



Separate but Assimilated:
Latino Immigrant Communities and their Museums

by

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“Acculturation is usually as much an economic rite of passage as a cultural one.”
Ruben Martinez, “The Perpetual Identity Crisis”

The movement of people from Central and South America across the border to the United States is older than those same borders. Latinos¹ living in the United States are an unusual mixture of both immigrant and indigenous peoples. And despite these ancient roots in the Western Hemisphere, Latinos often feel marginalized and unwelcome within the United States. Encountering such responses, an immigrant’s trek to the United States and efforts to meet basic necessities, though challenging, are not the only trials faced. Millions of Latinos have already settled in this country and various immigrant and refugee charities have been established, assisting their search for food, housing, and employment. However, once these primary needs are satisfied, how can an immigrant satisfy other basic needs – that of being understood, respected, and validated? Latino immigrants enter the United States and immediately become the ‘other’ - the other who cannot speak English or who does not celebrate the same holidays in the same way. During the course of the twentieth century, Latino barrios, or neighborhoods, have become commonplace in most large and many smaller cities across the United States. Oftentimes, these barrios provide a familiar extended-family feel, a community with recognizable stores and restaurants for immigrants and their families. Here, Latinos do not feel like outsiders. In the past twenty to thirty years, the size and frequency of Latino barrios has greatly increased. It is almost impossible to not notice the Latino presence in most large cities and many smaller ones across the United States. This firm community

¹ The term “Latino” will herein refer to people from Central and South America.

presence is continually expanding, and not only in numbers of residents, but also in numbers of cultural establishments.

Cultural establishments range from churches to art galleries. In the past twenty to 30 years, some cities have seen the establishment of full-fledged Latino museums.² It is no small task to incorporate a museum, whatever the size. In absence of a large and valuable collection, incorporation usually happens after years of other types of activities such as exhibitions, performances, and education programs by cultural activists. Thus the establishment and operation of a museum signifies the firm presence of a dynamic community and culture that desires to balance the arrival and assimilation of new immigrants with the preservation and promotion of their particular heritage. Examination of the various motives for establishing museums and the benefits or obstacles presented by such institutions illustrates the role of ethnic-specific museums for Latino immigrant communities. Museums are not merely indications of how assimilated or distinct the Latino community has become; they are forums of celebration and affirmation of their ethnic identity.

Latino barrios have not always been viewed as possible sites of important cultural production. During earlier efforts at urban revitalization in the United States, Latino barrios and other ethnic neighborhoods were considered real public health hazards, "...congested visual eyesores, and contagious mediums of vice and other social pathologies to middle-class urbanites. Chinatowns, Little Italies, and Mexican barrios were regarded as obstacles to modernization and cultural assimilation." It was not until

² See list of Latino Museums at end of paper. This is not an exhaustive list.

the civil rights movements of the 60s that the possible value of such a close-knit society of countrymen was affirmatively acknowledged by various scholars.³ Eventually, ethnicity became a dynamic quality and companion to social change, rather than a static primitive state. “The linked civil rights and ethnic power movements of the 1950s and 1960s helped to initiate and reinforce parallel projects of community action and heritage reclamation (in ethnic neighborhoods).”⁴ The founding of ethnic museums in major U.S. cities (such as in New York and Los Angeles) was a key part of this process. A sentiment which fueled Latino power movements (and continues to fuel some cultural activists) was that Latinos - especially Mexicans and Puerto Ricans - did not immigrate to the United States, rather the United States came to them. These sentiments led to much anger and hostility in politicized artists, immigrants, and others. Recently, much of this fury has subsided and the spirit and purpose of these movements have been focused into other (somewhat more productive) methods of cultural expression – such as museums.⁵

Cultural reclamation projects by Latinos (*i.e.* establishing museums, galleries, public arts projects) often are linked with other entrepreneurial and urban revitalization activities within a particular city.⁶ These projects often center upon a specific site within the particular urban area needing revitalization. In downtown Los Angeles, for example, Mexican historians and community activists are seeking to repossess and interpret Chicano history within historic homes and period rooms at the Olvera Street Plaza; while blocks away the new Latino Museum of History, Art and Culture recently opened its

³ Jan Lin, “Globalization and the revalorization of ethnic places in immigration gateway cities.” *Urban Affairs Review* November 1998.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (New York: 1995), 88.

⁶ Examples of such a linkage are found with the establishment of the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, California, as well as the Museo Chicano in Phoenix, Arizona.

doors. In Miami, Cuban heritage reclamation efforts center on the “Freedom Tower” and the Tower Theater intersection on Calle Ocho in Little Havana. The iconography of sites such as these holds a similar position in the imaginations of immigrants and descendants of immigrants as that of Ellis Island in New York.⁷ In other instances, ethnic-specific museums have been ideologically founded around experiences – a tragic moment in a culture’s history, or an oversight by another culture, such as the Japanese-American internment camps (Japanese-American National Museum, Los Angeles) or the epoch of black slavery (National Underground Railroad Museum, Maysville, Kentucky).⁸ Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, California and El Museo del Barrio in New York are examples of museums which were ideologically founded upon Mexican and Puerto Rican (respectively) involvement with civil rights movements in the United States, and also frustrations with Eurocentric cultural representation in mainstream museums.

Historically, the material culture of immigrants was of little interest to collectors and scholars. Many immigrants were poor, while others left their birthplaces under dire circumstances that did not facilitate the transportation of many possessions. Therefore many of the museums established by immigrant communities began with a historical focus, dominated by artifacts which demonstrate “movable cultural property: knowledge and skills.”⁹ Most Latino museums were not founded by privileged owners of priceless works of art. These museums began with educational programming, events, and sponsored exhibitions by a core group of founders. For example, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago began with founding members sponsoring exhibitions in

⁷ Lin, “Globalization and the revalorization of ethnic places,” November 1998.

⁸ Janet Hampton, Interview, February 1999

⁹ Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (London: 1996), 82.

other institutions and community venues around Chicago. Four years later the Chicago Park District provided a building as a permanent location.¹⁰ As was the case for the Chicago Mexican Museum, city and state governments usually have provided the seed money for Latino museums.

There are numerous motives – due to factors within and without the Latino community - behind the establishment of museums by Latino groups. The external factors include countering racism and unfavorable depictions of Latinos in mainstream culture. “These museums want to expand textbook views about United States history,” and expand the public’s notion of Latino art and culture.¹¹ Frustrated by under-representation (or misrepresentation) in mainstream museums, Latino cultural activists desired to reclaim the representation of their cultures. They also aimed to represent subjects concerning Latino culture which are not often treated in a regular school curriculum. These museums exist to “teach about the heritage of Latinos in an authentic manner, to fill an artistic and educational void in those cultures.”¹² Representation in museums and galleries is much more consistent and authentic today than before the cultural upheavals in the 60s and 70s, when gallery shows were few and representation of Latinos (but not *by* Latinos) was sporadic. Inspired by the turbulent politics of the time, a group of barrio artists and educators in New York’s East Harlem “protested what they saw as the centralized, exclusionary stance of downtown museums and began setting up

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹¹ Judith Colp, “Ethnic Museums for Mall to Tell Not-So-Pretty Tales.” *Washington Times* 5 Dec 1990: E1.

¹² Liz Zamarano, Interview, February 1999

grass-roots cultural centers and turning their own work into a form of public service.”¹³
El Museo del Barrio emerged from their efforts.¹⁴

Motives for establishing Latino museums also are ignited from within the Latino community. These motives largely center upon increasing ethnic pride. Connected with ethnic pride, another internal motive is the recognition of the need for creative and community space. Through education programs at such spaces, cultural activists can use their art to increase ethnic pride while encouraging young, emerging talent as well as trained artists to prosper. “Artists of all ethnicities have to produce their art and not lose their talent; they need to be encouraged to do this.”¹⁵ Latino cultural activists realized that their own museum/cultural center could - unlike other traditional museums - provide artistic opportunities tailored for the particular needs of the Latino community.

A desire to educate others about the traditions and beliefs of Latino cultures, coupled with the desire to maintain these traditions and associated artifacts, underscore reasons for the Latino community to incorporate a museum. “Often motivated by a desire to preserve and interpret the past and document changes, the establishment of a museum enables historical and contemporary issues to be examined, discussed and interpreted for the benefit of the [public].”¹⁶ Latino immigrants may become involved with the establishment of a museum due to feelings of nostalgia for familial or cultural ties and traditions that have weakened since emigrating. These immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, wish to give their community a sense of their own past, as well as explain themselves to others. Such searches for history and subsequent

¹³ Holland Cotter, “Pride of Place for Art and Artists in the Barrio,” *New York Times* 16 Mar 1998: E1.

¹⁴ See “El Museo del Barrio Information from museum website” at end of paper.

¹⁵ Zamarano, Interview.

¹⁶ Simpson, *Making Representations*, 4.

representation of this history in a Latino museum can promote a sense of cultural identity on a more personal level.¹⁷

Latino museums, whether motivated by external or internal factors, form from a need to affirm a culture, address those who have been marginalized, and aid in cultural understanding. They are usually established from celebratory motives, not necessarily political.¹⁸ Sometimes a competitive zeal to “keep up” with other ethnic groups in cultural production can become a strong motivating factor behind the establishment of a Latino museum.¹⁹ The fuel for the foundation of these museums is often a desire to reclaim representation of their culture, assert ownership of their history, and counter exclusionary practices by mainstream museums. What results is most often a museum where there is a close working relationship between the exhibited and the exhibitor.

Since the inception of museums solely focused on the Latino culture, museum professionals have debated the merits of such institutions, and the benefits or obstacles they present to Latino communities. Some question whether these places should even exist, indicating that there is no more ‘room’ for ethnic-specific museums.²⁰ It is more often the case, however, that discussions about Latino museums focus on whether these museums are fulfilling their missions and using their resources in a professional and beneficial manner, rather than if they should exist or not. If a firm community base is able to support and operate a museum, that museum should be entitled to function and thrive as much as possible.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁸ Hampton, Interview.

¹⁹ Larry Gordon, “As Minorities Thrive, so do Ethnic Museums,” *Los Angeles Times* 4 May 1998: A1.

²⁰ Mari Carmen Ramirez, Interview, February 1999.

Amidst the debates, it is evident that Latino museums provide many benefits for their communities. Being completely focused on a specific culture,²¹ these museums create a more personal experience for the visitor, as well as a comfortable, non-threatening learning atmosphere. Latino museums also address and create programs which may appeal to immigrants, such as events celebrating their specific holidays (*i.e.* Day of the Dead; Three Kings Day). The facilities of Latino museums provide a forum or outlet for discussion of issues facing immigrants and their communities when necessary. For example, El Museo del Barrio in New York presented a series of education programs accompanying an exhibit on the spread of the AIDS virus among Latinos.²² At a different time, El Museo was a central gathering place for discussion once the community heard of a tour company's plan to take tourists through the barrio to explore gang territories and their graffiti messages.²³ These discussions focused upon creating a positive plan of action to change such attitudes about their neighborhood. The goal of activities staged at these museums is that Latino patrons will be able to connect their past personal experiences with the circumstances of their new (if they are immigrants) and changing environment. Latino museums do not have to provide definite answers to questions of Latino identity - they simply provide a forum in which to do this.²⁴

²¹ Latino museums sometimes focus themselves even more on a particular type of Latino, *i.e.* Mexicans at the Museo Chicano in Phoenix and Chicago's Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum. Latino culture itself encompasses a very broad and diverse group of people. Latino museums offer their culture much more attention than larger general museums, however these museums should be cautious in representing such a broad and varied culture in the U.S. as to not become neglectful or too generalized.

²² Maria Dominguez. Interview. February 1999.

²³ David Gonzales, "Creating Pride from an Insult in El Barrio." *New York Times* 19 Apr 1997, sect. 1:21.

²⁴ L. Steven Velasquez. Interview. February 1999.

With a separate museum, there is more dignity for the Latino culture. There is an opportunity to uncover how Latinos perceive their communities and how they perceive themselves as part of the larger society.²⁵ Instead of being presented from a larger generalized context of American society, Latino staff members contribute authentic representation and viewpoints.²⁶ A separate museum may also contribute more focused research on specific aspects of Latino culture. Larger general museums oftentimes attempt to mount a wide range of exhibits on various cultures. In these attempts, there is the possibility of spreading curatorial energies out too thin.²⁷ An ethnic-specific museum staff does not have to remember to ‘include’ any other minority since their mission is designated for Latino subjects.²⁸ And within a larger institution, a curator may be limited - due to the mission and public relations interests of the museum - in the interpretation of objects and themes which treat ethnicity and power relations and are considered controversial, possibly offensive, or unpopular. This is less likely to happen in a smaller ethnic-specific museum, allowing for more exploration of nuances of meaning.²⁹

Latino museums also benefit the local artistic community. These museums have an opportunity to develop the creative talent of the community as well as employment and income. Many artists would not have other viable options to professionally display their talent if their only options were larger general museums or often inaccessible

²⁵ William Flores and Rina Benmayor, “Constructing Cultural Citizenship,” *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space and Rights* (Eds.) Flores, William V. and Rina Benmayor (Boston: 1997), 10.

²⁶ “Even though museums may aim to be cross-cultural in scope and to challenge ethnocentrism, they are also arenas in which one culture displays another. The power to display another as ‘other’ is considerable.” R. Grimes, “Breaking the glass barrier: the power of display” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4(2): 239-62, (Quoted in Simpson, p. 11).

²⁷ Dominguez, Interview.

²⁸ See footnote 21.

²⁹ Hampton, Interview.

galleries.³⁰ Some artists might not even receive encouragement to pursue the arts. In the early 70s, artist Manuel Vega attended an art workshop at El Museo del Barrio. Looking back at this opportunity, he reflects, "...if they hadn't been there, I probably would have become a mechanic (after high school)."³¹ Local artists also are a valuable source for new ideas for exhibits and programs held at these museums.

Some of the benefits of a separate museum result from motives to incorporate a museum. For example, the motivation of raising ethnic pride and identity among Latinos is also one of the benefits of a museum focused on issues of race, ethnicity and immigrant communities. Exhibits and programs suggest frameworks for constructing one's cultural identity within the United States: "A sense of ethnicity confirms belonging; it may not reduce the pain of other-ness, but it helps one face it."³² In these institutions, exhibits and programs may delve more fully into popular negative images of Latinos. These communities in a way have a 'clean slate' to use cultural display as tools for rebuilding and reinventing themselves in the eyes of outsiders.³³ Cultural rebuilding efforts also offer Latinos the option of becoming more involved with their respective cities through participation in these museums and other cultural reclamation projects. Through their establishment, Latino museums contribute significantly to the revitalization of central business districts and also to the general public culture of their city.³⁴

Within Latino museums, a cultural history is kept alive that is otherwise hardly documented. These museums aim to break the isolation that many Latinos feel by

³⁰ Zamarano, Interview.

³¹ Cotter, "Pride of Place," E1.

³² Robert Hughes, "Heritage of Rich Imagery," *Time* 11 Jul 1988.

³³ Cotter, "Pride of Place," E1.

³⁴ Lin, "Globalization and the revalorization of ethnic places," November 1998.

opening a space for the underrepresented – a place which attempts to foster understanding with people of different backgrounds.³⁵ Those who have been excluded are addressed and validated. The purpose of these institutions is to first bring Latinos into museums and then once inside, supplement their prior education and experience.³⁶ Despite these efforts by cultural activists and others, many Latinos may never patronize museums. Latino museums could still benefit these people in that the mere existence of such an institution is likely to be pleasing to them. The knowledge that their culture is important, established, and respected enough to have a museum in the United States focused solely on them will likely elicit a positive response. It can become a source of pride and a place that boosts the confidence of the local Latino community in general.

There are, however, some voices, even from within the Latino community, who do not encourage the establishment of culturally-specific museums, saying it ‘ghettoizes’ Latinos and limits their sphere of influence.³⁷ Therefore, instead of promoting ethnic pride and belonging, these culture-specific museums are seen as divisive and as an obstacle to the artistic and cultural evolution of Latinos. Some Latino artists want to be recognized on more universal parameters, rather than being labeled or pinned to a specific type of cultural product.³⁸ Latino museums can only exist if there is a community that sustains it. Some critics point to statistics which depict Latinos as only “haltingly becoming part of the social, political and cultural fabric of the U.S.” as evidence that there is a lack of a community that could sustain a museum. These

³⁵ Michael Brenson, “The Curator’s Moment,” *Art Journal* Winter 1998.

³⁶ Hampton, Interview.

³⁷ Oftentimes, smaller ethnic-specific museums collaborate with larger museums, expanding their resources as well as sharing exhibits of Latino artists. In this manner, it is possible to quell the artist’s fear of being ‘ghettoized’ as a Latino since his work may also be displayed in a larger, general context.

³⁸ Ramirez, Interview.

statistics are derived from the number of immigrants who choose to acquire American citizenship and the number of immigrants who choose to learn English.³⁹ Despite foreboding statistics and divisions over issues of ghettoized Latino artists, active and even thriving Latino museums/cultural centers in various cities attest to a strong support base for these institutions.

A separate museum could also weaken the view that Latinos are part of a larger society. A larger, general museum likely has more resources to create exhibits that could contextualize the Latino experience in a more complete manner.⁴⁰ Latino artists can shift outsider perceptions of the barrio by taking their work outside their community, allowing a wider audience to see it, and view it as something positive.⁴¹ Whether representation is in the form of an exhibit within a mainstream museum or within the walls of a Latino museum, it is a challenge to delimit a culture within one exhibit or even one museum.⁴² In light of this obstacle – the difficulty of adequately treating a multifaceted culture within one museum – it is apparent that museums are only one of the many available avenues of cultural expression for Latinos.

In the past few decades, emigration has emerged as a commonplace option in many parts of the world. The continual arrival of immigrants to the United States is one essential aspect of today's increasingly global culture.⁴³ Immigrants to the United States have not only changed American demographics, but also the cultural landscape.

³⁹ Linda Chavez, "Our Hispanic Predicament," *Commentary* 105(1998):47-50.

⁴⁰ Velasquez, Interview.

⁴¹ Cotter, "Pride of Place," E1.

⁴² See footnote 21.

⁴³ Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: 1995), 121.

Mainstream cultural institutions have tried to adapt to these changing demographics and cultural demands made by minority audiences. Ethnic-specific museums – which in some cases formed out of dissatisfaction with these mainstream museums – are evidence of the vast amount of history and art that immigrant communities in the United States can contribute and which await interpretation and display. Even when mainstream museums seem to threaten encroachment upon an ethnic-museum’s cultural ‘territory’ with their ethnic-specific exhibitions, places like Latino museums serve as vital links to the larger world outside its community⁴⁴ and focal points of community research and development.

Latino museums can aid an immigrant’s process of ethnic identification. They can become cultural coping mechanisms. “Ethnicity is a process of identification at a particular moment to cope with historical realities.”⁴⁵ And the ‘particular moment’ of self-identification may be at an exhibit or program, which treats themes of identity and the change it undergoes upon transplanting oneself to the United States. The central question for museum display and programming may not be whether Latino immigrants should assimilate or remain ethnically distinct. More often these museums strive to use art and cultural activities as a common language between Latinos and others, in an effort to affirm and celebrate Latino presence and contribution to the United States. In producing these types of programs, curators and museum staff perform a delicate balancing act – balancing the incorporation of the United States into Latino identity and formation of a distinct awareness and pride of one’s roots.

⁴⁴ Charles Storch, “Museums in an ethnic turf battle,” *Chicago Tribune* 14 Sept 1994, sect. 2C: 1.

⁴⁵ Schultz, April R., quoted in Matti Kaups, “Review of *Ethnicity on Parade*,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 31(1996): 186-91.

Historically, Latinos have been marginalized in what has become a ‘mainstream’ American identity. As major efforts to break from this marginalization, Latino museums and exhibits celebrate their ethnic identity and remind the rest of the country that Latinos are deeply rooted in the United States. The particular exhibit or museum is only a sample of a complex community in the midst of the mainstream. In this way, Latino museums represent a reaffirmation of a large mainstream identity, as well as a celebration of a smaller distinct identity.⁴⁶ “Art can speak for the silent masses. From the mid-70s to the present, Latinos have slowly traveled to center stage... (and) their art has metamorphosed into one produced for communal consumption, to one reaching a non-Latino audience.”⁴⁷ Many Latino museums are supported and attended by many people of other cultures, evidence that this celebration and affirmation also comes from outside the Latino community.

The fear of losing ethnic identity through assimilation can propel the establishment of a Latino museum. However, a Latino museum not only represents this desire, but also a certain degree of assimilation which has already transpired within the Latino community. “The establishment of something as permanent, public and expensive as a museum represents a coming of age, evidence of emotional and financial comfort.”⁴⁸ A full-fledged museum is symbolic of the community’s economic maturation within the United States.⁴⁹ It is a statement of the American element in their culture, saying, “We

⁴⁶ Velasquez, Interview.

⁴⁷ Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition*, 89.

⁴⁸ Gordon, Larry, “As Minorities Thrive, so do Ethnic Museums,” *Los Angeles Times* 4 May 1998: A1.

⁴⁹ One misconception of Latino artists in the United States is that most are the children or descendants of immigrants (see Rodriguez article, 1988). However, experience at the Museo Chicano in Phoenix and elsewhere has proven that many contributing artists are very recent arrivals from Central America (from Zamarano interview).

belong here too, we can make a museum.”⁵⁰ Having a basis of one’s heritage (articulated within a museum) is an important asset in the process of becoming an ‘American.’ In the case of Latinos in the United States, assimilation often entails becoming culturally ambidextrous and being able to function as a responsible citizen in one country while straddling (culturally) two worlds.⁵¹ “As ethnic groups assimilate, they want to share themselves with the rest of Americans... they want to show what’s good about their culture, what’s not so different from everybody else. It’s a maturation process.”⁵²

Fundraising for Latino museums continues to be a difficult task, however, as is the case for most museums. Donations for churches, schools and hospitals take precedence since they satisfy survival issues, and art and culture are not always considered survival issues.

For some people, the nourishment and development of art and culture are considered survival issues: “You can change someone’s socio-economic status, but you must also feed the soul, which is culture.”⁵³ As cultural endeavors, museums will continue to be beneficial to Latino immigrants and their progeny only if museum staff ensure that many voices and many points of view are expressed. Culture, politics and arts in the United States have not prospered due to efforts at cultural homogenization, but despite them.⁵⁴ Art and cultural activities can act as a kind of connective tissue, forming bonds within and without the community,⁵⁵ producing an outlet from oftentimes discouraging realities.

⁵⁰ Gordon, “As Minorities Thrive, so do Ethnic Museums,” A1.

⁵¹ Roberto Suro, *Strangers Among Us: How Latino Immigration is Transforming America* (New York: 1998), 12.

⁵² Gordon, “As Minorities Thrive, so do Ethnic Museums,” A1.

⁵³ Zamarano, Interview.

⁵⁴ Flores and Benmayor, “Constructing Cultural Citizenship,” 5.

⁵⁵ Cotter, “Pride of Place,” E1.

Museums are no longer only serve as temples of priceless art and material culture. These institutions now engage the public, giving them a place for education, expression, identification, and affirmation - not just a place to revere ancient masters. Latino museums emphasize the histories, traditions, cultural events, and racial mixing of their immigrants and descendant communities. These institutions represent years of activism and relentless efforts on the part of numerous individuals. Many people view the establishment of Latino museums as a milestone for this culture. As their community bases expand, these institutions will assist in the future assimilation of Latino immigrants as well as the preservation and promotion of the unique heritage they bring with them.

Latino museums in the United States

Art Museum of the Americas, OAS; Washington, DC, founded 1976

Baca House and Pioneer Museum; Trinidad, CO, part of Colorado Historical Society

Casa Navarro State Historic Site; Texas, founded 1975

Centro Cultural de la Mision; San Francisco, CA, founded 1977

Centro Cultural de la Raza; San Diego, CA

Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture; Miami, FL, founded 1985

El Museo del Barrio; New York, NY, founded 1969

El Museo Latino; Omaha, Nebraska, founded 1993

Florida Museum of Hispanic and Latin American Art; Miami, FL, founded 1991

La Raza/Galeria Posada; Sacramento, CA, founded 1972

Latino Museum of History, Art and Culture; Los Angeles, CA, founded 1985

Los Colores; Corrales, NM, founded 1990

Mexic-Arte Museum; Austin, TX, founded 1984

Mexican American Historical Society; Scottsbluff, NE

Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum; Chicago, IL, founded 1982

Mexican Museum; San Francisco, CA, founded 1975

Museo Chicano; Phoenix, AZ

Museo de las Americas; Denver, CO, founded 1991

Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, New York, NY

Museum of Latin American Art; Long Beach, CA, founded 1996

Plaza de la Raza; Los Angeles, CA, founded 1969

Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Chicago, IL, founded 1972

El Museo del Barrio information from museum website

“When Puerto Rican educators, artists and community activists founded El Museo del Barrio in 1969, they envisioned an educational institution that would reflect the richness of their culture. Thirty years later, as New York City's only Latino museum dedicated to Puerto Rican, Caribbean and Latin American art, El Museo retains its strong community roots as a place of cultural pride and self-discovery, yet projects itself nationally through exciting exhibitions and programs.

“As we enter the next millenium, El Museo del Barrio will continue to offer a forum for the unique creative languages of the varied communities of caribbean and Latin American descent, and to provide positive role models for cultural exchange. Come visit us.

“El Museo es tu museo.

“El Museo del Barrio was founded in 1969 by a group of Puerto Rican parents, educators, artists and community activists in East Harlem's Spanish-speaking el barrio, the neighborhood that extends from 96th Street to the Harlem River and from Fifth Avenue to the East River on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The contexts of El Museo's founding were the national civil rights movement and, in the New York City art world, the campaign that called for major art institutions to decentralize their collections and to represent a variety of non-European cultures in their collections and programs.

“From the outset, El Museo defined itself as an educational institution and a place of cultural pride and self-discovery for the founding Puerto Rican community. Initially El Museo operated in a public school classroom as an adjunct to the local school district; then, between 1969 and 1976, El Museo moved to a series of storefronts on Third and Lexington Avenues, in the heart of el barrio. In 1977 El Museo found a permanent home in the spacious, neo-classical Heckscher Building at 1230 Fifth Avenue.

“The move to upper Fifth Avenue allowed El Museo to maintain contact with its core community yet reach out to a wider non-Latino audience. In 1978 El Museo became a founding member of the Museum Mile Association, nine of the city's most distinguished cultural institutions along 20 historic and scenic blocks on Fifth Avenue, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Jewish Museum, and The Museum of the City of New York. The accessibility of the site, participation in this prestigious association, one of New York City's major tourist attractions, and a growing interest in Latin American art have brought a huge increase in our non-Latino visitors, today about 40% of our audience.

“In 1977 El Museo was made a member of the Cultural Institutions Group of the City of New York by an act of public policy of the Mayor of New York. This organization encompasses 31 cultural institutions housed in city-owned buildings, from large, world-famous ones like The Metropolitan Museum of Art, to small, community-based ones like El Museo. Through substantial funding, CIG membership acknowledges the importance of the cultural services these institutions render to the population of New York City.

“El Museo's educational mission continues to drive its collections and programs. At the same time, El Museo has broadened its mission, collections, and programs in response to substantial growth in the Mexican, Central and South American, and Caribbean communities, both in New York and nationally. El Museo's permanent collection remains a treasured resource for developing exhibitions and education programs. In recent years the public programs have been developed to address the educational needs of diverse populations—seniors, adults, adolescents, public school students, and very young visitors. Currently, El Museo has in place an experienced, professional staff, including the first generation of Latinos/as to specialize in the arts and to be trained in curatorial practice.

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