

# Grace McCann Morley and the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs

*by Berit Potter*

*Humboldt State University*



© 2022 by Humboldt State University



## Abstract

While conducting research for my doctoral dissertation, “Grace McCann Morley and the Dialectical Exchange of Modern Art in the Americas, 1935-1958,” I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in order to learn more about Grace McCann Morley’s work with Nelson Rockefeller and the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), through materials in Nelson A. Rockefeller’s personal papers. In 1940, Rockefeller invited Morley, the director of the San Francisco Museum of Art (SFMA; now San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), to serve as an advisor to the CIAA and its Committee on Art. This committee planned exhibitions such as *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana* for Latin American audiences and *Latin American Art* for US audiences. Although my research in the archives did not uncover correspondence between Rockefeller and Morley, it did reveal useful contextual information about Rockefeller’s investment in collecting and exhibiting Latin American art and Morley’s relationship with Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA).

My dissertation, “Grace McCann Morley and the Dialectical Exchange of Modern Art in the Americas, 1935-1958,” examines Morley’s pioneering role in establishing SFMA in its first permanent building, advancing the development of modern art in San Francisco, and promoting collections and exhibitions dedicated to modern Latin American art in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Morley was born in 1900 in Berkeley, California and her family later moved to St. Helena in Napa County, where she spent her childhood.<sup>2</sup> After receiving undergraduate and graduate degrees in French and Greek languages from the University of California, Morley earned a doctorate in French art and literature from the University of Paris. She served as the first general curator of the Cincinnati Art Museum and in 1934, she became the director of SFMA, directly before it opened in its first permanent location on the top floor of the Veterans Building in the War Memorial complex. While acting as the director of SFMA, Morley served as the first head of UNESCO’s Museums Division, which later became the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and established UNESCO’s journal, titled *Museum*. After Morley left San Francisco in 1958, she temporarily served as the assistant director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, before taking a position as the director of the National Museum of India, and later led ICOM’s Regional Agency for South and Southeast Asia.

When SFMA opened in its new location, Morley decided to expand upon the Bay Area’s passion for Diego Rivera, who created his first US murals in San Francisco in 1930 and 1931 (at the California School of Fine Arts and San Francisco Stock Exchange Luncheon Club), by initiating a program of exhibitions dedicated to Latin American art. Morley considered muralism to be the most important expression of modern art in San Francisco and a direct manifestation of Rivera’s presence and impact. Through early exhibitions at SFMA, she deliberately extended the public’s interest in Latin American art beyond Mexico to include work by Bolivian, Colombian, and Peruvian artists such as Antonio Sotomayor, Luis Alberto Acuña, and Julia Codesido. Morley considered Latin American art to be one of “the Museum’s fields of specialization” and ultimately developed an early and important collection of

modern Latin American art at SFMA in part through important donations of works by local collectors such as Albert Bender.<sup>3</sup> As a result of her dedication to Latin American art at SFMA, Morley was selected to curate an exhibition devoted to modern Central and South American art for the 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE), which placed special emphasis on the modern Indigenist artists of Peru, including Codesido and José Sabogal.<sup>4</sup>

Morley's section of the Palace of Fine Arts at the GGIE, titled *South and Central American Art*, attracted fanfare from critics and the fair's attendees, and local collectors made important purchases from the show. The success of the exhibition garnered the attention of Nelson Rockefeller, who invited Morley to serve as an advisor to the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) and its "Committee on Art."<sup>5</sup> The Committee was formed by Rockefeller to organize a traveling exhibition representing modern art from the United States. The exhibition, *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana*, circulated throughout Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean as a tool to secure inter-American cultural allegiances during the Second World War and combat propagandistic exhibitions of German art such as *Grabados Alemanes de Siglo XVI* of 1940.<sup>6</sup> John Abbott, assistant director of MoMA, led CIAA's Committee on Art, which included directors and curators from MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and American Museum of Natural History: Alfred Barr, Juliana Force, Laurance Roberts, Francis Henry Taylor, and George Vaillant. They were assisted by John Baur of the Brooklyn Museum, Lloyd Goodrich and Herman More from the Whitney, Dorothy Miller of MoMA, Herman Williams of the Metropolitan, and artist and critic Helen Appleton Read in selecting work for the *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana*. Remarkably, Morley was the only museum professional on the Committee who did not reside in New York.

Functioning as liaison between the Committee and Latin American artists, art professionals, and political figures, Morley traveled throughout South America and the Caribbean to assess regional interest in *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana* and plan its travel schedule. On behalf of the Committee, she traveled to Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru,

Uruguay, and Venezuela. During its two hundred sixty-five day tour beginning on June 12, 1941 in Mexico City, *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana* reached an audience of two hundred twenty thousand museum visitors.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition involved over two hundred fifty paintings by nearly one hundred twenty US artists selected by the Committee on Art.<sup>8</sup>

Morley formed important relationships with artists and museum professionals while planning the exhibition's tour and these relationships later supported her ambitious schedule of exhibitions dedicated to Latin American art at SFMA.<sup>9</sup> SFMA's Latin American exhibitions traveled throughout the western US to museums belonging to the Western Association of Art Museums, reaching audiences at dozens of locations west of the Rockies.<sup>10</sup> Her foundational work also impacted other institutions such as MoMA. After returning from her travels, Morley submitted an extensive report to CIAA titled "Art in Latin American Countries," which was housed in the library of MoMA and used in the planning MoMA's Latin American exhibitions as well as the development of its Latin American collection, which was formed by Lincoln Kirstein and financed by Nelson Rockefeller.<sup>11</sup> Just six months after Morley returned from her CIAA-sponsored trip, the organization asked her to arrange an exhibition of modern Latin American art for museum audiences in the US. Morley's exhibition, *Contemporary Latin American Art*, was one part of a network of exhibitions planned by CIAA, which included pre-Columbian and colonial exhibitions arranged by Herbert Spinden at the Brooklyn Museum. The group of exhibitions, which were collectively referred to as *Latin American Art*, were designed to provide audiences throughout the United States with a complete survey of Latin American art and were divided into sections for the East, West, and Midwest regions of the US. All western sections of *Latin American Art* were circulated by SFMA and when CIAA threatened to cancel the exhibitions because circulating them was more expensive than planned, MoMA (specifically Elodie Courter, MoMA's Head of Circulating Exhibitions) and SFMA took over their circulation.<sup>12</sup>

Because of Morley's work as an advisor for CIAA, I had hoped to find correspondence between her and Rockefeller in Nelson A. Rockefeller's

personal papers, especially given the amount of time Morley dedicated to planning *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana* and the modern section of *Latin American Art*. In addition to time, Morley invested her own limited financial resources into both exhibitions. She initially paid for her own travel while planning *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana* and purchased works of art to circulate in *Contemporary Latin American Art*, because so few examples of South American and Caribbean modern art existed in US collections at the time. The weight of Morley's investment in CIAA's projects was shared by her staff at SFMA, which was extremely limited during WWII. Despite her commitment to CIAA's projects, I did not find correspondence between Morley and Rockefeller in Nelson A. Rockefeller's papers. The only significant mention of Morley in Rockefeller's archival collection involved a letter between Alfred Barr and Rockefeller in which Barr described Morley as having "the reputation of being an extremely exacting and difficult person to work for in a subordinate position."<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, my time at the Rockefeller Archive Center was valuable. I gained important insights into the general scope of CIAA's activities, beyond the Committee on Art's work, as well as Rockefeller's longstanding dedication to Latin American art, specifically his financial support of MoMA's Latin American collection.<sup>14</sup> Notably, SFMA did not benefit from Rockefeller's financial support when forming its own Latin American collection. Morley used the honoraria she received from lecturing on Latin American art to build a Latin American Purchase Fund and retain at least one work of art from almost every Latin American exhibition hosted or organized by SFMA.

Through the collection of Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers, I also learned about the power that MoMA's board held over Alfred Barr. For instance, in 1949 Douglas MacAgy, then director of the California School of Fine Arts, asked Barr to participate in the Western Round Table on Modern Art, an important symposium about the state of modern art in the US, which included participants such as Marcel Duchamp and Frank Lloyd Wright. Barr wrote to Rockefeller and asked him for permission to participate in the symposium. Rockefeller declined Barr's request and replied, "I forgot to mention your note concerning

the visit to California. It would seem to me that until the other situation gets straightened out, it would be better not to try to take this one on, interesting and important as I know your visit there would be.”<sup>15</sup> This enriched my understanding of the relationships between museum directors and their boards during this period. It is significant that Morley also had a complicated relationship with SFMA’s board, which ultimately led to the end of her tenure at SFMA in 1958.

---

<sup>1</sup> Berit Potter, “Grace McCann Morley and the Dialectical Exchange of Modern Art in the Americas, 1935-1958,” PhD dissertation, New York University, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For information about Morley’s biography see *Grace McCann Morley and the Dialectical Exchange of Modern Art in the Americas*, Grace Morley and Suzanne B. Riess, *Grace L. McCann Morley: Art, Artists, Museums, and the San Francisco Museum of Art: An Interview* (Berkeley: University of California, General Library, Regional Cultural History Project, 1960) and “Oral history interview with Grace Morley, 1982 Feb. 6-Mar. 24,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>3</sup> *Art of Our Time: Dominant International Trends* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1945), np.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Morley’s early curatorial interests at SFMA, see “A Pageant to the Pacific: Latin American Art at the San Francisco Museum and Golden Gate International Exposition, 1935-1940” in *Grace McCann Morley and the Dialectical Exchange of Modern Art in the Americas*.

<sup>5</sup> Telegram from Nelson Rockefeller to Morley, 17 December 1940, *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives and Library*, ARCH:ADM.001, Box 34, Folder 1.

<sup>6</sup> The exhibition was actually divided into three sections, comparable in size and content, which were simultaneously circulated by CIAA so they would reach audiences as soon as possible.

<sup>7</sup> Before the exhibition began, its journey, it was shown for two weeks at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Minutes of the meeting of the Advisory Art Committee, 19 March 1941,” Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, EMH II.26.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the planning and reception of *La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana*, see “La Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana and the Foundation of Inter-American Exhibition Exchange, 1940-1941” in *Grace McCann Morley and the Dialectical Exchange of Modern Art in the Americas*.

<sup>9</sup> For more information see “Building a Model of Diversity: Grace McCann Morley and Collecting Modern Latin American Art in San Francisco” in *The Americas Revealed: Collecting Colonial and Modern Latin American Art in the United States*, ed. Edward J. Sullivan, (Center for the History of Collecting at The Frick Collection and Frick Art Reference Library, in cooperation with Penn State University Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> For more information about the Western Association of Art Museums, see Berit Potter, “Circulating Modern Art in the West: The Origins and Impact of the Western Association of Art Museum Directors” in *Rethinking Regionalism: Twentieth-*

---

*Century Art and Visual Culture in the American West*, ed. Rebecca Tucker, (Colorado Springs: Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> For information about Kirstein's trip on behalf of MoMA and Nelson Rockefeller, see Martin B. Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 359; 372-373. See also Miriam Basilio, "Reflecting on a History of Collecting and Exhibiting Work by Artists from Latin America," in *Latin American & Caribbean Art: MoMA at El Museo*, (New York: El Museo del Barrio and The Museum of Modern Art, 2004). For additional information about Morley's report "Art in Latin American Countries" and relationships with Barr and Kirstein see "Grace Morley and the United States' Emerging Engagement with Latin American Art" in *Grace McCann Morley and the Dialectical Exchange of Modern Art in the Americas*.

<sup>12</sup> For more information about *Contemporary Latin American Art* and *Latin American Art*, as well as Morley's exhibition schedule and collection dedicated to modern Latin American Art at SFMA, see "The San Francisco Museum and Contemporary Latin American Art, 1941-1948" in *Grace McCann Morley and the Dialectical Exchange of Modern Art in the Americas*.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Barr to Rockefeller in reference to Douglas MacAgy's (Morley's assistant curator) candidacy for the position of Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA. Over lunch, Morley told Barr that she had reservations about MacAgy's abilities. Morley described MacAgy as "capable," but also said that he "had difficulty in handling the heavy physical work in connection with exhibitions," 6 November 1947, Rockefeller Family Archives, Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers (hereafter NAR), record group 4, series L, box 133, folder 1310, RAC.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Alfred Barr wrote to Nelson Rockefeller and requested funds to purchase an Armando Reverón painting, "Monroe is leaving for South America tomorrow which brings up the question of our possible purchase of a painting by the best-known Venezuelan painter, Armando Reverón. Through the help of Gomez-Sicre we have found two Reveróns, which I understand are of good quality and in a private collection in Caracas." Alfred Barr to Nelson Rockefeller, 12 November 1953, Rockefeller Family Archives, NAR, record group 4, series L, box 142, folder 1400, RAC.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson Rockefeller to Barr, 19 February 1949, Rockefeller Family Archives, NAR, record group 4, series L, box 125, folder 1216, RAC.