



Sofía Duarte\*

## Auctions in Mexico: Art in Movement

**M**exico's auction market is very new. In Europe and the United States auction houses have been operating for more than 250 years, while in Mexico, the oldest one is Morton Subastas, established thirty-five years ago by Luis C. López Morton as a gallery for selling antiques on consignment.

A year after launching operations, it held its first auction, and since then has been the scene for momentous events. A little after opening its doors, the founder realized that many collectors in Mexico needed to sell their works but had no appropriate

forum for it. So, inspired by the English auction model, he created specialized departments that could cover this need. That's how the Modern Art Department came into being, where twenty-six years later I would have the opportunity to work.

With time, the department itself has specialized in different kinds of auctions, among them, graphic works, contemporary art, and Latin American art, which has grown the most in importance. It includes creators from Mexico to Patagonia and not only artists born in the region, but those who have been inspired or produced their work there.

Interest in Latin American art emerged in the early twentieth century when U.S. businessmen began to see Mexico as an important producer of art. They, in turn, developed big projects, which is why

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art from this part of the world began to be found in the U.S. market and its auction houses. However, the houses did not know how to categorize the works, because they did not fit into any of the existing categories. Mary-Anne Martin, working at Sotheby's, was the one who noticed this new market and traveled to Mexico. Here, she met Inés Amor, who headed up Mexico's first art gallery and was responsible for disseminating many of the most important local artists. This visit opened up a new panorama for Mary-Anne, who, upon her return to the United States, held a small auction of a few more than thirty lots of Latin American art. It was so successful that in 1979, the first full-fledged auction of Latin American art was held, which since then takes place twice a year.

In Mexico, the first Latin American art auction was held in June 2010. We had tried to hold one before that, but since we worked on consignment, we hadn't been able to gather enough works of the caliber an auction required. In 2010, we received a significant collection of work by Francisco Toledo. This allowed us to organize the very successful first auction: for the first time the public talked about Latin American art in Latin America itself, leading collectors from the world over to seek us out to grow their collections and even sell a piece or so.

Year after year, we see works with great history pass through this auction. One of the most memorable is the screen by David Alfaro Siqueiros, painted when he was in Lecumberri Prison, for the play *Licenciado no te apures* (Not to Worry, Counselor). Painted on both sides, the screen was one of a pair conceived as the backdrop for the play. The whereabouts of one of the screens was unknown for a long time until we found it in 2015, dismantled and packed up in an apartment hallway. We had to remove a window to get the piece down to the street, and then have a specialized team restore it so it could once again be put together and be presented at auction. It caused a flurry of interest among Siqueiros researchers since they hadn't known where it was; and after the sale, it was put on public display again with its other half in the place that Siqueiros originally made it for: the Lecumberri "Black Palace."

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from private collections that have not been seen by the public or specialists for many years; sometimes, they are even unknown to art scholars. The auctions are public, so anyone can get their catalogues and see the results. When specialists follow our auctions, they discover previously unknown works or pieces that can complete a museographical discourse they are working on. This means we're in constant communication with museums and specialists, and, if they need a particular piece for exhibition or a high-definition image for a publication, we're happy to provide them.

One of the most gratifying feelings I've had is, when going through a museum exhibition, coming upon a piece that has passed through my hands, that I discovered in someone's home, that I negotiated for, catalogued, met the owners of, and learned the history of.

These exchanges with specialists and the artists themselves are very important for auction houses. We sometimes help them locate a piece and they very often support us with their knowledge. One of auction houses' most important jobs is to authenticate each piece. If possible, we try to review them with the artists themselves, or, if that's not feasible, with specialists, who even share valuable information with us about the context they were made in, the exhibitions they have been in, or the reason they were created. All this information is included in the catalogue and helps buyers know more about the piece that interests them, which is to their advantage since it means they're acquiring a piece that will not create problems for them later.

The auction sale results we publish contain very valuable information for collectors and artists alike. At galleries, all negotiations are private; the sales

figures and how the prices of their work behave is not shared with the public. Auction houses, on the other hand, publish all the pieces they have handled, including the ones that didn't sell. Websites like Artprice and Artnet gather the worldwide results of auctions and provide the tools so anyone can find the results by artist, or even look into specific formats like graphics or sculpture.

This information is very valuable for appraisers, who use the sites to establish the value of a work in order to insure it or to establish a person's wealth. Web page data bases provide references to renowned artists, but also information about relatively unknown artists or those whose work is difficult to find. This makes them a frequently used tool, even for researchers and curators, to look for pieces they need for their exhibitions, as well as to complete or reaffirm their curatorial discourse. The artists and galleries themselves use them for sales, to see what amounts have been paid for the works auctioned off.

In general, our auctions handle works by established artists who already have a career and name-recognition, who have been exhibited and published. However, contemporary artists just starting their careers need a space for their work to be seen. That's why for the last eight years we have been holding an auction specialized in contemporary art titled "This Is Now." It has grown year by year, diversifying the formats and artists it includes.

This has helped attract new collectors and a younger audience who are beginning to see art as a form of investment. We have been able to include pieces with different formats, such as video art, documentation of performance art, installations, video, and even non-fungible tokens, or NFT.

In 2021, we auctioned an NFT for the first time in Latin America, working together with Juan Carlos del Valle, who was planning his first approach to digital art. With our help, he was able to do so. For the first time, we accompanied an artist through his creative process, advising him on licensing, contracts, and the implications of having to convert a digital work into an NFT. The piece was very successfully auctioned on June 24, thus opening the door to these projects and bringing this emerging art form to our collectors.<sup>1</sup>

One of the main obstacles we've faced is the preconceived ideas people have about auctions. Movies have shown us that auctions are unreachable, that you need an invitation to go, and you have to have millions of dollars to participate. But, in my time at Morton, I've discovered that this isn't true, that we have to shed our fears in order to approach this world. Of course, there are specialized auctions where we've had works that brought world-record sale prices, but we also have others that are accessible, where anyone can purchase works by their favorite artist at very attractive prices.

Auctions are a unique experience. Many have compared them to the excitement in a casino, with adrenaline running through the veins of the people raising their paddles and looking daggers at anyone who wants to win their lot so they can later hang it on their walls and relive the moment every time they walk by it. Living with art changes spaces, allows us to have a creative place far away from day-to-day events. Even during lockdown, it has allowed us to expand the mind and get out of our houses.

It isn't necessary to be a buyer to go to an auction. Before the auction itself, we always hold exhibitions open to the public that anyone can attend, whether a potential buyer, an art aficionado, a student, or just a member of the public. It's an opportunity to discover works from different times, with different discourses and materials in a single place. And many of them are pieces that, after the auction, will return to a private collection, making this an opportunity to see works that are seldom on view.

In Mexico, a great deal remains to be explored in the auction market, making it a fine opportunity to participate and acquire a great work of art at very attractive prices. **MM**

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For more about this piece, see "Viva' el primer NFT de Juan Carlos del Valle," Morton Subastas, [https://mortonsubastas.com/subastando/?p=1505&utm\\_source=Morton+Subastas+Mailing&utm\\_campaign=363b6b6171-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2020\\_10\\_12\\_08\\_29\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_6eba03a9b5-363b6b6171-](https://mortonsubastas.com/subastando/?p=1505&utm_source=Morton+Subastas+Mailing&utm_campaign=363b6b6171-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_10_12_08_29_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6eba03a9b5-363b6b6171-) [Editor's Note.]