Contributor: Cesar Peña

**Martínez Delgado, Santiago**

(Born: 1906—Bogotá; Died: 1954—Cajicá)



Figure 1. *Revista Vida* (1948) cover design by Santiago Martínez Delgado. Published at *Historia del Arte Colombiano* (1977), Salvat Editores, Bogotá.

<http://www.colarte.com/colarte/conspintores.asp?idartista=514>

Alongside Sergio Trujillo, Santiago Martínez Delgado is considered to be one of the most representative Columbian art deco artists. The blooming period of Martínez’s work coincides with the implementation of economic policies associated with capitalist modernisation in 1930s Latin America. Thus, his artwork captures a transitional moment in the history of Colombia. His formal language reflects the modernist impulse of avant-garde movements, even as his paintings and murals reflect an attachment to the traditional values of Colombian society. During his years as a student at the Chicago Academy of Arts, Martínez was exposed to the contrasting influences of American Art Deco and the artwork produced by the artists of the WPA. During the Great Depression, he also became familiar with the work of Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, **Walker Evans**, and the murals of **Diego Rivera**, **David Alfaros Siqueiros**, and John Augustus Walker. The influences of art deco and social realism can be seen in his work through the elongated human bodies and sinuous lines that guide the gaze of the spectator through the entire image. Volumetric shades and gestural lines uplift and reinforce the often heroic character of his paintings, something also emphasized with a color palette that adds an element of drama and grandiloquence to his works. Martínez had also a leading role in the emergence of the graphic industry in Colombia during the 1940s.

Prior to realising his projects, Martínez tended to dedicate many hours to the study of the topics frequently related to historical events or biblical imagery. As a result, Gabriel Giraldo, an art critic and friend of Martínez, considered him a representative and innovator of the historic Columbian painting genre in the line of José María Espinosa, Alberto Urdaneta, **Pedro Nel Gómez**, and Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo. However, as a member of the Colombian elite, Martínez always occupied positions of power, and his topics suited his filiation with the establishment. This, in addition to his commercial-art-related activities, led some late-twentieth-century art historians to see him as less relevant than other artists of his generation.

In considering Martínez’s work from a formal, analytical perspective, art historian and critic Álvaro Medina argues that it does not represent a significant contribution to the history of Colombian art. However, the artist’s skill and sense of history, combined with his social perspective, allowed him to comfortably and frequently move within a wide range of media: from oil and mural painting and fresco, to the design of magazine covers, to book illustration, to writing, and even radio broadcasting. In light of these contributions, Martínez can be seen as a very versatile artist for his time.

His most significant contribution to the field of graphic arts was through the magazine *Vida*, to which he contributed cover designs and drawings. Within the art academy, his most noteworthy contribution was his creation in 1936 of the curriculum for the course of Decorative Arts at the Universidad Javeriana. Martínez’s pragmatism and willingness to work for commercial firms was something that left him at odds with the prevailing artistic winds, as well as with some critics, for whom art for art’s sake was the rallying cry. Nonetheless, Martínez work deserves new attention in light of his role as part of Colombia’s cultural milieu of the first half of the twentieth century, and his oeuvre displays the changes that were taking place in professional art practice during this tumultuous period in Columbian history.

Martinez’s first artistic influence can be attributed to his mother, Mercedes Delgado Mallarino, a painter who devoted most of her known work to the depiction of religious scenes and historical characters. Martínez studied painting at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (“National School of Fine Arts”) at Bogotá, under the tutorship of Roberto Pizano, an artist and instructor well known for his anti-academicism and for his role as pioneer of modern art pedagogy in Colombia. In 1926, Martínez joined the program of fine arts at the Chicago Academy of Arts (now the Chicago Art Institute), where he worked under the tutelage of Social Realism committed artist, Ruth VanSickle Ford. While in the U.S., he also worked at Frank Lloyd Wright’s studio where he became familiar with the principles of Art Deco. In 1931 he returned to Colombia and organized his first solo exhibition. In 1933 won the Logan Medal of the Arts for his mural entitled “Columbian Evolution,” a representation of the cultural progress of the Colombian nation.

From 1937 through 1940 he worked with Enrique Uribe White to produce drawings and illustrations for the cultural magazine *Pan*. He also participated along with Ignacio Gómez Jaramillo, Domingo Moreno Otero, Marco Ospina, Guillermo Silva, and Sergio Trujillo, in the the first three editions of the *Salón Nacional de Artistas*, 1940-42, though he did not receive much attention. In 1946, president Alberto Lleras commissioned him to design a mural for the Colombian Capitol’s Elliptic Hall, which again exhibited his zeal for the construction of historical visual narratives. According to Camilo Calderón, this mural replaced the one previously made by Andrés de Santamaría, a painting that had generated great controversy.

The presence of Martínez in the history of art in Colombia can be seen from a manifold perspective. First, he represents change and the introduction of elements of visual modernism, especially in printed media. Second, he represents the emergence of the blurring boundary between fine and applied arts, where art practice can also serve practical and commercial purposes. Finally, his work embodies the visual representation of Colombia’s thirst for embracing modernity, while at the same time struggling with the weight of tradition.

**References and Further reading:**

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*Columbian Evolution (1933).* Mural representing the cultural progress of the Colombian nation*,* Logan Medal of the Arts, Chicago Academy of Arts, 1933.