

The Pan-American Union and the São Paulo Biennial (1955-67) Geopolitical Arrangements in Defense of Modern Art

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Abstract The representations of the Pan-American Union in seven editions of the São Paulo Biennial (1955-67) emphasize its geopolitical bias and the plots that governed the choices of artists and works. The initiative was coordinated by José Gómez Sicre, a Cuban living in the United States who was head of the Visual Arts Section of the Pan-American Union, linked to the Organization of American States (OAS), from 1948 to 1976. During the height of his tenure, in the Cold War years (1950-60), Sicre organized ten annual exhibitions of Latin American art (solo and group) at the Pan-American Union's headquarters in Washington, D.C., as well as promoting the touring of some of these exhibitions throughout the region. At the same time, taking his own ideal of modern Latin American art as a reference, he took the initial steps towards setting up the current Art Museum of the Americas (formerly the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America), incorporating works by the artists he protected. This essay highlights some of the awards won by the artists supported by Sicre and reflect on the impact of their work on the Brazilian and international art scene of the period, to reveal geopolitical plots in defense of modern art.

Keywords São Paulo Biennial. Francisco Matarazzo. Pan-American Union. José Gómez Sicre. America.

The São Paulo Biennial, founded in 1951 by the Italian-Brazilian industrialist Francisco Matarazzo, had a significant impact on the cultural life of Brazil, furthering an appreciation for modern art among local audiences. It also put the city of São Paulo on the map of the major international exhibitions in the post-war years, giving it a special place in the Americas. The Biennial facilitated an unprecedented movement of artworks, artists, and cultural agents in Brazil and Latin America, speeding up the flow of information and trends and fostering stronger connections between countries on the continent. Furthermore, it boosted the development of professional and social networks and transnational interests, which were reflected in the selection of artists, curators, and judges and the awards at the event. This led to a significant reorganization of the art systems in the region.

The participation of renowned cultural agents (art critics, art historians, curators, museum directors, representatives of international artistic associations, gallerists, etc.) seemed essential for ensuring the success and recognition of the São Paulo Biennial abroad in its first decade of activity, and this strategy was going to be replicated by other similar regional shows in the 1960s (Giunta 2004, 275).¹ These agents could support the much-desired process of promoting local artistic production internationally, writing positively about what they saw or advising on acquiring artworks for private and public collections or museums. At the same time, they left their mark on the local scene, influencing awards and sparking discussions that reflected the hegemonic cultural centers. The mobility of a significant contingent of artists, curators, critics, jurors, as well as art dealers and collectors, produced clashes, associations, and disputes that made evident the contradictions embedded in local, regional, and international categories in a world shaped by geopolitical divisions, economic motivations, and intricate power dynamics.

Some names stand out for their far-reaching presence and impact in the Latin American art scene at the time, including the Argentinean critic and art historian Jorge Romero Brest (1905-1989), who directed the Torcuato di Tella Institute in the 1960s, the also Argentinean Marta Traba (1930-1983) who settled in Colombia, and was the first director of the Museum of Modern Art of Bogotá, before leaving to Venezuela, the French critic Pierre Restany (1930-2003), who wrote extensively about Brazilian and Argentinean art, and the Cuban, based in the USA, José Gómez Sicre (1916-1991). This was by no means a group of friends or professional colleagues who shared the same points of view on the art of their time, but they have crossed paths on several occasions and sometimes collaborated. Furthermore, they all championed modern/contemporary art and praised the potential of art produced in Latin America. They would regularly visit Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s to follow the São Paulo Biennial, acting as jurors, commissioners, or art critics.

José Gómez Sicre, the subject of my paper, actively contributed to the expansion of the Latin American art scene during the Cold War and directly influenced the São Paulo Biennial. This is corroborated by the various letters he exchanged with the event organizers since January 1951, when he wrote to Lourival Gomes Machado, Artistic Director of the 1st São Paulo Biennial, avowing his enthusiasm for the show and committing to its promotion. This official correspondence initiated an institutional relationship that would be consolidated with the increasing participation of Gómez Sicre in the Biennial. His letters to Arturo Profili, General Secretary of the show during the 1950s, became more friendly and casual over the years, and they abandoned English as the official language and wrote to each other in Portuguese and Spanish. Still, since their first exchanges, Gómez Sicre hasn't slowed away from advising about the countries and artists the Biennial should invite and the people and institutions it should contact. In a letter dated 2 December 1952, he requested a different attitude toward Latin American countries on the part of the representatives of the Biennial, suggesting the show should put more emphasis on the art of the hemisphere and be a Pan-American

¹ In commenting on the Cordoba Biennial, for instance, Andrea Giunta asserts that "it was fundamental that prestigious figures from the international circuit could appreciate *in situ* what the country was doing".

manifestation. He asks Profili if he does not think that presenting the same panorama of European art of well-recognized masters is duplicating other similar events in Europe. I feel strongly, he states,

that if little more attention was given to the American countries, the Biennial would have a flavour more of its own and would serve to spread knowledge and appreciation of the art of the Americas and to increase the prestige of our nations.²

A few months later, on 4 February 1953, he recommended the Biennial should make the invitations privately, directly, to artists or groups of artists, without the intervention of official agencies, and thus better and more appropriate representations would result. Ironically, he declares in the sequence that he could suggest several names, not only from Cuba or Guatemala, but from Venezuela, Peru, Haiti, and Colombia, “which would give a good impression and could compete on an equal basis with the European artists”.³

Gómez Sicre’s suggestions were well received by the representatives of the São Paulo Biennial, who thanked and praised him for his indispensable cooperation. Profili wrote on 2 April 1953:

Your suggestions, dear friend Mr. Gómez Sicre, show something more than your sympathy with the Biennial. They show the nobility of your work, the intelligence, and the understanding with which you consider it and carry it out. To work with you is a sincere satisfaction to me and my collaborators.⁴

Five years later, as preparations for the 5th Biennial were underway, Profili continued to seek Gómez Sicre’s assistance. On 4 October 1958, he wrote:

Start now by suggesting the names you think are appropriate for each country. The Biennial has already started to establish direct contact with official entities, so the names you suggest could already be included. [...] Write to us soon with your suggestions, including the people who head the official entities with whom we could deal directly.⁵

In this same letter, Profili declared that he would get the Biennial Board to

2 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 2 December 1952.

3 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 4 February 1953. It is important to point out that Gómez Sicre rejected the idea of having special prizes for American countries, believing they could compete on their merit with the European countries.

4 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from Arturo Profili to José Gómez Sicre, 2 April 1953. To the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins, who at the time was traveling abroad making contacts for the 2nd Biennial in the name of the organizers of the show, Profili stated that “Gomez Sicre, with his Pan-American Union, can, if he wants to, alone, secure the participation of eighteen Pan-American states in our II Biennial, especially since he is a man who can really do it, due to his prestige and his sensitivity”: Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from Arturo Profili to Maria Martins, 16 December 1952.

5 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from Arturo Profili to José Gómez Sicre, 4 October 1958.

include Gómez Sicre on the International Jury, especially considering his presence as an official witness for the Latin American countries. Based on the consulted documents, it can be assumed that during Profili's tenure as secretary, Gómez Sicre became an informal advisor on Latin American affairs to the São Paulo Biennial and tried to promote his institutional arts agenda for the region.⁶

He played a key role in getting some countries to participate in the show by mediating negotiations with authorities and entities and ensuring their commitment. He was closely involved in these negotiations throughout the first decade of the Biennial and received detailed reports from Profili on their progress. His approach to Haiti's participation is a good example of his methods. After Haiti's presentation in the 1st São Paulo Biennial, he advised that connections should be made with the Centre d'Art of Port-au-Prince instead of the Foyer des Arts Plastiques, which had overseen the 1951 showcase, if they wanted to feature authentic Haitian primitive artists. As Bruno Pinheiro has pointed out, the Centre had numerous supporters among foreign players from the international art world and its absence in the 1951 negotiations generated comments among critics who expected to see works that had already been consolidated by international art networks (Pinheiro 2023, 48).⁷ Gómez Sicre had a close relationship with its manager, the American painter Dewitt Peters, after he visited the Centre in 1944, and they collaborated on a few occasions. In July 1956, commenting about the forthcoming Biennial with Profili, he declared that:

As for Haiti, I think there won't be much of a problem. The point is that if you ask only for paintings and sculptures of primitive artists, you will get an excellent result. If you ask for everything, you will have the intervention of a Society called Le Foyer des Arts Plastiques, whose members are second and third-class artists. To obtain a good set of important works, you must limit the submission to the creators represented by Le Centre d'Art. Its Director is Diwitt Peters, with whom I am always in contact, and I can help you and help him to ensure that what is sent is of first class. You must deal with this problem clearly, otherwise you will fall into the trap of bureaucracy.⁸

Gómez Sicre's influence on the artistic and cultural scenes in the post-war United States and Latin America has been the subject of recent examination by art historians and visual art researchers. They have aimed to unravel the intricacies of a complex web of cultural projects, personal and diplomatic relations, and corporate and political interests. These researchers include Claire F. Fox, author of the first in-depth study about the subject, Alejandro Anreus, Michael Wellen, Alessandro Armato, and Ivonne Pini. They all

6 I have conducted in-depth research at the Wanda Svevo Historical Archive/São Paulo Biennial Foundation, examining numerous correspondences between Gómez Sicre and the Biennial's representatives. Additionally, I have analyzed Gómez Sicre's papers at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas at Austin. The archival materials reveal the significance of his professional connections, personal interactions, and engagements related to some of the Biennial awards.

7 See also, from the same author, Pinheiro 2022.

8 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 25 July 1956.

emphasize the significance of Gómez Sicre's actions, at least until the late 1960s, in promoting a concept of Latin American modern art that could be readily accepted and included in the canon endorsed by major US art institutions of that time.

Gómez Sicre was the head of the Visual Arts Section of the Pan-American Union (PAU), the secretariat of the Organization of American States (OAS), from 1948 until 1976. That year, he became the director of the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America, connected to the OAS, a position he held until his retirement in 1983.⁹ During the Cold War (the 1950s-60s), he organized up to ten annual exhibitions of Latin American art at the Pan-American Union Headquarters in Washington, D.C., some of them of young Brazilian artists.¹⁰ In many cases, these exhibitions were the first solo shows of these artists in the United States and could be a turning point in their careers.¹¹ He also promoted continental tours of some of these exhibitions. Likewise, he gave support and consultancy to larger-sized exhibitions of Latin American art inside and outside the United States, believing in the possibility of creating international art centers other than Paris and strengthening intra-Latin American solidarity.

Furthermore, Gómez Sicre coordinated at close quarters the editions of the Pan-American Union's *Boletín de Artes Visuales* (Bulletin of Visual Arts), active between 1957 and 1973.¹² In his constant editorials for the bulletin, Gómez Sicre "militated against nationalism and mediocrity in the arts and argued in favor of free trade, Latin American cultural pride, and aesthetic quality" (Fox 2013, 4-5). Also noteworthy is the fact that he authored several articles in US and Latin American newspapers and magazines and acted as an unofficial consultant to US museum directors regarding the acquisition of Latin American artworks for their collections. At the same time, drawing on his ideal of Latin American art, he took the first steps towards building the collection of what is now the Art Museum of the Americas (formerly Museum

9 Gómez Sicre's relationship with the Pan-American Union began in 1946 when he was hired as an expert in arts to work at the Division of Intellectual Cooperation, under the supervision of Mexican Concha Romero James (1900-1987). In 1948, the Organization of American States (OAS) was established as the supreme body of the inter-American system of governance. The name of its predecessor organization, the Pan-American Union, was retained to refer to the location of the OAS General Secretariat in Washington, D.C. Despite the establishment of the OAS, the Visual Arts Division continued to use the old name, Pan-American Union, in official correspondence. The Visual Arts Section became the Visual Arts Division in 1961.

10 The Brazilian artists whose works were exhibited at the Pan-American Union Headquarters included: Roberto Burle-Marx (May to June 1954, traveling exhibition); Ivan Serpa (August to September 1954); Fayga Ostrower and Arthur Luiz Piza (September 1955, joint exhibition); Aloísio Magalhães (December 1956 to January 1957); Aldemir Martins (January to February 1958); Carybe (October to November 1958); Maria Bonomi (January to February 1959); Iberê Camargo (March 1959); Antonio Henrique Amaral (April to May 1959); Marcelo Grassmann (July 1960); Maria Helena Andrés (March to April 1961); Roberto de Lamônica (September to October 1961); Manabu Mabe (May to June 1962); Abraham Palatnik (July 1965); Wega Nery (January to February 1967); Tomie Ohtake (April to May 1968); Sonia Ebling (November to December 1968); Alberto Teixeira (September to October 1969): cf. Sanjurjo 1997.

11 Among the most well-known artists who had their first US solo shows at the Pan-American Union are Fernando Botero and Alejandro Obregón from Colombia, José Luis Cuevas from Mexico, Ernesto Deira and Raquel Forner from Argentina and Fernando de Szyszlo from Peru.

12 The *Boletín de Artes Visuales* succeeded the *Boletín de Música y Artes Visuales*, created by Charles Seeger in 1950. Seeger was a musician and composer and worked at the PAU from 1935 to 1953.

of Modern Art of Latin America), located in Washington, D.C., incorporating works of the artists he exhibited or protected.¹³

Alfred Barr Jr., the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), was undoubtedly one of the most significant influences on Gómez Sicre's understanding of modern art, which valued abstract (or semi-abstract) currents alongside so-called primitive or naïve art. Barr first met Gómez Sicre during a visit to Cuba in 1942 to acquire artworks for MoMA's emerging Latin American collection. Following that meeting, Barr recommended Gómez Sicre for a short-term fellowship to study in New York and enlisted his help in organizing the exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* at MoMA, which took place in 1944 and had a condensed version presented in other US locations as well as in Argentina. Barr was also the one who recommended Gómez Sicre for the position of director of the Visual Arts Section of the OAS.¹⁴

Gómez Sicre utilized the São Paulo Biennial to temporarily showcase the Latin American artists he admired and supported, intending to enhance their international reputation, but also

to increase his prestige [...] and, in general terms, to amplify the resonance of the main work he undertook since he joined the OAS in 1946: to promote and institutionalize, in Latin America, modern art of a 'formalist' tendency that would break away from the model, then already very weakened, of Mexican muralism. (Armato 2015, 33)

Gómez Sicre was indeed a strong critic of Mexican muralism, considering it an official and stale movement, overly didactic, and subordinate to political interests.¹⁵ He opposed socialist realism for the same reasons.

As Claire Fox has highlighted, Gómez Sicre moved within interconnected corporate, diplomatic, and governmental circles, exerting influence through a personal network of supportive critics, gallerists, curators, and the artists themselves. He argued for a "liberal internationalism" in which the cultural sphere is tied to multinational corporate interests and established his transnational curatorship projects on the principle of exchange and circulation of merchandise (Fox 2013).¹⁶ He exalted universalist values

13 The first donation received by the museum in 1949 was a painting by Brazilian artist Candido Portinari, *Return from the Fair*, 1940.

14 Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 3 June 1957. Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. In 1957, in a letter to Profili, Gómez Sicre openly suggested that Alfred H. Barr should participate in the 4th São Paulo Biennial jury. He stated that "there are few personalities in the world today who enjoy a better reputation for serenity and impartiality". Barr did indeed come to Brazil that year, invited by the representatives of the Biennial.

15 His tumultuous relationship with David Siqueiros contributed to his negative vision of Mexican muralism. Siqueiros, in turn, described Gómez Sicre in an interview in 1958 as an "agent of abstractionism".

16 In a 1962 editorial for the *Boletín de Artes Visuales*, Gómez Sicre highlighted the growing regional impact of private sponsorship in the arts, praising examples such as the Institute of Contemporary Art in Lima, the Center for Art and Letters in Montevideo, the Torcuato di Tella Foundation in Buenos Aires, various foundations in Venezuela, the Kaiser Industries in Argentina, which supported the Biennial of Córdoba, as well as Francisco Matarazzo. He placed particular emphasis on the American oil company Esso, which operated on a transnational scale; cf Gómez Sicre 1962b.

based on the ideals of freedom of expression, and artistic subjectivity. But she also observes that

his early intellectual formation did not augur his contemporary epitaph as a cold warrior for the arts. Indeed, in the 1940s, his political perspectives were more progressive than those of many of his contemporaries who went on to become revolutionary intellectuals.

In her opinion,

Gómez Sicre managed to survive the McCarthy era, only to emerge on the other side a cold warrior. [...] He debuted a vitriolic anticastrismo after the Revolution, and upon Cuba's expulsion from the OAS in 1962, he and a handful of other Cuban cultural workers became *de facto* representatives of their nation at the PAU. (Fox 2010, 90)

His connection with the São Paulo Biennial and the Brazilian art scene is just a small part of a wider range of activities in the US and Latin America. It should be analyzed in a broader context, where the OAS/PAU served as a hub promoting Pan-Americanist ideals as a strategy to counter communist influence in the region, especially after the Cuban Revolution.

In the 1960s, for instance, Gómez Sicre helped organize the Esso Salons for Young Artists, an inter-American event sponsored by the OAS and the Esso (Standard Oil) Company, aimed at artists under forty. The Esso Salons took place in countries where Esso had affiliates, including Brazil, Argentina, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Puerto Rico, and El Salvador. In El Salvador, the salon welcomed participation from all Central American citizens. Award-winning pieces from the various national salons would then compete in the final Salon, held at the Pan-American Union in Washington, D.C., in 1965. He also assisted in organizing the Córdoba Biennial and served on the jury of its first edition, where the Argentinean painter Raquel Forner was awarded the Grand Prize. The Biennial was active from 1962 to 1966 and aimed to promote artistic interactions within the region or continent, which aligned with Gómez Sicre's cultural strategies.

Furthermore, he frequently communicated with Leonel Estrada, who organized the Coltejer Biennial in Medellín, Colombia, from 1968 to 1972. In 1971, he pleaded with Estrada not to accept Cuban artists living on the island in the 3rd Biennial, stating that it was a request in favor of democracy (Garcés 2018, 113). With the same spirit, he strongly reacted to the 6th São Paulo Biennial (1961), which had Mário Pedrosa as Artistic Director and included countries of the communist bloc, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and the Soviet Union. Gómez Sicre wrote a negative review of the Soviet Union's first appearance on the show for *Américas*, magazine of the OAS, stating that even those sympathetic to Eastern European political doctrines expressed their discontentment with the low quality of the exhibition:

Few times has São Paulo seen exhibits so poor, so feeble, speaking so clearly not of a nation with pretensions to the domination of the rest of humanity but of an underdeveloped people. [...] The Soviet painting sent to this Brazilian contest was in the realm of amateur, of the intuitive done without knowledge or daring. In any light, it was incongruent that

a country that claims to use logic and discipline in technological matters should be so utterly lacking in both characteristics and produce a kind of painting that would shame second-year students in most countries that have never dreamed of being great Powers. (Gómez Sicre 1962a, 3-9)¹⁷

Gómez Sicre was a prominent figure at the São Paulo Biennial until its 9th edition in 1967. He served as the commissioner for Cuba three times and oversaw the Pan-American Union pavilion, which was the only official representation of a supranational body in the show at that time. Additionally, he was a member of the Biennial jury in 1959, 1963, and 1965, where the same jury that selected the regular awards was responsible for choosing works for the acquisition prizes as well. At the request of Francisco Matarazzo, he also helped bring an exhibition he curated on pre-Columbian art to the 7th São Paulo Biennial in 1963. This exhibition had previously toured various European cities in 1962 and was co-financed by the Colombian government and Esso Colombia S.A.

Despite being the first exhibition of its kind outside of Europe and in a peripheral capital, the São Paulo Biennial was modeled after the format of the Venice Biennale. It was based on national representations, with each country being responsible for its own, and it also awarded several prizes. The São Paulo Biennial did not challenge the 'Venetian formula' or its organizational and media structures; instead, it utilized this formula to strive for a prominent position in the international cultural landscape. In the early years of the Biennial, this scheme ensured the participation of numerous artists and foreign delegations at no cost to the organizers. As Profili explained to Gómez Sicre in a letter dated 17 February 1953, when replying to his suggestion that the Biennial should contact the artists privately, "at this time we may invite-only Governments and official entities which thus will assume duties and honors, will take upon themselves the organizing and sending of the delegations".¹⁸

The São Paulo Biennial became internationally recognized in part due to its extensive award system, which provided legitimacy to the show. This system, which was in place until the 14th edition in 1977, included regular awards, honorable mentions, and various acquisition prizes sponsored by different companies, collectors, public and diplomatic bodies, and civil associations or foreign representations in Brazil. Additionally, artists had the opportunity to sell their works during the event, like the practice at the Venice Biennale. Until the 8th edition (1965), prizes were awarded by category (painting, sculpture, engraving, and drawing) to national and foreign artists. Furthermore, from the 2nd Biennial (1953) onwards, a Grand Prize was awarded to an artist who stood out for the body of work presented.

In 1967, during the Brazilian military dictatorship, the regulations of the Biennial were revised, leading to significant changes in the award system.¹⁹

¹⁷ Gómez Sicre expressed similar concerns to the Argentine press in 1962, during his participation as a juror in the 1st Córdoba Biennial, warning about "international political plots" aiming to promote the "wonders of the plastic culture of the Soviet bloc" at the São Paulo Biennial, cf Longoni, Mestman 2010, 50.

¹⁸ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 17 February 1953.

¹⁹ The new regulations influenced the jury's composition, resulting in a panel of nine members, eight of whom should be from abroad, thus ensuring diverse geographical representation at

The number of regular prizes increased, and they were unified under the title 'Prêmio Bienal de São Paulo'. The Itamaraty Prize was introduced to replace the Grand Prize as part of an agreement between the Biennial Foundation and the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (known as Itamaraty), which began funding the awards and providing ongoing support for the exhibition. This year also saw the establishment of the Grand Latin American Prize Francisco Matarazzo, honoring the industrialist who founded the Biennial and was stepping down from directing the show. Under this new framework, acquisition prizes, honorable mentions, and several special awards remained in effect. For the 15th edition (1979), all awards were abolished, which had already occurred in major international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale and the Paris Biennale de Jeunes, created in 1959.

The acquisition prizes of the São Paulo Biennial were initially intended to build a collection for the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM), with occasional donations to other museums in Brazil. As described by Ana Magalhães, it was a patronage system where the management of the MAM invited businesspeople, associations, and important collectors to contribute money to purchase artworks for the museum: "Unlike the regular awards, the acquisition prizes of the São Paulo Biennial thus had a clearer sense of permanence" (Magalhães 2013, 473).²⁰

The awards granted at the São Paulo Biennial should be considered within the context of similar international art exhibitions, as these awards propelled not only the careers of artists but also those of critics, curators, and art dealers. It's important to consider the cultural strategies implemented by public and private institutions that recognized the importance of soft power on the global geopolitical stage, such as the Visual Arts Section of the Pan-American Union under Gómez Sicre's leadership.

Gómez Sicre participated in the first edition of the São Paulo Biennial in 1951 as the commissioner for the Cuban delegation, his home country. He fulfilled this role again in the following two biennials. On all three occasions, he brought together artists of the so-called 'Cuban avant-garde', whose careers he had closely followed since the early 1940s. This group included names such as Mario Carreño, a lifelong friend of Gómez Sicre, Amelia Peláez, Cundo Bermúdez, Luiz Martínez Pedro, Raúl Milian, René Portocarrero, and the Cuba-based Romanian, Sandú Darié. Some of these artists were included in the previously mentioned exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* and also represented Cuba at the 1952 Venice Biennale, which was the only post-war edition of the show to feature the country.²¹ The works chosen by Gómez Sicre demonstrate his clear interest in the experiences of the early twentieth-century European avant-gardes. This fact is highlighted in his presentation text about the Cuban delegation at the 2nd São Paulo

the Biennial. For the first time, commissioners from national delegations were prohibited from serving on the award jury simultaneously.

20 The works acquired on these occasions are now part of the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo (MAC USP) and no longer of the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo. See also, from the same author, Magalhães 2023.

21 For more information about the exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters*, see https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2317_300062020.pdf. After 1952, Cuba took part in the 33rd Biennale in 1966, showcasing works by René Portocarrero, and again at the 36th Biennale in 1972, featuring pieces by Wifredo Lam.

Biennial, while also pointing out that European avant-garde values were assimilated in the country in an innovative mode:

The current Cuban art scene is characterized by a lack of provincialism, meaning there is no delay or obstacle to new ideas. Cuban art consistently reflects universal movements and incorporates diverse approaches. However, on the Antillean Island, this reflection takes on a unique resonance and is infused with a distinct personal essence. (Gómez Sicre 1953)

Table 1 Cuban delegations organized by the Visual Arts Department of the Organization of American States – OAS at the first three São Paulo Biennials

Cuban Delegation 1st São Paulo Biennial (1951)	Cundo Bermúdez, Mario Carreño, Luiz Martinez Pedro, Amelia Peláez, René Portocarrero
Cuban Delegation 2nd São Paulo Biennial (1953)	F.I. Azevedo, Cundo Bermúdez, Mario Carreño, Sandú Darié, Luiz Martínez Pedro, Rafael Moreno, Amelia Peláez, René Portocarrero, Roberto Estopinã Vera (sculpture), Alfredo Lozano (sculpture), Raúl Milián (drawing), Rolando López Dirube (drawings)
Cuban Delegation 3rd São Paulo Biennial (1955)	Wilfredo Arcay, Sandú Darié, Luiz Martínez Pedro, Amelia Peláez, René Portocarrero, Roberto Estopinã Vera (sculpture), Raúl Milián (drawing)

During the three editions he served as commissioner, Gómez Sicre made only minor adjustments to the selection of artists, consistently favoring white male artists despite the substantial Afro-Cuban population [tab. 1]. The works presented largely adhered to lighter forms of geometric abstraction. Artists such as Amelia Peláez, Luiz Martínez Pedro, Cundo Bermúdez, René Portocarrero, Roberto Estopinã Vera, and Sandú Darié participated in at least two Cuban delegations under his charge. It is noteworthy that Peláez was the only woman figuring in these occasions. Gómez Sicre considered her work “among the most outstanding paintings Cuba has so far produced, [...] in which we witness a careful transposition of domestic objects in a universal language”.²²

It’s worth mentioning that the 2nd São Paulo Biennial was held in connection with the celebrations for the fourth centenary of the city of São Paulo and was significantly larger than the previous edition. It was hosted in two new buildings designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer in the newly inaugurated Ibirapuera Park. Thus, the increased number of artists in the Cuban delegation at this Biennial likely reflects the demands of the event. Subsequent Cuban representations at the São Paulo Biennial were organized by government agencies: the National Institute of Culture for the 1957 and 1959 editions and, following the Cuban Revolution, by the National Council of Culture in 1961 and 1963.

²² Amelia Peláez, b.1896, d.1968, Cuba: <https://www.oas.org/artsoftheamericas/amelia-pelaez>.

Beginning with the 3rd São Paulo Biennial, Gómez Sicre organized the Pan-American Union delegation, also known as the OAS pavilion. He selected works by artists from various Latin American countries, calling attention to those from the Northern Andes and Central America.²³ According to Gómez Sicre, this initiative stemmed from the desire to showcase works of American artists who, for various reasons, were either not included in their national delegations or whose countries did not participate in the Biennial that year. When introducing the first group of artists he selected, Gómez Sicre stated:

The Pan-American Union is starting a permanent section at the São Paulo Biennial to showcase artists deserving of recognition at this important event in America. The selection includes various trends in contemporary art, such as surrealism, expressionism, and non-objective art. Through the Pan-American Union, artists from the continent have another platform to share their artistic message. (Gómez Sicre 1955)

This platform was available over seven iterations of the Bienal de São Paulo, until its 9th edition, held in 1967. In the following São Paulo Biennials, there is no mention of Gómez Sicre, even though he continued in his position at the OAS in Washington, D.C., until 1976.

The first two Pan-American delegations at the São Paulo Biennial in 1955 and 1957 included a significant array of artists from various nationalities (six and five, respectively). While several of these artists may have faded from mainstream art history, they were quite active during those years, participating in international exhibitions and obtaining recognition in some. In their home countries, they contributed to important discussions surrounding national identity and international engagement, collaborating with other intellectuals and institutions. It's important to note that not all of them were based in their native countries at the time; a few had settled in major art centers like Paris and the United States. Moreover, some of them participated in both their national delegations and the Pan-American delegation simultaneously. For instance, Chilean artists Roberto Matta and Carlos Faz exhibited paintings in two separate rooms at the 3rd São Paulo Biennial (1955), representing both Chile and the Pan-American Union. This dual representation also applied to the Venezuelan Alejandro Otero and the Colombian Edgar Negret at the 4th Biennial in 1957, as well as the Argentinean Clorindo Testa at the 6th Biennial in 1961.

Starting with the fifth edition (1959), the Pan-American delegation featured only two or three artists, mainly working in different media [tab. 2]. In a letter to Profili dated 25 June 1958, Gómez Sicre announced a reduction in the number of artists while also indicating an increase in the number of artworks displayed at the OAS pavilion. At the 5th Biennial, for instance, Armando Morales from Nicaragua showcased eight paintings, while Georges Liautaud from Haiti presented ten sculptures. At the 6th Biennial, both Alfredo da Silva from Bolivia and Clorindo Testa from Argentina exhibited

23 "His goal in doing so was to work outside the sphere of his formidable curatorial competition in the contemporary field - influential figures such as Jorge Romero Brest and Mario Pedrosa, for example, were well established in Argentina and Brazil. In Central America and the northern Andes, he could also avail himself of U.S. corporate and foundation connections, such as the Rockefeller family's Standard Oil Company affiliates" (Fox 2010, 90).

six paintings each. However, the Pan-American Union's most substantial representations occurred at the 8th and 9th Biennials (1965 and 1967): Carlos Poveda presented twenty-two drawings, and Raúl Valdivieso exhibited twelve sculptures at the 8th Biennial, while Mauricio Aguilar showcased twelve paintings and Alberto Collie displayed thirteen sculptures at the 9th Biennial, marking the final participation of this supranational body at São Paulo.

Table 2 Pan-American Union Delegations at the São Paulo Biennial

3rd São Paulo Biennial 1955	PAINTING Roberto Matta (Chile) – resident in France Alejandro Obregón (Colombia) – resident in France DRAWING José Ignacio Bermúdez (Cuba) – resident in the USA José Luis Cuevas (Mexico) Hugo Consuegra (Cuba) ENGRAVING Carlos Faz (Chile) **passed away shortly before the event.
4th São Paulo Biennial 1957	PAINTING Carlos Mérida (Guatemala) – Acquisition Prize Manuel Rendón (Ecuador) Enrique Zañartu (Chile) Alejandro Otero (Venezuela) - Acquisition Prize SCULPTURE Edgar Negret (Colombia)
5th São Paulo Biennial 1959	PAINTING Armando Morales (Nicaragua) - Acquisition Prize SCULPTURE Georges Liautaud (Haiti)
6th São Paulo Biennial 1961	PAINTING Alfredo da Silva (Bolivia) Clorindo Testa (Argentina)
7th São Paulo Biennial 1963	PAINTING David Manzur (Colombia) ENGRAVING Omar Rayo (Colombia) DRAWING Pedro Pont-Vergés (Argentina) – Honorable Mention
8th São Paulo Biennial 1965	DRAWING Carlos Poveda (Costa Rica) – Honorable Mention SCULPTURE Raúl Valdivieso (Chile)
9th São Paulo Biennial 1967	PAINTING Mauricio Aguilar (El Salvador) - resident in the USA SCULPTURE Alberto Collie (Venezuela) - resident in the USA

In many cases, artists participated in the São Paulo Biennial shortly after holding individual exhibitions at the Pan-American Union headquarters in Washington, D.C. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the artistic agenda of the Pan-American Union was quite diverse, showcasing both solo and group exhibitions of artists from different nationalities and featuring thematic

shows, such as *Artists of the United States in Latin America* (1956), *Fine Arts of the Caribbean* (1957), *Modern Ceramics from Latin America* (1958), *3,000 Years of Colombian Art* (1960), *Neo-figurative Painting in Latin America* (1962), *A Panorama of Cuban Art Abroad* (1964). As Claire Fox notes, thanks to Gómez Sicre's efforts, it "became a major player in the burgeoning hemispheric arts scene, the scope of its activities surpassing other cultural initiatives of the OAS" (Fox 2010, 83). However, we can align with Alessandro Armato's observation that Gómez Sicre appears to utilize the OAS pavilion at the São Paulo Biennial as a platform to promote Latin American artists with whom he had personal or institutional ties (Armato 2015, 36). As illustrated in Table 3, there are numerous instances of this occurrence.²⁴

Table 3 Pan-American Union Delegations at the São Paulo Biennial

Exhibitions/Artists	Pan-American Union	São Paulo Biennial
Carlos Faz	1953	1955
José Luis Cuevas	1954	1955
Roberto Matta	1955	1955
Alejandro Obregón	1955	1955
Manuel Rendón	1955	1957
Enrique Zañartu	1956	1957
Edgar Negret	1956	1957
David Manzur	1961	1963
Omar Rayo	1961	1963
Alfredo da Silva	1961	1961
Raúl Valdivieso	1964	1965
Carlos Poveda	1965	1965
Mauricio Aguilar	1966	1967

Gómez Sicre reflected on the connection between his work at the Pan-American Union and the São Paulo Biennial in an unpublished text where he evaluated his work:

Not only was the OAS' gallery in Washington extremely active, but it also advocated abroad the most renowned artists who passed through it. The São Paulo Biennial, in Brazil, was a befitting venue from which to expand the nascent prestige of those artists who, because of their talent, had triumphed in the Washington gallery. Indeed, the OAS served to provide a wide range of artists with access to an important venue in which many Latin American countries did not participate because they did not accept their modern artists. It was through the OAS that different

²⁴ In contrast, Georges Liataud and Armando Morales held solo exhibitions at the Pan-American Union in 1960 and 1962, following their participation in the 5th São Paulo Biennial in 1959.

artists entered each edition of the Biennial after having had their first shows in the OAS' gallery.²⁵

As we've seen, Gómez Sicre had a significant influence on the São Paulo Biennials in various ways. I'd like to highlight some of the awards received by the artists he supported. Carlos Mérida [fig. 1], in 1957, and Armando Morales in 1959, were each awarded an acquisition prize. Their works, *Estabilidad sobre dos puntos* (1956) and *Sirenas II* (1958), are part of the collection of the University of São Paulo Contemporary Art Museum (MAC USP). Alejandro Otero also earned an Acquisition Prize in 1957, though his work is not represented at the MAC USP. Additionally, Pedro Pont-Vergés and Carlos Poveda were awarded Honorable Mentions in 1963 and 1965, respectively, while representing the Pan-American Union. Meanwhile, Fernando de Szyszlo, and Edgar Negret – two artists highly acclaimed by Gómez Sicre – also earned Honorable Mentions at the São Paulo Biennial in 1957 and 1965, respectively. The Cuban René Portocarrero, whom Gómez Sicre considered “an outstanding figure in the generation which initiated the modern art movement in Cuba”, received an Acquisition Prize at the 7th Biennial in 1963.²⁶



Figure 1 Carlos Mérida, *Estabilidad sobre dos puntos*. 1956. Casein on laminated parchment, 90 x 66,1 cm. MAC USP Collection

The most significant prize, and possibly the one that brought Gómez Sicre the most satisfaction, was the International Drawing Prize given to the Mexican artist José Luiz Cuevas at the 5th São Paulo Biennial in 1959. Cuevas and Gómez Sicre shared a close friendship, with Gómez Sicre

²⁵ Text by José Gómez Sicre assessing his work in the Gómez Sicre Papers, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection Archive, University of Texas at Austin. Folder 3: now in Pini, Bernal 2020, 8.

²⁶ See René Portocarrero, b.1912, D.1985, Cuba: <https://www.oas.org/artsoftheamericas/rene-portocarrero>.

actively following Cuevas' career. They kept in regular contact, exchanging letters and offering advice to each other throughout their lives. For Gómez Sicre, Cuevas' work was a clear example of the possibility of moving beyond the muralist ideals in Mexico. Cuevas was featured in the Pan-American pavilion in 1955, but in 1959, he was part of the Mexican delegation with thirty drawings. During that edition of the Biennial, Gómez Sicre served as a member of the São Paulo award jury for the first time.

Cuevas' victory cannot be solely credited to his friend's interference, but Gómez Sicre certainly advocated for him. On 30 July 1959, he urged Profili, saying, "I would like you to continue bringing up the works of José Luis [Cuevas], [Fernando] Szyszlo, and Armando Morales. We need to support them as much as possible".²⁷ A month later, on 11 August he wrote again regarding Cuevas' participation in the Mexican delegation:

In any case, I suggest you allocate a space for him that can be somewhat isolated within the Mexico section, allowing him to present his monochrome works without the distraction of the colours used by the other Mexican artists nearby.

And to Lourival Gomes Machado, Artistic Director of the 5th São Paulo Biennial, in a letter dated November 1959, Gómez Sicre expressed his dissatisfaction with Machado's opposition to Cuevas' nomination for the International Drawing Prize. Gómez Sicre stated: "I don't think you can raise a whole campaign against an artist just because he does not please a certain critic".²⁸ He also emphasized that the jury's decision regarding Cuevas' award should not be contested, as Cuevas had obtained thirteen of the seventeen votes. Gómez Sicre pointed out that Cuevas received more votes than British artist Barbara Hepworth, who was awarded the Biennial Grand Prize that year, as well as more votes than any other foreign prize contenders.

In 1967, the Pan-American Union participated in the São Paulo Biennial for the last time. A letter found in Gómez Sicre's papers at the Benson Library at the University of Texas at Austin sheds light on his reasons for withdrawing despite the accolades. On 27 May 1968, Gómez Sicre wrote to Brazilian art critic Geraldo Ferraz, thanking him for the positive review of the Pan-American Union delegation. However, he also expressed frustration over the delays in retrieving the works from Brazilian customs and the indifference with which the matter was officially addressed. Gómez Sicre felt that Biennial's representatives lacked goodwill toward both the Pan-American Union and him. As a result, he was seriously reconsidering participation in the following show, not wanting to endure such an unfortunate situation again.²⁹ A few years earlier, in 1961, he had complained to Mário Pedrosa, the Biennial's Artistic Director at the time, that while he received press announcements about the Biennial promptly,

²⁷ Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bial de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Arturo Profili, 30 July 1959.

²⁸ Benson Latin American Collection. José Gómez Sicre's papers, Box 9, folder 9. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Lourival Gomes Machado, 2 November 1959.

²⁹ Benson Latin American Collection. José Gómez Sicre's papers, Box 9, folder 9. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Geraldo Ferraz, 27 May 1968.

he could never find any mention of the Pan-American delegation, despite having sent the necessary documentation about it long ago.³⁰

When organizing the Pan-American Union delegations at the São Paulo Biennial, Gómez Sicre's primary goal was not to influence the Brazilian cultural landscape but to further the careers of the artists he supported beyond South America. He sought to leverage the connections he made at a show like the Biennial to promote these artists. In an interview late in his life, Gómez Sicre stated that his role as a curator and critic was to guide, open doors, showcase, and promote emerging artists from Latin America, with the intention of establishing new artistic values and standards. In this regard, he achieved some success, albeit temporarily.³¹ While he praised Latin American art and worked to address regional inequalities in the art and culture sector, he did not aim to confront dominant artistic values or create strategies for cultural resistance. Regarding the São Paulo Biennial, it seems he hoped for greater recognition at the show, which ultimately did not materialize.

His successes, however, influenced the regional art scene, particularly through acquisitions made for museums across the Americas, such as MAM SP (later transferred to MAC USP). Nonetheless, it cannot be claimed that the artists he championed have gained lasting recognition in this context; their artistic contributions largely remain on the fringes of major narratives, with their works often relegated to the technical reserves of museums. Moreover, the awards they received did not result in the establishment of consistent policies for acquiring Latin American art for these institutions. The Art Museum of the Americas may be an exception, but its collection primarily reflects the tastes of its founder.

30 Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. Correspondence from José Gómez Sicre to Mário Pedrosa, 18 August 1961.

31 "More than Just a Cold War Warrior. José Gómez Sicre and the Art Museum of the Americas". <http://www.oas.org/artsoftheamericas/more-than-just-a-cold-war-warrior>.

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