
COMMUNICATIONS

“ART AS A SOURCE FOR THE STUDY OF CENTRAL AMERICA, 1945–1975: AN EXPLORATORY ESSAY”:

A Response

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The article “Art as a Source for the Study of Central America, 1945–1975: An Exploratory Essay” (LARR 13, no. 1 [1978]:39–64), more than anything else, exposes the dangers of interdisciplinary studies. The danger in this case is Reber’s ignorance of standard methods of art historical inquiry, methodology and terminology. Her statements about style, technique, patronage, and the role of the art critic are imprecise and simplistic.

The basis for art historical studies is visual analysis, which involves a highly skilled, disciplined study of a work of art. It is from careful visual analysis and documentation that we arrive at conclusions about artistic influence, style, iconography, local traditions, national traditions and quality. These conclusions are then subjected to the principles of reasonable discourse as applied to the logic of formal (visual) relationships. Without this scholarly framework it is impossible to *prove* anything; even with this framework it is possible to *prove* very little.

Reber falls into the trap of illogical discourse repeatedly. She states, for example: “The fact that a Guatemalan artist is more influenced by Mexico City than by New York or Paris may indicate the international relations of Guatemala and most certainly its cultural connections” (pp. 40–41). If one can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that a Guatemalan artist was influenced by artists working in Mexico City, this fact proves *nothing* about international relations nor about

cultural relations. How can the experience of one, highly sensitive individual be projected as the experience of an entire country?

Reber claims further that “. . . an artist may write history through his art. Through the depiction of the past in paint rather than print, Mexican muralists such as Diego Rivera (1887–1959) and José Clemente Orozco have perfected the art of painting history” (p. 46). This is nonsense. Rivera and Orozco used the images of historical persons in their murals—Cortés, Hidalgo, Juárez, Zapata—but their interpretations are symbolic and idealized, not portrayals of historical facts.

Reber states (p. 42) that the influence of Cubism, Expressionism, Pop art and Op art are indications of “European” and “North American” influence, an artistic internationalism. She states (p. 53), apparently quoting Traba, that the nationalization of Pop art is one of the reactions “. . . against national cultural dependence on North America.” We are led to understand from this that an international style, Pop art, is nationalized. This, then, is an acceptance rather than a rejection of foreign style.

It is lamentable that art historical studies, which are well suited to interdisciplinary investigations, are not available in all areas of Latin American art. We are attempting to remedy this situation to some extent by preparing a multi-volume *Handbook of Latin American Art*, a project which is now in the planning stage. Several art historians are presently cooperating with scholars in other disciplines and we look forward to interesting results. In the meantime, the convenience of generalizations based on a lack of knowledge is no substitute for careful scholarship.