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Synthesis of the Arts in Quito in the mid-20th century

La Síntesis de las Artes en Quito a mediados del siglo XX

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ABSTRACT Throughout history, societies have expressed their collective identity through art in public spaces. In Quito, this tradition dates back to pre-Hispanic petroglyphs and extends through the Baroque period, which transformed church façades and interiors into narrative surfaces. In the 20th century, the city witnessed a singular phenomenon of Synthesis of the Arts: a collaboration between architects and artists that, within a short timeframe, materialized in projects linked to the Casa de la Cultura, the Universidad Central campus, and preparations for the XI Inter-American Conference of 1959. This study documents and contextualizes that exceptional moment, analyzes its aesthetic and ideological content, and assesses its value as a genuine expression of the spirit of the time. Finally, it underscores the urgency of recognizing and preserving this legacy through a critical architectural lens.

RESUMEN A lo largo de la historia, las sociedades han expresado su identidad colectiva a través del arte en el espacio público. En Quito, esta tradición se remonta a los petroglifos prehispánicos y se proyecta en el barroco, que convirtió las fachadas e interiores de sus iglesias en soportes narrativos. En el siglo XX, la ciudad fue escenario de un fenómeno singular de Síntesis de las Artes: una colaboración entre arquitectos y artistas que, en un corto periodo, cristalizó en proyectos vinculados a la Casa de la Cultura, la Ciudad Universitaria y las obras preparatorias para la XI Conferencia Interamericana de 1959. Este estudio documenta y contextualiza ese momento excepcional, analiza su contenido estético e ideológico, y evalúa su valor como expresión genuina del espíritu de la época. Finalmente, subraya la urgencia de reconocer y preservar este legado desde una mirada crítica y arquitectónica.

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1. Introduction

Synthesis of the Arts, integration of the arts, muralism, and total art refer to the union of artistic techniques and disciplines in a single project. Some propose bringing together various disciplines in a unified work; others express political-ideological positions, while still others, focused on the phenomenological, amalgamate aesthetic elements to generate comprehensive sensory experiences.

In this paper, the Synthesis of the Arts refers to the realization of a joint work by architects and artists—painters and sculptors—generally commissioned by a public patron. These movements have sought to express their identifying features through aesthetic expressions, a generational constant that extends from local prehistory to modern international references.

In the pre-Hispanic petroglyphs of the Yumbo people of Tulipe, in northwestern Pichincha, artists carved “repetitive engravings [with] symbolic designs [that] probably contain messages with cosmological connotations” (Jara, 2006, p. 101). The petroglyph in front of the National Museum of Ecuador (Figure 1) comes from El Bosque (personal communication, Estelina Quinatoa, June 7, 2024), on the slopes of Pichincha, equidistant from the archaeological sites of Rumipamba and La Florida (del Pino, 2018). This petroglyph contains connected spirals, churos, triangles, diagonals, and grids. What do these reliefs represent? Cosmic serpents? Urban grids?



Figure 1: Petroglyph in the National Museum of Ecuador/Yumbo people. (2024)



Figure 2: Four fragments of reliefs and murals in the Casona de la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, 1947/Alfonso Calderón Moreno. a) *Theater and dance*, 1947/Jaime Valencia and Luis Moscoso; b) *The cardinal points of Ecuadorian nationality*, 1947/Diógenes Paredes and José Enrique Guerrero. (2024)

In the American viceregal temples, a scenographic effect was sought that would continue the pre-Columbian tradition of outdoor ceremonies, where “the externalization of the sacred space led to the establishment of the temple’s façade as if it were an outdoor altar or altarpiece” (Chueca, 1971, p. 182). Thus, the Baroque façade “manifested itself with one of its conceptual reasons: to dazzle and impress” (Gasparini, 1985, p. 254). In Quito, pedagogical façades stand out, such as the 16th-century church of San Francisco—by Jodoco Ricke, Pedro Gosseal, et al—and the façade of La Compañía de Jesús, from 1765, described by Carrión as “stone embroidery on the outside” (Pérez, 2004, p. 45).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the modern avant-garde promoted the idea of *total architecture*. In Weimar and Dessau, Walter Gropius, director of the Bauhaus, encouraged artists and architects to master industrial design, theater, and music. The school sought “the materialization [...] of a total architecture that encompasses the entire visible

contour, from simple furniture to the complex city” (Gropius, 1968, p. 19), that is, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art¹. The *Maison de l’homme* in Zurich, designed by Le Corbusier, was built by Heidi Weber, “whose dream was to be able to present all the creations of the artist-architect in a house that he himself had designed” (Maurer and Rüegg, 2020, p. 37), thus, what is now known as *the Centre Le Corbusier* is a repository for his murals, paintings, sculptures, furniture, models, drawings, and writings, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that speaks of Le Corbusier—the complete artist.

Various movements with similar objectives emerged in Latin América. From the 1920s onwards, José Vasconcelos—ideologist and Mexican Secretary of Public Education—promoted *Mexican Muralism*, in which artists such as Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros, and Tamayo fused pre-Hispanic art, classical style, and cubism. Mexican *Social Realism* depicted the revolution, class struggle, and indigenous figures to build a new national identity. The library at the

¹ *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a concept by Richard Wagner that, starting from music, unified dance, poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture.



Figure 2: Four fragments of reliefs and murals in the Casona de la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, 1947/Alfonso Calderón Moreno. c) *Prehistory, the Inca Empire, and the Conquest*, 1948/Oswaldo Guayasamín; d) *The Founders of Nationality [The Colony and The Republic]*, 1949/Galo Galecio. (2024)

UNAM's University City campus stands out as "perhaps the most emblematic and iconic building. What makes this building so unique are the stone mosaics by Juan O'Gorman that cover the surface and represent the history of Mexico" (Carranza and Lara, 2014, p. 163). The book *Brazil Builds* revealed to the world a movement that, in the 1930s, connected art and architecture to celebrate Brazilian cultural identity. The design of the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro, or *Capanema Palace*, by Lúcio Costa, integrated architecture with "the imaginative use of decorated glazed tiles" in the ceramic murals by Cândido Portinari and the gardens by Roberto Burle Marx (Goodwin, 1943, p. 90). In the 1950s, at Ciudad Universitaria in Caracas, Carlos Raúl Villanueva merged architectural spaces with works by Calder, Léger, and Vasarely, opting for abstraction through "sculptures, reliefs, and murals strategically placed and in absolute harmony with the theatricality of the space, [creating] a place where one can truly speak of the integration between art and architecture" (Calvo, 2007, p. 507).

2. Methods

This study is based on direct observation: in modern Quito, some works combine architecture and art. Having detected this phenomenon, the following questions arise: what motivated it? Are these isolated achievements or a synchronous phenomenon that materialized in a specific period? What influence did international references have?



Figure 3: Theater of the Administrative Pavilion, UCE
1947-1952/Gilberto Gatto Sobral. *The History of Humanity*,
1948-1954. Fragment of the mural/Jaime Andrade, (2023)



Four authors stand out in terms of *comprehensive work* in Quito: Iván Burbano, who analyzes the relationship between design and craftsmanship in the 1970s and 1980s (Burbano, 2023); Giada Lusardi, who studies the Hotel Colón as a space for design and art from the 1940s to the 1990s (Lusardi, 2023); Shayarina Monard, who addresses the preparations for the XI Inter-American Conference and one of the murals created in that context (Monard, 2015); and Chiara Stornaiolo, who examines the networks between clients, artists, and designers in the Quito and Colón hotels, considering them to be immersive and unique works (Stornaiolo et al., 2023).

The approach to the object of study began with the identification of sites—some of which no longer exist—where the phenomenon could be observed. The corpus was formed from personal visual memories, interviews with experts, review of institutional archives, documentary collections, newspaper libraries, search for plans, and, fundamentally, on-site visits that included photographic and planimetric records. These findings allowed for the formulation of the following hypothesis:

Between the late 1940s and early 1960s, a phenomenon of *Synthesis of the Arts* took place in Quito, the result of a unique historical and cultural context, driven by three key factors: Benjamín Carrión as the ideologue of modern culture in the country, the creation of the University City of the Central University, and the preparations for the XI Inter-American Conference of 1959.

In the results section, the findings, far from being recounted from conventional perspectives, are presented and interpreted from the perspective of architectural historiography. In the conclusions section, the study warns about the condition of several modern monuments, taking into account their heritage value.

3. Results

3.1. Improper beginnings

In the case of Ecuador, the practice of *synthesizing the arts* had a rocky start. Camilo Egas², the most prominent exponent of Ecuadorian arts and considered by critics to be on a par with the Mexicans Rivera and Orozco, was commissioned to create an exterior relief and an interior mural for the Ecuadorian pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, together with Eduardo Kingman and Bolívar Mena Franco (Crespo and Vargas, 1977). The pavilion, designed by German-American architect Paul Lester Wiener was inaugurated on June 11, 1939. However, the Ecuadorian consul, architect Sixto Durán Ballén, strongly objected to the mural in the pavilion's cafeteria because of its moving theme, arguing that

It could have been more appropriate [since its] figures represent the Indian in his greatest state of poverty and backwardness, causing the public to imagine that our entire country is reduced to a life as miserable as that reflected in the painting (El Comercio, 1956, p. 7).

Once the fair was over, the Ecuadorian authorities abandoned the murals and did not arrange for their dismantling and transfer to the country. It is presumed that the works disappeared during the demolition of the pavilion (Barrera-Agarwal, 2010).

3.2. Benjamín Carrión and the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana (CCE)

In 1941, Ecuador had lost a significant portion of its territory during the Peruvian-Ecuadorian war, plunging the country into a climate of defeatism and discontent. Faced with this crisis, *lucid minds* such as Benjamín Carrión reacted firmly. In 1944, amid this state of collective apathy, Carrión founded the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana with the support of the intellectual community (Salazar, 2000), as

a response to the incitement caused by the pruning that the country suffered in 1941-1942. It was a positive response, devoid of any kind of vengeful feelings. It was a joyful, optimistic response, like that of a young tree, confident in the power of its branches and the wonderful fertility of the soil in which it is planted (Tinajero, 2013, p. 66).

² Between 1927 and 1962, Camilo Egas was affiliated with the New School for Social Research in New York, where he also served as Director of the Department of Art.

The CCE was created at the right moment. Among its founding objectives, it established the mission of “strengthening the national spirit and clarifying the vocation and destiny of the homeland”, restoring hope and offering a glimpse of a possible future through culture. In addition, it committed itself to “providing facilities so that scientific and artistic values could come to Ecuador [...] to give lectures and hold art exhibitions, musical concerts, scientific demonstrations, and technical presentations” (Tinajero, 2013, pp. 82–84).

That promised headquarters was the current *Casona*, a neocolonial building designed and built between 1945 and 1947 by engineer-architect Alfonso Calderón Moreno (CCE, 1945). The front façade, on Mariano Aguilera Avenue, now 6 de Diciembre Avenue, features three *Art Deco* high reliefs by sculptors Jaime Valencia and Luis Moscoso, but executed solely by Valencia (CCE, 1947c): *Music and Poetry*, *The Light of Culture*, and *Theater and Dance* (Figure 2a). The reliefs were executed in gray and white cement, sand, lime, plaster, and stone dust. In the lobby, there are oil murals by Diógenes Paredes that exalt Eugenio Espejo, science, education, the labor force of blacks, Indians, and mestizos in the countryside, and the fertility of the national geographical regions, with no trace of the large landowners. On the vaulted ceiling above the same space, painted in the shape of a

diamond, are four scenes entitled *The Cardinal Points of Ecuadorian Nationality*, by Diógenes Paredes and José Enrique Guerrero (CCE, 1947a). The eastern side of the diamond shows the chapel of the Virgin of the Rosary in the church of Santo Domingo and the arched gateway leading to Loma Grande. There, in the foreground, lies a figure dressed in a worker’s uniform. That clothing was painted over a sensual female nude that was quickly censored. How inconceivable to expose a natural female figure in front of the temple! (Figure 2b). Despite this, upon close inspection, the feminine features of the face remain distinct.

In the two main halls of the *Casona* are two murals of identical proportions, 8.55 x 4.92 meters, created by Oswaldo Guayasamín Calero and Galo Galecio (CCE, 1947b). Calderón Moreno conceived the murals’ arrangement as a spatial finishing touch. Created by Guayasamín, the old meeting room features *La Prehistoria*, *El Incario* y *La Conquista* (*Prehistory, the Inca Empire, and the Conquest*), a mural in three acts depicting a cavalcade of conquistadors advancing against the Inca Atahualpa, defended by his general Rumiñahui (Figure 2c). As a spatial counterpoint, the Jorge Icaza auditorium features the fresco mural *Los forjadores de la nacionalidad* (*The Forgers of Nationality*) by Galecio, which brings together the heroes—all men—of the Royal Audience of Quito,



Figure 4: Faculty of Jurisprudence, UCE, 1952-1955/Gilberto Gatto Sobral. Mural *The History of Man and Culture*, 1959/Oswaldo Guayasamín. (2023)

Independence, and the Republic (Figure 2d). In the absence of heroines, the base of the composition is occupied by pious women and children.

Carrión had created a favorable environment at the CCE for artists, writers, artisans, and folklorists to express themselves. Guerrero, Paredes, Galecio, and others received subsidies, awards, regular portrait commissions, contracts as instructors, and stipends for serving on the Casa's board of directors. A network for the exchange of ideas was established there, based on the ideological position of Benjamín Carrión, who was a great admirer, personal friend, and regular correspondent of the aforementioned Mexican thinker José Vasconcelos (Carrión, 2003).

3.3. The Regulatory Plan

The 1942 Regulatory Plan for Quito, drawn up by Guillermo Jones Odriozola, provided for an orderly scheme of urban expansion. To the north, civic centers, parks, sports facilities, and the University City were planned along new longitudinal and diagonal avenues. By the 1950s, the city was expanding beyond

the historic center, undergoing rapid transformation with an extensive public and private construction program, growing in an orderly manner despite financial constraints. The state and the municipality carried out infrastructure, telecommunications, and urban development projects, such as the railroad overpass at the southern entrance to the city, the first vehicular overpass on 12 de Octubre Avenue, and the paving, canalization, and tree planting of streets and avenues (El Comercio, 1958). At the end of that decade, the press highlighted this progress under headlines such as *Architectural Excellence of Modern Quito* (El Comercio, 1960c) and *Modern Quito: A Uniform and Planned City* (El Comercio, 1960d), presenting the new buildings and urban developments made possible under the umbrella of the Regulatory Plan. Amid the advances of this hygienist and modernizing plan, two events arose that required the implementation of new constructions and became fertile ground for the application of the *Synthesis of the Arts*: the University City and the announced Eleventh Conference of Foreign Ministers.



Figure 5: Indo-American Plaza, with University City in the background, ca. 1974/Gilberto Gatto Sobral. Various artists from the continent, 1961-1974. Gráficas Feraud Ltda. (n.d.). Postcard from the author's collection.

3.4. University City at the Central University

3.4.1. Rector's Pavilion

During several democratic administrations, from 1947 to 1963, the implementation of the University City of the Central University gained momentum. Uruguayan architect Gilberto Gatto Sobral designed the master plan for the campus and its most representative buildings.

The first building was the Rector's Office, now the Administrative Pavilion, which housed the rector's office, printing press, library, and university theater, all adorned with elaborate details, including doors carved with pre-Columbian motifs. The theater's northwest façade served as the basis for the first mural on campus. The dialogue between sculptor Jaime Andrade Moscoso and Gatto took place from the initial stages (Gatto Sobral and Paredes, n.d.). Gatto designed a subtly concave wall that serves as the backdrop for an outdoor agora and support for the mural. Between 1948 and 1954, Andrade, assisted by Gonzalo Pillajo, worked on roughing, carving, and polishing the stone of the 18 x 9-meter mural using a jackhammer and chisel.

Aimed at students, the mural tells a visual story of knowledge. From the lower left corner, children, young people, women, and men advance horizontally; from the opposite side, workers, teachers, and scholars join them. They all converge toward a central trail that evokes the emergence of the great civilizations of Antiquity. At the intermediate level, classical cultures emerge alongside the Christian cross, understood not so much as a religious symbol but as a foundational element of Western culture. At the top, the composition brings together the national flag, the industrial revolution, and a vision of the man and woman of the future. The ensemble culminates in an escape toward the sky, where a terrestrial sphere, crossed by a clearly delineated equatorial line, crowns the scene (Figure 3). Architect and sculptor converged here in the creation of a highly symbolic work, intended to represent the ideals of the university, the city, and the nation.

3.4.2. Faculty of Jurisprudence

On the eastern façade of the *Faculty of Jurisprudence* stands a colorful cubist mural in Venetian mosaic, completed in 1959 by Oswaldo Guayasamín. At the foot of the message "Because you are free to achieve your dreams" stands a Minotaur—as guardian of University City—Pachamama in the form of earth, life-giving water, American corn, primitive man, the wheel of progress, the arts, the evolution of science, and the advent of a new humanity. Guayasamín used this commission to issue public warnings against war, oppression, the dangers of the atomic age, and the destructive power of man (Figure 4). Gatto, the building's designer, reserved this surface to give it remarkable visibility from Avenida América.

3.4.3. Faculty of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences

In the lobby of the Faculty of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences is a mural by an anonymous artist, a surreal mountain landscape with a bright rainbow and weightless birds that, while appearing fantastical, are inspired by the *hoatzin*, an Ecuadorian Amazonian bird. Although unsigned, the mural is attributable to Gonzalo Endara Crow, "a lone figure in the panorama of magical realism in neo-surrealism" (Kennedy-Troya, 2005, p. 139). Decades later, Endara Crow reissued the same hoatzin in another mural in the Municipal House, confirming his authorship at the UCE. The synergy between the unusual mural-lintel and the lobby covered by translucent hyperbolic paraboloids (Luzuriaga, 2023) results in a threshold to knowledge.

3.4.4. Indoamérica Square

One of the main avenues outlined in the Regulatory Plan was Diagonal Universitaria, today Avenida Alfredo Pérez Guerrero. This artery ran from Parque de Mayo or El Ejido to a roundabout in front of the Rector's Office building on the University Campus. At that point, Plaza Indoamérica (Figure 5) was consolidated, a project promoted by the National Union of Journalists and welcomed by the Central University as a tribute to the indigenous heroes and heroines who resisted the conquest, and as a symbol of continental unity. Designed by Gatto, the plaza included a lighted fountain in the center of a large spiral pool. Two horizontal pedestals, floating on mirrors of water, were intended to hold the busts of heroic indigenous figures sent by the governments of



Figure 6: Legislative Palace, 1960/Alfredo León. *Genesis [Synthesis] of National History*, 1960. Fragment of the western mural/Luis Mideros. (2024)



twenty-one countries on the continent. The first busts to arrive were from Mexico, Venezuela, and Bolivia, followed gradually by those from other nations. The inauguration of the urban sculpture complex took place in 1961, though some pedestals remained empty until Ecuadorian sculptors filled them. Over time, some countries replaced their busts after reconsidering which figure best represented their indigenous identity. The last to be added was the bust of Hatuey, from Cuba, received in 1974.

Some of the creators of the busts were at the forefront of the search for an American-indigenous identity. For example, *Camarão*, from Brazil, was created by Bruno Giorgi, author of *Os Candangos* in Brasília, and there is a bronze replica—signed by Giorgi—located in Plaza Brasília in Vicentina. *Tecún Umán*, from Guatemala, was created by Dagoberto Vásquez, a prominent muralist in his native country and in Mexico. *Lempira*, from Honduras, is the work of Mario Zamora, also the author of *La diosa arrodillada* (The Kneeling Goddess), a female nude created for a film starring the iconic Mexican actress María Félix. The award-winning *Francisco Zúñiga* sculpted *Cuauhtémoc of Mexico* and *Abayuba* of Uruguay, the creation of José Zorrilla de San Martín, a leading sculptor of epic works in his country.

The bust of Rumiñahui is the work of Ecuadorian sculptor Vicente Rivadeneira, who based his interpretation of the character on the phenotypic features of Andean indigenous peoples, giving him a heroic countenance. Rumiñahui's appearance was therefore *designed to order*. The adoption of the character by the military institution and his appearance on postage stamps and thousand-sucre banknotes consolidated in the collective imagination the idea that Rumiñahui looked like the bust in the Plaza Indoamérica. Did the hero lose relevance when the sucre—the national currency—ceased to circulate and was replaced by the US dollar?

In this collective work, Gatto went beyond his role as a designer, becoming a driving force behind the synergistic event. Unfortunately, the ensemble created by Gatto and dozens of American artists was gradually distorted. The busts were relocated twice, both times in an ill-advised move. The first time, they were placed at the edge of the university grounds, like a fence; the second time, due to the construction of an overpass. In their current location, the busts are lined up on conventional pedestals in front of the Rector's Pavilion. Their meaning has been distorted: the spiral—a metaphor for unlimited growth—has been lost, as have the Indo-American heroes, who once gazed out over the entire horizon. Now they focus their gaze in a single direction.



Figure 7: Government Palace, 1960/Ethel Arias. Triptych *The Discovery of the Amazon River*, 1960/Oswaldo Guayasamín. (2023)



Figure 8: Caja del Seguro, 1960/GADUMAG. Protection for workers, 1959/Interior mural/Galo Galecio. (2024)



Figure 9: Mariscal Sucre Airport Terminal, 1956-1960/Airways Engineering Corporation. Mural *Telégrafo 1°* First airplane to cross the Ecuadorian Andes: 1921. Pilot Elia Liut, 1960 / Galo Galecio. (2023)

3.5. The XI Inter-American Conference in Quito

In 1954, the Organization of American States designated Quito as the venue for the XI Inter-American Conference. In response, President Camilo Ponce Enríquez created the General Secretariat of the XI Conference, under which the Construction Commission would operate. This commission would be responsible for “planning and carrying out a series of construction and urban improvements necessary to accommodate and house the diplomatic representatives and all the Conference staff” (Construction Commissions, 1957, p. 10). Thus, the execution of works that would present the capital and the country in a dignified manner became a national priority.

In 1957, work began on several buildings, and the completion of preparatory projects for the Conference was accelerated. In August 1959, the newspaper *El Comercio* stated that “the Inter-American Conference has served to enable Quito to begin to shed its outdated colonial garb and enter fully into the 20th century in terms of architecture and urban planning” (1959a, p. 13). A year later, complex diplomatic circumstances prevented the Conference from taking place, and it was first postponed and then indefinitely delayed. Nevertheless, the *Synthesis of the Arts* was applied in five of the projects that had been advanced.

3.5.1. Legislative Palace

The Legislative Palace would serve as the main venue for the Conference and later permanently house the legislative branch. As thematic background, the buildings that hosted the previous Pan American

Conferences in Bogotá and Caracas already included murals and works integrating the arts: the Elliptical Hall of the National Capitol in Bogotá featured a large mural by Santiago Martínez Delgado, and the Aula Magna of the Central University of Venezuela, designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva, featured a work by Alexander Calder. In keeping with these practices, architect Alfredo León designed two rectangular friezes measuring 40 x 4.70 meters on the north façade of the Palace, created by sculptor Luis Antonio Mideros Almeida and titled *Genesis of National History* (Inauguration of the Legislative Palace, 1960). The figures are high-relief carvings in gray stone from Cinto. It was a complex task to ensure high-quality work in a short period of time and to direct 85 carvers! (Diario del Ecuador, 1960a). Mideros, an academic sculptor, created an elaborate narrative of national history that was understandable to any passerby. The eastern frieze runs from the Kingdom of Quito, the Cara-Shirys, Puruhaes, and Cañarís, to Atahualpa as leader of the Inca Empire. Then appear figures from the conquest, such as Sebastián de Benalcázar, founder of Quito, Orellana pointing the way to El Dorado and the Amazon, and culminating with Fray Jodoco Rique and Eugenio Espejo, symbolic figures of independence. The western frieze represents progress and the union of forces that drive civilization. Women crowned with laurels announce the birth of the Republic, democracy, the law, and the constitution. The scene concludes with Atlas holding the globe, on which a woman measures with a compass the line that gives Ecuador its name (Diario del Ecuador, 1960b) (Figure 6). After analyzing the communications



between the Secretariat's Planning Department and the sculptor, Monard observes the precarious set of techniques and methods employed. This "non-modernity was interwoven with the appearance of modernity of the new buildings in their form and materials" (Monard, 2015, p. 57). Nevertheless, the mural became a true repository of collective memory, a vehicle for remembering identity, supported by an emblematic architectural-sculptural work.

3.5.2. Government Palace

The Government Palace or Carondelet Palace needed to be presented in a dignified manner for the Inter-American Conference. The young architect Ethel Arias Duarte, a rediscovered protagonist of Ecuadorian architecture, was commissioned to carry out the work. Her project almost completely reconfigured the building, preserving only the front section facing the Plaza Grande. Carondelet was transformed into a façade mask of republican order that conceals a modern building. During the execution, President Dr. Camilo Ponce Enríquez visited the site to check on the progress. A front-page news story in *El Universo* (1959) highlighted the progress of the work, saying

Architect Ethel Arias explained to the President that [...] where the large central staircase will be located [...] a large mosaic mural could be placed. At that moment, the President intervened and asked, "Is Oswaldo Guayasamín here [in the country]? He must leave his mark on the National Palace" (p. 1).

Regardless of the anecdotal dialogue, the architect envisioned the grand staircase flanked by a mural similar in layout to Diego Rivera's mural *La Epopeya del pueblo mexicano* (The Epic of the Mexican People), which surrounds the main staircase of the National Palace in Mexico City. In fact, Arias reactivated an old commission to Guayasamín, since "twelve years had passed since the [initial] commission until its completion in 1960" (Valdez and Morán, 2019, p. 78). The monumental triptych was to represent the discovery of the Great Amazon River—the Río de San Francisco de Quito. Ethel Arias coordinated with the artist throughout the process, from the sketches (El Comercio, 1959b) and design to the final installation (Figure 7).

In the late 1950s, nationalist discourse resurfaced, declaring Ecuadorian Amazonian identity to reaffirm Ecuador's right to the territory lost in the 1941 war. However, Guayasamín avoided adhering to a banal manifesto. Instead, he proposed a vision that did not oppose Hispanic and indigenous cultures. The left panel, measuring

5.12 x 6.84 meters, represents the beginning of the journey: indigenous people and Spaniards depart together from upper Quito, guided by a nascent watercourse. The central panel, measuring 7.58 x 6.84 meters, with an anti-colonialist focus, alludes to the loss of indigenous lives during the difficult journey to the tropical lands. There, the river widens, and the figure of an Amazon warrior shines, backed by a radiant sun. The final panel, measuring 5.12 x 6.84 meters, concludes at the river's mouth on the Atlantic Ocean, thereby incorporating the Amazon rainforest into the national imagination (Valdez and Morán, 2019).

3.5.3. Social Security Fund

The headquarters building of the *Caja del Seguro*, now the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute, was designed by GADUMAG³, a private association of architects and engineers created *ad hoc* to design this headquarters, which would initially serve as offices for meetings of foreign ministers. Gilberto Gatto, with a proven track record in the Synthesis of the Arts, was a senior partner in the firm, so he presumably promoted the inclusion of one exterior mural and two interior murals.

The glass-fronted building stands on an exterior stone plinth. The reliefs on the plinths, measuring 25 x 2.50 meters, are the work of Jaime Andrade Moscoso and depict work in various regions: fishermen, farmers, construction workers, and industrial workers. Compared to those at Ciudad Universitaria, Andrade simplified the anatomical features, making them mestizo. One merit is the mural's human scale: the workers have come down to the street and walk alongside the people. Unfortunately, the work is almost invisible behind bars or sales stalls, and it loses contact with pedestrians. In addition, the reliefs present a high degree of *proven danger*⁴ due to the stone's inadequate physical properties, pollution, and neglect, which are progressively degrading them. In 1962, Andrade completed a mural of abstract figures in white wood and copper, measuring 4.80 x 2.50 meters, on the mezzanine of the building. The work has lost its side panels, is located in a poorly accessible office, and is affected by furniture leaning against it. The stained-glass lights designed by Carola Cabrera Q. are also the subject of future study.

In the lobby of the same headquarters, there is a large fresco by Galo Galecio entitled *Protección a los trabajadores* (*Protection of Workers*), an allegory of the institute's function (Figure 8) depicting a pale savior—Social Security—who, with outstretched arms, descends from the Andean peaks to protect mothers, children, workers, farmers, and fishermen. Galecio resorts to an iconographic reinterpretation: just as in colonial times the pre-Columbian sun was replaced by a chalice from which rays of sunlight emanate, here Social Security is represented as a resurrected Christ descending from on high to reach out to the oppressed and dispossessed of the earth.

Of the cases discussed, those of the Social Security Administration are the works most directed at the masses and the working class, although they cannot be considered insurgent. According to an optimistic press release issued at the time of its inauguration, a current of *Synthesis of the Arts* was perceived to be in full formation.

The function of a fresco, such as the one in the Seguro building, is to teach the common man a lesson [...] in the future, the walls of large buildings will be used to display works of art, as has happened in other countries (El Comercio, 1960b).

Around the same time, the newspaper *El Comercio* described 1959 as a "fruitful year for the Ecuadorian arts", highlighting three of the murals discussed: that of "Luis Mideros [who] has worked on a large stone frieze" for the Legislative Palace, the bas-relief in the graceful and beautiful building of the Social Security Institute by Jaime Andrade, and a mural in the Faculty of Law "in Venetian glass, of great audacity and novelty" (pp. 1-2) by Oswaldo Guayasamín (El Comercio, 1960a).

3.5.4. Air Terminal

The airport terminals in Quito and Guayaquil were among the projects sponsored by the Conference. The initial design and construction were carried out by Airways Engineering Corporation and *Smith Engineering Construction Co.*, although the Ministry of Public Works completed the work. The Mariscal Sucre airport terminal was inaugurated in 1960 with two murals in the waiting room overlooking the runway.

High above the hall is a 21.84 x 4.45-meter fresco by Galo Galecio, entitled *Telégrafo 1º. First airplane to cross the Ecuadorian Andes: 1921. Pilot Elia Liut* (Figure 9). Galecio depicted the Italian aviator and his Hanriot HD.1 biplane en route from Guayaquil to Quito, with the Guayas River and El Panecillo at either end. The painter took some historical liberties, as the actual flight was from Guayaquil to Cuenca and then to Quito, where Liut landed on November 28, 1920. The mural incorrectly states the year as 1921. The message conveyed to terminal users when viewing the mural was that of a new conquest: man-machine conquering the mountain, dominating the air with a steel Pegasus, a symbol of modernity overcoming the territory. Architecturally, the terminal's designers reserved this rectangular surface for a mural from the outset, as confirmed by its twin terminal in Guayaquil, which also has a work in the same location and scale⁵.

On the opposite wall of the hall, a 6.56 x 7.55-meter mural in pink stone and beaten copper by Jaime Andrade was located next to a staircase, now removed, that led to the bar-restaurant and the outdoor terrace, from which family members greeted travelers. Andrade depicted Prometheus holding fire in both hands, observing the stars of the solar system as they revolved around a metallic sun with

³ GADUMAG. An acronym for the firm composed of Gilberto Gatto Sobral, Sixto Durán Ballén, Leopoldo Moreno, Oswaldo Arroyo, and Eduardo Gortaire.

⁴ According to Chapter IVB of the Operational Guidelines issued by UNESCO in 2012, "ascertained danger" refers to a concrete and imminent state of deterioration due to inadequate conservation and climatic factors.

⁵ Mural by Segundo Espinel at the Simón Bolívar Air Terminal, now the Guayaquil Convention Center.



Figure 10: Hotel Quito, 1960/Charles F. McKirahan, Andrés Chiriboga-landscaping. Illustration taken from (August 5, 1960). Advertisement for Área-Aerovías Ecuatorianas C. A. El Comercio, p. 25.

indigenous-mestizo features. A pond with aquatic motifs originally occupied the base of the mural. The old terminal ceased operation in 2012. It is said that the building has been saved from demolition thanks to these murals. When new uses for the building are defined, these works may be rescued from oblivion.

3.5.5. Hotel Quito

The Hotel Quito was created to accommodate most of the delegates to the continental event and as an investment by the Insurance Fund to attract foreign tourism through an international hotel chain. Renowned American architect Charles McKirahan, prestigious British interior designer Henry End, and emerging Ecuadorian landscape architect Andrés Chiriboga achieved the most outstanding interdisciplinary example of the juxtaposition of art, architecture, and landscape in the country.

McKirahan designed the hotel to give it a thoughtful presence in the Andean landscape. He endowed it with moving interior spaces, futuristic volumes, and a playful interplay of façades that are themselves plastic expressions. End conducted a local search for imagery. An example of this is the stone-carved mural of Patecte, a tribute to the Cañari culture, reinterpreted from a drawing in historian Federico González Suárez's book (González, 1878). The iconography of the hand-woven carpets originated in the Puerta del Sol of the Tiahuanaco culture, broadening the frame of reference to include other pre-Hispanic cultures. Olga Fisch and her Folklore workshop were excluded from participating as designers or manufacturers of the carpet, based on the iconography and motifs used by Fisch at that time (personal communication, Margara Anhalzer, November 14, 2024). The interior design combined these elements with the latest in

6. McKirahan experimented within the muralist mode in several of his contemporary projects, such as the sculptural columns at the *Sun Castle Club and Motor Hotel* in 1957, his interpretation of Neoplasticism at the *Playboy Club Miami* in 1961, and the exterior mural at *Seacoast Towers North*, now the Alexander, in 1962.

modern international furniture, designer lighting, tableware, utensils, and cutlery created especially for the hotel, achieving a setting that was as eclectic as it was harmonious. The prominent positioning of the Patecte mural in the lobby, specified by McKirahan, demonstrates his understanding of the communicative role of a work of art in dialogue with the architecture and the observer⁶.

The bird's-eye view of the Hotel Quito reveals the spatial theatricality conceived by McKirahan and Chiriboga (Figure 10). Chiriboga designed winding paths, serpentine benches, landscaped terraces, and gardens like an artist painting an abstract picture. Among his teachers were Oscar Niemeyer and, especially, landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, with whom he trained during his years as a student and young architect in Rio de Janeiro. At Hotel Quito, his landscaping, a colorful, gestural, and abstract painting, unfolds beneath the visitor's feet.

The coexistence of architecture, mural art, interior design, interior and exterior furnishings, and landscaping makes Hotel Quito the Ecuadorian project that comes closest to a total work of art. For decades, the hotel was the setting for cultural expressions and artistic performances of all genres: music, theater, dance, comedy, conferences, as well as the setting for international films and the backdrop for social events. Its positive impact on local culture demonstrated the hotel's transformative quality. Unfortunately, the current owners have failed to understand their role as protectors of the property and, without grasping its essence, have undermined this fundamental piece of modern architectural, landscape, and urban heritage.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Is the material presented heritage? Does it raise our self-esteem or cause us to feel detached? As Rosero (2024) argues,

the purpose of heritage should not be merely to preserve it, but to transform it as part of a community's appropriation of it when it understands it as a legacy of the past that is needed in the present for the collective construction of the future (p. 2).

The series of Quito works by *Síntesis de las Artes*, developed between the mid-1940s and early 1960s, constitutes a continuum that reconnects with the petroglyph engravers and colonial sculptors of previous centuries. At a key moment in the definition of national identity, three luminous junctures emerged on the Quito horizon, establishing a cultural philosophy, showcasing technical achievements, and sculpting a local aesthetic: the positioning of Benjamín Carrión with the creation of the Casa de la Cultura, the construction of the Ciudad Universitaria of the Universidad Central, and the planned—but unrealized—Eleventh Inter-American Conference. Uruguayan, American, British, and Ecuadorian architects—trained in Uruguay and Brazil—worked alongside avant-garde artists from the country and the continent. Not immune to international influences, they produced vibrant examples of *the Synthesis of the Arts*. These artists, designers, and architects, responding to universal perspectives while remaining faithful to their own idiosyncrasies and avoiding superficiality, captured the spirit and values of their era, conjuring works that speak not only of who we were but also of who we are.

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