes and heavier paint application, strong contrasts and livelier hues, and less color modulation and blending. This solitary farmhouse has a traditional, wood-burning oven by the entrance and a red roof of *tejas* (clay tiles). It is midday in this dry and hot place, which appears to be in the low-land, tropical dry forest region of Guanacaste to the country’s north. Like an impressionist study of light, tints of yellow, gold, and brown represent a radiant sunshine that bleaches most shadows. The sky, walls, ground, and hills beyond are all in bright light, emphasized by the few areas of strong contrast like the dark doorways, the area beneath the roof’s overhang, and the tree in shade to the left, its shadow but a smear of tinted magenta on the yellow ground. Like Cézanne, González covered the surface with daubs of paint, some applied vertically (the house, the ground), and some horizontally (the shrubbery to the right, the hill in the background). The smoothest surfaces on the canvas are the shadows, which are solid shapes of very dark green or near black magenta. Breaking with the laborious style of *Arco*, which aimed to copy the landscape, González’s *Paisaje* recreated the sensation of the arid environment and the effect of the glaring sun on the eye.

Continuing to experiment, the artist introduced black outlining circa 1935 in a manner similar to late nineteenth-century artists like Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard. This outlining enabled González to further simplify his painting as he filled in forms with solid color, which abstracted the image and emphasized the constructive nature of his painting. In *Paisaje*
(Landscape, fig. 2.3) of 1935, the artist portrayed the entrance to a farmhouse. In the foreground, on either side of the canvas are two adobe structures—presumably a house to the left and a galerón (covered shed) to the right—with wooden posts and tejas. In the middle ground there are tall trees, behind which is an open field, presumably a pasture for grazing. The height and narrowness of the trees indicate that it is the mountainous region of central Costa Rica. It is likely a small-scale dairy farm on the outskirts of San Jose, not one of the vast cattle ranches to the north. A diagonal path separates two structures and permits the viewer to enter the painting, but the angled point of view blocks sight of the end of the path. The eye is instead led back in space by the shapes of solid, light green fields in the background seen between the posts and tree trunks in the middle ground. Sight is drawn upward to the same tint of green highlighting the trees and then toward the light blue of similar value in the sky. With a balance of light and shadow, the strong contrasts animate the picture surface and carry the eye across the painting. The paint application also adds dynamism from areas of busier brushwork in a patchy style used to render the ground and foliage, to those of solid color, like the field, the walls, and the black window and doorway. The rhythmic pattern of the stone paved ground further energizes the image, as do the alternating direction of longer and shorter brushstrokes. Unlike his predecessors’ work and his own early painting, Paisaje is lively and exuberant, not sedate and placid.

When comparing Paisaje to Quirós’s Esquina de Escazú (fig. 1.4) a distinction arises that reveals González’s debt to Cézanne, Gauguin, and Matisse. González’s use of outline, a brighter palette than that of his mentor, and unattenuated areas of bold, unconventional color (the use of purple for shadow on the white walls, for example) strayed from tradition and yielded greater abstraction. While both artists focused on local imagery and the effects of tropical weather,
González’s was more experimental in his use of line, color, thicker brushstrokes, impasto, and an odd perspective that renders the viewer higher than the rooftops, but well beneath the lowest of tree branches. Against convention, there is little open space through which to navigate in this loaded composition, making the viewing experience awkward and irregular. These attributes made *Paisaje* among the most daring of those shown at the *Exposición* of 1935.

In González’s painting, landscape equals color, shape, line, and light. Having broken down painting into these elements, he experimented with even greater abstraction in *Untitled* (fig. 2.4), also from the 1930s. From a distant, elevated angle, the viewer sees a single woman walking along a road lined with houses. Her rounded figure replicates the less rigid nature of the adobe structures. The road is set at a diagonal leading the eye from lower left toward the center right of the composition where sight is met by a distant wall painted a shocking coquelicot. Vision is halted at that point and drawn upward by the black lines of a leafless tree, which stands at the end of the road, to the hill that rises above the town. At the summit are stylized shrubs and trees that look like dark green lollipops. The woman, the buildings, the *tejas*, and the trees are all heavily outlined in black and filled in with color that has little, if any, tonal inflection. As in the two previously discussed paintings, González sharply contrasted the brightness of the radiant walls to the solid black doors and windows, emphasizing the separation between interior and exterior space. By adding a figure, the artist added narrative emotion to the painting. The viewer senses the emptiness of this town during daylight hours, when town-dwellers are away from their homes working the fields.

Deviating from his conventional beginning in *Arco cerca de la Sabana* (fig. 2.1), *Untitled* (fig. 2.4), and both *Paisajes* (figs. 2.2 and 2.3) show the impact of González’s encounter with modern art. Thick, black outlines, flattening, shapes of color, visible brushwork, and skewed
angles of vision, at times reminiscent of Japanese printmaking, generate an image that is more about the act of painting and the synthetic essence of a place, and less about creating an illusion. As in his landscapes, he was equally innovative in paintings of people. He enlarged the figure following a modernist trend that may have been inspired by Diego Rivera or Picasso’s classical paintings of women from 1921, like *Large Bather* (fig. 3.4), which he may have seen in art journals or books in his friend’s libraries. González’s figures stare defiantly at the viewer in a manner like the challenging faces of Edouard Manet’s women. In 1936 González made one of the few paintings of Afro-Caribbeans in Costa Rica.\(^{137}\) *Venta de Negros*, also known as *Negros de Limón* (*Negroes’ Stand* or *Negroes from Limon*, fig. 2.5) shows a black couple in a fruit stand. The subject matter is a snapshot of the artist’s daily life, as the painting was based on a real fruit stand in San Jose owned by a black couple that moved to the capital from Limon.\(^{138}\) A hefty, seated man, his large body and massive hands taking up nearly half of the canvas, stares directly at the viewer. The whites of his eyes stand out and are as bright as the yellow shirt he wears. Toward the right, a black woman in a lilac dress with full lips and a bulbous nose stands in profile leaning against the wall. She too is heroic in size, a modern compositional tendency that elevates the status of these common people. Sight travels from him to her, and then toward the rear of the shop, where an open doorway reveals an exterior space with an undecipherable structure that implies storage space, not a bucolic internal garden of the four-corridor homes of San Jose’s elite. The luminous exterior contrasts with the dark interior, which is punctuated by the plantains, pineapples, avocados, and citrus on display. With his imposing presence, the man

\(^{137}\) Based on the titles of the exhibition catalogs of all of the *Exposiciones*, according to Eugenia Zavaleta, only four paintings of black people were ever shown. Zavaleta Ochoa, *Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas*, 175.

\(^{138}\) Francisco Amighetti, “Francisco Amighetti habla de la Exposición de Artes Plásticas,” *La Hora*, October 20, 1936.
guards his wares, which afford him the luxury of suspenders, a Panama hat, and a wedding band. The woman stands idly by as if waiting for the next customer, consumed in thought, her downcast gaze pensive.

Similar in style to González’s landscapes, black outlines both define and flatten the shapes that make up this image. Rather than a realistic rendering of light, this painting is heavy in contrasts. The clothing and the fruit are bright hues that stand out against the figures’ skin and the dark background. Short, differentiated brushstrokes of varying tones hint at the contours of the voluminous figures and the luscious tropical fruit. Otherwise the painting is flat; the components of the painting are fragmented and convey little depth, despite their overlapping. The unclear scene through the back door seems to mimic the plastic, disjointed nature of the painting as a whole. In this painting, González quite obviously aimed to be modern. The painting is an amalgamation of a variety of modernist techniques and traits, such as flattening, fragmenting, strong chromatic contrasts, heroic and defiant figures elevated from the mundane, exaggerated proportions, and expressive color.

González never stated which modern artists had impacted the development of his style. His daughter, art historian Mercedes González asserts that he avidly collected foreign art publications to gain information about the international art world.\(^{139}\) Equally important in his formation were the gatherings of the *Círculo de Amigos del Arte* (Circle of Friends of the Arts), to which González belonged. Because there was little public or private support for the arts in Costa Rica, the artistic community and its limited audience established this short-lived

association in 1934 in an attempt to foster the arts.\textsuperscript{140} The first of its kind, \textit{Círculo de Amigos del Arte} had more than one hundred members by 1937 and sponsored a variety of cultural events, including lectures, concerts, publications, and the last two \textit{Exposiciones} (1936 and 1937) at the National Theater.\textsuperscript{141} Costa Rican author and art enthusiast Abelardo Bonilla, a member of the \textit{Círculo}, stated in 1936 that the importance of the group lay in its “tolerant and mutual respect and shared enthusiasm for encouragement, which has united us in a common front against attack and the malicious intent of the intolerant and unsympathetic public.”\textsuperscript{142} Though the \textit{Exposiciones} drew large crowds, Costa Rican artists still felt alienated within their society. For five years the \textit{Círculo} strove to stimulate greater cultural awareness and dispel the public’s general lack of interest in art, particularly modern art. The group seems to have been more a social club than a cohesive movement, and their efforts did not have a lasting effect on society as a whole. Yet the meetings were nevertheless important, because members took turns sharing information about different international artists and movements, ranging from the Old Masters to the currents of

\textsuperscript{140}The first attempt to create an artists’ association in Costa Rica was made in 1928 in the midst of the first Exhibition of Plastic Arts at the National Theater. This original group signed a treaty of intent designed to honor Dr. Loudet’s effort to foster the arts in Costa Rica. Among those who signed were Enrique Loudet, Tomás Povedano, Enrique Echandi, Emilio Span, José Manuel Caballero, Jorge Volio, Angela Castro Quesada, Carlota Brenes, Noé Solano, Francisco Rodríguez Ruiz, Lilly Artavia. Little came of this initial endeavor. In 1931, due to the success of the third \textit{Exposición}, artists and authors once again cried out for the creation of some sort of alliance, but to little effect. Zavaleta Ochoa, \textit{Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas}.

\textsuperscript{141}Among its members were Teodórico Quirós, Abelardo Bonilla, Joaquín García Monge, Rogelio Sotela, Ricardo Segura, Claudia Lars, Mario González Feo, Mario Sancho, Julián Marchena, Adela Fernández de Líes, Fernando Gabriele, Manuel de la Cruz González, Francisco Amighetti, Emilia Prieto, Francisco Zuñiga, Néstor Zeledón, and Fabio Fournier. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{142}“Siempre ha existido dentro de nuestro grupo, -- nos referimos al ‘Círculo de Amigos del Arte’, -- un mutuo respeto de tolerancia y un común entusiasmo de aliento, que nos han unido en un frente común contra los ataques y la mala intención del gran público intolerante e incomprensivo.” Bonilla, “Octava Exposición de Artes Plásticas.”
modern art. It was thus through publications and discussion that González learned about modernism and gathered the ideas that he adapted in forging a personal style.

When *Venta* was exhibited in 1936 at the eighth *Exposición*, it unleashed a newspaper debate between Abelardo Bonilla and artist Francisco Amighetti. “Among the artists of the *Círculo de Amigos del Arte* a major fight has broken out due to lines, contours, masses, profiles, perspectives, lights, and shadows,” declared one newspaper reporter. Contemporary artist Francisco Amighetti praised *Venta* as that year’s best painting, superior to the winner, *Retrato de María Cristina Goicoechea* (Portrait of María Cristina Goicoechea, fig. 2.6, 1936) by Luisa González de Sáenz. An austere portrait of a society intellectual, González de Sáenz’s painting is more sedate than González’s *Venta*. A slender body with elongated fingers, the elegant model stares away from the viewer, her stoic expression difficult to read. In contrast to the expressionist style of González, González de Sáenz appears to have been influenced by post-expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* in her realistic style, angularity, and harmonious, even color palette.

143 Angela Beeche, Gilbert Laporte, and Fabio Fournier, all members of the *Círculo*, mentioned these discussions about art in interviews conducted by Zavaleta, which appear in her Master thesis. Zavaleta Ochoa, “Las ‘Exposiciones de Arte Plásticas’,” 385, 467, 517.

144 “Cosas de artistas,” *Semana Cómica*, October 24, 1936.


146 There is no specific mention of González de Sáenz having been influenced by modern German art, but it is probable that she visited the 1932 exhibition of German Expressionist prints held at the German Club of San Jose that permitted Costa Rican artists to see, first-hand, work by artists such as Erich Heckel, Käthe Kollwitz and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. Rafael Angel Herra Rodríguez, *El desorden del espíritu: conversaciones con Amighetti* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1987), 124. This experience may have drawn her to study modern German art through international publications that made their way to Costa Rica. This experience may have drawn her to The German art critic Franz Roh charted the distinctions between Expressionism and Post-Expressionism in *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus; Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (1925). Under Post-Expressionist characteristics he listed “sober objects … representational/absorbing/rather severe, Puritan/static/quiet/developed … smooth, evenly distributed [pigment]/harmonic purification of things…right-angled, parallel to the frame … cultivated.” Kenneth E. Silver, *Chaos & Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010), 25.
The painting is quiet and enigmatic, and the viewer becomes absorbed by the model’s serious demeanor. Perhaps these somber characteristics are what led Amighetti to state that *Venta de Negros*, when compared to *Retrato*, was more “emotive and better painted.” He extolled González’s use of color in *Venta*, claiming, “This painting phosphoresces in the black man’s shirt or the woman’s dress; it is a punished color that has lost its original crudity from the tube to acquire a seductive chromatic value.”\(^{147}\) *Retrato*, he considered, was flat, chromatically inconsistent, and questionable in its use of lighting. Bonilla responded to Amighetti, arguing that González de Sáenz intended to use a simple palette, rather than the extreme contrasts in *Venta*, and purposely avoided the representation of sculptural volume.\(^{148}\)

Both critics couched their arguments in reference to European modernism. Bonilla mentioned Manet’s use of contour lines, Cézanne’s “tonal superimposition of differing vibrations,” flattening in Puvis de Chavannes and Gauguin, and Picasso’s achievement of a purely plastic art.\(^{149}\) Amighetti, for his part, referred to the flatness seen in Japanese printmaking, as well as in the paintings of Manet and Whistler. He credited Cézanne for having rid art of the anecdotal, and Modigliani for having achieved a technical simplicity with abundant emotion.\(^{150}\)

The opinions of both critics are questionable, at least regarding the superficial manner in which they discussed European modern art, which seems more like “name-dropping” than substantive criticism. Such discussions about modern art in the 1930s are nonetheless revealing, for they

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\(^{147}\) “…más emotivo y mejor pintado…El color de este cuadro fosforece en la camisa del negro o en el vestido de la mujer, es un color castigado que ha perdido la crudeza original del tubo para adquirir un valor cromático que seduce… Es el negro que dejó de cargar los racimos entre el lodazal de las zonas palúdica y vende bananas en la tranquilidad burguesa del suburbio.” Amighetti, “Francisco Amighetti habla de la Exposición de Artes Plásticas.”

\(^{148}\) Bonilla, “Octava Exposición de Artes Plásticas.”

\(^{149}\) Ibid.

show that, despite their differing styles, both González and González de Sáenz were understood to be influenced by European modernism. Drawing on different international modes, each prodded the boundaries of the norm in Costa Rican art—greater expressionism, on the one hand, and a sober, psychological depth, on the other.

This period of fruitful competition and development in Costa Rican contemporary art came to end in the late 1930s. Due to a general loss of interest, the Exposición of 1937 would be the final one. Growing disagreements among artists and the disbanding of the Circulo also signaled the end of an era. According to Costa Rican art historian Edgar Ulloa Molina, the following decade was a period when artists worked independently, each aiming to consolidate a personal style. Though González’s painting style did not change appreciably during this period, his drawing was experimental, foreshadowing the path the artist would follow in years to come.

Ritmo (fig. 2.7, 1939), for instance, is an entirely non-figurative, synesthetic sketch. A square within which are three parallel, diagonal lines and a circle, this is one of several visual interpretations of music González made at the time. Ritmo appeared in an article about González written by the revolutionary female artist Emilia Prieto and published in Repertorio Americano. The essay featured other drawings as well, including the highly abstract though representation Ciudad (City, fig. 2.8, c. 1940), a precursor of González’s painting Ciudad en rojo (City in Red, fig. 3.20), which he completed fifteen years later in Venezuela. In Ciudad, several intersecting, freehand lines form shapes that look like city blocks and buildings. Enclosed spaces

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151 Zavaleta Ochoa, Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas, 33–37.


153 Other drawings from this series works are titled Debussy and Mozart. González Kreysa, “Música y artes visuales en Costa Rica.”
are intervened with small squares, rectangles, and an arch, representative of windows and doors. Prieto praised González’s simplicity, extolling him as among America’s “vanguard spirits” and commenting on the importance of his artistic innovation for Costa Rica. Poetically rather than analytically, she discussed his work:

He [González] doesn’t make allegories, instead he draws intuitions; he doesn’t repeat concepts, but rather creates symbols. That this should occur in Costa Rica, where everything is imitated and nothing is created, is something that moves me to enthusiasm. To think and feel for himself in the face of an environment that wants those who think to be embarrassed, as if it [thinking] were an abominable vice, is something that largely guarantees the salvation of our culture.\textsuperscript{154}

Prieto’s praise does little to explain what it was specifically about González’s work that placed him at the forefront of Costa Rican modern art, but it suggests how groundbreaking he appeared to be within the limited artistic environment. Though the majority of his work was representational, his venture toward non-figuration was rare and pioneering.

Part of what made González seem so daring and experimental in the context of the Generation of the 1930s was his intuitive style. Liberally adapting modern styles from foreign examples, González challenged convention. The characteristics of his painting, the way he applied paint to canvas, reveled in color and contrast, made awkward compositions, and distorted the figure, were integral to the foundation of a new aesthetic paradigm for art in Costa Rica.

\textbf{González’s Vernacular Content: A Realist Vision of Costa Rican Individualism}

The artists of the Generation of the 1930s broke with the stylistic convention of their predecessors. Yet while they aspired to create modern art in Costa Rica, they embraced

\textsuperscript{154} “No hace alegorías, sino que dibuja intuiciones, no repite conceptos sino que crea símbolos. Y que esto ocurra en Costa Rica, donde todo se imita y nada se crea, es algo que mueve a entusiasmo. Pensar y sentir por sí y ante sí en un medio donde ya quieren que se avergüence uno de pensar como si se tratara de un vicio abominable, es algo que garantiza en buena parte la salvación de la cultura.” Emilia Prieto, “Manuel de la Cruz González, un pintor costarricense,” \textit{Repertorio Americano} XXXVII, no. 22 (October 12, 1940): 245–246.
traditional icons of national identity in their paintings such as *carretas* (ox-carts), *campesinos*, and adobe houses nestled into lush landscapes or rural *pueblos* (small towns). This had been the subject matter of their forerunners both in art (Echandi [fig. 1.2], Povedano, Span [fig. 1.3], and Aquiles Jiménez) and literature (*costumbrismo*, Aquileo J. Echeverría, and Manuel González Zeledón). Yet the Generation of the 1930s shifted their perspective, getting closer to their subject matter, both physically and psychologically, than earlier artists. Whereas the point of view among the older generation of artists remained distant (fig. 1.3), modern artists entered the scenes of Costa Rican daily life, rendering details previously unrecorded, such as the elevated sidewalks along the cobbled street in Quirós’s *Calle de Escazú* (fig. 1.4). In the hands of modern artists, the *campesino* became the protagonist of national identity, as in Zuñiga’s virulent portrait of a *Boyero* (fig. 1.5), rather than remaining generic representatives of a passive rural populace.155 Like his contemporaries, González not only experimented with the expressive capacity of his medium, he also intensified his scrutiny of Costa Rican life by focusing on the manipulated environment (homes, corrals, sheds, towns, churches, domesticated animals, ox carts, farms, fields, and dirt roads) and the people who worked the land. Rather than idealize or criticize what he witnessed, González painted the country and its citizens in a realist mode to better capture the essence of Costa Rican life.

The early modern artists of Costa Rica did not enter the rainforests or the thick, often dark jungle that then covered most of the country.156 They also rarely depicted city life, which is

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155 In *Uno y los otros*, a Costa Rican literary history by Alvaro Quesada, the author points out the minor role *campesinos* had in *liberales* literature. “Campesinos are systematically excluded; if they appear it is tangential and episodic, always typified, never as protagonists or individualized.” “Los campesinos son sistemáticamente excluidos; si aparecen es de manera tangencial y episódica, siempre tipificados, nunca como sujetos protagónicos o individualizados.” Quesada Soto, *Uno y los otros*, 42–43.

156 Historian Ana María Botey points out that in the coffee census of 1935, the majority of the country’s landscape was covered in forests. Only three regions were widely colonized: the Central Valley, the banana and cacao
particularly surprising considering how much attention San Jose drew for its quaint, cosmopolitan beauty and burgeoning modern life. There are few, if any, paintings of the effects of industrialization on the landscape. For example, even though railroad tracks began to be laid in 1871, there are no paintings of the train, a metonym for modernization in works of many artists, including J.M.W. Turner, Claude Monet, and José María Velasco.\textsuperscript{157}

Avoiding confrontation, the Generation of the 1930s did not partake in strong social critique with their paintings, as was the case, for example, among some Cuban modern artists (fig. 3.5) who exposed the poverty-stricken reality of the masses. This may have helped to consolidate that vision of Costa Rica as a beautiful country of humble and hardworking campesinos, an idealized conception of the nation that was gratifying to the elite in its implication of peace, diligence and prosperity. Zavaleta suggests that the artists conveniently left out signs of poverty and hardship present during the difficult economic times that befell the country after the crash of the United States stock market in 1929 in order appeal to the bourgeoisie, which further reinforced the national myth.\textsuperscript{158} Most visitors to the Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas at the National Theater would have felt comfortable with this image of their country, accustomed as they were to a strong tradition of costumbrista literature.\textsuperscript{159}

This idealization in art did little to promote social change, as did Costa Rican vanguard literature of the 1930s and 1940s that harshly critiqued society. The difference is starkly apparent

\textsuperscript{157} Completed in 1890 with the financial backing of the United Fruit Company, represented by the American Minor C. Keith, the train connected San Jose to the Atlantic port and played an important role toward the development of the agro-export industry. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica, 77–80.

\textsuperscript{158} Zavaleta Ochoa, Haciendo patria con el paisaje costarricense, 24–29; Zavaleta Ochoa, Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas, 143–144.

\textsuperscript{159} Quesada Soto, Uno y los otros, 41–46.
in a comparison of contemporaneous depictions of banana plantations in painting and literature. In *Bananales* (fig. 2.2) of 1945, Quirós rendered a picturesque vision of a banana plantation. Eeriness pervades within the depth of this banana plantation, in the midst of which stand two anonymous, black-haired *campesinas* dressed in typical aprons. Their small stature, one-third the height of the tall trees, conveys a sense of their relative insignificance within the vastness of expansive plantations. Under the shadow of early dawn, bits of rich blue sky peek through thick banana leaves and the sun makes its way into the forest of banana trees, casting red highlights on the trunks and ground. This is an expressive painting, romantic in its sublime rendering of a space that usually inspires fear; for many in Costa Rica, banana plantations connoted disease, pesticides, and snakes. Nowhere are there signs of the United Fruit Company’s presence and its exploitation of workers. These women are lovely and healthy. In contrast, the Costa Rican author and Communist leader Carlos Luis Fallas wrote a novel of pivotal importance to the social reform movement of the period. Published in 1941, *Mamita Yunai*—the title is a reference to the United Fruit Company—exposes the harsh and unjust conditions for banana plantation workers in the Caribbean province of Limon.\footnote{\textsuperscript{160} Much of Fallas’s work is based on his own experience as a banana plantation worker. After the Revolution of 1948, in which the Communists played an influential role, the novel was banned from 1950 to 1970. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, *Historia de Costa Rica*, 138; Molina Jiménez and Palmer, *The Costa Rica Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, 99–100.}

There were also others nightmarishly deformed by deep scars, as if they’d been chewed on by some foul monster. While others crept by with heavy deliberation, swollen to exaggeration, their flesh bursting from their shoes. The men would try to hide the deformities by wearing baggy pants, while the woman [sic.] wore their wounds with grotesque pride…Diseased legs, swollen legs, mangled legs. All rotted by the banana swamp. And the gold of the gringos…

Those three hours [binge drinking on the weekends] of bottomless lethargy, that fictitious death—not feeling anything, not dreaming anything—are the only oasis in the desert of the plantation worker…To be able to fly through our fantasies to those far-off, cherished places. To love and be loved by good, healthy, beautiful women. To leave the miserable
banana trees, and to be released from the muck and mire!...And this is why there are deluges of alcohol at the camp...And this is how the tyrants on Wall Street fill their coffers, with the gold amassed from sweat and tears, from bloody sputum and cries of anguish. Gold that reeks of pus, of rotting limbs, and rum...Glory to the fair-haired bankers of the North! The road to Civilization!¹⁶¹

This is not the banana plantation in Quirós’s painting. Jiménez exposes the horror of the living and working situation in the banana plantations while simultaneously denouncing the social and economic repercussions of the exploitative presence of the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica.¹⁶²

This stark difference between art and literature may lead to the assumption that painting was apolitical and remained within the comfort zone of the privileged. Yet it is within the choices of what visual artists did and did not paint, and taking into consideration the audience for their paintings, that one can find political meaning in what on the surface appears simply as pleasant scenes. As opposed to print, which was widely disseminated in this highly literate country, paintings were for the most part viewed only by the upper classes and tourists of San Jose who attended the annual Exposiciones and the few other organized exhibitions.¹⁶³ The nostalgia for the traditional and vernacular, the celebration of the rural over the modern, urban environment of San Jose can be read as a subtle rebuke of the elite members of society. Rather than rally the literate working-classes with inflammatory texts, the visual artists quietly urged the elite, in the face of impending modernization, not to lose sight of Costa Rican cultural tradition.


¹⁶² Plantation workers were paid in a currency that could only be used in the convenience stores of the United Fruit Company, and they lived in the Company’s housing projects. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, The Costa Rica Reader: History, Culture, Politics, 128.

¹⁶³ Molina Jiménez and Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica, 92; Zavaleta Ochoa, Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas, 48.
Within this context the adobe structure was a ubiquitous symbol of Costa Rican identity. Among the Generation of the 1930s nearly every artist depicted it. In an essay dedicated to the topic, Carlos Francisco Echeverría suggests that artists had “rescued” this national icon during an era of capitalist expansion.

These artists, who saw the disintegration of the rural and provincial culture of Costa Rica to the advent of reinforced concrete, highways and automobiles, came to the rescue of a valued material culture whose gradual disappearance they resented ... these painters postulated a utopia symbolized by the serene air of the familiar and warmly human adobe house ... [which] represented to the artists, consciously or unconsciously, a desirable mode and lifestyle for the country... 164

The changing landscape from rural to “reinforced concrete” was directly related to the economic crisis of 1929. At first, president González Víquez (who held office from 1906 to 1910 and again from 1928 to 1932) faced the financial situation by resorting to loans, higher taxes, reduced spending, employee layoffs, and salary reductions in attempt to keep the nation afloat. But his successor, Ricardo Jiménez, in his third presidential term counteracted the country’s economic distress by establishing public works projects (bridges, highways, schools, and waterways) during the most difficult years of the depression, when coffee prices plummeted to an all time low in 1932. 165 On the one hand, he distributed nearly 250,000 acres of land to campesinos and day laborers, a socialist move that satisfied the left; on the other hand, he flirted with capitalism by encouraging foreign investment and multi-national corporations. 166 Within this context, the choice by artists to depict vernacular architecture, as in González’s Paisaje (fig. 2.3), instead of

164 “Estos artistas, que veían desintegrarse la cultura rural y provinciana de Costa Rica ante la irrupción del cemento armado, de las carreteras y los automóviles, fueron al rescate de los valores de una cultura material cuya desaparición progresiva de algún modo resentían...los pintores postulaban una utopía simbolizada por el aire sereno, familiar y cálidamente humano de la casa de adobes...[que] representaban para los artistas, consciente o inconscientemente, un modo y un nivel de vida deseables para el país...” Echeverría, Ocho artistas costarricenses, 129–130.

165 Botey Sobrado, Costa Rica entre guerras, 98.

166 Ibid., 96–99.
modern public works projects represented a socially acceptable critique to the government’s handling of the crisis. With the onslaught of modernization led by the government and foreign investment, the modern Costa Rican artist came to defense of local tradition.

In González’s work from this period, the nationally inflected nostalgia for tradition was paired with an essentialist reading of the Costa Rican in line with the national identity myth.

[Costa Ricans are] lovers of their homeland, respectful of tradition and the principles of citizenship, lovers of freedom, peace and work; that great virtue that makes them condemn with all their might and all the power of their calm and patient spirit, raw power and savage events.167

This was part of a speech González gave in 1936 to support Octavio Beeche, who, in addition to being the artist’s uncle, was the presidential candidate of the National Union Party, a center-left party accused by the opposition of affiliation with the communists.168 Those who favored Beeche, consequently, had to disavow this idea actively, claiming that their only similarity to the communists was their distrust of Cortés. The center-right, National Republican Party candidate León Cortés, who won the election by a wide margin, had headed the public works projects under Jiménez and ran on a platform that proposed continued infrastructural development of the country.169 González condemned this kind of progress in his speech, which is likely the reason he never painted images that celebrated development.

What will León Cortés give you, Costa Rica? Concrete roads? Why do you want them if what they are for is to drag along the chains of tyranny and the shame of a liberty lost?

167 “Queredores de su solar, y respetuosos de la tradición y de los principios ciudadanos, amantes de la libertad, de la paz y del trabajo, esa gran virtud que los hace repudiar con todas sus fuerzas y todas las potencias de su espíritu tranquilo y paciente, el poder bruto y los procederes salvajes.” Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, “Del Partido Nacional, Candidatura del Lic. Octavio Beeche 1936-1940. Brillante discurso de Don Manuel de la Cruz González perifoneado desde la estación Philco,” Diario de Costa Rica, June 29, 1935.


169 Ibid.
On these concrete roads will arrive, to the tranquil and honest citizens of this country, the whip and espionage, death and desolation, the foundations of tropical *casiquismo* [chiefdom].

This statement, while hyperbolic, testifies to the extent to which concrete buildings and highways, as opposed to adobe structures and dirt roads, symbolized the perceived negative effects of right-wing modernization. Considering González’s distrust of infrastructural modernization, his paintings of the vernacular, while nostalgic images of a simpler life, also served as a cautionary call to the elite to respect the autochthonous in an age of impending globalization.

González’s political speech stemmed from a traditionalist view of Costa Rica set forth by the *liberales* leaders at the turn of the century. *Alegoría del café y banano* (*Allegory of Coffee and Banana*, 1897, figs. 2.10 and 2.11) epitomizes the late nineteenth-century idealization of life in Costa Rica. Commissioned for the National Theater in the 1890s, this large-scale canvas was executed in Italy by Milanese painter Aleardo Villa (1865-1906). It was then shipped to Costa Rica, laid on board and mounted to the double-story ceiling of the theater’s second vestibule. Having never been to the country, Villa created a classicized port scene that represents the two primary agro-exports: coffee and bananas. On the right of the composition, numerous light-skinned *campesinas* with typical *canastos* (baskets) pick coffee from a plantation that reaches the coast, an impossibility considering that coffee is planted in the highlands far from the ocean. Their white skin and Caucasian features reiterate the myth that the Costa Rican population is predominantly of European descendent. At center, where the coffee meets the bustling port scene

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170 “Qué os dará León Cortés, pueblo de Costa Rica? Caminos de concreto? Para qué los queries si son para arrastrar por ellos las cadenas de la tiranía y la vergüenza de una libertad perdida? Sobre esos caminos de concreto llegarán para los ciudadanos tranquilos y honrados de este pueblo, el látigo y el espionaje, la muerte y la desolación, fundamentos de este casiquismo tropical.” González Luján, “Del Partido Nacional.”

to the left, a sturdy, darker-skinned man carries a large bunch of bananas. Just behind him, with his back to the viewer, is a distinctively dressed man in a white suit, the common attire of the wealthy foreigner; he is the symbol of international investment. The man is visually connected to the American and French flags waving atop the docked ships by a diagonal sight line that runs to them from the thick, black ribbon of his hat. All the men working at the dock seem clean and well dressed, red bandanas around their necks, hats on their heads, and shoes on their feet. This harmonious image of Costa Rican agro-industry reveals nothing of the reality and difficulty of laboring in the fields for an unmerciful client, the foreign export market, and stands in stark contrast to Carlos Luis Fallas’s description of life in the banana plantation in *Mamita Yunai*.

This idealized image of the agro-export industry in Costa Rica, and the conservative, European mode in which it was painted, became the norm among the country’s elite. The glorification of rural life became the basis of the national identity myth. Whereas the white, coffee-picking *campesinas* represented the export market, the *lechero* (dairy farmer) signified local agriculture. A folkloric character, the *lechero* lives in the mountains, in a place similar to González’s *Paisaje* (fig. 2.3), and delivers his milk to the people in the town below. The 1937-1938 *Almanaque Bayer Centroamericano*, a yearly periodical put out by the pharmaceutical company filled with short articles, useful information, and advertisements of their products, eulogized the *lechero*.

The roar of the modern truck engine that drives hundreds of liters of milk to the city pretends to forever overshadow the romantic figure of the local *lechero*, keeper of the

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172 Costa Rican cultural historian Luis Ferrero argues that the visual aesthetic of the National Theater contributed significantly to the elitist preference for neo-classical European art, which was detrimental to the national artist. It would take several decades for Costa Rican art to be accepted by the upper classes. Ferrero Acosta, *Sociedad y arte*, 146.

173 The back cover illustration, for example, shows an elegant mother sleeping on a bed embracing a child with the text: “Restorative sleep, calm nerves, thanks to Adalin tablets.”
native land tradition. The dairy farmer is the typical figure of an age full of romance that is now disappearing.\textsuperscript{174}

German émigré artist Emil Span painted a similar image of the \textit{lechero} in his 1937 painting \textit{Paso de la Vaca} (\textit{Cow’s Pass}, fig. 2.12) hung at the last \textit{Exposición}. In this bright image, a barefoot, young dark-haired woman smiles at a milkman. He, a middle-aged man wearing a distinguished hat and a nicely kept mustache, sits astride a dark mule, its neck blocking all but the right leg, left shoulder, and head of the woman. Straddled both in front and behind the rider are metal milk jugs. Perhaps the farmhouse in the middle ground at the bottom of the slope of vast, grazing fields is the \textit{lechero}’s home, and the girl his daughter. Based on the title of the painting, he is probably on his way to sell his milk at the market place that used to exist in downtown San Jose named \textit{Paso de la Vaca}. This is a man of integrity, well dressed and groomed, with a loving family at home. He is a typical representative of the traditional values of the Costa Rican; he leads a simple life of hard work and honor.

This impression of the \textit{lechero} stands in contradiction to that portrayed by Max Jiménez, painter and author of the Generation of the 1930s, in his novel \textit{El jaul}.\textsuperscript{175}

These people whose life is in four jugs, bring the milk down to the city and bring up booze. Often the horse, on a single course, comes home without the rider, and the raggedy family receives the terrible knowledge that \textit{el tata} [the father] is lying in a ditch on the road, drunk and calling out obscenities to imaginary bystanders ... The consequences of a horse that does not respond to abuse or yanks on the bridle, is paid for by the poor woman, loyal companion of terrifying resistance, who receives all the

\textsuperscript{174} “Ronca el motor del moderno autocamión que conduce a la ciudad centenares de litros de leche, pretendiendo eclipsar para siempre la romántica figura del lechero criollo, mantenedor de la tradición en la tierruca. El lechero es la figura típica de una edad llena de romance que ya va desapareciendo...” “El lechero típico de Costa Rica,” in \textit{Almanaque “Bayer” Centroamericano} (Costa Rica, 1937), 10.

\textsuperscript{175} Though the word “\textit{jaul}” means “cage” in Spanish, it refers in this case to the name of the town San Luis de los Jaules surrounded by \textit{jaul} trees (\textit{alnus acuminata}). In the text, the tree is described as a non-native species maladapted to the climate of the town. Certainly, though, the \textit{double-entendre} was intentional. Ileana Alvarado Venegas, \textit{Max Jiménez: aproximaciones críticas} (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 1999), 41.
clubbing missed by the horse, and that generally, like cows, is always ready to give birth.\textsuperscript{176}

Written in the same year as the publication of the \textit{Almanaque} and exhibition of Span’s \textit{Paso de la Vaca}, Jiménez penned a dreadful description of the Costa Rican \textit{lechero}. The way in which the author described the lives of the people from the town of San Luis de los Jaules, in the mountains above San Jose represents a critical tone, like that of Fallas, of Costa Rica’s literary vanguard. There is a strong distinction between Jimenéz’s \textit{El jaul} and the placid images of \textit{costumbristas}, which has been thoroughly discussed by Quesada Soto. The philologist incorporates quotes from the novel \textit{El jaul} to establish his point.

The main themes of the \textit{cuadro de costumbres} [literary vignettes typical of \textit{costumbrismo}], the picturesque houses, the \textit{campesino} romance, the warm and bountiful nature, the virtuous and meek women, are represented in \textit{El jaul} as a sham, false and deceitful appearances, hiding a terrible and dark truth … the bucolic landscape of \textit{costumbrismo}, sunlit, cozy and protected by mountains, becomes the ‘dreadful loneliness' of an infernal mountain, where 'every day the sun shines upon another failure'; a mountain eroded by rain and darkened by fog, inhabited by ‘a grafted race without family, on false footing.’\textsuperscript{177}

This reading helps explain how profound was Jiménez’s critique of the hypocrisy of Costa Rican society. By inverting the mythic image of Costa Rica, he portrays all that is wretched in the invented San Luis de los Jaules, from the wet and often inhospitable mountain, to the inclement and intense weather, to the solitude and disappointment, and, lastly, to the lack of a strong

\textsuperscript{176} “Estas gentes de vida en cuatro tarros, bajan leche a la ciudad y suben guaro. Frecuentemente el caballo, de un solo camino, llega al hogar sin el jinete, y la familia andrajosa llega al terrible conocimiento de que el tata está tirado en algún zanjón del camino, borracho y llamando a pleito a los transeúntes imaginarios…Las consecuencias de un caballo que no responde al maltrato ni a los tirones de la brida, las paga la pobre mujer, compañera de fidelidad y resistencia aterradoras, que recibe todos los palos que faltaron al caballo y que, generalmente, como las vacas, siempre están para dar a luz una nueva cría.” Max Jiménez, \textit{El jaul}, 3rd ed. (Heredia, C.R.: Editorial Universidad Nacional, 2002), 24.

\textsuperscript{177} “Los principales tópicos del cuadro de costumbres, las casitas pintorescas, el romance campesino, la naturaleza acogedora y pródiga, la mujer virtuosa y mansa, son representados en \textit{El jaul} como una farsa, apariencia falaz y mentirosa, que esconde una verdad terrible y sombría…El paisaje bucólico del costumbrismo, bañado por el sol y protegido por acogedoras montañas, se transforma en la ‘espantosa soledad’ de una montaña infernal, donde ‘el sol alumbrá todos los días un nuevo fracaso’; una montaña erosionada por la lluvia y oscurécida por la niebla, habitada por ‘una raza de injerto sin familia, sobre pie falso.’” Quesada Soto, \textit{Uno y los otros}, 199–200.
heritage among its inhabitants, non-united people transplanted from somewhere else. Jiménez’s criticism goes much farther than the small, insignificant town of San Luis de los Jaules, and is a thinly veiled reference to life in the Costa Rican countryside. The pessimism is palpable; the message is clear.

Although Jiménez was born into a wealthy family, providing him the opportunity to travel, self-publish, and help friends, it is not surprising that he was left leaning. Socialist ideas were present within Costa Rican politics since the 1920s. Laborers and artisans gained clout in 1917 because of their crucial role in the overthrow of the Tinoco dictatorship. Subsequently, their presence was increasingly prevalent in politics. Their participation, paired with the frustration felt by leading intellectuals such as Dengo, Mario Sancho, and García Monge, led to the formation of new reformist parties that would have an impact in legislation in the following decades. First was the Reform Party in 1923, which consolidated the urban workers and artisans under the charismatic leadership of Jorge Volio, and subsequently the communist party in 1931, which enlisted electorally the following year as the Bloque de Obreros y Campesinos (Workers’ and Peasants’ Bloc). The latter party’s membership was comprised of law students,

178 Further on in the novel, Jiménez refers to the inhabitants of this mountain town as “very white people perched on the peak of a mountain who banished some men who were probably like the few remaining birds: little men, bony, of liana flesh, and grim faces; men who believed in gods, not for forgiveness of sin, but out of a need for something greater… And now, a white, degenerate race, makes a life open to the elements, which it can hardly resist. A white race disintegrated from its landscape… A race that eats white bread… and that every day gets further away from corn. People who do not know that corn is worth worshiping, as the Indians had worshiped… whose ferment gives the forgetting of time for the knowledge of life.” “Gentes muy blancas encaramadas en el pico de una montaña, que desterraron a unos hombres que probablemente era como las pocas aves que aún quedan: hombres pequeños, huesudos, de carnes de bejuco, de caras sombrías; hombres que creían en dioses, no por el perdón del pecado, sino por la necesidad de algo superior… Y ahora, una raza blanca, degenerada, haciendo una vida de intemperie que tan mal resiste. Una raza blanca desintegrada del paisaje… Una raza que come un pan blanco… y que cada día se aparta más de maiz. Unas gentes que no saben que el maíz es muy digno de adorarse, como lo adoraban los indios… cuyo fermento da el olvido del tiempo, por el conocimiento de la vida.” Jiménez, El jaul, 29–30.


several members of the intellectual elite and literary vanguard, among them Fallas and Carmen Lyra, workers, campesinos and artisans. They opposed private monopolies (in favor of nationalization of services such as insurance and electricity), the take-over of vast tracts of land by foreign investors, and the industrialization of the country to the detriment of civilian sovereignty.¹⁸¹ Their main arm of activism was the magazine *Trabajo (Work)* that pointed out the poor working and living conditions of commoners while promulgating change and social reform for the country. Costa Rican communism remained legal throughout the 1930s and 1940s. With democratically elected seats in the government, the communists’ concern was to correct the abuses of power and excesses of corrupt politicians.¹⁸² The majority National Republican Party leaders often heeded communist initiatives, which led to amendments in labor law, health care, housing, education, and agricultural reform. This relationship foreshadowed the alliance that formed between the two parties in the 1940s, yet during the 1930s, the *Bloque* was not aligned with the republicans on fiscal and economic issues and believed that the enacted reforms did not go far enough.¹⁸³

Several of the most critical authors of the 1930s were members of the *Bloque de Obreros y Campesinos* and they used their writing to create awareness about and among the disenfranchised in Costa Rica.¹⁸⁴ The artists, however, were not communists, which is likely the result of a desire or need to be respected and coveted by members of the elite.¹⁸⁵ Yet it was

¹⁸³ Botey Sobrado, *Costa Rica entre guerras*.
¹⁸⁵ Costa Rican historian David Díaz Arias points out that by the 1930s, aside from Carmen Lyra, the older intellectual vanguard that had brought together the Reform Party of the 1920s, considered the young communists to
common among painters of the Generation of the 1930s to portray campesinos, in this way sympathizing, if only in spirit, with the battle for improved rights among the lower classes. The paintings of campesinos by modern artists were not critical and, therefore, did not resemble the rural characters of vanguard literature, the beaten down members of society, ignorant of their unjust social position. Their paintings were also unlike the traditional image put forth by the liberales. The modern artists aimed to dignify campesinos, not through idealization, like Span or Villa, but by portraying them as integral and respectable members of society. Like the images of adobe structures, the depictions of the campesino represented the artists’ preference for a more traditional economy and an anti-imperialist position regarding foreign, especially United States, investment. Campesinos represented model members of society because they owned small parcels or worked on communal land to be self-sufficient, attaining extra income by whatever means the family could manage, such as the sale of surplus goods or services.\textsuperscript{186} As agrarian capitalism took over, particularly toward the late nineteenth century, the government supported laws to ease the privatization of lands that had been communal, and encouraged massive, uni-crop, export farms.\textsuperscript{187} By the twentieth century campesinos were a dying class and most agricultural workers were jornaleros (hired day laborers).\textsuperscript{188} Interestingly enough, the few families left based on the campesino model were the least affected financially between 1929 and


\textsuperscript{187} Fumero Vargas, \textit{Centroamérica: Desarrollo desigual y conflicto social, 1870-1930}, 6; Botey Sobrado, \textit{Costa Rica entre guerras}, 82.

\textsuperscript{188} Molina Jiménez and Palmer, \textit{Historia de Costa Rica}, 65, 83.
1936, the hardest years of the economic crisis in Costa Rica.\textsuperscript{189} In this context, while paintings of 
\textit{campesinos} may have elicited a nostalgic response from the viewer, they simultaneously may have reminded the audience of the country’s historic economic system of independent, middle-class citizens that was increasingly threatened by big-business interest.

González exhibited his paintings of \textit{campesinos}, as did his contemporaries, at the 
\textit{Exposiciones} in the National Theater. There presidents, public officials, and the nation’s elite came face to painted face with the rural lower class. Alongside portraits of elegant members of society hung paintings of \textit{campesinos}, the two social classes on an equal footing.\textsuperscript{190} Unlike the idealized \textit{campesinos} visitors saw on the ceiling of the vestibule, González presented a realist portrayal of the rugged men and women who worked the Costa Rican land. Though not a defiant expression of political alliance, within their exhibited context, such works constituted a declaration of solidarity with a social sector under pressure. They were a visual statement that the country must ensure all citizens the right to remain independent and economically stable.

González’s \textit{Untitled} (fig. 2.13), executed in the 1930s, portrays a \textit{campesino} couple in front of a painted, adobe home. Standing in a doorway with her arms raised, a sensual woman clad in a bright orange dress, her breasts and waist accentuated, stares out at the viewer. Next to her is a man on a bench, barefoot as is the woman, wearing a \textit{chonete} (typical, Costa Rican \textit{campesino} hat) and gazing off to his right. Loyally seated at their feet is a small dog with a beaded collar. On the wall above the man’s head is a painted cross, which reveals the couple’s faith and signals that they are humble and moral people. The composition is loaded, and González resolves the sense of spatial closure by covering the painting with brief, unblended,

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 100.

\textsuperscript{190} Portraiture was a prevalent genre among painters in the \textit{Exposiciones} of 1928 to 1937. Zavaleta Ochoa, \textit{Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas}, 166–167.
parallel brushstrokes that activate the eye resulting in a staccato energy that reverberates across the canvas, from the woman’s up-stretched arm to the leathery tropical foliage in the lower right corner. High cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, and light brown skin indicate that the couple is mestizo, and their strong bodies tell of the hard work to which they are accustomed. The exaggerated proportion of their hands and feet links this painting to indigenista artists throughout Latin America, like Cândido Portinari of Brasil and Eduardo Kingman of Ecuador, who used this trope to criticize the exploitation of indigenous and black laborers. Portinari’s O lavrador de café (The Coffee Plantation Laborer, 1939, fig. 2.14) portrays a large-scale, black man in the foreground, barefoot, in work clothes, and holding a hoe. He stands before a vast plantation of coffee so expansive that a train running along the edge of one of the fields is minimal in comparison to the infinite rows stretching into the horizon. Portinari has glorified this man while emphasizing that he will reap no reward from this effort except the promise of more work. González’s figures are similarly massive, yet his painting only vaguely hints at the injustice of backbreaking work shown by the man’s contorted posture. Otherwise, there is no specific political statement, no direct reference to any oppression, as in O lavrador. The swelling bodies of these campesinos convey health and admirable strength.

That González wanted to ennoble the campesino is evident from his point of view; the angle of vision is from below the tall figure of the woman. The viewer literally looks up at her. Yet aspects of the painting also reveal a class-inflected essentialism that underscores the differences between the cosmopolitan artist and his rural subject. At first glance, the sexualization of the female form emphasizes the paternalism of a society in which a woman,
particularly one of a lower class, is perceived as an object of sexual desire. But inversely, the attitude is one of suspicion from her, and indifference from him. They are not welcoming, and the woman’s defiant stare and posture block entry to her home. The viewer literally cannot see what lies beyond the threshold, as if González, like his intended audience, would never have actually ventured or been invited inside a campesino’s home. The sense of distance between the viewer and the subjects is heightened by several artistic choices. Both of these figures have black, hollow eyes that render them anonymous, and echo the dark interior of the adobe house. The tightly encapsulated composition—there is no room in the painting for the viewer to step inside—emphasizes the separation; observer and observed are two separate units of existence that do not relate.

Despite the sense of separation and difference, González rendered his figures reverentially by the manner in which he portrayed their stance and their home. They might be barefoot and live in a dirt-floor house, but these people are not conchos (vulgar campesinos). Details such as the woman’s colorful dress, the painted walls, the dog’s collar, and the man sitting on a bench rather than de cuclillas (on his haunches, the characteristic posture of relaxation among conchos, fig. 2.15), point to a respectable home. Again painting diverges from literature. Vanguard essayist Mario Sancho in 1935 described the campesino’s house as “a shack with a dirt floor and a roof that, if it rains, a true pigsty, where smoke stings the eyes, and the smell offends the nose.” Unlike González, Sancho openly criticized Costa Rica in his seminal text, ironically titled Suiza centroamericana (Central American Switzerland), which argued for

191 Alvaro Quesada discusses the presence of this theme of sexuality among Costa Rican costumbristas of the turn of the century, pointing to specific stories by both Magón and Claudio González, La propia and El hijo del gamonal, respectively. Quesada Soto, Uno y los otros, 51–52.

192 “…Una casucha de piso de tierra y de techo que si llueve, verdadera pocilga, donde el humo escuece los ojos, el olor ofende las narices…” Mario Sancho, Costa Rica, Suiza Centroamericana, 2nd ed. (San Jose, CR: Editorial Costa Rica, 1982), 74.
social redemption. His biggest complaints throughout the text are corruption, ineptitude, and a lack of solidarity among national leaders, yet he debases the society as a whole.

Such a people [campesinos], —behind, stuck in its way, immersed in the darkness of superstition and prejudice, to whom the Government provides, as the only derivative of its misery, alcohol —cannot, as often as it may be said, form their own opinions about anything or have any serious interest in what happens outside of its very restricted radius in which develops, or rather atrophies, its existence. Within this society, he goes on to contend:

The campesino in fact knows that things are not done in response to his benefit and comfort, that the roads are made, when made, when it is in the interest of the greats, that the bridge is placed over the river not so that he can cross it by foot, dry and without danger, but because it is necessary to give easy access to a powerful rancher. This he believes, and we believe it as well.

Although González is not so pointed in his criticism, his painting does reflect this suspicion toward the elite; the couple in Untitled (fig. 2.13) seems distrustful of those who stare at them. But while Sancho presents campesinos as disenfranchised, aware of injustice but unable to react to it, González shows strength born from the steadfast, independent nature of the campesino.

Picturesque depictions of campesinos and the landscape were palatable to an elite audience who had learned to find beauty in the autochthonous, symbol of the hardworking

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194 “Un pueblo así, --atrasado, rutinario, sumido en la oscuridad de supersticiones y prejuicios a quien el Gobierno ofrece, como único derivativo de su miseria, el alcohol,-- no puede, por más que se diga formarse opinión de nada ni tener ningún interés serio en lo que pasa fuera del restringidísimo radio en que se desarrolla, o mejor dicho, se atrofia su existencia.” Sancho, Costa Rica, Suiza Centroamericana, 61–62.

195 “El campesino sabe efectivamente que las cosas no se hacen en atención a su comodidad y a su provecho, que los caminos se hacen, cuando se hacen, si el interés de los grandes así lo dispone, que el puente se coloca sobre el río no para que él pueda cruzar éste a pie enjuto y sin peligro, sino porque hay necesidad de darle acceso fácil al finquero poderoso. Esto cree él y esto creemos nosotros también” Ibíd., 65.
individualism touted by the *liberales*. Certainly Sancho’s was not an agreeable image of the *campesino*, but neither was González’s. Much more agreeable was a painting like *Campesinas* (1952, fig. 2.16) by González’s contemporary Gonzalo Morales Alvarado (1905-1986). In this painting, two young, light-skinned *campesinas*, identifiable as such because of their typical attire of flowing skirt and tucked in white blouse, pose for their portrait. One sits prettily on the ground, legs crossed, one hand placed lightly on her lap and the other on a *tinaja* (clay vessel). The other young woman, slender like the first, is blonde, rather than brunette. She carries her *tinaja* gracefully without exerting force. Both women have Caucasian features: long thin faces, narrow noses, eyes spaced closely together. The painting is illuminated by golden, placid sunlight, and behind the women extends a landscape that is more Italianate than tropical. To identify these two young ladies, Morales represented obvious *campesina* connotations; but it is precisely those details that make the painting an idealization rather than a truthful portrayal. The seated woman’s bare feet—lower-class Costa Ricans were often shoeless—are dainty; they have not trod through rough terrain. Their garments, while similar to those on Villa’s coffee pickers, are embellished rather than generic; ruffled, embroidered, and tapered these outfits were purchased at a shop or tailor-made and certainly not available to the working class. While without jewelry, the young women wear ribbons and barrettes in their styled hair, which is not the typical, tight braid of the *campesina*. These women would be incapable of bearing the strain of work in the country, but this probably did not faze the painting’s audience, San Jose’s elite, who were themselves unaware of the harsh conditions of agricultural labor.

There is an obvious distinction between Morales’s idyllic painting and González’s *campesinos*. Morales’s smooth and pristine academic mode is in contrast with González’s

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modern style of bulky figures and expressive strokes. Beyond this stylistic disparity, the paintings diverge in content. Both paintings intended to depict the typical Costa Rican character, but what each artist stated about that identity was different. González’s *Untitled* is realist: *mestizo* rather than white figures, simplicity rather than abundance, sensuality rather than charm. His *campesinos* are neither idealized nor miserable; they are expressive symbols of strength and independence. Shown at a time of growing political unease, the more defiant painting, though not an active political statement did empathize with the potentially disenfranchised, those who would suffer, according to González, Cortés’s “tyranny of progress.” In a sense these are the people. Unlike Morales and Villa, González did not merely use the icon of national identity; he recreated it, shifting it from passive, white, and easy-going to robust, darker-skinned, and solemn.

**San Jose’s First Mural and Costa Rica’s “labriego sencillo”**

In a vain attempt to leave something for posterity, the *Círculo de Amigos del Arte* asked González in 1937 to create the country’s first modern mural for their meeting space in downtown San Jose (fig. 2.17 and 2.18). He accepted the commission, for which he received no payment, and worked on it with help from Quirós, often after midnight when he finished work at the radio station. Unfortunately, the mural no longer exists. Indicative of the general lack of interest in

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197 González, unable to make ends meet as a painter, worked as a radio show host. As a youth he cultivated an interest in music and theater, serving as a stagehand, set and costume designer, actor, and director. His appreciation for oration and music also led him toward a life in radio. With a clear and resounding voice suitable for broadcast, he began to be a regular radio presence in 1934 with a revue called “Ponme la radio Tomás…!!” Radio had been introduced to the Costa Rican public around 1930 and soon became an ever-present aspect of daily life. By 1935 there were at least 30 different radio stations in the country. For 14 years González worked at the popular stations La Voz de la Victor (The Voice of the Victor), a reference to the RCA Victor brand distributed by the station’s owner, Perry Girton, and Radio Para Ti (Radio for you). He ran various shows, among them the midday show *Estampas Musicales* (Musical Imprints) in which he read stories, poetry, or historical accounts by national and international authors, some written by himself, interspersing the readings with music. Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, *M. de la t.* (San Jose, C.R.: Museo de Arte Costarricense; Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1980), 8; Cuevas
the arts, it was whitewashed over by the tenants who used the space after the Círculo disbanded, and was later demolished completely when the walls were razed.\(^{198}\) At the time of the mural’s creation, however, the press related the excitement with which González’s endeavor was regarded, commenting on the various visitors who stopped in to watch him work, from policemen to tourists, and of course journalists and other artists.\(^{199}\)

The only other murals in San Jose that were widely seen, at least among the elite, were the ones decorating the ceilings and walls of the National Theater. The classical figures in Villa’s light and airy port scene differ greatly from González’s large, stylized bodies and strong contrasts. On each of the three walls of the Círculo’s mural, the artist represented three different regions of the country, blending them together at the corners with local wildlife: the Central Valley (east wall), the coast (south wall), and the mountain region (west wall).\(^{200}\) Brightly colored, the murals were painted with encaustic over whitewashed walls covered in oil paint.\(^{201}\) Each of the walls represented members of the laboring class set within the landscape where they toil. In the mural representing the Central Valley, titled Meseta, leafless trees toward the right side of the composition indicate it is the end of the dry season, and thus time to prepare the land for planting. There are five men setting about this task with the central figure, a strong man bent at the waist and forming a triangle with his body, mightily pulling out shrubbery from the baked


\(^{199}\) “Muy visitado el local donde se están haciendo las pinturas murales,” La Hora (San Jose, March 12, 1937).

\(^{200}\) A fourth wall was supposed to depict the north sector of the country, but it was never completed. Fernández, “Un crimen cultural: los murales desaparecidos de Manuel de la Cruz.”

soil. His body language emphasizes the physical exertion necessary to work the land. A small preparatory sketch of this figure (fig. 2.19), dedicated to fellow artist Max Jiménez, identifies González’s working process of observing the human form in action. His study includes a grimacing face, but he transferred only the posture and not the expression to portray the essence of toil. Behind the central figure are two men; only their upper bodies are visible. One mops the sweat from his brow with his forearm, while the other holds his elbow aloft in mid-action. To the right of this triad is a robust figure with both hands holding the handle of a shovel, its sharpened end sinking into the ground. This man is barefoot, and his stern face is contorted into a scowl, jaws clenched, eyes staring in determination at the ground in front of him. Across the image, a man stands in an oxcart that lumbers its way toward the workers. One arm holds up the prodding stick used to guide the oxen, the other grabs tightly onto the cart; wooden wheels on dry, dirt roads do not provide a smooth ride. A rising or setting sun glows from the horizon behind the driver, keeping his face in shadow yet brightly illuminating the scene. The viewer is placed beneath the stage-like plane on which the action takes place, which creates the sensation that there is a world beyond this scene. If it were possible to take a step closer, one might see the progress brought about by agriculture, yet González has cut this view out of sight. This separation limits the viewer’s perspective and amplifies the distance between the laborers’ reality and that of those who look upon them.

Despite this disconnection between subject and viewer, the image conveys kinship and a sense of pride in what has been made in Costa Rica from the sweat and ingenuity of those who work the land, as opposed to Portinari’s O lavrador, which emphasizes the injustice of the exploited worker. An even more striking contrast can be drawn between this image and a scene from Diego Rivera’s mural cycle in Cortés’s Palace in Cuernavaca, Mexico, that represents the
cruel treatment of the indigenous laborers on a sugar plantation (fig. 2.20). Anonymous, dark skinned figures in tattered clothes bundle sugar cane in the foreground, closely watched by a lighter-skinned Spanish administrator on horseback who doles out orders and holds a rifle across his lap. Further back, two rows of indigenous workers wearing loin clothes haul a cart laden with cane, kept in line by a figure wearing Spanish attire. This component of the image is a reference to colonial slavery. Feeling no reservations about abusively treating humans as if beasts of burden, a white master lies in a hammock lazily overseeing the entire operation. González would not have been able to create such a painting, because the scene differed so drastically from the reality of Costa Rican agriculture. As discussed in Chapter 1, the small population of Costa Rica since colonial years meant that the wealthy could not count on vast amounts of laborers to cultivate their crops. Landowning *campesinos* would not submit to forced labor on the farms of the coffee oligarchs. Instead, the agro-exporters purchased the grain from many small-scale, family-run producers and amassed the product for processing and export. In *Meseta*, González referred to this individualist nature of the Costa Rican *campesinos* who engaged in his own work, not that of an overarching master. In the first modern murals made for his country, González highlighted this form of subsistent independence representing the social and economic construction of Costa Rica, a nation that developed differently than most other countries in Latin America.

It is worth pointing out once more that González did not paint the small, but significant urban sector or the offices and homes of wealthier Costa Ricans. Everything was outdoors and González represented each region’s identity by portraying the productivity of the land and the people that put it to work. His figures are massive, muscular, and solid, their bodies projecting

hard work, though little emotion. This Costa Rica is not necessarily pleasant, like Villa’s *Alegoría* punctuated by smiling, white women and clean-cut men at work. In González’s mural the setting is hot and dusty and the people sweaty and stern. Engaged in the task at hand, the men in González’s mural are the “*labriegos sencillos*” (“simple laborers”) sung about in the Costa Rican National Anthem, written by José María Zeledón Brenes in 1900. “¡*Vivan siempre el trabajo y la paz!*” (“May work and peace live forever!”), concludes the anthem, and this is the same nationalist tone of González’s painting. Even for his specifically art-related audience González rendered the country without criticism: no overt politics, no turmoil, no complaints. A contemporaneous newspaper reporter praised the artist’s patriotic vision of the country. "All sections of the country are brought together, taken as living expressions of a simple existence, with no tragic history, without meaning or transcendent conception. Just as is Costa Rica. And herein lies its greatest success.”

González more forthrightly depicted the idiosyncratic social class structure of Costa Rica in *Gamonal y peón* (Landowner and Worker, 1940, fig. 2.21), the painting that he sent to San Francisco’s Golden Gate International Exposition in 1940. In the foreground, pushed up to the picture plane, are two men in three-quarter-length profile. Behind them is a small townscape. The man closest to the viewer has dark skin. A straw hat covers his head and he wears an ill-fitting white coat that emphasizes his drooping shoulders. His face is rugged and his high

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203 “Reune pues, todos los puntos del país, tomados como expresiones vivas de una existencia sencilla, sin historial trágico, sin sentido ni concepción trascendente. Tal como Costa Rica. He aquí su mejor acierto.” José Marín Cañas, "Los murales que pinta Manuel de la Cruz," *La Hora*, Apr. 1 1937, 7. Though some articles were critical of the overall results, the general consensus was that González should make more murals. Despite his intention to heed this call, he did not paint another mural until the 1950s in Maracaibo. “Muy visitado el local donde se están haciendo las pinturas murales”; “Murales e Inauguración del Círculo ‘A.A.’”

204 Dr. Grace L. McCann Morley coordinated the exhibition, and the painting was lent to the Division of Central and South American Art in the Fine Arts Building. According to correspondence from Dr. Morley, it appears other works were shipped from Costa Rica, though it is unclear where they were from being as they were referred to as “from the region.” González Archive.
cheekbones and slanted eyes indicate that he is of indigenous heritage. Just behind him, but a step ahead, is an older, lighter-skinned man, partially overlapped by the worker’s hat. He stands erect wearing a black suit, a navy tie, a stiffly starched shirt, and a Panama hat with a thin black ribbon. The stark whiteness of his hat and shirt commands attention, particularly in comparison to the shabbier white of the first man’s garment. The older man’s attire and his European features, prominent brow and chin, indicate that he is the landowner to which the painting’s title refers; the first man is the peón he trusts to get the job done. Though they hold their heads differently—the older gentleman holds his head up high while the worker’s head is tilted slightly downward assuming an air of submission—both men stare into the distance in the same direction, a visible manifestation that they share the same objective. The small-scale structures in the near distance are typical blue and white adobe buildings and the three-story bell-tower indicates that this town is wealthy enough to have a substantive church. The proximity to the mountain beyond reveals that it is not in San Jose proper, but rather in the periphery of the capital, and thus likely a coffee-farming region. Light filters in from the left, twilight approaches, casting only the slightest sliver of a shadow from the hats onto the men’s foreheads. The sky over the mountains begins to darken; the day is nearly done.

González’s modern style in Gamonal exudes greater confidence in his personal approach. Thick impasto reveals traces of brushstrokes applied rhythmically to the canvas. As in his painting of campesinos (fig. 2.13) or Negros de Limón (fig. 2.5), the two men take up the majority of the composition establishing a vertical emphasis that challenges symmetry and shrugs academic balance. Even though González depicted the end of the day, he employed his characteristically bright and expressionist palette, which resonates with the light and chromatic exuberance of the Costa Rican countryside. The large areas of solid color, such as the green
field, the blue base of the adobe exteriors, the black suit, and the white hat, contrast with the
flecked highlighting on the men’s faces. This opposition, as well as the abrupt overlapping, and
the awkward sense of space force the eye to bounce around the image leaving no place for sight
to settle. Gamonal is dynamic because of these formal choices, and it is perhaps in this painting
that González most successfully applied a modern aesthetic to depict an age-old relationship.

While Gamonal is thematically in line with the previously discussed paintings of adobe
houses, campesinos, and the agricultural landscape, it contains a significant difference: the upper
and the lower class convene in a single image. González positioned the two figures close to one
another, thereby providing a sociological reading about what makes Costa Rica different from its
Latin American brethren. While in Mexico the wealthy man relaxes in a hammock on his
veranda, removed from his numerous laborers, in Costa Rica the landowner stands shoulder to
shoulder with his most trusted employee, and is bolstered by his presence. According to the
exhibition receipt for the return of this painting, found in one of the artist’s scrapbooks, the title
of the painting at the Golden Gate International Exposition was Men of the Fields.205 This title
renders the two men as relative equals, at least in name, for the painting’s American audience.
By sending this painting to San Francisco, González stated to an international audience that, in
his country, the privileged man succeeds only when he is directly involved in the business and
can count on the foresight and dedication of the man he hires, not on legions of poorly paid
laborers. Motivated by nationalism, this image is a socio-economic rendering of the
interdependency of class relations in Costa Rica. González appears to be proud of his country, in
which he perceives class hierarchy as the tranquil order of things, not a drastic injustice. From

205 González Archive.
the artist’s perspective there existed a sense of solidarity and respect among Costa Ricans, in
despite of evident class differences.

González sets forth a similar perspective in a drawing from 1945 entitled *El pueblo* (The
Town, fig. 2.22). The image depicts a *gamonal* on his horse engaged in conversation with a
*campesino* couple, the distinction made clear not only by the former’s mounted status, but also
by the difference in the men’s hats. In the middle ground there are two *campesinos*, almost
entirely blocked by the horses neck and head, and two shrouded women. Beyond, there are a few
single-story buildings presided over by a significant looking church with a domed bell tower and
a rose window. In front of the church more people mill about, implying that it is Sunday, a day
for the family, rest, and prayer. Catholic mass gathers everyone to the center of town regardless
of socio-economic status, and it is the context for a drawing that emphasizes the direct
communication held between the *gamonal* and the *campesino*. Though one man is above and the
other below, the two maintain direct eye contact. This was how González perceived and
described Costa Rican society: though a man has less wealth, he does not need to avert his eyes,
or change his step to accommodate the rich. Equally, the *gamonal* takes time on a Sunday to talk
with this worker in a demonstration of mutual respect.

In not problematizing the relationship between the wealthy and the poor, González
appears to condone it, which is not surprising considering his political affiliation in the 1940s.
He did, however, elevate the status of the real “*labriego sencillo*” and underlined the mutual
respect held traditionally among Costa Ricans. This was particularly important during an age
when foreign investors and the moneyed classes were taking control over and exploiting the
labor force. In the face of changes, portraying the *campesino* as an honorable individual gave
added value to the inherited socio-economic system and thereby continued to fuel the national identity myth.

Calderón Guardia, Social Reform, and the Revolution of 1948

Costa Rican visual art suffered during the 1940s. There were no more Exposiciones, which had prompted healthy competition among artists, and the Círculo de Amigos del Arte had disbanded bringing an end to the many events they sponsored. The most important development was the renovation of the School of Fine Arts when it became part of the new University of Costa Rica, matriculating 55 students in its first year, 1941.\(^\text{206}\) Teodorico Quirós, who became dean of the School in 1942, and he headed the “modernization” of the curriculum, which included painting *en plein air*, the study of anatomy from the nude model rather than plaster casts, and art history lessons.\(^\text{207}\) Under this new direction, González was designated professor of painting and aesthetics to the third and fourth year students.\(^\text{208}\) Despite the art historical significance of the renovation to artistic education in Costa Rica, little else propelled the visual arts at this time. The decade was fraught with growing social divisionism that led to the Revolution of 1948. During this socially fragmented period, González’s art did not reflect his political persuasion.\(^\text{209}\) He was actively political, however, and sided with the Republican Party, an affiliation that would lead to him into exile after the Revolution.


\(^{208}\) Letter to González from the School of Fine Arts confirming his position on the faculty, Mar. 12, 1945. González Archive.

\(^{209}\) González may have been more polemical in his work for the theater. In 1946 he founded a theater troupe called “*Teatro Experimental.*” The troupe’s activities appear to have been truncated due to the country’s political upheaval;
The decade began with a new president, Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia (1900-1970) of the Partido Republicano Nacional (National Republican Party), who won the election of 1940, claiming nearly 85 percent of the votes. A popular and invigorating leader, he initially represented the face of reform. When he had been a student of medicine in Belgium, with the struggles of Costa Rica ever present in his mind, Catholic social teaching influenced his thought.

Everything I could have hoped for as a response to my concerns was foreseen and addressed in the Social Code, the sketch of a Social Catholic synthesis...there...the most admirable analysis of human life is achieved, not from the point of view of a negative individualism or a negative materialism, but rather starting from the Christian conception of man, Society, and the State. This is done without deifying man as individualism does; without deifying the State, as Socialism does; and without deifying the Society, as positivist sociology does.\textsuperscript{210}

Within Calderón’s first year in office, he founded the University of Costa Rica (UCR). He also improved health reform, which culminated, in 1941, in the creation of the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS, Costa Rican Department of Social Security, an institution that continues to oversee the country’s socialized medical system).\textsuperscript{211} In 1942 he put forth the Garantías Sociales (Social Guarantees), a set of labor laws, elevated to a constitutional level, that secured citizens a minimum salary, an eight-hour work day, paid vacation, freedom to form trade unions, and the right to strike, among others.\textsuperscript{212} Calderón claimed that his motivation for this vast program of social reform was his sense of solidarity with the Costa Rican people, but nestled within his words was a paternalistic sense of obligation as well.


\textsuperscript{211} Díaz Arias, Reforma sin alianza, 9–12.

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 15.
[My] people, living in a rich and fertile land, were dying of pain and suffering... [I] was in the presence of profound social injustice...Those men have been denied all that their work entitles them to receive. Charity and occasional acts of kindness shown to them are improper because they are humiliating. Society owes them the retribution that they have the right to demand...They are most definitely not a load borne by those elements of society who have used the working people's strength and taken advantage of their economic activities; they are victims of an injustice...As I am one of those who create wealth with which to subsist if need be, I did not forget nor could I forget that those who have no other weapon to defend themselves other than their debilitated arms need government help. I have tried to make sure that my sympathy for our peasants and workers is not pure rhetoric. Rather, I have tried to identify myself with their needs and limitations, to try to get closer to understanding these humble brothers with a heart free of prejudices. And listening to their voices and their complaints, I have felt that we cannot be indifferent to their pain and their suffering because discontent, poverty, lack of personal esteem, economic inequalities cannot subsist in a well-organized democracy.213

Calderón’s thought was pleasing to both the Church and those seeking significant social reform.214 In 1943 the National Republicans, the communists (forced to change their official name from Bloque de Obreros y Campesinos to Vanguardia Popular), and the Church, guided by Monsignor Victor Manuel Sanabria Martínez, established a strategic triple alliance.215 For the remainder of the decade until the outbreak of the Revolution of 1948, this allegiance, referred to since the 1944 elections as the Bloque de la Victoria (Victory Bloc), would face strong opposition.

Criticism of Calderón and his government came from various opposing sectors, among them the Centro para el Estudio de los Problemas Nacionales (CEPN, Center for the Study of National Problems), a group that gathered in 1940 at the UCR to form a political think tank. As Costa Rican historian David Díaz Arias explains, “The centristas were mostly middle class and


214 Communists in Costa Rica had by then abandoned a rhetoric based solely on class struggle. Their political efforts were now focused on achieving social reform. Díaz Arias, Reforma sin alianza, 7.

215 At the time, this union of capitalists and communists was acceptable considering the alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States during World War II. Costa Rica was the first Latin American country to declare war against Nazi Germany in 1941, within hours of the United States having done so. Ibid., 14, 17–18.
their main critique of the Calderón Guardia administration was directed at corruption, politicking, improvisation, empiricism, and the lack of a coherent plan for development.”

One of their specific concerns was the radical increase of the country’s deficit from a little over 1.5 million colones (Costa Rican currency) to 25 million colones between 1940 and 1942.

Whether or not the issue of the deficit was the result of corruption, politicking, or mismanagement of government funds, it could not be ignored. The opposition sought to modernize the political, electoral, and economic system of Costa Rica. While they believed in certain aspects of socialism, they were committed anti-communists and opposed Calderón’s method of running what has been referred to as a “personalist and patronage-steeped government.”

Though the opposition lost the 1944 elections—their candidate, León Cortés, no longer a National Republican, as he had been when he was president from 1936 to 1940, faced the Calderón-backed, National Republican candidate Teodoro Picado—and again lost the mid-term elections of 1946 (both times claiming fraud), they wrested support from the National Republican Party, which had been dominant since its creation by Ricardo Jiménez in 1931.

The situation became tenser when José Figueres Ferrer, who had been forced into exile by Calderón in 1942, returned to Costa Rica. Figueres, aligned with the centristas and the followers of Cortés, was staunchly against Calderón. He advocated a military course toward a

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216 “Los centristas era en su mayoría de clase media y su crítica principal a la administración de Calderón Guardia iba dirigida a la corrupción, la politiquería, la improvisación, el empirismo y la falta de un proyecto coherente de desarrollo.” Ibid., 11.

217 Ibid.


219 Both times the opposition could provide no evidence of fraud, but as Molina points out, “Costa Rican society increasingly believed that fraud played a significant role in its electoral life—something that would prove crucial in giving legitimacy to Figueres’s armed rebellion after the presidential elections of 1948.” Ibid., 165.

220 Longley, The Sparrow and the Hawk, 29.
government take-over based on the grounds that the opposition did not have an electoral majority, and he and his followers began to plan and carry out small-scale terrorist actions throughout the country. Their militant activities increased in 1947, and a general strike was held that year, the *Huelga de brazos caídos* (Strike with Arms at Sides). The strikers were bankers and business owners, angered by corruption, instability, and fraud, who halted their operations between July 23 and August 3, demanding electoral reform. Costa Rican society was clearly divided regarding the direction in which the country should proceed.

Throughout the 1940s González was an active *calderonista*. He campaigned for Calderón on the radio and designed posters for his party. On December 1, 1947, he spoke out against Figueres and the opposition party, referring to them as:

A group that does not care that the Costa Rican worker, the laborer, or the *campesino* are members of a starved, sick and miserable society, if that misery and that emaciation are useful for their businesses. A group that thinks that education and culture can represent a hazard to their financial investments. A group who in the end struggles to safeguard the interests of a few to the detriment and discredit of the many.

González sided with the worker and the *campesino*, calling upon them to see a friend in Calderón, who in the 1948 elections was once again at the head of the tripartite allegiance of the Church, communists, and republicans. The opposition formed the *Partido Unión Nacional* (National Union Party) with Otilio Ulate as its candidate, joining the intellectual *centristas* with

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223 María Alejandra Triana Cambronero, *El arte como integración cósmica: Manuel de la Cruz González y la abstracción geométrica* (San Jose, C.R.: Fundación Museos Banco Central, 2010), 21–22.

224 “Un grupo a quien interesa poco que el trabajador costarricense, el obrero o el campesino, sean miembros de una sociedad famélica, enfermiza y miserable, si esa miseria y ese raquitismo les son útiles en sus negocios. Un grupo que piensa que la instrucción y la cultura pueden representar un peligro para sus inversiones [sic] financieras. Un grupo en fin, que lucha por salvaguardar los intereses de unos pocos, en detrimento y desprestigio de los mas [sic].” Qtd in Zavaleta Ochoa, *Los inicios del arte abstracto en Costa Rica*, 10.
followers of Figueres and the by-then-deceased Cortés. In his speech, González referred to the
disenfranchised as “starved, sick and miserable,” terms similar to those used by Calderón in his
1942 speech quoted above. Figueres also referred to the “dishonor and poverty” of the current
situation in Costa Rica in a speech denouncing Calderón that he delivered from the balcony of
Ulate’s Diario de Costa Rica building. All three concurred that the country needed to be
saved.

Despite the dire situation of the country, there is little visual representation of economic
despair or political turmoil by artists of the period. What can explain this? If authors felt
empowered to expose the wretched situation of the poor, as in El jaul and Mamita Yunai, why
did painters not aggressively challenge the myth of a bucolic, idyllic Costa Rica? Perhaps it is
because the narrative is so deeply engrained in the Costa Rican psyche that it was nearly
impossible for artists, who were less avant-garde, to see their country otherwise. Carlos Cortés,
Costa Rican essayist and journalist, summarizes the myth in his critical essay “La invención de
un país imaginario,” (“The Invention of an Imaginary Country”): “A paradise of poor
campesinos, isolated, with no conflicts, no social classes, and ethnically whitened, that, as a
result of their own poverty and equality of material and social conditions, opts for
democracy.”

225 Díaz Arias, Reforma sin alianza, 28–29.
226 Ibid., 27.
227 There are surprisingly few images of poverty. The only artist who painted the marginal shantytowns of San Jose
in the 1930s was the academically trained painter Claudia María Jiménez. Zuñiga also made several critical images
228 “Un paraíso de campesinos pobres aislados, sin conflictos, sin clases sociales, éticamente blaqueados y que,
como resultado de su propia pobreza e igualdad de condiciones materiales y sociales, opta por la democracia.”
Carlos Cortés, “La invención de un país imaginario,” in Identidad, invención y mito, ensayos escogidos (San Jose,
poor, and individualistic nation. Centuries-long in its construction, the identity myth, according to Cortés is the “socialization of a community of values, a symbolic total, and, at the same time, the construction of a real and an imaginary consensus laden with icons, representations, and perfectly identifiable discourses to the national society.” In this way the campesino was an icon representing this “community of values” for the Generation of the 1930s. Are their paintings patriotic, complicit in perpetuating the myth of Costa Rica? Or do they bespeak a continued exploration of national identity that simply conveyed the artists’ perspective of reality?

Cortés explains the complexity of the Costa Rican identity myth, which fundamentally represents a “double dynamic, integration and exclusion, identity and separation.” González’s painting of campesinos portrays that “double dynamic.” Untitled (fig. 2.13) represents people who humbly paint a cross at the door, are dressed nicely, have at least one plant at their entrance, and collar their dog. Yet they do not welcome you in; they are separate, keep to themselves, individuals out of necessity. Gamonal y peon (fig. 2.21) and El pueblo (fig. 2.22) show the relationship between the classes in Costa Rica. They work side by side, in mutual respect, but the richer will always have more: a sturdier hat, European-style clothes, and a horse on which to ride to town for Sunday mass. González did not problematize the contradictions or the social hierarchy implicit in the national myth maybe because he believed it.

The National Republican Party campaigned on this mythic vision of Costa Rica, one that has always sought to differentiate the country from the rest of Central America, claiming that its exceptionalism was the result of its hardworking people, democratic principle, and egalitarian

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229 "La socialización de una comunidad de valores, de una totalización simbólica y, a la vez, la construcción de un consenso real y de un imaginario cargado de íconos, representaciones y discursos perfectamente identificables para la sociedad nacional." Ibid., 175.

230 “Doble dinámica, integración y exclusion, identidad y separación.” Ibid., 179.
society (supposedly equal before the law). Tradition was the preferable path for the country’s future, while touting the rights and well being of citizens its primary concern. As Calderón stated, he sought “to guarantee…not only the dispossessed their legitimate rights but also the propertied classes the enjoyment of their goods and the social peace they so badly need for the maintenance of current riches and well-being.” He aimed to maintain a clearly demarcated social hierarchy, while ensuring that all Costa Rican citizens were given labor rights, decent healthcare, and an education. Within this vision remained a paternalist perspective and a desire to maintain control of power and the economy. The opposition party, Partido Social Demócrata, led by Figueres but whose candidate was Otilio Ulate Blanco (1891–1973) countered this stand and called for modernization through investment in physical infrastructure (cortesistas), the promotion of the middle-class and small business (Figueres), and the restructuring of the economic system (CEPN).

Revolution broke out when the electoral tribunal declared that the opposition candidate, Ulate, had won the election of 1948 after a tense month of counting ballots. When Calderón declared there had been fraud, Figueres seized the moment to lead his National Liberation Army into battle against the weak government army and the communist-led militia of urban and agricultural workers known as the “mariachis.” The civil war lasted 44 days and resulted in the death of over 4,000 people, making it the bloodiest event in Costa Rican history. It ended when Figueres took over the capital and made a pact with the government whereby Ulate would be instated to power after an eighteen-month, interim, Figueres government.

231 Equality was only shared among male citizens. Women did not gain the vote until 1949.


As soon as the war ended, the persecution of calderonistas and communists began. González, among the professors at the UCR who opposed the new government, was imprisoned because of his political affiliation. Detained and humiliated, he was paraded down the Avenida Central in the back of an open truck through the center of a San Jose, which still had a small-town character. Now considered a rebel, González lost his teaching position at the university and went into exile in Cuba, an unforeseen path that would alter the course of his life and his art.

Conclusion

The Generation of the 1930s recreated a Costa Rican landscape that was fresh and energetic in style. Alongside Zuñiga, Amighetti, Jiménez, and Quirós, González experimented with composition and form, breaking up and flattening the image. He distorted the figure and used color expressively. Despite the conservative audience in San Jose and a rigid flank of traditionalists that struggled to keep the academic style alive, this “new” art eventually became the norm, and its practitioners became professors at the reformed School of Fine Arts. Within this context, González ventured toward a modern personal style that melded intuition, the ideas of those within his small milieu, and the limited examples and information about foreign art that he received from abroad. He transgressed boundaries in the limited artistic environment of San Jose and was integral to the transformation of Costa Rican art toward a renewed style that broke with the past.

Although González was modern in style, he was traditional in content. His vernacular themes (adobe houses, the tropical sun, the agricultural landscape, campesinos) were similar to the nationalist iconography established by the liberales of a beautiful land populated by hard-

working, independent *campesinos*. González painted selective scenes emblematic of Costa Rican life and represented society with neither criticism, as did the literary vanguard, nor apology. While folkloric and nostalgic, his painting is not without politics. González’s painting aligned with Calderón’s mission to guarantee social rights while remaining a society based on a paternalist, oligarchical structure. The adobe, dirt-floor home of the *campesino* was a manifestation against pavement and cement construction of the idyllic tropical landscape, viewed by González as the product of corruption and exploitative international business.\(^{236}\)

During these years González investigated the national character and portrayed the “myth” of egalitarianism promoted by the elite, a supposed mutual respect held among Costa Ricans regardless of class. In his portrayal of an individualistic society, the worker is both humble (respectful) and proud (respected). González established class difference with symbols of national iconography, bare feet and *chonetes*, but he did so in a realist mode that neither idealized nor denigrated the *campesino*. Rather than refute the narrative of national identity, as did his literary counterparts, González approached his subject from a different perspective. He believed in the myth and went in search of it; in so doing he uncovered a slightly different Costa Rica. *Campesinos* did not smile while they worked, nor were they white and demure. They were of mixed race, brawny from demanding labor, and serious about maintaining their independence and integrity.

The political turmoil in Costa Rica during the 1940s slowed the drive toward artistic innovation shared by members of the Generation of the 1930s. This period, however, laid the foundation for the Revolution of 1948, which served as a pivotal turning point in Costa Rican politics, society, and culture. And yet, González’s paintings of national identity created prior to

\(^{236}\) González Luján, “Del Partido Nacional.”
the Revolution resonate with the national identity myth still touted in Costa Rica today. The white, smiling campesinas on the ceiling of the National Theater do not represent Costa Rican life; the darker-skinned gamonal standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his worker, or speaking directly to him in a courteous fashion, does. At present the country still pretends to be egalitarian, despite strong class division and economic disparity. This resonance with posterity shows that, in his art, González deciphered characteristics of Costa Ricanness that time has yet to dispel.
Chapter 3

MODERNIST SHIFTS IN EXILE: GONZÁLEZ IN HAVANA AND MARACAIBO

Madre guajira (Guajira Mother, fig. 3.1) depicts a large, round-faced woman seated with a baby in her lap in a dark and warm hued environment. She stares directly at the viewer while the baby looks toward the right gesturing at a tropical, maize-like plant. Thick, black hair hangs heavily behind her broad, straight shoulders, establishing the vertical emphasis of the painting, which is repeated by the plant stalk. Her tall, proud neck and stoic face are split down the middle, one side in light, the other in shadow, adding a hint of volume to what is an otherwise flat painting. The faces of both mother and child are punctuated by small slits for eyes between which runs a straight line for the nose. Her hair and terracotta skin tone as well as her almond-shaped eyes, wide nose, and circular head indicate that she and her baby are of indigenous blood. Highly stylized, their bodies are defined by black outlines that emphasize the geometric shapes used by the artist to construct the image. The baby’s body, all four limbs splayed, is no more than an odd-shaped polygon topped by a diagonally placed oval head. Superimposed over his mother’s large form, which takes up more than half of the canvas’ surface, he is pegged in place by her heavy, sausage-fingered left hand. In its simplicity this overbearing gesture emphasizes her strength and the child’s unbound energy.

Manuel de la Cruz González painted Madre guajira in Maracaibo, Venezuela in 1956. The painting’s style differs greatly from the artist’s previous body of work, a shift incited by his experience outside Costa Rica. It is non-naturalistic in its figuration, has a simpler palette, and compositionally compresses space, indicating González’s modernist embrace of the two-dimensionality of the painted surface. The artist’s choice of dark earth tones links these figures—the archetypal mother and child or secularized Madonna and Child—to the land. González
continued to be interested in regional themes, similar to those that had preoccupied him in Costa Rica (the adobe house, the oxcart, the *campesino*), but he now developed them in a manner that infused them with broader significance. His prior local, realist approach gave way to a lyrical abstracting of the figure, with increasingly non-naturalistic backgrounds. These changes were a direct result of a decade spent abroad during which he witnessed international modernist trends that influenced artistic practice in spaces of greater cultural exchange and development than Costa Rica.

The decade of González’s exile in Cuba (1948-1950) and Venezuela (1950-1957) broadened his experiences and increased his exposure to modern art, as can be seen by investigating the artist’s activities in both countries—the exhibits he attended, the publications he encountered, and the relationships he formed. Attention to these socio-cultural contexts can reveal the stylistic influences that led him to make a significant creative transition: from figural and lyrical abstraction to geometric non-figuration. When analyzing the trajectory of González’s career, Cuba represents a period of intellectual gestation, whereas Maracaibo represents the birth of several new bodies of work. Havana inspired González for he saw around him a society in which the institution of culture was deeply ingrained into daily life, a reality he had not previously witnessed or experienced. His experience in Maracaibo was even more important in regard to his growth as an artist. There he participated in cultural institution-building and was exposed to geometric abstraction—a movement that took hold throughout Venezuela in the 1950s—linking him to the mid-century currents of Latin American modernism. An analysis that compares these locations to Costa Rica sheds further light on the aesthetic infrastructure (or lack thereof) that González left behind in San Jose.
This period in González’s career shows the artist pivoting in relation to the art world around him. In Cuba, he saw the work of artists who incorporated cubism and surrealism in their work to assert a regional identity that incorporated the disenfranchised members of society. In Venezuela, he applied what he had seen in Cuba to his own work and subsequently turned toward geometric abstraction, again in response to what was being created around him. González’s constant shifting between styles reflects how open he was to adopting new ideas, which dictated the course of his artistic production. His openness to various trends reflects the broader circulation of movements and ideas throughout Latin America. González’s time abroad was not only significant for his own artistic development, but also would impact the Costa Rican art world upon his return.

Art and Politics in Cuba

Sometimes, exile means freedom. It is the opportunity and experience for dissidents to live beyond the parameters of a repressive state that sets conditions and limitations to their freedom. A person in exile is a person in flux, a new character born out of decisions made to survive as a stranger in a foreign country. The experience can be positive or negative; there are those who suffer and those who profit immensely. Much depends on the person, the place, the manner of departure from home (voluntary or forced), and the exile’s reception in the new location. In "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said describes the advantages that being a foreigner could bring.

While it perhaps seems peculiar to speak of the pleasures of exile, there are some positive things to be said for a few of its conditions. Seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives
rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal.²³⁷

This originality of vision comes from an ability to forsake prior certainties about life and the world, allowing new realities and ideas to refocus one’s existence. Throughout different periods and places, the artist’s need to travel has always been vital for artistic development. Art historian Linda Nochlin asserts, “For some artists, getting away from home and its restrictions has been the *sine qua non* of a successful art career.”²³⁸ This was certainly the case for González, whose only prior travel outside of Costa Rica was a two-week trip to Guatemala in 1945 with a delegation of artists from the UCR. Unlike his contemporaries Teodorico Quirós, Francisco Amighetti, or Max Jiménez, who afforded leaving Costa Rica to further their careers in Boston, Mexico City, New York, and Paris, González had no first-hand knowledge of large artistic centers. Thus, he benefitted from being forced to leave home; otherwise, he might never have had the experience of living in different environments that prodded his thinking in new ways and transformed his art.

The shift in González’s art began upon settling in Havana with his Costa Rican partner Tanya Kreysa after the Revolution of 1948.²³⁹ González went to Cuba acting on the suggestion of fellow Costa Rican artist Margarita Bertheau (1913-1975) who, though born in Costa Rica,

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²³⁸ Nochlin’s essay “Art and the Conditions of Exile” provides case studies of artists who flourished in exile: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, R.B Kitaj, Shirley Jaffe, and Zuka. Though it focuses on the condition of exile for female artists, the essay also analyzes more generally the positive effects of exile on the creative production of visual artists. Linda Nochlin, “Art and the Conditions of Exile: Men/Women, Emigration/Expatriation,” *Poetics Today* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 318.

²³⁹ González was one among the 7,000 Calderón advocates and sympathizers who left the country after Figueres took control of Costa Rica upon winning the Revolution. Many of his exiled compatriots instead followed Calderón and Picado to Nicaragua, or Manuel Mora to Mexico; at one point González planned on accepting an invitation from the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza to settle in his country. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, *Historia de Costa Rica*, 125–129. For more information about the Revolution of 1948 as it related to González, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
had been raised in Cuba and educated at the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts. Like San Jose, Havana, was the capital of a small country dependent on a few key agricultural exports (sugar and tobacco) and heavily influenced by foreign interests from Europe and the United States. What was altogether unfamiliar to González was the experience of being part of an exciting cultural environment with a well-established vanguard, whose social, political, and aesthetic ideals affected artistic production. By the time González arrived on the island, much had been done to foster, maintain, and advance modern visual art. Precisely because the arts were considered a critical component of society, cultural life in Cuba was more active than in Costa Rica. Both the government and the private sector actively promoted the arts, and artistic education was superior to that in Costa Rica. Exposed to this reality, González quickly became aware of his prior cultural isolation in Costa Rica.

One of the primary reasons that contact with Havana’s artistic environment was life-altering for González was precisely because the visual arts were held in high esteem on the island, and rigorous artistic education was considered imperative for artists. In chapter 1, I discussed how Costa Ricans frequently dismissed the arts, specifically the visual arts, as frivolous. The detrimental effects of this attitude only began to be countered in the late 1920s by artists of González’s generation, who strove to be modern and who worked to alter the circumstances for practicing artists. Though both Costa Rica and Cuba were Spanish colonies, Cuba’s strategic location in the Caribbean meant it had easy access to transcontinental trade, travel, and culture. Since the sixteenth century Havana was one of the main arrival and launching grounds of the Spanish flota (fleet), a naval tactic of rounding up all ships carrying Crown goods

from the Americas into a massive unit to ensure safe travel across the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{241} Thus, from early in its colonial history Havana became a port city that benefitted from commercial and intellectual exchange.\textsuperscript{242} There were practicing artists on the island as early as the sixteenth century, and by the eighteenth century there was a significant increase in religious art and portraiture made by Cuban artists.\textsuperscript{243} By the nineteenth century, elite Cubans had the economic means and the desire to purchase art and luxury goods for their households.\textsuperscript{244} Such was their interest in developing Cuban fine art that in 1818 the \textit{Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País} (Economic Society of Friends of the Country) founded the San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts, the second academic art school in the Americas, preceded only by the San Carlos Academy in Mexico City founded in 1781.\textsuperscript{245} Painting and printmaking flourished during the nineteenth

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{242} Architectural historian Narciso G. Menocal traces the evolution of Cuban culture, beginning with seventeenth-century poetry, the establishment of the first university in 1728, the printing of the first newspaper in 1790, and the publication of the first history of Havana in the middle of the eighteenth century. All of which, as Menocal states, “gives evidence that a conscious ‘Cubanness’ was evolving.” By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, “A belated Enlightenment brought with it a series of progressive measures in politics, agriculture, industry, and commerce—and Cuban culture began to evolve, first in literature. No national art existed yet. Art was mostly an imported commodity generally circumscribed to religious articles and pictures for the church and the laity and to those pieces of industrial art—silverware and the like—required by the best households.” Narciso G. Menocal, “An Overriding Passion: The Quest for a National Identity in Painting,” \textit{The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts} 22 (1996): 188.
\item \textsuperscript{243} Guía Arte Cubano (Havana: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2002), 28.
\item \textsuperscript{244} During the nineteenth century, the island’s economy improved due to technological advances that made the sugar, tobacco, and coffee industries more efficient, and thus more lucrative, which in turn stimulated the acquisition of national and international luxury items. Olga López Núñez, \textit{La sociedad cubana del siglo XIX: Reflejos de una época} (Havana, Cuba: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2004), 11, 22–23. An abridged version of this text was printed in \textit{Cuba: Art and History, from 1868 to Today} (Montréal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2008), 44–49. The collection of decorative arts at the Museum of the City of Havana is a testament to the luxuries enjoyed by Havana’s colonial elite. See Raída Mara Suárez Portal and Odalys Roblejo Negrín, \textit{Palacio de los Capitanes Generales: Museo de la Ciudad de La Habana, Andar--} (Havana: Oficina del Historiador, Ciudad de La Habana, 1996).
\end{itemize}
century, and the number of Cuban trained artists increased dramatically.\textsuperscript{246} European printmakers like Frédéric Miahle (1819-1881; in Cuba from 1838-1854), Víctor Patricio de Landaluze (1828-1889; arrived in Cuba in 1863), and Éduoard Laplante (1818-?; in Cuba circa 1848) inspired local artists to look at their environment, their population, and their traditions as subject matter.\textsuperscript{247} By the late nineteenth century, the symbolism and impressionism of artists like Armando Menocal (1863-1942) and Leopoldo Romañach (1862-1951) replaced the once popular neo-classical and realist styles of their predecessors.\textsuperscript{248} Despite Menocal’s and Romañach’s incursions into modernist trends, academicism remained strong and at the forefront of Cuban visual art through the turn of the century and into the first decades of the twentieth century. Though this conservatism was criticized by the forthcoming generation of \textit{vanguardistas}, it was, nonetheless, what provided a firm foundation for artistic practice in Cuba. The serious nature of artistic education at the San Alejandro Academy, under government control since 1863,\textsuperscript{249} stood in stark contrast to the inferior and unsystematic instruction at the School of Fine Arts established in San Jose in 1897. Like many of his contemporaries, González did not receive training at the School of Fine Arts; the majority of students were young ladies of the upper class who were instructed only through copying casts and prints of European masterworks.\textsuperscript{250} This

\textsuperscript{246} By the end of the century, the director of the San Alejandro Academy was Cuban and the faculty was comprised entirely of its own alumnae. \textit{Guía Arte Cubano}, 51.


\textsuperscript{248} \textit{Guía Arte Cubano}, 67–74.

\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 51.

\textsuperscript{250} Luis Ferrero Acosta, \textit{Juan Ramón Bonilla: Un escultor costarricense de principios del siglo 20} (San Jose, Costa Rica: Editorial Mesén, 1999), 22.
difference in artistic education, along with the greater appreciation for visual culture in Cuba, are two fundamental reasons why the Cuban art world was, and perhaps still is, far more developed than in Costa Rica.

Cuba’s cultural policy supported and advanced national culture, another aspect that differentiates it from the Costa Rican context, which lacked any such policy. This can be seen from the Cuban administration’s course of action in the 1940s. González arrived in Havana around the time that a new president-elect, Carlos Prío Socarrás (1948-1952) of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano (Auténtico) (Cuban [Authentic] Revolutionary Party), took office. Prío, known as "the cordial president," was politically aligned with his predecessor and mentor, Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín (1944-1948). The "Auténticos" had opposed the violent dictatorship of Gerardo Machado (1925-1933). While they maintained strong ties with the United States, which were considered ultimately beneficial, party members made it a priority to protect Cuban dignity and independence in the face of impending political, military, and economic hegemony of their northern neighbor.251 During the eight years of leadership under Grau San Martín and Prío Socarrás, there was a cultural policy program “that effectively used the symbols of revolution, economic independence, social justice, youth, and modernity to oppose the principles and policies of government of the colonial past.”252 By fostering the arts, humanities, and social

251 Between 1903 and 1934, Cuba was directly controlled by the United States through the Platt Amendment. The economic control was tight; Cuban currency was made interchangeable with the dollar, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta established Cuban monetary policy. Thomas E. Skidmore, Peter H. Smith, and James N. Green, Modern Latin America, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 128.

sciences, government officials in the 1940s sought to counter the social challenges of their day and to promote national culture.\textsuperscript{253}

This effort to bolster national culture dates back to the 1930s, when the groundwork was laid for a thriving and progressive cultural infrastructure. The Directory of Culture (a branch of the Ministry of Education), established in 1935, sponsored a variety of cultural events, such as conferences, concerts, and exhibitions, as well as commissioning publications and planning new institutions such as museums, schools, and libraries.\textsuperscript{254} As stated by its first director José M. Chacón y Calvo, the Directory had “the intimate purpose of making culture a living and creative function.”\textsuperscript{255} The Directory hosted the national painting and sculpture salon, which included modern art from the outset. González participated in this salon in 1949 and witnessed the benefit of government sponsorship, a reality not present in the Costa Rican \textit{Exposiciones de Artes}.

\textsuperscript{253} Both Grau and Prió are viewed as ineffectual presidents, whose leadership allowed Fulgencio Batista to retain virtual power despite being in exile after his direct involvement in governance between 1934-1940 and his presidency of 1940-1944. Batista returned to power with a military coup in 1952 and ruled as a dictator until the Cuban Revolution ousted him from power by early 1959. “In reality, Cuban politics saw little change between 1934 and 1959. The futility of the electoral system was repeatedly demonstrated, as the perennial strongman (yesterday Machado, today Batista) worked his will. The honest opposition, far weaker than its true constituency, scrapped harmlessly. What had happened to the revolutionary fervor of 1933? Where was the coalition that had so frightened Washington? It had gone the way of all Cuban nationalist movements—rendered impotent by the unbeatable alliance of the Cuban elites, their political and military handmaidens, and Uncle Sam.” Skidmore, Smith, and Green, \textit{Modern Latin America}, 265. Nonetheless, between 1944 and 1952 honest attempts were made, fueled by underlying leftist ideology (Grau had been particularly radical early on when he was a leader among university students), which helped to lay the foundation of a strong cultural policy that persists in Cuba to this day.

\textsuperscript{254} Other cultural civic institutions established during the period included the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana (1938), the Academy of International Historical Studies, the Society of Afro-Cuban Studies (1937), \textit{Escuelas Libre de Pintura} (Free Schools of Fine Arts, begun in 1932); and the \textit{Universidad del Aire} (University of the Air), an initiative driven by Jorge Mañach (1898-1961) to disseminate radio and television culture). César A. Salgado, “Orígenes ante el Cincuentenario de la República,” in \textit{Cuba, un siglo de literatura} (1902-2002), ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Roberto González Echevarría (Madrid: Colibrí, 2004), 156–189; Anke Birkenmaier, \textit{Alejo Carpentier y la cultura del surrealismo en América Latina} (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2006); Arturo Alfonso Roselló and Juan Joaquín Otero, eds., \textit{Libro de Cuba: Una enciclopedia ilustrada que abarca las Artes, las Letras, las Ciencias, la Economía, la Política, la Historia, la Docencia y el Progreso General de la Nación Cubana} (Havana: Publicaciones Unidas, 1954), 656–666; José Gutiérrez Pérez and Ofelia Flores Valdás, \textit{Eduardo Abela} (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2005), 27.

\textsuperscript{255} Inaugural speech by Chacón y Calvo in his second term as director of the Directory of Culture, 1937, quoted in Martínez, \textit{Cuban Art and National Identity}, 16.
Cuban cultural critic Cesar Salgado suggests that the government supported cultural institutions, permitting them certain freedoms as long as they contributed toward building a “concept of the nation.”

Each of these groups devised civic programs that, although financed by means of laws and initiatives conjured by official directors, did not seek to promote a partisan platform or a particular regime, but rather a wide concept of the nation as a means for civic coexistence. In this way, in the public plane that flowed between the civil and the state, a triple agenda was formed: 1. The promotion of a monumental urbanism that would illustrate the continuity of the civic present, inaugurated by the Constitution of 1940, as well as the validity of the heroic past; 2. The establishment of yearly «fechas patrias» [national holidays] that would highlight the civic virtues of this past as well as its military feats; 3. The development of a Post-Plattist infrastructure for historic memory through the construction of new libraries and archives.256

Although politicians of the 1930s and 1940s used culture as a building block for their newly independent nation, they were not responsible for laying the groundwork that led to innovation. Rather, since the 1920s, intellectuals and artists played a crucial role in their country’s social and cultural progress. During the Machado dictatorship, they formed a solid vanguard movement that countered his regime, asserting their dissatisfaction with the prevalent corruption, abuse of power, and privileging of foreign investment over Cuban autonomy.257

Known as the Grupo Minorista (Minority Group) they were bound by a shared political activism, which they declared in their 1927 manifesto:

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256 “Cada uno de estos grupos trazó programas cívicos que, aunque financiados a través de leyes e iniciativas conjugadas por los directores en su capacidad oficial, no buscaban promulgar una plataforma partidista o régimen particular sino un concepto amplio de la nación como convivencia ciudadana. De esta forma, en un plano público que fluyó entre lo civil y lo estatal se constituyó una triple agenda: 1. La promoción de un urbanismo monumentalista que ilustrase tanto la continuidad del presente cívico inaugurado por la Constitución de 1940 como la vigencia del pasado heroico; 2. La puntualización de un ciclo anual de «fechas patrias» que destacara las virtudes civiles de este pasado tanto como sus hazañas militares; 3. El desarrollo de una infraestructura pos-plattista para la memoria histórica a través de la construcción de nuevas bibliotecas y archivos.” Salgado, “Orígenes,” 170. The Platt Amendment was ratified in 1903 stipulating the relationship that the United States would have with Cuba. Most of its regulations were repealed in 1934, and it was removed altogether from the Cuban Constitution of 1940. Post-Plattist Cuba refers to the period after 1934. Skidmore, Smith, and Green, Modern Latin America, 128–130.


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[O]n 18 March 1923 to be precise, a small number of intellectuals (artists, journalists, lawyers) happened to be present at the Academy of Sciences and joined in an act of protest and censure against the then Minister of Justice who was also present, thereby manifesting the general public’s repudiation of the government’s famous purchase of the Convent of Santa Ana contrary to the wishes of the majority of the population.258

The above quote explicitly complains about government abuse of power and it positions the minoristas alongside the “wishes of the majority of the population.” Written in response to the columnist Lamar Schweyer, who reported that the group did not exist, the minoristas publicly retaliated by printing their official stand.259 The manifesto was the first published statement signed by the minoristas as a group, and served to unite its members, who opted to fight the government with pen and brush. They insisted on, among other points:

- The revision of false and outmoded values;
- For popular art and, in general, new art in all its diverse forms;
- For the introduction and dissemination in Cuba of the latest artistic and scientific doctrines, theory and praxis;
- For educational reform. Against the corrupt system of University appointments. For university autonomy;
- For Cuban economic independence. Against Yankee imperialism. Against political dictatorships…against electoral farce…For improved conditions for the farmer, the peasant, and the worker in Cuba; For the friendship and unity of Latin American nations.260

The importance of the manifesto should not be underestimated, as it is both a proclamation of existence and a revolutionary call to action. Literary historian, Vicky Unruh, argues for the importance of manifestos in *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters*. She states, "A brief manifesto or a literary survey appearing in a short-lived vanguardist periodical may constitute as significant a factor in the dialogue of artistic and cultural ideas as a critically


259 Ibid.

260 Ibid.
acclaimed creative work." Written at the pinnacle of the minorista’s collective effort to invoke revolutionary change, the manifesto is a declaration of existence and a definitive articulation of the group’s stance on political, cultural, economic, and educational issues. Furthermore, as Unruh argues, the proclamatory nature of the manifesto constructs “imagined audiences,” allowing the vanguardistas to be actively involved in the creation of a new public. The effect of setting words to paper, prefaced by the word “manifesto,” positioned the members of the vanguardia to participate from thenceforth in the incessant labor of edifying the nation’s culture and civil society through politics, art, education, and ultimately, history. This is yet another underlying difference between the Cuban and the Costa Rican contexts. Artists in Costa Rica lacked a definitive resolve to invoke the kind of permanent change and societal transformation that the minoristas took on. It was the lack of the above-mentioned historical precedents of exchange and dialogue, along with a deficient cultural infrastructure and a lagging vanguard spirit in Costa Rica, that prevented its artists and intellectuals from establishing a cohesive base from which to incite a fundamental cultural, social, or political transformation in their country.

The minoristas published the first issue of the magazine Revista de Avance (Magazine of Advance) the same year that they wrote their manifesto. The publication served as a megaphone for their thoughts on national, continental, and global issues. It responded to the manifesto’s appeal to: 1) keep the Cuban public abreast of artistic, intellectual and scientific progress in the modern world, and 2) print the voices of European and American modernists, who rallied for many of the same revolutionary causes as the minoristas. Along with the desire to disseminate


262 “Through the rhetoric of the vanguardist manifestos, Latin American writers mapped out specific positions on culture and art. In the process, they constructed imagined audiences embodying the aesthetic practices and cultural positions under attack as well as the idealized allies for building a future new art.” Ibid., 69.
information about the latest ideas from abroad, *Avance* was fueled by a sense of nationalism and a genuine concern for the welfare and progress of the island. In her essay, "Rethinking Neocolonial Esthetics: Literature, Politics, and Intellectual Community in Cuba's *Revista de Avance*," Francine Masiello, Latin American cultural and literary historian, states, “Contributors to the journal *Avance* described the function of literature as a weapon against the tyranny of censorship and social injustice. Finally, they invoked avant-garde art as a challenge to bourgeois ideology, assaulting a fixed semantic logic and awakening a new way of seeing in readers.”

*Avance* was not the only publication broadcasting modernism at the time; notable contemporaries were *Cuba Contemporánea, Social, and El Diario de la Marina*. What distinguished *Avance* from its Cuban counterparts, as well as from Joaquín García Monge’s noteworthy Costa Rican journal, *Repertorio Americano*, was its unequivocal support for and incorporation of visual art. As Masiello describes:

> *Avance* was the most handsome product of avant-garde creativity in Cuba and perhaps in Spanish America. Its pages were filled with reproductions of sculptures, lithographs, and paintings by internationally recognized artists such as Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dalí, and Henri Matisse. The journal thus provided superb examples of the flourishing of modern visual art in the 1920s. In publishing theory and texts by members of cosmopolitan avant-garde movements, *Avance* demonstrated that it was in touch with both the European and U.S. artistic communities as well as with intellectuals from all over Latin America.

While this comprehensive and cosmopolitan project placed the editors and their readers in dialogue with foreign styles and ideas, it also bolstered the visual arts at home. *Avance* editors curated the *1927: Exhibition of New Art*, the first exhibition dedicated solely to modern art. Selected works for this watershed exhibition were by artists who opposed the conservative nature of the San Alejandro Academy (although most were trained there), including Carlos Enríquez

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263 Masiello, “Rethinking Neocolonial Esthetics,” 16.

264 Ibid., 4.
(1900-1957), Amelia Peláez (1896-1968), Víctor Manuel (1897-1969), Eduardo Abela (1891-1965), Wifredo Lam (1902-1982), Marcelo Pogolotti (1902-1988), and Antonio Gattorno (1904-1980). Each of these artists had by then been or would eventual go to Paris, a requisite destination for any Cuban interested in the arts, and all employed modern European styles, namely Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism, to address their identity as Cubans, Caribbeans, and Latin Americans. The coordinators of the exhibition issued a statement published in *Avance*, claiming, “We wish only to bring together the work of young artists stimulated by a sense of anxiety, enquiry, a search for new horizons, as long as it is a genuine position and not some false simulation. It is not simply a question of enlisting forces, but of a much-needed revision of values that will enable us to move forward.”

Though the exhibition gathered the most modern works of the period, Cuban art historian Juan Martínez points out:

> Although the editors of *Revista de Avance* classified the paintings in the exhibition as ‘militant,’ ‘new,’ and ‘avant-garde,’ those that are reproduced in the May 15, 1927 issue of this magazine reflect mild versions of European modern styles…Most of these painters were only starting to discover their style and subject matter, yet their paintings in this exhibition signaled a decisive new beginning for Cuban art.

Martínez rightly suggests that real change in Cuban art did not happen suddenly, but rather through a gradual process. Previously, artists who experimented with modern styles could only exhibit their work at the *Asociación de Pintores y Escultores (APE)*, a venue founded by Federico Edelman Pinto in 1915 for the exhibition of both conservative and avant-garde art.

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266 Ades, “Manifesto of the Grupo Minorista.”


268 Ibid., 5.
This association was at the forefront of artistic activity well into the 1920s and helped lay the theoretical groundwork for the emerging vanguardia movement. Evidence of this comes from Juan Marinello’s speech given at the Salón Anual de Bellas Artes (Annual Fine Arts Salon) hosted by the APE, on February 18th, 1925. "I dare to insinuate two modalities of action that should be energetically initiated for the benefit of all and that will bring you all, in a notable fashion, to definite triumph: support of a sober criticism and the encouragement of a truly national art." Feeling that criticism was essential, he goes on to argue, "[I]t is necessary to set our standards, not with the end of hurting susceptibilities, nor with the intent of establishing mortifying distinctions, but with the sole purpose of informing the opinion of those who love beauty, so that they might, in an already propitious environment, assert a wise orientation."

Marinello suggested to his listeners that they should be open to questioning artistic merit so that they might be capable of critique, a quintessential aspect of modernism. In Costa Rica, by contrast, modern artists and their public adopted no such attitude. Though there was printed debate in Costa Rican newspapers regarding some works of art, these remained relatively sedate and did not help to establish a standard by which to judge and stimulate artistic practice. According to Cuban art historian Yolanda Wood, this inward-seeking, critical stance was elemental to the process of deconstructing and reconstructing a new pictorial tradition in Cuba.

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269 “Pero, en lo particular, yo me atrevo a insinuaros dos modalidades de actuación que debéis iniciar enérgicamente para bien de todos y que han de acercaros de modo notable al triunfo definitivo: el apoyo a una crítica serena y el fomento de un arte verdaderamente nacional…es una necesidad la fijación de valores, no con el fin de herir susceptibilidades, ni con el objeto de establecer distingos mortificantes, sino al solo propósito de informar la opinión de los amantes de la belleza, para que estos puedan, en el ambiente ya propicio, imprimir una acertada orientación.” Juan Marinello, “Nuestro arte y las circunstancias nacionales,” in Comentarios al arte, ed. Virgilio López Lemus (Havana, Cuba: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1983), 50.

270 For this reason it is important to acknowledge the influence of San Alejandro Academy on modern artists, on their formation and how they dislodged themselves of that tradition. Wood, Proyectos de artistas cubanos en los años treinta, 28–31. One result of this motivation to self-assess was the publication of historical texts about Cuban art, one of which was written by Marinello.
Regarding the development of a “truly national art,” Marinello confessed that he faced two questions: "Is it possible to seriously think that a national art might come to exist?" and “What should be understood by arte nuestro (our art)?” In this regard, he concluded that to "Cubanize" the visual arts a dual process of integration must take place: "Go to the vernacular with foreign eyes and to the foreign with Cuban eyes...What remains to be realized is the phase of the process that is no doubt the longest and most difficult: to make Cuban eyes so that with them what is ours and what is foreign can be interpreted."\(^{271}\)

Marinello’s peers shared his ideas of creating a “truly national art” and fostering “Cuban eyes,” and so it was that the early efforts of the vanguardistas in the 1920s cemented the ideological foundation of avant-garde artistic practice on the island through the 1940s. During that period, though styles varied from one artist to the next, all focused their gaze internally, seeking through their art the meaning of cubanidad.

This search for Cuban identity rooted artists in the local, yet they were unequivocally influenced by European modernism. This was particularly evident in the early works by vanguardia artists. For example, Antonio Gattorno’s idyllic scene of Mujeres en el río (Women at the River, fig. 3.2) exhibited in 1927 upon the artist’s return from Paris displays the impact of his experience abroad. Two dark-haired, mestiza nudes sit by a river, while a clothed, black woman approaches them with a basket of fruit on her head. The seated nude on the left has her back to the viewer; the other, head tilted down but showing her indigenous features (wide-spaced, almond-shaped, slanting eyes; high cheek bones), stands next to a banana tree. Meant as a symbol of the tropical setting, the rounded, curving branches of the banana plant emulate the shapely, female figures and the hills in the background. The tame, orderly manner in which this

\(^{271}\) “¿Puede pensarse seriamente en que llegue a existir un arte nacional?; ¿qué debe entenderse por arte nuestro?...Ir a lo vernáculo con ojos extranjeros y a lo extraño con ojos cubanos...Siempre quedaría por realizar la otra fase del proceso, sin duda la más larga y difícil: hacer ojos cubanos para con ellos interpretar lo propio y lo extraño.” Marinello, “Nuestro arte y las circunstancias nacionales,” 51.
tropical plant is painted, like the minimal trickling of the stream does little to indicate the luscious, albeit wild Cuban landscape. Rather, this neat environment is the backdrop for two attractive female figures who invoke classicism, the *rappel a l’ordre* practiced by European artists in response to the chaotic devastation of World War I.\(^{272}\) The elongated figure on the left with its swooping contours is reminiscent of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s women (fig. 3.3), while the figure on the right is more specifically in the style of Picasso’s nudes from the 1920s with their rounded, corpulent bodies and soft modeling (fig. 3.4). Further summoning European modern masters, Gattorno included a still life of fruit, a blue bottle, and a cup in the lower right corner of the composition in a style that references Cézanne, its brightly colored objects darkly outlined and set about off kilter. The items in the still life provide local specificity; rather than Cézanne’s pears and apples Gattorno used bananas and mangoes. Strangely though, the fruit is set on the opposite bank of the river and the figure on the left stares instead at the black woman carrying bananas. In so doing the three figures are integrated within their setting: the fruit, the tree, the vendor, the consumer. This is not the wild side of Cuban nature, but rather a sensual, relaxed, timeless vision of a classical scene of bathers that Gattorno altered from the Western archetype to make it Latin American: his figures were the *mestizas* and Afro-Cubans from his country and they were in the tropics.

Gattorno, a *minorista*, was among the *vanguardia* artists who experimented with modern painting styles while turning their attention to Cuban subject matter. Their predecessors, too, had painted Cuban themes, but nineteenth-century painting addressed subjects acceptable to the elite: vast landscapes dotted with palm trees and large *haciendas* or images of Cuban life (portraits, *\(\dots\)*

\(^{272}\) In returning to a classical ideal, artists like Picasso looked not only to antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, but also to artists like Nicolas Poussain, Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Aristide Maillol. Silver, *Chaos & Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936*, 20–21.
genre scenes, and the occasional history painting) populated by the dominant, white elite and their subjugated, but “happy,” colored servants. Vanguardia artists considered this a misguided impression of their country, and they reacted against it by investigating their nation through a sociological or ethnographic lens. Masiello explains that the Avance editors spurred this activity.

Although Cuban accomplishments were considerable, as the [Avance] editors claimed, Cuba was suffering nevertheless from a spiritual and ideological deficit. Responding to a legacy of corruption that was heightened during the regimes of Zayas and Machado, Avance identified a Cuban spiritual malaise—defined by inertia, passivity, and aimlessness—and a profoundly equivocal interpretation of national history. The editors traced these misunderstandings first to a structural dysfunction in Cuban society and second to the impoverished analysis of the past that had been rendered by intellectuals. Accordingly, Avance took on the study of the Cuban national character. Inspired by Fernando Ortiz (the spiritual father of the Minoristas), whose earliest ethnographic studies had set out to explore la cubanidad, editors Ichaso, Lizaso, Mañach, and Marinello began to investigate the nature of Cuban behaviour in an effort to explain the current crisis...Intellectuals reflected on definitions of nationhood, the heterogeneity of racial strands, and Cuba's dependent relationship to foreign cultures.273

During colonial times the Cuban elite considered their society Hispanic and thus akin to the European way of life. Nonetheless, entrenched within Cuban culture were deep ties to African heritage, which served as a source of inspiration for vanguardia artists and intellectuals particularly between the 1920s and the 1940s. Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969), Cuban anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, laid the groundwork for the acceptance of Afro-Cuban culture as an integral component of Cuban society. Since early in the twentieth century Ortiz published ethnological studies that focused primarily on Afro-Cubans, a term he coined in 1906.274 From this work, Ortiz elaborated the notion of transculturation, which argues that


cultural transmission is not unilateral: from dominant to dominated. Rather, he claimed that when various ethnicities live side by side a new culture emerges that incorporates the predominant threads of each original culture. Cuban Counterpoint, among his most well-known texts, asserts African heritage was equally as influential toward the creation of Cuban culture as its Hispanic legacy.

This drive to enlighten Cubans about their society led race and class-consciousness to be at the forefront of artists’ minds. While Mujeres en el río appears relatively benign on the surface, it is actually a potent inversion of the norm that elevates the colored members of the common classes, previously disregarded by Cuban artists, to the status of protagonists of a classical scene. With what Wood calls a “critical spirit of revision of old values and the search for a vernacular art of national expression,” the minoristas incorporated new subject matter into their work that negated old stereotypes and constructed affirmative images of cubanidad that

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276. Ortiz published Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar in 1940. In it he lays out a fundamental and relevant dichotomy between the agricultural production of tobacco and sugar. “The posing and examination of this deep-seated contrast which exists between sugar and tobacco, from their very nature to their social derivations may throw some new light upon the study of Cuban economy and its historical peculiarities. In addition it offers certain curious and original instances of transculturation of the sort that are of great and current interest in contemporary sociological science.” For Ortiz, the means of sugar production, its necessary machinery, extensive land use, centralized processing plant (literally called the central), and massive slave-labor force, represented foreign capitalism. The tobacco farmer on his vega (parcels of land where tobacco is grown) was, by contrast, independent and self-sustaining. He required smaller portions of land that he worked with his family throughout the year, rather than seasonally, as was the case with the sugar harvest (a disruptive economic system). Similarly, a racial connection to each of the crops emerged: black to sugar (due to the slavery involved), and white to tobacco. Further distinguishing between the two, Ortiz points out, “Tobacco is native to the New World, while sugar was brought in from the Old.” He further stresses that the sugar investment in Cuba is foreign, whereas the tobacco industry is local. Though on the surface the text is a study about agricultural production, Ortiz processed his thoughts about the underlying social issues at play in Cuba in a nuanced manner: Western versus African, foreign versus local. Fernando Ortiz, “The Cuban Counterpoint,” in The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics, ed. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 240–242.

bore popular roots. They made paintings of Afro-Cubans and guajiros (lower-middle class country dwellers of mixed indigenous and Spanish origin, comparable to the Costa Rican campesino), like Gattorno’s figures in Mujeres en el río. In so doing visual artists joined the vanguard in its social commitment to critically analyze, modernize, and equalize Cuba while also helping to liberate it from the harsh conditions under the Machado dictatorship. This reformist attitude was present among the Costa Rican literary vanguard of the 1930s and 1940s (Mario Sancho, Carmen Lyra, Carlos Luis Fallas, Max Jiménez), but the same was not the case among Costa Rican visual artists who did little through their art to alter the political situation in their country.

The Cuban vanguardistas were committed leftists who sided politically with the common and struggling classes. Influenced by Mexican modernism, they used their art as social commentary, creating images of the surrounding poverty and human misery. An example of this is the ironically titled Campesinos felices (Happy Peasants, fig. 3.5), a particularly disconcerting work of 1938 by Carlos Enríquez. Anything but happy, the members of this emaciated family, in a depressing excuse for a bohío (hut), stare at the viewer outwardly, extending the blame for their misery. The central figure is a haggard woman, so thin her face looks like a skull. She is the tallest figure in the composition, underscoring her role as the sole

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279 Wood, Proyectos de artistas cubanos en los años treinta, 14–15. Between 1928 and 1933 political activism against Machado increased in Cuba, particularly in Havana. Different left-wing groups formed among students, intellectuals, professionals, and workers, such as the University Students Directory, Left Wing Students, Revolutionary Cells Organization, and the Cuban Communist Party (founded in 1925). Their actions against the government were both peaceful to violent. Martínez, Cuban Art and National Identity, 44–45.

280 Wood, Proyectos de artistas cubanos en los años treinta, 26–27, 50.

281 Cuban artists and intellectuals saw in the Mexican example a political revolution that led to cultural progress, which in turn had continental repercussions. Cuban cultural magazines systematically reported on Mexican art, primarily Social and Revista de Avance and artists frequently traveled to Mexico. Ibid., 17–26.
caretaker for them all. In her arms, a baby with exposed ribs gazes out in fear, wide eyed and frowning. To the woman’s right, a man with rail-thin legs weakly sits hunched in a hammock, wrapped in a red, dingy cloak. With barely open eyes, he exhaustedly stares at the viewer. Though the only figure in the painting wearing shoes, he is the very image of poverty, disease, and death. At his feet are a small, black piglet and a bony mutt; both creatures add to the hopelessness of this scene. On the opposite side a young girl extends her arm upward, grabbing her mother’s rag dress. The child, with a distended parasitic belly, has her finger in her nose, signaling her distance from the world of bourgeois manners. Her splayed legs look capable of elastically bouncing back upright, and her red hair is symbolic of the energy and youth her parents have lost. With a furrowed brow she glares furiously out from the canvas, a specter of underlying rage. The family is not in an exuberant tropical environment, but rather near a burnt field, its wisps of smoke reaching the hut, a reference to the tiempo muerto (dead time) after the sugar harvest when unemployment is high. In every respect this painting portrays the horror of the human condition when faced with poverty and illness. Enríquez specifically indicts the government for these people’s misery by including two election posters, one with a pig-headed politician beneath the word “VOTE,” the other with the head of an ass, an ironic detail of empty promises by corrupt and inept politicians.

The narrative components of Campesinos felices inform the viewer of the destitute state in which poor Cubans live, but it is Enríquez’s post-expressionist style that reinforces the troubling content. Similar in its approach to the Neue Sachlichkeit artists George Grosz, Max Beckmann, and Otto Dix, Enríquez used a grotesque realism of exaggerated features and shocking colors to make a scathing remark about the moral degradation of Cuban society. The

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282 Martínez, Cuban Art and National Identity, 65.
artist aimed to jolt his viewers by eliciting in them a visceral response through his use of compositional hierarchy, line, color, and paint application. The emphasis is on the woman, who is larger than the rest. Her hideously thin and haggard face, her broken front teeth, and her relative nakedness, which reveals sagging, empty breasts, set the depressing tone of this work. Like the stylized line that traces the woman’s chest, the child’s round belly and ribs broadcast her hunger and sickness and the lines on the man’s face highlight his exhaustion. The green paint used for flesh portrays a sense of disease. Color is also used to establish a compositional disharmony: cool colors above contrast with the warm palette below. The translucence of the paint gives an evanescent quality to the scene. Nothing is sturdy; solids can be seen through solids, the girl’s leg behind her mother’s, the pig’s belly through the man’s pant leg. This effect makes the figures appear ghost like, as if the artist is further commenting on their invisibility within society. As a whole, the composition is overloaded and discomforting; it is an uneasy image that matches the disturbing social predicament it contemplates.

Enríquez’s campesinos contrast greatly with González’s painting of campesinos made around the same time (fig. 2.13). Formally there are many differences: color palette (bright in González, dark in Enríquez) paint texture (built-up, short brush strokes in González, blended, wash-like glazes in Enríquez), and composition (balance in González versus tension and disunity in Enríquez). But more importantly, González’s image contains no political sentiment in any way comparable to the rage present in Campesinos felices. Rather than show the harsh conditions and social injustices suffered by campesinos and agricultural laborers, which certainly existed in Costa Rica although to a lesser degree than in Cuba, González, like his contemporaries from the Generation of the 1930s, represented the rural working class as having the humility and integrity borne of meeting simple needs through resourcefulness. Only marginally political, Costa Rican
visual artists had a more limited social commitment. The image of the *campesino* was laden with nostalgia; it was meant as a counterpoint to the growing consumerism of modern life and the increase in foreign investment and industrialization, which artists feared would strip Costa Rica of its national character. But in no way did the Costa Ricans delve into that national character as had Cuban artists. Without an artistic tradition to counter, as in the case of Cuban artists who went against tradition by creating inclusive images of their country, Costa Rican depictions of *campesinos* did not carry such political weight. Gattorno’s *guajiras* or Enríquez’s portrayal of the wretched poor did much more to revolutionize the conception of *cubanidad* than did González’s *campesinos*, which differed from prior depictions only in terms of perspective and style.\(^{283}\) Simply stated, Costa Rican artists were not nearly as committed to the transformation of their society as the Cuban *vanguardistas* had been.

The efforts of Cuban *vanguardia* painters were twofold; they wanted to transform their country and develop a “new” art that was their own, or as Wood puts it, an art that was “national, anti-academic and with a social function.”\(^{284}\) Enríquez’s work exhibits a personal style, one that he consciously elaborated in his search for personal freedom informed by his knowledge and adaptation of modern art.\(^{285}\) The same can be said for the rest of Cuba’s *vanguardista* painters like Peláez, Lam, Victor Manuel, Pogolotti, and Abela. By the late 1930s, they had each consolidated an individual style, most having spent extensive periods abroad. The same cannot

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\(^{283}\) Defiance of tradition was particularly apparent in works that depicted the human figure, “displaced from the prototype of luxury and formal beauty, to the prototype of the oppressed.” “El interés en la figura humana se ha desplazado del prototipo del lujo y la belleza formal, al prototipo del oprimido.” Juan, *Abriendo Ventanas, Textos Críticos*, 105–106.

\(^{284}\) Wood, *Proyectos de artistas cubanos en los años treinta*, 27.

\(^{285}\) Carlos Enríquez is among the Cuban artists directly influenced by surrealism. As he explained, “I believe that my work is in constant evolution towards the interpretation of images produced in a state between wakefulness and dream…However this does not mean that I am a surrealist, although I accept their creative freedom.” Martinez, *Cuban Art and National Identity*, 14.
be said of the Costa Rican painters of the period, whose paintings in the 1930s tended to be timid and contained few distinguishing characteristics, a reality that has much to do with not having inherited an artistic legacy like that of the Cubans.

What Marinello understood and declared in the 1920s about Cuban art had in fact coalesced by the 1940s: only by being open to new artistic trends, while also creating art with "Cuban eyes," could their work have universal appeal and not be derivative. By this time Cuban art was frequently exhibited in cities around the United States, Latin America, and Europe. This exposure led Alfred Barr, Jr., director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, to Cuba to purchase art for the museum’s collection. In collaboration with his colleague Lincoln Kirstein, Cuban art dealer María Luisa Gómez Mena, and Cuban critic José Gómez Sicre, Barr organized the 1944 exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* at MoMA. Barr’s impression of Cuban art was that, "It has something of the brashness, but even more the virtues of youth--courage, freshness, vitality, and a healthy disrespect for its elders in a country which is very old in tradition and very new in independence." Barr detected the rich inherited tradition of Cuban art and understood that the Cuban vanguardia artists struck out against academic tradition and embraced their country’s eclecticism to create a vibrant, new, and uniquely Latin American school of art.

González’s Artistic Awakening within Havana’s Embrace

González arrived into this stimulating Cuban art world in the summer of 1948, a time that coincided with the creation of the Agrupación de Pintores y Escultores Cubanos (APEC, Cuban


Painters and Sculptors Group). The APEC was a union of established and emerging modern artists headed by Luis Martínez Pedro (1910-1989), Mariano Rodríguez (1912-1990), and Cundo Bermúdez (1914-2008), members of the second vanguardia generation. Together the older and younger artists shared in the conviction that they should make concretely Cuban imagery that was neither folkloric nor touristic. The cohesion among artists was palpable, even among those who were not part of the APEC. Artists were more socially accepted and there were more exhibitions that spurred publication and criticism about new tendencies in art. The interest in learning about Cuban vernacular culture also persisted and Cuban art was increasingly exhibited abroad.

González was quickly immersed into this artistic environment through his friendship with the younger, controversial artist Carmelo González (1920-1990) and his circle of friends, artists José Antonio Díaz Peláez (1924-1988), Roberto Diago (1920-1955), and Martínez Pedro.

As has been discussed, Cuban art of the 1940s, while striving to be original and specifically Cuban, grew out of European modernism, namely Cubism, Futurism, Purism, and Surrealism. This in turn would affect González, as his exposure to the Cuban art world influenced his artistic creation both thematically and stylistically, prompting him to move away from the post-impressionist, realist paintings of local subject matter he had been making in Costa Rica.

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289 Martínez, Cuban Art and National Identity, 25–27.

290 According to Cuban artist Juan Sánchez, “Carmelo was polemical...for many years back he held the fame of being restless and rebellious. I recall...his name being among those youths that held the most promise and who were the most discussed. In San Alejandro, Carmelo was always the first in the classroom and the first to protest.” “Carmelo es la Polémica...De años atrás le viene la fama de inquieto y rebelde. Recuerdo que ... sonaba su nombre entre los jóvenes que más prometían y más discutían...En San Alejandro, Carmelo fue siempre el primero en el aula y el primero en la protesta.” Juan Sánchez, El Grabado En Cuba (La Habana: Impresora Mundial, 1955), 80–81. How González became friends with Carmelo González is unknown, and that he should have spent time with Carmelo’s friends is primarily conjecture.
Rica, toward a more lyrical abstraction. González became confident in his artistic liberty amid the progressive cultural environment of Havana realizing that art could be more than an interpretation of reality. It could evoke emotions and ideas shared by humanity regardless of national identity.

There are few known works by González from his time in Havana, and there is little documentation of his life there; in later interviews, he spoke highly of his Cuban experience but without going into many details. A general picture, however, can be reconstructed from documents in his scrapbook, which includes addresses, correspondence, publications, exhibition catalogs, and clippings. In October 1948, only a few months after his arrival, González published an article about Carmelo González in Orígenes, an important journal edited by José Lezama Lima. That same month, he had a solo show at the Lyceum Gallery titled “Souvenir de Costa Rica: Exposición Manuel de la Cruz González.” The gallery, opened in 1929, served as the first private venue for the exhibition of avant-garde art, and it soon became a gathering place for vanguardista intellectuals and artists who pursued a new expressive style and message.

Though it was not the only gallery in Havana —by the 1940s there were multiple commercial

291 Orígenes was geared toward cultivating a Cuban audience for modern, national culture that was informed by current foreign trends. It had articles about Cuban and international art, including texts by Giorgio de Chirico, an interview with Marc Chagall, and essays about Braque, Picasso, Orozco, Bonnard, Tamayo, and even Caravaggio. On Cuban art there were essays and reviews about Roberto Diago, Rene Portocarrero, Mariano, Alfredo Lozano, Amelia Peláez, Aristides Fernández, Gregorio Valdes, and Carmelo González. The journal showcased illustrations by Mariano, Lozano, Peláez, Portocarrero, Orozco, Wifredo Lam, Luis Martinez Pedro, Roberto Diago, Aristides Fernández, Felipe Orlando, Raúl Milian, Mario Carreño, and Cundo Bermúdez. For more on Orígenes, see Salgado, “Orígenes”; Anke Birkenmaier, “Negociaciones para un arte revolucionario: Carpentier, Lam y Lezama,” in Cuba, un siglo de literatura (1902-2002), ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Roberto González Echevarría (Madrid: Colibrí Editorial, 2004), 71–90. Salgado.

galleries—it served as a primary platform for Cuban modernism and aimed to educate its audience with its library and conferences dedicated to modernist topics. Because of the venue’s prestige, having secured this exhibition at the Lyceum was definitely one of González’s major accomplishments while in Cuba, though the work he exhibited had primarily been made in Costa Rica.

This exhibition is also important because it illustrates the starting point from which González made his creative and intellectual leap. He showed 47 works on paper of Costa Rican vernacular culture, images of campesinos, adobe houses, and painted ox-carts, the iconic symbols of Costa Rican identity. One gets a sense of the literal and folkloric nature of the works on display from the printed image on the exhibition catalog cover, which shows a caricaturesque campesino couple standing in front of an ox-cart (fig. 3.6). The catalog text, written by the modern Cuban architect Emilio de Soto, also provides an impression of how innocent González’s work appeared within the Cuban environment.

The work exhibited interprets, through a “naïve” concept, Costa Rican types and customs in which the author tried to conserve vernacular nobility and sincerity, while using a formal approach similar to that of the great Central American painter, Carlos Mérida. It does not aim to be transcendental, merely a pleasant account of his homeland, a souvenir of its regions, the coast and the plateau, and a tribute to the popular soul, power and greatness of the people.

In 1942 María Luisa Gómez Mena opened the Galería del Prado naming José Gómez Sicre its director. There were also several art supply shops that also exhibited art. Martínez, Cuban Art and National Identity, 12–13, 24.

The works exhibited are unknown. They all bear titles that link the work thematically to the Generation of the 1930s, like Mercado (Market), Peones, Campesinas, Lechero, Some of these works were purchased by Cuban collectors at the time of the exhibit. Manuel de la Cruz González Luján and Emilio de Soto, Souvenir de Costa Rica: Exposición Manuel de la Cruz González (Havana, Cuba: Lyceum Lawn and Tennis Club, 1948).

“La obra expuesta, interpreta, a través de este concepto "ingenuo", tipos y costumbres costarricenses en que el autor ha tratado de conservar la nobleza y sinceridad vernáculas usando un procedimiento formal similar al empleado por el gran pintor centroamericano, Carlos Mérida. No pretende ser trascendental, apenas si un recuento agradable de su patria, un souvenir de sus regiones, la costa y la meceta [sic.], y un homenaje al alma popular, fuente y grandeza de los pueblos.” Ibid.
González, who thought himself modern and intellectual, surely would not have liked seeing his work referred to as “naïve,” and unambitious. Such an assessment may have prodded him to reconsider the direction of his art.

A transition in González’s art can be detected as early as 1949, the year following his arrival in Havana. Though the artist did not fully consolidate a new style until he was in Maracaibo, the works he produced in Cuba reveal movement in this direction. He modified his approach to the object in his painting finding potential in the symbolic power of the subjects he represented. This is apparent in the cover illustration, titled *Verano* (*Summer*, fig. 3.7), of the June issue of *Crónica, Revista Quincenal de Orientación y Cultura* (*Chronicle: Fortnightly Journal of Orientation and Culture*); he also expressed his changing in an article “*Arte y realidad*” (“Art and Reality”) that appeared in the same issue.296 *Crónica*, dedicated to culture and current events, was of a more traditional bent than *Orígenes*. It was edited by the lawyer Mariano Sánchez Roca, a republican exile of the Spanish Civil War who also founded the Cuban publishing house *Editorial Lex*.297 In the editor’s forward to the June issue, Roca, enthusiastically

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296 Apart from the following quotation, there are few references to this journal. “It began to come out on January 15, 1949 under the leadership of Mariano Sánchez Roca, director of the prestigious Editorial Lex. In January 1953 (because none have been found between the years 1950-1952) it was already in its second phase and was still run by Sánchez Roca. It published *Ideario Cubano* by Fermín Peraza. It made emphasis on Cuban painting, music and theater. Articles also appeared on Cuban architecture. Collaborators included Emeterio Santovenia, Gabriela Mistral, José Gómez Sicre, Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, Marcelo Pogolotti Onelio Jorge Cardoso, Gerardo del Valle, Lydia Cabrera, Surama Ferrer, Enrique Labrador Ruiz, Nora Badia, Raúl Roa, Luis Rodríguez Embil, Ricardo Rano Jauma, Nydia Sarabia and Jorge Manach. The last number found was June, 1953.” “Comenzó a salir el 15 de enero de 1949 bajo la dirección de Mariano Sánchez Roca, director de la prestigiosa Editorial Lex. En enero de 1953 (pues no se ha encontrado ningún ejemplar de los años 1950-1952) se encontraba ya en su segunda etapa y continuaba siendo dirigida por Sánchez Roca. Publicó el *Ideario Cubano* de Fermín Peraza. Hizo énfasis en la pintura, la música y el teatro cubanos. También aparecieron artículos sobre arquitectura cubana. Colaboraron en sus páginas Emeterio Santovenia…Jorge Mañach. El último número encontrado corresponde a junio de 1953.” Manuel Aznar Soler, *Escritores, editoriales y revistas del exilio republicano de 1939*, Biblioteca del exilio, 9 (Seville, Spain: GEXEL, 2006), 1061.

celebrated González and his cover illustration.

Summer! Of course, in Cuba to greet the arrival of summer is somewhat paradoxical. But rather than signal the change of season, these lines, based on the cover of this issue of CRÓNICA, intend to present a new and expressive contribution by our esteemed collaborator Manuel de la Cruz González. / A beautiful record of summer. The woman - always the woman! - Facing the sun, the sea ... Summer in Cuba, as elsewhere, brings a renewal of the beaches. And this great artist’s pictorial motive is to express that beautifully for our cover.298

The image presents a beach with the figure of a young woman seen from behind. Facing the sea, she wears only a yellow bikini, which emphasizes her tanned skin. Her light brown hair blows in the wind. At the bottom of the image, exaggerated in scale, there is a large conch and marine foliage, between which, as if tying the two together, there is a fisherman’s net represented by white cross-hatching. Like marginalia, these elements frame the woman and the message of summer. She is like a summer muse enclosed in a triad of sea, sky, and land. Differing from the editor’s thoughts, González must have been inspired by the arrival of summer in June; in Costa Rica summer comes in January. He must also have been excited about living on the coast, as San Jose is in the mountains of central Costa Rica, and the beach was still, at mid-century, a remote destination. Furthermore, he was surrounded by a multitude of women freely taking sun along the coast of Havana wearing fashionable (and minimal) swimwear. Thus, the image is a vision of Cuban coastal life filtered through González’s outsider perspective. For him, this liberated figure looking towards the horizon is an emblem of the renewal and freedom he felt as the happy result

298 “¡El verano! Claro que en Cuba saludar la llegada del verano resulta un tanto paradójico. Sin embargo más que el señalamiento de cambio de estación, lo que estas líneas pretenden es presentar, con base en la portada de este número de CRÓNICA, un nuevo y expresivo apunte de nuestro estimadísimo colaborador Manuel de la Cruz González. / Un bello apunte de verano. La mujer —¡siempre la mujer!— enfrentándose al sol, al mar... El verano en Cuba trae consigo como en todas partes, la actualización de la playa. Y expresarla bellamente es el motivo pictórico de nuestro gran dibujante en nuestra portada.” Mariano Sánchez Roca, Crónica, Revista Quincenal de la Orientación y Cultura 1, no. 10 (June 15, 1949): 3. It is unclear how Manuel de la Cruz met this distinguished member of the Cuban publishing world, but among his correspondence is mail sent to González at the address of one of the Editorial Lex facilities. In that same issue González made illustrations for an installment of La regenta, a novel by Spanish author Leopoldo Alas, and published two articles, "Arte y realidad" and an obituary for the Costa Rican author and communist leader, Carmen Lyra.
of spending his time in exile in a propitious environment.

The collage-like aesthetic of this image is unlike anything González had previously made, particularly considering the disproportionate objects rendered below. González’s essay "Arte y realidad" provides clues to the artist’s intention in this work. In this text he discusses that there was a transformation of the role of the object in modern art, and he clarifies for his reader that there are two different ways for the artist to embrace the figurative elements in a work of art: realistically and symbolically.

There are two positions, both conscious, to reach genuine expression: One based on the immediate reality, present, and the other, which takes place within the personal, inventive world, made up of memories and emotions…Modern art has made these principles its own, by imposing the PICTORIC onto the PICTURESQUE. We understand pictoric as the intimately spiritual and intellectual process expressed through voluntarily ordered and inventive forms; and picturesque as the more or less capable rendering of nature by means of its laws of physics and immediacy--superficiality--despite its implicit personal stamp that, in this case, is exclusively calligraphic. While not disavowing “picturesque” art, or that which is created from “immediate reality,” González elevates the “pictoric,” understood as visual expression that materializes from “memories and emotions.” Though he considers both as “genuine expression,” González felt liberated, albeit belatedly, from representing the surrounding world. He was aware now of his choice to interpret the object through his own subjective reaction, his “memories and emotions.”

Verano can be read as an image about the sensation of coastal living: the conch, its mouth pointed toward the viewer’s ear, denotes the sound of the sea; the woman’s flowing hair the ocean breeze; the algae the smell of salt in the air. These are the visual elements that gave form

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299 “Hay dos posiciones, conscientes ambas, para llegar a la expresión genuina: Una basada en la realidad inmediata, presente y la otra la que se efectúa dentro del mundo personal hecho de recuerdos y de emociones, inventiva… El arte moderno ha hecho suyos estos principios al imponer lo PICTÓRICO a lo PINTORESCO. Entendemos por pictórico al proceso íntimamente espiritual e intelectual expresado en formas de inventiva voluntariamente ordenadas y por pintoresco, el recuento más o menos hábil de la naturaleza a través de sus leyes físicas e inmediatas, –superficialidad–, aunque lleve implícito un sello personal que en este caso es exclusivamente caligráfico.” Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, “Arte y realidad: El objeto,” Crónica, Revista Quincenal de la Orientación y Cultura 1, no. 10 (June 15, 1949): 56.
to the physical feelings González had in his new environment. The illustration projects his emotional response, the sense of independence that González found in Cuba after a life spent in the limiting atmosphere of San Jose.

This newfound ability to convey deeper, intangible feeling in his art led González toward closer scrutiny of his subjects. In 1949 he drew *Bembé* (fig. 3.8), a graphite rendering of a kneeling Afro-Cuban man caught up in the ecstatic act of playing a drum. The vantage point, indebted to early modernism in its awkward intimacy and angle, is from above and to the left of the musician. Light shines on the man directly overhead, as if from a heavenly spotlight. The man’s facial features are rendered in great detail. His gathered brow reveals intense concentration and the up-turned eyes, irises rolled up beneath his eyelids, are emblematic of religious ecstasy. The central focus of this drawing is the man’s heightened spirituality. The body, in turn, is more illustrative with the arms hovering over the stretched hide of a tall drum that is gripped between strong thighs. González drew the gesture of the hands making music with a synthetic economy of line, unlike the modeled shading he used on the face, as if to say that the hands are simply the means for expressing the man’s extreme emotional condition.

The attempt to capture a psychological state, rather than merely the act of playing an instrument, reveals a transitional step González took in Cuba. This shift is evident when comparing *Bembé* to an earlier drawing from 1940 titled *Indígenas* (*Indians*, fig. 3.9). In *Indígenas* one man plays a flute and another a tambourine while a nude woman lies, her knees bent at a ninety-degree angle, between them. Drawn from afar, rather than from the proximity of *Bembé*, the viewer feels more like an outsider looking in onto a scene of arcadia. The three people are anonymous and expressionless; one does not gain a sense of zealous music making, ad does *Bembé* has on the viewer. The later work was the result of coming in close contact with
Cuban popular culture. Nothing like the music and energy of Caribbean ceremonies existed in the conservative, Catholic city of San Jose. The artist’s proximity to the subject and the way he scrutinized the musician’s face reveal that González was mesmerized not only by this Yoruba ritual, but also by the man’s enraptured ecstasy. More than just a study of the external appearance of things, it conveys a new approach—albeit primitivizing, exoticizing, and potentially problematic—that attempted to connect with a primordial sense of spirituality.

It is important to note that González would not have been drawn into this new and strange world of Afro-Cuban traditions had it not been for his contact with the vanguardistas’ investigations of Afro-Cuban popular culture. As was previously discussed, Avance intellectuals and artists followed the path laid forth by Ortiz, progenitor of this inquiry into Afro-Cuban life. By the 1940s the study of Afro-Cuban culture was ever-present in work by author Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980), sociologist Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991), poet Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), and artist Wifredo Lam, well-known practitioners of this trend. The aim of such studies was to reevaluate the significance of Afro-Cuban culture on Cuban national identity. Art historian Charles Merewether deciphers a greater complexity in the representation of Afro-Cuban culture practiced by the vanguardista artists and intellectuals.

There exists in the work of all of these Cuban intellectuals an effort to encounter and evoke Afro-Cuban culture as if it were an encounter with a sacred knowledge. This encounter would become a source for understanding their own identities. Each would, in distinct ways, conjure a world that is secret, underground, hidden, yet palpable and within their midst.**

It appears that González, though not part of this group and unable to claim Afro-Cuban culture as part of his own identity, nevertheless also sought this “sacred knowledge” in the surrounding environment. Life in Havana and a drawing like Bembé led him to seek out that “secret” layer of

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life, James’s “figure in the carpet,” which would continue to inform González’s art in the future.

The incorporation of Afro-Cuban culture into Cuban art was born out of the European interest in “primitivism.” Artists like Gauguin and Picasso ascribed the authenticity of tribal arts to purity of vision (originality), manifesting their interest either through “primitive” subject matter (Gauguin), or a distinctive aesthetic approach (Picasso). Cuban artists, influenced by their European counterparts, experimented with this idea by looking at their own, local culture for inspiration. Instead of focusing on the aesthetic component of primitive art, as had Picasso, for example, Cuban artists looked to the customs of their own “primitive” culture. The 1930s Surrealist fascination with ethnography impacted Caribbean artists who knew of the movement either through direct contact with the group in Europe or acquaintance with its members in exile who spent time on the islands.³⁰¹ On one hand, Europeans can be credited with awakening Latin American artists to the repository of subject matter within their own heritage and cultural idiosyncrasy. But, on the other hand, this mysticism was inherent in the work of many Caribbean artists. Álvaro Medina, Colombian art historian, interprets André Breton’s review of an exhibition of Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite (1894-1948) in December 1945. As Medina points out, Breton was intrigued by the “message” and “secret” in the work of the Caribbean artist.

Unwittingly, the founder of Surrealism [Breton] defined what was, has been, and will continue to be the essential art of the Caribbean, pregnant with light, sky, sea, land, people, intuitions, and beliefs. The key…is found in the two words…message and secret. If we place them in relation to one another, we will understand that the author was speaking of contents that revolve around what is hidden, the unknown, the core of an idea or feeling.³⁰²


González’s idea of the “pictoric” object laden with memories and emotion aligns with the notion that Caribbean art contains “contents that revolve around what is hidden, the unknown, the core of an idea or feeling.” That González was likely impacted by Surrealism in Cuba is not surprising, considering how pervasive the movement had become among Caribbean artists and authors in the 1940s. The intention behind Bembé is similar to that in Eduardo Abela’s Gallo místico (Mystical Cock, fig. 3.10), for example, a painting that shows four Afro-Cubans entranced in a ceremonial dance with a cock. The artist employed free brushwork that portrays the fluidity of the dancer’s movements while the gestural positioning of their arms marks the rhythm of their dance. The viscous quality of the color is symbolic of the mystery of this dance. Style complements subject matter to depict otherworldly devotion and the incomprehensible energy of life.

Stylistically González’s Bembé is not surrealist, yet a different drawing made by the Costa Rican in Havana in 1950 shows that he embraced a more intuitive use of line by the end of his time on the island. Untitled (fig. 3.11) is a near-automatic drawing of a nude woman made from a single line. The artist’s hand was not lifted from the paper. Here is an approximation to “the actual functioning of thought…exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern,” what Breton called for in his First Manifesto of Surrealism.\(^\text{303}\) With great confidence, this drawing represents a further degree of release from the clutches of representational tradition. González’s divergent approach contrasts to Untitled (fig. 3.12), an ink drawing of a reclining female nude from 1942. The earlier drawing is detailed and concerned with naturalism and proportion; the later image employs a lyrical line that is elegant in its swift simplicity. The approach reveals an awareness of

the Surrealist technique of automatic drawing, and it reveals González's comfort with a more abstract mode of expression, which would continue to evolve in the following years.

The two years that González spent in Cuba, though economically difficult, were professionally productive. Alongside the publications and exhibitions previously mentioned, González also participated in several group shows,304 designed sets for the elite theater group known Patronato del Teatro,305 worked as a graphic designer and illustrator, restored paintings for the Masonic Lodge of Cuba, and painted commissioned portraits.306 Why did the Cuban cultural community so openly accept González, far from an innovative modernist? One possible explanation is that his Cuban contemporaries sympathized with his status as an exile because of his affiliation with the Costa Rican political party that incorporated the communists, considering that many artists and intellectuals were left leaning.307 Another is that González’s arrival in Cuba nearly coincided with large-scale celebration of the centennial of the birth of Cuban Independence hero, Antonio Maceo (1845-1896). Maceo had opposed Spanish hegemony in 1878 after the first war of independence in what came to be known as the Protest of Baraguá. Subsequently, Maceo chose exile in Costa Rica, where he remained until he received Jose Martí’s request to join in the fight for independence in 1895. Be it out of a sense of empathy, political expediency, the Cuban warmth of character, or an interest in anything foreign Havana’s

304 In 1949 he exhibited work in two annual salons, once in Havana for the Círculo de Bellas Artes (Circle of Fine Arts), and once at the Centro la Luz in San Antonio de los Baños. Exhibition catalogs, González Archive.

305 He created the set design for a production of “Theresa,” directed by the Yale University graduate Luis Martínez, performed at the Patronato del Teatro. “Founded by Ramon Antonio Crusellas, Patronato was the theatre of the dominant class and the intellectuals in Cuba before the Revolution...[its] greatest accomplishment was creating a climate of interest in theatre in Cuba.” Philip C. Kolin, "Tennessee Williams’s ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ in Havana: Modesto Centeno’s Cuban ‘Streetcars,’ 1948-1965," South Atlantic Review 60, no. 4 (November 1995): 91.

306 González Archive.

307 Martínez, Cuban Art and National Identity, 45; Wood, Proyectos de artistas cubanos en los años treinta, 15–19.
cultural milieu received González with open arms. He, in turn, gained in Cuban a fresh outlook on artistic possibilities.

In 1950 González accepted a job with General Electric to travel throughout South America as the master of ceremony of “House of Magic,” a show that introduced the public to the “magic” of electricity.\(^{308}\) The next phase of his career would take place in Venezuela, where he was faced with a different set of opportunities in which to develop, learn, and assert himself.

**Maracaibo: González Reaches Toward Cosmic Art**

González arrived in Maracaibo with Kreysa in November 1950. From there he expected to travel to different cities in Venezuela with “House of Magic,” and possibly to other countries in South America. The event was held on multiple occasions in Maracaibo (fig. 3.13), but shortly thereafter the tour was cancelled, likely due to political instability in Venezuela that led to the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. González’s intention was to return to Cuba at the end of his contract, but once in Maracaibo, fellow Costa Ricans who resided there and local members of the cultural community, such as poet Mercedes Bermúdez de Belloso whom the artist had met years earlier in Costa Rica, convinced him to stay.\(^{309}\) While in this city he played an important role in cultural institution building. More importantly, he painted avidly, experimenting with different styles that followed mid-century artistic trends in Latin America, non-descriptive realism, lyrical and then geometric abstraction. What these new styles held in common, which differed from his earlier work, was their aim to communicate on a universal level.

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\(^{308}\) Though it is unclear how he obtained the position, González most likely got the job because of his familiarity with theatrical design and his oratory skills. There are letters discussing the contract, but none regarding the initial contact. González Archive.

Maracaibo was a more positive experience for González than his time in Havana for various reasons. First, professional reasons, rather than politics, motivated his move. In fact, he had returned freely to Costa Rica on September 16, 1950 and had stayed there for two months prior to his departure to Venezuela. Furthermore, Maracaibo is not the country’s cultural center, thought it is one of the wealthiest cities in the country due to the vast amounts of petroleum extracted from Lake Maracaibo. This reality would benefit González during his seven years there. Wealthy individuals and companies were willing patrons of the arts, and the lack of a consolidated cultural community meant that he, though a foreigner, was welcomed into the top ranks of visual artists in the city. Being away from home, this time by choice and in a place that benefitted from his experience, afforded González the opportunity to reconstruct his persona. An avid self-promoter, he presented himself and was received as a well-versed, open-minded artist. In Cuba, González was not necessarily an important member of the artistic community; the art world there was not altered because of his presence. In Maracaibo, on the other hand, he was influential and became a prominent figure in the transmission of new artistic concepts, ideas that would likewise transform his work.

González’s time in Maracaibo was productive. He painted, exhibited, taught, lectured, wrote, made murals, and worked as a graphic designer. Things also went well for Kreysa, who in 1953 opened her own beauty salon, which was frequented by the city’s elite. The couple had

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310 An airline ticket confirms this date, and he received correspondence in Costa Rica during this period. González Archive.


312 González worked for the advertising agency ARS Publicidad for many years while in Maracaibo, first in the capacity of artistic director and later as production manager. González Archive.
their first child, Guadalupe de los Ángeles, in 1954. Maracaibo’s cultural community incorporated González into their activities and newspapers contacted him for his opinion on art-related matters. In 1953 he was a founding member of the newly formed Centro de Bellas Artes Ateneo de Maracaibo (CBA, Center of Fine Arts Maracaibo Athenaeum), a venue in which he exhibited, taught, and lectured for the remainder of his time in Venezuela. The CBA was an initiative begun by a group of women, including Bérmudez de Belloso, in response to the city’s lack of cultural infrastructure. Through corporate and private sponsorship the institution offered art and language courses and held cultural events, theatrical productions, and exhibitions by both contemporary Venezuelan artists such as Mateo Manaure (1926), Alejandro Otero (1921-1990), Jesús Soto (1923-2005), and Oswaldo Vigas (1926), as well as Latin American artists, such as Lam and Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991). His fundamental role in the center’s visual arts department—he was the CBA’s first painting and drawing instructor and frequently lectured on art—led him to become acquainted with the artists and cultural patrons who came through the space.

González painted prolifically while in Maracaibo. During his first years he produced images of his new environment and its popular culture, but not with the expressionist realism of his early Costa Rican work. Rather, continuing down the path he had begun in Cuba, he

313 A Ministry of Health certificate, dated April 8, 1953, granted Kreysa permission to run a beauty parlor. A magazine clipping shows her surrounded by elegant women who went to her salon. González Archive.


increasingly abstracted the figure, simplified backgrounds, and sought to convey primordial meaning through his subject. His first exhibition was in October 1952 at the Lions Club in Caracas, a solo show of 69 paintings and drawings of street scenes, guajiros, fishermen, sailors, docks, and agricultural workers. The work on display was varied in theme and style, and the artist referred to the show as “eclectic,” probably a means of circumventing the exhibition’s lack of cohesion. The drawing Sembrador (Sower, 1952, fig. 3.14), a sepia-toned work on paper, portrays a kneeling man with arms reaching between his legs toward a sprouting plant in the soil. The contour lines of his body are straight and angular, contrasting with the rounded shape of the few budding leaves. Stylized white lines structure his body and detail his ribs, abdomen, and ankles. Etched like a motif drawn by connecting points of a constellation, these lines seem to link the man to the cosmos. His head is a perfect oval, tilted at an angle, and his features are geometric white lines, gashes for the eyes, a curve for the cheekbone, a triangle for the nose. His mask-like face echoes Picasso’s depictions of African masks, which the Spaniard used to elicit the originality of “primitive” cultures. By virtue of this device, González in Sembrador similarly references ancient agricultural practices of indigenous societies. The mask-like face, parted down the middle by a white line, renders the head, like the entire body, flat; there is no volume. Likewise, there is no space beyond the man, only darkness. Nothing factors into the barren setting except two strange birds in the upper-right corner, one black, one white, both with wings extended like medieval representations of angels. In this work, González is less concerned with the realism of the object rendered than with the subjective idea elicited from the image. Here we

316 It is unknown how González secured this exhibition, but it is interesting to point out that, according to a letter the Director of the Lions Club of Caracas, Ramón Armando Rodríguez, sent to its members, this exhibition was the club’s inaugural cultural event. González Archive.

317 Raul Agudo Freites and Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, Exposición de dibujos y pinturas: Manuel de la Cruz González Luján (Club de Leones de Caracas, 1952); “Pintura: Manuel de la Cruz González Luján,” Elite, 1952.
see humanity, capable of shaping the physical environment, yet ruled over by forces beyond human control.

*Sembrador* is lacking in details that would make it specifically Venezuelan, yet critics considered the exhibition a reflection of the artist’s new surroundings. Venezuelan author Raul Agudo Freites wrote the entry for the exhibition catalog and introduced the artist as “coming from among the people and in the people finding his ultimate inspiration.” Agudo’s text concludes, “Here, then, the work of a Central American artist ... who has found in Venezuela, in the scorched horizons of Zulia and the dark men that are the color of petroleum, an inexhaustible source for the art he passionately loves.”

To gauge the change in González’s work, it is helpful to compare *Sembrador* to *Meceta*, the more realistic image of a similar topic from González’s mural cycle for the *Círculo de Amigos del Art* (figs. 2.17-2.19). The expressive gesture and tense muscles of the bending central figure in the fresco emphasize the arduous labor involved in agriculture. *Sembrador*, in contrast, is more poetic by virtue of its abstraction, drawing an allegory of humanity’s relationship to the earth and the greater unknown. Agudo may have been correct in suggesting that the Venezuelan landscape facilitated this creation, but in *Sembrador*, as in *Madre guajira*, González abandoned depiction of the visible world to convey precepts universal in scope and significance.

This kind of abstract figuration was common in Latin America at mid-century, and it is useful to consider the work of Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo as a model to understand the artistic intent of twentieth-century Latin American artists who were neither social realists nor non-figurative (fig. 3.15). Art historian Diane Dupont explains Tamayo’s relationship to

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318 “He aquí, pues, la obra de un artista centroamericano... que ha encontrado en Venezuela, en el Zulia de horizontes abrasados y hombres oscuros color de petróleo, un inagotable venero para el arte que ama con pasión.” Agudo Freites and González Luján, *Exposición de dibujos y pinturas: Manuel de la Cruz González Luján*. 

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modernism in her revisionist text *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*. Tamayo referred to his art as “non-descriptive realism,” to distinguish it from that of his social realist Mexican counterparts, as well as from abstract art. Tamayo was adamant that he was not an abstract artist; as far as he was concerned, he always referred to reality. For him, there was no incompatibility between figurative painting and modern art, and he staunchly rejected the pervasive argument that total abstraction was the only course for painting in the twentieth century.

Tamayo sought the essence of his subjects and opted to use a modern painting style to ensure relevance for the twentieth century: a fresh method of material application, the decomposition of form (traceable to Cézanne and Cubism), and the spiritual search for truth (as sought by Kandinsky and Matisse). For Tamayo, to be modern was to participate in the advance of universal aesthetics and to interact across political and cultural boundaries. Nonetheless, the artist also remained devoted to the local and incorporated the ancient cultures of the Americas into his work. Finding inspiration in Abstract Expressionism and the Surrealist émigrés in New York, he was influenced by their “quest for understanding conscious and unconscious human thought and action.” Dupont further explains, “Tamayo was not drawn to the personally subjective, psychoanalytic aspects of Surrealism but toward its universal, archetypal meaning. Like the New York School, Tamayo searched for mythic meaning in the modern age,

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319 Dupont, who provides the most detailed examination to date of Tamayo’s large body of writing, analyzes his position as the fourth *grande* of Mexican modernism. Diana C. Du Pont and Mary K. Coffey, *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007).

320 Dupont further validates Tamayo’s artistic perspective through a discussion of the Parisian avant-garde of the early 1920s, positing Matisse’s notion that “imitation cannot yield deeper understanding,” and the idea, as expressed by Apollinaire, that Cubist art is not imitation, but an art of conception and creation. Both Picasso and Mattise, Dupont explains, focused “on visible reality in pursuit of truth.” Ibid., 33–44.

321 Ibid., 43.
drawing upon the past to comment on the present.”

González followed a similar course with Sembrador and the many works that belong to the Guajiras series, of which Madre guajira is a part (figs. 3.1, 3.16, 3.17, 3.19). This work, though inspired by specific indigenous subjects, sought to convey universal meaning. It links González to other Latin American artists, namely Tamayo and Lam, who painted locally and yet were inspired by figurative abstraction; their works sought to assert regional identity in a manner that resonated internationally.

Within a few years of being in Venezuela, González’s abstract style became increasingly geometric, and he incorporated a grid into his painting. La chicha, also known as El espíritu de la chicha (Chicha, or The Spirit of Chicha, fig. 3.17) of 1953 illustrates this transition. Dominated by shades of intense red, the painting represents a man and woman engaged in an

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322 Ibid., 67.
323 This series is based on the Guajiros, an indigenous tribe from northeast Colombia and northwest Venezuela. By the mid-twentieth century, many Guajiros lived or worked in and around Maracaibo. González was interested in this indigenous group, especially the women, whose faces were painted with black patterns. The images he collected of them can be found in his personal archive. This interest may have dated back to his time in Cuba, as an article about the Guajiros was published in Carteles, a popular magazine on the island, which was illustrated with one of the same photographs in González’s collection. José Granda Blanco, “Siguen los indios motilones renuentes a la civilización,” Carteles, December 11, 1949. González Archive.
324 Venezuelan art critic Juan Calzadilla discusses the connection between Surrealism, abstraction, and Latin American identity in reference to the surrealist phase of artist Mateo Manaure, a close acquaintance of González. “Manaure’s surrealist period… is related to artists’ growing interest in the Latin American world. Well understood, abstractionism did not mean a denial or rejection of reality, but a way of penetrating and revealing it in its internal aspect, in its essence, in its new aspect. The new art, which started from an abstract foundation, saw the American not as the social or anecdotal subject of the social realist painters [Mexican muralists], but as something deeply connected to the magic of indigenous civilizations, to the writing and symbols of modern Afro-American culture, or the feeling of the jungle and the desert… Matta, Lam, Tamayo, Torres García, or Carlos Merida, departed from this course, moving beneath the crust that disguised American reality, seen only partially or literarily as it was presented to the world.” “La época surrealista de Manaure… se relaciona con un creciente interés de los artistas por el mundo latinoamericano. Bien entendido, el abstraccionismo no significó una negación o rechazo de la realidad, sino una manera de penetrarla y revelarla en su aspecto interno, en su esencia, en su aspecto inédito. El arte nuevo, que partía de un fundamento abstracto, vio lo americano no como el motivo social o anecdótico que vieron los pintores del realismo social [muralistas mexicanos], sino como algo profundamente conectado con la magia de las civilizaciones indígenas, con la escritura y los símbolos de la cultura afroamericana moderna, o como el sentimiento de la selva y el desierto… Matta, Lam, Tamayo, Torres García o Carlos Mérida, habían partido de igual supuesto para traspassar esa corteza bajo la cual se disfrazaba y veía parcial o literariamente la realidad americana que se mostraba al mundo.” Juan Calzadilla, Mateo Manaure (Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Arte, 1967), 4.
indigenous, Venezuelan ceremonial dance called chicha or chichamaya. Staring at the viewer, both figures have dark skin, round faces, and slanted, olive-shaped, black eyes. Though the space around them is undefined and compressed, there is nonetheless depth due to the black square behind the man’s head that implies a window and the shadow of two men to the right behind the woman. The man wears a typical peasant’s hat and collared shirt and stands before a blue drum holding two mallets. She wears a wide-necked, full-length dress and a substantial veil on her head, customary attire for this ritual. Standing in profile, with one, bare arm visible, she bends at the waist, her head toward the man, yet pivoted to face the viewer. His figure appears solid; rounded shoulders and some shading imply weight and volume. The woman, on the other hand, seems to float, her unstable presence composed of shapes filled in with brushy strokes and traced by thick, black lines. She dominates the right half of the canvas, taking up two-thirds of the painted surface, yet this imbalance is countered compositionally, as well as psychologically, by the erect solidity of the male figure.

While La chicha shares the subjectivity and painterly abstraction of Sembrador and Madre guajira, it differs because of geometric forms González incorporated. Shapes are free of representational value. The style, while similar to his early Costa Rican landscapes with flattened areas of color that modernized the image (fig. 2.3), diverges from his previous work in that the grid predetermines some of those shapes. That there is an underlying grid is evident in the diagonal line that runs from the lower right side, through her skirt, her face, and then into the background toward the upper, left center. González often used grids in preliminary studies for his

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325 Originating from the Chibchan culture of the Isthmo-Colombian region, this ritual is performed by Guajiros at the close of most festivities and to celebrate marriage unions. Sometimes women dance while men play a drum, other times both men and women dance. The dance has come to allude fertility. “La danza de la Chicha,” eltieme.com Volume| (October 18, 1996), accessed January 10, 2013, http://www.eltieme.com/archivo/documento/MAM-561861; Manuel Zapata Olivella, “Tambores de América Para Despertar Al Mundo,” Guaraguao 6, no. 14 (Spring 2002): 102–120.
paintings, mostly as an aid in proportion, but he had never incorporated them into his compositions. In looking at the preparatory sketch for *La chicha* (fig. 3.18) it is evident that the artist transposed the drafting grid into the final painting to compress space, revealing the painting’s compositional structure and breaking from any intention of representing reality.

In bringing the design principles to the visible surface, González began a new artistic phase in which the elements of painting, line, color, shape, and texture, became the main subject of his work. Between 1953 and 1956 he continued to paint figuratively, but the representation of reality became increasingly less apparent in his work. *Guajiras* from circa 1956 (fig. 3.19) is a geometrically stylized rendering of a standing mother and child under a bright full moon. Parallel, horizontal, diagonal, and curved lines, along with shaded color, are the chief components of this painting. The bright yellow of the woman’s dress is the same hue of the moon. It contrasts with the dark and telluric red, ochre, blue, and green tones that surround the two figures. Impasto continues to be important in the artist’s handling of his medium. Painting expressively, González applied thick daubs of paint, mostly in short strokes texturally activating the surface. A rich object to behold, the eye moves along the surface guided by line and color more than by the recognition of the figure. The *guajiras* were now all but a pretext for the artist; here González was centrally concerned with the formal elements of his painting practice.

In 1956 González relinquished the figure entirely. Ricocheting between lyrical and geometric abstraction, he created *Ciudad en rojo* (*City in Red*, c. 1956, fig. 3.20) in which he applied paint to canvas intuitively and expressively in relation to an overriding grid. Reading into the title, one might decipher a bird’s-eye view of a city, or a horizontal cityscape, but ultimately, there is no recognizable object, no concrete visual information that enables a specific reading of a representational image. Red dominates the background with gestural, black strokes blended
into it. The intensity of the predominant colors provokes anxiety and tension. Intersecting, straight, white lines slice across the painting at varying angles, forming irregular quadrangles, a few of which are filled in with green, orange, blue, pink, and white paint. In this case, the grid is not a means of objective precision, nor does it extend hypothetically beyond the edges of the canvas. The lines are self-contained elements within the composition; they are not the underlying structure of the painting, but rather an imposed trellis that allows what is beneath to show through it and grow. Yet the straightness of the lines is unequivocal and intentional, a signal of what would come about in González’s subsequent work.

The artist continued to vacillate between the figurative and the non-figurative before committing to his neo-platonic desire to describe the basic structure of life beyond physical appearance. Untitled (fig. 3.21), made circa 1957, contains no figurative elements, yet the lines, shapes, and dimensions reveal the resonance of a head. A central, vertical axis divides the painting in half. A large C-curve that begins in the upper right, runs left, and swoops down, appears to trace the shape of a face. A second black curve implies the outline of hair in a manner similar to the contours used by the artist for many of his Guajiras, namely the girl in Guajiras (fig. 3.19). A vertical axis line runs down the middle of the “face” and is divided at intervals by horizontal lines that demarcate the sections of the head: eyes, bottom of the nose, mouth. Toward the bottom of what would be the chin, a black triangle emerges that implies a neck. Beyond that, nothing else insinuates figuration. Several black and white lines cross the painting surface, as in Ciudad en rojo, and enclosed areas are painted somber shades of gray, olive green, straw yellow,

326 Costa Rican curator María Alejandra Triana suggests that the intersecting lines were made by paint-soaked strings applied to the surface. While there is no proof of this, it seems likely due to the varying thickness of these lines, and the minute streaking that occurs along their length. This would also explain their precision in a work that is otherwise freely gestural. In this regard it is worth highlighting that González believed the straightness of the line was an important compositional necessity. Triana Cambronero, El arte como integración cósmica, 59.
and mauve, as well as black and white. The artist’s hand is apparent throughout the brushwork, but there is less impasto than in previous work yielding a smoother surface. When the painting is rotated, it loses all suggestion of a head and becomes an entirely non-figurative work.

González arrived at non-representation along a gradual path, in which he analyzed the structure of visible objects conceived on a grid. His turn toward geometry was no doubt a result of his exposure to the geometric abstract art produced in Venezuela at the time, which in turn reflect the broader internationalization of abstraction. Prior to González’s departure in 1948, non-figurative art did not exist in Costa Rica. In Cuba he most probably saw the non-figurative work of the Romanian-born painter Sandu Darie (1906-1991); but when González left in 1950, few artists aside from than Darie were working in this manner. It was thus in Venezuela that González became fully aware of non-figurative art and its premises. In the 1950s, particularly in the larger Venezuelan cities, geometric abstraction became the prevailing aesthetic that represented the country’s social, political, economic, and cultural will to modernize. Mary Schneider Enríquez describes how the government propelled this modernist movement.

The oil boom fueled prosperity and the emergence of a strong middle class, and President Pérez-Jiménez pushed development through numerous architectural projects that amplified the image of Venezuela as an emerging international player. In the arts, the ultra-modern technological prowess implicit in geometric abstraction and kineticism was displayed nationwide through government commissions.\textsuperscript{327}

Indeed, oil money drove the country to build, as it also aided in sending artists abroad to further their education. They maintained contact with the community at home and eventually returned to

the country with modern works produced abroad and the objective of sharing lessons learned in Europe.\textsuperscript{328}

The onset of non-objective art was certainly strongest in Caracas and as Venezuelan art historian Luis Pérez-Oramas explains, at its height in the period between 1948 and 1957, years that coincided with the military dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez.\textsuperscript{329} In a sense, 1948 was a watershed year for modernism in Venezuela. Young artists who opposed the academic nature of the Escuela de Artes Plásticas (School of Visual Arts) and its emphasis on landscape formed the Taller Libre de Arte (Free Art Studio). Both workshop and gallery, the Taller presented the first exhibition of non-objective art that year, featuring Argentine concrete artists as well as by members of the Taller.\textsuperscript{330} It was also in 1948 that architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva (1900-1975) completed his initial plan for Caracas’s Ciudad Universitaria. The university campus is a bastion of modernism in Venezuela, based on the mandates of synthesis of the arts, and its features design and art by leading national and international artists.\textsuperscript{331} Despite this initial effort to modernize, the artistic community was not unified. Beyond the Taller there was, as yet, no collective motivation to develop a national movement that incorporated modern innovation to their specific condition of being Venezuelan. The consolidation of a vanguard movement finally


\textsuperscript{329} Luis Pérez-Oramas, “Caracas: A Constructive Stage,” in The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection, ed. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro (Austin, TX: Blanton Museum of Art; University of Texas at Austin, 2007), 78.


came about in 1950 in Paris, under the leadership of the artist Alejandro Otero, who had gone to France in 1945. With their eyes open to new possibilities of artistic expression, other Venezuelan artists who arrived in Paris after Otero, most on government scholarship, united as Los Disidentes (The Dissidents). This group of rebellious artists included Omar Carreño (1927), Carlos González Bogén (1920-1992), Manaure, and Pascual Navarro (1923-1986) among others. They exhibited together and published their ideas in Los Disidentes magazine, thereby transferring the most recent innovations in art to the cultural community back home. The tone of their 1950 Manifiesto de los NO (Manifesto of the NOs) is combative; it primarily denounced the “climate of falsity” of Venezuelan culture. The group disbanded that same year, but most of the artists continued their vanguard pursuit of geometric abstraction.

Many of the Disidentes returned home in the early 1950s by invitation of Villanueva to participate in his university project, which integrated art and architecture. Thus began a radical, modern shift in Venezuelan art towards geometric abstract, optical, and kinetic art, which, in turn, dramatically influenced the art of González. This is not to say that geometric abstraction flooded the Venezuelan art world in the 1950s; as Pérez-Oramas notes, although the Venezuelan art world had evolved to incorporate the most recent international modes in art, design, and architecture, it still generally had few practitioners and supporters. Art historian Marguerite Mayhall further explains that, during the years of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship, the Venezuelan


334 Pérez-Oramas states, “The official art of the dictatorial regime had prevailed, in the form of nativist and sometimes indigenous-centered muralism, often heroic and always hagiographically Bolivarian. Although this official art did coexist with the discreet presence of geometric abstraction, the latter was largely reduced to Villanueva’s university project.” Pérez-Oramas, “Caracas: A Constructive Stage,” 83.
art world was engaged in a debate regarding what properly constituted national art. The government commissioned both geometric-abstract and figurative work. The former represented the regime’s interest in modernizing the state; the latter directly adapted Venezuelan history and indigenous heritage as a means of fostering nationalism. Artists and intellectuals on the left who pushed for social realism thus also championed figuration.³³⁵ In this regard, González could have continued painting figuratively and still remained relevant within the Venezuelan cultural context; his stylized Guajiras aligned with what Mayhall refers to as the “dictatorship's concurrent effort to rejuvenate the country's noble indigenous past.”³³⁶ Instead, González, perhaps influenced by the wealthy patrons intent on modernizing their country on an international level, adopted hard-edged geometric abstraction, the mode favored by the Venezuelan elite because of its direct connection to European art and its modern aesthetic.³³⁷

González had shown an interest in non-figurative art early in his career in his synesthetic drawings of music of 1939 (fig. 2.8). But it was not until he was in Maracaibo that he absorbed the concept of a purely plastic art.³³⁸ Initially, he grappled with its precepts, claiming that, though he was intellectually aligned with abstract art and considered it art’s closest approximation to “plastic truth,” he could not see what its future would be. In a newspaper interview, published on the occasion of his 1955 CBA, solo exhibition, González stated:

I think, definitively, that art is vital and cannot be halted. I find that with neoplasticism, which is integrated with architecture, there has been great artistic movement. But I think

³³⁵ Mayhall, “Modernist but Not Exceptional,” 125.
³³⁶ Ibid., 141.
it has already given what it had to give. I do not see what will be the next step of this art, as you can not go back to the figurative, or go further into full abstraction to which the field has already come.339

Disregarding his skepticism, or perhaps fueled by it, he lectured on abstract art, introducing the movement’s tenets to an audience uncomfortable with non-representational art. His introduction to a lecture titled “Does Abstract Art Annul Man?” is suggestive of the public’s resistance to abstraction. “I do not propose to catechize anyone with this lecture, but simply to inform.”340

Whether or not people agreed with the movement he suggested that they at least be aware of what it proposed. The gist of his argument was that non-figurative art contains no narrative and that the viewer is wrong to seek one out. Abstract art is self-serving; it is about form and color and should be approached as one might a symphony or a sunset, without expectation of meaning and with one’s mind open to finding pleasure in the purely aesthetic.341 This is a superficial approach to what was happening in the Venezuelan modern art movement, much of which happened abroad, in the mode of geometric abstract art. Though it may reflect the tenor González felt was necessary to present his subject to his particular audience, it is more likely indicative of not being entirely abreast of the current discussions. During González’s tenure in Venezuela, the main art centers for Venezuelan art were Caracas and Paris. Artists like Otero, Soto, Omar Carreño, and Carlos Cruz-Diez, used a universal language to engage viewers in an

339 “Creo, en forma definitiva, que el arte es vital y que no puede detenerse. Me parece que con el neoplasticismo, que tiene su colocación exacta en la integración con la arquitectura, se ha dado un gran movimiento plástico. Pero creo, que ha dado ya cuanto podía dar. No veo cuál será, en esa línea, el próximo paso de este arte, ya que no puede volver atrás, a lo figurativo, ni avanzar más dentro de la total abstracción a que ha llegado en este campo.” Ibid. It is worth noting that this quote implies González’s awareness of de Stijl principles of integrating art and architecture, a result of either reading their texts or of a general understanding of this modernist movement incorporated into the Ciudad Universitaria project.

340 The analysis of this lecture is based on a synopsis of the lecture published in the newspaper, “¿Anula al hombre el arte abstracto?” (n.d.): 14. Newspaper clipping, González Archive.

341 Ibid.
entirely new way. Through geometry, repetition, seriality, and kineticism, and responding to artists like Malevich, Mondrian, and Josef Albers, Venezuelan artists removed subjectivity from their art and confronted their creations as a problem to be solved objectively.\textsuperscript{342} For the Venezuelans, the spectator was considered an essential component of their work participating and activating the art object.\textsuperscript{343} González, however, did not incorporate the viewer, and thus, seems to have had a limited understanding of the artistic movement that surrounded him.

Non-figurative art was increasingly exhibited in Maracaibo throughout the 1950s, and it increasingly factored into González’s work. One of the most important showcases of this new art was the D’Empaire Salons, sponsored primarily by the wealthy businessman Carlos Julio D’Empaire. González participated in the first D’Empaire Salon of 1954 with three works of art, and then was a juror in 1955 and 1956. The catalogs, which list González as participant and then juror, testify to the participation of non-figurative artists like Carreño, González Bogén, Manaure, Navarro, Otero, and Víctor Valera (1927-2013).\textsuperscript{344} In 1956 Valera was awarded the main prize of that year’s D’Empaire Salon for his geometric abstract sculpture, attesting to González’s and his fellow jurors’ interest and belief in the movement.\textsuperscript{345} That year González wrote, "Non-figurative art at first proposes to replace the mere reproduction of the object with

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\textsuperscript{342} Luis Pérez-Oramas, \textit{Hacia el siglo XX venezolano: Artes plásticas, academicismos, implantaciones y localidades (Coleccion Patricia Phelps de Cisneros)} (Caracas: Fundación Cisneros, 2000), 10–12.
\textsuperscript{343} Mercedes Iturbe, “Voces diagonales, ruptura y abstracción en el arte latinoamericano,” in \textit{Cruce de miradas: Visiones de América Latina. Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros} (Mexico City: Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes; CONACULTA-INBA; Fundación Cisneros, 2006), 44.
\textsuperscript{344} After a few years, the salon became an important yearly event—certainly the most important in Maracaibo, and one that many Venezuelan artists attended. Juan Carlos Palenzuela, \textit{Arte En Venezuela, 1959-1979} (Caracas: Editorial Galaxia, 2005), 41. D’Empaire Salon catalogs, González Archive.
\textsuperscript{345} According to the Venezuelan art critic, Sergio Antillano, it was the first time in Venezuela that a non-figurative work of art received a major prize. Antillano and Figueroa Brett, \textit{Artistas del Zulia}, 90.
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the creation of a new object, an object of intrinsically plastic characteristics. The article, entitled “Arte abstracto, realidad de nuestro tiempo” (“Abstract Art, Reality of our Time”), appeared in the January 1957 edition of Brecha, a Costa Rican cultural journal. He goes on to explain:

By replacing the affiliated object, allegory disappears and with it anecdote, along with all elements foreign to the plastic [arts]. Kandinsky’s terrible question: ‘... but, with what to replace the object?’, was made viable through number, the basic component of all rhythm, all balance, all harmony, and its formal encasement, geometry. Moreover, not only Euclidean geometry of closed and simple shapes [is used], in themselves beautiful and expressive—Malevich, Mondrian—but also in ideal geometries as well: inbound and outbound, opposites, negative positive, etc.

In this case, González clearly explains the importance of the universality of geometry and the idea of art as a new, independent object, but he does not mention the spectator’s experience of the artwork, missing the optical, kinetic, and phenomenological component of art produced by Venezuelan contemporaries.

By the time González published “Arte abstracto,” he had traversed the divide between the figurative and the non-figurative, finding in the repetition of geometric pattern a way to absolve art of allegory. Accompanying the article was a photograph of González standing next to one of his first hard-edge, geometric abstract art works, an architectural installation for the new building of Radio Popular in Maracaibo (fig. 3.22). The image illustrates what he argued: consecutive repetition of geometric pattern resolves the conundrum of what to do with art when it no longer

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346 “El arte no figurativo plantea como primer intento la sustitución de la mera reproducción del objeto, por la creación de un nuevo objeto, un objeto más de características intrínsecamente (sic.) plásticas.” Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, “El arte abstracto, realidad de nuestro tiempo,” Brecha 1, no. 5 (January 1957): 8.

347 “Al sustituir el objeto afilable, la alegoría desaparece y con ella la anécdota junto con todos los elementos extraños a la plástica misma. La terrible pregunta de Kandinsky: ‘... pero, con qué sustituir al objeto?’, se hizo viable en el número, componente básico de todo ritmo, de todo equilibrio, de toda armonía, y en su encajamiento formal, la geometría. Mas no solamente la geometría euclidiana de formas cerradas y simples, de por sí bellas y expresivas.-Malevitch, Mondrian- sino también, en ideales geometrías: entrantes y salientes, los opuestos, negativo positivo, etc.” González Luján, “El arte abstracto.”
is meant to be a representation of reality. Measuring approximately two meters in height and one meter in width, the installation piece, likely a lacquer on wood, is divided into two squares, one atop the other, filled in with a regular pattern of thin, vertically oriented zigzags. Each triangle has a straight, vertical line that runs through it meeting at the point of the triangle in the opposite square. This relates the above square with the one below. The work was mounted onto a pair of tubular metal posts, thereby integrating art into the architectural setting. Stylistically, the Radio Popular work is comparable to the geometric abstract murals commissioned for Ciudad Universitaria. One example is Valera’s Síntesis de las artes (Synthesis of the Arts, 1955-1956, fig. 3.23), a mosaic mural made for the Humanities Department. Valera’s work is also made of vertical, straight-edged zigzags, but it differs from González’s piece because of a rhythmic, engaging syncopation achieved by varying the widths and heights of the zigzags and the size and shape of the rectangles within which the zigzags are set. It is evident, nonetheless, that González’s installation is stylistically similar to Valera’s and other geometric abstract murals in Ciudad Universitaria, in its non-objectivity, its precision of line, its overall smoothness of surface, and its incorporation within the architectural surroundings.

By the following year, González developed his theory of the cosmic nature of geometric abstract art. Whether or not by intention, his ideas differed from those of the artists at the forefront of Venezuelan geometric abstraction, in its emphasis on Gestalt, rather than the physical and perceptual experience of optical and kinetic art. In July 1957, he gave a lecture titled “Arte como integración cósmica” (Art as Cosmic Integration) on the occasion of an exhibition by Jesús Soto at the CBA, which consisted of nine kinetic sculptures made in Paris.348

348 Soto had a strong connection to Maracaibo, having led the Escuela de Artes Plásticas (School of Fine Arts) there between 1948 and 1950, prior to his departure to Paris. Antillano and Figueroa Brett, Artistas del Zulia, 87. Antillano and Figueroa Brett, 87.
The Maracaibo cultural community did not easily digest these objects, though they were generally open to what Soto was doing, particularly because his work reflected Parisian influence.  

González, who was interviewed on the occasion, responded to Soto’s work with general appreciation. He expressed gratitude for the exhibition because it showcased recent artistic innovation and he acknowledged that Soto, in his aim to “resolve the problem of movement in painting,” had pushed the limits, “opening an unknown horizon of infinite possibilities.”

González understood that Soto’s kinetic sculptures dealt with the relationship of movement, space, and art. During his lecture, González projected images and played sound clips to explain to his audience how to look at contemporary art. He emphasized that kinetic and geometric abstract art shared an “eternal,” or universal language, devoid of reference, that is valuable for its capacity to be “integrated with the cosmos.” This notion, which diverges from Soto’s own views, sprung from González’s certainty that everything in the universe, or cosmos, is interrelated, and that the universe in itself is “rhythm, order, and integral equilibrium in which infinite forms constitute an eternal and indestructible cosmic whole.” According to this reading, everything in the world responds to different rhythmic frequencies, which, in turn, affects each thing’s physical composition and its appearance; “yet its autonomy is subject to the universal whole.”

González’s approach to geometric abstraction was, thus, primarily a concern with the interrelation of parts of the art object to each other and to the greater whole.

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349 Newspaper clippings, González Archive.


352 “El universo es ritmo, orden y equilibrio integral en el que infinitas formas constituyan el todo cósmico indestructible y eterno…pero cuya autonomía está sujeta al todo universal.” Ibid.
In his art, González sought to visually express this “cosmic” theory concentrating on the interrelation of color, shape, and line. Though González never mentioned it specifically, this approach to geometric abstraction resonates with Mondrian’s ideas set forth in “Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art.”

Art makes us realize that there are fixed laws which govern and point to the use of the constructive elements of the composition and of the inherent inter-relationships between them. These laws may be regarded as subsidiary laws to the fundamental law of equivalence which creates dynamic equilibrium and reveals the true content of reality.

Mondrian suggests that different components within a composition can have equal value, allowing them to balance each other. When the artist achieves this balanced interrelation, the entire work achieves “dynamic equilibrium” and reveals “the true content of reality.”

To achieve balance in his work, González depended on the use of a grid, but he also allowed intuition to guide his choices. An example of two Untitled works (figs. 3.24 and 3.25), a preparatory drawing and the final oil on canvas, exemplify González’s working process around 1957. The drawing shows how the artist subdivided a vertical rectangle first in half (both

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vertically and horizontally) and then in quarters (both vertically and horizontally). He then drew diagonals from the corners of each of the subdivided parts, creating Xs of varying heights and widths. After creating this initial grid, which consisted of verticals, horizontals, and diagonals at varying angles, González went back to the drawing to heighten certain lines, emphasizing asymmetrical, angular shapes. He then added lines that did not specifically correspond to the grid, sometimes drawn to or from points of intersection within the grid, but often having no specific visual relation to it. The lines that do not correspond to the grid are representative of González’s implementation of artistic intuition. The final white, beige, taupe, black, and blue painting is based closely on the sketch, though it shows that the artist’s inventiveness extended beyond the preparatory drawing. It has elements not present in the first version, such as jutting black marks that invade the composition, two at right, one at left, and one below. There are also thick horizontal and vertical bands in white, black, and blue that add rhythm to the finished painting while emphasizing its verticality. The flat shapes of color appear to overlap, which gives dimension to the painting; black recedes in space while the lighter colors advance toward the picture plane.

As in his *Radio Popular* installation, *Untitled* (fig. 3.25), for example, contains no visible connotation of reality; but it differs from the architectural piece in its intuitiveness. In the later work, González experimented with the interrelation of the parts of his compositions. He started with a grid but progressively moved away from its mathematical precision, playing with the effect each individual element had on the others and the work as a whole. This creative process appears similar to Otero’s approach in his *Colorhythms* series (fig. 3.26), created between 1955 and 1960, which is also dually schematic and spontaneous. Both artists began from sketches

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355 The relationship between these two artists is unknown, but they certainly met in Maracaibo during Otero’s exhibition at the CBA in 1957. Otero said of the Costa Rican, “Manuel de la Cruz González, little known in Caracas,
based on a grid, but the initial study was modified for the final painting. Otero stated that, though the finished work did follow the original sketch, it was completed by free and unstructured choices.

As I composed the trial sketches which preceded each of these panels, rhythms and tensions, forms and colors followed the free movement of my intuition. No judgment of criteria intruded upon the unity of the creative act from outside. In each sketch the work sought out, almost of its own volition, its own unity, its own beginning and end. So, too, were González’s paintings elaborated from an initial sketch that he then experimented with to establish a defined relationship between color, line, rhythm, shape, and dimension. In Otero’s words, the final paintings yield “more appropriate proportion or scale, more formal clarity, greater definition in the coloring and organization.” Both artists were inspired by music and shared an interest in manipulating their medium to create a visual manifestation of aural dynamism. As in music, which is perceived as a single work composed of discernible instruments, harmonies, and beats, Untitled (fig. 3.25) comes to life as the eye scans the painted surface perceiving lines, angles, and expanses of solid color that interact with both harmony and tension.

The last geometric abstract painting González made in Venezuela belongs to a series known by two names: Espacio color (Space Color) and Concretismo espacial (Spatial Concretism). These were exhibited at the CBA alongside the geometric abstract sculpture of Lia but, in my way of seeing it, of the best that there is in Venezuela.”

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356 Mary Kate O’Hare, Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s-50s (Petaluma, CA: Newark Museum; Pomegranate, n.d.), 38.
Bermúdez, who had by then become a close friend of the González family. Untitled (fig. 3.27) belongs to this series and is emblematic of González’s progressive experimentation with geometric abstraction. This square painting is like a magnified version of his previous work, Untitled (fig. 3.25). The shapes and areas of color are larger and more solid. Black, white, and blue lacquer on wood, this painting is smooth, with a polished finish. The industrial paint obliterates all trace of the artist’s hand, and the viewer’s experience becomes a visual exercise in considering the effect of the whole composition and the interrelatedness of its component parts. Does one color represent form and another ground? Are these inventive shapes layered upon each other, or do they exist in a single plane?

The geometric abstract painting González made in Venezuela was based on a simplified visual aesthetic, which he referred to as a “depuración de estilo” (stylistic purification): geometric shapes, solid colors, smooth surface, straight lines. His belief in the universality of geometry links him to his Venezuelan contemporaries, such as Soto, who considered geometric form as removed ideally from the local. In an interview conducted during his 1957 exhibition, González said about the style:

Cultivated with seriousness and faith…It [geometric abstraction] is at present the most genuine vehicle to express man’s sensibility…With the work of simplification for the sake of more solid and profound expression, a perfect formula is pursued of magic projections through which painting becomes the ideal medium for man’s reintegration with cosmic unity.

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359 Correspondence, González Archive.

360 Jiménez, “Neither Here nor There,” 250.

361 “Cultivada con seriedad y con fe…Es el vehiculo de expresión más genuina de la sensibilidad del hombre actual…Con el trabajo de simplificación en beneficio de una expresión más sólida y profunda, se persigue una fórmula perfecta, de proyecciones mágicas, por medio de la cual se logre que el cuadro sea el medio ideal de reintegración del hombre a la unidad cósmica.” “La pintura abstracta es la mas grande verdad descubierta por el arte, dice Manuel de la Cruz,” Panorama, 1957.
It is hard to fully grasp the artist’s meanings in these words, specifically because his painting Untitled (fig. 3.27) does not emit a sense of “cosmic unity,” but rather one of incongruity and syncopated tension. Costa Rican curator María Alejandra Triana suggests a scientific approach to understanding this idea.

Manuel de la Cruz was convinced that the cosmos—understood as an ordered structure—is infinite and eternal. He believed that chemical, physical, and evolutionary changes, as well as thoughts, emotions, and the spiritual, operate according to a kind of grammar, whose lexicon consists of ’rhythms, frequencies, or vibrations’ and whose syntax is nothing other than math.\footnote{362}

While this interpretation is valid, it is necessary to add that González was spiritually aligned with the Catholic conception of God and that his religious perspective influenced his notion of the cosmos.\footnote{363} The viewer need not know about the structure of the universe, “rhythms, frequencies, or vibrations,” only sense it as the beauty found in nature and art. Seeking such beauty is, according to the artist, one of the few pathways toward cosmic equilibrium, spiritual harmony, and truth (union with God). Triana rightly concludes, “Manuel de la Cruz wanted to create a diaphanous art, through which the viewer could feel a sort of connection with the structure of the world. In other words, his goal…was that we could move away from the superficial appearance of things to approach, through contemplation of his works, the essence of the universe.”\footnote{364}

Giving visual form to that essence, for González, was both a material and a spiritual pursuit.

\footnote{362}{“Manuel de la Cruz estaba convencido de que el cosmos –entendido como una estructura ordenada- es infinito y eterno. Creía que los cambios químicos, físicos y evolutivos, así como los pensamientos, las emociones y lo espiritual, operan según una especie de gramática, cuyo léxico se compone de ‘ritmos, frecuencias, o vibraciones’ y cuya sintaxis no es otra cosa que las matemáticas.” Triana Cambronero, El arte como integración cósmica, 66.}

\footnote{363}{In an interview toward the end of his life he Georgina Pino and students of Estudios Generales, Grupo Taller (San Jose, C.R.: Museo de Arte Costarricense, 1983), 21.}

\footnote{364}{“Manuel de la Cruz quiso crear un arte diáfono, a través del cual el espectador pudiese sentir una especie de conexión con la estructura del mundo. En otras palabras, su objetivo, en consonancia con el pensamiento de los otros artistas abstractos que defendía un arte de carácter metafísico, fue que lográramos abstraernos del aspecto superficial de las cosas, para acercarnos, mediante la contemplación de sus obras, a la esencia del universo.” Triana Cambronero, El arte como integración cósmica, 67.}
In this spiritual pursuit of the cosmic, González deviated from Venezuelan geometric abstract art, which was primarily concerned with innovative perceptual processes and the place of art in society. During the 1950s, geometric abstract artists and leaders of the country instrumentalized this international aesthetic to construct a modern, national image that incorporated the viewer in the role of participant and activator of the art object. For the Venezuelans, art and architecture were considered tools for utopian, social transformation in the modern era. González, rather than focus on the potential role of art in social redemption, found in geometric abstraction a means by which to alter the viewer spiritually and intellectually.

When asked by an interviewer whether or not art serves a human function, González cited Mondrian’s idea that art has no real reason for existing, and responded that art arises out of a human need to feel connected to the larger unknown. He expounded, “It [art] supplements life’s deficiencies. But the real art is life itself, in the process of perfection. And this desire for perfection, this approach to the eternal, toward God is the cosmos. It [art] is simply a means, a formula that allows us to reintegrate our most abysmal telluric resonances in specific ways.”

For González, the best method to pursue this unreachable goal was through abstract art. What he realized in Venezuela was that figuration is limited to three responses by the viewer: first to identify what is being seen, for example, “an apple;” then to respond to it physiologically, “it looks good enough to eat;” and finally to react to the painter’s skill at rendering the apple.

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366 “Suple las deficiencias de la vida. Pero el verdadero arte es la vida misma en trance de perfección. Y este anhelo de perfección, este acercamiento hacia lo eterno, hacia Dios es el cosmos. Es simplemente un medio, una fórmula que permite reintegrarnos por determinadas vías a nuestras más abismales resonancias telúricas.” A.R.S., “Encuentro con Manuel de la Cruz.”
can be so much more than this, he realized; it can be beauty, and truth, and “cosmic integration.”

A process that began in Cuba as a search for the universal shifted in Maracaibo to a search for the eternal, which, according to González, is attained “spontaneously” by children or intuitively, as by Rembrandt, Goya, Velásquez, or the abstract artist who consciously sought it. By the time González left Venezuela he understood that art could be the creation of a new visual object and that it need not be representative of surrounding reality, ideas he would try to transmit to the Costa Rican art world. Like the Cuban and Venezuelan artists who travelled to Europe and returned to their countries with new ideas to share, González went home intending to broaden the parameters of Costa Rican art. With the confidence of one held in high esteem, the firm conviction that geometry is universal, and a longing for home, where he hoped his presence might make a difference as it had in Maracaibo, he boarded a ship with his family to Costa Rica. By then, political tensions had waned in the country and González would never leave his native soil again.

Conclusion: The artist’s experience of exile

Between perennial clouds of distance
I remember the green of your mountains
and when I feel the patriotic fire within,
I lift the chalice that absence pours.
Sultana suspended between two seas,
for you vibrates the clamor of my desire
from the wide and extensive plain

367 Ibid.
368 Ibid.
369 In early 1958, Calderón was granted a general amnesty and he returned to Costa Rica to occupy a seat in the Assembly. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica, 126–127.
to the lofty summit of all your volcanoes.  
A gauze of shame blankets my absences 
that only hope sustains and enlivens 
waiting for consciences to flower 
in my martyred and plagued Costa Rica. 

—from “Song of the Exile” by González

Exile: a different landscape, estrangement, new neighbors, another temporality, unusual flavors—all changes that inevitably force a person to adapt. In Cuba and in Venezuela, González witnessed the broadened parameters of Latin American art and these encounters with diverse cultural currents made an impact. Beyond the local, he became aware that art could be universal and cosmic. Exile was necessary for this shift to occur. For González, Said’s concept of “originality of vision” began in Havana, but was truly made manifest in Maracaibo. In an interview conducted decades later in San Jose, the artist stated, “Cuba gave me friendship, dialogue, understanding. Along with Carmelo González I said to myself: 'I know nothing'. And since then, I maintained a fruitful relationship with young [modern] painting.” Having released his past, González embraced his present abroad, laying the groundwork for his future as a stalwart of modern art in Costa Rica. This chapter delineated his artistic transition to acknowledge the transnational trends and ideas that influenced his production.

When asked what he intended to do when he left Venezuela, González responded, “Paint, paint, paint…When in Costa Rica I will make a small but deep and sincere tribute to two

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370 “Entre perennes nubes de distancia/ recuerdo el verdor de tus montañas/ y al sentir el fuego patrio en las entrañas,/ elevo el cáliz que la ausencia escancía,/ Sultana entre dos mares suspendida,/ por ti vibra el clamor de mis afanes/ desde la llanura amplia y extendida/ A la enhiesta cumbre de todos tus volcanes,/ Cendal de penas cobija mis ausencias/ que solo la esperanza sostiene y vivifica/ aguardando que florescan [sic.] la conciencias/ en mi martir [sic.] y asolada Costa Rica.”  

371 “Cuba me brindó amistad, diálogo, comprensión. Junto a Carmelo González me dije: 'no sé nada'. Y mantuve fecunda relación con la pintura joven.”  
countries that gave me everything a good man could want: roof, friendship, understanding and bread."  

And so it was that within a year of his return to San Jose, González had an exhibition at the National Museum to display the new path his art had taken as a result of his tenure in Cuba and Venezuela. The show shocked his audience, but it would influence a future generation of artists and help alter the Costa Rican conception of art. His experiences abroad fueled his desire to make a difference at home, and his achievements in Havana and Maracaibo allowed him to imagine that he could effect change in his country.

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372. “Pintar, pintar, pintar, pintar…Cuando esté en Costa Rica haré un pequeño pero profundo y sincero homenaje a dos países que me dieron todo lo que un hombre de bien puede desear: techo, amistad, pan y comprensión.” A.R.S., “Encuentro con Manuel de la Cruz.”
Chapter 4

GONZÁLEZ’S RETURN TO COSTA RICA: STATE PATRONAGE AND THE CHALLENGES OF “COSMIC” ART

After a decade abroad, González, revitalized by the cultural communities in which he had lived and worked, returned to Costa Rica to share the transnational modernist ideas he had gleaned in his travels through lectures and his artwork. During the 1960s, González played a major role in seeking to foster modern art in San Jose. From the late 1950s until 1971, he created hard-edge, lacquer paintings that are now considered canonical in Costa Rican art history. But, despite González’s great conviction and effort, geometric abstraction did not take hold within the Costa Rican artistic environment. Although he enjoyed numerous local and international achievements during these years (exhibitions, awards, commissions), he could not transfer his passion for geometric abstraction to succeeding generations of artists. This chapter seeks to understand why that was the case by considering the surrounding issues of patronage, context, and González’s artistic philosophy.

Costa Rica was a changing country at mid-century, discovering itself anew after the Revolution of 1948. Opposing factions were either intent on maintaining power among the traditional, agro-export oligarchy, or addressing the concerns of the growing middle class by encouraging small business, granting credit, and increasing the number of government related, white-collar jobs. After the Revolution, an overhaul of the governing system took effect. A new constitution was written, characterized by the Second Republic’s social democratic

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ideology, and the army was abolished. The state took an active role in all aspects of the country’s affairs in terms of economics, education, and healthcare. Cultural policy in Costa Rica also changed, as the state became the main benefactor of the arts in the country, aiding the development of the creative community.

During this same period, with the rise in government patronage and new cultural institutions, artists began returning from abroad. González was among the more experienced of these artists, and he was already known for his involvement in the Generation of the 1930s. During the 1960s, his active participation as a member of and adviser to the two earliest vanguard movements in Costa Rica, Grupo Ocho (Eight Group) and Grupo Taller (Studio Group), catapulted him into a leadership position. He and his contemporaries created abstract artwork the likes of which had never been seen in Costa Rica. They enlivened San Jose’s provincial and conservative cultural atmosphere, while improving opportunities for artists and inciting the public to have a greater interest in art.

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376 Although they banded together in artists’ groups and mutually supported efforts to push for cultural reform at an institutional level, different artists took different approaches. Four of the major artists of the period are representative of these differences: Rafael “Felo” García worked at the government level; Lola Fernández and Francisco Amighetti worked in the academic realm of the UCR; and González followed an independent path and pushed for Costa Rican artists to be part of the international art world. Their efforts, along with artists and intellectuals, like Isaac Felipe Azofeifa (author, 1909-1997) Alberto Cañas (author, 1920), Graciela Moreno (theater producer, 1927-2003), Carmen Naranjo (author, 1928-2012), Samuel Rovinski (author, 1934-2013) Guido Saenz (author and painter, 1929), and Fernando Volio (politician, 1924-1996), modified what had been a stultifying artistic realm and ushered in a new age with institutions dedicated to dance, literature, visual art, music, and theater. For published interviews with Azofeifa, Cañas, Garcia, Saenz, and Volio, see Rafael Cuevas Molina, Cultura y política en Costa Rica: Entrevistas a protagonistas de la política cultural en la segunda mitad del siglo XX (San Jose, C.R.: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 2006). Among the institutions created were the Taller Nacional de Danza (National Dance Studio), the Compañía Nacional de Danza (National Dance Company), the Compañía Nacional de Teatro (the National Theater Company), the Instituto Nacional de la Música (National Institute of Music), the Compañía Lírica Nacional (National Opera Company), and the Coro Sinfónico Nacional (National Symphony Choir), the National Radio, Channel 13 (television channel dedicated primarily to culture), and the Museo de Arte.
Throughout this period, González produced a wide body of work, including figurative and non-figurative paintings, drawings, and illustrations in a variety of styles and media. This chapter focuses exclusively on the development of his geometric abstraction upon his return to Costa Rica. It is in this style that he most stringently broke with tradition and aimed to alter what art could signify in the country, away from the narrative and emotional and toward the intellectual and philosophical. González was alone in this endeavor. While many of his fellow artists wanted to prod the limitations of what was still a conservative artistic environment, they did not do so within the strict parameters that González imposed on himself when working in a geometric abstract mode. His work evolved toward rigorous simplicity, as he incorporated the universal concepts of phi and cybernetics. Then, in 1971, after making the lacquer paintings for which he is most well known today, and presenting them in the gallery of honor at the Central Costarricense (MAC, Museum of Costa Rican Art). All of the laws passed regarding cultural policy can be viewed on the website of the MCJ at the following address: http://www.mcj.go.cr/ministerio/transparencia.aspx. In an ultimate acknowledgment of the importance and the potential of culture in the country, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports was established in 1970 granting the arts a government agency. Fernando Volio stated that when this ministry was created artists felt they finally had a home. However, he also described the difficulty of creating the new ministry, as culture was always considered the “Cinderella” of government ministries. Among the laws that would help artists was one that made the sale of art by artists tax exempt. Ibid., 90–95; Cuevas Molina, Tendencias de la dinámica cultural en Costa Rica, 41; Molina Jiménez and Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica, 140. Since its inception, the policy of the ministry has been inclusive rather than exclusive, sponsoring events at times regardless of their caliber, which has led some to complain about mediocrity in the artistic profession. González published a review of the artistic events of 1971, commenting that the number of exhibitions was “interminable,” and that much of what was done by the government did not necessarily deserve the attention it was given. Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, “Panorama plástico costarricense 1971,” La Nación, January 8, 1972, sec. Alfa. Despite these concerns, the Costa Rican art world had changed from a sedate environment that offered few alternatives for artistic exhibition, to one of greater opportunities. By 1975 the MCJD held 35 exhibitions in its two gallery spaces. Samuel Rovinski, Cultural Policy in Costa Rica, Studies and documents on cultural policies (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1977), 43.

The artist believed that he was more prolific this way, and that by switching between different media and styles, he exercised his artistic freedom. Carlos A. Morales, “La furia de Manuel de la Cruz en su Nuevo Expresionismo,” La Nación, April 27, 1975, sec. Ancora; Juan Carlos Flores, “Manuel de la Cruz González: un sueño trunco,” La Nación, September 15, 1985.

González referred to his artistic practice in such terms: “Geometric abstraction conduces me toward a classical discipline and ascetic emotion. But when I get tired of the convent, I go to the brothel.” This highlights both his seriousness and an innate rebelliousness. “La abstracción geométrica me conduce a la disciplina clásica y a la emoción ascética. Pero cuando me cansa el convento me voy al prostíbulo.” Ulloa Barrenechea, “Artes Plástica: Manuel de la Cruz González: hombre con vida propia,” 29.
American Biennial in San Jose, he relinquished the style altogether. This may have been a response to the fact that his geometric abstraction proved too challenging for an unprepared public, as well as the negative response of the biennial jury that included Marta Traba, who rejected geometric abstraction as an import from the United States; influenced by Cold War politics Traba instead promoted humanist neo-figurative styles.\textsuperscript{379} Traba’s views held great weight in Costa Rica, which lacked a strong artistic tradition, and may have influenced González’s decision to forgo geometric abstract painting. Whatever the reason, it was clear that Costa Rica did not possess the proper conditions that would have allowed the artist to develop a geometric abstract art movement, leading to the failure of this strand of transnational modernism in the country.

1950s Motion to Action: The Second Republic and Early Government Support of the Arts

The Partido Social Demócrata (Social Democratic Party) and José “Pepe” Figueres Ferrer (presidential terms: 1948-1949, 1953-1958, and 1970-1974) prevailed after the Revolution of 1948.\textsuperscript{380} Their party’s political ideology was drawn from a variety of sources, described by the historian Leslie Bethell as follows,

> On the first level was the political, populist and statist thought of Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre and aprismo. To this was added the moderate distributionist policies of English socialism, North American pragmatism, and Colombian social progressive liberalism. Institutionally, the South American examples of Chile and Uruguay facilitated the establishment of decentralization projects and state modernization. This coincided with

\textsuperscript{379} Traba, Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas, 1950-1970.

\textsuperscript{380} This short-lived political party was the result of the collaboration of intellectuals who participated in the Centro para el Estudio de Problemas Nacionales (CEPN, Center for the Study of National Problems) in the 1940s at the newly established UCR, which was guided by dean and educator Rodrigo Facio (1917-1961). Molina Jiménez and Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica, 111–112.
the search for new business and productive horizons beyond the traditional agro-export model.  

The legitimately elected Otilio Ulate took office (1949-1953), after an 18-month, interim government by Figueres. Differences emerged between Figueres and Ulate and, in 1951, Figueres formed the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN, National Liberation Party) running for president and winning the 1953 election. This was a period of social and political readjustment for the country, in which the government responded to the needs of a growing middle class held back in previous decades by financial limitations imposed by the agro-export oligarchy.

Foreign affairs also took a turn as Costa Rica began to stand out internationally for some of its exceptional characteristics, such as the abolishment of the army, the high investment in education and healthcare, and its staunchly heralded democratic principle throughout the Cold War years.

After the Revolution of 1948, the political structure of the country was not dramatically altered; the democratically elected Legislative Assembly remained the law-making body. What changed was the motivation behind the state’s role in national issues: now, the government was

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383 Figueres, concerned about his relationships with foreign leaders, was determined that Costa Rica play a role in international affairs. He specifically opposed many of the tyrannical governments in the region, like that of Rafael Trujillo Molina in the Dominican Republic and the Somozas in Nicaragua. He actively worked to cultivate his and Costa Rica’s image abroad, specifically in the United States, where he hired a public relations firm to manage his image as a champion of democracy. Ibid., 218.
to be less paternalistic and should instead convey a sense of camaraderie with the common man, whose cause it sought to advance. In 1949, a new constitution was written that melded the original Constitution of 1871 with the social reforms implemented in the 1940s (creation of social security, garantías sociales [social guarantees], and a clearly defined labor law), and the social democratic ideas set forth by the Partido Social Demócrata. The government decreed its right to both produce and distribute national wealth. Power held by the executive branch was diminished, and the Assembly was impelled to enact measures that led toward decentralization. An array of autonomous institutions, at the service of the state, was established to run national affairs, delegating control of the social democratic principle among a wider sector of society. These empresas estatales (state businesses), which still function today, are independent entities run by boards of directors, yet tied to the government by a measure of economic and legislative support. A system of public civil service, Servicio Civil, was instated to fill the many new jobs that opened at these institutions, converting the state into the country’s main employer. The army, already a weak branch prior to the Revolution of 1948, was abolished entirely, and the state reallocated its funds toward education, infrastructure, and welfare. Despite some lingering


385 These institutions include the state universities, banks, insurance, healthcare, human rights organizations (including one for women, and two for children), comptroller, electoral tribunal (curtailed fraud and granted women and Costa Ricans of Afro-Caribbean descent the right to vote), and other institutions established to safeguard basic standards of living in Costa Rica. Ibid., 116. For a complete listing of current institutions, see “Gobierno y Democracia / Instituciones Autónomas,” Portal del Estado Costarricense, accessed July 24, 2013, http://www.gobiernofacil.go.cr/E-GOB/weblinks/index.aspx.

factionalism, there was an overarching conviction that the democratically elected politicians were accountable for the country’s economic and social development.  

Costa Rica aspired to set an example within the region of a true democracy whose government was involved in improving the lives of its citizens through healthcare, education, business and labor opportunities, industry, infrastructure, wealth and land distribution, and access to culture. By 1978 statistics yielded a positive picture: the average life expectancy was 70 years of age, infant mortality dropped to two percent, over ninety percent of adults were literate, and an ever-increasing number of Costa Ricans were receiving a university education. Health care coverage reached 86 percent of the population, poverty had decreased significantly, and unemployment was below five percent. The democratic system has been sustained during these years, with the two main political parties alternating control, helping maintain a balanced approach to governance. The leaders of Costa Rica remained anti-communist (the communist party was outlawed between 1948 and 1970), and though they have been critical of the United States’ support of dictatorships in the region, the two countries forged and maintained a strong, anti-communist allegiance in North America. While dictatorships were established throughout Latin America, with militarily strong, rightwing governments that violently retained power in the face of socialist threat, Costa Rica remained peaceful and democratic.

387 Bethell, Historia de América Latina: América Central Desde 1930, 212.


389 Calderón Guardia, exiled after the Revolution, twice led military advances against the government, once in December 1948 and then again in 1955, both times attempting to invade from Nicaragua. Figueres was able to stave these advances with the help of the Organization of American States. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, Historia de Costa Rica, 125–126. Figueres’ first defeat came in 1958, when the PLN candidate, Francisco Orlich, lost to Mario Echandi. Ultimately, Figueres considered the defeat a positive turn in the larger scheme of Latin American democracy. Skidmore, Smith, and Green, Modern Latin America, 303.


During these years, the government allocated large sums of money toward infrastructure building primary and high schools, colleges, roads and highways, hydroelectric plants, clinics, and hospitals.\(^{392}\) The cultural sector of the country also benefitted from the vast socio-political transformation that was taking place in Costa Rica, though at a slower pace due to inadequate funding. The state of cultural affairs prior to the Revolution of 1948, and well into the 1950s, was weak. Even during the years of the *Exposiciones de Artes Plásticas* at the National Theater, there was little support for the visual arts. Max Jiménez complained about the disappointing environment in his 1936 book, *El domador de pulgas* (The Tamer of Fleas). “The flea artist found a NO always, an initial NO, that by force of repetition, and because of the roundedness of its fine O turns into the world.”\(^{393}\) The difficult conditions for artists paired with the loss of the yearly salon hindered innovation in the visual arts. Eugenia Zavaleta, Costa Rican art historian, describes the environment:

Since the exhibitions sponsored by the *Diario de Costa Rica* (1928-37), the visual art world had fallen into a lethargic state that brought its development to a halt. This was the panorama: there were very few exhibitions, art criticism did not exist, the market for artwork was practically non-existent, and definitely, apathy reigned. There was also the fact that Costa Rican society of the fifties was highly conservative, and as such, less prone to handling vanguard tendencies.\(^{394}\)

\(^{392}\) Such progress was economically feasible not only because funds were not being spent on a military, but also for two additional factors. First, a ten percent income tax was levied on the wealthiest members of society; and second, agricultural exports augmented became more lucrative with the worldwide economic expansion after World War II. Agricultural technology aided in making plantations more efficient and productive. Banana exports rose from 3.5 to 18 million boxes a year between 1944 and 1952, while the price of coffee increased by about seven and a half times between 1940 and 1956. Low interest credit was granted to people of low, middle, and high socioeconomic status, and the opening of international markets permitted extensive growth in diverse industries, such as textiles and other agro-exports like pineapple and cotton. Molina Jiménez and Palmer, *Historia de Costa Rica*, 119–125.


\(^{394}\) “Desde las exposiciones auspiciadas por el *Diario de Costa Rica* (1928-37), el medio plástico había caído en un letargo que frenó su desarrollo. Este era el panorama: las exposiciones eran escasas, la crítica de arte no existía, el mercado de obras de arte era casi nulo y, en definitivo, la apatía imperaba. Además estaba el hecho de que la
Costa Rican artists were frustrated by the country’s lack of support, which only worsened during the 1940s, despite the renovation of artistic education at the UCR. As stated by Alberto Cañas (1920), author and Costa Rica’s first Minister of Culture (1970-1974), the *liberales* leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had no defined cultural policy. For them, the National Theater was merely a grandiose building. Cañas, a *centrista* (member of the CEPN), commented that the 1940s was a decade of crisis during which, “*no hay tiempo de cantar*” (“there is no time to sing”).\(^{395}\) *Centristas* believed national culture should be neither specifically elite nor popular, but rather a new kind of culture produced by intellectuals and specialized artists who sought to codify the “authentically” Costa Rican. Once identified, this culture needed to be spread throughout the country.\(^{396}\) In the Constitution of 1949, the Assembly established that the government must “promote, protect, and teach science and the arts.”\(^{397}\) At first, politicians thought that the arts could be left in the hands of the UCR; their main concern was to rebuild the country. But soon it was clear that the development of culture could not and should not be relegated to the university alone, and eventually, active measures were taken to support and promote the arts. With political stability, economic growth, and an increase in the number of citizens receiving a higher education, came a greater thirst for the arts and a desire for greater cultural awareness.\(^{398}\)

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\(^{395}\) Cuevas Molina, *Cultura y política en Costa Rica*, 43.


The state first became actively involved in an art-related project due to an initiative by the Ministry of Foreign Relations. After the Revolution, with the ultimate victory of the democratically elected party, the abolishment of the army, the increased investment in education, and the many other innovations set forth by Figueres and his followers, Costa Rica was *en vogue*, especially in Europe. Embassies requested literature about and from the country, but there was nothing available for distribution. In 1955, the director of international political affairs, Fernando Volio, called a meeting of authors to discuss the creation of texts for circulation. He noted in a 1990 interview that there was no sense of unity among the authors, and no institutional entity that brought them together. Volio also noticed a general sense of low self-esteem among cultural creators in the country.\(^3\)\(^9\)\(^9\) To remedy this, he instigated the creation of the *Asamblea de Autores* (Assembly of Authors, also referred to as the *Asociación de Autores de obras literarias, artísticas y científicas* [Association of Authors of Literary, Artistic and Scientific Works]), ratified as a state agency in 1958 during the last weeks of Figueres’s term in office in 1958. The Assembly further proposed the creation of the *Editorial Costa Rica*, an initiative that was approved in 1959 and established in 1960.\(^4\)\(^0\) These government initiatives to foster the literary arts made politicians aware that the state could help coordinate artists and provide them with an outlet for their work. Enabling creative development became symbolic of what a social democratic government could do for the country in the name of culture.

This willingness to promote literature did not encompass the visual arts, except for an initial government action right after the Revolution. In late 1948 the *Cuartel de Bella Vista* (Military Headquarters of Bella Vista) was slated as the new home for the National Museum.

\(^3\)\(^9\)\(^9\) Cuevas Molina, *Cultura y política en Costa Rica*, 82–84.

Remodeling began in 1949, funded mostly with private donations, so that the interior would meet the needs of the museum and to ensure that the space never be used again for military purposes. Among the galleries designed in the museum’s new home was a space for temporary exhibitions and another dedicated to Costa Rican art, named the Max Jiménez Room in honor of the national artist who had recently died in Argentina. Regardless of this political good will toward the museum and Costa Rican culture at large, the government did not properly fund the institution. For example, the position of curator was eliminated in 1952 and not reinstated until 1972. Much of the decision-making and organization was left to the volunteer members of the board of directors and underprepared, understaffed employees. During this period, the institution’s main objective was to protect, investigate, and exhibit archaeological and historical objects and scientific specimens. It was linked to the UCR through which it obtained funding for investigative and didactic projects. Without a set budget, the museum also depended on national and international donations to finance their activities, circumstances that made it impossible for the museum to grow steadily and maintain a constant agenda of events.

401 Kandler, National Museum of Costa Rica, 41.

402 Ibid., 42–46.

403 In the 1950s there were many archaeological digs in the country that yielded rich findings about Costa Rica’s past. This required a reorganization of cultural policy that sought to improve scientific scholarship and to prevent looting at archaeological sites, which was all too prevalent in Costa Rica (and remains so to this day). Adding recent findings to their collection the National Museum reinstalled their permanent display of Pre-Columbian artifacts in hopes of educating the public and instilling popular pride for the country’s heritage and patrimony. Furthermore, the Museum created travelling exhibitions that could be sent both to communities throughout the country as well as abroad. In 1953 the Colonial Room was inaugurated, exhibiting the museum’s collection of colonial works, mostly wooden furniture, doors, and religious objects. For more on this topic see, Kandler, National Museum of Costa Rica.

404 The Asociación de Amigos del Museo Nacional (Association of Friends of the National Museum), created in 1963, promoted the museum and charged a membership fee that would help the museum cover its programming costs. “Se está formando grupo de amigos del Museo Nacional para elevar la cultura,” Mujer y Hogar, July 19, 1963. On this topic see Kandler, National Museum of Costa Rica, 42. The history wing of the museum is currently undergoing a major renovation.
While the museum was incapable of making a dedicated effort toward the cultivation of visual art, it did make its galleries available to outside groups, since the Museum was one of the few exhibition spaces in San Jose. Throughout the 1950s, shows reflected the interests of the organizations that sponsored them such as the Centro para Estudios Femeninos (Center for Women’s Studies), the Asociación Costarricense de Arquitectos (Association of Costa Rican Architects, founded in 1956), and the French and American embassies.\(^{405}\) The move of the National Museum to its new location permitted it to gain visibility and prestige (the fortress resides on a hill and can be seen from distances blocks away), heightening Costa Rican awareness of the nation’s artistic and cultural patrimony. Yet the museum seems to have held little importance to the average Costa Rican, who considered it primarily an educational resource to benefit school children.\(^{406}\) A newspaper reporter admonished Costa Ricans for their lack of interest in the museum. In response to a 1957 UNESCO-sponsored exhibition that included reproductions of two thousand years of Chinese painting, the author scolded:

> It is sad to think that an opportunity like the one offered to our public, made vain because it is consistently referred to as ‘cultured’, is lost without being the least taken advantage of...The reproductions of the UNESCO...languish in a deserted gallery of our National Museum: nobody visits it, nobody comments about it, the ‘critics’ have not ceded it great importance, the newspapers have ignored it and perhaps its sponsors should remove it before the end of its remaining week of exhibition, as our ‘cultured’ public must be too

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\(^{405}\) Among the exhibitions at the National Museum during the 1950s were XIII-XVII Century English prints of funerary monuments (May 1950), Reproductions of French Art (1950), paintings by members of the Centro para Estudios Femeninos (August 1950), the Photographic Club of Mexico (sponsored by the Photographic Club of Costa Rica, August 1950), an exhibition about the North American Indians from the Museum of Natural History in New York (April 1952), reproductions of drawings by Leonardo da Vinci (December 1953), Costa Rican religious art (April 1955), two shows of reproductions of European masters (both 1955; the first show were works made before 1860 including images by Blake, Bosch, Brueghel, Constable, Daumier, Durer, Fragonard, Ingres, Rembrandt, Reynolds, Rubens, Turner, Velazquez, and Vermeer, among others; the second were works made between 1860-1955 with works by Bonnard, Braque, Cézanne, Chagall, Degas, Gauguin, van Gogh, Gris, Klee, Kokoschka, Leger, Manet, Marin, Marc, Matisse, Miro, Modigliani, Monet, Moore, O’Keefe, Orozco, Picasso, Pissarro, Redon, Renoir, Rivera, Rouault, Rosseau, Segonzac, Seurat, Sisley, Toulouse-Lautrec, Utrillo, and Vlaminck among others), French affiches (sponsored by the Alianza Franco-Costarricense and the French embassy, September 1957), Reproductions of 2,000 Years of Chinese Painting (UNESCO, Dec. 1957). National Museum Archive.

\(^{406}\) “2,000 años de pintura china, y la soledad del Museo,” *Diario de Costa Rica*, December 3, 1957.
busy studying the last cha-cha-cha step or the latest marvel that, like a gift, the Mexican cinema will send.⁴⁰⁷

Even with artists actively coming together in the 1930s, the renovation of the School of Fine Arts in the 1940s, and the government’s willingness to give a prominent space to the museum in the 1950s, the majority of Costa Ricans still perceived the arts as unimportant. The limited exchange of ideas, a lack of adequate outlets for artists to show their work, and the general absence of an appreciative and critical audience strained the evolution of the visual arts in the country.

A paradigmatic turning point came in 1958 as a result of various exhibitions. A show of Costa Rican art, coordinated in conjunction with the 33rd Annual Congress of Americanists, attempted to catalog Costa Rican art history. Reports of the Congress began to appear in newspapers over a year in advance.

We have faith that our country will not come across badly. We will have something to show, even if it is only our aboriginal culture. But the upcoming year 58 must be the year of Costa Rican Culture. We repeat this to urge all of our working citizens, the researchers, to get into a plan of activity, of collaboration, because time is limited. Let us move ahead, let Costa Rica contribute to this extraordinary event [33rd Annual Congress of Americanists], surely the only one for years to come, to demonstrate Costa Rica’s cultural capacity.⁴⁰⁸

Nestled within these words is a derogatory perception of the nation, particularly in the face of international scrutiny, similar to that perceived by Volio upon gathering Costa Rican authors.

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⁴⁰⁷ "Es triste pensar que una oportunidad como la que se brinda a nuestro público que se envanece porque continuamente se la llama ‘culto’, se pierda sin el menor provecho…Las reproducciones de la UNESCO… languidece en una sala desierta de nuestro Museo Nacional: Nadie la visita, nadie la comenta, la ‘crítica’ no le ha concedido importancia, los periódicos la han ignorado y tal vez sus patrocinadores debieran retirarla antes de concluir la semana que aún le falta por exhibirse, ya que nuestro ‘culto’ público debe estar muy ocupado estudiando el último paso de cha-cha-cha o la última maravilla que como un regalo, nos enviará el cine mexicano.” Aroldo, “Dos mil años de pintura China en el Museo Nacional,” La Nación, November 28, 1957.

The statement reveals a sense of isolation: “Let Costa Rica contribute to this extraordinary event, surely the only one for years to come,” and concludes that there is an obligation to prove something, “to demonstrate Costa Rica’s cultural capacity.” But what exactly did they mean to prove and why question the nation’s worth? “We have faith that our country will not come across badly.” Why does it not read, “We have faith that our country will come across well or brilliantly?” Palpable here is a post-colonial sense of inferiority that stems from a feeling of pertaining to the “periphery.” The quote also reveals a prejudiced reticence to identify with the country’s largely extinct indigenous culture. (“We will have something to show, even if it is only our aboriginal culture.”) Why not be proud of that “aboriginal culture,” the collection of which was recently installed in its new venue, a fort that no longer functioned militarily because the army was abolished? Why was that not enough to “demonstrate Costa Rica’s cultural capacity?”

The Congress drew over one hundred scholars, scientists, and intellectuals from Europe and the Americas. To receive the delegates, the organizers coordinated the exhibition “Contemporary Costa Rican Art” with painting and sculpture by twenty-one artists. Accompanying the exhibition was a small catalogue by Amighetti that included a short essay about the history of Costa Rican art. It begins with an explanation of colonial history, briefly reviews the nineteenth century, and then goes into more detail about the Generation of the 1930s (not yet referred to as such). Amighetti mentioned the critics Abelardo Bonilla and Enrique Macaya, referencing the importance of a critical audience. In regard to the 1940s, Amighetti merely points out the return to Costa Rica from Cuba of artist Margarita Bertheau (1913-1975). He then summarized the contemporary art scene with a list of names of emerging artists, most of them UCR graduates, and concludes with a sentence about González’s return to Costa Rica with non-figurative painting (though at the time this work had yet to be publicly exhibited, and
González did not feature in the group show). Amighetti, a prolific and experienced artist, was also a professor of art history at the UCR. His attempt to catalog artistic creation in Costa Rica, looking back to colonial history, is telling of an increased historical self-awareness among artists. By concluding his essay with a mention of González’s return, Amighetti foretold the important role González would play in the creation of modern art and the formation of new artists in coming years.

More importantly, a triad of solo shows featuring abstract art marks 1958 as a watershed year in Costa Rican art history. Lola Fernández (born 1926; exhibition dates May 29-June 15, fig. 4.1), Rafael Ángel “Felo” García (born 1928; exhibition dates November 21 -December 1, fig. 4.2), and González (December 3-15, fig. 4.3) each had spent time abroad (Fernández in Colombia and Italy, García in Cuba and England), where they developed an abstract painting style that, upon their return to Costa Rica, they exhibited to an audience unaccustomed to such art. Fernández and García showed lyrical abstraction; González both lyrical and geometric abstraction. Never before was abstract art displayed with such prominence in the country, or discussed with such frequency in lectures and newspapers. Though the art was challenging to the public, the exhibitions were well received. They represented a rupture with the predominant tradition of painting the landscape and the campesino, as established by the Generation of the

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411 These three solo exhibitions are so important in Costa Rican art history that they are mentioned in nearly every survey text. They are also mentioned specifically in Kupfner, “Central America,” 73.
1930s. By the end of 1958, the conjunction of these exhibitions augured well for the visual arts in Costa Rica, as stated in a newspaper clipping from the time. “The year…has been extraordinarily fruitful, has laid the bases for renewal in the visual arts of the country and promises greater achievements in the future.”

To recreate the cultural environment just prior to the beginning of what would be a major shift in the visual arts of Costa Rica, it is worth looking at how critics received Lola Fernández’s exhibition, the first of these historic shows. Fernández had been a prodigious art student at the UCR and continued her studies at the National University of Bogota. Upon receiving her degree, she returned to Costa Rica and taught at the UCR. Soon thereafter she won a scholarship from the Italian government to study at the Florence Academy of Art, where she graduated with honors. After a solo show in Paris, reportedly well received, she returned to Costa Rica and resumed teaching at the university. In honor of her return, the university sponsored the exhibition of her work at the National Museum. The Sunday before the exhibition, one report offered readers a succinct rendering of the artist’s biography, extending early congratulations for her “certain success.” Two days after the opening, a positive, though superficial review claimed, “The encounter brought together a considerable audience that was eager to admire the famed artist.” It mentioned that the public had expressed interest in purchasing some of the

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413 For more on Fernández, see José Gómez Sicre, Lola Fernández Retrospectiva: 30 Años de Pintura (San Jose, C.R.: Museo de Arte Costarricense, 1984); Ulloa Barrenechea, Pintores de Costa Rica, 141–145; Zavaleta Ochoa, Los inicios del arte abstracto en Costa Rica.


paintings. The next day (Sunday, the day with widest readership), a longer review extolled Fernández’s work for its strength and confidence, portraying it as the result of an honest search for self-expression. The author further commented that, although many might complain that there was nothing innately Costa Rican in her abstract paintings, such a charge was misplaced. “In Costa Rica we do not yet have a manner of painting, let alone a pictorial school. It may or may not appear one day. It may even be brought to us by this strong painter.” The glowing article concludes, “As for me, I can simply say that this is the first time that I have seen painting in Costa Rica.” From such reviews, it appears that, at least among the cultural elite, Fernández’s work was very well received. An attempt was made to understand this groundbreaking work, not so much in order to aid the artist herself, but as a means of prodding the Costa Rican art world, which many felt was in need of renewal.

Shortly after Fernández’s exhibition, González articulated his dissatisfaction with the conditions for artists in Costa Rica. In a July 1958 interview, he asserted that artists still feared being tagged “bohemians” and that the average Costa Rican only cared for soccer. His first major activity following his return to Costa Rica was his 1958 exhibition titled “Diez años de

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417 “Por lo que a mi respecta, podría decir, hablando en llano, que esta ha sido la primer vez que he visto pintura en Costa Rica.” Ibíd.

418 This idea is further discussed by Zavaleta, who points out that art criticism written by distinguished intellectuals like León Paecheco and Arturo Echeverría Loria surged in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Zavaleta Ochoa, Los inicios del arte abstracto en Costa Rica, 95–97.

419 With this intention, two days before the exhibition closed, González gave a lecture at the National Museum titled “Vistazo sobre arte abstracto” (Overview of Abstract Art). The lecture was similar to the one he gave in Maracaibo several years earlier (referred to in Chapter 3). He instructed the Costa Rican art-viewing public on how to look at abstract art, emphasizing that abstract art is not anecdotal and viewers should not seek meaning or explanation.

420 “Nuestra vida afectiva gira tras una pelota,” La Prensa Libre, July 6, 1958.
"pintura: homenaje a Cuba y Venezuela" ("Ten Years of Painting: Homage to Cuba and Venezuela", fig. 4.3). Curated as a retrospective, González’s intention was to show his artistic evolution abroad. The catalog lists his work chronologically, starting with a landscape executed in 1947, just prior to the artist’s departure from Costa Rica. Next, eight figurative paintings are listed as having been made in Cuba, followed by seventeen figurative and nine non-figurative paintings made in Maracaibo. The final work in the exhibition had been produced in Costa Rica that year. A geometric, non-figurative lacquer on wood painting, titled Espacio color (Space Color) and later retitled San José No. 1 (fig. 4.4), represents a continuation of the artistic course that González began in Maracaibo in his Espacio color series (fig 3.30): smooth, hard-edged, geometric abstraction in few colors and based on a grid. González created this composition on a grid and then made several studies before submitting it to the lacquerer who executed the final painting (figs. 4.5 - 4.7), thereby removing all trace of the artist’s hand. The smooth sheen of the lacquer paint in primary, untinted, and unmodulated color incorporates a patina of industrialism and modernity. Lines of varying width intersect with triangles and quadrangles in red, yellow, black, and white, giving the painting a frenzied rhythm. The shapes and colors compete, contrast, and complement each other as the viewer scans the composition to comprehend the interaction of the different geometric elements and how they come together as a unit.

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421 He also displayed various works on paper made abroad.

422 In the 1970s, art critic Amy Goldin usefully termed this kind of viewing “scanning,” differentiating it from what she referred to as “easy” viewing. “Scanning is a much more specialized, anxious kind of looking. It contains an element of search, an unsatisfied search at that, since it implies a restless refusal to focus and an attempt to grasp the nature of the whole.” Amy Goldin, “Patterns, Grids, and Paintings,” Artforum 14, no. 1 (1975): 51.
Years after his 1958 exhibition González claimed that he was called “crazy” because of the abstract work that appeared in this exhibition. Newspaper reviews, however, were positive and included such comments as: “[The exhibition] constituted a great artistic success,” “[It] has generated favorable commentary,” “[The work] is filled with strength and vibration, vitality and stylized poetry,” “[A] panorama filled with dignity and youthful vigor, which shines, like a resplendent light, the original soul of the painter,” and “[An event] that impacted the limits of the small art world of San Jose.” This “small art world” was unaccustomed to non-figurative art, even though abstraction dominated international modernism by the end of the 1950s. Regardless of abstraction’s tardy appearance, these three exhibitions of abstract art demonstrate that artists in Costa Rica were facing an important transitional moment. This shift, along with increased government support of the arts, economic prosperity, political stability, the return of artists from abroad, and a growing audience interested in the arts all came together to stimulate the artistic revival of the 1960s.

Early 1960s: Public Art, Grupo Ocho and the Dirección General de Artes y Letras

The year 1958 marked the beginning of an artistic transformation in Costa Rica, but it would take the following two decades to create real change in the cultural world. The combined effort of artists, cultural agents, and the state toward artistic development had an impact on society at large. In the words of writer and artist Guido Saenz, who served twice as Minister of Culture:

\[423\] Zavaleta Ochoa, Los inicios del arte abstracto en Costa Rica, 26.

There was an increased cultural awareness; people now became aware of the existence of those [art related] things, they turned to look, which they had not done before when they would pass by with the most absolute indifference, even contempt, disdain. Artists had been seen as lazy drunks, lowlifes; there was a revalorization of the human being-artist-creator.425

Artists of the 1960s staked new paths, moving away from the predominant themes of the campesino and the landscape. Artistic parameters widened by virtue of the growing ease with which ideas of transnational modernism made contact with the Costa Rican art world via artists’ travels, international periodicals, and visits by foreign cultural agents. As artists showed a greater tendency toward experimentation, the state simultaneously expressed greater interest in assisting the burgeoning cultural sector.

The government of the Second Republic realized that strengthening its commitment to fostering the arts and guaranteeing public access to culture was beneficial to the general public.426 One of the earliest ways in which the state fostered the visual arts was through the cultural agendas of the empresas estatales. As early as the 1950s, the Banco Central de Costa Rica (Central Bank of Costa Rica), the Instituto Nacional de Seguros (INS, National Institute of Insurance), the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS, Costa Rican Social Security System), and the Assembly all established programs to collect national art.427 The Banco Anglo,
one of several state-run banks, was among the first institutions to sponsor a modernist public work. The bank commissioned González to create a cement relief mural along the exterior of the east wall of their new building as part of a larger project to alter the visual fabric of the city.

*Mural espacial (Spatial Mural, figs. 4.8 and 4.9, 1960)*[^428] is situated in the heart of San Jose on one wall of what is presently the Ministerio de Hacienda (Ministry of Revenue, fig. 4.10). It is on Avenida Central (Central Avenue), diagonally across from the National Theater and in front of the neo-classical building of the Gobernación de la Provincia de San Jose (Governance of San Jose Province, now defunct). When erected, it was one of the first structures built by a public institution to introduce what became the symbolic style of the state: multi-storied building in the International Style.[^429] The first three decades of the Second Republic gave the city and the country a new physiognomy, one with modern structures of rational lines that specifically broke away from the neo-classical and art deco style of the past.[^430] Modern public art projects such as

[^428]: The polychrome on the mural in these two figures does not coincide. For many years the mural was left white, and there is currently a debate about whether or not the mural should return to being white considering that the present colors are not original.


González’s represented an embrace of the capitalist and democratic ideal that inspired the Second Republic.

*Mural espacial* was both physically and conceptually innovative for its time. It demonstrates an embrace of the kind of integration of the arts called for by international modernism, which González had witnessed in Caracas at the *Ciudad Universitaria*. González consciously challenged spectator expectations with a non-representational mural that was entirely different from the figurative murals made in the 1950s by Francisco Amighetti, Luis Daell (1927-1998), and Margarita Bertheau. In relief, about half of the cement shapes project out approximately 7.5 centimeters in depth (fig. 4.11). In its totality, the mural measures 3.2 meters in height and ten meters in width, dimensions that envelop the spectator when close to the wall. The viewer feels a further sense of intimacy because of a poured cement overhang, which both draws the viewer in by blocking from view the five-story elevation of the building and provides shelter during the eight-month-long rainy season. From afar, it is possible to distinguish a few Latin letters; on the left side there is a sideways M and C, the artist’s initials, and toward the right there is a sideways C and R, the country’s initials. Viewers who decipher these letters may in turn attempt to decode the shapes in the middle; while it is possible that they are based on letters that spell “Banco Anglo,” it is difficult to assert with certainty that the bank’s name is in fact spelled out. Also, considering the drawn out process of creating numerous studies before arriving at the final mural composition (figs. 4.12 and 4.13), it is likely that, if the shapes were based on the alphabet, González distorted them freely. These large-scale shapes that jut out from the wall continue González’s investigation into the spectator’s close interaction with free-

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431 Figueres commissioned Amighetti and Daell with figurative frescos of nationalist sentiment in 1948 right after the Revolution; the former painted *La agricultura* (Agriculture), the latter *La piedad* (Pietà). Both of these are currently located in the Museum of Costa Rican Art. Bertheau painted the figurative mural, *La danza* (1956, The Dance) for the elite women’s shop, *Dama Elegante* (Elegant Lady).
floating, geometric shapes, seen in his last lacquer paintings made in Maracaibo. In this way the mural differs from *San José, No. 1* (fig. 4.4), which integrates more lines and shapes yielding a dynamic interplay of its component parts and greater depth. By contrast, the large shapes of *Mural* are independent shapes juxtaposed harmoniously within the built environment. Rather than the frenetic energy of *San José, No. 1*, the viewer experiences *Mural* as a rhythmic progression from left to right. The phenomenological experience of the work in space and time impacts the dynamic between the object and the viewer, incorporating spectator and public space through art, sculpture, and architecture.

This kind of state sponsorship was only the beginning of a public art movement to modernize the urban environment. Yet artists still felt they were not receiving the proper support, and they began to take action. In 1961, sculptor Nestor Zeledón Guzmán (1933), concerned about the idle state of the art world in Costa Rica, approached García in his office at the Ministerio de Obras Publicas (Ministry of Public Works). Together they concocted a plan to prod contemporary artistic practice. As García recalled in an interview years later, he had suggested, “‘Let’s make a group and fight together.’ So then, right there, Nestor and I began the task of making a list of artists who we felt at that moment...could comprise such a group. We made the list, in which Manuel [de la Cruz González] was the absolute first.”\textsuperscript{432} This initiative led to the creation of the *Grupo Ocho* (Group Eight), named such because of its eight original, all male members: García, González, Zeledón, César Valverde (1928-1998), Harold Fonseca (1920-2000), Guillermo Jiménez (1922-1988), Luis Daell, and Hernán González (1918-1987). These artists shared a common frustration with the cultural environment in Costa Rica. In the words of

\textsuperscript{432} “Hagamos un grupo y peleemos juntos. Y entonces, allí mismo, Nestor y yo, nos dimos a la tarea de hacer una lista de artistas que creíamos en ese momento...podían componer ese grupo. Hicimos la lista en la cual desde luego Manuel era el primerísimo...” Montero, “Conversación,” 30.
Valverde, “Some of us who had studied in Europe or North America, returned with our baggage of ideals and images seen in galleries and museums, but suddenly found ourselves isolated and misunderstood before a visual arts panorama that was stagnant and circumscribed by the adobe house, the oxcart and the bucolic-rural landscape.” Traditional iconography reigned supreme, but by the 1960s such themes no longer reflected the national character. Cultural historian Rafael Cuevas Molina points out that a shift in Costa Rican identity was reflected both in the visual and the verbal arts.

From the fifties, the representative character of 'the Costa Rican' no longer was the concho [vulgar campesino] of nineteenth-century literature, but the clerk, the middle class, the people of the city. Carmen Naranjo was the first writer to notice this change of profile in Costa Rican literature, in the same way as, a few years before, the Grupo Ocho burst onto the visual arts scene of the country creating scandal by abandoning the figurative (adobe houses, the oxcart) and adopting abstraction as their means of expression.

Modern artists in Costa Rica were no longer drawn to nationalist iconography. It had become cliché. Yet few deviated from this standard, and there had been no effort in the previous two decades to foster an audience interested in more modern, updated creations. The Grupo Ocho was a harbinger of the upcoming artistic revival of the 1960s, setting a route toward change.

García stated,

We formed the group to launch our struggle to improve the setting, to stir up the environment, and, well, to enter a battle by way of discussion, etc., all that would be

433 “Algunos artistas que habíamos estudiado en Europa y Norteamérica retornamos con un bagaje de ideales y de imágenes vistas en galerías y museos pero de pronto nos encontramos aislados e incomprendidos ante un panorama con una plástica que se hallaba estancada o circunscrita a la casita de adobe, la carreta y un paisaje bucólico-rural.” Cesar Valverde, “Vigencia de Los Ocho,” Revista Nacional de Cultura, November 1991, 25.

434 “A partir de la década del cincuenta, el personaje representativo de ‘lo costarricense’ no será más el concho de la literatura decimonónica, sino el oficinista, la clase media, la gente de la ciudad. Carmen Naranjo será la primera escritora que dará cuenta de este cambio de perfil en la literatura costarricense, de la misma forma como unos pocos años antes, el Grupo Ocho había irrumpido en la plástica del país creando escándalo al abandonar el figurativismo (las casas de adobes, la carreta de bueyes) y adoptar el abstraccionismo como forma de expresión.” Cuevas Molina, Tendencias de la dinámica cultural en Costa Rica, 23.
necessary, with the goal, not to be recognized ourselves, but rather to create an awareness of how behind we were in relation to the world’s artistic reality.  

With the goal of breaking away from the conservatism and virtual silence that had ruled the cultural environment of Costa Rica, the Grupo Ocho published their manifesto in a paid advertisement space of *La Prensa Libre* on November 30 and December 1, 1961 (fig. 4.14). With the subheading “a spiritual state, more than a theory” the manifesto served as an invitation to the group’s first collective exhibition. The short manifesto, approximately 250 words in length, is divided into two parts. With a sentence reminiscent of the Futurist Manifesto’s phrase “Museums, cemeteries!” the Grupo Ocho manifesto begins, “Classical beauty is dead because it negates the spirit of our century: static, quiet, mute.” The manifesto goes on to acknowledge the novelty, uncertainty, tumultuousness, and speed of current times (again, reminiscent of the Futurist Manifesto), and proclaims, “*El arte es vida*” (“Art is life”). The manifesto states that art is change; it is an account of the interior life of man, his intuitive aesthetic, his free and creative consciousness. The first section concludes, “Art is part of eternal, universal creation,” an idea comparable to González’s notion about art as cosmic integration. Because of this, though signed by all eight members, it is likely that González took a more active role in writing the manifesto, particularly the first part, which references the universality of art, the importance of creative freedom, and the idea that life is art.

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435 “Formamos ese grupo para lanzarnos a luchar por el medio, a remover el medio, y pues a entrar en una batalla de discusión, etc, todo lo que fuera necesario, con el fin, no de que se nos reconociera, sino que se reconociera el atraso que estábamos viviendo en el medio artístico mundial.” Montero, “Conversación.”

436 “La belleza clásica está muerta porque ella es la negación del espíritu de nuestro siglo: estática, quieta, muda.” Luis Daell; Harold Fonseca; Rafael A. García; Hernán González; Manuel de la Cruz González; Néstor Z. Guzmán; Guillermo Jiménez; César Valverde, “Manifesto Grupo Ocho (un estado de espíritu, más que una teoría),” *La Prensa Libre*, November 30, 1961.

437 “El arte es parte de la eterna creación universal.” Ibid.
The second part of the manifesto declares the group’s ambitions and specifically states their intention to improve the national art scene.

We want to unsettle the environment to stimulate all forms of creative originality. We want to exalt the artist who interprets in his work our deepest roots. We believe that the creative consciousness of our people runs through multiple, unprecedented channels. We want to generate a new national art movement capable of developing the arts in its many manifestations.438

At its core, the statement is revolutionary, because it is a declaration that the undersigned found it necessary to “unsettle” their society as a means of developing the visual arts in their country. Concluding with a promise to host “exhibitions, conferences, and polemic… [and] exchange with foreign artists,”439 it welcomes the public to join them in their efforts. The manifesto ends on a note of good intention and does not prescribe a specific style or theme. It was, after all, “a spiritual state, more than a theory.”440

While the manifesto now seems benign and outdated, the first few words, “Classical beauty is dead,” provoked a strong reaction among traditionalists, who published newspaper responses to the group. Costa Rican poet Ioan Vidal wrote that classical art could and should not be disavowed.441 González responded to this under the pseudonym “Un Ocho” (An Eight)—both crediting the group and perhaps feeling the need to hide his identity from those not directly part of his social circle—by saying that the manifesto should not be perceived as a desire to “bomb the Parthenon,” but rather to establish that the validity of classical beauty “as the authority on

438 “Queremos inquietar el ambiente para estimular toda forma de originalidad creadora. Queremos exaltar al artista que interprete en sus obras nuestra raíz más profunda. Creemos que la conciencia creadora de nuestros pueblos discurre inédita por múltiples canales. Queremos engendrar un nuevo movimiento artístico nacional capaz de desarrollar las artes plásticas en sus más variadas manifestaciones.” Ibid.

439 “Haremos exposiciones, conferencias, polémicas.” Ibid.

440 Ibid.

plastic thought had passed.”442 Another Costa Rican poet, Manfred Reinhold, published a subsequent article rejecting the manifesto. He argued that, if the main purpose was to “discomfort the environment, so as to stimulate all manner of creative originality,” then it was indicative of a perilous situation, because it meant that art was being used frivolously, rather than as a positive force to inspire greatness.443 Responding again as “Un Ocho,” González wrote:

“It [classical art] inspires us because those who created it surpassed their material setting. But its creators died, and well dead they have been for a long time…We men who live today confronted by other dimensions honestly try to find a bridge between the intimate world and the marvelous universe that we are discovering.”444

In this way, González defended artistic freedom. He took charge of repelling the attacks on the Grupo Ocho and thereby helped to establish the presence of Costa Rica’s first artistic avant-garde.

These printed debates happened in tandem with the group’s open-air exhibition. The public discussion about modern art in San Jose (Diario de Costa Rica, La Prensa Libre, and La Nación) helped lure an audience. The first Grupo Ocho exhibition was held in December in Las Arcadas (The Arcades), located in front of the National Theater. It received a variety of critiques, both positive and negative. Popular criticism revealed the philistine immaturity that the artists faced. A humorist wrote, “My God what canvases! To be honest some were like dog vomit ... at best, an occasional work seemed like when one is totally drunk and looks, as if through mist, at the spectacle of horses, slides, rides, and stands in La Sabana [Park] on the night of December


444 “Ella nos inspira porque quienes la crearon superaron su medio material. Pero sus creadores murieron, y bien muertos están hace tiempos…Los hombres que hoy vivimos enfrentados a otras cifras, tratamos honestamente de encontrar el puente entre el mundo íntimo y el universo maravilloso que estamos descubriendo.” Un Ocho, “Siguen Los Ocho: Cordialmente al señor Reinhold,” La Prensa Libre, December 11, 1961.
This was the attitude the Grupo Ocho wished to fight. The cultural elite, on the other hand, showed a more constructive approach toward the exhibition and the group in general. One reporter wrote,

To those who are not conversant in the matter, the paintings might easily be judged as ‘difficult,’ strange even. The mass public tends to rebel against the creation of art works that in the abstract or the figurative, only barely make visible a vague idea of what the painter wants to manifest with his measured brush strokes or fast application of color.

This article pronounced that a new artistic movement had been born. Although ultra-modern for the Costa Rican public and thereby largely inexplicable to most, the exhibition ushered in a much-needed artistic revival. To further convince his readers of the benefits of the Grupo Ocho, the reporter quoted the ex-first lady, Karen Olsen de Figueres, who said,

Undoubtedly we have many artists of a high degree. I am moved by the first Grupo Ocho exhibition and am happy that the artists are taking on such cultural force in their own hands. I believe they should be encouraged because the flavor of a country can always be found in the artistic… You can be sure they are worth encouraging. I have seen many exhibitions in different countries and the one that opened today in this city is not wanting in grounds of modern art.

The words of the first lady, though superficial, served to give the opinion of the upper echelon of society and meant to give legitimacy to the group.
“Much has been said and even argued about the exhibition at ‘Las Arcadas' by ‘Los 8,’” stated one reporter by the end of the exhibition’s run.\textsuperscript{448} It was visited and discussed “by all classes of people, including passers-by and the curious.”\textsuperscript{449} The following year, the Grupo Ocho made an open call to artists to exhibit in the “1\textsuperscript{st} Festival of Fine Arts” held at the Parque Central in front of the Cathedral of San Jose. While successful, the event did not have the same impact as the first Grupo Ocho exhibition, as it did not incite the same level of public debate. It did, however, emphasize the lack of state support for the arts. The announcement was published in various newspapers inviting artists to submit their work to the Festival, beneath the statement, “The Grupo Ocho (for lack of a Ministry of Culture) convokes…”\textsuperscript{450} In this way, the Grupo Ocho pinpointed a major problem within the cultural sector: the central government had no entity to support the arts.

After this event, the Grupo Ocho incorporated several other members, including Fernández and Carlos Moya (1925). In the four major exhibitions mounted prior to their dissolution in 1963, the artists displayed mostly lyrical abstraction, with the exception of Fonseca and González, who also showed geometric abstraction. José Gómez-Sicre, chief of the Visual Arts Unit of the Organization of American States (OAS), developed an interest in Costa Rican contemporary art during his first visit to San Jose upon seeing a Grupo Ocho exhibition. After a second trip to the country, he organized an exhibition in 1964 titled “Contemporary Costa Rican Art” at the OAS Gallery in Washington D.C. that included most of the Grupo Ocho

\textsuperscript{448} “Se ha hablado mucho, y discutido más de la exposición en ‘Las Arcadas' a cargo de ‘Los 8’.” Ibid.


\textsuperscript{450} “El Grupo Ocho convoca (a falta de un Ministerio de la Cultura).” Newspaper clipping, González Archive.
members.451 The exhibition catalog credits the *Grupo Ocho* with having “clear[ed] the way for the vitalization of Costa Rican art.”452 In writing about this experience Gómez-Sicre asserted that he was delighted to hear a woman’s indignant refusal to accept that what was on display was Costa Rican art. For this viewer, art without *campesinos* was not Costa Rican art.

Gómez-Sicre credited himself with having helped establish a new era of emerging art in Costa Rica. Figurative and abstract, without folklore, he wrote,

[These artists had] overcome the provincial and descriptive phase that had hovered over Central American art for a long time to the delight of holiday travelers. Costa Rica, for our encouragement, on this opportunity peeped into our Latin American art scene with a well-formed group of artists concerned with conveying not a territory of carnival, but rather undertaking the inescapable problems of art ... These were artists who, without losing sight of their environment or continental spirit, did not bow to mere typical description.453

Whether or not Gómez-Sicre had a hand in motivating Costa Rican artists away from the vernacular iconography of their predecessors, he was right in recognizing the fundamental role the *Grupo Ocho* played in changing the course for visual art in the country. Though short-lived,

451 The exhibition featured Combariza, Fernández, Fonseca, García, Hernán González, Jiménez, Carlos Moya, Carlos Poveda, and Valverde. It is unclear why Daell, Zeledón, and Manuel de la Cruz González, original *Grupo Ocho* members, were not included.


453 “Superado esa fase provincial y descriptiva que tanto gravitó sobre el arte centroamericano durante un buen tiempo, para deleite de viajeros en vacaciones. Costa Rica, para estímulo nuestro, se asomaba en esta oportunidad a nuestro panorama de arte latinoamericano con un bien formado grupo de creadores preocupados en plasmar no un territorio de carnaval sino acomete en los problemas ineludibles del arte...Eran artistas que, sin perder de vista su medio o su espíritu continental, no se doblegaban a una somera descripción tipicista.” Gómez-Sicre goes on to enumerate several traits of Costa Rican society providing a sense of the image that Costa Rican cultural agents like García, González, Loría Echeverría, Fernández, and others projected to outsiders in the 1960s. Gómez-Sicre pointed out, “For many years now there has been no illiteracy among the people in Costa Rica, a problem that still worries most of the continent...There are more school teachers than National Guards...With a strong political conscience, profoundly democratic, Costa Ricans are secure in themselves, serene, legitimately democratic, lovers of work, organized...They have produced literary movements...but its visual arts had been lacking in courage.” “No hay analfabetos en Costa Rica desde hace muchos años mientras ese problema todavía preocupa a casi todo el resto del continente...número mayor de maestros que de la Guardia Nacional.” “De fuerte conciencia política, profundamente democrático, el pueblo costarricense es un pueblo seguro de sí mismo, sereno, legítimamente democrático, amante del trabajo, ordenado...Ha producido movimientos literarios...pero le faltaba a sus artes visuales un arresto.” José Gómez Sicre, “Un brote de arte nuevo en Costa Rica,” *La Prensa Libre*, November 26, 1964.
the Grupo Ocho brought rebellious artists together, reached out to other artists, debated ideas, disrupted the stasis in the visual arts, pointed out the need for state sponsorship, and validated the growing tendency among artists in the country to create abstract art. This last achievement may largely be credited to González’s capacity to argue eloquently, if not convincingly, for abstraction. Within the Grupo Ocho he was considered the erudite member, the one who could provide answers to those seeking to understand modern art.

With manifestations of modern art what happens to us is that we cannot penetrate the significance of certain artistic trends of the moment…From this somewhat pedestrian level—as part of the city’s thick-headed populace—we declare we liked the Grupo Ocho’s exhibition. If someone asks for explanations we will send him to converse with Manuel de la Cruz [González] so that he can provide them.454

The effort by the Grupo Ocho to gather artists drew the attention of national leaders. By the early 1960s, cultural agents, particularly García, helped the government realize that it must take an active role in the arts. Until then, the state’s most important contribution to culture had been the establishment of the Editorial Costa Rica and the Asociación de Autores, initiatives spearheaded by Fernando Volio. Important initial steps, both organizations illustrated that state intervention was necessary and fruitful, and could have a positive effect on the development of national culture at large. In 1961, Volio, then a congressman, led another initiative to promote the arts: Premios Nacionales de la Cultura (National Awards of Culture). The prizes, still awarded today, were intended to increase awareness of artistic creation in the country among citizens, as well as foster healthy competition and serve as incentive for artists. Volio stated in a later interview:

454 “Con las manifestaciones de arte moderno nos sucede a nosotros-que no hemos podido penetrar la significación de ciertas tendencias artísticas de última hora... Desde este plano un tanto pedestre—como parte del vulgo municipal y espeso—declaramos que nos gustó la exposición de arte del Grupo Ocho. Si alguien nos pide explicaciones lo mandaremos a conversar con Manuel de la Cruz para que él se las dé.” “La Columna,” La Nación, December 4, 1961.
[The Premios] made the State concerned with promoting the creative qualities of Costa Ricans as another stimulus toward creative work. It was also a way to highlight this work taking it out of anonymity and elevating the artist to a position worthy of his participation in an enlightened society: there would be more respect for the artist. And then, what had been only an idea became something very important for artists and a source of healthy competition to stand out.455

The monetary prizes encouraged artistic creation; if art was publicly exhibited it could be seen and judged by the jury. This state recognition of talent within the visual arts, theater, literature, music, dance, and journalism was the first time artists were singled out by the country’s leaders in honor of their achievements and dedication toward furthering culture. When in 1964 González won a Premio Nacional his prize included a government-sponsored, retrospective that included the coordination of publicity, invitations, exhibition catalog, and no percentage taken when he sold work during the exhibition.456

In 1963, the government took a further step toward cultural patronage, establishing the Dirección General de Artes y Letras (DGAL, General Directorate of Arts and Letters), a sub-entity within the Ministry of Education. The constitutive committee of the DGAL was made up of representatives from the Editorial Costa Rica, the Asociación de Autores, the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional (National Symphonic Orchestra, first established in 1940),457 the National Museum, and the UCR.458 Influenced by social democratic thought, the government adopted the notion that access to culture is a right within a democratic society. It became the state’s

455 “Hizo que el Estado se preocupara, de esa manera, de la promoción de las cualidades creadoras del hombre costarricense, como un estímulo más a esa obra creadora; y también es una manera de destacar la obra, sacarla del anonimato y poner al artista a una altura merecedora de su participación en la sociedad más ilustrada: se le respetará más; y entonces lo que apareció como una idea se convirtió después en algo muy importante para el artista y una fuente de sana competencia por sobresalir.” Cuevas Molina, Cultura y política en Costa Rica, 87.

456 Requested in return was a work of art to form part of a future collection of national contemporary art. Letter from Rafael A. García to Manuel de la Cruz González, March 24, 1964. González Archive.


458 Zavaleta Ochoa, Los inicios del arte abstracto en Costa Rica, 122.
responsibility to promote the arts, provide artists a secure arena within which to broadcast their work, and ensure an ample cultural offering for citizens. The DGAL was the mechanism through which government could support the arts. García, named the first director, opened the DGAL gallery on the ground floor of the Ministry of Education building, Edificio Hütt, on Avenida Central. Its easy access drew a crowd from among those who did not usually attend cultural events, thus promoting DGAL activities to a wider audience.\(^{459}\) González’s 1964 retrospective, granted as part of his Premio Nacional, was the first exhibit sponsored by the DGAL (fig. 4.15). Reviewers welcomed the initiative to support the arts. “In sum, an excellent exhibition that continues the ascendant course of our visual arts…Hopefully this good spell continues as the public is demonstrating a real interest.”\(^{460}\)

The “good spell” did continue throughout the 1960s, and new galleries of vanguard art opened in San Jose. In a newspaper article about these galleries, author Aquiles Certaud proclaimed, “Costa Rica has the best abstract painting in Central America.”\(^{461}\) Written in 1967, this far-fetched statement is surprising considering how young abstract art was in the country, but it also represents how quickly abstraction spread among exhibiting artists. The statement also attests to the visibility of abstract art, at least in San Jose, by the end of the decade. Yet despite this growing popularity, few paintings sold. “Still the wealthy men from here have not developed

\(^{459}\) Though the intention was not necessarily to be a patron of abstract art, the tendency of those in charge throughout the 1960s supported vanguard artists. Other artists, besides Garcia, involved in the DGAL include Zeledón and Daell, both members of the Grupo Ocho. Also, since its earliest years in existence, the DGAL gave out scholarships for emerging artists to study abroad. They also hosted approximately 40 lectures a year and published the cultural magazine Artes y Letras beginning in 1966. Ibid., 122–123. The gallery was particularly active between 1964 and 1967 when Garcia was in charge. Juan Carlos Flores, Cofradía, testimonio pictórico: Alvaro Bracci, Edwin Cantillo, Rafa Fernández (San Jose, C.R.: Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deportes, 1985), 24.


\(^{461}\) “Costa Rica tiene la mejor pintura abstracta de Centro América…” Certaud, “Galerías de pintura en San José.”
the vocation, or the dilettantism, or even the patriotism to form their own private collections of painting with a good and solid core of national artworks.” Certaud criticized the preference to purchase second-rate art in New York, Miami, or San Francisco, rather work by national artists. Yet he commended the surge in visual art, and his language conveyed the excitement felt among those aware of the cultural transition occurring in the city, which lent it a more cosmopolitan air. “The painting galleries…have given San Jose a European feeling of foreign resonance, and have contributed to the creation of centers of opinion, discussion, and constructive polemic for their assiduous visitors, be they people in the know or simply dilettantes.” This new art world, though active, did not have a market, which is why government patronage was so important. Without state support, it is likely that the drive of modern art would have stalled, unable to continue its course.

The Grupo Taller and González’s Insistence on Expressive Freedom

González received state-backed commissions, awards, and exhibitions, yet he was not personally affiliated with any of the new government agencies of culture, in large part due to his political entanglements during the Revolution of 1948. Perhaps for this reason he remained

462 “Todavía al hombre adinerado de aquí no le ha entrado la vocación, o el diletantismo, o hasta el patriotismo, de formar su propia colección privada de pintura con buena y mayor base de obras nacionales.” Ibid.

463 The author also mentioned that literature in the country lacked similar ambition, though he credits the emergence of a worthy, though underground, movement among the emerging authors, particularly in poetry. "Las Galerías de Pintura…le están dando a San José un ambiente europeo de mucha resonancia exterior, y contribuyendo, además, a formar centros de opinión, de discusión, de polémica constructiva entre sus asiduos visitantes, ya sean conocedores de pintura o simplemente dilettantes." Ibid.

staunchly independent, though rarely isolated. González and his wife were fond of socializing. They often opened their home, including the artist’s studio, to friends, students, and guests, who spent hours in the González residence in Barrio Amón, a traditionally elite section of San José a few blocks northeast of the National Theater. A reporter for the women’s and entertainment section of the Diario de Costa Rica described what it was like to be a guest in the González home, the layout of which was like “the homes of our grandparents,” with a central garden surrounded by four corridors.

It often happens that without previous warning and as if by common accord everyone shows up [at the González residence] to have a nice time and friendly conversation…The living room is beautiful; its main point of attraction is a piano upon which González plays arpeggios with true mastery…But we stayed in the parlor, or bar, or whatever one might call it. The sofas were of contrasting colors with large pillows of lively tones that lined the length of the wall. In one corner the bar…in another the record player, and beyond large and small masks from different countries that seem to look at us with their empty eyes, to speak of all that which they have seen. Expressive and original paintings by Manuel de la Cruz finish off this room, giving it life and drama. Black coffee, liquor, and hors d’oeuvres were served to the guests, including don Arturo Echeverría Loría [poet, and then Minister of Education] and doña Graciela de Echeverría; don José Gómez Sicre; don Lyonel Yglesias [Director of Esso Standard Oil], don Carlos Moya [visual artist]; don Manuel Segura [author, journalist, and diplomat]; don Carlos Poveda [visual artist]; don Felo García and others. ⁴⁶⁵

González’s guests were part of the cultural revival that was taking place in San José during the 1960s, and González was an integral part of this renaissance (fig. 4.16). People were drawn to his outgoing, multi-faceted character that ranged between intellectually stimulating and

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⁴⁶⁵ “Muy a menudo ocurre eso que sin previo aviso y como de común acuerdo se presentan todos a pasar un rato de amena charla…La sala es preciosa y su punto de atractión es el piano en donde Manuel de la Cruz, arranca con verdadera maestría el arpegios musicales…Pero nos quedamos con el cuarto de estar, o bar, o como quiera llamárselo. Los sofás en color contrastantes con almohadones de vivo tonos se alinean a lo largo de la pared. En un rincón el bar…En otra esquina el tocadiscos y más allá máscaras y mascaritas de distintos países, que parecía nos miraban con sus ojos vacíos, para hablarnos de todo lo que han visto. Finaliza el arreglo de este salón los expresivos y originales cuadros de Manuel de la Cruz, que le dan vida y dramatismo. Café negro, licores y bocas era repartidos a los asistentes entre los que estaban don Arturo Echeverría Loría y doña Graciela de Echeverría; don José Gómez Sicre, don Lyonel Yglesias, don Carlos Moya; don Manuel Segura; don Carlos Poveda; don Felo García y otros más.” Delfina Collado, “Ellas hablan… con Manuel de la Cruz y Tanya,” Diario de Costa Rica, March 22, 1964.
boisterous.\textsuperscript{466} Those who wrote about him recall his proclivity for what they considered deep topics of conversation (art is life; art is to be felt, not explained; the artist paints out of a fundamental need), which often evolved into monologues illustrated with anecdotes about his life or his theoretical understanding of art and society.\textsuperscript{467} González aimed to remain an independent spirit dedicated to the effort of developing both his own art and that of aspiring and emerging artists in Costa Rica.\textsuperscript{468}

Around the time that the Grupo Ocho disbanded, the Grupo Taller (Studio Group), named such because it gathered in González’s studio, came together under his tutelage (fig. 4.17). Approaching him as a master, this group of younger artists, many of whom were students of the School of Fine Arts at the UCR, wished to glean what they could from González’s experience and knowledge of international modernism.\textsuperscript{469} The group included Claudio Carazo (1916-2006), Rafael “Rafa” Fernández (1935), Tanya Kreysa (the artist’s wife), Jose Luis López Escarré (1941-1996), Moya, Floria Pinto (1923), Teresita Porras (1934), Sonia Romero, and Ricardo Ulloa Barrenechea (1928). Their first group show was held in September 1963 in a gallery space of La Prensa Libre (the newspaper in which González had published his responses

\textsuperscript{466} For example, Olga Espinach stated, “Of course, writing an article about our tempestuous friend [González] is not easy, for he is a great conversationalist and is of vast culture; to say conversationalist, I mean tireless. “Por supuesto, el hacerle un reportaje al tormentoso amigo, no es nada fácil, pues es un gran conversador y de un vastísima cultura; al decir conversador, quiero decir infatigable.” Olga Espinach, “La pintura no se explica, se siente, dice Manuel de la Cruz,” La Nación, March 18, 1965.

\textsuperscript{467} Such an image of González can be gleaned from descriptions of his character that appear in many different texts written about him during these years.

\textsuperscript{468} Years later he stressed the repercussions of that independence. “The least thing I have is money; I am an independent painter that receives no retirement pension of any kind. I will die painting.” “Lo menos que tengo es plata, soy un pintor independiente que no recibe jubilación de ninguna especia. Moriré pintando.” Carlos Castilla del Pino, Cuatro Ensayos Sobre La Mujer (Madrid, Spain: Alianza Editorial, 1974), 22.

\textsuperscript{469} Zavaleta Ochoa, Los inicios del arte abstracto en Costa Rica, 128.
to Grupo Ocho critics), and it was received as a continuation of the drive to transform the visual arts. 470

González’s leadership of the Grupo Taller provided several benefits for the group members, one of which was an important social component. Ulloa Barrenechea stated, “In it [González’s studio] we had discussions, we screamed, danced, and partook of a bohemian lifestyle in the manner of Max Jiménez’s circle…Such a home kept us away from that cancerous and sickly evil: miscommunication, solitude, and silence.”471 And González recalled that they had “parties, that…filled the gray life of San Jose with vitality.”472 His home provided a space free from the limitations of a conservative society only beginning to embrace modern art. In González’s studio they could paint, experiment, let loose pent desires, and release their inhibitions. It was also a place where they met other artists, intellectuals, and important cultural agents from Costa Rica and abroad.

The proximity of the Grupo Taller members to González also granted them exhibition opportunities, both locally and abroad. Members of the international art world, who came in contact with, or were interested in Costa Rican art either knew or quickly learned that González was a leading figure.473 Visitors, intent on learning about the country’s current artistic


472“Hasta hacían fiestas, que … llenaron de vitalidad la vida gris de la ciudad de San José.” Pino and students of Estudios Generales, Grupo Taller, 16.

473 For example, in an interview of José Luis Cuevas, during his visit to Costa Rica, he said, “Before getting to Costa Rica I was aware of Manuel de la Cruz González and Lola Fernández, who I wished to meet personally because I am a sincere admirer of their painting. I had an opportunity to engage in conversation with them during the opening of my exhibition and at an interesting gathering that we had Saturday afternoon.” “Antes de llegar a Costa Rica tenía presentes a Manuel de la Cruz González y Lola Fernández, a quienes deseaba conocer personalmente por
production, contacted him and often spent time in his home. He was sought for his help in selecting works of art that represented the country in international exhibitions. One such event involved the corporate sponsorship of Esso Standard Oil International. In 1964, the oil company sponsored an exhibition of Central American art with the help of Gómez-Sicre. González’s influence probably impacted the outcome of their selection. Six of the nine artists chosen to represent Costa Rica in this regional exhibition belonged to the Grupo Taller. The paintings and sculpture made by these artists at the time were abstract expressionist or neofigurative in style. The selected works were first displayed in the DGAL gallery before being

474 Materials from his personal archive document visits from foreign college students, artists, and intellectuals. Spanish curator Luis González Robles requested the artist’s help in selecting Costa Rican artists to participate in an exhibition held in May, 1963, at the Hispanic Cultural Institute in Madrid, entitled “El arte actual de América y España” (Current Art of America and Spain). Correspondence from González Robles, 1962. González Archive. On this occasion works by García and Kreysa were selected for the exhibition and sent throughout the capitals of Europe to appear in a travelling exhibition that lasted two years and was visited by heads of state. “Artistas costarricenses triunfan en Europa,” La Prensa Libre, July 15, 1964, sec. Suplemento3.


477 Gómez-Sicre and Lionel González of Esso joined the Costa Rican jury, which included González, Amighetti, and Juan Portuguez (dean of the School of Fine Arts), and they selected work by Zeledón, Pinto, Lopez Escarré, Porras, García, Moya, Kreysa, Lola Fernández, and Rafa Fernández.
sent to San Salvador for the *Salón Esso de Artistas Jóvenes* (Esso Salon of Young Artists), the OAS gallery in Washington D.C., and various other institutions in the United States.\(^{478}\)

Beyond the increased exposure and the social benefits of belonging to the *Grupo Taller*, there was also the technical and theoretical aspects of González’s mentorship, which reflect the artist’s own practice. A 1983 UCR study of the *Grupo Taller* defines what it meant to belong to the group.

The objectives of the *Grupo [Taller]* were to paint, to be an experimental group that used new techniques, to broadcast their work and to contribute in this way to the development and betterment of Costa Rican painting…They promoted the formation of artists that were in communication with universal art, and above all, they succeeded in, and this was the great battle of Manuel de la Cruz, convincing Costa Rica that there existed an art different than that of Teodorico Quiîrés, the classical masters, and the academics.\(^{479}\)

Gathered in his studio, González helped these emerging artists to improve their technique and relinquish the vernacular.\(^{480}\) González advocated freedom of expression and experimentation, rather than emphasize the tenets of academic training or painting *en plein air*, prevalent at the

\(^{478}\) A newspaper reported that this event aimed to support artists younger than forty who embraced “the most independent and comprehensive spirit…All tendencies of contemporary art will find a respectful welcome.” “El espíritu más independiente y amplio…todas las tendencias del arte contemporáneo encontrarán respetuosa acogida.” “Seleccionados nueve obras para ‘Salón Esso de Artistas Jóvenes’,” *Prensa Libre*, November 26, 1964, sec. C. Esso was forming a collection of Latin American art with Gómez-Sicre as their advisor. That same year González received $200, and Kreyea and Porras each received $80, along with a letter from Gómez-Sicre stating the works were purchased in the name of International Petroleum Co. for their exhibition in the New York World’s Fair. Correspondence folder, González Archive. There was also a group show that featured *Grupo Taller* artists, including González, during the *Semana Panamericana* (Panamerican Week, Sept. 9-16, 1967) in the art gallery of the Hilton Hotel, in New York City. The show was reported as organized by a city entity referred to as the *Departamento de Actos Públicos*, possibly an equivalent to the current Office of Citywide Event Coordination and Management (CECM). The exhibition also showed work by other Central American artists. “Pintores ticos expondrán en Nueva York,” *La República*, April 3, 1967. González was also responsible for organizing an exhibition of Contemporary Costa Rican art for the Costa Rican embassy in Mexico, held in June 1967. Javier Wimer, *Pintura Costarricense Contemporánea* (Mexico: Embajada de Costa Rica en México; Instituto Politécnico Nacional, 1967).

\(^{479}\) “Los objetivos del Grupo eran pintar, ser un grupo experimental que utilizara las nuevas técnicas, divulgar sus obras y contribuir de esa manera al desarrollo y al mejoramiento de la pintura costarricense…Propiciaron la formación de artistas que se comunicaban con el arte universal y, sobre todo, lograron, esa fue la gran lucha de Manuel de la Cruz, que Costa Rica se convenciera de que había un arte distinto al de Teodorico Quiîrés y de todos los clásicos y académicos.” Pino and students of Estudios Generales, *Grupo Taller*, 16.

\(^{480}\) The quote reiterates the concern among artists of the 1960s, stated by Gómez-Sicre, that contemporary Costa Rican art should steer away from the adobe house and *campesino* of Quiîrés and the Generation of the 1930s. Gómez-Sicre probably was aware of this concern as a result of the time he spent with González.
UCR. Yet he promoted rigor and urged the Grupo Taller artists, “What one with artistic concerns or inclinations must do is work hard and cultivate the soul.”\footnote{“Lo que debe hacer quien tenga inquietudes o inclinaciones artísticas, es trabajar duro y cultivar el alma.” Pino and students of Estudios Generales, Grupo Taller, 19.} He did not believe in directing them toward a specific course; instead he insisted that each arrive to his or her own artistic path independently. Rafa Fernández, Taller member who became one of the most well recognized artists in the country, said that as a group they gained a sense of what it meant to be an artist and to work in a studio. He credited González with helping them comprehend the need for each artist to develop “a concept of the work, of the reason one painted.”\footnote{“Pero lo que más aprendí fue a tener un concepto de la obra, de por qué pintaba.” Rafael Fernández qtd in Flores, Cofradía, testimonio pictórico, 24.} González endowed his disciples with the concept of artistic liberty, which he used as a guiding principle in his own career. But in consequence, González did not foster a generation of geometric abstract artists, as none of the Taller members followed in his search of cosmic unity through art.

González insisted that his students follow their own volition without feeling bound to any specific style or theme, an idea argued in a 1965 essay titled “El arte, el artista y sus relaciones en la sociedad” (“Art, the artist and his relationships in society”).

Art only germinates in a climate of unrestricted and unscathed liberty…In art there are no fashions, fashion is fleeting and non-transcendental, anti cosmic; [in art] there are states, manners, investigations, a drive forward that impedes the putrid stability of cadavers. Change and adventure are inheritors of liberty, just as they are also inheritors of art.\footnote{“El arte solo germina en un clima de libertad irrestricta e incóreme… En arte no hay modas, la moda es fugaz e intrascendente, anti cosmica, hay estados, maneras, búsquedas, empuje hacia delante que impide la putrefacta estabilidad de los cadáveres. El cambio, la aventura, que son patrimonio de la libertad, son también patrimonio del arte.” Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, “El arte, el artista, y sus relaciones en la sociedad,” Polémica, no. 9–10 (January 1965): 1, 6, 8.}

As mentioned, González constantly fluctuated in artistic style and media. In his geometric abstract art he aimed to be universal, and manifest his quasi-religious sentiment toward artistic
practice: “A mere formula through which man reintegrates—or projects himself—into infinity, easing his indefensible state in the face of the unknown.” For González, art was a spiritual pursuit meant to ease the unsettling reality of the “unknown.” By incorporating the intellect and mathematics into his artistic investigation of form, color, and composition, González aimed to satisfy his desire to create something that reflected his metaphysical conception of the unity of life. To achieve this he increasingly simplified his compositions. *Equilibrio cósmico* (*Cosmic Equilibrium*, fig. 4.18), made in 1965, is a crowning work from this period that exemplifies how the artist sought to achieve an aesthetic response from the viewer by using a degree of minimalism previously unseen in his painting. Like his previous lacquer work, *Equilibrio* is shiny and smooth; the material and technique, its sharp edges and even finish, exude industrial precision. As the title implies, the painting intends to symbolize González’s conception of “cosmic equilibrium.” A pitch-black, scalene triangle stands on its most acute angle, the point set onto the lower edge, just left of center. This downward pointing arrow seems to pierce, like a thorn, the bottom of the painting. From that point of intersection an inverse, symmetrical curve snakes its way to the upper right corner of the painting. To the right of the curve the painting is solid beige; to the left it is mustard yellow. The movement of the curve and the solid rigidity of the black triangle make *Equilibrio cósmico* simultaneously dynamic and stable. Years earlier, González explained: “Curved lines, which possess the secret of grace and enchantment, lack the properties held by straight ones of austerity and severity, inciting a mere sensual delectation. Curves need the stabilizing power of straight lines to not lose their strength.” In its simplicity,

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484 “[U]na mera fórmula a través de la cual el hombre se reintegra, --o se proyecta—al infinito comando su estado de indefensión ante lo desconocido.” Ibid.

485 This quote comes from an unpublished syllabus for a drawing course González gave in Maracaibo. “Las líneas curvas, que poseen el secreto de la gracia y del encanto, carecen de la propiedad de las rectas de austeridad y
the combination of one curve and one triangle allows each element to complement the strength of the other.

How did González arrive at such a simplified composition, particularly considering that his earlier geometric abstraction was made of more shapes and competing elements? Those who have discussed the development of the artist’s geometric abstraction, such as contemporaneous newspaper reporters and critics, art historian Zavaleta, or curator María Alejandra Triana, mention the influence of Mondrian, Kandinsky, Pre-Columbian art, and the South American abstractionists on González’s work. They emphasize what González repeatedly claimed about his lacquer paintings: they are based on phi and cybernetics. But none have attempted to analyze what he meant by this. For example, in his book Pintores de Costa Rica (Painters of Costa Rica), Ulloa Barrenechea wrote poetically about González’s abstract painting.

Linear structure defines the action of a space that is flat and superficial, accorded to it by classical tectonics, definitive of a closed and permanent world. And so, it should not seem strange that the lacquers by González excite us by their classical austerity, for their equilibrium, monumentality and beautiful composition, for the rational data or serenity in the varied richness of number and measure…In sum, science and reason are the final result of the bill, a game of planes, lines, colors and structures.

The contemplative text, written over a decade after the last of González’s lacquer paintings, provides no insight into the paintings, their composition, medium, or theory. Zavaleta is only slightly more precise in her discussion; she states that González was influenced by phi and


487 “Esta estructura lineal define la acción de un espacio plano y en superficie, accordado por la tectónica clásica definidora de un mundo cerrado y permanente. Entonces, no nos debe extrañar que las lacas de González nos emocionen con la austeridad del clasicismo por lo que tienen de equilibrio, de monumentalidad y bella composición, de dato racional o de serenidad en la variada riqueza del número y de la medida…En suma, ciencia y razón son la resultante final de la factura, con su juego de planos, líneas, colores y estructura.” Ulloa Barrenechea, Pintores de Costa Rica, 109.
cybernetics in his effort to achieve absolute balance and harmony, as well as the mandates of Mondrian and Kandinsky in his use of a square format (Kandinsky), and primary colors (Mondrian). She wrote, in terms similar to Ulloa’s,

> The relationship that he [González] established through verticals and horizontals confers to the works, reciprocally neutralized in their strength, that tectonic and closed character, proper of classical art, which leads to the most absolute serenity. In this way, the influence of Mondrian is palpable, as in the predominance of primary and neutral colors.488

Zavaleta only hints at the theory that served as the foundation for González’s geometric abstract painting providing little analysis for a deeper understanding of González’s lacquer paintings.

This was precisely the problem with González’s hardedge abstraction: his intent was not easy to grasp. The artist was never clear about the aim of his work. For this reason, knowing that he was influenced by cybernetics and phi is key toward grasping the artist’s objective.

Cybernetics is an interdisciplinary field that has affected mathematics, science, social science, technology, and culture. Its founder, American mathematician Norbert Wiener, adapted the Greek word for steersman, kybernetes, to his research on feedback in systems, first published in 1948.489 A number of competing definitions have surfaced since. Louis Couffignal, French mathematician, wrote one of the more philosophical definitions in 1956. “Cybernetics is the art of assuring the efficacy of action.”490 If one understands efficacy as the production of a desired effect, then in Couffignal’s terms, cybernetics is the ability to perform systematically and with

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488 “La relación que estableció de verticales y horizontales les confiere, neutralizadas recíprocamente sus fuerzas, ese carácter tectónico y cerrado, propio del arte clásico, que conduce a la más absoluta serenidad. En lo anterior, se palpa la influencia de Mondrian, así como en el predominio de colores primarios y neutros.” Zavaleta Ochoa, Los inicios del arte abstracto en Costa Rica, 84–85.


precision to accomplish a specific end. British theorist Stafford Beer gives another meaning to cybernetics as related to management systems and the creation of management machines. For him cybernetics is, “the science of proper control within any assembly that is treated as an organic whole.”

At their core, what remains the same in these definitions of cybernetics is the study of systems and how those systems are organized, how their parts interact, and how they maintain stability. Austrian-American physicist Fritjof Capra defines systems as “Wholes whose specific structures arise from the interactions and interdependence of their parts…Although we can discern individual parts in any system, the nature of the whole is always different from the mere sum of its parts.” Thus, a system is anything that can be identified and considered as a whole; it can be a computer, a kidney, a bear, a hurricane or, of course, a work of art.

While there is no evidence that this is how González applied the idea of cybernetics in his art, it is feasible that he conceived of painting as a system, composed of individual elements that affect each other and the functioning of the whole system. This being the case, Equilibrio cósmico would have been considered a whole from the outset, with its three forms and three colors being calculated choices based on their interactivity and interdependence. The yellow, black, and beige sections would all be innate to the piece, not consequential. They also are not separate, representative entities, but rather parts of the whole. González did not perform a balancing act, offsetting one element with another. There was no periodic stepping back from the canvas to observe the progression of the painting. Equilibrio is a unit of existence. The logic of the system ensures that all of the parts in the composition communicate with each other, which in turn ensures the system’s stability. Striving for a dynamic equilibrium in the work connects

491 Stafford Beer, qtd. in Pask.

González to cyberneticians, who proclaim that the ability to avoid imbalance is to have control over the entire system.\textsuperscript{493} For the artist this required knowledge of the outcome before the actual production was undertaken. The end result is divorced from the creative process, which is in line with González’s choice to submit the work to a professional lacquerer who brought the painting to fruition. For González, like Couffignal, the art was in the intellectual formation of an efficacious system.

González’s artistic choices were also affected by \textit{phi} (\(\Phi\)), the Greek letter that represents the golden ratio (1.618) also known as the divine proportion.\textsuperscript{494} González said that he used the golden ratio to create art that was not subjective, but rather an object that was of universal beauty and of cosmic purity that could provoke a creative and uplifting response in the viewer.\textsuperscript{495} Both the ancient Egyptians and Greeks used the divine proportion, also known as the golden ratio or the golden section, in antiquity. In the Renaissance, artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Piero della Francesca became interested in the golden section following the text \textit{Divina Proporzione} by Franciscan Luca Pacioli, which claims the divine proportion, seen in science and art, is mystical and extremely beautiful. Twentieth century artists used the golden ratio to engage its mystical qualities and formal aesthetic. It was thought of as a mechanism for ridding artwork of the personal (and the local) in favor of the universal. Design scholar Jay Hambidge wrote in 1926, “Without mental control, instinct, or feeling compels the artist to follow nature as a slave a master. He can direct his artistic fate only by learning nature’s ideal and going directly for that as


\textsuperscript{495} Flores, “Un sueño trunco.”
a goal.”496 For Hambidge “nature’s ideal” is the divine proportion. When incorporated into art and design it yields dynamic symmetry. “Its [dynamic symmetry’s] great value lies in its power of transition or movement from one form to another in the system.”497 In other words, there is an innate sense of movement that the viewer perceives in a work of art that uses phi. What is also intriguing about phi is its presence not only throughout human history but in nature as well, in the spirals and curves of shells, leaf arrangements, and flowers. It is conjectured that the proportion strikes humans as beautiful precisely because of an unconscious familiarity with it.498

In *Equilibrio cósmico* González employed phi in a simple and straightforward manner: the black triangle intersects with the bottom exactly at the golden ratio point. Algebraically the theorem is written $B/A = (B + A)/B$, and reads $A$ is to $B$ as $B$ is to $A + B$. In this case, $A$ is equal to the distance from the lower left corner to the point of intersection, and $B$ is equal to the distance from the point of intersection to the lower right corner (fig. 4.19). The point of intersection is directly proportional to the overall width. Phi is numerically represented by 1.618; so $A$ (32 cm) multiplied by 1.618 is equal to $B$ (52 cm), and $B$ multiplied by 1.618 is equal to $A+B$ (84 cm). Here the artist adheres to the rules of mathematics to create his composition. This rational rather than intuitive approach makes this an intellectual rather than an emotional work of art.

Though the artist may have been able to explain the choices he made in creating his geometric abstraction through phi, cybernetics, mathematics, or color theory, he was not able to engage his audience aesthetically. Costa Ricans did not understand González’s geometric

497 Ibid., xv.
abstract art and insisted on their preference of a more traditional art, like that of Quirós.\textsuperscript{499} None of his students engaged in the style. In this sense his lacquer paintings were irrelevant within the local context at the time of their creation, which may be the main reason why he gave up working in this mode for long periods at a time.

González claimed that he transitioned between different artistic practices when he got tired of a style or no longer felt challenged by it.\textsuperscript{500} But, it is likely that he suddenly stopped painting geometric abstraction because he became frustrated by the lack of an encouraging environment for this work, as he had had in Venezuela. Though he insisted, “I paint as I please!” González also admitted, “If I find someone who likes it [my painting], fantastic! Because art is like love: two are needed for it to exist.”\textsuperscript{501} It was important for him to have an appreciative audience. In 1965, González veered away from the austerity of his lacquer paintings and dedicated most of the remainder of the decade to painting in abstract expressionist and neo-figurative modes, approaching the canvas with a greater freedom than the strict limitations he self-imposed with geometric abstraction. Throughout the latter half of the 1960s, his media, compositions, and degree of naturalism varied, possibly the result of needing to feel free in terms of the creative process and subconsciously requiring acceptance and appreciation, despite claiming otherwise.\textsuperscript{502}

\textit{Grupo Taller} disbanded in 1969, the result, according to González, of the artists wishing to go independently in their own direction. “Each one had different interests and it is always


\textsuperscript{500} “Manuel de la Cruz: contundente, apasionado e iconoclasta.”

\textsuperscript{501} “¡Pinto como me da la gana! Si encuentro a quien le guste, ¡fantástico! Ya que el arte es como el amor: se necesitan dos para que exista.” \textit{Ibid.}

good for people to become independent and to try to fly with their own wings.” This parental perspective is likely what led some of the group members to distance themselves from González. Rafa Fernández, the first to abandon the group, said he did so because, “Manuel’s concepts no longer impacted me as much and I could lose respect for him as a teacher.” González’s ego was at first appealing to the members of the Grupo Taller. They found in him a mentor who encouraged their rebelliousness and who introduced them to important members of the established art world. He also shared what it meant to be an artist: a free spirit who followed his vocation with discipline and sincerity. In the first half of the 1960s he worked in a geometric abstract mode impacted by ideas of cybernetics and phi, but in 1965 he stopped, maybe the result of dedicating the bulk of his time to the Grupo Taller. It was upon spending more time alone that González returned once more to geometric abstract art, a solitary and intellectual pursuit, void of connotations with reality, in search of the cosmic.

The Central American Biennial of 1971: Marta Traba’s Criticism in Costa Rica

“There is no doubt that traditional painting as a creative medium is in crisis these days, as much as is present society.” This sentence begins González’s 1970 article “¿Ha entrado en coma la pintura de caballete?” (“Has easel painting entered into a coma?”), which concerns the future, or the “next step,” of “revolutionary art.”

The revolution (the return to the starting point) is a phenomenon that has always encouraged painting in its harassed escape from the academy. The Courbets, Manets or

503 “Cada uno tenía diferentes intereses y siempre es bueno que las personas se independicen y traten de volar con sus propias alas.” Pino and students of Estudios Generales, Grupo Taller, 16.

504 “Los conceptos de Manuel ya no me impactaban tanto y podía perderle el respeto como maestro.” Flores, Cofradía, testimonio pictórico, 24.

505 “No hay duda alguna de que la pintura tradicional como medio de creación en nuestros días está en crisis, tanto como la sociedad actual lo está también.” González Luján, “¿Ha entrado en coma la pintura de caballete?”.
the Cézannes, the Van Goghs and Matisses, the Braques and Picassos, constitute in our history the apex of that feeling. They are the ones responsible for the discovery of man as visual artist, a being provided with an intense inner life and not simply a reflection of the exterior, culminating in the surprising discovery of non-figurative painting by Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich.\footnote{506}

He goes on to further discuss developments of non-figurative painting and kinetic art.

\begin{quote}
This enormous effort [non-figurative art] has produced a new art with a true sense of actuality that flees from reality to produce a beautiful and unproblematic state, which began with painting but ceased to be it, to 'create creation' ... Sexless art in a world that exalts pornography to saturation, a world of canned laughter, silent art in an era of pain.\footnote{507}
\end{quote}

Rather than exist as an art of a crude and commercial world, geometric abstract art makes visual an intellectual plane of existence in which reside mathematics (geometry) and science (color). He explains to his readers that the goal is for painting to cease being decorative and to instead remain “in the realm of the philosophers, with neither practical use nor artificial suggestions, simple and clear, authentic, direct, and ethical.”\footnote{508}

González’s desire for “simple and clear, authentic, direct and ethical” art is manifest in the painting he was creating at the time. He continued to use a minimal visual vocabulary, seeking purity in a limited palette and simple geometric shapes, as in \textit{Equilibrio cósmico} (fig. 4.18). His paintings were flat, conceived on a grid, saturated, glossy, and executed by a professional lacquerer. Now, though, he used only verticals, horizontals, and small squares,
primary colors, and black, brown, and white. The paintings from this period radiate a confident resolve. His final series of lacquer paintings include *Amarillo continuo* (Continuous Yellow, fig. 4.20), *Blanco interrumpido* (White Interrupted, fig. 4.21), *Negro interrumpido* (Black Interrupted, location unknown), and *Síntesis del ocaso* (Synthesis of Sunset/Decline, fig. 4.22). Completed in 1971, all four measure a meter square and 3.5 centimeters deep. The thick edges of these works are also painted (fig. 4.23), which indicates that González conceived of the paintings as three-dimensional objects, breaching the painter’s perennial struggle with the limitations of the two-dimensional surface in a manner similar to *Mural espacial* (fig. 4.11).

Of the three paintings that still exist from this series, *Amarillo continuo* provides the most intense visual experience due to its saturated colors. This square meter of bold, stop-sign red immediately catches the viewer’s attention. A thick black band runs vertically from top to bottom, several centimeters in from the right edge. To the left of this black stripe runs a parallel, thin white line that also spans the height of the work. This line, similar to a Barnett Newman “zip,” seems to divide the painting into two unequal parts. In the lower left is a solitary, floating, yellow square measuring ten centimeters, the same as the width of black band. The sense of harmony exuded by this painting is the result of González’s use of phi and the employment, perhaps intuitive, of other mathematical relationships that determined the painting’s composition. Segmenting the painting reveals the use of phi: A is to B as B is to A+B; B is to C as C is to

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509 Only the first three appear in the Biennial catalog, but *Síntesis del ocaso* follows the same parameters, and is often thought of in conjunction with *Amarillo continuo* and *Blanco interrumpido*.

510 It is interesting to note that these lacquer paintings were made at the same time as the non-figurative Argentine painter Cesar Paternosto created blank surfaces with painted canvas edges. There is no way of knowing exactly what informed González’s thinking when he made this 1971 lacquer series. He did, however, have a vast library, suscribed to various international art journals, and cited contemporary art critics like the French Michel Rangon, whose work González read in the “universalmente famosa revista de arte Aujur D’hui [sic.].” Manuel de la Cruz González Luján, “Decadencia y Descrédito de Los Concursos de Artes Plásticas En Costa Rica,” *La Nación*, July 6, 1970.

511 The location of *Negro interrumpido* is unknown.
B+C; A+B+C is to D as D is to A+B+C+D (fig. 4.24). Other mathematical relationships exist as well: B=E; F=A+B+C; E is to F as A is to C; and G=1/2 H. Thus, despite the jarring colors, the eye is made comfortable by the composition’s internal logic.

The yellow square is the sustenance of the work. It is the element that breaks the solidity of the painting and adds dynamism. The eye is drawn to this pulsating square, which springs forward and appears to radiate light. Through his choice of color, González played with the viewer’s perception. Wassily Kandinsky, an influential figure for González, said the following about the color yellow:

The initial movement of yellow is the tendency to advance toward the spectator, which can be increased to a degree bordering on intrusion by increasing the intensity of yellow; and also, the second movement, spreading beyond the boundaries, the dispersion of the power into its surroundings are similar to the capacities of any material power which blindly assails an object to burst aimlessly in every direction. On the other hand, yellow, in any geometric form, if gazed at steadily, disturbs its observer, hurts him but also stimulates him.

The yellow in Amarillo contínuo is indeed expansive, disturbing, and stimulating. When the viewer advances close enough to the painting, so that it engulfs one’s vision, the surface becomes an endless bright, red universe that acquires three dimensions by virtue of the depth provided by the yellow square. The yellow square becomes a tunnel of yellow light that glows warmly and projects endlessly into the depths of the work. With Amarillo contínuo, González created a work of timeless, virtual space—his way of answering his own mandate to create a

512 González frequently mentioned Kandinsky in his lectures and articles. González Luján, “¿Ha entrado en coma la pintura de caballete?”, González Luján, “El arte abstracto.”

“new art with a true sense of actuality that flees from reality to produce a beautiful and unproblematic state…to 'create creation.'”\(^{514}\)

González exhibited this series of lacquer paintings in the Gallery of Honor at the 1971 Central American Biennial (the first and only of its kind), sponsored by the newly established Ministerio de Cultura, Juventud y Deportes (MCJD, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports) and the Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano (CSUCA, Central American Superior University Council).\(^{515}\) Held in commemoration of the 150\(^{th}\) anniversary of the region’s independence from Spain (September 15, 1821, is the date of independence shared by all of the Central American countries), the Biennial also inaugurated the new building of the National Library. Rafa Fernández, García, Daell, Valverde, and Lola Fernández were among the artists in the Costa Rican delegation. Alongside González, Amighetti and Guatemalan artist Carlos Mérida were invited as honorary participants.\(^{516}\) The jury panel was made up of the artists José Luis Cuevas (Mexican, 1934) and Fernando de Szyszlo (Peruvian, 1925), and the art critic, Marta Traba (Argentine/Colombian, 1930-1983).

These critics were likely the most notable group of the international art world members ever to visit the country, which is probably why their verdict caused such uproar. There was to be an overall winner and one winner from each country, awarded with a monetary prize and the purchase of their artwork.\(^{517}\) The general prize was given to the Guatemalan artist Luis Díaz (1939) for his triptych entitled Guatebala 71 (present location unknown), a semi-abstract work

\(^{514}\) González Luján, “¿Ha entrado en coma la pintura de caballete?”

\(^{515}\) Artists invited to exhibit in the Gallery of Honor did not compete for the Biennial’s prizes.


\(^{517}\) The main prize was 3,000 U.S. dollars, and each of the national prizes was 1,000 U.S. dollars. I Bienal Centroamericana de Pintura (San Jose, C.R.: Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano, 1971).
that, as its title implies, deals with the violent reality of his country. The jury also awarded a
prize to the Nicaraguan artist Rolando Castellón. But it was so unimpressed by the remaining
work that it awarded no prizes for Costa Rica, Honduras, and El Salvador. They explained their
verdict in a statement published in the newspaper:

It has been the ongoing concern of the jury to deliver a ruling that, while taking into
account the objective quality of the works, also considers their meaning within the
national and Latin American context. Within this inclination the jury has tried to
stimulate with the prizes awarded or withheld, those searches that simultaneously show
an assimilation of the contemporary language of painting with an urgency to express
content that reveals the artists’ situation in their midst and the honest need to
communicate it.\textsuperscript{518}

The jury was looking for artwork that was relevant in both context and content, executed in a
“contemporary language” and of “objective quality.” They refused to award prizes to works that
did not meet these standards.

During a round table discussion several days later, Marta Traba, an authoritative Latin
American art critic who traveled widely and published frequently, gave a presentation titled “La
pintura como medio de comunicación” (“Painting as a means of communication”), parts of
which were transcribed in \textit{La Nación} the next day.

It is an indisputable historical fact ... that Latin American countries are … living a grave
revolutionary chapter. Painting, as part of the creative process, must be present in that
chapter ... The only way painting will restore its lost function as language, and thus will
be able to communicate content that is attentive, insightful, and critical, commensurate
with the times in which we live, is by reconnecting signifiers and signifieds, in such a
way so that they express things such that what is said is again audible and
understandable.\textsuperscript{519}

\textsuperscript{518}“Ha sido preocupación permanente del jurado emitir un fallo que además de tener en cuenta la calidad objetiva
de las obras tomar en consideración su significado dentro del contexto nacional y latinoamericano. Dentro de esta
tendencia el jurado ha tratado de estimular con los premios concedidos o declarados desiertas, aquellas búsquedas
que muestran simultáneamente una asimilación del lenguaje contemporáneo de la pintura con la urgencia de
expresar contenidos que revelan la situación del artista en su medio y la honesta necesidad de comunicarlo.” Jose
Luis Cuevas, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Marta Traba, “Guatemala ganó I Bienal de Pintura Centroamericana,” \textit{La

\textsuperscript{519}“Es un hecho histórico indiscutible…que los países latinoamericanos están … viviendo un grave capítulo
revolucionario. La pintura, como parte del proceso creador, tiene que estar presente en ese capítulo…La única
Traba has been frequently cited in Costa Rican art history because of the impact her rhetoric had on artists in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{520} She established an idea of what Latin American artists should produce, and many either took inspiration from or repudiated her for it.\textsuperscript{521} For Traba, Latin America was “living a grave revolutionary chapter,” and painting needed to be “attentive, insightful, and critical,” as well as relevant and revelatory; in other words, it should be what she referred to as “art of resistance.”\textsuperscript{522} But, one might ask, when was Latin America not going through a “grave revolutionary chapter”? And more importantly, why should painting be part of this revolutionary process in order for it to be valid?

Traba praised Díaz because he used “contemporary language” to “communicate content” that was “commensurate with the times.” She further stated, “In the entire First Central American Biennial, the work Guatebala 71 was an act of aggression intelligently expressed in contemporary language; this second part is essential for the act of aggression to exist as such.”\textsuperscript{523}

Insistent that Latin American artists should create their own language, and not a borrowed one,

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521 In 1983 González was quoted to have said, “I am not interested in painting that is political.” He also expressed his specific opposition to Traba regarding the political import of art. “That is idiotic,” González said, “because art serves its social purpose by being art and not sign or poster.” ”No me interesa la pintura con tendencia política…Eso es una idiotez, porque el arte cumple su función social con ser arte y no cartel o afiche.” Pino and students of Estudios Generales, \textit{Grupo Taller}, 20.


523 “En el conjunto de la Primera Bienal Centroamericana, la obra Guatebala 71 era un acto de agresión inteligentemente expresado en lenguaje contemporáneo, esta segunda parte es indispensables para que el acto de agresión exista como tal.” Traba qtd. in Rojas González, \textit{Arte costarricense: Un siglo}, 235–236.
\end{flushright}
Traba believed that the artist’s language could in fact convey revelatory meaning, thereby helping the region take charge of its own cultural course. The language of the Latin American art, she believed, needed to be both specific and poetic and capable of conveying what she referred to as “multiple meanings and decodifications,” which in turn would enable the “reevaluations” necessary to lead, rather than follow, in the “cultural process.”

Traba’s ideas were exemplified not only by the jury’s selection of Díaz’s Guatebala, but also by their recognition of Amighetti during the Biennial. "The jury unanimously wishes to express its appreciation for the excellent work presented in the Salón de Honor, by the printmaker Francisco Amighetti, who represents in an exemplary manner the art of Costa Rica." Amighetti’s printmaking language had evolved over decades. He exhibited the following woodcuts, among others, during the Biennial: Conversación (Conversation, fig. 4.25, 1969), La niña y el viento (The Girl and the Wind, fig. 4.26, 1969), Las beatas y la Virgen (Pious

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524 “For painting to communicate something it must be language, and to reach that specific language it is necessary to convey a poetic language of multiple meanings and decodifications, which allows for the constant reevaluations that occur to us with works of art from the past; and the need to make them valid and the possibility of owning that cultural process, rather than seeing it as a foreign body that intercepts our step.” “Para que la pintura comunique algo debe ser lenguaje, y para que alcance ese lenguaje específico es necesario que trasmita un lenguaje poético, de múltiples significados y decodificaciones, lo cual permite las constantes revaluaciones [sic.] que operamos con las obras de arte del pasado; la necesidad de hacerlas vigentes y la posibilidad de ir adueñándose del proceso de la cultura, en lugar de verlo como un cuerpo extraño que nos intercepta al paso.” Loaiza, “Primera Bienal Centroamericana de Pintura.” For more on Traba’s idea that Latin American artists needed to construct their own language, see Traba, Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas, 1950-1970, 65.

525 “El jurado desea por unanimidad expresar su aprecio por la excelente obra presentada en el Salón de Honor, por el grabador Francisco Amighetti, que representa ejemplarmente el arte en Costa Rica.” Cuevas, Szyszlo, and Traba, “Guatemala ganó I Bienal de Pintura Centroamericana.”

526 Like many of the Generation of the 1930s, Amighetti had tried his hand in printmaking in the early 1930s. He was first truly captivated by the medium’s potential in Mexico, where he travelled in 1947 to study mural painting. Perhaps due to his exposure there to the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP, Popular Graphic Workshop), Amighetti came to dedicate himself exclusively to printmaking. For more on Amighetti see: Stefan Baciu, Francisco Amighetti (Heredi: Editorial Universidad Nacional, 1984); Echeverria, Historia crítica del arte costarricense; Herra Rodriguez, El desorden del espíritu: conversaciones con Amighetti; Carlos Guillermo Montero, Amighetti: 60 años de labor artística (San Jose, C.R.: Museo de Arte Costarricense, 1987).
Women and the Virgin, fig. 4.27, 1970).527 Each of these prints contains an element of social critique by representing complex social situations pertinent to life in Costa Rica: the first, a bar scene of two disgruntled men, above which hovers a reclining nude woman in the background; the second, a shocked girl, alone, who is made aware of her sexuality by virtue of the forces of nature and scolding elders; the third, a critical glance at the relationship between civil society and the church. These works represent the human condition in a manner particularly relevant to Costa Rican society, ruled over as it is by alcohol, conservatism, and the Roman Catholic religion.528 In each of these prints Amighetti exploited the potential of his medium and his visual vocabulary. In Conversación, the angular gouge marks add an element of violence and masculine virility. The reclining woman floats above, her sensual round belly, curvaceous arms and breasts contrary to the men’s sharp postures. Is she a poster on the wall of a seedy bar, or the figment of the male imagination conjured through vulgar conversation? In La niña y el viento, Amighetti emphasized the rings of the wood grain of the plate as a visual means of referencing the wind, blown from the left by clouds made of multi-aged, adult faces. The subtlety of the wood opposes the strong contrasts of the black ink providing the print a harmonious balance between organic and dramatic. In Las beatas y la virgen, the emotional power of the hands and faces is perhaps the print’s most striking feature. The two shrouded beatas at right have mask-like faces; the one with folded, thick-knuckled hands drawn close to her rounded, square head (indicative of a working-class background and possibly indigenous heritage) is the epitome of shame and repentance. On the other hand, the genderless, innocent child, blank face devoid of the scars of

527 Rojas González, Arte costarricense: Un siglo, 236.

time and past sins, obediently carries a processional lantern. To the left, a tearful Our Lady of Sorrows, neck ruff denoting Spanish religious and cultural influence, stands prudishly with hands clutched in front of her waist.

What elements in Amighetti’s work appealed to the jury? Thematically, the prints are strongly linked to Costa Rican daily life; urban or rural, rich or poor, most Costa Ricans are Catholic, conservative, and live in an environment of high alcohol consumption. Aesthetically, Amighetti’s personal style exploits the strength of the woodcut medium, which carries a visual effect particularly relevant to viewers from a highly forested country. Regionally, his work was relevant as well. Traba gave Amighetti much credit for his printmaking as a form of the “modest” art she felt was being positively exploited among Latin Americans, and she considered him among the important precursors of its use. Amighetti was ideal; the content and aesthetics of his work resonated with its audience, and his work factored into the growing trend among Latin American artists to work on paper.

In contrast, geometric abstract art was not the jury’s ideal. Traba later explained why the prizes were withheld in a chronicle entitled, “Por qué Guatemala se ‘tragó’ la bienal (Why Guatemala ‘Swallowed’ the Biennial).” Though not specifically referring to González, it is possible to apply her criticism as a judgment of him as well.

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529 “The reconquest of drawing and printmaking as modest forms of multiple expression, as opposed to art promoted from the centers of experimentation and technology in North America, Europe and Japan, which required costly materials and a sophisticated level of production ... Among the precursors of the graphic work one must cite the Costa Rican Francisco Amighetti (1907), [et al] ... who maintained in the period that concerns us, an activity coming from preceding decades, supplementing it with docent and formative work of enormous importance.” “La reconquista del dibujo y del grabado como formas modestas y a la vez múltiples de expresión, en contraposición al arte promovido desde los centros de experimentación y tecnología norteamericanas, europeas y japoneses, que requería materiales costosos y un sofisticado nivel de producción...Dentro de los precursores de la obra gráfica hay que citar al costarricense Francisco Amighetti (1907); [et al]...quienes mantuvieron en el periodo que nos ocupa una actividad que venía de las décadas precedentes, completándola con una tarea docente y formativa de enorme importancia.” Marta Traba, *Arte de América Latina: 1900-1980* (Washington, D.C.: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 1994), 135–136.
[The] works were not directed toward any objective, and for that reason they proceeded from no medium and they pointed to no receiver. They were executed just because, responding only to the personal distraction of the artists and their great or small capacity to absolve painting as a technical problem.530

This statement clearly defines Traba’s position against art of universal ambition, or “not directed toward any objective…no medium…no receiver.” Latin American art historian Mari Carmen Ramírez has shown how Traba’s position was informed by Cold War politics: Traba envisioned North and South America as two regions diametrically opposed, the technologically and industrially advanced society of consumerism in North America versus the “developmentally unbalanced and mythically self-absorbed” nature of Latin America.531 As such, Latin American art had no reason to look like North American art (Pop and Op Art, Minimalism, or happenings). Rather, Latin American art, according to Traba, should fulfill a role of “resistance” to be critical and relevant.532 Following Traba’s line of reasoning, geometric abstract art had no place in Central America, because it was neither rebellious nor “directed toward any objective.”533

González was thus a derivative—or what Traba referred to as a “kitsch”—artist who copied a

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530 “[Las] obras no estaban dirigidas a objetivo alguno y, por lo tanto, no procedían de ningún medio ni apuntaban a ningún receptor. Resultaban ejecutadas porque sí, respondiendo solo a la distracción personal de los artistas y a su mayor o menor capacidad de absolver la pintura como un problema técnico.” Traba quoted in Rojas González, Arte costarricense: Un siglo, 232, 235.


532 Ibid., 49.

533 The following quote supports this line of reasoning. “If we consider geometry, as presented in the 50’s, as the proper way to enter a universal circuit…it is logical that the major development of this trend occurred in ‘open’ countries … It is equally logical that the geometric will and the temptation to target the non-identifiable international circuit [of art] also occurred in ‘closed’ countries... [but] it did not acquire in these the force of a mainstream movement.” “Si consideramos la geometría, tal como se presentó en los años 50, como la forma adecuada para ingresar en un circuito universal…es lógico que el desarrollo mayor de esa tendencia se produjera en los países abiertos…Es igualmente lógico que aunque la voluntad geométrica y la tentación de apuntar al circuito internacional no identificable se diera también en los países ‘cerrados’…no adquiriera en estos últimos la fuerza de corriente dominante.” Traba, Arte de América Latina: 1900-1980, 107–108.
visual language invented and only valid elsewhere.\(^\text{534}\) Within Traba’s rubric, González’s lacquer paintings may have conformed to what she considered “bloated rhetoric.”\(^\text{535}\)

In her seminal text *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas, 1950-1970* (Two vulnerable decades in Latin American Plastic Arts), published two years after the Biennial, Traba referred to González patronizingly as one of the “touching, autodidactic characters of Central American art: Manuel de la Cruz González in Costa Rica (1909), Julia Díaz (1917), in El Salvador, are capable only through the force of tenacity and intuitive blows to perforate the deserts in which they live.”\(^\text{536}\) These “deserts” are what Traba referred to as “closed” cultural arenas. In contrast to artists in “open” areas who remained abreast of modernism, those from closed areas were disconnected from it, unoriginal, disloyal to their own ideas, and constantly altering artistic styles due to personal insecurities.

As the ‘closed area’ is a category dominated by inbred conditions, enclosure, the weight of tradition, the strength of an environment, the rule of the Indian and black races, and their corresponding blends with the white race; the ‘open area’ is guided by its progressivism, its civilizing eagerness, its ability to absorb and receive the foreigner, its breadth of vision and its tendency to glorify its capitals.\(^\text{537}\)

According to Traba’s definition, it is possible to consider San Jose an “open” area; it had progressive social democratic principles, a “civilizing” infrastructure, was eager to receive

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\(^{534}\) Traba defined kitsch as “the sum of products of artistic imitation, received through mass media offered by the society of consumerism and camp, with a natural audience that responds effortlessly to its bloated rhetoric and its baroque excesses.” “La suma de productos de imitación del arte que recibe por medio de los medios masivos de comunicación ofrecidos por la sociedad de consumo y el camp, con un público natural, que responde sin esfuerzo a su hinchada retórica y a sus excesos barrocos.” Loaiza, “Primera Bienal Centroamericana de Pintura.”


\(^{536}\) “Los personajes conmovedores de arte centroamericano, como los autodidactas: Manuel de la Cruz González en Costa Rica (1909), Julia Díaz (1917), en El Salvador, capaces sólo a fuerza de tesón y golpes intuitivos de perforar los desiertos donde viven…” Ibid., 170.

\(^{537}\) “Así como el ‘área cerrada’ es una categoría, donde predominan las condiciones endogámicas, la clausura, el peso de la tradición, la fuerza de un ambiente, el imperio de la raza india, la negra, y sus correspondientes mezclas con la raza blanca, el ‘área abierta’ está pautada por su progresismo, su afán civilizatorio, su capacidad de absorber y recibir al extranjero, su amplitud de miras y su tendencia a la glorificación de las capitales.” Ibid., 92.
foreigners, and enjoyed a glorified status within the region. This dichotomy of “opened” and “closed” is thus problematic, as it prejudices and excludes art and artists based on geography and reinforces the troubled relations of center and periphery. In this case, it seems that Costa Rica was “open” to the neo-figurative trend coursing through Latin America, as seen in Amighetti’s printmaking, but “closed” to geometric abstraction. But for Traba, all of Central America was “closed,” automatically situating its art in a negative position.

The heavy dependence which paralyzes all Central American countries (including Costa Rica, despite its glorified, good-natured petit bourgeoisie and lack of army), the cruel past and present history of the ‘banana republics’; their futile attempts at liberation; ruthless and denigrating treatment of the people by the empire and the many atrocious chiefdoms of so many ‘señores presidentes’; form a fiercely terrestrial scenario, a long, narrow, ‘valley of hammocks’ in which Central American artists must express themselves.538

Inevitably, this perspective on the Central American cultural context excludes the possibility that the reality may have affected artists differently in different parts of the region. While the 1960s and 1970s resounded with revolutionary causes in the rest of Central America, Costa Rica was experiencing an era of prosperity, and the situation for Costa Rican artists was markedly improved due in large part to the creation of the DGAL and then the MCJD. Yet Traba and her fellow jury members did not consider such factors and instead simply rejected any art that did not emphasize a so-called revolutionary stand.

538 “La espesa dependencia que paraliza todos los países centroamericanos (inclusive Costa Rica, pese a su glorificada bonomía pequeñoburguesa y su carencia de ejército); la cruel historia pasada y presente de las ‘banana republics’; sus inútiles intentos de liberación; el tratamiento despiadado y despectivo dado al pueblo por el imperio y los atroces cacicazgos de tantos ‘señores presidentes’; configuran un escenario ferozmente terrestre, un largo, estrecho, ‘valle de las hamacas’ donde deben expresarse los artistas centroamericanos.” Ibid., 169. Nicaraguan essayist Claribel Alegria reiterated this perspective in 1991. “The blood-drenched reality of Central America over the past two decades has been such a traumatic spectacle that no self-respecting human being in the area can avoid taking sides. Any artist who avoids commitment in this struggle is guilty at least of ivory tower escapism and at worst of complicity with the Squadrons of Death and the total militarization of society.” Claribel Alegria, “Our Little Region,” in Being América: Essays on Art, Literature and Identity from Latin America, ed. Rachel Weiss and Alan West (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1991), 45.
It is also problematic to limit artistic appreciation geographically in an age of increased transnational flow of people, ideas, and styles. González began making geometric abstraction when he lived in Venezuela, a location where, according to Traba, such creation was valid. González abandoned geometric abstraction after the Biennial and in later interviews he stated with bitter nostalgia, “[Leaving] Venezuela means my farewell to life.” Despite the problems with Traba’s dichotomous theory, her influence may have led González to lose hope. The outcome of the Central American Biennial probably led him to realize the futility of creating geometric abstraction art in Costa Rica, as it was not understood, not debated, not appreciated, and not adopted.

For a few years, González stopped painting altogether, and when he began again, he returned to his earliest figurative themes: the national landscape and campesinos (figs. 4.28 and 4.29). It is impossible to know exactly why the artist abandoned his experiments in geometric abstraction, and it is likely the consolidation of many issues. In the early 1970s González was also struggling financially, and the high cost of creating lacquer paintings, coupled with the fact that they did not sell, may have made their continued production unfeasible. It is also probable that González’s disillusionment with his context, despite his frequently professed love for Costa Rica, also led him to give up geometric abstraction. Traba’s criticism suggested that not even the

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539 In Dos décadas, Traba does not question the use of the visual vocabulary of geometric abstraction and kinetic art in Venezuela, which factors as one of the primary examples of an “open” area. Traba, Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas, 1950-1970, 185–187.


541 Letters in his personal archive establish that he no longer worked in advertising, and collection notices attest to his debt. In an interview years later, Tanya Kreysa pointed out that, because the production cost of the lacquer painting was high, the paintings were expensive, and few sold. Zavaleta Ochoa, Los inicios del arte abstracto en Costa Rica, 151.
most distinguished foreign visitors of the art world, let alone those from within the country, could appreciate his work in the style. Perhaps he reached the point at which, receiving no external motivation, his internal drive to keep pushing his own limitations ceased. Thereafter, he never stopped perceiving the Costa Rican art world as a “mierdero” (shit hole), plagued by mediocrity, in which the visual arts could not develop.542 “The grave failure of the Biennial leads me to ask myself and formulate many questions,” González stated in early 1972. He continued:

Costa Rican visual art is immature, mired in a conventional and bland stasis, prefabricated for a superficial and provincial bourgeoisie, without struggle, blood, pain, or historic reality. I fatally question: If the evidence shows these shortcomings, who or what is to blame? Poor preparation? Lack of responsibility for its own destiny? Lack of authentic vocations? / Denial of a historical or traditional backing? Prodigal scholarships, awards and accolades? I do not know specifically, perhaps several of these concur, but what is certain is that the past endures and the future is unclear...Who or what is responsible for this overwhelming mediocrity?543

He concluded his criticism of Costa Rica as an artistic wasteland by pointing to two examples of Costa Rican artists who had established successful careers abroad: Carlos Barboza in Spain and Francisco Zuñiga in Mexico.544 Such a statement also implies that the artist felt he would have been more successful had he stayed abroad.

Hostility and resentment pervaded in González’s voice in nearly every text published after 1971. Circumstances, human frailty, and a non-receptive environment all led to the failure of geometric abstract art in Costa Rica. Nonetheless, González’s lacquer paintings remain worthy

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543 “El fracaso de la Bienal me conduce por gravedad a hacerme y hacer muchas interrogantes...la plástica costarricense se presenta inmaduro, sumido en un estatus convencional y anodino, prefabricado para una burguesía superficial y provinciana, sin lucha, sin sangre, sin dolor, sin realidad histórica. Fatalmente pregunto: Si la evidencia comprueba estas deficiencias, de quién o de qué es la culpa? ¿Preparación deficiente? ¿Falta de responsabilidad ante su propio destino? /Ausencia de vocaciones auténticas? /Negación de un respaldo histórico o tradicional? ¿Prodigalidad de becas, premios y elogios? Yo no lo sé en concreto, quizás concurran varios de estos elementos pero lo cierto es que perdura el pasado y no se ve claro el porvenir...¿Quién o qué es el responsable de esa mediocridad apabullante?” González Luján, “Panorama plástico costarricense 1971.”

544 Ibid.
artistic investigations that elicit both aesthetic and intellectual appreciation no matter where or when they are viewed. They are universal works of art, in that they specifically and intentionally seek to transcend the local and the subjective, one of the main goals González set out to accomplish in making “cosmic art.” Rather than discredit him for his abrupt abandonment of the style, the strength of his work and the rigor with which he pursued it make him a valuable case study of how geometric abstraction came to be interpreted and adapted within Latin America. His culminating works in geometric abstraction demonstrate a provocative use of phi and cybernetics, theoretical concepts accessible to people of diverse fields, anytime, anywhere. In *Amarillo continuo*, for example, the interrelation between the saturated yellow and red, the spacing between the shapes, the way in which the glossy lacquer provokes a retinal effect, the dimensions of the painting—all of González’s choices make the painting harmonious, solid, and powerful. That his geometric abstraction was not accepted at the time of its creation reflects on the limitations of Costa Rica.

**Conclusion**

“Since I was born, I have always had the illusion of serving my country; if destiny put me in the field of the visual arts, I am there and am interested to serve it. I love my country profoundly.” This patriotism may have been what drove González to return home in late 1957, never to leave again. Costa Rica, now on the verge of cultural renewal, was a very different country from the one he left. It defined itself as a state that embraced social democracy while remaining staunchly capitalist. Higher levels of education among a growing middle class created

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545 Desde que nací, he tenido siempre la ilusión de servir a mi país, si el destino me puso en el campo de las artes plásticas, ahí estoy para servirlle y me interesa. Quiero a mi patria profundamente. Espinach, “La pintura no se explica, se siente, dice Manuel de la Cruz.”
an unprecedented cultural demand. Together with a solidified system of artistic education, the return of artists from abroad, the establishment of a government agency for culture (first the DGAL and then the MCJD) and greater contact with international art, the visual art world in Costa Rica was revived and ready to present something new—something not based on the campesino, the ox-cart, or the adobe house. González played a fundamental role within this movement; he represented an independent artist who was serious about his practice and actively involved in developing the visual arts in the country through his mentorship.

Through his lectures, writing, and efforts with Grupo Ocho and Grupo Taller, González tried to recreate an environment of forward-thinking experimentation, like that he encountered in Cuba and Venezuela. His influence was considerable. But in an art world only beginning to declare its emancipation from tradition, he was ultimately unable to transfer his passion for geometric abstraction to other artists. Eventually, his socio-cultural context overwhelmed him. Dwindling self-conviction in his geometric abstraction, disillusionment, and cynicism led González to abandon his most daring and challenging work and to look back on his days abroad with nostalgia. The 1971 series of lacquer paintings would prove to be his most experimental contribution; thereafter, he reverted to a more traditional, figurative style.

The 1960s was a particularly prolific period for González. Alongside his geometric abstract studies and final works was an entire body of figurative and lyrical abstraction. In specifically studying González’s geometric abstraction, this chapter and the dissertation as a whole has shown that, in order for a transnational style or idea to take hold in a country such as Costa Rica, it is necessary to have a receptive context. Multiple forces must come together to prompt and support such artistic development. While Costa Ricans have always been open to cultural ideas from abroad, it would have required the efforts of many others to embrace,
experiment with, and build a national movement in the visual arts based on new ideas. As a single individual, González was incapable of establishing such an environment in the 1960s. In this way, the failure of geometric abstraction in Costa Rica demonstrates the challenges of promoting international art movements in such limited environments. What instead took hold was socially-engaged, neo-figurative art like that advocated by Marta Traba. González ended his career painting the campesino and the Costa Rican landscape, producing works that proved accessible and popular. It is possible to trace in these late paintings the artist’s predilection for geometric form and mathematical composition, yet their narrative content reveals that he had entirely given up the goal of non-anecdotal, “cosmic” art.

Little did González know that his geometric abstract work would be appreciated daily by Costa Ricans decades after his death. In 2010, the municipality of San Jose erected fourteen freestanding mosaic murals with recreations of González’s geometric abstract art. Set up along the heavily transited Paseo de los Damas (figs. 4.30 and 4.31), this homage to González is a few blocks away from his Barrio Amón home.546 Despite never being appreciated during the years of their creation, today this is the work for which the artist is best known, being heralded and given prominence among the people who circulate San Jose.

546 The Paseo de los Damas (Avenue of the Damas) in downtown San Jose, named such because of the damas trees that line it, was once the grand entrance into the Costa Rican capital for travelers arriving on train from the Atlantic coast where they had disembarked ships from Europe, North, and South America. Today the train station no longer functions as such (the Beaux-Arts building now belongs to the Ministry of Culture), yet the boulevard remains important running through the cultural and political heart of the city, flanked by the National Library, the National Park (home of the National Monument), the complex of the Ministry of Culture with its various theaters and the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, the Electoral Tribunal, and other parks and monuments of historical and patrimonial import. Costa Rican artist Luis Chacón, curator of this public art project, stated that these paintings represent the pinnacle of twentieth century Costa Rican art. Andrea B. Solano, “Paseo de las [sic.] Damas: Murales recuerdan la obra de Manuel de la Cruz González,” La Nación, February 23, 2010, sec. Aldea Global, accessed June 20, 2013, http://www.nacion.com/ln_ee/2010/febrero/23/aldea2277795.html.
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