

Argentine Cultural Identity - Its Graphic Evolution

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The *conquistadores'* attack against natives, colonisation and the fights for independence have naturally been transferred to every form of artistic expression in our Latin America. The clash of cultures must still fight its hardest battle, and that is against globalisation. The speed of change and the dissolution of boundaries between countries and identities force us to be in the presence of cultures alien to our tradition. Everything leads us to re-thinking our past in order to understand and plan a future of dignity and goodwill.

In this context, Argentine history is somewhat different to the rest of the countries in the region. The cultures here were simple and widely spread, which helped Spanish domination. On the one hand, there is the extermination of native races, on the other, a natural Hispanic influence which finds not much resistance, and in the third place, the problem of half-breeding, a matter to be considered.

Immigration at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries brings in individuals of diverse nationalities; in the political sphere, there is the beginning of labor movements.

From the artistic point of view, many of those born in the area look for new horizons abroad: mainly Rome, Florence and Paris, the latter becomes the *Mecca* of Argentinians. The influence becomes undeniable: in clothes, in the urban landscape, in building. The idea of a defined identity fades. The links with Europe only deepen the foreign-ising aims of the aristocratic classes.

What exactly is nationalism: boundaries? a common language? shared historical experience? Or is it associated with elements such as common goals, faith, spirit, native art?

Therefore, it is not strange that many artists go to Europe to recapture the source of inspiration of their ancestors, and use themes foreign to our tradition. The tendency is obviously towards what is foreign, except on those occasions in which an artist becomes the "Spokesman" of a native reality and we can specifically speak about A. Berni (Honour Prize in Engraving. Venice Biennial, 1962).

All those who travel, once they return, start creating their own spaces in their own homeland. Towards the fifties, a new tendency begins to enrich the local panorama. In Argentina, there are changes which will transform the direction of graphics. Many artists search for self-expression in engraving. New techniques and innovative elements are introduced. The International Circuits start and also new generations of artists who, with the present time technology, give life to a new "End-of-the-Century Graphics.



The problem of identity, which is under debate in Latin American countries at present, has old roots and particular characteristics in each one of these countries. It starts with the arrival of the Spaniards and Portuguese to the Americas, then continues with the wars of independence fought over a hundred and fifty years ago, and comes up to the present time.

This "odyssey", which starts with the meeting of the European man with the natives who inhabited the territory of the Americas, bringing about a real clash of cultures, has not finished yet, and it is perhaps getting ready to fight its hardest battle against the so called globalisation, a phenomenon which involves almost all the countries in the world, and which poses a real challenge to humankind on the threshold of the third millenium.

Now, more than ever before, it is necessary to appeal to particular values and beliefs in order to face the vacuum produced by the dissolution of boundaries and the consequently widening spaces, the speed of changes and the constant presence of cultural forms alien to our tradition. Nevertheless, those who do not know the past cannot understand the present, and not even dream of the future. It is therefore the right time to walk together through our History in order to reach the present and project ourselves into a future of dignity and goodwill involving all the people on Earth.

The Argentine history is notably different from the rest of the countries in the region. In the first place, when the Spaniards arrived at our shores, the primitive inhabitants of the territory had not reached a level of civilisation comparable with that of the "Incas" in Peru, or that of the "Mayas" and "Aztecs" in Mexico. They belonged to very simple and widely apart cultures, that did not offer strong opposition to the white man, who did not take long to overcome them and even expel them from their own domains. In spite of all this, it is impossible to ignore the influence of this sector in the making of our identity.

On the second term, the action of the Spanish crown representatives during the time of the conquest, and then during the time of the colony, and even well advanced the 19th century, suggests a reality of undeniable influence through more than two hundred years. This colonial experience, partly rescued by collective memory, defines many of the features of our culture. The re-assessment of this root, though belated because it is only performed during our century, opens new roads for research and study of the local artistic production.

Parallel to what has been mentioned above, there is a slow and irregular process of half-breeding which involves not only the man in the country-side but those in towns and villages as well, producing in its creative aspects certain genuine forms which translate the encounter of different spiritual worlds. In other regions of the Americas this half-breeding current reaches wide dissemination, specially due to the activity developed by churches and convents, which expresses the religious fusion of the time.

Finally, towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, a great migration movement brings to our port Italians, Spaniards, French, German, Greek and Turkish among others. This means a very rapid increase in population, which rises from four million in 1895 to eight million people in 1914. Argentina, turned into producer and exporter of meat, hides and grains, sets as its goal peopling its huge territory, but this is only partly achieved because foreigners settle in and around the capital, producing the overcrowding so common in large cities, and the resulting lack of employment for many of them. This, together with the presence of anarchists from different parts of Italy, starts a series of workers' movements, where men and women participate to defend their jobs.

From the point of view of art, at the beginning of the 19th century Argentina becomes importer of European artists, who are in charge of planting the first seeds, becoming at the same time models for the coming generations. On the other hand, during the second half of the century, many of the artists born in the Argentine territory, after studying with a European master in the country, and feeling they are not able to complete their formation in Buenos Aires, travel to Europe looking for new horizons for their vocation.

Rome, Florence and Paris are the cities most widely visited by these artists, with Paris becoming the "Mecca" for the Argentinians in the last decades of the century. From there comes what, especially the "porteño" (native of a city-cum-port) admires: fashion, customs, and art. And this will acquire a deeper meaning when, with the passing of time, the influence is not only felt in clothing and home decoration, but in building and public squares. Many of the constructions of the time, either public or

private, show Frenchified features which lend the urban landscape a European character.

Something similar happens in connection with architecture, in which a survival of Italian models can be observed. These classical forms, which are reproduced in private homes and government buildings such as the *Congress* follow the designs of architects and artists of Italian origin. Bearing in mind the way these tendencies are articulated to give the city its characteristics, it is possible to say that Buenos Aires, capital of our extended territory, appears as an "icon" to the foreignising aspirations of the ruling classes.

Natives, Spaniards, half-breeds, together with Italians, English, French and Germans, make up the cultural substratum of the present-time Argentina. The character of multiple heir makes difficult any type of enterprise related to the study of artistic identity. In relation to the rest of the Latin American countries, there are some authors who have made the idea of identity derive from that of nationalism because, as Boyd Shafer states "nationalism is the instrument through which man retains his identity and satisfies his expectations as regards individual necessities such as safety, protection, etc."

But, what exactly is nationalism? Territorial boundaries? a common language? shared historical experience? or is it associated with elements such as common goals, faith, spirit? In principle, I share the encompassing idea which involves all and each of these concepts although, in the case of Argentina, there are particular signs which complicate the panorama. To the long period of domination, half-breeding and the migration wave of the end of 19th century, there is also the influence, coming through the government, of the ruling classes which devise a nationality with their eyes set in Europe.

It is not unusual that even in our century many artists still go to Europe to drink from the source of inspiration their ancestors did, and they use in their work themes and models foreign to our tradition. For that reason, the foreignising tendency which is present in the artistic production of our country, is only interrupted occasionally when an artist becomes the spokesman of a reality which is our own. This is specifically the case of painter and engraver Antonio Berni (1905-1981), who in 1962 receives an international award for Argentina at the Venice Biennial, with a body of work which shows his preoccupation about the dispossessed classes, centred in the figure of Juanito Laguna, a character he created.



Berni was born in the city of Rosario, and shows artistic conditions while still very young. In 1925, with a Fellowship from the Jockey Club of his home town, he travels first to Spain and then to Paris, where he studies with the lesser cubists André Lhote and Othon Friesz, very much in fashion at the time, and becomes connected with the surrealist movement through the poet Louis Aragon. In 1930, he returns to the country and once he comes in contact with the reality of his homeland, he very soon forgets what was learnt in Europe and expresses his social concern in his work, concern which develops in him a great admiration for the Mexican muralists. In 1933 he works together with Siqueiros in a mural both paint in a private home in the province of Buenos Aires.

For some authors, this form of social realism he develops in his paintings admits foreign influences, such as Picasso's in his communist stage, and that of artists André Fougeron and Boris Taslitzky, both identified with the French Communist Party. Nevertheless, in the sixties he defines his own artistic personality with the creation of two characters, Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel, whose misfortunes he narrates, rendering all the pain and misery which invade the existence of the lower layers of society.

The first one is a boy who lives as an outcast, in an area where industrial waste is part of the daily landscape, polluting the environment and the activity of the inhabitants. Berni takes advantage of this situation to include any type of refuse material in his works, introducing the viewer into a real but at the same time magic world, which expresses the peculiar vision of the artist of this reality. As regards the second character, this is a prostitute, a controversial figure almost always connected with decadent aspects of society, who generates more rejection than admiration in the audience. Nevertheless, in his repeated treatment of the theme, Berni produces an original angle, originated in the use of resources which allow him to create an atmosphere, in between the intimist and the grotesque, that attracts the viewer.

Lace, different textures and certain symbolic elements, define the pattern of the images, in engravings as much as in paintings, which tell us about Ramona Montiel. Her presence becomes familiar through a number of anecdotes that summarise her life from the plastic point of view: *Ramona, adolescent; Ramona, seamstress; The kiss; Ramona's spiritual friend; Ramona and the countryside*, etc. These are not directed only to the formal aspects of the work, but make an actual commitment to reality, with the surroundings. Hence, the originality of the artist, who is able to connect his concern for the environment with kindred aesthetics. The theme and the use Berni makes of certain resources and materials, such as collage and gauffering, bear witness to his intense search.

In connection with Berni's work, which defines our cultural identity, I will refer to the Argentine graphics and the changes operated in the last fifty years.

From the beginning of the 20th century the latest currents in European art start spreading in Latin America. Many Argentine artists go to Europe in search of information and training. On their return, they bring a cultural load that allows them to create novel expressions within the local tradition, which nevertheless retains its own weight.

Around the fifties a new influence enriches the panorama of our graphics. The United States, through Pratt's Institute, the Tamarind Institute and Friedlander's workshop, start to lead the path of contemporary graphics. In 1964 there is a painting, sculpture and engraving exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where artists such as David Hockney, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg take part, and which signals the renaissance of the engraving.

At the same time in Argentina there are some changes which definitively transform the direction of graphics. Different types of engraved reliefs without colour, gauffering, clippings, and the mingling of all of them, establish a model to be followed by the younger artists.

In Paris, Argentine artist Rodolfo Krasno introduces the manufacturing of white paper as an original element, in something he calls neo-engraving, while in Buenos Aires the activity is centred around the Engraving Club, the Museum of Engraving (which became national in 1983) and Alfredo de Vicenzo's workshop, which resumes the characteristics of Hayter's Workshop 17. The First American Graphics Biennial, which took place in Chile in 1963, the Latin American Exhibition of Drawings and Engravings, which took place in Venezuela in 1967 and the First San Juan de Puerto Rico and the Caribbean Biennial in 1970 bring us to the seventies during which the technological contribution of photography, photo-engraving and xerography and later on the computer, help in the birth of Experimental Graphics, in whose workshop artists belonging to the so called mid-generation work to emphasise the changes produced during the previous decade, and which consist of the valuing of the support and the social character of the art of engraving.

Finally, a third generation, between the eighties and nineties uses toner transference, carborundum, solar plaques (non-toxic engravings), and digital engraving, thus achieving more expression of the artistic object. This is the beginning of "the Group of the Six" who try to find new solutions to old problems in engraving, using the different techniques and valuing resources and materials in an even form.

The changes effected in the last years are also shown in the production of the artist's book which, as instrument of expression and communication, reaches the public to spread an aesthetics always renewed.

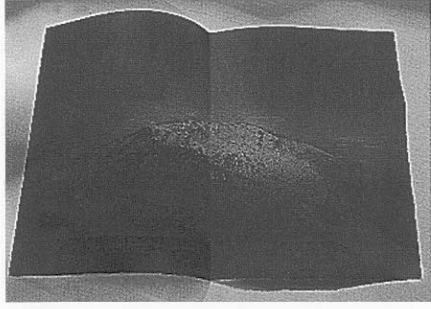
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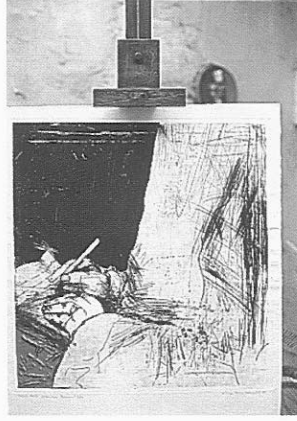
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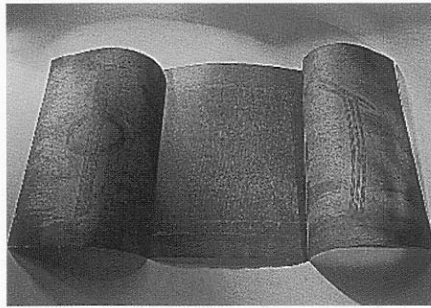
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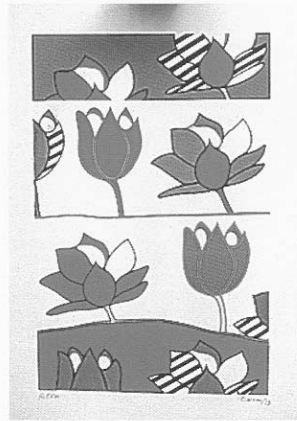
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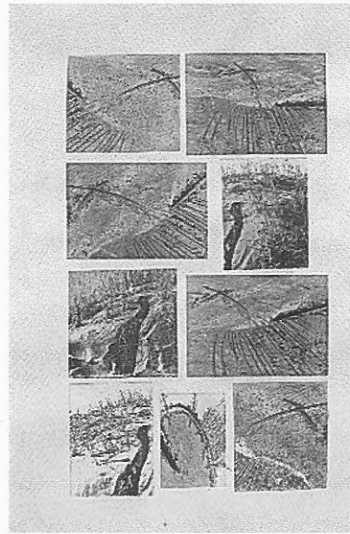
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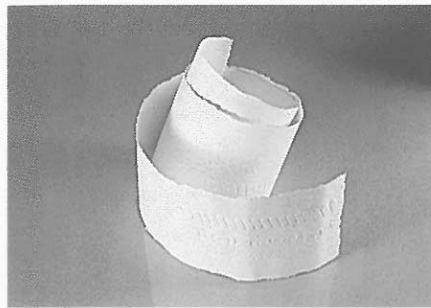
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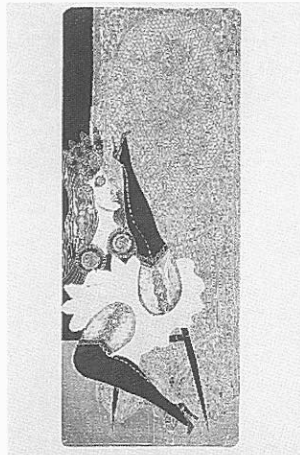
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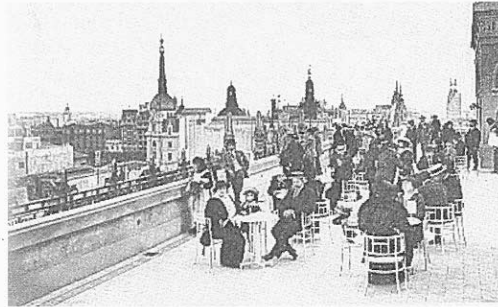
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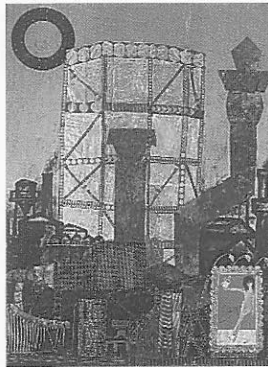
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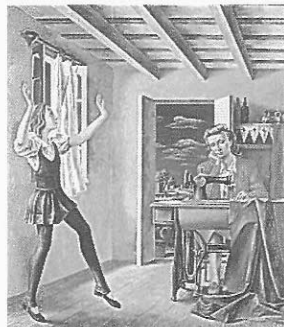
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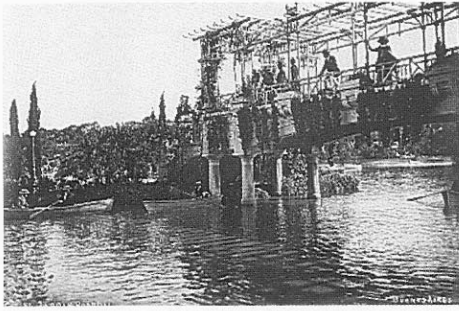
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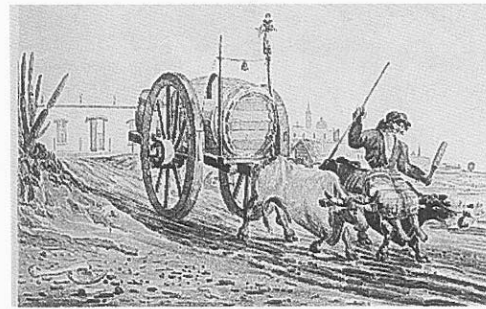
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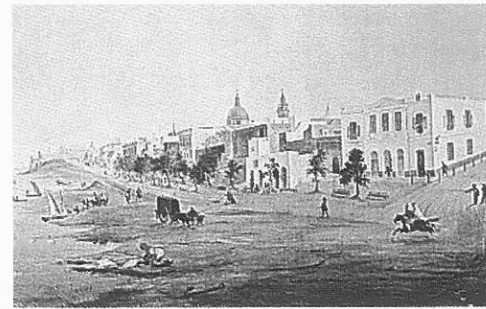
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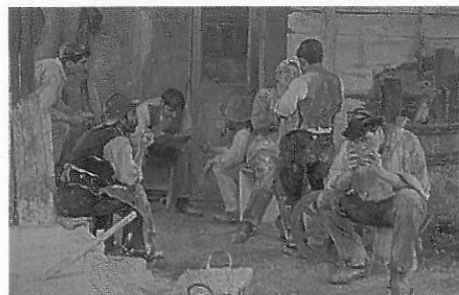
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