Artists: Argentine

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The coastline of Argentina has drawn mariners for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Archaeological evidence points to fishing activities on inland rivers and along the coasts. European exploration along the Argentine coast was evident by the late fifteenth century. Despite Argentina's long relationship with the sea, the history of maritime art in Argentina has not been constant, a reflection of the political and social influences on this South American treasure.

The earliest maritime images of Argentina came from the journals and logs of European explorers. Theodor de Bry chronicled Magellan's visit to Patagonia, producing images of Patagonia and of Magellan's ships along the Argentine coast. The diary of Ulrich Schmidel, published by Levinus Hulsius at Nuremberg in 1599, had some of the earliest-known views of the settlement at Nuestra Señora Santa María del Buen Aire (today's Buenos Aires), including images of the port being attacked by Querendi Indians in 1536 and a view of Buen Aire from the sea. Schmidel included images of the town, but he also drew the local fishing boats and trade ships that dotted the harbor. Other art from this period includes an anonymous engraving from 1610 depicting Sir Francis Drake on the Río de la Plata and a 1628 painting by the Dutch artist Johannes Vingboons of the second incarnation of Buenos Aires. By including key landmarks in the profile of the new Buenos Aires, Vingboons's painting provides a chronological marker for change along the South American coast.

Images of trade ships in the port of Buenos Aires are rarely seen, because for nearly two hundred years much of Spain's transatlantic trade was controlled by northern ports. Some black market trade did continue, and local shipping was allowed, but the ports in Peru and Panama captured the majority of the shipping until 1778. Images of Argentina's maritime history came from other sources. Between 1708 and 1713, the engineer José Bermúdez de Castro captured the changing face of Buenos Aires via a series of maps, each of which included drawings of the ships that found refuge in the Río de la Plata. Ferdinand Brambila Ferrari (1763–1834) is credited with paintings of Buenos Aires and Montevideo around 1794, when he visited the area with the Malaspina expedition.

By the mid-1800s, a change in the political environment brought about a new vision of Argentina, with an emphasis on nativist, traditional values. As the country looked inward, maritime art took a back seat, though artists such as César Hipólito Bacle (1790/94–1838) captured images of local fishermen and merchant ships off the shore of Buenos Aires (c. 1840), and Agosto Ballerini (1857–1897) honored the Argentine navy in a mid-nineteenth-century painting.

Changes in immigration and increased trade introduced a change in the social and political dynamic by the end of the 1800s. An era of progressive thought brought economic and cultural growth, and by 1900 Buenos Aires had grown into a thriving cultural center with more than 129,000 inhabitants. Art schools were developed, and state-sponsored scholarships enabled students to travel to Europe to study art. The Academia de la Sociedad Estímulo de Bellas Artes was nationalized in 1905 and served as the cornerstone for artistic study in Argentina. Whereas the nineteenth century had focused on the old image of Argentina, the twentieth century brought with it a new sense of identity, which was decidedly more international and middle class.

Maritime artists in the twentieth century were divided in their approach. Many tended toward a traditional style and content. Artists such as Benito Quinquela Martín...
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(1890–1977), Victor Cun solo (1898–1937), and Fortunato La Camera (1887–1951) painted the views from their studios on the Ríochuela River in styles reminiscent of the French Impressionists. They chose vivid colors, exaggerated shadow effects, and had colloquial subjects: brightly colored fishing boats, steel-gray docks, hard-working tugboats, or the dingy sails of the junks. Many of the artists lived or worked in an area of Buenos Aires known as La Boca, which was located, as the name implies, at the mouth of the Ríochuela. They formed a community known as Grupo de la Boca, which produced some of Argentina’s most lasting images of the river.

Some experimental artists also captured the essence of Argentina’s relationship with the sea. In Juanito en la laguna (1973; Colección Lily Berni, Buenos Aires), Antonio Berni used found objects to create images of a small boy in a lagoon. Xul Solar (1887–1963) created a whimsical view of an Argentine port with a floating city and stylized mountains in his work Vuel Villa (1936; Museo Xul Solar, Buenos Aires). Later artists ranged from the realistic paintings of María Emilia Troglic and Gustavo Salvador Peses to the complete abstraction of Juncos en el Agua by Celia Basavilbaso. In the twenty-first century, art photographers have joined the community of artists who are documenting the maritime community from an artistic perspective.

Although the modern era witnessed an expansion of maritime art, images of Argentina’s coast and inland waterways have been in existence for hundreds of years. The earliest artists were explorers, historians, and engineers, documenting a new world. Present-day Argentine maritime artists are capturing the images of a new Argentina, which is culturally diverse, forward-looking, and artistically alive.

[See also Buenos Aires and Painting, subentries on Historical Themes and Political Themes.]

Bibliography

“Artelista.” http://www.artelista.com/. Artelista displays some of the most promising Argentine artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ranging from the traditional to the abstract.


“100 Masterpieces by 100 Argentine Artists.” Visual Arts, Konex Foundation. http://www.fundacionkonex.com.ar/ingles/bienales_del_arte/index.asp/. Fundación Konex has collected some of Argentina’s finest works, with special focus on twentieth-century art. The online collections include this exhibit of one hundred masterpieces, many of which have a maritime theme.


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