

## Notes on Latin American *Modernismo* 1875–1916

During the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there occurred in Latin America the first major humanities movement that is specifically and uniquely Latin American. This movement is known as *modernismo*. This movement is similar to and overlaps in part with European Modernism, yet it also diverges from its European counterpart in ways that are characteristic of Latin America. *Modernismo* began as a reaction by Latin American intellectuals during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to European-style realism and realism's pseudo-scientific extension, naturalism. Part of the goal of these last to humanistic tendencies (realism and naturalism) was to educate the public about social and political problems at the seeming expense of artistic or æsthetic aspects. The new generation of innovative Latin American humanists promoted the independence of the humanist himself or herself. For the most part they sought a social niche in each of their society separate from social activists and political reformers, yet social commentary is not at all absent from their works. In literature, the *modernistas* campaigned to renew and enrich their prominent international languages (Portuguese and Spanish) by updating them from the tradition-bound grammars and vocabularies that had become frozen in the past. They also added neologisms imported often from French and Classical languages. Furthermore, they thought in universal and international terms, which means that the *modernistas'* audience was not local but rather extended throughout all of Latin American and beyond to North America and Europe. The humanities became new, novel, independent, and cosmopolitan. In order to create this new æsthetic, a number of trends from Europe were tapped for inspiration and models. Most notably, these models came from France: Parnasianism (i.e., art for art's sake), symbolism (i.e., to suggest an ethos rather than describe exact and realistic details), and Romanticism (i.e., freedom, emotions, lyricism, melodrama). Prominent *modernista* characteristics, then, are (1) cultural maturity; (2) pride in Latin American identity (i.e., spirituality vs. United States' materialism); (3) internationalism; (4) exoticism; (5) blend of European "-isms"; and (6) *la voluntad de estilo*. The last characteristic in this list, *la voluntad de estilo*, is hard to express in English. Literally, it means "will to style". Beyond the literal sense, however, it means that Latin American humanists in the *modernista* mode and moment seek to produce, through force of personal will and desire, an absolutely independent and unique expression by means of a style that arises both from the subject matter itself and the humanist-creator's own identity and style. In sum, *modernismo* is considered the most important artistic movement of renewal in the history of Latin American humanities.

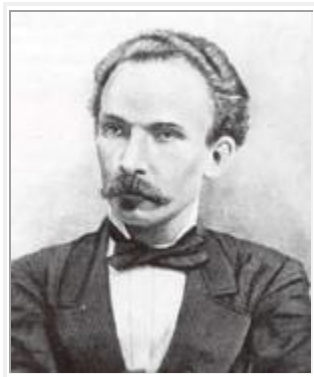
The leader of the first *modernista* period is **José Martí** (1835-1895). He is considered the Cuban national hero *par excellence*. His was born in La Habana,

and his parents were both Spaniards. When he was sixteen years old he was exiled to Spain for engaging in revolutionary activities. He took advantage of living in exile to get a doctorate at the Universidad de Zaragoza and to travel to France, England, Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, and the United States. In this way he expanded his horizons, experiences, and knowledge, and he became, in effect, a universal Latin American. During his travels he worked as a bilingual translator, teacher, and journalist. Martí worked primarily in New York City from 1881 to 1895. During these years he was an active leader of the Cuban Revolutionary Party. In 1892 he founded this party's journal *Patria*. In 1894 he attempted to invade Cuba, but he was intercepted in Cuba and sent back to New York. In 1895 he succeeded in reaching Cuba where he joined forces with the independence hero, General Máximo Gómez y Báez. Martí died a month later while fighting for independence at Dos Ríos. Martí was a prolific writer of theater, novels, children's literature, poetry and essays about politics, economics, and culture. As one example among hundreds, in the January 10, 1891, issue of *La Revista Ilustrada* (New York), he published a significant article titled "Our America" in which he expressed the modernista sense of pride in Latin America as a place distinct from Anglo-America.

In addition, he was an inspirational speaker. One of his most notable speeches is the one titled "Mother America", which he gave to the Hispanic-American Literary Society in Washington, D.C. on December 19, 1889. In another speech to the same group delivered on October 28, 1893, he spoke proudly about praise for Simón Bolívar the man and the hero of South American independence—this as Martí was leading the fight for Cuban independence. After reviewing the progress of Bolívar's exploits, Martí ended his address, which is simply titled "Simón Bolívar," with these words: "The five flags of the new nations blaze with real flames atop a resurrected America. Cannons announce the hero's approach, and above heads bared out of respect and awe the crackle of gunfire echoes from peak to peak as each mountain repeats the salute. And so, as long as America lives, the echo of his name will pass from father to son in all that is best and manliest in our natures!" (José Martí, *Our America: Writings on Latin America and the Struggle for Cuban Independence*; ed. Philip S. Foner. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977, 108).

Important characteristics of Martí's works are the richness of his ideas and his frequent use of symbols and metaphors. In him we see the combination of a passionate and idealistic man of action who fought for positive social and political goals, and at the same time we see a tormented intellectual striving for independent aesthetic perfection. In terms of style, it is at once crisp, unpredictable, and complex. In terms of content, he demonstrates both a love for family and a love for humanity and for Cuba. For a good Internet link containing Martí's Spanish poetry, see this site: => [Poesías completas](#). For all of these reasons, José Martí is considered the "Father of *modernismo*."

For brief notes and a poem by José Martí with English translation and study questions, click on the following image:



The second most prominent representative of *modernismo* is **Rubén Darío** (1867-1916). Rubén Darío is actually a pseudonym for Félix Rubén García Sarmiento. He is the central and most dominant *modernista* figure. He was a prolific, creative, innovative, and protean poet from the small Central-American town of Metapa, Nicaragua. In fact, Rubén Darío is so significant a humanist that, traditionally speaking, his death in 1916 sets a kind of end mark for the entire movement. Of course, other Latin American writers and other humanists continued to produce exciting works in the modernista vein; nevertheless, the year 1916 is a handy way to mark a transition to a rapid succession of changes in style and content in the humanities of Latin America that continues throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Another not incidental feature of this stellar figure is that he was illegitimate and that his heritage includes white, black, and indigenous forebears. From a young age he was a precocious poet. In 1886 he went to Santiago, Chile, where he contributed to the newspaper *La época*. Later, he traveled to France, Spain, El Salvador, and the United States. Then, in 1888, his first major publication, *Azul*, which contains both prose and poetry, situated him as a poet of the first magnitude, and his reputation spread throughout Latin America and Europe. From this time onward he worked as a diplomat and journalist, and he was in high demand on the international lecture circuit. The influential Argentinian newspaper *La nación* sent him to Paris as its foreign correspondent. In 1890, Darío married Rafaela Contreras, but she died two years later. Later, he married Rosario Murillo, but they separated after a while without actually divorcing.

Darío is the central and most powerful voice of *modernismo*. He led a turbulent life of travels, troubles, love affairs, intense friendships with fellow intellectuals, and meditation retreats. He read widely and deeply in the works for 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics, Parnassians, and Symbolists from France and Spain. Above all his works show that he was intensely interested in the following: (1) modernizing the

Spanish language for both Latin America and Spain; (2) producing a new and pure poetical art free and isolated from end-of-century materialistic pursuits; (3) and pursuing an ever elusive ideal of beauty. At the end of his life, however, he integrated themes dealing with (Latin American) patriotism and spiritual concerns. He produced a prolific body of work, and his major works, after *Azul*, are: *Prosas profanas* (1896), *Peregrinaciones* (1901), *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905), and *Canto errante* (1907). For a representative poem by Darío and study questions, click on the following image:



In addition, other prominent *modernistas* are:

- (1) José Asunción Silva (Colombia, 1865-1896)
- (2) Amado Nervo (Mexico, 1870-1919), José Enrique Rodó (Uruguay, 1872-1917),
- (3) Leopoldo Lugones (Argentina, 1874-1938)
- (4) Julio Herrera y Reissig (Uruguay, 1875-1910)
- (5) Ramón López Velarde (Mexico, 1888-1921).
- (6) José Enrique Rodó (1872-1917), the Uruguayan *modernista* writer who wrote *Ariel* (1900), a book-length essay inspired in part by Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*; in Rodó's book, there is a debate between the character Ariel, who represents the spirituality of Latin America, and the deformed and monstrous Caliban, who represents the materialism of Norteamérica (i.e., the United States); Rodó's main purpose is to support the traditional Western humanistic tradition.

The secondary literary genre of Latin American *modernismo* is the *modernista* novel. After the realist novel of, for example, Blest Gana, there is a rather sudden change. Sequential plots, emblematic character portrayal, detailed descriptions of local color, and social commentary give way to dilating on isolated images, metaphor, symbols, and an original use of language. The most typical *modernista* novels are "escapist"; they reflect the *mal de siècle* (end of century malaise) symptoms prevalent in European fiction of the same period. Such fiction offers a kind of escape from social crises during the period. Some notable *modernista*

novels are: Carlos Reyles (Uruguay, 1868-1938), *La raza de Caín* (1900); Enrique Larreta (Argentina, 1873-1961), *La gloria de don Ramiro* (1908) and *Zogoibi* (1926); and Rafael Arévalo Martínez (1884-1975), *El hombre que parecía un caballo* (1915).

The novel in the *modernista* period leads to a bifurcation of the novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: (1) fictional prose narratives that focus on idealism, subjectivity, European models, and aestheticism; (2) Latin American regionalism, moral issues, and social commentary. Since the *modernista* period extends into the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is worthwhile noting that the bulk of industrial revolution entered Latin America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not the 19<sup>th</sup> century as it had in Europe and the United States. The middle class begins to take social and political power out of the hands of the land holding, aristocratic upper class, and the working class begins to organize. European-style thinkers continue to dominate the intellectual milieu, but they begin to reorient their perspectives toward uniquely Latin American issues. Thinkers and writers in all genres (novel, short story, drama, poetry, essay, philosophy) start to reflect consciously on what is American (i.e., *lo americano*).

While the verbal arts were making such a dramatic change in Latin America during the modernista "revolution", painting did not change until the next century. It is important to make a careful distinction in the use of terminology: Latin American *modernismo* is not precisely the same as worldwide Modernism. The first term (modernismo) refers specifically to the Latin American humanities movement as discussed above; whereas, Modernism is a humanities movement—especially in art—that began in Europe and later moved to the United States and to Latin America. For Modernism in art, in this on-line course, refer especially to the trajectory of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo (see: => **Diego Rivera Index**). In order to visualize the kind of painting that Latin Americans were still producing during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, notice the following two examples. The first is a painting by the Mexican artist José María Velasco, in which we see an image indicating the marginal (lower right corner) entrance of industrialization into the vast virginal landscape of Mexico:



The second example of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin American art is a painting by the Cuban artist Leopoldo Romañach from about 1900 that shows a carriage attempting to ford a river.



As you can see, in Latin American painting, traditional realistic elements continue to dominate throughout the century. One country in which painting is somewhat independent from painting in Spanish America is Brazil. Because many Brazilian artists traveled and studied in France and Europe, rather than Spain, they were exposed to European trends to a somewhat higher degree than Spanish-American artists. However, more generally, when artists from all over Latin America go to Europe after 1907 they will discover the huge revolution in art initiated by European painters such as Pablo Picasso. For a brief tour of some Brazilian paintings from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, study the following sampling:



**Rodolfo Amoêdo**  
**"Amuada", 1882**

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