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REPRESENTATIONS OF ARGENTINE NATIONAL IDENTITY VIA EL MUSEO NACIONAL DE BELLAS ARTES

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Abstract

National identity is a concept that every nation constructs and celebrates through the remembrance of important events or persons, the projection of literary works, and the erection of monuments. Yet, in order to truly understand a nation's self-imagery, one must examine and chart all of its different periods through time. This allows one to avoid narrow, static definitions by viewing a nation in a more holistic sense. In this study, it is hypothesized that museums function to preserve, assert, and disseminate a sense of heritage and, in the case of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, a sense of what being Argentinean has historically meant and currently signifies during a time of change and uncertainty. Museums accomplish this through schematically grouping their works by time period, artist, and subject material. This arrangement conveys an impression of Argentinean history, the attitudes and values of its citizenry, and its cultural traditions.

Introduction

Most study-abroad programs are specifically designed so that students have ample time to travel and acclimate to a new environment. As a study abroad student in Argentina, I took advantage of this freedom, spending much of my time exploring the city of Buenos Aires. My lodging was centrally located in La Recoleta, a wealthy neighborhood that is also the home of many cultural centers, *ferias* (outdoor markets), plazas, cafes, and museums. La Recoleta is also in close proximity to what is known as the *Milla de Museos* (the mile of museums). Stretching along one of the city's busiest highways, and ironically the city's most frequented running and biking trail, this mile contained more than ten museums dedicated to transportation, fashion, indigenous art, modern art, and national art. Many foreigners are intrigued by all that is defined as "Argentinean"; one way to absorb the culture is to spend time perusing its museums, learning Argentine history and myth, identifying its famous figures and reliving its historic events.

The museum that will be described in this paper, *El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* (The National Museum of Fine Arts), is shown in Figure 1. This is Argentina's first art museum, inaugurated on December 25, 1896. It has been relocated twice since then to its current location in a plaza on the edge of La Recoleta and Palermo, another wealthy neighborhood, which together comprise the area of the city known as Barrio Norte. There are three permanent exhibits at the museum. On the main floor there is an exhibit dedicated to European art from the Middle Ages to the 20th century that is considered to be the most important collection of European art in South America. The other two permanent exhibits are dedicated to 19th and 20th century Argentine art; they include works by foreign painters who visited Argentina during this era. At the time of my visit, there was also a temporary exhibition space that housed a collection for the nation's bicentennial.



Figure 1. El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes



Figure 2. La Casa Rosada

Interestingly, the façade of El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes is pink; this is worth noting since, in Buenos Aires, the only neighborhoods where bright colors are common are the southernmost areas of La Boca and San Telmo; in the microcenter and Barrio Norte (including La Recoleta), colors are much more subdued.

La Casa Rosada (The Pink House), shown in Figure 2, is the first site to which tourists are directed upon their arrival in Buenos Aires. It is the seat of the Argentine government located in the center of the city, overlooking the port that gave the nation its wealth. The entire city radiates out from this landmark site. It does not appear to be a coincidence that the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes mimics this design as an affiliation with the symbol of the nation. The concept of national identity is a matter that every nation must actively construct. Whether through holidays in remembrance of important events or persons, the projection of certain literary works, or the erection of monuments, every nation consciously lays down a framework through which its citizens envision themselves as part of something larger (Ben-Amos & Weissberg, 1999).

Background

Throughout this paper, we examine the following four sections of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes: 19th and 20th century Argentine Art, Arte Rioplatense, Arte Europeo, and the temporary exhibit Bicentenario: Imágenes Paralelas (Bicentennial: Parallel Images). This exploration investigates the ways in which the pieces in the museum, and the coinciding descriptions of those pieces, attempt to create an “official” or “authentic” history of the nation. In an attempt to describe how nations share their history, Dan Ben-Amos and Liliane Weissberg state:

Since the late eighteenth century, the political demands on memory have been particularly strong. The invention of nation-states called for a common past as well as a common future. Monuments urged the individual to remember, but to remember and define each individual as a member of a larger group. Museums were constructed as national museums and opened to the public as institutions representative of a shared past (1999, p. 12-13).

Museums are crucial to the understanding of national identity in that they contain material culture that represents the past for those living in the present. However, as Pierre Nora (1989) asserts, there are many differences between memory and history. History is a reconstruction and reconstructions are always problematic and incomplete. In other words, history is an attempt to conceive the relative, to find patterns, to make connections, to analyze and criticize. Throughout the detailed case study of the history of France, Pierre Nora explains that “each historian was convinced that his task consisted in establishing a more positive, all encompassing, and explicative memory” (p. 10). This memory then needs to be presented and dispersed, hence “sites of memory”, or “the embodiment of memory in certain sites” (p. 7). The fact is that because we no longer live in “real environments of memory,” according to Nora, we must invent them. Hence monuments and museums are constructed. “Lieux de memoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (p. 12). National museums fit neatly into this schema because “Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events” (p. 22). The Museo Nacional is just such a site of memory. So while museums function to preserve, assert, and disseminate a sense of heritage and, in the case of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, a sense of what being Argentinean has meant throughout the years and what it currently means, we must always remember the necessary flaws that are inherent in this type of facility.

Another case study regarding this problematic dichotomy comes from anthropologist Richard Flores (2002), who explores how the Alamo's transformation into an American cultural icon helped to shape social, economic, and political relations between Anglo and Mexican Texans from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries. Transformations of this sort that involve the “remembrance” of events, time periods, and persons also involve the active process of erasure of certain truths. Representations, especially those within various genres of public and popular culture, are always “entangled with official historical discourses” (p. 8). This transformative process, in the case of the Alamo, signified “a radical difference between ‘Anglos’ and ‘Mexicans’ so as to cognize and codify the social relations circulating at the beginning of the twentieth century” (p. 10). Throughout this paper I will demonstrate how the representational practices at El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes participate in a similar transformation and constitution of Argentinean national identity.

However, first we must determine why museums should be studied as a reflection of national identity. James Clifford (1997), academic historian and critic, suggests that “museums express the interests of nation-states. Wherever local custom, tradition, art (elite or popular), history, science, and technology are collected and displayed -- for purposes of prestige, political mobilization, commemoration, tourism, or education -- museums and museum-like institutions can be expected to emerge” (p. 216). So what caused the emergence of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1896, and why has it continued to be a prominent museum for the last 106 years? In 1896 Argentina still held its status as one of the ten wealthiest nations in the world. Economically, the nation's peers were Switzerland, Belgium, Britain, and four former English colonies including the United States (Glaeser, 2009). Buenos Aires came to be known affectionately as “the Paris of the Americas” and the population reveled in that image. City planners fostered that image through broad avenues, public architecture, and by encouraging the developing café culture. They also looked to their European peers for cultural trends.

In 1753 the first national public museum, the British Museum, was founded in London. France followed suit several years later with the Louvre and other European nations joined in as

well. Argentina embraced this practice and built its own national museum, not to mention several theatres and opera houses that also stemmed from European tradition. The museum's original home was on The Bon Marché on the Calle Florida. Built in the style of its namesake in Paris, it was situated in the elite neighborhoods of the city. In 1910, the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes relocated to the Plaza San Martin, in the center of town, and was housed within a palace made of iron and glass that had served as the Argentine Pavilion at the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris and which had been shipped back to Buenos Aires after the Exhibition's conclusion.

International exhibitions were precursors for museum exhibitions beginning in the mid-1800's. Stemming from a history of trade fairs and industrial exhibits, world's fairs were an extension and exaggeration of this concept. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains the importance of world's fairs as follows:

In spectacular exhibition halls, the nations of the world compared themselves, competed for preeminence, and projected a utopian future built on the machine, international trade, and world peace. Whole cities were built to accommodate these fairs, and millions of people attended them. Coming as they did with the growing military and economic power of modern nation-states, the consolidation of large colonial empires, the mass migration of populations, and the rapid rise of industrialization, world's fairs offer for analysis a virtual phantasmagoria of 'imagined communities' and invented traditions. (1998, p. 79)

The fact that the national museum was moved from its original location into the same exhibition structure used to represent Argentina at the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris is not a coincidence. Argentina was actively constructing the idea of the "national" for not only the world, but for itself as well. From the origination of the museum's concept to its physical relocation within Argentina's capital city, the "national" museum proved to be strongly influenced by European traditions.

Yet while this museum actively seeks to define the contours of Argentina's identity, the first exhibit consists of a European Art collection. This seems somewhat remarkable, particularly considering that Argentina had fought a war for independence from Spain and European influence beginning in 1810. Thus, it begs the question as to why the museum curators have chosen to display the pieces of European art ahead of the pieces chosen to represent Argentinean art. As one response, it is important to note that Buenos Aires, from its foundation, has been tied inextricably to Europe; while it enjoys autonomy from its European colonial rulers, the city still defines itself as "European." Travel writers, tourists, and citizens alike still make reference to the "European feel" that the city's planners originally cultivated. Indeed, current population demographics indicate that more than 86% of the immigrant descendants self-identify as having European descent; in addition, approximately 60% of Argentineans declare some degree of Italian descent (Simon, 2011).

In terms of immigration, Article 25 of Argentina's 1853 Constitution indicates that the "Federal government will encourage European immigration" (Georgetown University, 2008). Aline Helg (1990) argues that Argentina's immigration policy was a result of the scientific racism of the period that disregarded the racial heterogeneity that characterized the society in favor of closer connections to Europe. For Argentina, this was amplified by indigenous genocide campaigns of the 1870's and 1880's and the pre-existing racial blending of the black community with Spaniards during the colonial period; as a result, today the population defines itself as overwhelmingly white.

A policy whereby Argentina explicitly and intentionally ‘whitened’ their society and whereby city planners created a ‘European’ layout was encouraged and upheld by Juan Bautista Alberdi (1886) and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, two prominent Argentine writers of the day who agreed that for economic and cultural reasons, Europe was the ‘ideal’. Alberdi (1886) supports his racist ideas when he writes, “even if one makes the “gaucho and the chola, fundamental share of our popular masses, go through the transformation of the best education system; not even in a hundred years will you get an English worker” (p. 128). In regard to the Argentine populace, Sarmiento (1884) noted: “how many years, if not centuries, will it take to lift up those degraded spirits to the level of cultivated men?” (p. 76). Using the example of the United States, Sarmiento (1845) asserted that not only was European immigration necessary but Northern Anglo-Saxon Europe immigration was required (p. 64). While immigration exclusively from Northern Europe was not the result, as demonstrated by the demographic statistics of the percentage of Spanish and Italian descendants from Southern Europe, it is important to realize that the general European preference promoted by these key literary figures prevails even today. For instance, many Argentinians are fascinated by light skin and hair and utilize any method necessary to achieve this look. In addition to the people themselves, one of the main reasons why Argentina has a European ambience is because the city plan was originally and purposefully constructed to lend that ambience.

Thus, the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes’ affiliation with Europe as the first projected concept of the ‘national’ Argentine identity is supported by the history of its racist policies and practices. Yet, why then was the museums’ temporary exhibition devoted to images of the Bicentenario, the 200-year anniversary of the country’s declaration of independence from Spain? Homi Bhabha offers an explanation for this: “More valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, a [shared] programme to put into effect, or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together” (1990, p. 19). Therefore, proclaiming the importance of the Bicentenario and the event that it commemorates is not contradictory to the nation’s European heritage; rather, it is a reminder of the time since that event by which the nation has alternately thrived and survived.

The Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes is arranged so that visitors progress sequentially through Argentine history. In reference to the founding of Buenos Aires by European colonists in 1536 and then again, permanently in 1580, the main floor consists of the works on European art and the temporary exhibition space. The second floor consists of 19th and 20th century Argentine art and the uppermost third floor is dedicated to modern art. The process of creating a sequential passage through space is an attempt to place objects within a narrative of the historical formation of Argentina and its cultural identity. The pieces contained within those sections are a representation of the national heritage concept and demonstrate how it has evolved over time.

In order to comprehend Argentine national identity, it is necessary to first realize that this narrative has already been created for the museum visitor and that the visitor is experiencing the representation of this constructed history. As James Clifford (1997) asserts:

...from their emergence as public institutions in nineteenth-century Europe, museums have been useful for politics gathering and valuing an ‘us.’ This articulation...collects, celebrates, memorializes, values, and sells (directly and indirectly) a way of life. In the process of maintaining an imagined community, it also confronts ‘others’ and excludes the ‘inauthentic.’ (p. 218)

The visitor, therefore, must not accept everything presented as absolute truth or fact. The history presented within a museum has been subjectively chosen by its curators and community to assert its specific interpretation of events. For the purpose of this discussion, pieces from each section that are representative of the major themes are examined and evaluated for their contribution to the construction of Argentina's national identity.

19th and 20th Century Argentine Art

In order to reach the collections of Argentinean art one must ascend several flights of stairs to the second and third floors. The dim atmosphere that serves to preserve the works, as well as the guards stationed every 20 or so feet, foster a heightened sense of awareness and anticipation. Upon entering, the first images consist of battle scenes from Argentina's war with Paraguay and the subsequent war for independence from Spain - soldiers dressed in uniform, horses poised to charge, and flags raised high in the air - are represented. Other images that emerge include churches in the traditional European style, scenes from the Buenos Aires port (key to the level of trade that allowed Argentina to flourish economically into the twentieth century), an overview of the layout of the city, and several landscape paintings.

The first overarching theme that emerges from these rooms is that nearly every work displayed was created by a European painter who immigrated to Buenos Aires from Italy, France, Brazil, and Scotland. Why is this important? Native citizens of foreign countries who immigrate to a new land arrive with a sense of identity already in place and consequently, they see new lands within the context of what they already know. Immigrants inherently view their new location differently than natives. Hence, their ideas regarding the culture or specific events must be viewed in light of their unique perspectives.

In order to clearly understand this distinction, I have selected the painting *Sin Pan y Sin Trabajo* by Ernesto de la Cárcova as representative of the works displayed by immigrant artists which paints an image of dismay. The scene depicted in this work is a result of the conditions endured by immigrants. They arrived expecting an immediate increase in their standard of living; however, they were directed upon arrival to shanty-town immigrant communities just outside the port area. They then had to compete with the other thousands of new immigrants for the job opportunities that existed; the positions that they found included scant pay and long working hours (Simon, 2011). While the economic situation was certainly not hopeless, it was a disillusioning time for many immigrants. With an influx of immigrants also came profound changes in Argentina's economic and social situation.

The colors, shadows, postures, and subject material of *Sin Pan y Sin Trabajo* (FADU-UBA, 2010a) appear in many of the other pieces completed by immigrant artists during this period. As you will see, while immigrant artists may have had the cultural capital necessary to join the elite class, they also conveyed a sense of solidarity with others from their home countries who were not as fortunate in their new land.

There are only three paintings completed by native Argentinean artists within the section on 19th century art. All three reflect some aspect of the *gaucho* (cattle herder) tradition which was so prominent at this time. Gauchos originally hunted the large herds of escaped cattle and horses that roamed freely, bred prodigiously, and remained free from predators on the extensive pampa plains when Dutch, French, Portuguese, and British traders cultivated a profitable contraband business for hides and tallow. The contraband business proved to be less profitable than selling the beef legitimately; as a result, private owners bought the land, built *estancias* (estates), and then hired the gauchos to drive the cattle onto their property. Through their efforts gauchos became known not only for their skills at animal handling but also for their more

impressive knife skills. In the epic Argentine poem *Martin Fierro* suggests that disputes were typically settled by a knife fight to the death (Hernandez, 1872). Due to their skills and renowned rough nature of the gauchos, when the government needed soldiers to fight in wars, such as the War of Independence from Spain (1810-1816) or the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay (1864-1870), it insisted upon recruiting gauchos. Through this service, most gauchos were killed, leaving behind only the stories of their skills that have earned them the image of folk-heroes. Today, ranch-hands continue to dress in the traditional style of the gauchos and play the guitar for visitors while performing the doggerel verses that the gauchos once sang about their prowess at hunting, fighting, and lovemaking.

The painting *Un Alto en el Campo* (A Stop in the Countryside) by Prilidiano Pueyrredón (1861), is representative of the main themes of these three gaucho pieces. This painting transports the viewer into the *pampa* region, where vast *estancias* (ranches) that account for the renowned Argentinean beef can be found. In the foreground the gauchos (in their traditional dress and wearing the knives for which they were so well known) appear on horseback. They are seen standing by women and drinking *mate* outside of a *pulpería* (outlying saloon or bar). Along the horizon are tiny specks, which represent the cattle. The colors of the painting are bright and vibrant, the culture of the gauchos clearly displayed through their dress and physical presence; their homeland is romantically depicted by the vast open sky and fields.

It is important to consider why representations of the 19th century between immigrant artists and Argentine artists lie in such stark contrast. James Clifford explains this phenomenon in his assertion that “when a community displays itself through spectacular collections and ceremonies, it constitutes an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’” (1997, p. 218). For the purposes of 19th century art, Europeans and those descended from European bloodlines, also known as the *criollo* class, were considered the ‘inside’ of Argentine society. *Mestizos*, or persons of mixed European-Indigenous blood, were considered ‘outside’ Argentine society. These differences were also reflected in the spatial distribution of Buenos Aires at the time. For example, the inner part of the city and the northern sections belonged to the wealthy classes. Even today, households of modest means have been relegated to the southernmost sections of the city where poor immigrants previously resided. The ‘outside’ or ‘other’ during this time period consisted of the Argentineans themselves. Thus, the paintings completed by the immigrants artists depicted life within the city and the paintings completed by the native Argentinean artists depicted life in *el campo*, the region surrounding the city or *la pampa*, the region delegated to the gauchos.

Arte Rioplatense

Before discussing the section on *Arte Rioplatense*, it is important to understand the background of this title. In colonial times, Spain divided its territorial claims in South America into four viceroyalties to gain more efficient control of transported materials and information. The modern nation of Argentina belonged to the Vice Royalty of Rio de la Plata; it also includes areas that today belong to Uruguay and Bolivia. During the war for independence, San Martin, the war hero from Argentina, joined Simon Bolivar, for whom Bolivia is now named, in driving out the Spanish. While there are some vast differences between these countries (for instance the high percentage of Bolivia’s population that claims indigenous heritage), some cultural aspects, especially those between Uruguay and Argentina, are very similar. *Rioplatense* refers to the conjecture of similar cultural traditions that resulted from the interconnectedness of this region. For instance, within this section, painters from Montevideo depicted the tango, Buenos Aires boulevards, wine, and *mate* (an herbal tea that is shared in social settings). This Argentine art is much more diverse than the 19th and 20th century Argentine art. While there are many images of

the tango, of café patrons drinking wine and *mate*, and of the city itself, there are also images of churches, crowds in the streets protesting, men fighting outside bars, interactions between neighbors, and daily consumptions like cigarettes and food. This artwork depicts the activities of the everyday person and the cadence of life as it was lived throughout the last two centuries of Argentina. The formality that characterized the artwork from 19th and 20th Century Argentina disappears and gives way to a casual, observational quality. Viewers feel as though they are looking at a snapshot of a moment in time without the fanfare that previously existed in the depictions of war scenes and in the portraits of city leaders.

These qualities are best represented through the following piece of artwork, *Fiesta de Disfraz* (The Masquerade Party), completed in 1913 by Rafael Barradas. The fashion, the outdoor atmosphere, and the wine in the hands of the revelers are characteristic of middle and upper-class Argentines then and now. Fashion is important to Argentines as they like to be well dressed at all times. What is commonly referred to as ‘business casual’ in the United States is the everyday norm in Argentina. The Center for Cross Cultural Studies provides the following dress code advice to study abroad students:

You’ll find that most Argentine people tend to dress up a little more than what you might be used to back home. You will see young men wearing jeans and t-shirts or soccer jerseys, but you’ll also see a lot of people in nice pants and dressy shoes. Women tend to wear very feminine clothing, even if they’re wearing jeans, and they don’t tend to wear sneakers. Most people get very dressed up to go out at night, and you will probably want to, as well. If you want to fit in a little better with your Argentine peers, don’t wear athletic-looking sweat suits or your pajamas. Nice, fitted clothing is what most people wear, and that is a sure way to blend in as best you can. (Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, 2012)

The prominent café culture of the city is the most obvious feature of the *Fiesta de Disfraz* painting. It is presumed that the persons in the foreground know one another; in the background there are throngs of people mingling alongside one another. This socialization is representative of Argentina; even runners, bikers, and roller bladers participate in group activities or as part of a club. As depicted in the bottle of wine on the center figures’ lap, the wine in Buenos Aires is plentiful; in fact, Argentina enjoys a reputation as one of the world’s top wine producing countries.

The contrasts in the style and origin of artists and artwork beg us to consider the question of authenticity. Who determines what is authentic? Can what is considered ‘authentic’ change over time? The sponsors and curators of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in some sense determine what ‘authentically’ represents the nation of Argentina. When examining the works they have selected to display, their notions of what is and what should be representative of Argentina become clear. First, they believe that the European influence within their nation is unavoidable and deeply ingrained. Hence, one begins the museum experience with European artwork, before proceeding to formal compositions and battle scenes in the European tradition, and then onto art that is representative of the daily atmosphere of Buenos Aires today. For an outsider with little knowledge of historical events, the habitual activities and mannerisms of the nation’s people, included in the 20th century Argentine art and Arte Rioplatense, are more applicable for understanding the Argentine sense of culture and heritage than are the representations of historical events. According to the specific sections of artwork, Argentinean culture includes large, boisterously loud families and friends, meals complemented with wine and *mate*, the sharing of a smoke break, the tradition of attending mass, and an obsession with

the tango. Persons riding on the city's *colectivos* (city buses) often make the sign of the cross when passing a church, wine is had with every meal, and the plazas around the city are constantly brimming with groups of people sharing *mate* or preparing for a *milonga* (gathering of tango dancers). While these traditions are representative of daily life in the 21st century, the formal portraits and battle scenes from 19th century Argentine art were accurate representations of life at that time.

When examining the construction of 'authenticity', it is first necessary to recognize that cultures and nations change and develop over time. In order to truly understand a nation, its history, heritage, culture, and people, one must examine all of its different periods through time. Take for instance the Argentina of the 1800s, before the period of mass immigration that occurred at the end of that century. Nineteenth-century Argentina was home to a predominantly Spanish population, and it did not have the reputation as a world economic power that it acquired through the arrival of the immigrants. This influx of immigrants also provided the Italian influence that is apparent in Argentina's contemporary cultural life. Immigration is a part of Argentina's history; it transformed the country's heritage, culture and demographic composition. Just as immigration is a factor of change, so are changing technology, ideals, leadership, and international exchange. Nations are not static and therefore neither is authenticity. Authentic representations in one period may not be considered authentic representations of the next period; however it is important to note that this does not negate their importance. Thus, one cannot definitively assert "the culture of Argentina can be analyzed through x, y, and z"; rather, one should avoid narrow, static definitions and view a nation in a more holistic sense. After all, it is the combination of different experiences and responses throughout life that are used to determine our identities. *El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes* has embraced this concept by showing the different aspects and attitudes of the nation through the different stages of Argentina's history.

Bicentenario: Parallel images (1810-2010)

In 2010 the entire country of Argentina joined in celebrating the nation's Bicentenario, the 200 year anniversary of the beginning of Argentina's independence from Spain. As part of the Bicentenario many museums and cultural centers around the city of Buenos Aires featured exhibits that highlight the last 200 years of the nation's history. The image that the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes chose to project during the Bicentennial celebration was an untitled photograph of blonde sisters, presumably twins (FADU-UBA, 2010b). The women are dressed in sky-blue bikinis and are seated underneath a broad, aged, yellow and white umbrella. One of the women is pregnant and the other is extremely physically fit; both gaze directly into the camera as though challenging the opinion of those observing them.

This photograph embodies the Bicentenario by depicting the birth of a new nation (the pregnant woman) and the nation that exists 200 years later (her sister), a nation that still shares many of the same features at its foundation, much in the same way that twins share distinctive features. It is an image that leaves little room for ambiguity. This particular photographic image representing the Bicentenario is representative of the overall theme of the exhibit. When Argentina officially declared independence from Spain in 1810, the fledgling nation was in a state of uncertainty. Who would assume power? How would the government be structured? What would become of Argentina's status internationally for trade and politics? While the questions today may be different, the uncertainty that the nation was experiencing in that period is the same uncertainty that the nation is experiencing today. For after a major economic crisis and the fall of political dictatorships, the nation experiences uncertainty once more.

This uncertainty is the predominant feature on the pregnant twin's face. Her forehead is wrinkled, her lips pursed, her eyebrows pushed together, with a gaze that is hard and questioning. What will come of this next stage of life? Her sister, while clearly more relaxed, has a softer version of those questioning features on her face as well. The umbrella is faded and stained while the women's bathing suits, still brilliantly colorful, are clearly new. This is a reference to the potential that the nation holds. Despite its messy political history and economic downturn, Argentina still has hope that it will re-emerge as a major team member on the international scale.

Other images are not as easy to interpret. For instance, the image of naked sunbathers on a rooftop pool, an abstract representation of men going off to various forms of work, a tree that is encircled by a ring of flames, the transformation of a naked man into a cactus, a tango quartet composed of patients from the city's mental hospital, or a *futbol* player shown in the foreground of a landscape that includes a Trojan horse and the Eye of London are much more open to interpretation.

Conclusion

Museums contextualize their pieces through classification or schematic arrangement. The Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes uses both of these methods to create the concept of the 'national'. Its curators provide a logical historical timeline progression beginning with the colonizer in the form of European art. It moved from colony to country as displayed in the 19th and 20th century Argentine Art and Arte Rioplatense. The curators conclude the timeline with an overview of the last 200 years of Argentina as a nation, including the changes that have occurred and the challenges that remain. In doing this they also schematically grouped the paintings by time period, artist, and subject material. The journey through time that is created through the pieces of art conveys an impression of the history of Argentina, the attitudes and values of the country's immigrants and citizens, and the cultural traditions that it values and upholds. The destination of this journey is defined as "collective self-understanding. The museum engaged in the task of imagining the nation must define its location, a responsibility that has repercussions beyond the journey within its walls" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 139). This task of creating a site of memory (Nora, 1989) with which the Argentine people can affiliate makes the viewpoint of El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes more 'real' to the visitor and more of an 'experience' rather than simply a physical visit, culminating in the transmission of an actual 'felt understanding' of Argentine citizenship.

To an Argentinean it is understood that not everything about the nation or its history can be included in the small space allocated for a museum. Yet for a foreign visitor, the images conveyed by the museum may shape a lasting impression of the nation. What is lacking in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes is also important to the identity of Argentina as a nation. The indigenous genocide campaign in the 1880's by Julio Roca and the political dictatorships of the 1900's are merely two examples of nation-defining moments that do not appear in the national museum. It hence becomes the responsibility of the museum visitor to contextualize the images presented within the larger context of the nation's history, one that contains more than simply representative pieces within a designated space.

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