

# boulton and his contemporaries



# boulton and his contemporaries

critical dialogues in venezuelan art 1912-1974

edited by ariel jiménez

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Los Guayabitos in the morning;

Chapter 1, p. 13: Alfredo Boulton. Vista de El Ávila desde Los Guayabitos de mañana (El Ávila mountain seen from

detail). c. 1943. See p. 142

for full image and caption

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Frontispiece: Alfredo Boulton

(seated, far right, foreground)

and friends at the atelier of Francisco Narváez (seated

behind Boulton). c. 1932. Photographer unknown. Alberto Vollmer Foundation,

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zone to be occupied by the El

project, 1942, Archivos

Silencio urban-redevelopment

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by Alfredo Boulton (detail). 1987. See p. 309 for full image and

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# acknowledgments

The series of documentary anthologies to which this volume belongs began in 2002 with the publication of *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s.* At that time, Paulo Herkenhoff, who was then MoMA's Adjunct Curator of Latin American Art, proposed that we address Latin America in the next volumes of the series and conceived an initial group of publications focusing on writings from Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil. The first of these was *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde* (2004), which was subsequently published in Spanish as *Escritos de vanguardia: Arte argentino de los años '60* (2007), with the collaboration of Fundación Proa and Fundación Espigas of Buenos Aires.

Following the success of *Listen Here Now!*, we are delighted to present the next offering in this program, *Alfredo Boulton and His Contemporaries: Critical Dialogues in Venezuelan Art, 1912–1974*. Alfredo Boulton was a key personality in the creation of the discourse on modernity in Venezuela, a significant historian and critic of the visual arts, an important photographer in his own right of the Venezuelan landscape and people, and a long-time member of the International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, serving as its Chairman from 1970 to 1974. His figure provides an ideal focus for the study of this fascinating era in the history of Venezuelan art.

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Jay A. Levenson
Director, International Program
The Museum of Modern Art

# foreword

The aim of Alfredo Boulton and His Contemporaries: Critical Dialogues in Venezuelan Art, 1912-1974 is to provide readers interested in Latin American cultural processes with a series of essential tools with which to delve into the universe of works and ideas that drove Venezuelan art practice in the twentieth century. For this purpose, we have adopted as a guide the person and work of Alfredo Boulton, art historian, critic, and photographer, who held a commanding perspective on the art made in his country. Indeed, no one before Boulton had attempted a comprehensive analysis of the region's art from colonial times to the present; thus his work has become a mandatory reference for Venezuelan art historiography and criticism.

Using Boulton's work to guide our selection of texts determined the volume's chronological parameters, as well as its strict focus on what we may call the "modern Venezuelan project," beginning with the advent of Impressionistic painting in the early twentieth century and ending in the mid-1970s, when the country's will to modernization reached its peak. Boulton's preferences, opinions, and understanding of Venezuelan art provided a point of view for us; in order to delineate it, we were obliged to document the main works and artists that Boulton discusses in his criticism, as well as a number that—for methodological or ideological reasons—he purposefully chose *not* to discuss.

Boulton did not limit himself, however, strictly to the purview of Venezuelan art practice. From very early on, he maintained a far-reaching dialogue with artists and intellectuals in Latin America, Europe, and the United States—especially with The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, where his photographs were included in the 1946 exhibition *New Photographers*, curated by Nancy and Beaumont Newhall. But it was not only as a photographer that Boulton was engaged with MoMA: he was an interlocutor deeply involved in the Museum's international activities, to the extent that he was appointed Chairman of the Board of MoMA's International Council in 1970. In this role, Boulton shared with the Museum the benefits of his understanding of the art of his time from a perspective that encompassed work made in the most diverse national and regional settings and that went beyond a narrow reading of modernism.

For the reader familiar with the evolution of what we have come to call modern Western art, the dates 1912 to 1974 that serve as this publication's framework may seem curious. Indeed, the choice of this particular chronological period says much, not only about the discrepancy that characterizes Venezuelan processes vis-à-vis their European models, but about their specificities—about that difference that makes the Venezuelan reality unquestionably distinct.

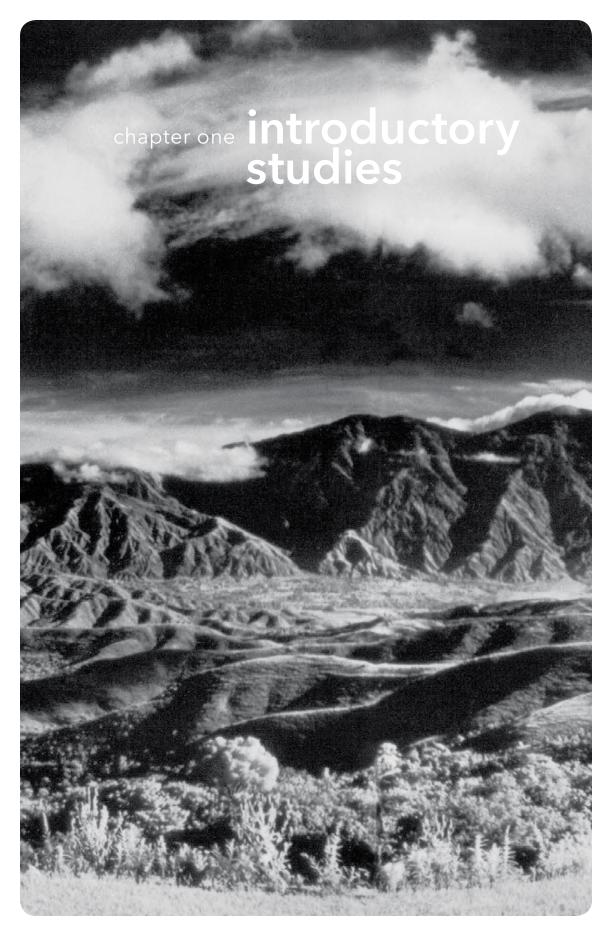
This volume is divided into two essential sections and periods: "Figuring Venezuela, 1912-1949" and "The Challenge of the Times, 1949-1974." In both sections, the reader will find historical documents selected to illuminate the issues that distinguished the period in question; most of these texts have never before been published in English. The historical sections that constitute

the heart of the book are preceded by a series of introductory studies by contemporary scholars. The purpose of these essays is to give readers the frame of reference needed to understand the political, demographic, and cultural context in which ideas were fomenting. The book concludes with a "critical nexus": four essays by contemporary critics discussing issues addressed by Boulton that characterize Venezuelan modernity. At the end of this publication, a chronology and selected bibliography offer useful complements for readers who wish to continue their research and broaden their knowledge of the period.

Due to the inevitable limitations of the book's physical size, we have abridged some of the selected historical documents, in particular the more extensive ones (such editorial abridgments are acknowledged by ellipses in brackets within the texts; a note at the end of these pieces indicates both the fact of abridgment and the full publication information should readers wish to consult the complete texts). Lastly, if the dates of certain texts do not coincide with the period of the section in which they are included, it is because the issues discussed by the writer correspond in essence to the concerns of the era in question. This is the case, for instance, with Arturo Úslar Pietri's essays on *mestizaje* (racial mixing), a topic that clearly corresponds to concerns typical of the first half of the twentieth century—especially after 1920—although Úslar Pietri dealt with it in the 1970s.

Specialists may lament the absence of a specific image, or the fact that an important artist or group is mentioned only cursorily here. Our hope is that interested audiences will find in this book a broad and representative introduction to the individual artists and movements cutting across the twentieth century in Venezuela—their achievements and failures, their expectations, and their remarkable collective initiatives—and may proceed from this grounding to further investigations.

-Ariel Jiménez



# latin american modernities hugo achugar

### latin american scenarios

According to Hegel, the American continent was incapable of developing its own theoretical approach.<sup>1</sup> Other thinkers of the so-called First World have seen Latin America, specifically, as a premodern realm of handicrafts and magic realism. In much of the discourse on Latin America, the region is synonymous with great rivers, abundant tropical rainforests, and an alarming accumulation of dictators, malnourished children, and drug dealers. These scenarios have "orientalized" Latin America, making it the home of the savage, of the cannibal, of Shakespeare's Caliban.

The history of such scenarios and representations of Latin America begins before 1492.<sup>2</sup> During the twentieth century these representations changed in accordance with global events such as the Bolshevik Revolution, the two world wars, and the Cold War, and with regional events such as the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the dictatorships of the 1970s, and the more recent emergence of left-wing or "populist" governments in various countries of the region, particularly Venezuela since the time of Hugo Chávez's rise to power in 1999.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout history, many of the images of Latin America—those constructed both locally and abroad—have had a common tendency: a will toward homogeneity. The reasons for this have often been political and economic. However, if anything characterizes Latin America it is its radical heterogeneity—its geographic, ethnic, and social diversity, of course, but also its cultural heterogeneity, marked by the dichotomy of oral and written culture,<sup>4</sup> the trichotomy of indigenous, African, and European cultures, as well as the experience of living simultaneous temporalities or "mixed times";<sup>5</sup> in other words, it is possible to find a variety of cultural, social, and economic temporalities coexisting within Latin America, and even within a single country. Paradoxically, these multiple scenarios provide one of the region's fundamental—and unifying—traits: its supranational diversity and multiplicity.

This does not mean that it is impossible to identify a single element that cuts through these countries' heterogeneous historical and cultural realities, allowing us to establish a few common factors. There is certainly at least one such element—heterogeneous in itself—that would eventually underlie all Latin American modernities: the experience of speed, both in the sense of movement from one place to another and also in relation to the propensity for change and the acceptance of novelty and difference. Different speeds in Latin America have made it possible for highways and skyscrapers to multiply in Caracas at an ever-increasing pace since the mid-twentieth century, while in other regions of Venezuela, which remain untouched by successive waves of modernization, indigenous groups still live on the fringes of the country's modernity in spite of their relatively small size in comparison to those in the Andean region, in Guatemala, or in Mexico.

In Venezuela differences and tensions are played out between the city and the countryside, the Western and the indigenous, the literate and the illiterate, the cosmopolitan and the provincial, but also within each of these categories. Thus, the cosmopolitan may be illiterate and rural, the urban may be

provincial and literate. This heterogeneity of scenarios is not a recent phenomenon, although it intensified throughout the twentieth century and now, at the start of the twenty-first, goes hand in hand with the current technological, media, and audiovisual revolution.

As a consequence, it is increasingly difficult to understand various Latin American phenomena in exclusively national or regional terms. To speak of the radical heterogeneity of the vast majority of these countries is also a way of describing their social and cultural fragmentation. Perhaps this is why, among the discourses that sought to provide a general image of Latin America—including those developed by Latin Americans—the most meaningful ones were constructed from afar. This was the case with the Venezuelan Andrés Bello<sup>6</sup> during his exile in London around 1820, with the Cuban José Martí<sup>7</sup> who was writing from New York in 1891, with other Latin Americans such as Carlos Quijano, <sup>8</sup> Arturo Úslar Pietri, <sup>9</sup> Alejo Carpentier, <sup>10</sup> Julio Cortázar, <sup>11</sup> and with many others as well, ranging from the early twentieth century to the present, as general visions of Latin America are still being developed in the context of a globalized world and from a globalized perspective.

Situating Venezuela within the diversity and heterogeneity of Latin America poses two risks: the first, of committing the "sin" of exceptionalism, and the second, of failing to recognize the particularities of a country that is itself multiple and heterogeneous. Any attempt to make homogenizing assertions about a nation that harbors the Andean foothills, long stretches of Caribbean coast, wide plains, and the northern section of the Amazon basin—plus a significant Afro-Venezuelan community, an indigenous minority, and a sizeable population of mestizos (people of mixed races)—is destined to fail. However, the many Venezuelan cultures do possess certain traits that distinguish them from the rest of Latin America; these result from the interrelation of natural, demographic, and social circumstances and from the fact that the country has developed a particularly sophisticated artistic practice in close contact with Western centers of power, an important cultural industry of its own, and a popular culture that is diverse, secular, and both urban and rural.

### modernity is multifarious

There is more than one modernity in Venezuela and Latin America. This is due not only to Latin America's diversity and heterogeneity but also to the different stages that characterized the development of the region's modernities.

That development itself was, furthermore, uneven and asynchronous: while Venezuela was living through Juan Vicente Gómez's dictatorship during three decades of the twentieth century (1908-35), Mexico was in the throes of a revolution that began in 1910 and would last long into the century, as other countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, were engaged in an accelerated process of modernization. In addition, the various stages of modernization were experienced differently by different people: while some enthusiastic Latin Americans welcomed modernity as a synonym for progress, for others it was experienced as a brush with the Apocalypse.

These ambivalences and conflicting visions have pervaded the imagery of Latin American artists and intellectuals since the mid-nineteenth

century. For example, in 1845 the Argentinean Domingo F. Sarmiento<sup>12</sup> coined the problematic phrase "civilization or barbarism" as an illustration of the contradictions between the "barbarous" characteristics of local culture and Eurocentric modernizing impulses. This problematic vision has been reiterated, questioned, and finessed up to the present century, thus confirming the fact that the representations and imagery of different modernities have not been able to escape their own diversity or the conflicts intrinsic to the region.<sup>13</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, Latin America was in the midst of an uneven integration into the Western project of modernity. The process of decolonization had ended in almost all countries—with the exception of Cuba and Puerto Rico, which were involved in the Spanish-American War of 1898—and a series of administrative reforms had been achieved at the state level, notably the creation of public education and the abolition of slavery. The transition from a precapitalist system of exploitation to economic rationalism was already a fact for the majority of the region's countries. Once again, such processes were neither homogeneous nor simultaneous; whereas modernizing impulses were evident in southern Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and other countries of the Southern Cone, some countries persisted in the colonial rhythm. Although Venezuela was beginning to emerge from the civil wars that had put an end to the multiple presidencies of Antonio Guzmán Blanco Hendon spearheaded a number of reforms to modernize the state and the educational system—this was not necessarily linked to the transformations of the time.

This diversity and heterogeneity of circumstance meant that in some regions and countries the influx of icons representative of modernity's productive and technological revolution coexisted with lifestyles, behaviors, and modes of production that were characteristic of the colonial era and sometimes incompatible with Western versions of modernity. Thus by the first decades of the twentieth century, vast regions of Latin America continued to live within cultural, social, and economic parameters set by indigenous traditions barely altered by their contact with European colonizing practices. At the same time Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Mexico City, Montevideo, and a few other cities were undergoing a period of particularly dynamic growth with regard to media, transportation, the new products of the cultural industry (especially film, radio, and music), dialogue with European cultural production, and the establishment of new literary and artistic centers. Venezuela, for example, witnessed the appearance of its first movies in 1897, the first full-length film in 1916, the first automobile in 1904, and the first radio broadcasts in 1926.

These were not yet mass phenomena; many modern icons were linked to the powerful or most educated socioeconomic classes. Dialogue between the educated class, or the "lettered city," and cultural production in cosmopolitan centers—particularly France—was, however, a common practice in all Latin America, and especially Venezuela, as the correspondence between Arturo Úslar Pietri and Alfredo Boulton or between the latter and Julián Padrón 18 from the 1920s to the 1930s demonstrates. For example, in a letter of October 11, 1939, sent to Boulton in Paris, Padrón asks for James Joyce's *Ulysses* in French and suggests that Boulton acquire "Finnegans Wake, Joyce's latest work, along with the recordings in which he himself reads several passages," a recommendation

that illustrates the modern cosmopolitanism characteristic of the period's educated class.<sup>19</sup>

The "lettered city's" cosmopolitan dialogue was accompanied by migratory processes that altered the demographic landscape and contributed to an increase in the population of various Latin American cities. The population of Buenos Aires went from 890,000 inhabitants to almost 1,500,000 between 1903 and 1913, and Mexico City's grew from little more than 340,000 to more than a million between 1910 and 1930. New York City grew from almost three million to nearly seven million between 1900 and 1930. Caracas's expansion was not as pronounced: the city had close to 90,000 inhabitants in 1900 and some 150,000 in the 1920s.

The quick growth of Buenos Aires and New York has been explained in terms of strong migratory currents from Europe. But those two cities were not the only ones affected by the influx of European immigrants; a similar wave occurred in Santiago de Chile, Montevideo, and other cities of the region. This was compounded by immigration from non-European countries, contributing to the region's present cultural and ethnic diversity—from Japan to São Paulo; from China to some countries on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, such as Peru; from India (in particular) to some Caribbean countries. There was a substantial Jewish migration to various countries, especially those in the Southern Cone. In Venezuela's case, the greatest impact came from the colonial slave trade. From the early nineteenth century on, however, immigration was subject to a number of vicissitudes both at home and abroad that, in spite of its importance, weakened the impact of European immigration—from Germany, Italy, and Spain especially—on the country in comparison with other regions of the Americas.

All the changes that characterized the rise of modernity in the early twentieth century—including immigration to Latin America, the impact of World War I, the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917—helped to reinforce an imagery of renewal; this was further strengthened by the daily experience, already acquired and assimilated, of the transformations in the media and transportation systems.

Although trains, electricity, and automobiles were still privileges enjoyed by few, they had long been part of everyday life in the Americas. By the early twentieth century, mass transit systems – one of the most obvious symbols of modernity-had already been in existence for half a century. In his Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin wrote that in Paris, "on January 30, 1828, the first omnibus began operation on the line running along the boulevard from the Bastille to the Madeleine."20 In New York the first horse-drawn streetcar appeared in 1832, and in Latin America three lines opened simultaneously in 1858 in Mexico City, Havana, and Santiago de Chile. Latin America's first railroad opened in Cuba in November 1837, eleven years before trains ran in the capital of the Spanish empire that ruled over the island. In Venezuela, the main railroad lines were inaugurated before the turn of the century, though their construction had begun much earlier: the lines from Puerto Cabello to Valencia (1888) and from Caracas to Valencia (1894) were linked to the one between La Guaira and Caracas (1883), the two most important ports and cities of the central region. The horse-drawn streetcar, on the other hand, arrived here in 1882 and the electric streetcar in 1908.

The purpose here is not to list modern means of transportation but to highlight the emergence of a different perspective, a new gaze. Our main interest is not the railway per se, but the experience of modernity and, above all, a gaze lived and experienced through the new means of movement from one place to the next. This new gaze, introduced by the icons of modernity – photography is paradigmatic of such a gaze – was a key element of the technological innovations that transformed the experience of the "new" in Latin America.

### avant-gardes and modernity between the wars

The panorama set up by the first modernity was already well established by the time the "historical avant-gardes" burst onto the scene in Latin America: the São Paulo Semana de Arte Moderna (Modern art week)<sup>21</sup> in 1922 is held as a key date,<sup>22</sup> and 1925 is considered a fundamental year as both the start of the Mexican muralist movement and the year in which the Venezuelan Úslar Pietri, based in Paris, coined (or adapted) the term "magic realism" as a form of Latin American "cultural capital" (to borrow a term from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu).

The technological, social, and cultural transformations at the beginning of what has been called the "short century"<sup>23</sup> gave rise to great cultural productivity, an intense dialogue between the two shores of the Atlantic Ocean, and an energetic revitalization of ideas that had an impact on the image of Latin America, especially among the region's intellectual and artistic elites. This enthusiasm, transformation, and dialogue produced a kind of generalized upheaval that sparked political, artistic, and literary as well as ethnic and cultural movements: Andean indigenism, the Mexican Revolution, Caribbean negritude—which occurred at the same time as the New York Harlem Renaissance—and the americanismo<sup>24</sup> championed by various authors and countries.

Enthusiasm and unlimited faith in the potentials of the New World in the face of European decadence were not, however, the only aspects of Latin American modernity during this period. Like those in Western Europe, Latin American modernities also had their dark side, their apocalyptic elements.

The promise of Futurism was epitomized in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1909 proclamation that "a speeding car... is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace," but little of that zeal is to be found in Charlie Chaplin's representation of modern malaise in the film *Modern Times* (1936). Likewise, Rómulo Gallegos<sup>25</sup>—the future president of Venezuela and an enthusiastic proponent of the power of education and civilization in Latin America—observed the following in his September 1931 talk at the Nicholas Roerich Museum of New York: "The Empire State Building is large. Grand. They say it will hold five thousand offices. Five thousand abodes of toil with their corresponding instruments of torture for five thousand typists. Five thousand bankruptcies. The crisis continues indeed."<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that the experience of modernity was ambivalent and even contradictory, or that the modernity depicted in *Modern Times* (or in Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*), and which Gallegos satirized, was merely one of modernity's many manifestations. In fact, if one compares the critical spirit with which Gallegos engages the modernist icon of the Empire State Building in his 1931 speech with his stance in the 1929 novel *Doña Bárbara*, in which

he fleshes out his belief in civilization and modernization, it is obvious that the ambivalences of modernity were due not only to economic or financial factors but to conflicting feelings generated in many Latin Americans by the enthusiasm and frustrations of the modernizing process.

From the mid-nineteenth century to the present, contradictory experiences and ambivalent reactions to the successive stages of modernization were common in both the West and peripheral Latin America. In January 1928 Venezuela was still controlled by Gómez and barely a decade had passed since the discovery of its tremendous oil reserves, which put an end to the cocoa production that had dominated Venezuelan agriculture since the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

That year, a group of students wrote the words that would serve as a kind of generational manifesto: "We are a group of young men with faith, with hope, and with no mercy."28 These young men would later become known as the "Generation of 1928," <sup>29</sup> a group that included future Venezuelan presidents Rómulo Betancourt<sup>30</sup> and Raúl Leoni, <sup>31</sup> as well as other figures such as Jóvito Villalba, Miguel Otero Silva, 32 and Isaac Pardo, all of whom played important roles in Venezuela's cultural and political life (and to whom Úslar Pietri, among others, had close connections). Their "faith" and "hope" - and even their lack of mercy-are emblematic of the enthusiasm of the educated class at the forefront of one of Latin America's many modernities. Proponents of this modernity believed not only in cultural renewal but also in the transformation of life in all its aspects, most particularly in the democratization of public life. It was this belief that inspired the student movement and the 1918 reforms to the university system in Córdoba, Argentina; it was this same belief that motivated the Nicaraguan Augusto César Sandino's<sup>33</sup> actions in the 1920s and mobilized artists, writers, politicians, and social activists in various parts of Latin America. In the United States, meantime, the "roaring twenties" saw the return home of veterans of World War I, the growth of jazz, the emergence of the modern woman (the flapper), and the beginning of the Great Depression.

In Venezuela and the rest of Latin America, along with enthusiasm, willfulness, and experimentation came frustrations, the rise of dictatorships, economic disasters, the failure of projects, isolation, and tense relations between Latin America and its great northern neighbor, which invaded or engaged in conflicts with Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and others between 1898 and 1934. These years were marked by the fall of dictatorships, including Gómez's in Venezuela (1936), the Argentine military coup, the rise of Getulio Vargas's populism in 1930 in Brazil, he Chaco War between Paraguay and Bolivia (1934), Gerardo Machado's period of despotism in Cuba, the beginning of the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, but also Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas's nationalization of the petroleum reserves (1937), Sandino's insurrection in Nicaragua, and Farabundo Martí's insurrection in El Salvador.

During these years, the presence of North American multinational companies assumed ominous overtones, as happened with the United Fruit Company's involvement in the "Banana Massacre" (fictionalized in Gabriel García Márquez's 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). Companies also finished consolidating their power, making the Rockefeller family the owner of 95 percent of Venezuela's petroleum production through the Standard Oil Company in 1940.

These events helped establish the stereotype of the "banana republic" that has been grafted onto the region's countries from the mid-twentieth century to the present, as well as other stereotypes that would follow: the tropical exoticism of Carmen Miranda, or the world of the Buenos Aires and Montevideo mafia, as seen in the 1946 Rita Hayworth vehicle *Gilda*.

This was also a time of fevered *americanismo*, strong nationalist sentiments, and close contact with cosmopolitan centers. The maxim of the Brazilian avant-garde—"Tupí or not Tupí, that is the question"<sup>39</sup>—references the desire to hybridize cultures, that deliberate cultural cannibalism that would elsewhere be termed *mestizaje* (Úslar Pietri), or the universal "melting pot," as in the Mexican José Vasconcelos's *La raza cosmica* (*The Cosmic Race*),<sup>40</sup> or Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García's version of *americanismo*, in which Constructivism was engaged with Inca symbols.

In Venezuela, this period coincides not only with the cultural and educational renewal ushered in by the "Generation of 1928" but also with the construction of a society in which petroleum would play a key role. The phrase "sembrar el petróleo" (to sow the oil), coined by Úslar Pietri in 1936, was put into practice by Gómez's successor, General Eleazar López Contreras, 41 toward the late 1930s. In 1936, some of the country's most valuable intellectuals, among them Rómulo Betancourt and Mariano Picón Salas 42 (a central figure in the realm of education), returned to Venezuela; both of these men founded a political movement whose goal was to democratize and modernize the country.

This was a rich and diverse time in Latin America, during which the cultural dialogue with Europe and the United States resulted in collaborations not only among Latin American and European painters but also among writers from many countries; the hotbed of artists included Vicente Huidobro, Alejo Carpentier, César Vallejo, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Nicolás Guillén, José Lezama Lima, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Pablo Picasso, Jean Arp, Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens, and Edward Weston. It was during this time that the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein discovered Mexico, and French writer Blaise Cendrars was captivated by Brazil. Venezuela not only participated in this multifaceted dialogue, but in fact produced numerous artists and writers (Úslar Pietri and Boulton, as mentioned, but also Francisco Narváez, Jesús Rafael Soto, Guillermo Meneses, Sofía Imber, and the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva Solóa whom became a paradigmatic example of the Latin American intellectual's role as a "culture broker" for his or her country of origin.

The somewhat arbitrary list above seeks to show yet another face of the multiple heterogeneities and temporalities experienced during the emergence of modernity between the wars in Latin America: the modernity of transatlantic and transcontinental dialogue, an exchange shaped by the time period and by the cosmopolitan and globalizing aspects implicit in both past and present irruptions of modernity.

### midcentury or contemporary universalism

Modernizing impulses in Latin America underwent a very particular transformation at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. This transformation can be understood as the weakening of artistic and cultural projects, the emergence of existentialist thought, or the consequence of economic and political changes that began with the economic crisis of 1929 and with the regional and global consolidation of political movements that resulted in the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the Holocaust.

Although these events happened outside Latin America, their effects were felt within the region. They played, after all, a predominant role in the restructuring of world power that took place after 1945 once Mussolini's and Hitler's fates were decided and Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin had divided up the planet at Yalta. During this new stage of globalization and modernization, Latin America not only served as a refuge for various groups—Spanish exiles, Jewish communities, and other European émigrés—but also as a supplier of food and oil, and as repository for European capital. In some cases (particularly in Brazil) Latin America would participate by sending soldiers off to fight in Europe, and in others (such as the Río de la Plata) it felt, to a lesser extent, the effects of a naval battle. Venezuelan oil would play a crucial role both in World War II and in the new global order.

By the end of the 1940s, other effects of the major transformations brought about by global reorganization came into focus: the beginning of the Cold War, the Bretton Woods Agreement (1944), the beginning of the atomic era with the bombing of Hiroshima (1945), the creation of the U.S. National Security Council (1947), the creation of the Organization of American States (OAS) (1948), and the Truman government's implementation of the Marshall Plan. The effects of the Truman Doctrine and the National Security Act would be felt throughout Latin America, particularly with the establishment of authoritarian regimes in countries as diverse as Guatemala, Paraguay (1954), the Dominican Republic, and Colombia, as well as in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina during the 1960s and '70s.

In Venezuela's case, after López Contreras's government, a revolutionary junta led by Betancourt deposed President Isaías Medina Angarita<sup>46</sup> in 1945 and took provisional power in order to guarantee presidential elections and establish direct, universal secret suffrage. Three years later, in 1948, Rómulo Gallegos assumed the presidency with the intention of initiating educational reforms and renegotiating petroleum contracts, but was ousted by the end of the year. The new world order, as well as internal turmoil in Venezuela, facilitated the establishment of dictatorial governments that would control the country until January of 1958, with Marcos Pérez Jiménez<sup>47</sup> as their central figure.

There was another aspect to this scenario, intimately linked to certain aspects of midcentury modernization. The European conflicts and the new world order provided, in effect, economic "benefits" to some of the countries in the region due to an increase in exports and the localization of some global assets. During these years, the architecture of cities such as Caracas, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City underwent profound transformations. Latin America's modernizing impulse and the urban transformation of the late 1940s and early 1950s are key to understanding midcentury modernity in Latin America (although it must be remembered that the vast majority of Latin America was excluded from these transformations).

It has been argued that the most evident signs can be seen in Havana, which remained frozen at this stage of modernization; but perhaps



El Silencio building complex in Caracas. Photograph by Alfredo Boulton. c. 1945. Alberto Vollmer Foundation, Inc., Caracas

Caracas and São Paulo are even clearer examples of the post-World War II drive to modernize. The redevelopment of the El Silencio district (1941-45) and the construction of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (1944-58)—two Caracas projects by the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva—had an enormous impact on the city's inhabitants, which numbered barely more than a million in 1950; and the buildings and highways in São Paulo—which in the same year had a population of 2,200,000—are eloquent examples of modernity's face at that time. The urban and architectural growth of Caracas and São Paulo in the 1950s is indicative of the vitality that characterized this phase of modernity. Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia project (1956-60) is a particularly revealing example of the spirit of the time. All tepitomizes the idea of modernity as a civilizing mandate, as the inscription of culture on nature, as omnipotent reason's control over natural chaos; the city's construction in the middle of the Mato Grosso jungle was a geometric operation kindred, concordant, and convergent with a modernity that was seeking its own path.

This is perhaps the key to this stage of Latin American modernity: the desire to make the universalism of reason coincide with a new regard for the particular and local. During this period, universalism and localism inspired multiple projects, similar to those attempted in the years between the wars but of a different tenor. The difference lay in Latin America's midcentury efforts to attain self-sufficiency, which converged with import-substitution policies. The impulse to construct new societies, modern cities, and universal spaces was complemented by an effort to create national industries, at least in some countries (as others remained mere producers of raw materials for the industries of developed countries).

This oscillating perspective, this gaze trapped between contemporary universalism and nationalist localism also crystallized in projects as dissimilar as Jorge Luis Borges's anti-realism, Miguel Ángel Asturias's and Rosario Castellanos's magic realism, Juan Carlos Onetti's blurring of boundaries between the real and the imaginary, and Alejo Carpentier's "real maravilloso" (marvelous real). Although most of these authors began writing before World War II, the midcentury decades brought new interest to their particular visions.

In fact, this entire period is a battleground between those who held on to the strictly local and those who aspired to enter into dialogue with the global, between the populist nationalism of president Juan Perón and his wife Evita in Argentina and the universalism of intellectual currents that attempted to distance themselves from the local.

This polarization, however, does not account for everything that was happening at the time. Numerous writers, artists, art critics, photographers, and intellectuals were speaking out on both sides of the issue. The term and the notion of the "glocal" –a conflation of "global" and "local" –had not yet been coined, yet the "glocal" spirit and, in particular, "glocal" production already existed in Latin America.<sup>49</sup>

Boulton's *La Margarita* (1952), an ethno-historic photo-essay about the Isla de Margarita, off Venezuela's northern coast, is closer to artistic creation than to photographic record, and embodies the "glocal" spirit. The book is, on one hand, a detailed and carefully documented historical account, and on the other a photographic record with ethnographic ambitions, both of which are brought together through a "modernist" aesthetic.<sup>50</sup> Nature, everyday objects, and human beings are treated not only in terms of their referential value—that is, as documents—but also as aestheticized images or objects valuable in and of themselves. Two good examples of this are the image of the fishing net (which can almost be envisioned as one of sculptor Gego's weblike Reticuláreas),<sup>51</sup> and the aerial photograph of the Isla de Margarita in which the "real object" is defamiliarized and given the status of an "artistic object."<sup>52</sup>

This spirit—which we may anachronistically call "glocal" because of its attempt to give new worth to the local and national while simultaneously inscribing itself within the universalist aesthetics of contemporary Western modernism—is present in the work and thinking of other Latin American authors, artists, and intellectuals of the time. To a great extent, this aesthetic-ideological project can be found in the writings of Octavio Paz, in the essays of the art critic Romero Brest, and in the architectural work of Oscar Niemeyer. The "glocal" allowed enthusiasm for the French films of the Nouvelle Vague and a prefer-

ence for the films of the Swede Ingmar Bergman over Hollywood's productions to coexist with Pérez Jiménez's nationalist cultural project and his celebration of the patriotic Semana de la Patria (Homeland week) and Danzas Venezuela (Venezuela dances) as two faces of a divergent, cosmopolitan, Americanist project.

There were, however, other positions, other faces to this divergent project. Villanueva's correspondence with Alexander Calder dates to these years; it is the same period in which Roger Caillois translated the work of Borges and made



Fishing net. Photograph by Alfredo Boulton. c. 1952. Alberto Vollmer Foundation, Inc., Caracas

it accessible to Europeans; Lezama Lima established contact with Wallace Stevens; Witold Gombrowicz roamed around Buenos Aires; and Malcolm Lowry was entranced by Mexico—these and other projects during this time period confirm Latin America's cultural heterogeneity. Such endeavors opted for the inward-looking americanismo of Pablo Neruda's Canto General (1950), Heitor Villa-Lobos's Bachianas Brazileiras (Brazilian Bach-pieces), and the Argentine Alberto Ginastera's "objective nationalism." In Venezuela's case, they included in the realm of music Inocente Carreño's Suite Margariteña (1954) and Antonio Estévez's Cantata Criolla (1954).<sup>53</sup>

Around 1950 there were two sites of "progressive Venezuelan art," according to Miguel Cabañas Bravo: 54 Caracas and Paris, where two groups emerged in short succession—the Taller Libre de Arte 55 (Free arts workshop, 1948) and Los Disidentes (The dissidents, 1950). 56 Many of the latter's members returned to Caracas during the 1950s, espousing an abstract-geometric vision that challenged the prevailing artistic conservatism in Venezuela; they fell into step with contemporary Western artistic production and with the work of Latin Americans such as Wifredo Lam. This group—which included Alejandro Otero, 57 Mateo Manaure, 58 and Oswaldo Vigas, 59 among others, and which maintained close contact with Carlos Cruz-Diez 60 and Jesús Rafael Soto—epitomized that moment of midcentury modernity in which contemporary universalism entered into a dialogue that exceeded the merely local, reaching its ultimate expression in Villanueva's Universidad Central de Venezuela (just one example among many). This work by Villanueva involved the participation of such international artists as Jean Arp, Victor Vasarely, Alexander Calder, and Fernand Léger.

Venezuelan and Latin American midcentury modernity continued its dialogue with Western European culture, but for the first time it experienced the euphoria of seeing one of its projects validated and assimilated, at least by the West; the euphoria of having attained a modernity that carried its own signature—a modernity "made in Latin America" that could engage as an equal, if not with the rest of the planet, at least with the old empires and the recently forged superpowerful "American dream." The distinctly Venezuelan stamp on this modernity lay in the audacity of its proposal and its progressive character within the Latin American context.

# from the 1960s to the turn of the twenty-first century: hopes and disappointments

Boulton concluded the 1952 edition of his photography project *La Margarita* with these words: "Rejecting all other industries, the island will continue living on what has always been nearest to its heart. It will live off the sea, fishing, and pearls." In the edition that was reissued thirty years later, the preliminary note reads:

I would like travelers today to recognize the change that the island has suffered. I hope these images encourage them to prevent this harsh turn of events from becoming even more desolate and sterile. I hope they do their utmost to preserve and protect whatever still remains of the land-scape and its people, for if it loses its current charm, the island will have lost its reason for being.<sup>61</sup>

The quote reveals a love of popular customs, traditions, and the surviving natural landscape, and expresses a desire to preserve local values or "authenticity" in the face of modernizing forces. Boulton's sentiment betrays the characteristic ambivalence of a modernity that he himself admired and celebrated in his commentary on Cruz-Diez and Soto, while at the same time proclaiming his adherence to the disingenuous naïveté of Armando Reverón, 62 and marveling at the colonial cultural production or reveling in Venezuelan popular culture and the country's natural landscape.

The Isla de Margarita was not the only place affected by these changes. As Boulton himself put it in 1981: "The tremendous difference between the Venezuela of 1950 and the one of 1981 is obvious." Summarizing the changes that Venezuela and Latin America underwent during these years is not an easy task. Those intervening thirty years included the Bolivian Revolution (1952), the Cuban Revolution (1959), the return of democracy to Venezuela, the creation of OPEC, the emergence of guerrillas in the 1960s, the heyday and fall of Che Guevara, the beginning of the "space age" and the landing on the moon, dictatorships in the Southern Cone, the Vietnam War, the fuel crisis and economic turmoil of the mid-1970s, the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, the appearance and apotheosis of television, the democracy of so-called "petrobolívars," the development of Pop art, the rise of Latin America's "boom" generation of writers, the new *aggiornamento*, or "openness," of the Catholic church, and the spread of the liberation theology, in addition to innumerable other cultural, technological, and artistic transformations.

In Venezuela, the nationalization of the iron and oil industries, as well as the tremendous increase in the international price of oil in the 1970s, fueled significant cultural developments such as the international theater festivals begun in 1973, the Rómulo Gallegos International Novel Prize (which helped establish the reputations of the writers Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes), and other initiatives that turned the country, and particularly Caracas, into a cultural point of reference for all of Latin America.

Latin America had entered another phase of its successive modernities, this time characterized by the rise of television and the advent of the "telenovela"—in whose production Venezuela, Mexico, and Brazil played a preponderant role—as a specifically Latin American cultural product distinct from the North American soap opera. However, cultural modernity and the emergence of new forms of popular culture were also accompanied by profound sociopolitical transformations, increased immigration from rural areas to the city, and the exponential growth of megalopolises such as Mexico City and São Paulo. By the end of the 1950s, in particular with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and the worldwide success of Latin American literature, <sup>63</sup> the region became fashionable and captured the world's attention—with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, among other things—but also passed from the stereotype of a continent filled with "banana republics" to that of the home place of the "bearded revolutionary."

Cultural and revolutionary modernity was not, of course, an exclusively Latin American phenomenon. It was also embodied by the turmoil and protests of May 1968 in France, the civil-rights movement in the United States, the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement in the United States, the Chinese Cultural

Revolution, postcolonial independence movements in Africa, Prague Spring, the second wave of feminism, and the start of the gay-rights movement. The synchronization of times that Latin America had aspired to in the early twentieth century seemed to be falling in step with the planetary clock during this period.

According to cultural critic Charles Jencks, modernity ended on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 P.M. with the demolition of the functionalist Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>64</sup> The nostalgia expressed by Boulton and numerous others between the end of modernity and postmodernity's beginnings points to the inevitable state of every change in eras: simultaneous discontent and glimmers of future potential.

One can understand postmodernity as the conclusion of modernity. One can argue that the project of modernity remains unfinished, that it is still valid. One can also argue that modernity and postmodernity—or better, modernities and postmodernities—still coexist. In spite all this—and in spite of discussions about whether postmodernity begins with the "short century," after World War II, with the crisis of 1973, or even, as some suggest, in 1492<sup>65</sup>—it seems obvious that something called "postmodernity" had taken root in Venezuelan awareness at the beginning of the 1980s, when Boulton expressed his nostalgia for the past of the Isla de Margarita and the revolutionaries of the 1960s began to lose heart.

These were years of transition, from the experimentalist impulse of Latin American art—whose centers were the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires, the São Paulo biennials, Mexico City, and Caracas—to the millennium's threshold when the last stage of modernization in the region was (for the time being, at least) finally assimilated. It was during this period that the group known as El Techo de la Ballena (The roof of the whale),66 representatives of the 1960s Venezuelan avantgarde, developed much of its work, which combined informalist rupture, the influence of Surrealism, and the liberating political blitheness of the time.

The final stage of development, which extends to the present, is something more than just modernity's new face. It is most likely a *civilizational* change, not only in the realm of the arts, but also in the social, the political, and particularly the technological realms. This civilizational change, which is occurring in Venezuela as well as in the rest of Latin America, is marked not only by the sociopolitical transformations sparked by the "Caracazo" protests and brutal military response on February 27, 1989,<sup>67</sup> but also by the conclusion of an era, by the demise of a certain way of understanding the cultural and political life that shaped Venezuelan history in the twentieth century. There have been similar changes throughout Latin America, but the events that transpired since the late 1980s and early 1990s in Venezuela entailed a rupture greater than those in other countries.

The Venezuelan process is, however, inscribed within more generalized phenomena. One need only enumerate words that have entered the vocabularies of the vast majority of Latin Americans and the rest of the world's inhabitants: fax, Internet, DVD, CD, credit card, money wires, email, cell phone, laptop, iPod, Blackberry, AIDS, space stations, artificial satellites, European Union, MERCOSUR, Chavismo. One need only enumerate words that have lost their currency: Soviet Union, telex, telegram, Berlin Wall, apartheid, Cold War, and so on. One need only enumerate words that have always been meaningful and are still in use: war, genocide, poverty, discrimination, torture, populism, dictatorship,

illness, border, church, drugs, terrorists (they existed even before World War I), theater, film, dance, radio, car, avant-garde, artistic experimentation, censorship. One need only enumerate all these words to understand that modernity and contemporaneity—terms that are not synonymous—embody the tremendous changes we are living through at the present stage of globalization. This is all one needs in order to understand that Latin American modernities—and pertinently Venezuelan modernities—have undergone a tortuous process of rapprochement and dialogue with other contemporary modernities around the world, and have taken on a never-ending search for their own path.

### Translated by Catalina Ocampo

### notes to the text

- "Of America and its grade of civilization, especially in Mexico and Peru, we have information, but it imports nothing more than that this culture was an entirely national one, which must expire as soon as Spirit approached it. America has always shown itself physically and psychically powerless, and still shows itself so." G.W.F. Hegel, The Philosophy of History (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), p. 98.
- 2. See Miguel Rojas Mix, *América imaginaria* (Madrid: Lumen, 1992).
- Eric Hobsbawm established 1914 (World War I) and 1991 (the end of the USSR) as the beginning and end dates of what he terms the "short" twentieth century; the Venezuelan phenomenon of Hugo Chávez's rise to power thus falls outside the period delineated. Hobsbawm, The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991 (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).
- See Antonio Cornejo Polar, Escribir en el aire: Ensayo sobre la heterogeneidad socio cultural en las literaturas andinas (Lima: Horizonte, 1994).
- Fernando Calderón, "América Latina: Identidad y tiempos mixtos, o cómo tratar de pensar la modernidad sin dejar de ser indios," *David y Goliath* (Santiago de Chile), 1987: 4-9.
- 6. Andrés Bello was a Venezuelan law-maker, politician, and poet committed to Latin American independence early on in his career. In 1842, he founded the Universidad de Chile. He was the author of the Código civil (1857) or the Chilean civil code, the Silvas americanas (American verses; 1823-26), a collection of poems dedicated to Latin America, and the Gramática de la lengua castellana destinado al uso de los americanos, the first Spanish grammar book written specifically for Latin Americans (1847).

- José Martí was a Cuban poet, writer, and hero of Cuban independence. He was the author of the influential essay "Nuestra América" (Our America) (1891).
- Carlos Quijano was a Uruguayan journalist and intellectual, and a founder of the Latin American student association in Paris at the start of the twentieth century. He founded the influential journal Marcha (1939-74), in which Jean-Paul Sartre, Che Guevara, Julio Cortázar, and many intellectuals worldwide published writings.
- 9. Arturo Úslar Pietri was a Venezuelan writer, lawyer, and politician who later had a fruitful career as an essayist. He is the author of *Las lanzas coloradas* (*The Red Lances*; 1931), one of the major works written during the first stage of modernity in Venezuela. In 1936 he published his influential article "Sembrar el petróleo" (To sow the oil), a slogan used to this day by Venezuelan politicians. Úslar Pietri coined the term "realismo mágico" (magic realism) in the 1930s.
- 10. Alejo Carpentier was a Cuban writer whose work had a considerable impact in Latin America. He is the author of El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of this World; 1949), in whose prologue he developed his theory of the "real maravilloso" (marvelous real) to describe the power of eliciting wonder through an unexpected alteration or revelation of reality. Unlike "realismo mágico" or "magic realism," most commonly used to describe a writer's deliberate transformation of reality, Carpentier considered the "real maravilloso" to be an intrinsic characteristic of Latin American reality.
- Argentine writer Julio Cortázar was one of the main representatives of the Latin American "boom" generation of writers. He is author of the novel Rayuela (Hopscotch; 1963) and many short stories.
- 12. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento served as Argentina's president from 1868 to 1874. He was the author of *Civilización*

- y barbarie (Civilization and Barbarism; 1845), an influential book about the caudillo Facundo Quiroga.
- 13. Of course, the ambivalence toward modernizing impulses or different stages of modernity is not an exclusively Latin American phenomenon. One can trace enthusiasm as well as uneasiness, disruptions, and fears to the beginning of the nineteenth century in both France and England, to name only two centers in which modernity had a particularly powerful impact. The era's experience of the frisson nouveau that interrupted tradition's narrative and imposed an uncertain future was best described by Charles Baudelaire: "L'air est plein du frisson des choses qui s'enfuient": "the air is a-shudder with things on the wing." (See "Le crepuscule du matin" in Baudelaire, Les fleurs du mal, introduction by Jean Paul Sartre [Paris: Gallimard, 1965], pp. 120-21.) Although many saw the nineteenth century as the embodiment of modern progress and blind faith in the future, the discovery of the crowdedness and anonymity of the new cities, human exploitation, and the scandal of slavery also gave rise to an unpleasant malaise that prompted insurrections like those that broke out in various European cities, the beginning of a series of utopias that set universal salvation as their goal, and the beginning of the abolitionist movement.
- 14. The abolition of African slavery in Latin America began in 1804 in Haiti and continued throughout the nineteenth century until 1888 when it was achieved in Brazil. In Venezuela slavery was abolished in 1854 and free, public elementary education was established in 1870.
- 15. José Martí wrote: "La colonia continuó viviendo en la república" (The colony continues to live within the republic). "Nuestra América," in Nuestra América de José Martí, prologue by Juan Marinello; chronology by Cintio Vitier; ed. and notes by Hugo Achugar (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1977), p. 30.
- 16. Caudillo Antonio Guzmán Blanco controlled Venezuela between 1870 and 1888 and played an important role in the symbolic construction of the nation. He promoted the construction of significant urban and architectural works in the capital, as well as the first important wave of iconography centered on the struggle for independence and its heroes.
- See Ángel Rama, La ciudad letrada (Hanover N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984); in English as The Lettered City,

- trans. John Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).
- Julián Padrón was a Venezuelan writer and lawyer, as well as a founder (with Úslar Pietri and Boulton) of the literary journal El ingenioso hidalgo.
- Julián Padrón to Alfredo Boulton, letter in the Boulton Archive at the Alberto Vollmer Foundation, Inc., Caracas.
- Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, ed. Roy Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), convolute no. M3a, 8.
- 21. The São Paulo Semana de Arte Moderna was a public repudiation of academic art and an endorsement of modern art. Held in February 1922, it gathered a significant number of artists and intellectuals for a week of exhibitions, concerts, and conferences. The date is considered a crucial moment in the development of modern art in Brazil.
- Jorge Schwartz, Las vanguardias latinoamericanas: Textos programáticos y críticos (Madrid: Cátedra, 1991).
- 23. Hobsbawm, The Age of Extremes.
- 24. The term "americanismo" (or "Americanism")—here and throughout the essay—embraces the entire continent and not just the United States; it refers to an enthusiasm for and a championing of the New World over and against Europe. Trans.
- Rómulo Gallegos was a writer and statesman. He served as president of Venezuela from February to November 1948.
- Rómulo Gallegos, "Las tierras de Dios" ("God's Lands"), in Rómulo Gallegos: Una posición ante la vida (Caracas: Centauro77, 1977) pp. 112-44. This speech is included in the present volume, pp. 103-7.
- 27. In 1914, the so-called reventón (or "blowout") of the Zumaque 1 oil well in the Mene Grande field on the eastern coast of Lake Maracaibo unearthed the oil reserves that would grant Venezuela access to the world's energy markets.
- 28. Arturo Úslar Pietri, "Somos" ("We Are"), Válvula 1, no. 1 (January 1928), included in this volume, pp. 98-99.
- 29. The phrase "Generation of 1928" refers to a group of university students who staged an important public protest against Gómez during the carnival of 1928.
- 30. Rómulo Betancourt served as president of Venezuela from 1959 to 1964.
- Raúl Leoni was a founding member of Acción Democrática, and president of Venezuela from 1964 to 1969.
- 32. Miguel Otero Silva was a writer and

- politician. In 1943 he founded *El Nacional*, one of the two most influential newspapers in Venezuela. He was a member of the Communist party and wrote a number of novels, including *Fiebre* (Fever; 1931) and *Casas muertas* (Dead houses; 1955).
- Augusto César Sandino was the central Nicaraguan nationalist leader, well known for his struggle against U.S. occupation in the 1920s.
- 34. Getulio Vargas was president of Brazil on four occasions (1930–34, 1934–37, 1937–45, and 1951–54). He was known as "the father of the poor."
- Gerardo Machado was a general in the Cuban Army during the Spanish-American War and president of Cuba from 1925 to 1933.
- 36. Anastasio Somoza García, head of Nicaragua's Guardia Nacional in its fight against Augusto César Sandino, assumed power over Nicaragua in 1936. After his assassination, power was transferred to his son Luis Somoza Debayle, who ruled from 1956 to 1963. Luis Somoza's brother Anastasio Somoza Debayle was president from 1967 to 1972, and was reelected for the term 1974-79.
- Lázaro Cárdenas del Río was a Mexican general of the revolutionary forces; he served as president of Mexico from 1934 to 1940.
- 38. Agustín Farabundo Martí was a Communist revolutionary who founded the Salvadorian Communist party in 1930 and was one of the instigators of the rural uprising in El Salvador.
- See Oswald de Andrade, "Manifiesto antropofágico," Revista de antropofagia 1 (São Paulo, May 1928): 1. The Tupí are an indigenous people of Brazil.
- 40. José Vasconcelos was an important Mexican writer and politician. His *La raza cósmica* (1925) was an influential book about what he believed was the destiny of the Americas: to be the land of *mestizaje*, the place where "the synthetic race that shall gather all the treasures of History . . . will be created." Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, trans. Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 18.
- Eleazar López Contreras was the minister of war during the last years of Juan Vicente Gómez's dictatorship and assumed the presidency of Venezuela from 1936 to 1941.
- 42. Writer and historian Mariano Picón Salas was the author of Formación y proceso de la literatura venezolana (Form and process of Venezuelan literature; 1940) and Comprensión de Venezuela (Understanding Venezuela; 1949).

- 43. Francisco Narváez was a painter and sculptor and one of the protagonists of the nativist movement in Venezuela. He participated in the most important attempts by Carlos Raúl Villanueva to integrate the arts into architecture: the development of El Silencio in Caracas (1941-45) and the Universidad Central de Venezuela (1944-67).
- 44. Jesús Rafael Soto was one of the founders and principal representatives of European and Venezuelan kinetic art. A significant number of his works have been integrated into urban architecture in cities around the world.
- 45. Architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva designed and developed some of the largest architectural complexes in Venezuela; the best-known among them is the Universidad Central de Venezuela (1944-67), which spearheaded the project of integrating art and architecture.
- 46. Isaías Medina Angarita was a politician, a member of the military, and chief of staff during the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez. After Gómez's death, he was appointed minister of war and the navy by López Contreras. He was elected president of Venezuela by the country's national congress in 1941 but was overthrown by a coup d'état in 1945.
- 47. Marcos Pérez Jiménez was a politician and a member of the Venezuelan military. He participated in the 1948 coup d'état against Rómulo Gallegos and established himself as dictator from 1952 to 1958.
- 48. Designed in 1956 by Oscar Niemeyer and city planner Lúcio Costa, the city of Brasilia was officially inaugurated as Brazil's capital on April 21, 1960.
- 49. The term "glocalization" was introduced by Manfred Lange to indicate "local and global change," on the occasion of the touring exhibition Global Change: Challenges to Science and Politics, which opened at the German Chancellery in Bonn, May 1990. Since then, the term "glocal" has been used by numerous authors (among others recently Zygmunt Bauman). (See writer.zoho.com/rss/public.ximl?id=suite.)
- 50. Here "modernist" is used in its Anglophone sense – that is, as the aesthetics established and consolidated by the early twentieth-century avant-gardes.
- Gego (Gertrude Goldschmidt) was a Venezuelan sculptor born in Germany, known for her abstract geometric works, including the Reticuláreas series.
- 52. In Boulton's own text; he affirms: "I am working on a book about the artistic value of our aboriginal ceramics in light

- of contemporary aesthetic concepts. I am taking the archaeological object as an artistic work, and applying my own concept of beauty to it." In "El arte en nuestra cerámica aborigen" (Caracas: Alfredo Boulton; printed by S.p.A. Antonio Cordani, Milan; designed by Carlos Cruz-Diez, 1978), p. 11.
- 53. This period also produced a number of works that fit multiple categories, or works that have been given divergent interpretations. One example of this is the Mexican Juan Rulfo's narrative Pedro Páramo (1954), which has been taken as the purest expression of the Mexican spirit but also as a prime example of a work inscribed in the Western biblical tradition.
- 54. Miguel Cabañas Bravo, "Caracas, un intento frustrado de continuidad en las bienales hispanoamericanas de arte (I)," in Espacio, tiempo, forma (series 7, Historia del arte, no. 8; Madrid: Universidad Nacional de Educacíon a Distancia, 1995), pp. 325-64.
- 55. The Taller Libre de Arte was inaugurated on July 10, 1948 as a response to the demands of dissatisfied young artists who insisted that education, still mired in the work of Paul Cézanne and the Cubists, needed to be modernized. As with the Círculo de Bellas Artes in 1912, the Taller attracted the most progressive artists and generated influential exhibitions, such as the one featuring the Argentine organization Arte Concreto-Invención, also founded in 1948. During its first few years the Taller was directed by the painter Alirio Oramas.
- 56. Los Disidentes group was created in Paris by young Venezuelan artists and intellectuals, primarily Alejandro Otero, Mateo Manaure, J. R. Guillent Pérez, Perán Erminy, Aimée Battistini, Pascual Navarro, Dora Hersen, Narciso Debourg, Luis Guevara Moreno, and Carlos González Bogen. Los Disidentes produced a journal by the same name through which they voiced their ideas and demands.
- Artist Alejandro Otero's work triggered various currents of abstract art in Venezuela. He was a founding member of Los Disidentes.
- 58. Mateo Manaure is a Venezuelan visual artist and a founding member of Los Disidentes. He participated in the Universidad Central de Venezuela project.

- 59. Artist Oswaldo Vigas participated in the Universidad Central de Venezuela project. Although his work tended toward geometric abstraction in the early 1950s, he always maintained a nationalistic approach, using themes drawn from local history and mythology.
- 60. Carlos Cruz-Diez was a staunch advocate of painting as a tool of political dissent before becoming one of Venezuela's most important kinetic artists in the 1960s.
- Alfredo Boulton, La Margarita (Caracas: Macanao Ediciones, 1981), unpaginated prefatory text.
- Armando Reverón was one of the most important Venezuelan artists of the twentieth century. He was a member of the Círculo de Bellas Artes.
- 63. The 1960s was the decade in which Jorge Luis Borges achieved global recognition, Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude appeared, and Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and numerous other writers of the Latin "boom" generation published their major works.
- 64. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977), p. 9.
- 65. Serge Gruzinski, *El pensamiento mestizo* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2000), p. 18.
- 66. El Techo de la Ballena (1961-68)—"The roof of the whale"—was an artists' organization in Venezuela that was heavily influenced by Surrealism. It was, in a sense, the cultural manifestation of political battles that led to the armed uprising of pro-Cuban guerrillas in the 1960s. Carlos Contramaestre, Daniel González, Adriano González León, Caupolicán Ovalles, and Juan Calzadilla were among its members.
- 67. The 1989 "Caracazo" uprising was marked by looting and riots in protest against the economic measures instituted by the newly elected president Carlos Andrés Pérez. The harsh military response to the events caused thousands of deaths and had a profound impact on Venezuela.

# an appraisal of contemporary venezuela elías pino iturrieta

As the first decade of the twentieth century came to a close, the people of Venezuela had begun to indulge in the idea that their country might be embarking on an auspicious new path. The so-called Restauración Liberal (Liberal restoration) regime of Cipriano Castro (1899-1908) offered some measure of distance from the tumult of the nineteenth century, but his administration ended in a tyranny that replaced hope with pessimism. It was during Castro's time in power that the country finally overcame the political disintegration it had suffered, and progressed toward the development of a centrist administration that had never before existed. But the defeat of past powers was not used as an opportunity to evolve truly republican forms of government; instead, a leadership style evolved that was rooted in the "cult of personality." Lost amid its banalities and unconcerned about improving the economy, the new leadership brought only hardship to the lives of the people it governed. The president-turned-dictator fomented corruption and instigated protracted disputes with the European powers and with the dynamic and enterprising United States, which provoked a state of affairs that was untenable for all parties involved. When Castro was ousted in a bloodless coup d'état, the great thinkers of the day predicted the start of a promising new period for Venezuela.

### change and permanence

The Venezuelan people had high hopes for Juan Vicente Gómez when in 1908 he rose to the rank of president, where he would remain through 1935. A quiet man known for his austere habits, he provided a stark contrast to the recently deposed head of state. At the time, no one anticipated the extent of his appetite for power, to which he would cling until he died, an old man, having committed countless offenses against his people and country—from making legislative changes at whim to pillaging the public treasury, appropriating private property, and issuing orders for horrific torture.

Initially, though, the new leader's inscrutable nature and disinterest in striking dramatic poses were qualities that led some people to believe that the dawn of a new era was on the horizon, and prompted young writers like Rómulo Gallegos to declare that the country had reached the end of a barbaric age. There was much evidence that seemed to support this belief. A new age seemed to be in the air-still, there were many people who feared that it might be only an illusion.

The possibility of real change for the nation would ultimately depend on the country's ability to take advantage of the copious flow of oil that bubbled forth from its subsoil. Before the government began to make use of its hydrocarbon resources, some very concrete steps were taken to ensure their future: first, the regime put an end to its conflicts with foreign governments; it implemented a new system of roadways that helped transform the country's dismally poor internal communications, and it established the national army, an institution that reinforced the strength of a dictatorship with lifelong aspirations. The visit of U.S. Secretary of State Philander Knox, who met with Gómez in a closed-door meeting in 1912, was a sacramental blessing for the new head of state. Hydrocarbon operations



Juan Vicente Gómez (left) and Cipriano Castro. 1901. Collection Fundación para la Cultura Urbana, Caracas

in Venezuela began in 1914, when the first commercial well was tapped in Mene Grande, the first oil pipeline was built, and work started in the district of Colón in the state of Zulia. The wealthy Bolívar district would soon follow, entering the market in 1915. Companies with British capital were the first to take control of exploration rights in the country, but American consortia began receiving advantageous concessions of their own as of 1918.

And so began the empire of strong interests, such as that of Maracaibo Oil Exploration (a forerunner of Standard Oil of New Jersey). These were the companies that would transform the life of the nation as they introduced the Venezuelan people to an odd kind of opulence, a great change that required no effort whatsoever on their part. Soon foreign companies operating in the country began to see returns on more than twenty million tons of

hydrocarbons, and while their profits were generous, the regulations governing them were not—a detail that was taken care of between their managers and the Venezuelan government. Through these efforts, the earnings that remained in the country sparked a metamorphosis that was beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

Venezuela's governmental sector began to exhibit unprecedented levels of efficiency in many areas. The administration overhauled the treasury and instituted a bureaucracy that was capable of handling every last bit of state business, on every corner of the map. The foreign debt was paid off and new commercial, legal, and criminal codes were drafted and enacted.

These were the realities of 1922, when the country had been sailing along its river of black gold for scarcely eight years. Finally, in the waning years of the dictatorship, twelve million hectares were designated for subsoil exploration, a blessing that gave way to a number of critical consequences for the traditional way of life in Venezuela and for the coexistence of its citizens. The regime grew stronger thanks to the exorbitant taxes that went straight into its coffers.

The daily lives of Venezuelan people were radically transformed. Decisions that had previously been made within the context of rural life were now thrust into the realm of the urban neighborhoods that were just beginning to take shape. The country now boasted a half-dozen dynamic urban centers that controlled the flow of this unexpected bounty. Now that Venezuela had joined the club of capital-rich countries, its citizens could hardly recognize themselves in the mirror of the rural, deplorably impoverished country that had been languishing until so very recently.



Corner of the church of San Francisco, Caracas. Photograph by Luis Felipe Toro Mujica (Torito). c. 1920. Collection Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional. Archivos Nacionales de Venezuela, Caracas

That old country continued to exist in emblematic figures like Gómez and many members of his clan-strongmen wallowing on their ranches, impassive in the face of the government's often cruel modus operandi, acolytes who were always loyal to their master but never to any kind of legality. Everyone had to make the same decision: either resist the avalanche of change or become a part of it.

A new kind of life and coexistence began to take shape in Venezuela, the likes of which would have been unthinkable in the early years of the nation-state with its crippled economy, its feeble executive branch, and the disruptions of so many civil wars. This sudden windfall of material resources precipitated a change that, as time went by, set up patterns of behavior that some people believe to be defining characteristics of the nation's contemporary history—as well as stumbling blocks on the path of establishing a true, mature republican state. What evolved might be described as a parasitic sensibility that lingered on indefinitely thanks to the money spread around by political operators and the lack of individual commitment to the pursuit of a common good.

The country that had come of age during a period of tyranny began to enjoy all the benefits of modern comforts, acquiring the most coveted goods the market had to offer and sending its young people off traveling to the capitals of the Western world. At the same time Venezuelans grew accustomed to remaining silent as crimes were committed in certain places that would become synonyms for atrocity, such as the Caracas jail La Rotunda, or the colonial castle in Puerto Cabello. The horrors of these places circulated by word of mouth, though the news never prompted any meaningful protest. The Venezuela of the day was also a country that looked on, unfazed, as its agriculture industry fell into decline, poverty gripped a broad swath of the population, and education and public health were all but abandoned by the government. As more and more luxury goods flowed into the country, 60 percent of Venezuelan oil workers suffered from venereal diseases, 65 percent of the population remained illiterate, and malaria swept through the countryside.

The novelist Manuel Díaz Rodríguez lamented the paralysis that had afflicted and dominated Venezuelan society since the period of independence.

In his 1920 book *Idolos rotos* (Broken idols), he described a nonexistent nation burdened by the weight of its omissions, a place where nothing had moved forward since 1830. The influential essayist Rufino Blanco Fombona had already insisted in his 1905 work *El hombre de hierro* (The man of iron) that the country lacked a "national soul." José Rafael Pocaterra, enemy and prisoner of the regime, described his experiences in 1927 under the title *Memorias de un venezolano de la decadencia* (Memoirs of a Venezuelan in the age of decadence), a text that underscored the inescapable quality of that unfettered decline. Only Gallegos managed to avoid reaching the most damning conclusions. In his deeply analytical novel *Doña Bárbara* (1929), he described a battle that barbarity would ultimately lose when civilization arrived at the goal that had been declared at the very birth of the nation.

Venezuela had indeed changed, but these changes inspired terribly pessimistic interpretations, because the country had been hijacked, so to speak; it stifled the majority of its inhabitants while allowing a select few to partake in the delights of capitalist consumer culture.

One of the results of this clash was the student movement that was launched in 1928 with the goal of making improvements within the university faculty and administration, and obtaining financial aid for their more disadvantaged classmates. The majority of these young activists—who later became known as the "Generation of 1928"—were sent to jail. The undergraduates at Venezuela's Universidad Central who meekly proposed a change through the vehicle of the ephemeral journal *Válvula*, and who sought resources for their poorer classmates, became the victims of ruthless punishment: some were sent to concentration camps while others endured torture (both standard practices at the time) before being released into the comparative relief of ostracism. At the time, these were not significant names among the protests of the day, which were still fairly elemental and tame; some of the radicals, however, went on to become important figures who would establish political parties of a more modern orientation. At the center of all this, two future presidents of the republic, Rómulo Betancourt and Raúl Leoni, were also finding their way in the political sphere.

The year 1936, just after Gómez's death, marked the beginning of a renaissance in literature, nonfiction writing, science, and the visual arts; it was a time of change that found its voice in various members of this movement. At the time, though, it seemed like only the vaguest hint of something that could not possibly materialize in a country with wealth so capriciously distributed among its people, and with so many age-old shortcomings and conflicts.

### timid first steps

Following the death of Gómez, power fell into the hands of General Eleazar López Contreras, the former dictator's war and naval minister. His regime, which lasted from 1936 to 1941, was clearly a continuation of the previous one; indeed, to a large degree it was a fulfillment of the late tyrant's express wishes. Nevertheless, the country that had been bitten by the oil bug was also enthused by the return of exiles; this provided some relief within Venezuelan society.

The new head of state, a soldier who had risen up through the ranks during the dictatorship until making it into the military's supreme command, was

not like his predecessor. López Contreras presented a bold new plan, the so-called Programa de febrero (February program), with the aim of finding solutions to the country's main problems, such as health, education, and agriculture. It was an agenda unlike any that had come before. López Contreras instituted constitutional reforms that shortened the administrative period and blocked the immediate reelection of the first magistracy, but also prohibited Communist and anarchist propaganda, declaring adherents to be traitors to the nation. He abolished torture in the nation's prisons, and announced that he would give his countrymen the freedom to form political parties (although he created a labyrinth of legal subterfuge—detailed forms, interrogations with the attorney general, petitions for good conduct, certificates that appeared in documents on an ad hoc basis—to discourage the establishment of organizations that might be inclined toward "radical" political options). The straitjacket was subtler and more comfortable now, but it remained a straitjacket.

Close to twenty parties, representing a limited political spectrum, began to enjoy an intermittent presence in the country. The Venezuelan students' federation encouraged the scenario with their battalions, holding demonstrations that occasionally overshadowed those of the political parties. The reemergence of extremist conduct at the core of one of these student groups led to an important splintering: the seed from which the Christian Democratic movement came to life.

This was the moment when young Rómulo Betancourt began his long and steady rise to prominence. A student of the "Generation of 1928" and an indefatigable champion of the radical opposition in exile, he fought for organizations that would keep republican institutions from succumbing to the cronyism represented by the first magistracy - a cronyism that could easily be replayed in the future if ideas did not prevail over individual prestige. In exile, Betancourt and a group of his friends had drafted a plan of action for a structural metamorphosis that, they believed, might finally pave the way toward democracy. Starting in 1931, the Plan de Barranquilla<sup>1</sup> – outlining actions to be taken against the Gómez regime - was circulated among a select group of people; it was one of the first testimonies of political modernity in twentieth-century Venezuela. After 1936, members of political movements that were not sympathetic to the administration were often expelled or imprisoned. The autocratic regime that had only recently ended was no doubt the inspiration behind the new administration's desire to quash its opposition, but the changes wrought by the hydrocarbon industry over the previous decades, in addition to the experience acquired abroad by Gómez's exiles, were by now unstoppable forces. The oil business had expanded all the way to the eastern coast of Lake Maracaibo, the Monagas savannahs, the plains and the foothills of the Andes. After Gómez's death, a number of politicians – both old-school and just-out-of-school – finally dared to return to Venezuela. Were these the engines that would propel the inevitable change?

In order to fulfill an array of increasingly specific demands, the governmental structure underwent a transformation of sorts. New executive departments were created through an initiative that signified, beyond the mere construction of new offices, a renewed desire to focus on areas that had traditionally been

neglected. To this end, certain central governmental departments were expanded to make room for newly minted, contemporary-minded entities such as the Banco Industrial de Venezuela, the national institute of hygiene, the department of labor, and the national children's council. The activities of these new agencies implemented a large number of new regulations and achievements (such as the national finance-office law, the labor law, the code for minors, and the agricultural census), as well as programs that offered financial assistance and subsidies to farmers and cattle ranchers, international trade agreements governing commercial reciprocity, and a new scheme for the employment of currency.

At the same time, the government was taking a closer look at the oil industry, the immediate result of which was the suspension of new concessions and a full review of the existing system. The administration also stopped ignoring education and culture, and began to implement significant changes in those spheres—including the foundation of the Instituto Pedagógico Nacional (National pedagogical institute), the creation of geology and veterinary schools at the university level, improvements in the education and training of primary-school teachers, the erection of new buildings to house the museums of fine arts and natural sciences, and the publication of the journal *Revista Nacional de Cultura*.

In 1937 the economist Alberto Adriani, a champion of this bureaucratic overhaul, wrote the book *Labor venezolanista* (Venezuelan labor), in which he speaks of planting new trees in an age-old land—that is, initiating activities linked to Venezuelan traditions. The notion encapsulates the spirit of an administration in which the most illustrious spokespeople, such as the writer Arturo Úslar Pietri and the historian Caracciolo Parra Pérez, wanted to gradually close the chapter on the Gómez era.

When all was said and done, however, the intensity of this long and tumultuous voyage would depend not on moderates but on discoveries made by the more outré thinkers, and the conflicts sparked by the pioneers of a new cultural movement that, perhaps to their surprise, found all doors flung wide open to them. After Doña Bárbara, Gallegos continued producing his masterful works, while a new generation of fabulists changed the way people thought about writing. Distinguished authors such as Guillermo Meneses, José Rafael Pocaterra, Miguel Otero Silva, Ramón Díaz Sánchez, Antonio Arráiz, and Jacinto Fombona Pachano broke with the old formal ways of thinking. The movement of essayists that began to emerge at this time generated a great deal of serious reflection about the direction in which society was headed, in what was a quest to challenge notions and answer questions. Positivism languished, while other systems of thought, more liberated concepts of the environment, sought to envision and shape a multifaceted destiny for the nation. The most important among the essayists of this period were Mario Briceño Iragorry, Mariano Picón Salas, Augusto Mijares, Joaquín Gabaldón Márquez, Miguel Acosta Saignes, and Rodolfo Quintero. The brains at the center of the governmental machine (including Adriani, Úslar Pietri, and Parra Pérez, along with their colleagues Amenodoro Rangel Lamus and Tulio Chiossone) continued to operate, all of them placed at the highest strata of the bureaucracy.

The situation was ripe for a new form of expression also in the plastic arts, the values of which were perhaps best represented by the most

significant artists of what came to be called the Escuela de Caracas, such as Pedro Ángel González, Marcos Castillo, Elisa Elvira Zuloaga, and Antonio Alcántara, who began to achieve recognition among refined arbiters of culture as well as (for the first time) the public at large.<sup>2</sup> Their versatile, newly emancipated talent provided both a contrast to the stiff purity of those who had come before them and yet another testimony to the transition that Venezuelan society was experiencing at the time.

This transition continued with even more intensity during the regime of Isaías Medina Angarita (1941-45), whom López Contreras handpicked to succeed him as head of state, though in doing so he created a crisis within the avalanche of more mass-oriented politics. With López Contreras at the helm, the administration tended to be perceived as the instrument of a select cast of characters – a coterie of intellectuals, high-ranking bureaucrats, qualified professionals, and confidants that surrounded the head of state, all with a common cause. This group believed that the Venezuelan people were not yet ready to control their own destiny, a point of view that sparked a heated reaction of varied consequences for Venezuelan society. The advisors surrounding the president did not fall silent, but they were eventually overcome by the leftist forces that had been incubating. By granting freedom to political parties, they allowed matters of the state to be aired with greater liberty and facilitated a more careful analysis of economic entanglements, but their sensibility was marked by a paternalistic attitude that confined all decision making to their inner circle. The most significant decision they made emerged with the passage of the country's new "hydrocarbon law" in 1943, which gave the state an increased level of participation in the country's oil earnings by substantially raising the taxes levied against foreign companies that were granted concessions to operate in the country. The law also gave the state greater control over oil-industry operations, as well as product commercialization, by unifying contracts and imposing requirements that governed the processes of refining crude oil on national territory.

A handful of regulations that garnered praise, however, was not enough for the Venezuelan people to shake the feeling that the promoters of those regulations smacked of elitism and small-mindedness. This became still more apparent when the government eliminated the legal obstacles that had blocked the establishment of emerging organizations. At the center of this new scene was Acción Democrática (AD), the party founded by Betancourt and legalized in 1941 through a constitutional reform.<sup>3</sup>

Acción Democrática instantly set out on a propaganda and organizational campaign that established its presence throughout the country. The party's platform, presented and launched with ease, underscored the importance of responding to the needs of the poor through the fairer distribution of oil revenue and by encouraging the Venezuelan populace to play a more active role in public affairs. The focal point of all the party's speeches, however, was the demand for direct and universal suffrage, through secret ballots, for the election of public officers, a stance that garnered increasing popular support over time. The newspaper *El País*, Acción Democrática's mouthpiece, reached multitudes of readers. After their party was legalized the Communists ultimately supported the government and found endorsement from two papers of a more

contemporary orientation, *El Nacional* and *Las últimas noticias*. It was on the pages of these two dailies that the destiny of Venezuelan newspaper tradition would be decided.

The conservative faction that had broken off from the federation of students became the Comité de Organización Política Electoral (Political electoral organization committee, or COPEI), the forerunner of Christian Democracy.<sup>4</sup> The two flags under which the nation's destiny would be monopolized for much of the rest of the century had now been raised. In 1936, Venezuela had a population of 3,364,347 inhabitants, whose senses had been numbed by the Gómez regime. By 1941, at the dawn of a surprising new horizon, the census registered that the country was home to 3,850,772 people tempted by voices they had scarcely dreamed of hearing.

### splendors and miseries of the revolution

The strings that had been pulled in so many directions finally broke when the regime bristled at the changes that AD had proposed regarding universal suffrage. The disagreement over what appeared to be a widespread demand from the people became the perfect excuse for a coup d'état. Leaders of the AD party were invited to participate by a group of midlevel officers that had come together, in secret, to create the Unión Patriótica Militar. During their clandestine meetings, members became convinced that they had to upend the military order and bring technology and professionalism to the army.

The movement triumphed in October 1945. Betancourt's rise to power ushered in a three-year stretch that offered hope for the country's future. Though it was brief, that rocky period left deep and lasting marks on Venezuelan society, and also served as a harbinger of the conflicts to come. At the time, the instigator of the change appeared to be Betancourt, president of the civilian-military governmental junta, though it was in fact the founder of the Unión Patriótica Militar, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who exerted increasing influence from behind closed doors.

Popular participation was the hallmark of these three years. Finally the demon of politics had gotten under the skin of laborers and artisans, the workers and the common people, all of whom took to the avenues and alleyways in an endless parade of demonstrations. At no other point in its history had the country witnessed such a groundswell of people, from all corners of society, exhibiting their willingness to become part of Venezuela's political future.

The political analysts who took the time to consider the events of 1945 were forced to take a hard look at those multitudes that were so willing to change their own destiny. The campaign for the election of a constituent assembly and the radio coverage of the debates regarding the matter were a mirror of the drive and the scope of an unprecedented social upheaval that would reach its pinnacle with the election of Rómulo Gallegos as president of the republic in December 1947.

Never before had Venezuela experienced such a vast collective mobilization as this. Politics had finally ceased to be a small-town phenomenon. Joseph Stalin's speeches and the editorials in *Pravda* were openly discussed, and socially oriented encyclicals were no longer pious reading but topics for heated

debate. Foreign political figures and intellectuals – including Haya de la Torre, León Felipe, Juan Marinello, Germán Arciniegas, and Nelson A. Rockefeller – came to celebrate the rise of Gallegos. Both friends and foes of the revolution joined with the parties of the day as protagonists of this motley, momentous struggle.

The country was without question on the precipice of a very promising future, but there were certain factors threatening to tip the situation into the abyss. The governmental party suppressed all demonstrations of other parties, and its strong-arming caused a great deal of friction. People generally assumed that the power monopoly was under the control of Betancourt, whom the opposition denounced as circumventing the purposes of democracy and transparency that had been heralded at the start of the new administration. The demonstrations and rallies held by opposition parties were subject to acts of sabotage that generally went unpunished, while the red carpet was rolled out for governmental events. The mounting list of excesses reached such a peak that the government began to incur the wrath not only of its opponents, but also of the military officers who were part of its own power structure. Many officers were already disgruntled, as the majority of the jobs in the new administration had been commandeered by sectarian politicians. When rumors began to circulate about an incipient Bolshevik-style revolution, the resentful officials began to distance themselves from the "insolent" party that had granted them so few positions within its inner circle. Not even Gallegos, the discreet and intellectual politician so highly regarded for the quality of his literature, escaped reproach.

A few measures that the junta had approved in advance only caused suspicions to fester. One was the creation of a jury for civil and administrative responsibility against the illicit enrichment of previous governmental authorities, which arrived at debatable sentences (sentences that could not, however, be appealed) against figures such as ex-president López Contreras and the writer Úslar Pietri. Another measure was a decree regarding evaluations of secondary-school education that discriminated against private-school students, as the Church disclosed in communiqués that prompted a number of public demonstrations.

Considering these circumstances, the sea change that occurred after October 18, 1945, was crucially important; it was during this time that Venezuela obtained the tools it needed to make its way in the twentieth century with confidence. The development firm Corporación Venezolana de Fomento was created; the government raised taxes on oil companies after aborting its policy of awarding concessions to private interests; a daring transportation system was drafted; the autonomous railway system, the Merchant Marines of Greater Colombia, and an agency for the docks and shipyards were all established. Great emphasis was placed on the development of the country's human resources, as evidenced by the foundation of new patrimonies and institutes for national literacy, public nutrition, and immigration-all of which produced very tangible results. When Gallegos rose to power, this legacy became clear in a number of ways: an investment of 430 million bolívars in public works; the construction of residential low-income apartment housing; the allotment of fifty million bolívars for the construction of the Universidad Central campus, and the first steps toward the building of the Caracas-La Guaira highway. Of greatest note, however, were the advances made in the state of education: in two years 37,000 adults had learned to read and write, and a record number of 5,500 people entered the halls of higher education. Who could possibly doubt, after the burial of the Gómez era and the start of two long years marked by such overwhelming numbers, amid the heat of the bonfires that raged in the country, that Venezuelan society was finally blazing the trail of its own contemporary history?

### a military officer in power

Rómulo Gallegos was overthrown in a coup d'état on November 24, 1948. A military junta, presided over by Carlos Delgado Chalbaud and comprised of the lieutenant colonels Marcos Pérez Jiménez and Luis Llovera Páez, attempted to change the course of the country. At first it was assumed that the rule of law would be interrupted for a brief period as a kind of prerequisite for a new institutional experience, but Delgado Chalbaud's death by assassination in 1950 eliminated the one person who was perceived as a possible mediator between left and right in the march toward contemporaneity. The path to an open democracy was clearly impossible now, as was made evident by the prohibition of the Acción Democrática and Communist parties, and the dissolution of the national congress, as well as the electoral council and the municipal councils.

With the legitimate institutions abolished, the regime refused to recognize an overwhelming defeat in the elections for a new constituent assembly, selected an acquiescent parliament, and proclaimed Pérez Jiménez the "constitutional" president. The atmosphere was rife with dark prophecies that began to come true in April of 1951, when more than three hundred political prisoners were sent to the Guasina concentration camp. The ruthless attack launched to quell a peasant uprising in Turén and the murder of the celebrated resistance leader Leonardo Ruíz Pineda signaled the direction of the regime. During 1953 and 1954 the repression remained intense, but as time went by, what had begun as a general policy evolved into a crusade against specific intractable opposition leaders. Given the circumstances, bankers, business leaders, and bishops felt no shame as they offered their support to the president and his plans for material development.

From the start of the dictatorship, the residents of Caracas were surprised by the amount of work they saw being carried out on the avenues of the capital city: the construction of buildings in depressed areas, the plans laid out for new urban development zones. Prestressed concrete was the new darling of the building industry. In the areas of mining and oil, solid advances were achieved as well, such as the inauguration of the refineries at Amuay and Puerto La Cruz, the discovery of the oil-rich fields at Oriputano and Doción, and the initial phase of iron-ore extraction. The new Caracas-La Guaira highway plan<sup>6</sup> won a Pan-American prize for Pérez Jiménez and untold millions under the table for his cronies; but it also gave the Venezuelan people what they needed to take possession of their national territory. The citizenry embraced the pompous style of the monuments, street intersections, and traffic circles that were built during this period. The dynamic spirit of urbanism sparked a transformative change in lifestyle, which was made even more interesting by the influx of European immigrants arriving on Venezuelan shores. The expansion of the radio industry

and the advent of television, air travel, and modern telephone communication became factors of cohesion as well as development.

There was, however, less encouraging data to contend with as well: 30 percent of the populace was illiterate. Only .08 percent of all Venezuelans had more than a secondary-school education. A troubling 46.7 percent of the cities were blanketed with shantytowns, and as many planned urban projects had been summarily halted. Other, less quantifiable measures and attitudes were adopted by the government—censorship of the press, terror inspired by the national-security agents, hubris of the armed forces, a dizzying rise in corruption, and constraints instituted in the educational system to prevent people from dreaming up subversive ideas—revealing that the panorama in Venezuela was perhaps less promising than it appeared on the surface.

Still, the burgeoning cultural life of the country was not to be stopped. This period, in fact, produced many essential works of thought and artistic creation that would become cornerstones of the evolution of the Venezuelan spirit. Writers produced books and poems that soon became fundamental texts for understanding the country, including Guzmán, elipse de una ambición de poder (Guzmán, ellipse in one man's quest for power; 1950) by Ramón Díaz Sánchez; Mensaje sin destino (Message without destiny; 1950) by the exiled Mario Briceño Iragorry; Buenas y malas palabras (Good and bad words; 1960) by Ángel Rosenblat; Los días de Cipriano Castro (The days of Cipriano Castro; 1953) by Mariano Picón Salas; and Esta tierra de gracia (This land of grace; 1955) by Isaac Pardo. The literary awakening was evident in other essential works such as El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo (The false notebook of Narciso Espejo; 1952) by Guillermo Meneses; La tuna de oro (The golden tuna plant; 1951) by Julio Garmendia; Casas muertas (Dead houses; 1955) by Miguel Otero Silva; Elena y los elementos (Elena and the elements; 1951) by Juan Sánchez Peláez; and Florentino y el diablo (Florentino and the Devil; 1940-57) by Alberto Arvelo Torrealba.

In the area of plastic arts, the principal name is of course Armando Reverón, along with his contemporaries Alejandro Otero, Héctor Poleo, Luis Guevara Moreno, Pascual Navarro and the young Jacobo Borges. The founding of the Maracaibo symphony orchestra and the premieres of Antonio Estévez's Cantata criolla (1954) and Inocente Carreño's Suite margariteña (1954) serve as proof of the great strides made in the field of academic music, and inspired many to tout the virtues of "nationalist music."

Venezuelan society never fully surrendered to the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship. From the most varied disciplines and trades, from artistic production to other outlets of fame and fortune, people managed, with a certain amount of determination, to go about their business. They confronted the regime with demonstrations of autonomy that gained momentum as the government contemplated the conundrum of a new constitutional period: Pérez Jiménez had been appointed by Venezuela's constituent assembly until April 19, 1958, a deadline that forced him to manipulate the legality of his situation to keep the army and the citizens from rising up in protest of his excesses. An insurrection in the army barracks that quickly turned into a massive popular mobilization put an end to this lull, and on January 23 of 1958, a critical year, the doors were opened

anew to democratic coexistence. Until this date, twentieth-century Venezuela had enjoyed a period of only three short years of democracy. Now, once again, the country would try to make it work.

### an outline for a new approach

It was the administration of Rómulo Betancourt, from 1959 to 1964, that heralded Venezuela's return to democracy. The nation's vision for the future, however, soon broke off into two distinct paths, creating a rift between the political forces at play. The debate now revolved around the difference between real freedoms and "formal" freedoms, between the promises made in the political discourse and the real need to fulfill them in order to truly redress historical wrongs. This crossroads began to take shape through three of the issues that were most pressing for Venezuelan society at the time: agrarian-reform, urban reform, and nationalization. The struggle to resolve these things, however, became linked to armed violence in all its myriad manifestations. The influence of the Cuban Revolution and the belligerence of the Communist party played their parts in cultivating another kind of radicalization of thought, the influence of which was felt among intellectual circles as well as in the rank and file of the government.

It was in this atmosphere of premature conflict that the rule of law was established, along with a republican culture that had been on hold since the beginning of the twentieth century. These early confrontations were characteristic of the process from this point forward, and they left wounds that would never fully heal.

Within the framework laid out by the 1961 constitution and controlled by the 1945 parties AD and COPEI, new foundations were established for the modernization and industrialization of Venezuelan society, which entailed the exclusion of Communism and its adherents. Further moves were made through a broad program focused on rebuilding the nation, the initiatives of which included the creation of national institutes for cooperative education and for culture and fine arts, and the enactment of the agrarian-reform law. With regard to the employment of natural resources, significant goals were achieved in the diversification of energy sources and the establishment of the groundwork for heavy industry, as evidenced by the inauguration of the Caroní Hydroelectric Complex and the creation of OPEC.

However, all these steps happened amid widespread unrest that Betancourt managed to control only through his stubborn insistence on an ideal model of democracy. Not only did the president have to respond to foreign threats from Caribbean powers like Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic<sup>11</sup> and the Somozas in Nicaragua, and the armed factions of army officers sympathetic to the recently deposed dictator, he also had to pay close attention to the subversive designs of the left that found inspiration in the Cuba of Fidel Castro. The Frente de Liberación Nacional (National liberation front) and the armed forces of Liberación Nacional led a rebellious period that grew more intense as the constitutional period reached its peak in 1964.

It was during the term of the new president, Raúl Leoni (1964-69), a seasoned leader of the governmental party, that the democratic experiment began to reveal its cracks. Apart from the forces controlled by AD and COPEI,

many elements began to cluster around the figure of Úslar Pietri. Beyond his personal dynamism and other qualities, Úslar Pietri represented the Venezuela of past regimes—while the leftists raged against the elections with a spirited chorus of intellectuals supporting them. But Úslar Pietri and other figures who had come to power just after the Gómez era were not the only ones who felt they had been excluded from the country's democratic destiny—the guerrillas and the domestic intelligentsia felt the same way, and they expressed their objections in public without reservations.

Nonetheless, the policies that Betancourt's administration had implemented over the course of the previous five years were continued in the new regime. By 1968 the country was producing 3,600,000 barrels of oil per day. The expansion of the Orinoco iron and steel works and the success of the Venezolana de Navegación shipping company produced plentiful profits from their business ventures. The country's network of highways was expanded by more than three thousand miles. Considerable sums of money were invested in housing and the social security system was revamped with very favorable results.

Leoni's supreme skill, however, was in his handling of the problems he faced during an era of armed struggle and opposition from the intellectual community. His awareness of these problems led him to instigate a complex confrontation with the armed elements and a deft reconciliation with the country's artists and thinkers. And while he supported the use of force to an unacceptable degree, he did enact a law for the commutation of sentences through pardon or expulsion, an action that was aimed at releasing some 250 left-wing militants from prison. The poets, writers, and painters who had distanced themselves from the regime and from public institutions were now called in to participate in promoting culture from official or semi-official posts. The Instituto Nacional de Cultura y Bellas Artes (National institute of culture and fine arts) would now serve not just for those urgent ends but also to promote, with renewed energy, a practice that would become a constant in future administrations: governmental sponsorship of the very broadest range of activities of artistic creation or cultural promotion.

When the COPEI party candidate Rafael Caldera<sup>12</sup> rose to the presidency (1969-74), the friction seemed to abate somewhat. He was an opposition candidate, and his election confirmed for the first time that the dream of republican alternation in power was in fact possible in Venezuela. Negotiations with the guerrillas led to an open policy of peacemaking – which brought subversive elements back toward the path of democracy. But former dictator Pérez Jiménez's supporters also emerged boldly from their clandestine existences, and it came as no surprise when they garnered a healthy number of votes for their nationalist Cruzada Cívica Nacionalista (Nationalist civic crusade).

Ultimately, during Caldera's first term as president continuity trumped change in decisive areas such as iron- and steelworks, energy, petrochemicals, and aluminum. Caldera upheld the legacy that had begun in the 1940s, when he embodied the greatest legal challenge to Acción Democrática. Both he and his party had changed, but more importantly, the country had changed. By this point, the national population had passed the ten million mark, and was 75 percent city-based. The modernization that had taken place in areas like communications and the circulation of ideas, as well as the influence

of all that was happening outside the country, became increasingly important. But the reverse was true as well: Venezuelan cultural and economic events now had an impact beyond the country's borders. For example, when Venezuela's status dropped to fifth place among the world's oil-producing nations, the United States took notice, warning that the descent was due to the country's limited competitive capacities and its failure to take sufficient advantage of its mineral resources.

People who had lived in the belief that Venezuela was the first in oil production were forced to realize the ephemeral nature of the very privileged circumstances that they had enjoyed since the beginning of the twentieth century. The path would become more and more fraught with peril every time this reflection went unheeded. Today, as the democratic coexistence that prevailed back then has begun to wend its way down some very twisted paths, it is clear what went unnoticed by the individuals who should have been busy reflecting upon the plummeting numbers of the hydrocarbon business. Neither the country's leaders nor its intellectuals, in all their searching, realized that what Venezuela most desperately needed was not the resolution of urgent economic matters, but rather a metamorphosis in the way of thinking about how leaders and society alike might operate to bolster the common good. It was a perfect opportunity to remedy the missteps of a democracy that had already begun to show patent signs of deterioration – and about which the majority groups of the population began to grow extremely concerned and disgruntled. The details of a political landscape that was growing hazier escaped the shortsighted mindset of the day, and this was what allowed the historical chapter that began in 1958 to take a turn that might give way to a complete breakdown - in other words, the conundrum we are facing today.

### Translated by Kristina Cordero

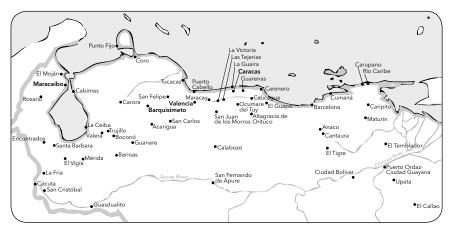
#### notes to the text

- The Plan de Barranquilla was a document drafted in Barranquilla, Colombia, in 1931 by a group of Venezuelan exiles. The document offered an analysis of the situation in Venezuela at that time, and itemized actions to be taken against the Gómez dictatorship. In a way, it was the manifesto of the leftist collective Agrupación de Izquierda (ARDI), which counted among its members two future presidents of Venezuela: Rómulo Betancourt and Raúl Leoni.
- 2. The artists of the Escuela de Caracas were focused on capturing the unique spirit of Venezuela, particularly through landscape. González, one of the Escuela's central figures, was well known for his depictions of the iconic El Ávila mountain. Castillo painted landscapes as well as still lifes and nudes; he is considered one of Venezuela's masters of color. Zuloaga was a painter and printmaker;

- in 1948 she became the cultural director of Venezuela's ministry of education, and in that post issued study grants to a group of young people who would go on to establish the group Los Disidentes in Paris. Alcántara was a landscape painter.
- 3. This was the "democratic, multiclass, popular, revolutionary" party founded in Caracas in 1941 by Betancourt, Leoni, and Gonzalo Barrios, among others. After participating in the coup d'état against Medina Angarita in 1945, the party went on to become a primary influence upon the politics of Venezuela in the second half of the twentieth century.
- 4. COPEI was a political party with a Social Christian orientation, founded by Rafael Caldera in 1946. Along with Acción Democrática, COPEI was one of the political parties that had the greatest impact on Venezuela in the second half of the twentieth century.
- The Guasina concentration camp was established by the revolutionary junta

- of the government following the coup d'état that overthrew Gallegos. More than three hundred political dissidents, the majority of them members of the Acción Democrática party, were incarcerated at this camp, which was located on an island in the estuary of the Orinoco River.
- The Caracas-La Guaira highway, which connects Caracas to its seaport, was inaugurated by Pérez Jiménez in 1953 and became an emblem of the modernization process initiated by the dictatorship.
- 7. Héctor Poleo was one of the pioneers of socially engaged art in Venezuela. He was influenced by the Mexican mural painters of the early 1940s. After World War II, Poleo's work began to move toward Surrealism, and his later output was marked by a more abstract and decorative style.
- Luís Guevara Moreno was a founding member of Los Disidentes. A champion of geometric abstraction during the 1950s, he later returned to figurative painting.

- Pascual Navarro was a founder of Los Disidentes. Like many other Venezuelan abstract artists, he returned to figurative painting in 1955.
- 10. Among visual artists, Jacobo Borges is the most representative of the "new figuration" in Venezuela of the 1960s, during which time he created paintings that revealed his strong opposition to the political situation of the day.
- 11. Rafael Trujillo was the dictator who governed the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961. In 1960 he engineered an unsuccessful assassination attempt against Betancourt.
- Rafael Caldera, the founder of COPEI, was president of the republic from 1969 to 1974 and again from 1994 to 1999.



Coastline and Principal Cities of Venezuela

# transformations in venezuelan territorial development and construction from the 1920s to the 1950s marco negrón

In the period of the 1920s to the 1950s, Venezuela underwent a number of crucial transformations in the interdependent realms of politics, economics, and demographics. These changes were largely, though not exclusively, the result of the country's new oil wealth, the impact of which was both hugely beneficial and stunningly complex. It was a time of exponential growth and migratory shifts: factors that were both pivotal in Venezuela's coming modernization and its new role on the international stage.

### the oil economy, modernization, and urbanization

During the early twentieth century, the Venezuelan nation was still a physically scattered entity comprised of four poorly interconnected regions, each made up of subregions that also suffered from weak communications systems. To the west, Maracaibo was the port from which export goods were dispatched to international markets; it was also the focal point for the fragmented region of Los Andes and its then-flourishing coffee economy. The country's eastern region had little internal physical integration. Its principal city of Carúpano - home to a significant and very entrepreneurial population of Corsican immigrants – was the principal port of the region of Paria, shipping coffee and cocoa from its harbor, though its narrow strip of coastline proved difficult to integrate into the region as a whole. At the center of the country, Caracas asserted its status as the nation's capital. Despite its weak links with other regions, Caracas prevailed over Venezuela's other cities in terms of population, politics, and culture. Since the late nineteenth century, the Caracas region had had the benefit of a road and rail system connecting its cities and two ports, La Guaira and Puerto Cabello; by the early twentieth it was the only region in Venezuela that was fully integrated in terms of transport and communication. In the south of the country and the plains, a sparsely populated area where the principal economic activity was large-scale ranching, the chief transport system was comprised of the Orinoco

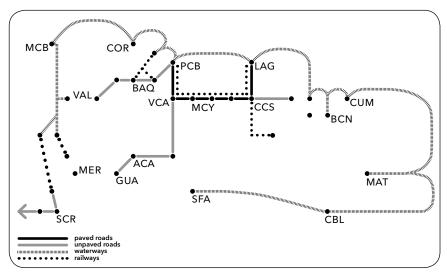


Fig. 1: Venezuela's National Transportation Infrastructure, 1920. Source: *Urbanización en Venezuela*, 3 vols. (Caracas: CORDIPLAN-United Nations, 1971).

and Apure rivers, and the main urban center and nexus to the rest of the world was Ciudad Bolívar (see fig. 1).

The process of urbanization in contemporary Venezuela, as well as the physical integration of the nation's territories, is associated with the rise in oil-export activity that transformed the Venezuelan economy beginning in the 1920s. In 1926, for the first time, oil exports were worth more to the country than its traditional agricultural exports, and from that point on the predominance of oil exports would continue to grow. By 1929, oil outpaced agricultural exports by four to one.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the 1920s, no city in Venezuela had more than 100,000 inhabitants, and only seven boasted more than 10,000, representing 8.5 percent of the country's population.<sup>2</sup> Caracas alone represented 3.7 percent of Venezuela's population with just over 92,000 inhabitants, as the urban population (that is, in localities of more than 2,500 inhabitants – the census's definition of an "urban center") scarcely grazed 16.4 percent of the country's total.

During these years significant changes began to take place within Venezuela's demographic indicators. The country's great economic catalyst was the return value of its oil exports: that is, the rent the State took in and subsequently redirected into the country's domestic economy. In this period of growth, internal production activities were relatively insignificant economically, and were dependent on the performance of oil exports.<sup>3</sup> To this we may attribute the fact that by 1941, when oil exploration and development activities were at their peak, the population of the seven significant oil-industry cities of the day—Cabimas, Punto Fijo-Cardón, Ciudad Ojeda Lagunillas, El Tigre, El Tigrito, Bachaquero, and Mene Grande—represented 1.3 percent of the overall population of Venezuela, having multiplied their 1920 population numbers by 3.5 percent<sup>4</sup> (while Caracas now boasted 8.4 percent of the population). At this time the population tended to cluster not around those urban centers most directly

connected to the extraction of hydrocarbons, but rather in those where the distribution of the return value of the exports was determined.

A second important factor in Venezuela's demographic history was the widespread presence of malaria in the national territory, which lasted until at least the 1940s. It has been noted that in the early 1930s, two-thirds of the 570,000 square miles of Venezuelan territory were affected by malaria. The first attempts to put an end to the epidemic were made at some point in the mid-1920s, but more sustained efforts began in 1936. There was a qualitative leap forward starting in December 1945 with the introduction of the mosquito-killing pesticide DDT, which ultimately eradicated the disease. This achievement, too, was linked to the country's oil exports, which generated the funds necessary to finance such a vast undertaking.

Geographic factors also played a part in the uneven territorial occupation of Venezuela. The country was naturally divided into three large geoeconomic regions: the coastal-mountain region comprised of the Andes, the Maracaibo Lake basin, the northern mountain range, and the Caribbean coast; the *llanos*, or plains, comprising the mesas and savannahs of the country's central zone; and Guayana, covering the territories to the south of the Orinoco River, and comprising the Amazon jungle. The first region (which includes the islands) represents 20 percent of the national territory, and is the home of the country's most fertile agricultural land. For this and other reasons, the main cities of Venezuela have been centered in this region since the colonial era. In the second region, which makes up 35 percent of the country's territory, the predominant economic activity has long been large-scale cattle ranching, with its high demand for land, low demand for labor, and relative incompatibility with the presence of urban conglomeration. The third region, which makes up the remaining 45 percent of the nation's territory, is a rich but complex area, generally focused on ore extraction and generation of hydraulic energy, activities that started to become particularly valuable in the middle of the twentieth century. In this region, the few human settlements have tended to concentrate along the Orinoco River, no doubt because of the advantages it offers for transportation.

In 1873, when the first national census was conducted in Venezuela, the first of these regions was home to 65 percent of the population, the second to 32 percent, and the third to 3 percent. By 1936 – early in Venezuela's modern demographic transition – the third region remained more or less the same, but the first region had jumped to constitute 80 percent of the population, and the second had slipped to 18 percent. This change was related to two phenomena that had a tremendous impact upon the territorial distribution of the population and the location of production activities: the bloody wars of the nineteenth century, which took place largely in the region of the *llanos*, and which did not end until the early twentieth century;<sup>6</sup> and the malaria epidemic, which affected the plains regions most severely.<sup>7</sup>

Another factor was the belated integration of the Venezuelan territories: while in 1920 the country's central area boasted a network of paved roads and railways that guaranteed its internal integration, interregional connections were virtually nonexistent. Regions were either completely isolated from one another or were connected by a few precarious waterways and dirt roads. Trains

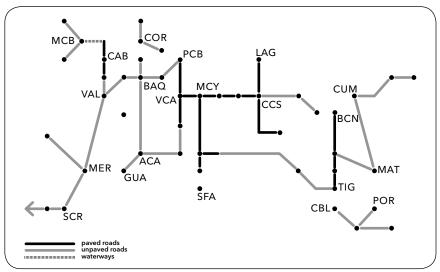


Fig. 2: National Roadways Infrastructure, 1947. Source: Urbanización en Venezuela (1971)

existed in some of these areas, but (with the partial exception of the Caracas-Valencia axis) there was no comprehensive rail system, even on the regional level, which meant that they had virtually no overall territorial impact.

The transportation-integration process was spurred by the growth of Venezuela's oil economy. By 1947 there was a relatively comprehensive national transport network (see fig. 2), although the majority of the roadways were still unpaved and the old railways and coastal navigation routes had been abandoned.

By 1947 the new paved roads had expanded beyond the Caracas-Valencia region into the oil-producing regions, along the eastern coast of Lake Maracaibo and between the oil fields to the south of Anzoátegui and Puerto La Cruz.

### 1920 - 45: modernization in the making

In the maturation of the so-called petro-state,<sup>8</sup> the years 1920 - 45 constitute a key period: a nexus between what might be termed the "agro-colonial" phase and the modern era. During this period Venezuela began to witness economic, political, and sociocultural transformations that would form the contemporary nation.

What set off this great change was of course the surge of oil-export activities that began in the 1920s and marked Venezuela's definitive entry into the world-trade system, from which it had long been marginalized (indeed, it was partially excluded from this system for a significantly longer period than were other Latin American countries). During this era, oil was virtually the sole engine of the Venezuelan economy; it was a time of what might be described as "simple growth," when economic accumulation was not greatly significant. It was only toward the end of World War II that conditions became ripe for the advent of a second economic engine: the building industry. Ambitious construction

projects brought jobs and incited growth in ancillary industries, accelerating the expansion of Venezuela's internal market, as well as in the areas of accrual and urbanization.

Before the oil boom, Venezuela's development had been precariously based on agricultural exports that had a low intensity of capital and were closely connected to economic fluctuations. The modest surplus that these exports brought tended to go straight into the pockets of the emerging bourgeoisie of the central region, affording leverage to the financial, real estate, commercial, and transportation sectors. The country's work force was vulnerable, dispersed, and greatly lacking in education and cultural sophistication; all this allowed the bourgeoisie to consolidate its power—occasionally in alliance with landowning sectors—in the domestic political sphere. The bourgeoisie favored investment in the fertile region that constituted the bedrock of its hegemony, a process that naturally compounded its own power.

Nevertheless, in these pre-boom years, the Venezuelan economy saw few benefits from the surpluses, as an internal investment structure was not yet in place. The modernization project that Antonio Guzmán Blanco had initiated at the end of the nineteenth century was atrophied. The profits were further diminished by the ruling class's reluctance to reinvest them—although these were the activities that constituted the basis of its power. All these factors played a part in Venezuela's slow development, its negligible urbanization, and the widespread consolidation of a subsistence economy.

### the expansion of the oil business after 1920

The table below offers an illustration of how oil exports altered the dynamics of the Venezuelan economy.

years	coffee and cocoa		oil	
	value (in millions of bolívars)	% of total exports	value (in millions of bolívars)	% of total exports
1920	101	50.0	26	12.9
1926	118	24.2	325	66.6
1929	158	17.0	721	77.4
1940	26	3.8	616	90.2
1947	89	3.0	2,746	93.4

Table 1: Venezuelan exports, 1920 - 47 (indicating economic values and percentages of total exports)
Source: Asdrúbal Baptista, Bases cuantitativas de la economía venezolana 1830 - 2002 (Caracas: Fundación Empresas Polar, 2006), pp. 218 - 22.

Thus, in a short span of years, oil overwhelmingly replaced agriculture in the nation's exports. Interestingly, however, 1929 data reveal – contrary to what is widely believed – that the decline of the agriculture economy was not attributable solely to the emergence of the oil market. The worldwide economic crisis of the 1930s dealt the deathblow to Venezuela's traditional export business, leading to a national agricultural crisis, the repercussions of which were

felt at least until the 1960s. For obvious reasons, the Depression had a far less dramatic effect on oil production.

Venezuela's oil production was determined by and dependent upon foreign countries; the demand for oil came exclusively from outside the country's borders, from industrialized nations that were major participants in the world's economic processes. Foreign companies had the technology and capital to take control of the markets and the commercial channels—indeed, of the entire scope of oil-production activities. <sup>10</sup> As a result, Venezuela's oil industry had its main economic impact abroad; operations within the country became a kind of enclave: the only direct effect of oil production upon its domestic market was through the payment of salaries and wages. <sup>11</sup> What would revolutionize the domestic economy was not oil production itself, but rather the return value of its exports.

Since Venezuela's national constitution has historically adjudicated ownership of the country's subsoil to the State, all of that return value entered the country through the government. Whoever was at the helm of the country at a given point played a critical role in the distribution of returns—and thus in establishing the general state of the country's economy. Just 16 percent of Venezuela's oil income generated between 1920 and 1936 went directly to private citizens, through wages and salaries paid out by oil companies; the remaining 84 percent went toward taxes and royalties charged by the government. This situation only strengthened the politically powerful bourgeoisie's domination over a range of social processes, in addition to helping it withstand the collapse of the export agriculture business—its original source of power—in 1930.

Venezuela's ruling classes were hence further empowered economically. The Proyecto Nacional, 13 which had been incubating since 1864, quickly became identified as the only conceivable framework for the organization and operation of society. 14 This, however, did not initially imply a substantive expansion of the country's internal-production apparatus, either through the source of this new wealth 15 or any use that was made of it.

Corruption was rampant. According to historian Germán Carrera Damas, it would not be an exaggeration to consider embezzlement as the "decisive factor in the maturation process of the Venezuelan bourgeois class." <sup>16</sup> Rómulo Betancourt proposed that proximity to power was in itself an essential link to wealth. <sup>17</sup> There was little financial risk for the ruling class, and this new source of wealth had unprecedented stability, in comparison to the unstable and weak economic activity that had previously predominated in Venezuela.

It has been argued that none of the Latin American societies that suffered infrastructural crises at the end of the eighteenth century was able independently to generate the dynamic economic factors that might have allowed them to overcome their difficulties. On the other hand, it has also been suggested that by the 1930s and '40s there already existed viable options for internal reinvestment of the oil rent—in theory, at least. In practice, because of the manner in which it originated, the distribution and use of such revenue among socioeconomic agents were determined on the basis of political rather than economic reasoning. The criteria for the distribution of wealth were largely determined by the ruling class and its desire to ensure the status quo.

This state of affairs did not come about easily or rapidly: as Venezuelan society grew increasingly complex, the debate regarding the management of oil income also became more complicated and contradictory. At stake was the dialogue of power between the different strata that comprised Venezuelan society. The ramifications of this dialogue would be felt far into the future. 18

### "sowing the oil" and the role of the state

Under the Gómez administration the Venezuelan ruling class recognized that, given the complexity of the oil business and the lack of education among the vast majority of the country's citizens, there would be no feasible way to integrate Venezuelan society into this economic system through the means of production. They did, however, see the possibility of integration through rent. But while some people favored the participation of private landowners, others felt the oil business should belong primarily to the State, as owner of the country's subsoil. The first option would have meant placing the country's wealth in the hands of a social class operating with a pre-capitalist mentality, whereas the second option at least offered the possibility that the wealth might be channeled into productive means and toward the modernization of the country.

After Gómez's death in 1935, the influential voice of Alberto Adriani<sup>19</sup> maintained that oil represented an ephemeral source of wealth that was best left aside, so that the agricultural sector—especially the coffee industry—might be strengthened and modernized. Adriani had little understanding of the characteristics of the oil business, but the notion of a rent-based economy was anathema to him. His premature death in 1936 helped clear the field so that ultimately a different approach would be adopted.

In ethical terms, the position of Arturo Úslar Pietri, a writer, law-yer, and politician who exercised considerable influence upon the Venezuelan governments between 1936 and 1945, was perhaps not so different from that of Adriani, but in practical terms he took into account the great relevance that oil income would soon have for the country. Úslar Pietri understood this market to be about not only rent but "natural capital," a concept that legitimized the revenue from its very roots. In this sense, the oil rent did not exist as the result of a relationship between a landowner and a capitalist businessman, but was equitably positioned between two entities possessing capital that came together to form an association: the Venezuelan nation, owner of the "natural capital" of oil, and the foreign oil companies, owners of the technology that facilitated the extraction and production of that oil.

All that remained to be determined was the fate of that income – that is, how to keep it from being directed toward purely consumptive ends, which would drive the nation toward an increasingly parasitic existence. This was a risk that would rise as the previous internal production business – export agriculture – had collapsed with the Depression. The proposed solution was to put the oil income in its entirety toward *investment* instead of operating expenses, a notion that was synthesized in the slogan "sembrar el petróleo" (to sow the oil): in other words, turn the oil rent into the "seed" that would eventually grow to become a national, production-based capitalist system. To allocate this income for consumption would not only be an ethically unacceptable position

(according to Úslar Pietri's way of thinking), it would also lead to the swift disintegration of this clearly vast source of "natural capital."

Within this program, the State would be responsible for defending national interests against those of foreign companies, as well as administering and distributing the income. Direct investment, on the other hand, would be the responsibility of the private sector, following the idea that voluntary individual initiative is the firmest foundation for the efficient management of such things, and for the construction of a true democracy. In operational terms, however, there was a problem: not only was this income effectively "rent," it was a level of rent so extraordinary that it would always tend to exceed the capital absorption capacity of the society that enjoyed it. This represented an enormous obstacle to the objective of "sowing the oil."

In 1945, the national-populist ticket, with the help of military powers, overthrew the "old executors" of the Gómez legacy, placing Rómulo Betancourt and the Acción Democrática party in power. For the new ruling party, the legitimacy of the rent's origin was accorded with the same basic criteria—but with one important difference: the new leaders declared that the direct participation of "the people"—and not just private capital—was crucial in determining the manner in which the country's income was to be spent. Betancourt made it very clear that the popular, democratic claims and demands were at one with the national interests regarding revenue. He also well understood the forces he would have to face in this stance: the foreign oil companies and the ruling elites that were his domestic allies.

This was how the Venezuelan government legitimized the use of oil revenue for consumption. One of its primary objectives was to improve the living conditions of "the people" through salary raises in the public sector (a measure that trailed behind the private sector), and to increase the job market and citizens' services, especially in the areas of education, health, and housing. But the State would be given a newly important role in the area of production as well, due to the private initiatives' inclination to take the path of least resistance.

The populist strategy may be summarized in the following terms: rent from oil, initially, was intended to help develop "human capital" and create a domestic market—in other words, to establish the foundations that would allow the oil to be "sown." Once this objective was fulfilled, and oil rent had been channeled toward consumption, the country would be ready to enter a second phase, in which the emphasis would be on accumulation, on investing the oil rent in the development of productive activities, specifically industry. If the phase of consumptive absorption of the rent were prolonged beyond what was absolutely necessary, however, there was a risk that the money might begin to be squandered.

The members of the Acción Democrática party would not have the chance to prove their ability to handle this new system. In November 1948, the same military officers who three years earlier had brought the party to power overthrew the recently elected president, Rómulo Gallegos, and instituted a radically different kind of political program, ostensibly focused on the "transformation of the physical environment" (although in this respect the new administration continued in more or less the same vein as the previous). In the 1950s, as

Venezuela's oil production soared higher than ever, these policies were translated in a short span of years into the construction of a physical infrastructure that was arguably without parallel in all of Latin America.

### migratory processes and the logic of urbanization

In 1920 Venezuela was an overwhelmingly rural country: nearly 80 percent of its 2.3 million inhabitants lived in the countryside and all its cities had fewer than 100,000 residents. According to certain estimates, the active rural population in 1926 came close to one million people;<sup>20</sup> by 1937, the country's agricultural census reported that this figure had dipped to just under 650,000.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, these statistics reveal that as time went on, in addition to the accelerated growth of its population, Venezuela also experienced an intensification of internal migration that, as is traditional in such contexts, originated in the rural environment and was directed toward the country's urban centers. By 1941, the overall population of Venezuela was approximately four million, and the two cities that had more than 100,000 inhabitants, Caracas and Maracaibo, together represented 10.8 percent of the country's population. At the other end of the spectrum, the rural population grew in absolute numbers but suffered a drastic reduction in relative terms, tumbling to 60 percent of the overall population.

Contrary to what one might conclude at first glance, the final destinations of those migrants were not the cities that had recently sprouted up around Venezuela's oil fields, the source of the nation's newfound wealth. Instead, they gravitated toward the country's more traditional cities, despite the fact that significant development in any kind of large-scale production had not yet occurred. The 1936 census listed only two oil-industry cities, Cabimas and Lagunillas, both on the eastern shores of Lake Maracaibo, the combined population of which was no more than 23,425 inhabitants, scarcely 0.7 percent of the country's overall population. The subsequent census, however, taken in 1941, identified seven oil-industry cities, the majority of which were clustered around Lake Maracaibo, with two others quite far away in eastern Venezuela. The total population of these cities had just barely increased to 48,813 inhabitants, representing 1.3 percent of the overall population. Studies carried out later reveal that between 1936 and 1941, the final balance of the migration toward the oil-producing districts totaled 31,500 people, a number that was almost doubled by the migratory flow into Caracas, which absorbed some 58,000 people during this same period.<sup>22</sup>

The reason for the weak demographic pull of these new oil-industry cities is that their principal activities were carried out with a high level of productivity. Again, oil-industry employment reached its peak during this period with 27,000 employees in 1929, the year in which the value of oil exports was almost five times greater than coffee and cocoa exports (see table 1), which required, as we have pointed out, a much greater volume of labor.

Given all these factors, oil-production activities cannot be described as having been directly responsible for the population growth that took place in urban centers during this period, nor can this growth be explained by any processes of modernization in the agricultural sector, because in fact such modernization never occurred. On the contrary, the collapse of the export agriculture business in 1930 was what prompted this wave of internal migration.

This demise, coupled with the demographic increase in the countryside due to the decreasing mortality rate and the continued concentration of agricultural property,<sup>23</sup> quickly created a surplus rural population whose only option was migration. In addition, the migratory flow into Venezuela's traditional cities cannot be attributed to any transformations in the urban-industrial apparatus (such transformations had not yet taken place); it was, rather, due to the political nature of the decisions relating to the distribution of oil income. These decisions determined the concentration of that distribution according to the presence of the dominant social strata in these cities—and led to increased employment possibilities in the areas of commerce and services.

### developing and constructing the national territory

The 1939 "Plan Monumental," the urban-renewal plan for Caracas, designed by the directorate for urbanism of the government of the federal district, in consultation with a group of distinguished European urban planners, <sup>24</sup> was the definitive inauguration of Venezuela's new tradition of urban planning. Because of bureaucratic obligations, the project's leaders were forced to limit the agenda to the area that is now known as the Libertador municipality within the metropolitan district of Caracas; it was, nonetheless, a plan of massive dimensions.

According to the 1939 publication *Revista Municipal del Distrito Federal* (Municipal journal of the federal district):

In its goal of achieving a total resurgence on the national level, Venezuela has the advantage, thanks to its favorable economic conditions, of access to all the modern equipment and the most effective, rational methods that the time-tested experience of other countries suggests for the improvement of the administrative mechanism. As such, the country is in an unparalleled position to **modify and rebuild those great cities** that the government, industry, and commerce need. The country will, additionally, be able to **stimulate growth in certain regions**, while at the same time avoiding the intermediate agglomerations that were necessary in other times due to the lack of roadways.<sup>25</sup>

This mission would be revived toward the end of World War II by the national commission for urbanism, which carried out the country's first regional-planning efforts and executed projects on a national level until it was disbanded in 1957. Its responsibilities were then transferred to the directorate of urbanism under the country's public-works ministry.

In the same vein, in 1947, the recently created national highway-administration commission formulated a preliminary highway plan, which was implemented swiftly and would remain in use for the rest of the century. In 1936, Venezuela had some 3,000 miles of roads, of which only 300 were paved. By 1948 those numbers had risen to 4,700 and 1,000 respectively; and by 1957, the global road network in Venezuela had increased by more than 200 percent, while the number of paved roadways grew by 300 percent. In contrast with the 1947 roadways, which were primarily concentrated in the area around Caracas and the oil-producing regions (see fig. 2), they now covered practically the entire surface area of the territories to the north of the Orinoco and Apure rivers (see fig. 3).

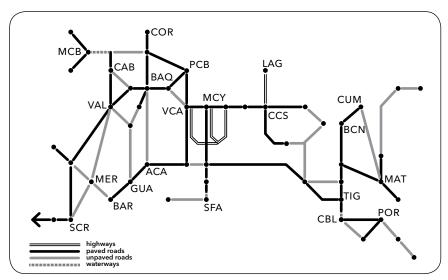


Fig. 3: National Roadways Infrastructure, 1957. Source: Urbanización en Venezuela (1971)

In 1971 Venezuela's institute of state railroads formulated a national rail plan, but it was barely executed, and thus had little or no impact on Venezuelan life.

### the great architectural projects

In the aftermath of Gómez's death, Venezuela experienced a boom of formidable architectural projects, including a network of primary and secondary schools built across the country. Caracas in particular benefited from a number of extraordinary urban-renewal plans, many of which incorporated the work of modern artists, in a newly inspired vision of a "synthesis of arts" and architecture. Between 1943 and 1945, Carlos Raúl Villanueva's El Silencio complex was erected at the very center of Caracas, comprised of seven blocks of 747 apartments and 207 commercial units – all in a city with a population that had yet to reach 500,000. Villanueva brought in the artist Francisco Narváez, who created the fountain-sculpture around which the entire project is conceived. In 1949, just one street east of El Silencio, construction began on the Centro Simón Bolívar, an ambitious complex of offices and commercial space designed by Cipriano Domínguez.<sup>27</sup> With 400,000 square meters of space, the center featured murals by Oswaldo Guayasamín<sup>28</sup> and César Rengifo,<sup>29</sup> among other works, and was crowned by two towers that ascended thirty floors skyward - an unprecedented and almost inconceivable height for the Caracas of those days.

In 1955, on an ample stretch of land scarcely separated from El Silencio by the Calvario hill,<sup>30</sup> work began on what would eventually be known as the 23 de Enero community,<sup>31</sup> a facility for 55,000 residents. The project was developed by the architecture workshop of the Banco Obrero under the stewardship of Villanueva, who on this occasion invited the participation of the artist Mateo Manaure, creator of the polychromes on the façades of the complex's fifteen-story apartment blocks.

In 1944, during the presidency of Isaías Medina Angarita, work began on Caracas's Ciudad Universitaria (the campus of Venezuela's Universidad Central), again under the direction of Villanueva.<sup>32</sup> The Aula Magna (great hall) and Plaza Cubierta (covered plaza), the two most exceptional elements of this architectural complex, were completed between 1952 and 1953. In these two spaces Villanueva most clearly enacted his vision of a "synthesis" of all the arts, incorporating works by the most celebrated young Venezuelan artists of the day, as well as by a distinguished selection of the international avant-garde, from Jean Arp to Fernand Léger, as well as Victor Vasarely, Henri Laurens, Baltasar Lobo, Antoine Pevsner, and Alexander Calder, whose remarkable 1953 Acoustic Clouds hang in the great hall.

Despite their impressive scale and formal attributes, Venezuela's modernist architectural achievements are unlikely to be deemed "grand urban projects" as we conceive of them today. There is no doubt, however, that they strengthened the Venezuelan capital, helping to place Caracas on the map of great Latin American cities, and transforming it into an attractive destination for international migration as well as for the intellectual elites in the rest of the country.

Indeed, Venezuela's position and identity in the global context had changed radically in a relatively short span of years: from the inchoate, impoverished land it had been in the 1920s, it was now a country to be reckoned with, entering the future on an equal footing with other nations.

### Translated by Kristina Cordero

### notes to the text

- Asdrúbal Baptista, Bases cuantitativas de la economía venezolana, 1830-2002 (Caracas: Fundación Empresas Polar, 2006), p. 219; Miguel Izard, Series estadísticas para la historia de Venezuela (Mérida: Universidad de Los Andes, 1970), pp. 186, 200.
- Julio Páez Celis, Ensayo sobre demografía económica de Venezuela, 2nd edition (Caracas: Edoven, 1975). The seven cities were: Caracas, Maracaibo, Valencia, Barquisimeto, La Guaira-Maiquetía, San Cristóbal, Cumaná.
- Luís Carlos Palacios, "El desarrollo y la planificación urbana en Venezuela," Urbana, no. 12 (Caracas), 1993: 11-26.
- Marco Negrón, "Los orígenes de la urbanización contemporánea en Venezuela: El crecimiento sin acumulación entre 1920 y 1945," Urbana, no. 4 (Caracas), 1982: 71-92.
- Germán Yépez Colmenares, "La lucha para controlar y erradicar la malaria en Venezuela entre los años 1936 y 1948," Anuario vol. 2, no. 6 (Caracas: Instituto de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1994).

- 6. The dictatorial regime of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–35) put an end to the civil wars of the nineteenth century.
- 7. In 1916, "an intense and catastrophic malaria epidemic that . . . decimated the Venezuelan plains" was recorded. Official statistics indicate that between 1905 and 1935 more than 220,000 people died as a result of malaria in Venezuela, that is, 12.5 percent of the total deaths in the country during that period. See Jeannette Rodríguez and Víctor Pinzón, "La aplicación del DDT en la lucha antimalárica en Venezuela (1945–1948)," Anuario 2, no. 5 (Caracas: Instituto de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1993).
- 8. The term "petro-state," coined by Terry Lynn Karl in 1995, refers to those peripheral economies that rely heavily on income from oil exports, and for which the state plays a central role in channeling income toward the domestic sphere. From this perspective, Karl states that "culturally, Venezuela belongs to Latin America; structurally, its economy and patterns of stability and instability are more similar to those of such other relatively populous oil exporters as Algeria,

- Iran and Nigeria." Cited in Fernando Coronil, The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 5.
- Irene Rodríguez Gallad, "Perfil de la economía venezolana durante el régimen gomecista," in Elías Pino Iturrieta (coordinator), Juan Vicente Gómez y su época (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1985), p. 83.
- 10. During this time, it was the policy of these foreign companies not to operate oil-refining plants on Venezuelan soil, with the exception of a very few that were intended to satisfy a small part of the country's own demand for fuel. The Venezuelan government neither hindered nor objected to this policy.
- 11. Even this portion of the economy was weak, as the labor required in these oil-production activities is relatively low: for the entire period that ended in 1945, labor demand never exceeded 27,000 workers, the number that was recorded in 1929. Until the nationalization of the industry in 1976, it never exceeded 3.5 percent of Venezuela's overall employment. See Baptista, Bases cuantitativas de la economía venezolana, pp. 916-17; Chris Tanner, Venezuelan Migration (Diessenhofen, Switzerland: Rüegger, 1980), p. 92.
- Armando Córdova, Inversiones extranjeras y subdesarrollo, 2nd ed. (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1979), p. 150.
- 13. Venezuela's Proyecto Nacional, or "national project," first defined in the country's 1864 constitution, was a comprehensive plan for the construction of a liberal, democratic state, including the consolidation of government, the bolstering of the bourgeoisie, and the modernization of the economy. The project was reformulated in the constitutions of 1947 and 1961 to comprise a socially oriented rule of law; increased individual, social, and economic rights; and the implementation of new policies with regard to the nation's oil wealth.
- Germán Carrera Damas, Una nación llamada Venezuela, 4th ed. (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1991), p. 137.
- 15. According to Max Flores, oil income, in terms of the domestic economy, "does not express a social product per se that is, a product for which a direct effort is made by people, the economic subjects that are involved in the production process and who, as such, are part of a global accumulation process through which the majority of the surplus is gen-

- erated, recirculated within and reinjected into the economy." See Flores, "El capitalismo en la Venezuela actual," Economía y Ciencias Sociales 18, no. 1 (Caracas), 1979. Bernard Mommer considers it a form of rent "in Ricardian and Marxist terms." See Mommer, La nueva situación energética enfocada desde la teoría ricardiana y marxista de la renta de la tierra (Mérida: Universidad de los Andes, Economics Department, publication 76-02, 1976). A similar formulation, but inclusive of the entire range of basic export products, is in B. Widyono, "Empresas transnacionales y productos básicos de exportación," Revista CEPAL, no. 5 (Santiago de Chile: CEPAL, 1978).
- 16. Carrera Damas, Una nación llamada Venezuela, p. 112.
- Rómulo Betancourt, Venezuela, política y petróleo, 3rd ed. (Caracas: Editorial Senderos, 1969), chaps. 6, 7, and 8. Betancourt's observations are based on data provided by Edwin Lieuwen.
- 18. An in-depth analysis of this debate can be found in Asdrúbal Baptista and Bernard Mommer, El petróleo en el pensamiento económico venezolano (Ediciones IESA, 1987). The paragraphs that follow synthesize many of the ideas of these authors; I hope to have faithfully represented them in my own attempt to understand the debate surrounding the territorial question.
- Alberto Adriani was an economist, writer, and politician. He was Venezuela's agricultural and wildlife minister, then treasury minister during the administration of Eleazar López Contreras.
- See Federico Brito Figueroa, Venezuela siglo XX (Havana: Casa de las Américas), 1967.
- See Marco Aurelio Vila, Geoeconomía de Venezuela, 2 vols. (Caracas: Corporación Venezolana de Fomento), n.d.
- 22. See *Urbanización en Venezuela*, 3 vols. (Caracas: CORDIPLAN-United Nations, 1971).
- 23. According to the national agricultural and farming census, in 1937, 89 percent of the agricultural lands of Venezuela were in the hands of 4.7 percent of the landowners. See Vila, Geoeconomía de Venezuela.
- 24. French urban planners Henri Prost, Jacques Lambert, and Maurice E. H. Rotival worked with an engineer named Wegenstein. For practical purposes, Rotival assumed the leadership of the team and returned to Venezuela on several occasions as advisor to both the Comisión Nacional de Urbanismo and the Centro Simón Bolívar.

- Revista Municipal del Distrito Federal, Posición y función geográfica de Caracas: Su porvenir (Caracas: Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 1939), p. 19 (boldface in ms.). Facsimile edition of 1985.
- Rafael S. Valery, Los caminos de Venezuela (Caracas: Cuadernos de Lagoven, 1978), p. 47.
- 27. Cipriano Domínguez was one of the founders of the architecture school of the Universidad Central de Venezuela.
- 28. Ecuadorian painter Oswaldo Guayasamín's work was influenced by Mexican muralism; his work decried the humiliation and misery of indigenous Latin Americans and all those living in poverty.
- 29. César Rengifo was a Venezuelan painter and playwright. Influenced by the Mexican muralists, he sought through his work to denounce the suffering of the poor.

- 30. Calvario hill was a park in the center of Caracas, with Gothic-inspired architecture that was designed by French landscape architects during the administrations of Guzmán Blanco (1870 - 88).
- 31. A residential complex designed by Villanueva in the 1950s, under the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. The name by which it is now known, 23 de Enero, commemorates the date (January 23, 1958) of the popular rebellion and coup d'état staged to overthrow the dictator.
- The Ciudad Universitaria project was carried out without interruption until 1967. It was designated a World Cultural Patrimony of Humanity site by UNESCO in the year 2000.

## alfredo boulton and the historiography of venezuelan art roldán esteva-grillet

I analyze time through the artist or artists who best manage to express it.

— alfredo boulton, 1973

### death to the colony, long live independence

In the late 1950s, anyone interested in Venezuelan art history who went to a library looking for information would have found very little material. The oldest book was published in 1883, the centennial of Simón Bolívar's birth. The date is no coincidence; Venezuela's then-president, Antonio Guzmán Blanco, had commissioned two works: an enormous painting, *La firma del acta de la Independencia* (The signing of the declaration of Independence), by the academic painter Martín Tovar y Tovar for that year's Exposición Nacional, and a book titled *Ensayos sobre el arte en Venezuela* (Essays on art in Venezuela) by historian Ramón de la Plaza.¹ If anything besides State secularization distinguished Guzmán Blanco's nearly two-decade hegemonic rule (1870–88), it was his support of the arts and sciences.

De la Plaza's *Ensayos sobre el arte en Venezuela* became required reading in Venezuelan schools. The author held patently negative opinions about art of the colonial period, but took a more sympathetic view of two Republican painters – Pedro Castillo in Valencia and Juan Lovera<sup>2</sup> in Caracas – from the era of General José Antonio Páez.<sup>3</sup> Readers of the book were introduced to the academic painters who, after completing their advanced studies in Rome, formed the teaching staff of Caracas's Instituto de Bellas Artes (from 1877 under the direction of de la Plaza). In both his book and his review of the Exposición Nacional, de la Plaza propounded the idea of overcoming colonial "backwardness" with a new art of patriotic themes, in the academic French tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Tovar y Tovar was de la Plaza's great favorite. Relegated to painting society portraits after his studies in Madrid and Paris, Tovar y Tovar was given the opportunity to make a name for himself as a historical painter with Guzmán Blanco's 1883 commission. La firma del acta de la Independencia was massive, measuring some twenty-three by fifteen feet (7 by 4.8 meters), and was awarded a gold medal at the Exposición Nacional. The following year, it was the subject of a detailed study by Arístides Rojas, a well-known chronicler and collector of art (and later great-uncle of Alfredo Boulton). Rojas also published writings on petroglyphs and indigenous effigies, and urged the establishment of an official system of art patronage. After his death in 1894, some twenty years would pass before another major contribution to the field of art history would be made in Venezuela.

Both de la Plaza and Rojas were fully in step with the period's positivist trends, and the two of them championed an academic art that glorified the nation's military past. Spurning Spanish colonialism, they were instrumental in turning Venezuela's focus toward the products of its own indigenous culture.

### the landscape is the nation

During Juan Vicente Gómez's lengthy dictatorship (1908-35), Tito Salas—the official painter of the Gómez regime—took up the cause of academic art, and created a celebrated series of large-scale paintings of the life of Simón Bolívar. At the same time, the younger generation of artists began to turn away from commissions, painting scenes of their own milieu, such as the iconic mountain El Ávila, in the hopes that a market would emerge to purchase their work.

As early as 1906, critic and journalist Jesús Semprum<sup>5</sup> spoke of younger students' predilection for landscapes at Caracas's Academia de Bellas Artes. His speech at the 1912 inauguration of the Círculo de Bellas Artes<sup>6</sup> was broadminded and welcoming: "Along with supporters of the strictest classicism," he stated, "along with those most stubborn defenders of Romanticism and its derivatives, the fervent followers of the new schools – no matter how outrageous or absurd they may seem to us, including those ascribing to esoteric Symbolism or the frenetic lovers of Futurism – should also join us." (Nonetheless, in his 1919 survey of Venezuelan art history, Semprum seemed more keen to recount the immediate academic past than to discuss the artistic innovations whose emergence he was witnessing.)

There was a need for more critics to foster an audience and market for art. In the newly formed Círculo de Bellas Artes were two important writers: Leoncio Martínez,<sup>8</sup> a champion of Venezuela's new art from 1912 to 1918, and Enrique Planchart, who took up the cause from Martínez in 1918. Often credited with engendering the first wave of modern criticism in Venezuela, Planchart was keenly attuned to formalist concerns, and generally refrained from the sort of literary and patriotic tangents that were typical of de la Plaza and Rojas. He would continue his advocacy of the modernist agenda until his death in 1953.

The painters, poets, and novelists of this generation—several of them founders of the Círculo de Bellas Artes—began to take over both new and established institutions after Gómez's death in 1935: the painter Antonio Edmundo Monsanto became the director of the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Aplicadas, an important position that he held for the next decade; landscapist Manuel Cabré was at the Museo de Bellas Artes; writer Rómulo Gallegos became the country's minister of education; and Planchart was named head of the Biblioteca Nacional.

Adopting Martínez's point of view, Planchart extolled a naturalistic portrayal of the landscape and its regional traits, a style that drew on that of the European post-Impressionists. But as this generation was joined by younger converts, and as the art market developed during the 1940s, Planchart stopped working as a critic and became an art historian, focusing above all on the nineteenth century. He claimed, however, to know practically nothing about art of the colonial era, and presumed that most works of the period were in fact Spanish imports. Although he generally refrained from criticizing works of the colonial period, in 1938 he did speculate that much colonial art was created by "la mano esclava" (that is, by slaves)—a theory he later rescinded. Planchart unearthed period documents about the nineteenth century and did formal analyses of works from the recent past—especially by Lovera, Tovar, Arturo Michelena, and Cristóbal Rojas—providing well-researched biographical information on each artist.

### the colony, without prejudice

By the 1930s, writers who had managed to shake off their positivist prejudices were ready to contend with the colonial period. They may be categorized together as humanists, although some were conservative (such as Caraciolo Parra Pérez and Mario Briceño Iragorry) and others liberal (among them Augusto Mijares, Arturo Úslar Pietri, Mariano Picón Salas, Ramón Díaz Sánchez, and Guillermo Meneses). These writers' engagements with the topic of Venezuelan art were uneven, with the exception of Picón Salas and Meneses, both of whom wrote surveys about Venezuelan art for exhibitions (in 1954 and 1961 respectively). These two also were the first to bring attention to Armando Reverón - the most original artist of the Círculo de Bellas Artes generation – writing about his work in the late 1930s. Rather than dwelling upon Reverón's eccentricities and sometimes outlandish persona, they focused on his luminous painting. The writer Alejo Carpentier likewise felt that the theatrics of the "hermit from Macuto" - as painter and critic Pascual Navarro dubbed Reverón in 1947-should be disregarded in order to concentrate attention upon his work (Boulton would later concur emphatically with this approach).

While Planchart established himself as the new historian of a specifically Venezuelan tradition in art (a tradition that in his view came into being only in 1920),9 Carlos Manuel Möller wrote essays that dwelled on the colonial tradition's importance in the fields of architecture and the decorative arts. Although neither of them had an academic background, they contributed much to both the research and the appreciation of Venezuelan artistic and architectural heritage. Even so, they published only one book each, compilations of their articles: Planchart's La pintura en Venezuela (Painting in Venezuela), issued in 1956 after his death, and Möller's Páginas coloniales (Colonial writings), published in 1962. These were pioneering (though modest) studies with documented sources, bibliographical references, illustrations, and competent-in Möller's case, sometimes even evocative – writing. To these two books may be added José Nucete Sardi's Notas sobre la pintura y la escultura en Venezuela (Notes on painting and sculpture in Venezuela), which was awarded the prestigious Premio de la Raza from the Real Academia de la Lengua Española when it was first published in 1940, and had the distinction of being twice reprinted.

### two crucial decades

At the end of his *Notas*, Nucete Sardi speaks of an emerging genre: an "Americanist" art that values folk customs and indigenous or mulatto identity. He mentions the artist Francisco Narváez and boldly brings up the work of the sculptor Alejandro Colina, who was at the time practically unknown. <sup>10</sup> Though his book does not feature the same level of formal analysis as Planchart's, it does bear abundant references to lesser-known provincial artists. Local production was also a topic of interest for the writer Eduardo Rohl, who published a series of essays about nineteenth-century travelers, all of whom were scientists, and some (such as Ferdinand Bellerman and Anton Goering) artists at the service of science.

The year 1942 would be especially significant for Venezuelan art history and historiography. That year, the Museo de Bellas Artes presented an

imposing show titled *Paisaje Venezolano* (Venezuelan landscape), which was reviewed by Planchart and the Catalan writer Albert Junyent. The Salón Oficial de Arte awarded a privately sponsored prize for the first time—called the "John Boulton," after Alfredo Boulton's father—to the Mexican-educated figurative painter Héctor Poleo. In the same year, the Asociación Venezolana de Amigos del Arte Colonial (Venezuelan association of friends of colonial art) was formed following a show of colonial art in 1939 at the Museo de Bellas Artes. Finally, an exhibition about Simón Bolívar was presented at the same museum to celebrate the centennial of the repatriation of his remains from Santa Marta, Colombia. It was a time of coinciding themes—themes that set off a new, strictly documentary historiography, an objective approach that Boulton believed was necessary in order to form a true understanding of Venezuelan heritage.

Between 1945 and 1948, there was much political turmoil at all levels: General Isaías Medina Angarita's rule came to an end in 1945, to be followed by the first of Rómulo Betancourt's two presidential terms (1945–48); and Rómulo Gallegos's subsequent social-democratic government was ousted after less than a year in power in 1948. Unrest at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas y Aplicadas led to the foundation of the Taller Libre de Arte (Free arts workshop). The Taller was a forum for discussion—more intuitive than rational or pragmatic—about the new trends that broke with post-Impressionism and social realism, as a number of artists began to gravitate toward avant-garde abstraction.

The reform of Venezuelan art education in 1945 was split between two factions: the anthropologist Gilberto Antolínez championed a socially and politically committed art, whereas the painter Pascual Navarro Velásquez advocated an independent, libertarian art legitimized by its formal inquiries and entirely "devoid of dogma." 11 Intellectual artists such as Miguel Arroyo (who was educated in the United States) and César Rengifo (schooled in Mexico) discussed abstract art and realism at the Centro Venezolano Soviético de la Amistad (Center for Venezuelan-Soviet friendship) in 1948.

The 1950s was the defining decade for Venezuelan modernism, aided by a sharp rise in oil prices that was fed partly by the Korean War. During this period, Caracas's Ciudad Universitaria (the main university campus) was designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva, who conceived it as a great "synthesis of the arts"; the space incorporated the work of both Venezuelan and foreign artists associated with the avant-garde. There was a much-publicized controversy about abstract art involving artist Alejandro Otero—one of the founders of the renegade group Los Disidentes—and leftist writer Miguel Otero Silva in 1957. While Otero defended his own modernity-related rationalist avant-garde (which embraced such artists as Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, and Antoine Pevsner), Otero Silva accepted *only* the work of Pablo Picasso, and furthermore felt that modern artists' participation in the putative "synthesis of the arts"—as at the Ciudad Universitaria—was tantamount to a subordination of painting to architecture, a relegation common in the Middle Ages.

Reverón's death in 1954 and his retrospective exhibition at the Museo de Bellas Artes in 1955, with an accompanying text by Boulton, marked the end of one era and the dawn of a new one.

### from word to image

The time was ripe for a new proponent of Venezuelan art history to enter the scene.

Though Boulton was admitted as a member for life to the Academia Nacional de la Historia (National academy of history) in April 1959, 12 he was in fact more a connoisseur than a scholar. His induction to the academy of history—which he attributed to its members' generosity—was based on a single book: Los retratos de Bolívar (Portraits of Bolívar, 1956). Up to that point, Boulton had been known primarily as a photographer and less as an art critic; with this volume he demonstrated to what extent an image could serve as a record of history.

Boulton's education was typical of members of the upper middle class of the day: he had private tutors in Caracas and five years of secondary education at a Swiss boarding school, followed by a year studying business in England. What made this basic education unusual was his family—one of recent European extraction (from England and Italy) that nonetheless had deep Venezuelan roots and a heartfelt commitment to the arts. Among his ancestors, a great-grandfather was a painter, his great-uncle Arístides Rojas an art collector and chronicler, and his father a businessman and collector who was friends with many artists. His mother had been educated in France for twelve years. In the years during which Boulton lived in Europe, he went regularly to galleries and museums, accompanied by his parents when they visited him. As a young man, he also demonstrated his own artistic predilections, which he explored with a small camera given to him by an uncle.

When Boulton returned to Venezuela in 1928 at the age of twenty, he was surprised to encounter a burgeoning avant-garde-though, like all the independent cultural initiatives that arose under Gómez's dictatorial regime, it was having little public impact. But a new generation-which would become known as the "Generation of 1928" - was rising to challenge this dictatorship. At the beginning of the year a group of young intellectuals published the first and only issue of the journal Válvula, with a Cubist-inspired illustration on its cover and texts on Surrealism and Futurism in its pages. Among the writers featured in Válvula were Arturo Úslar Pietri, Miguel Otero Silva, Antonio Arráiz, José Antonio Ramos Sucre, Pedro Sotillo, Carlos Eduardo Frías, Fernando Paz Castillo, and José Nucete Sardi. During the ensuing Semana del Estudiante (Students' week), inflammatory anti-government speeches were made by university students-among them Raúl Leoni and Jóvito Villalba-bringing an end to a relatively quiet period in the country. The university was in for a painful trial: two hundred students, some of whom had collaborated on Válvula, were arrested and sent to prisons or forced labor. Boulton immediately aligned himself with this "Generation of 1928."

Other factors indicated that change was in the air in 1928. The young Carlos Raúl Villanueva received his architecture degree from the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and made his first visit to Venezuela to begin his career working for the government in Maracay, an important city in the center of the country, near Caracas. The following year, the distinctly regionalist novel *Doña Bárbara*, by Rómulo Gallegos, then a psychology teacher and the director of the Caracas Lycée, was published in Spain; this event buoyed many Venezuelans' hopes for the future.

Since the Círculo de Bellas Artes had formed in 1912, a rift between two positions had become apparent: one inward-looking, seeking a form of nationalistic expression (Martínez was the chief proponent of this stance) and the other open to the coexistence of currents from all parts of the globe (advocated by Semprum). Still, it was clear, even within the country's general climate of repression, that there was another Venezuela striving to express itself culturally.

In 1931, a private institution for the promotion of culture was established in the capital: the Ateneo de Caracas. Here, the educated bourgeoisie paid tribute to music, theater, intellectual pursuits, and the fine arts. It was on the occasion of a Venezuelan art show at the Ateneo in 1933 that the twenty-fiveyear-old Boulton took his first steps as an art critic, with a review in the pages of El Universal. 13 (Because his family was well known, he used the pseudonym "Bruno Plá," based on the initials of his two last names, Boulton and Pietri.) Disregarding the Cuban writer José Martí's famous mandate that "one should not concern oneself with bad art," Boulton brazenly panned the works of the widely admired painters Manuel Cabré and Marcos Castillo, along with other pieces that he felt should simply not have been exhibited; he also stated flatly that Reverón and Narváez were the only interesting contemporary painters. His words invited a sharp response: a Basque journalist, Francisco de Villanueva de López y Uralde, defended Cabré and Castillo as accomplished artists, and asserted that Alejandro Colina's work at the Aborigen de Tacarigua park was an example to follow in terms of "authentic" Venezuelan art. 14

Boulton contributed writings (under the pen name Bernardo Pons) to Élite magazine in 1934, and in the following year (again as Bruno Plá) to *El ingenioso hidalgo*, where his text appeared alongside those of his friends Julián Padrón, Pedro Sotillo, and Úslar Pietri. This rather Europeanist and liberal journal was attacked by *La gaceta de América*, whose staff of writers included the leftist nationalists Inocente Palacios and Miguel Acosta Saignes.<sup>15</sup>

In tandem with his work as a critic, Boulton began organizing shows at the Ateneo de Caracas, to help Reverón and Narváez gain the attention of Venezuela's limited buying public. He organized a Reverón exhibition in 1934, which was a failure in terms of sales. According to a review by Padrón, Narváez's show in the same year garnered some nine hundred bolívars (despite Marcos Castillo's castigation of Narváez's painting as "naïve").

### from image to word

Boulton married Yolanda Delgado in 1937 (the couple received a set of bedroom furniture designed by their friend Narváez as a wedding gift), and they settled in Maracaibo. He spent his vacations traveling around western Venezuela with the Rolleiflex he had received from his cousin Úslar Pietri during a trip to Venice. Boulton's first photography exhibition took place at the Ateneo de Caracas in 1938, and it brought him wide recognition. Two years later, he traveled to New York and returned home with his first published book of photographs, *Imágenes del Occidente venezolano* (Images from the Venezuelan West), with texts by Padrón and Úslar Pietri. It was the first publication of its kind in Venezuela.

The country was undergoing huge and rapid transformations with the profits of the oil industry. Boulton photographed the new cityscape that arose with Villanueva's redevelopment of Caracas's El Silencio district between 1943 and 1945. In 1944, Boulton turned to the Isla de Margarita, where he had bought an old country house; his photographs of the island were shown at the Museo de Bellas Artes in 1944 to great acclaim. Around this time, Boulton befriended the painter Rafael Monasterios and took him along on one of his trips to the Andes so that Monasterios could paint landscapes while Boulton photographed them.

During Medina Angarita's presidency (1941–45), Boulton's cousin Úslar Pietri worked for various government ministries. In October 1944 a group of seventy-four intellectuals, including Boulton, penned a letter in defense of the "climate of total freedom in which all intellectual and artistic manifestations are gaining such a powerful momentum, which expresses the fruitful and creative will of this democratic government." Medina Angarita's liberal-democratic government came to an end in a civil-military coup on October 18, 1945, and was replaced with the Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno, led by Rómulo Betancourt. In 1948 Boulton showed a series of portraits of his intellectual friends at the Salón Planchart—all of them opposed to the incoming Gallegos regime—under the title 30 hombres para el 48 (30 men for 1948). At the end of that year, the much-reviled Gallegos government was ousted by yet another coup d'état.

Venezuelan politics affected every aspect of the country's cultural development. The government-sponsored folkloric traditions and ceremonies—always with nationalistic references to the regime—during the Semana de la Patria (Homeland week) celebrations. In 1950—the year General Carlos Delgado Chalbaud was assassinated—Boulton published his book *Los llanos de Páez* (Páez's plains), judged by Úslar Pietri to be a model geography and history manual. For this project, Boulton revisited the sites mentioned by José Antonio Páez in his 1867–69 autobiography, documenting in photographs the landscape of broad horizons and floodplains, as well as the *llaneros* at work and at leisure. In 1952—the year of Pérez Jiménez's electoral fraud—a new book appeared that marked the beginning of Boulton's documentary research into history: *La Margarita*. Here, his photographs of the Isla de Margarita were accompanied by his text describing his dogged research for obscure news items among old documents in the island's archives.

Boulton had made the transition from image to word. Just as he had investigated people and landscapes in his photographs, he investigated their roots in his writings.

After his work on Páez, it was natural that Boulton should choose Bolívar as the subject of his next project. His research, the undertaking of a man educated by and thoroughly engaged with images, began with the hero's famous portraits. Boulton first looked at the Venezuelan paintings, all of which were copies of works by artists from other countries; he then tracked down the original renderings, which more accurately represented the features of Bolívar as they changed over the course of his life. "El Libertador" had never been painted in life by a Venezuelan, but had posed for painters from Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia, where he had spent more time and where the arts had reached a more advanced stage of development.

In 1954, Manuel Pérez Vila came to work as Boulton's assistant; the presence of this Spanish scholar would be fundamentally important to Boulton's education as a historian. Pérez Vila had studied at the universities of Bordeaux and Toulouse and had been employed for five years at the Archivo de El Libertador (Bolívar archives). He would work for Alfredo Boulton and for the John Boulton Foundation over the course of twenty-seven years.

While Boulton was deeply involved with his documentary research, as a collector of art he also understood the importance of examining period painting on a formal level. During travels with his camera-which he now used to document works of art-he began to draw connections between the Venezuelan copies of Bolívar's portraits and the originals from which they derived, through an analysis of the paintings' imagery, which included comparing them to physical descriptions from the period. The results of his intensive research were collected in Los retratos de Bolívar, published in Venezuela in 1956-the first of Boulton's books to be produced in his homeland.

A year later, Boulton entrusted Marcel Floris with the design of an exhibition summing up his Bolívar research. The show opened in the Diego Ibarra square in Caracas and had a total attendance of more than thirty thousand people. Boulton then organized a similar show with the original portraits at the Museo Nacional in Bogotá. Critic Marta Traba's review of the show noted "a sense of pedagogy and of historical research."17

### criticism, curation, and research

As a critic, Boulton was very involved with the art of his period, helping and advising young artists, acquiring works for his collection, acting as a juror at the annual Salones Oficiales exhibitions, reviewing and organizing shows. As a historian, he undertook a thorough study of nineteenth-century Venezuelan art in search of faithful likenesses of Bolívar - an interest that led him to the paintings of Juan Lovera, many of which were scattered among several private collections. Boulton curated an exhibition of Lovera's work at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas in 1961; it was the first time that a Venezuelan artist of such a distant era had been featured in a major show. The exhibition came as a revelation to many about the substance and value of the nation's history.

For approximately eight years, Boulton focused his research on ecclesiastic archives, and uncovered a vast amount of information that helped to give form to the specter of Venezuela's colonial painting. How could the anonymous makers of so many paintings be identified? The Museo de Arte Colonial had been established at the Casa de Llaguno in 1942 to exhibit the collections of the Asociación Venezolana de Amigos del Arte Colonial. As a member of this association-with personal ties to some of the country's few serious collectors and antiquarians - Boulton had the opportunity to examine many colonial paintings closely; he measured them against information gleaned from estates as well as certificates of baptism, marriage, and death, as well as other documents. He examined the imagery on all levels-formal, stylistic, academic-and combined this examination with documentary research.

In the course of this study, Boulton happened upon a painting that was dated and signed by one Juan Pedro López, who had until then been identified simply as "El Caraqueño" (or alternately as "El pintor de los ángeles mofletudos": "The painter of chubby-cheeked angels"). In 1963, Boulton presented the first exhibition of López's work at the Museo de Bellas Artes—the preeminent site for important art events since its founding in 1938.

The first volume of Boulton's monumental three-part historical study of Venezuelan painting was published in 1964. Historia de la pintura en Venezuela: Época colonial (History of painting in Venezuela: Colonial period) was enthusiastically received; it also revealed to the Venezuelan public how much of their history had been overlooked. The country was just developing an anxious sense that its own artistic production was perhaps not of a level comparable to that of the Spanish vicerovalties, while other means of research – such as economic studies - showed that the mantuanos (people of Spanish heritage, sometimes with aristocratic titles, generally in possession of vast households) had made their fortunes in the cocoa trade in the eighteenth century. With thorough documentation, Boulton demonstrated that while many works of art had indeed been imported to Venezuela, others had been made within the country. Although the ravages of time, war, and above all ignorance and negligence had destroyed much of the work to which wills and inventories testified, those pieces that had been conserved must, Boulton insisted, be valued as evidence of Venezuela's important collective past.

The second volume of Boulton's study, *Historia de la pintura en Venezuela*: Época nacional, was published in 1968; it dealt with Venezuela's post-independence period. This book concluded his historical research, which spanned from the early nineteenth century (with Lovera) to the early twentieth (with the formation of the Círculo de Bellas Artes). It drew upon a wide variety of sources, from period newspapers and magazines to legal documents, public and private archives, and artists' personal correspondence. Boulton debunked many myths of the colonial period—including the attribution of certain folk works to "la mano esclava"—and shed new light on figures of the post-independence period, such as the academic artist Cristóbal Rojas, whose paintings—like Arturo Michelena's while they shared a studio—often depicted social miseries and destitution, and revealed a rebellious, tortured personality.

While Boulton's first volume had met with great acclaim, the second, which dealt with more recent art, was not so well received. Other critics, and the general reading public, were not satisfied with Boulton's use of the Círculo de Bellas Artes generation as the endpoint of his study. Many wished for him to go on to address truly contemporary art—but Boulton was reluctant to comply with a third volume, feeling that his own "scientific" research went only as far as the 1940s with the Círculo de Bellas Artes. Boulton's rebuttals to various critical reviews<sup>18</sup> were relatively unconvincing, in arguments on such topics as the complexity of art practice after Picasso, the oil industry's transformation of the Venezuelan lifestyle, and the diversification of art practice after World War I. It would seem that Boulton lacked the temporal distance from which to venture an objective, well-grounded assessment.

In the four years between the publication of the first and second volumes of his *Historia de la pintura en Venezuela*, Boulton produced three monographs that presaged his future focus: that is, in-depth studies of individual

artists. He became engrossed first in the work of Camille Pissarro, who was born in the West Indies and spent time in Venezuela as a young man before moving to France. In Boulton's investigations into the nineteenth century, he had placed much focus on "traveling" artists, and Pissarro was itinerant for much of his early life. Boulton took a particular interest in the artist's drawings and watercolors that were informed by his time in Caracas. Boulton's second monograph was on Armando Reverón, whom Boulton knew and with whom he was in touch up until the artist's death in 1954. Boulton organized an exhibition featuring four hundred of Reverón's works at the Museo de Bellas Artes in 1955, and a smaller selection that traveled to various cities in the United States. The last of Boulton's three monographs was on Alejandro Otero, whose work in 1966 was at the forefront of kinetic art.

### the creation of hegemony

It is not surprising that Boulton's first monograph on Otero was published in 1966 by the country's Oficina Central de Information (Central office of information). The democratic period, beginning in 1958, was characterized by high oil revenues and technological advances (highways, iron- and steelworks, high-rise buildings), alternating political powers, and great respect for private capital; with these advances, the new democratic period managed to stanch old wounds. After Venezuela's Social Democratic party—which reintroduced militarism to the country—had overthrown the last dictatorship and faced leftist insurgents (inspired by the Cuban Revolution), those social sectors the party had once spurned for being liberal and bourgeois were now welcomed as supporters of the new regime. This political situation suited Boulton's own aspirations, and as for Otero, he was fully identified with the democratic regime.

The Venezuelan government had much to gain in spreading the word abroad about artists such as Otero and Jesús Rafael Soto, who garnered new prestige for the nation's culture. The Venezuela Pavilion at the 1967 World's Fair in Montreal was a minimalist construction designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva. Its interior featured Soto's ephemeral environment *Volume suspendu* (Suspended volume, 1967). The presence of these two Venezuelan artists at world-class events became increasingly common. Soto's inclusion in President Rafael Caldera's retinue during the president's first trans-American trip in 1971 was indicative of the new status artists had achieved in Venezuela. Undoubtedly, the international success of kinetic art kindled a sense of national pride, and the government was sensible enough to support projects that allowed these artists to make monumental works in Venezuela itself.

But kinetic art was of course not the only genre in Venezuela in the 1960s. New *art informel* and neo-figurative tendencies played parts in expressing the malaise and contradictions of a democratic system that had to defend itself against guerrilla movements triggered by the Cuban Revolution.

It was in this context that the debate arose over Boulton's third volume of historical research, *Historia de la pintura en Venezuela: Época contemporánea* (History of painting in Venezuela: Contemporary period), published in 1972. With the second volume in his trilogy, some readers had felt that Boulton underplayed the importance of such figures as Franco-Venezuelan

Emilio Boggio (whom he called an "outdated Impressionist") and Marcos Castillo (although Boulton adopted a somewhat more favorable view of Castillo in this third volume). For the most part, Boulton limited his study to those great figures that were, in his view, the outstandingly original artists of their generation. What he categorized as "contemporary" began with the Taller Libre de Arte in 1948 and the central members of Los Disidentes around 1950. He was criticized also for excluding foreign artists and disregarding social realism as well as the Informalist and neo-figurative trends. (It is likely that these movements' political and social underpinnings made Boulton feel uneasy about stating a negative opinion.) He claimed not to know of any outstanding foreign artists, though he acknowledged the importance of critics José Gómez Sicre from Cuba and Gaston Diehl from France, and the influence of Mexican artist José Luis Cuevas.

Boulton's central point was that art may be understood as a narrative, in which certain individuals are eminently worth mentioning for their unique contributions, or for best expressing the spirit of their time. Much of Boulton's thinking was influenced by Thomas Carlyle's historical approach and the importance he attached to heroes, and by Hegel's idealistic conception of the zeitgeist. In his earlier volumes Boulton had adroitly juggled the roles of "connoisseur" and rigorous researcher—tackling major and minor artists, locals and foreigners, and referencing a gamut of writers, from Renaissance authority Bernard Berenson to modern theoretician Pierre Francastel. In this third volume, turning to his own time and place, Boulton based his ideas largely on his own auctoritas.

The publication of this third volume coincided with Boulton's being awarded the Premio Nacional de Literatura (in the essay category) for the years 1969-71. It was a new phase in the country's democratic history, bringing a successful peace process, the end of guerrilla insurgencies, booming oil revenues, and new cultural policies that met with the intelligentsia's widespread support. This prosperity led to the foundation of a large number of museums, at a time when U.S.-influenced art movements were emerging (among them Pop art, Conceptual art, performance art, body art, and video art).

Boulton played a crucial role in the development and establishment of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Caracas. In the museum's impressive exhibition spaces, he had the opportunity to organize countless shows of his favorite artists, accompanied by substantial catalogues. The institution's professed "contemporary" mission was sometimes set aside to allow for Boulton-curated shows that might be more logically expected at the Galería de Arte Nacional: a collection of indigenous ceramics; works by a seventeenth-century religious painter known as "El Pintor del Tocuyo"; and the art of the self-taught painter Bárbaro Rivas.

In 1978 an article by Marta Traba appeared in the journal *Revista Medellin*, making spirited claims concerning Boulton's responsibility in the creation of what she saw as an "artistic hegemony" in Venezuela—that is, kinetic art. She labeled Boulton a "futurologist." For Traba, the work of such figures as Gego (Gertrude Goldschmidt), Harry Abend, and Gerd Leufert—artists of European origin, now residents of Caracas—was of far greater value than that of the kineticists, who, she felt, had crafted a rarefied experiment and transformed it

into a luxury object for a sophisticated elite. The environments they constructed fed the illusion of a technological society, she stated, without the "greatness of the structural pioneers." Kineticism monopolized recognition, commissions, and even scholarships, as if nothing else existed in the Venezuelan art world.

### final recognition and appraisal

In 1987, shortly before Boulton's eightieth birthday, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo organized an event in acknowledgment of his lifetime achievement. The president of the republic himself decorated Boulton with the highest of Venezuelan honors, the Orden del Libertador. The catalogue that accompanied this homage provides a wealth of information about Boulton's career. It features transcripts of a number of interviews he granted the press—including one titled "No le debo nada a nadie" (I do not owe anything to anyone)—that reveal a singular, multifaceted persona: a businessman (in the fields of transportation and insurance); a patron of the arts and sciences; a promoter of museums; a collector; a scholar of the colonial period and nineteenth century; an expert in the imagery of Bolívar, Páez, Sebastián Francisco de Miranda Rodríguez, Antonio José de Sucre, <sup>20</sup> and Manuela Sáenz; <sup>21</sup> and finally, a photographer of Venezuelan landscapes and people, of artists and intellectuals who were his friends, of native populations, and of indigenous works.

Even the most adamant critics of the 1970s had to admit that Boulton was an important and unique figure, and that in spite of certain mistakes and occasional class-conscious posturing, he indubitably deserved credit for what he had accomplished and was still accomplishing in his various fields of interest.

Boulton had the integrity and humility to recognize in the late 1980s that Carlos F. Duarte—who had delved into many of Boulton's chosen subjects—had notably improved upon his own earlier findings on Lovera. Boulton acknowledged the possibility that a portrait he had identified as depicting Sucre was not actually of the "hero of Ayacucho" (in view of claims and evidence presented by a great-great-grandnephew of Sucre's). Boulton did not live to realize that he had been the victim of a swindle: two portraits he had bought—a pastel of Bolívar supposedly made in Haiti, and another of Miranda, allegedly made in the United States—turned out to be forgeries, as did a miniature of Bolívar attributed to José María Espinosa, a work that Boulton had recommended to the Galería de Arte Nacional for acquisition. Ironically, he himself had spoken out against the unscrupulous trade in forgeries, especially of Reverón's works.

Boulton wished to be thought of as a researcher. He denied being a critic on more than one occasion—although he was in fact the president and founder of the Venezuelan chapter of the International Art Critics' Association, and had taken on all the tasks normally associated with the profession: reviewing and curating shows, working as a juror, penning catalogue texts and articles for magazines and newspapers, and writing artists' monographs. He also balked at the title "historian," although some of his books certainly meet all the requirements of historical treatises. When he did adopt the role of historian, he regarded his task as that of relating an artist's adventures; he was a narrator, ultimately allowing the artist to explain his concerns in his own words. (This might

be considered an act of modesty on Boulton's part, or a way of justifying the author's stance as mere chronicler.)

Boulton focused exclusively on painting, perhaps because he found in it a kinship to the photographic image as he understood it, with similar rules of composition, light, and framing. He dealt with sculpture only in exceptional cases—such as that of Narváez, who was originally a painter but more successful as a sculptor, in both his *criollista*<sup>22</sup> and abstract *nuevas formas* (new forms) phases. When speaking of the kinetic artists—Alejandro Otero, Jesús Rafael Soto, and Carlos Cruz-Diez—Boulton's critical language tended to give way to personal, descriptive account.

His work as a photographer was exceptional in its own right, but he wrote and spoke little about his photographs or the medium in general. Two exceptions are an article from 1952, in which he asks himself if photography can be considered art (his answer is yes), and a course he taught on the theory and aesthetics of photography at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello – but here he was careful to tailor his discussion of the trajectory of this medium's development in Venezuela, a trajectory in which he had played such a significant role.

In 1978 – the year of Traba's controversial article – the faculty of arts was founded at the Universidad Central de Venezuela. To this day, anyone conducting research in visual art will encounter the work of Boulton, now considered a "classic," especially when it comes to certain topics and artists. His œuvre has been complemented by the research and writings of new generations who have strived to fill the gaps and carry Boulton's investigations forward. We will remain indebted to his work for many years to come.

The author wishes to thank Simón Noriega and Lourdes Blanco for their critical revision of the manuscript.

Translated by Richard Moszca

### notes to the text

- Historian Ramón de la Plaza was a general in the Guerra Federal and the first director of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (1877). He died in 1886, at the age of fifty.
- Juan Lovera was one of the initiators of Venezuela's nationalist art, and is responsible for two classics of Venezuelan Republican art: El 19 de abril de 1810 (April 19, 1810) and El 5 de julio de 1811 (July 5, 1811).
- 3. José Antonio Páez was the chief commander of the Venezuelan independence army. He was considered the archetypal llanero leader, and played a central role in the country's history between 1821 and 1863. He was the first constitutional president of Venezuela after the unified territory of Great Colombia, established by Simón Bolívar, was split into separate countries in 1830.
- 4. De la Plaza also took a deep interest in music, and was a pioneer in writing about the importance of the Escuela de Chacao, the music school founded by Father Pedro Ramón Palacios y Sojo in Caracas in 1781, where a considerable number of composers and other musicians were educated in the late eighteenth century.
- Jesús Semprúm was a doctor, writer, journalist, and literary critic who collaborated regularly on the journal El cojo ilustrado from 1905 to 1915.
- 6. The Círculo de Bellas Artes was a group of young artists (painters, writers, musicians, and journalists) who, following the model of Madrid's Círculo de Bellas Artes (1880), sought to renew the way art was taught in Venezuela. It was formed during strikes against the Academia de Bellas Artes (1909) and its then-director Antonio Herrera Toro.
- Jesús Semprum, "El Círculo de Bellas Artes," speech delivered at the inauguration of the Círculo de Bellas Artes, September 1912, at the Teatro Calcaño in Caracas. In Visiones de Caracas y otros temas (Caracas: Corporación Venezolana de Fomento, 1969), p. 108.
   See Semprum's full speech in this volume, pp. 96-98.
- Leoncio Martínez was a journalist, caricaturist, art critic, and a founder of Fantoches magazine (1923). His 1912 manifesto "Ideas y propósitos: Palabras en la instalación del Círculo de Bellas Artes" ("Ideas and Aims: Some Words on the Establishment of the Círculo de Bellas Artes") is included in this volume, pp. 94-96.

- 9. In a 1920 article discussing the previous year's exhibitions, Planchart mentions several shows of works by foreign artists such as Emilio Boggio, Nicolas Ferdinandov, and Samys Mützner emphasizing the dearth of true Venezuelan painting. Planchart refused to acknowledge the academic tradition as endemically Venezuelan because of its French influence in both style and subject matter.
- 10. Alejandro Colina lived in various indigenous communities in western Venezuela for eight years. Two sculptures of indigenous figures and various archaeological motifs of his form part of the Indio del Tacarigua Plaza (Maracay, 1933); other well-known sculptures by Colina include María Lionza (1951) and El cacique Tiuna (Tiuna the cacique, 1951).
- Pascual Navarro Velásquez, "Arte sí... pero sin dogmas," El Nacional (Caracas), December 2, 1945; reprinted in Roldán Esteva-Grillet, Fuentes documentales y críticas de las artes plásticas en Venezuela: Siglos XIX y XX (Caracas: Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 1022-26.
- 12. Boulton was thus honored after presenting an essay on the imagery of Sebastián Francisco de Miranda Rodríguez (1750-1816), a Venezuelan military man and a forerunner of Venezuelan independence, who fought in the French Revolution and in Spanish campaigns during the American Revolutionary War.
- Alfredo Boulton (as "Bruno Plá"), "La pintura venezolana como valor internacional" ("Venezuelan Painting as International Value"), in El Universal (Caracas), August 20, 1933. The essay is included in this volume, pp. 107-10.
- 14. Francisco Villanueva de López y Uralde, "Hay arte venezolano?" El Heraldo (Caracas), September 5, 1933. On the other hand, the painter Marcos Castillo was offended by Boulton's criticism, and protested his dismissal of landscape in favor of the still life.
- 15. Over the years, curiously, a number of thinkers who were initially accused of being "pro-foreign" were eventually acknowledged as champions of a Venezuelan agenda, and the inverse happened as well: Inocente Palacios went on to become a promoter of international contemporary music festivals, an expert on Arnold Schönberg, and a collector of abstract art.
- 16. "Carta pública de los escritores y artistas al Presidente de la República," *El*

- Nacional (Caracas), October 7, 1944; reprinted in Esteva-Grillet, Fuentes documentales y críticas, p. 986.
- Marta Traba, "El verdadero rostro de Bolívar," El Tiempo (Bogotá), June 12, 1957; reprinted in Marta Traba (Edición del Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, Editorial Planeta, 1984), p. 154.
- The most important critiques of Boulton's book were penned by José Ratto-Ciarlo, Rafael Pineda, Marco Figueroa, José Antonio Rial, Luis Alfredo López Méndez, and José Nucete Sardi.
- Marta Traba, "Venezuela: cómo se forma una hegemonía artística," Revista Medellín, April 1978; reprinted in Marta Traba, p. 217.
- 20. Antonio José de Sucre y Alcalá was a Venezuelan military man, a hero of Latin American independence. Known as "the great marshal of Ayacucho," he was president of Peru and of Bolivia.

- 21. Manuela Sáenz was a revolutionary of Ecuadorian origin. The wife of English doctor James Thorne, she lived in Lima, the capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru, and developed an interest in politics. In 1822 she became Simón Bolívar's lover and followed him on his campaigns until his death.
- 22. Narváez's criollista period took place in the 1930s and '40s, when he focused on racial and social topics (mulattos, fishermen), which he depicted with stylized, geometric realism, inflected by Art Deco.

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