

LATIN AMERICAN

Cultural Center Opens in Oakland



A GLIMPSE INTO THE PAST

ABOVE: An interactive permanent exhibit shares the histories of the people of Latin America. **OPPOSITE PAGE TOP:** The museum highlights art and artifacts from the region. **OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM:** The new museum is housed in the former Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania building on Bigelow Boulevard in Oakland.

written by **JULIA FRASER**

A WOMAN SPINS A CRISP WHITE THREAD, A VERMILION sky rises over water and doves hover in Paula Nicho Cúmez's painting, "Process and Vision of the Peace Accords." She composed the painting in the wake of the 1996 Peace Accords in Guatemala, which brought an end to the country's 36-year civil war.

"The only thing that remains for us is to once again weave the country, without forgetting our histories," Cúmez said. Her words hang in the text next to the painting as part of the "Maya Spirituality: Indigenous Paintings 1957-2020" exhibit on display at the Latin American Cultural Center in Pittsburgh.

The Latin American Cultural Center, a new museum located in the heart of the city's Oakland neighborhood, hopes to weave and share the histories of the nearly 40 countries and 650 million people of Latin America with Pittsburgh.

"The museum is less about the objects," said Sylvia Keller, senior advisor at the Latin American Cultural Center. "And really about how the objects illustrate the messages we're trying to convey. This is really about their cultural context."

The center opened to the public in September by appointment only as a part of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), an academic organization based in Pittsburgh with more

than 14,000 members worldwide. Located in the Italian Renaissance-style building that once housed the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, the museum has started to take shape with interactive permanent exhibits on Latin American geography, history, arts and culture, as well as the special exhibit on Mayan paintings. Auditorium renovations, curriculum development with public school districts, plans for future exhibits, lectures and film festivals are on deck, as funding and staffing grow.

"We want to create a place where people can learn the basic outlines of what Latin America is, what its history has been and how it relates to the United States and the rest of the world," said Bill DeWalt, senior advisor at the Latin American Cultural Center.

A SMALL, BUT GROWING POPULATION

The number of people with Latin American heritage has boomed in the United States. Nearly 19 percent of the U.S. population identified as Hispanic or Latino in the U.S. Census Bureau's Decennial Census. Pittsburgh has had a historically slight Latino population and, while Latinos made up only 3.8 percent of the city's population in the 2020 Census, the population is growing. Nearly 4,656 more people of Latino descent lived in Pittsburgh in 2020, compared to a decade earlier — a 67 percent increase, according to Decennial Census data.

Milagros Pereyra-Rojas, executive director of the Latin American Culture Center and Latin American Studies Association, is a native of Peru who came to Pittsburgh on a scholarship to Carlow College in the 1990s. "Pittsburgh has evolved in the last 20 years," Pereyra-Rojas said. "I can see what has been done, in terms of diversity and organizations serving the Latino communities. It's amazing." Part of this growth is a stronger network of local nonprofits such as Casa San Jose, a resource center for Latino immigrants, that work to support the Latino community and connect new immigrants to services.

There were no museums in the U.S. specifically dedicated to the culture of Latin America, according to benchmarking done by Keller. "Not a lot has been done in the way of what we are doing, which is showcasing Latin America, not the Latino culture of Latin Americans born in the U.S.," Pereyra-Rojas said. "We're showing and honoring the history and culture of Latin America to those who do not know us. And we hope to build some bridges between the people of Pittsburgh and those in Latin America."

HOW TO BUILD A MUSEUM

The seed for the museum sprouted when Pereyra-Rojas decided to buy the historic building on Bigelow Boulevard for LASA offices in 2019. Since moving to Pittsburgh in 1986, LASA had been based out of the University of Pittsburgh, but it outgrew its space and Pereyra-Rojas wanted to find a permanent headquarters independent of a university.

She thought a small museum would fit into two small galleries on the first floor, a grand gallery upstairs and a spacious auditorium in need of renovation. She saw a chance to grow the





CULTURE ON DISPLAY

ABOVE: The museum hosts a special exhibit on Mayan spirituality. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** A reproduction of the mural, “The Presence of Latin America,” by Jorge Gonzales Camarena hangs in the auditorium.

<< organization’s outreach in the community and tap into the network of global LASA members — half of whom have expertise in the humanities — for help creating exhibits, programming and events.

With no experience building a museum from scratch, she reached out to a former classmate, Sylvia Keller, and her husband, Bill DeWalt, who had decades of experience in museums, big and small, including leading the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. Most recently, the pair led a \$250 million project establishing the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, which features a collection of more than 12,000 musical instruments from around the world. They jumped at the opportunity to work together in Pittsburgh.

“This was a lovely way to think about riding into the sunset of our careers,” Keller said.

Building a smaller museum doesn’t come with smaller challenges. “No matter the size of the museum, you need all the components: visitor services, wayfinding, making sure the restrooms are clean,” DeWalt said. “All the things that go into building a museum, no matter the size, are pretty similar. How you get enough resources to do that is the challenge. You can’t do it right out of the box.”

They hired Sandra Budd, an exhibit design professional, as

assistant director and began work bringing the museum to life during a global pandemic. Work during the first year focused on fixing up the old building and making repairs. But construction during the pandemic brought unseen challenges because progress on the building renovations took longer than expected. During that time, the team worked with partners such as Iontank, a local design studio, to develop interactive permanent exhibits, continue to raise funds, and develop a website with an eye toward showing future exhibits and events held in the museum and online in multiple languages.

THE PAST ON DISPLAY

Today, the center’s permanent exhibits guide visitors through the history, environment and culture of Latin America through artifacts, photographs and interactive touchscreen displays in the first-floor galleries. Touch a map to learn about the different climates and geographic regions or move through a timeline of early civilizations peering at Olmec or Inca artifacts. One gallery untangles political movements in the region; another surveys art from around the region with samples of music, paintings and folk art alongside video interviews with the artists.

“Our goal is to have a lot of context to our exhibits, put



context to the art and give the artist a voice too,” Budd said.

Along the wall in the auditorium is a large reproduction of the mural, “The Presence of Latin America,” by the Mexican artist Jorge Gonzales Camarena. The mural depicts the tangled timeline and unity of Latin American cultures, merging symbols from the natural world, religion and violence. The original remains in the lobby of the University Art Museum in Concepción, Chile.

After renovations to the auditorium are completed, they plan to host a regular series of lectures, authors and film series in the space. Upcoming special exhibits are underway, including one on folk art from Mexico and Haiti, complete with more programming around exhibits.

School groups have begun to visit the museum, including

some from Pittsburgh Public Schools. The team has hired someone to help build a curriculum for different age groups of children in line with public and private schools in the area. This is central to the mission of the museum, according to Pereyra-Rojas.

“My vision is that Pittsburgh is exposed to different cultures — Latin American being one of them,” she said. “That one of the kids from one of the schools in the future is inspired by what we have to show in the building and decides to study Latin America, to become an anthropologist or biologist in the region because of something they experienced here. That would be success.”

Julia Fraser is a Pittsburgh Today staff writer and research specialist.

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