



The “Tree of Life” (“El Árbol de la Vida”) sculpture, by the San Antonio-based Mexican American artist Verónica Castillo. Photograph by Tony Powell / Courtesy National Museum of the American Latino

DAILY COMMENT

THE LONG MARCH TOWARD A NATIONAL LATINO MUSEUM

A community whose role in U.S. history has been too often ignored is telling its story at the Smithsonian.

On a recent trip to Washington, D.C., I visited the new Molina Family Latino Gallery, at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. It opened to the public in June, and its first exhibit, "¡Presente!," attempts to fit hundreds of years of Latinx history in the United States—a narrative arcing from Spanish colonization to this day—into a single forty-five-hundred-square-foot room. The exhibit opens with a ceremonial-dance dress, handmade by descendants of the Genízaro people, who were enslaved by Spaniards and by other tribes in what is now New Mexico, and ends with a first-person oral-history interactive from a dozen prominent Latinx personalities, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Maria Hinojosa. In between, hundreds of objects, photographs, paintings, and prints depict mostly Mexican American, Cuban American, and Puerto Rican history and culture. (These are the largest and most storied groups; future exhibits will focus on others.) On the threshold of the gallery, there are touch screens where visitors can scroll through information on topics such as what differentiates the terms "Hispanic," "Latino," and "Latinx"; the cultural and socioeconomic demographics of various communities; and polling data on the Latinx electorate.

The first section looks at colonization, with a focus on the resistance of Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans. Among the striking objects on view are a ceramic bust of Po'Pay, the leader of the Pueblo Revolt, in 1680, by the Cochiti Pueblo artist Virgil Ortiz, and an illustration of a Black man breaking a chain with his clenched fist, made by the Puerto Rican artist Augusto Marín to commemorate the centennial of the abolition of slavery on the island, in 1873. The next section is on Texas Independence and the Mexican-American and Spanish-American wars. The goal here is to showcase how U.S. expansionism "impacted the story of the oldest U.S. Latino communities." In an animated video, a man is seen walking, above the caption, "We didn't cross the border. The border crossed us"—a well-known reference to the Mexican population that found itself, as territories were conquered and annexed, in Texas, California, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. This section also looks at the U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico, which began after the Spanish-American War, and the independence

movement led by Pedro Albizu Campos. “These historical legacies of slavery, colonization, and war continue to shape U.S. and Latino history today,” a description reads.

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After conquest comes migration, featuring a collection of personal objects and narratives from people who arrived fleeing wars or political regimes, such as Cubans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans; or who came looking for work and opportunity, as in the case of Dominicans, Mexicans, Peruvians, and Venezuelans; or who just became part of the country, if not full citizens of it—Puerto Ricans. A final section, about contributions to the society and the culture, highlights the work of Latinx activists in the national struggle for civil and social rights.

My favorite piece in the exhibit is one that was commissioned for it, the “Tree of Life” (“El Árbol de la Vida”), a fifty-three-inch-tall clay sculpture by the San Antonio-based artist Verónica Castillo. Castillo comes from a Pueblan family of artists who have been sculpting trees of life for three generations. This tree stands on a painted dome base, and its branches loop back onto its trunk in a pretzel-like pattern. Flowers, animals, and figurines populate the tree: a butterfly representing the Dreamers, and an eagle for the United Farm Workers; a woman holding a megaphone, another with a poster that reads “*Huelga*” (“Strike”); and figurines of the farmworker leaders Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, and of Emma Tenayuca, who organized a famous pecan shellers’ strike in Texas in the nineteen-thirties, among others. There is a tiny clay poster of the Young Lords, the social-justice organization started in Chicago by Puerto Rican former street-gang members in the nineteen-sixties, hanging from a branch, and another with a Black Power fist and the name of Carlos Cooks, a Dominican immigrant who was a key member of Marcus Garvey’s Black Nationalist movement in the nineteen-forties.

The tree poetically depicts the ongoing history of *la lucha*, the struggle for civil rights and recognition. The theme fits not just the history of the Latinx population but that of the exhibit itself—of how it came to be housed in what is a repurposed storage room on the museum's first floor. In fact, the show is a placeholder for a much larger and more comprehensive project, the first Smithsonian National Museum of the American Latino, the plans for which were approved in December, 2020, after thirty years of effort. But it was the fight for civil rights, and the academic and political debates that accompanied it, that initially brought about a review of how American history had been presented to the American public. One conclusion of those debates was that the Smithsonian Institution—the publicly funded museum that was created by the government in 1846 (with a bequest from the British scientist James Smithson), and is now the world's largest museum, education, and research complex—had underrepresented, and in many cases ignored, the role of communities of color.

A dress by the Venezuelan designer Carolina Herrera. Photograph courtesy National Museum of American History

A bomba dance outfit. Photograph courtesy National Museum of American History

First came the discovery, during the nineteen-eighties, that the Smithsonian held the remains of thousands of Native Americans as part of its collections, and that led to legislation, in 1989, calling for the establishment of a National Museum of the American Indian, which opened in 2004. In 1991, an effort was launched to address the representation of Black Americans at the Smithsonian, which led to the establishment of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which President Barack Obama inaugurated in 2016. In 1993, the Smithsonian appointed a Task Force on Latino Issues that, a year later, released a report titled "Willful Neglect," which found that Latinx people had "contributed significantly to every phase and aspect of American history and culture," and "yet the Institution almost entirely excludes and ignores Latinos in nearly every aspect of its operations." Among other measures, the report recommended the creation of "one or more museums portraying the historical, cultural, and artistic achievements of U.S. Hispanics." Approximately twenty-five million Latinx people lived in the country then, accounting for about nine per cent of the total population. They were underrepresented not only in museums and history textbooks; in 1996, the nonprofit NALEO (National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials) Educational Fund counted just 3,783 Latinx elected officials nationwide.

That lack of clout at the national level translated into very slow steps. First, the Smithsonian appointed a Latinx counsellor to the secretary (as the head of the institution

is known), Miguel Bretos, who collaborated with a working group, to release a plan called “Towards a Shared Vision,” in 1997. It argued that the Latinx presence should not be concentrated in one part of the Smithsonian but be dispersed throughout its museums. As a result, a Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives was created. (It was later renamed the Smithsonian Latino Center.) In 2003, a decade after the task force had been appointed, Xavier Becerra—who is now President Biden’s Secretary of Health and Human Services, but at that time was a congressman from California—pushed for a bill to create a commission to study the potential creation of a national museum of the American Latino. It was approved five years later. By that time, there were about fifty million Latinx people in the country—twice as many as at the time of the “Willful Neglect” report, making up seventeen per cent of the population. The number of Latinx elected officials had grown to 5,475, almost a fifty-per-cent increase from 1996.

A couple of more years went by before the commission submitted a report calling for, again, the creation of a museum. Henry Muñoz III, a designer, businessman, and activist from San Antonio (and the son of two prominent labor and civil-rights organizers) who chaired the commission, told me that, as a critical part of that effort, in 2009, the Latino Center digitized exhibits to create a virtual “museum without having the walls of a museum” that was shared across the nation, in partnership with community centers. (In 2013, Obama appointed Muñoz the national finance chair of the Democratic National Committee; he now chairs the board of trustees of the new museum.)

Finally, in December, 2020, the report’s proposal for a museum was added to the \$2.3-trillion omnibus spending package, which passed Congress with bipartisan support. So the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Latino was nominally established under the Presidency of Donald Trump. (The same bill created a Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum.) The victory was only possible owing to “the growth of power and influence of the groups that carried it through,” Jorge Zamanillo, the museum’s founding director, told me. The Latinx population now makes up nearly twenty per cent of the country, with more than sixty-two million people. Their political representation is still underwhelming, but has reached 6,883 elected officials.

A monkey-shaped purse that was given to a child before departing Cuba, via Operation Pedro Pan. Photograph courtesy National Museum of American History

Today, the Smithsonian owns the largest collection of Latinx art in the country, and has approved more than twenty-six staff positions focussed on Latinx projects (twenty-six and a half, to be precise, the half being a part-time employee) in ten museums and centers. No matter the many steps still ahead, Muñoz emphasized, “we *have* a museum already: it is in the gallery and in all the divisions of the Smithsonian.” And there is much to be done before the new museum can open. To begin with, a site needs to be chosen. The search has narrowed to four possible locations, all of them on the Mall, which Muñoz called the nation’s social and political “sacred land.” Three are on undeveloped plots: at the foot of the Washington Monument, near the National Museum of African American History and Culture; north of the Capitol Reflecting Pool; and at the Tidal Basin. The fourth is the Smithsonian’s Arts and Industries Building. That building would need to be renovated, and any new building will first have to be designed and approved. In addition, a new collection will have to be assembled. The museum aims to raise some five hundred million dollars, half the predicted necessary funding; the federal government will provide the rest.

In the meantime, the Molina Family Latino Gallery—established with a ten-million-dollar donation by the children and the widow of C. David Molina, who made his fortune

with a health-care company—will serve as “Latino 101,” Eduardo Díaz, the deputy director of the new museum and a former director of the Latino Center, told me. It offers, he said, a single message to visitors: “Latino history is American history.” But not everyone approves of the way that history is presented. In a recent op-ed in *The Hill*, three Latinx conservatives—some of whom signed a letter in support of the 2020 proposal to Congress—deem the gallery’s “unabashedly Marxist portrayal of history, religion and economics” as “disgraceful.” They reject its focus on colonization and the condemnation of “right-wing autocrats,” such as Fulgencio Batista and Rafael Trujillo, in the absence of similar condemnations of “left-wing and Marxist dictators,” such as Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, or of leftist guerrilla and terrorist groups, such as Colombia’s FARC and Peru’s Shining Path. “The Latino exhibit simply erases the existence of the Hispanic who loves, contributes to, benefits from and exemplifies the promise of American liberty,” they wrote. “That is to say, it erases the Hispanic majority. As this demographic cohort moves to the right in American politics and civil society, the people running the Smithsonian’s Latino work offer no insight or awareness as to why. Instead, they offer an ideological fantasy world dominated by a grim and falsified narrative of oppression.”

An exhibit display at the Molina Family Latino Gallery. Photograph by Tony Powell / Courtesy National Museum of the American Latino

There is actually more in the exhibit than this ideological narrative: for example, a campaign button that reads “Viva Reagan!”; the pilot helmet of Ellen Ochoa, the first

Latina to go into space; and a dress designed by Carolina Herrera. And, during my visit, the public seemed to be less ideologically influenced and more pleasantly surprised by a familiar yet unknown reality. A couple of African American women were interested to learn that Gwen Ifill, the late journalist, was of Panamanian descent. At the back of the room, two young white women examined a handmade raft, just six and a half feet long, that had carried two Cubans to Miami prior to the Balsero crisis of 1994, when Castro declared that anyone who wished to leave the island could do so. They noticed a small cylinder with a lid on a rail in front of it; when one of them opened it, the salty smell of the Caribbean filled her nostrils.

More than a hundred and thirty thousand people have visited the gallery since it opened, in June, and many more will come before the new museum will be ready to tell the complete, complicated story of the U.S. Latinx experience. It might take at least another decade, but considering the tasks ahead, Zamanillo told me, “it doesn’t feel like that much time.” By then, according to Census Bureau estimates, the Latinx population will have reached 74.8 million, and, who knows, maybe the museum will be inaugurated by a Latinx President. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated C. David Molina’s name.

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