LATINO ART & CULTURE

FROM THE SERIES

AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

Mixing Cultures and Blending Influences
A Latino or a Latina is an American whose cultural roots are in Latin America: Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, or Central or South America. Like the peoples of Latin America, Latinos are not only of Spanish descent. Rather, theirs is a mixture of European, indigenous, and African heritage. In many cases, Latinos do not refer to themselves with just the umbrella term Latino. Like German or Chinese Americans, many also identify with the country or place from which they or their ancestors hail. Thus Latinos may refer to themselves as Spanish Americans, Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, Dominican Americans, Nicaraguan Americans, Colombian Americans, and so on. In a fashion similar to other ethnic groups such as African Americans or Irish Americans, each Latino contingent brings a unique cultural heritage and social and historical experience to life in the United States. The contribution of each alters and enriches the fabric of American society.

The work of visual artists of every ethnic heritage often contains references to their historical or cultural roots. In addition to these ethnic influences, artists are also affected by other stylistic trends and by environmental influences and personal experiences.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

Jesús Bautista Moroles is a Mexican-American sculptor whose work contains references to his historical and cultural roots. Granite Weaving [fig. 8], for example, recalls certain elements reminiscent of the architecture of the Pre-Columbian Aztec and Maya civilizations. In this relief sculpture, Moroles uses stacked blocks and slabs of gray granite, strongly recalling the construction techniques and composition of pyramids built by these ancient peoples [fig. 9].

OBJECTIVES

1. To define the terms Latino and Latina
2. To describe and analyze historical, social, and cultural sources that inform the work of Latino artists
Fig. 8. Jesús Bautista Moroles, *Granite Weaving*, 1988, Georgia gray granite, 245.1 x 193 x 25.4 cm (96 1/2 x 76 x 10 in.). Gift of Frank Ribelin
Other influences found in this work reflect certain experiences Moroles had as a child and young adult. He spent several boyhood summers in Rockport, Texas, with an uncle, a master stonemason trained in Monterrey, Mexico. They worked on a variety of stone construction projects, including a Gulf Coast seawall. The skills Moroles would need later as a sculptor were further strengthened through drafting, electronics, mathematics, and woodworking courses he took at North Texas State University in Denton, Texas, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1979. Moroles spent the next year immersing himself in the classical European sculptural tradition by working in a foundry at Pietrasanta, Italy, not far from the quarries at Carrara. These two important towns date back to ancient Rome, and during the Italian Renaissance, sculptors, including Michelangelo, chose their stone there.

Moroles returned to the United States in 1980, settling in Waxahachie, Texas, where he began to create the monumental granite sculptures for which he is best known. By 1982 he had moved his studio to Rockport, where he continues to live and work today.

Rather than carve granite, Moroles prefers to extend the limits of this extremely hard stone in other ways. He uses modern tools and engineering technologies to assemble pieces of cut stone into new configurations. Granite Weaving reflects his signature vocabulary, combining rough-hewn, irregular surfaces with smooth, highly controlled geometric shapes. Horizontal slabs of smooth stone emerge from the rough granite. The tentative projections at the top gradually intensify through the dramatic interplay of light and shadow as each descending tier reveals more stone. In addition to the architectural reference to the stepped pyramids of ancient Mexico, the title, Granite Weaving, and the pattern also seem to suggest an interlocking basket or textile design.
Agueda Martinez is a weaver who lives in Medanales, New Mexico, near Santa Fe. Martinez’ designs reflect textile traditions from the time of the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century. One of her sources is Spanish textile weavings, introduced in New Mexico by the early Spanish settlers along the Rio Grande River; another is the local tradition produced in New Mexico and southern Colorado by the indigenous Pueblo and Navajo peoples. Martinez’ work demonstrates a fusion of both cultural influences through her materials, techniques, and designs.

The Spanish introduced sheep to provide food and wool to the Rio Grande area, and Martinez’ use of wool and a treadle loom reflects that Spanish influence [fig. 10]. She also has gained recognition for designs, such as the one seen here, made from recycled cotton clothing and rags, which are related to the traditions of the indigenous peoples in the use of cotton rather than wool. Martinez’ designs also reflect a blend of Spanish and indigenous patterns, ranging from the simplified northern Mexican Saltillo designs of early Rio Grande Spanish settlers [fig. 11] to modified Navajo types such as serrate diamonds woven as zigzag stripes and Pueblo patterns of solid, alternating stripes. In Tapestry Weave Rag Rug Jerga [fig. 12], Martinez has fused these Spanish and indigenous influences into an individualized pattern of horizontal striped designs incorporating both Rio Grande-inspired serrate diamonds and Pueblo patterns. In addition, the solid bands at the top and bottom and the repeated serrate diamond-patterned stripes also reflect the weaving traditions of Chimayó, another small New Mexican town near Medanales. She calls this weaving a jerga because it is coarsely woven.

fig. 12. Agueda Martinez, Tapestry Weave Rag Rug Jerga, 1995, woven cotton cloth, 133.3 x 206.9 cm (52 1/2 x 81 1/2 in.). Museum purchase in part through the Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program.
Cuban-born Ana Mendieta came to the United States as a child in the early 1960s and later studied at the Center for the New Performing Arts at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Her sculpture and performance pieces reflect several influences. The international body art and performance art movements of the 1970s suggested her use of her own body or other female forms to create ephemeral sculptures that became performances. *Anima (Alma/Soul)* [fig. 13], a performance artwork documented through a series of five photographs, also reflects elements of her Cuban heritage. Mendieta creates a sense of drama with fire, an element symbolizing regeneration that is integral to Santeria, a Latin-American synthesis of Roman Catholicism and the Yoruban religion of slaves from West Africa who were brought to Latin America beginning in the early sixteenth century. Many of the practices associated with Santeria, such as sacred dances and the designation of deities by colorful necklaces, reflect the Yoruban religion more than Catholicism. In *Anima (Alma/Soul)*, Mendieta has constructed a female form from an armature of bamboo and fireworks. As the fireworks are lit, the form can be seen fully illuminated. The series of photographs document the reduction of the form as the fireworks gradually extinguish themselves. Regeneration is the central theme in this work. The use of fireworks and the dancing

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**Fig. 13.** Ana Mendieta, *Anima (Alma/Soul)*, 1976, from series of five photographs documenting the performance piece constructed from bamboo and fireworks, ea. 31.7 x 49.5 cm (12 1/2 x 19 1/2 in.). Museum purchase in part through the Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program.
of the resultant flames suggest the regenerative nature of fire associated with the practices of Santeria; the placement of the figure on a cross makes a strong identification with Christ’s crucifixion. The *sagrado corazón*, or Sacred Heart of Jesus, an important Catholic symbol representing Christ’s compassion, is the last light to be extinguished in this dramatic performance piece.

**Alfredo Arreguín** is a Mexican American whose paintings, including *Sueño* (*Dream: Eve Before Adam*) [fig. 14], contain densely patterned surfaces with precise details rendered in rich, jewel-like colors. The sources for his paintings are as complex as the works themselves, often including diverse references from Central America, Europe, and the Near East. Arreguín was born in Morelia, Michoacán, a dry region in central Mexico. As a young man he worked on a construction project in the rain forest of the state of Guerrero, where he developed a respect and love for such lush environments. At the age of twenty-three, Arreguín moved from Mexico City to the United States to attend the University of Washington in Seattle. The temperate rain forests of the Olympic Peninsula, located near his new home, rekindled his earlier Guerrero impressions. Since the death of the Brazilian environmental activist Chico Mendes, Arreguín has painted many lush and beautiful tributes to rain-forest ecosystems.

In his **triptych** *Sueño* (*Dream: Eve Before Adam)*, the dense patterns typical of the artist’s work both reveal and conceal plant, animal, and human forms symbolizing Eve, female goddesses, and protector figures. In each panel the face of Frida Kahlo [fig. 15], the Mexican artist and wife of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, can be discovered by searching through the complex forms of the highly

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**Fig. 14. Alfredo Arreguín, Sueño (Dream: Eve Before Adam), 1992, oil on canvas in three panels, overall: 183.5 x 366.4 cm (72 1/4 x 144 1/4 in.). Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and the Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program**

**Fig. 15. Portrait of Frida Kahlo by Peter A. Juley. Peter A. Juley & Son Collection, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution**
animated surface. Further scrutiny of the three large panels in this painting reveals a host of other images that allude to past and present Mexican cultural sources, including Pre-Columbian architectural ruins and the rich colors, teeming life, and overwhelming presence of the lush tropical environment.

The California artist Larry Fuente infuses his mixed-media sculptures with richly patterned surfaces that transform ordinary things into unique objects of splendor and delight. One of the influences present in Game Fish [fig. 16] can be attributed to the tradition of contemporary Latino folk art in which everyday objects are richly ornamented. Every square inch of the fish is covered with lines or fields of scintillating plastic beads or other baubles. These colorful surface patterns and designs accentuate and emphasize the essential shape of the form underneath. Fuente approached surface ornamentation like a painter; but instead of using pigments, he “colored” the surface of the fish with intensely hued, mass-produced toys, ensuring that the final creation is chromatically balanced and harmonic.

*Game Fish* also fits within the sensibility of Chicano rasquachismo:

> In the realm of taste, to be rasquache is to be unfettered and unrestrained, to favor the elaborate over the simple, the flamboyant over the severe. Bright colors... are preferred to sombre, high intensity to low, the shimmering and sparkling to the muted and subdued. The rasquache inclination piles pattern on pattern, filling all available space with bold display. Ornamentation and elaboration prevail, joined to a delight for texture and sensuous surface.


In addition to its Latino folk art and Chicano rasquachismo associations, *Game Fish* also possesses a double meaning. On the one hand, it is indeed game, in this case a sailfish. On the other, many of the objects with which it is adorned are real games or game components: badminton shuttlecocks, poker chips, dominoes, dice, chess pieces, ping-pong balls, even an array of overlapping toy pinball machines. Alphabet blocks and Scrabble tiles spell out “Game Fish” along the body of the fish.

The great dorsal fin is covered with successive layers of other game-related paraphernalia, including a host of figurines from athletic trophies.
ACTIVITIES

1. The sophistication of the Native American cultures of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca civilizations amazed European explorers in the sixteenth century. Aspects of modern society continue to be affected by influences that can be traced back to these ancient civilizations. Working individually or in small groups, determine major subject headings such as architectural design, technological innovation, governmental structure, language and literature, or agricultural products and farming methods. List contributions made by each culture in chart form. Discuss ways in which your everyday life and home or community environment reflect these influences. Achievements of these civilizations are discussed on pages 8–10 of A History of the United States by Daniel J. Boorstin and Brooks M. Kelley with Ruth Frankel Boorstin (Needham, Mass.: Ginn and Co., 1986).

2. Many factors influence our choices in the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the music we listen to, the way we decorate our environments, and the activities we participate in. Spend part of a class period discussing what some of these influences are, and assign a reporter for each group to share your findings with the rest of the class.

3. As a class project, organize a weaving exhibition. Collect different examples of weaving and talk about similarities and differences between them in terms of materials used, design, and technique. Write a label for each object, including information you think visitors would like to know or should know about individual pieces.

4. Study the panel of Alfredo Arreguín's triptych Sueño (Dream: Eve Before Adam), printed in color on the front cover of the Study Guide. Make a list of any cultural, historical, architectural, geographical, and botanical references that you see. As a class project, create a mural design on white paper using paint or black and colored felt-tipped markers. Include cultural, historical, and architectural references to your community. Embed them within a patterned surface that reflects the flora and fauna of where you live.
**ARTISTS’ BIOGRAPHIES**

**Alfredo Arreguín**
Painter, born in 1935 in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico. At age nine, Arreguín became the youngest pupil at the Morelia School of Fine Art. At age thirteen he moved to Mexico City, living there for eleven years until he came to the United States in 1959. Arreguín is currently a resident of Seattle, where he earned B.A. and M.F.A. degrees from the University of Washington. He has received numerous awards, including a Humanitarian Award by the Washington State Legislature, a Governor’s Arts Award from the State of Washington, and a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship Grant.

**Larry Fuente**
Sculptor, born in 1947 in Chicago. After attending the Kansas City Art Institute in 1967—68, Fuente moved to Mendocino, California, and since the late 1960s has concentrated on work with an overriding interest in surface ornamentation and decoration.

**Agueda Martinez**
Weaver, born in 1898 in Chamita, New Mexico. Attending primary school until 1913, Martinez first began to weave rag rugs at the age of twelve. In 1916 she married a weaver and schoolteacher and by 1937 had given birth to ten children. Martinez learned to weave tapestry wool blankets in 1921 from Lorenzo Trujillo of Río Chiquito, New Mexico. In addition to weaving on a contract basis for various blanket dealers in New Mexico, she has taught weaving through the Home Education and Livelihood Programs (HELP) in Hernández and Abiquiu, New Mexico. Martinez is a recipient of the New Mexico Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts.

**Ana Mendieta (1948—1985)**
Sculptor, performance and conceptual artist, born in Havana, Cuba. Mendieta came to the United States in 1961 and spent her adolescence in Iowa. The trauma of dislocation from her family and homeland is a recurrent theme in her work. Mendieta died from injuries sustained in a tragic fall from a window in her New York City apartment building at the age of 37.

**Jesús Bautista Morales**
Sculptor, born in 1950 in Corpus Christi, Texas. Morales grew up in Dallas and graduated with a B.F.A. from North Texas State University in 1978. Morales is a recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and an Awards in the Visual Arts Fellowship. His largest public commission is the Houston Police Officers Memorial in Houston, a massive granite earthwork completed in 1992. Morales received an Artist Award from the American Institute of Architects in Houston in 1995.