

# **ENHANCING THE VALUE OF A COLLECTION THROUGH ITS DOCUMENTS.**

## **The Case of the Ignacio Merino Municipal Art Gallery, Lima- Peru**

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The Ignacio Merino Municipal Art Gallery is the most important collection of republican painting within Peru. Within it are conserved the largest number of watercolors by costumbrist artist Pancho Fierro as well as the oil paintings of Ignacio Merino, considered to be the first Peruvian painter with an academic formation. Both artists are key figures within Peruvian art history, as well as other representative pieces by Peruvian painters from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century.

In exploring this collection we can begin to understand how the concept of art has changed within Peru, starting with the country's independence from the Spanish Crown. The theme of Peruvian identity, which since the 19th century until today is manifested in all Peruvian arts, is also a constant within these paintings.

The Ignacio Merino Municipal Art Gallery is made up of a collection of 571 artworks, most of which are oil paintings and watercolors, and in a smaller number, drawings and prints. In addition, within its inventory are noted some sculptures and old furniture that make up the decoration of the Municipal Palace of Lima and the Segura Theatre. The Art Gallery was formally created in 1925 with the name Municipal Art Gallery; nonetheless the collection exists since 1876 when 56 paintings and a file of wash and other drawings by Piura painter Ignacio Merino were brought from Paris. Through his will, the city of Lima inherited Merino's personal production, conserved until his death in his personal art studio. As the years passed, the collection grew, but it never had its own exhibition space and was moved between different spaces. Similarly, as the documentation concerning the collection grew, it was distributed as various bureaucratic documents kept in several different archives and libraries.

It is worth highlighting that the creation of this Art Gallery had a social impact on the cultural environment of Lima, as through it the teaching of the visual arts was promoted, reason for which the first director of this gallery was the painter Daniel Hernández, who was also the first director of the National School of Fine Arts, created in Lima in 1918.

When I was called to work in the Municipal Art Gallery in 2004, I was hired for four months to verify the inventory of the collection. I was handed an inventory, a Microsoft Excel document with a list of paintings, their titles, and names of artists, locations, economic values, conservation statuses and dimensions.

The Education, Culture and Sports Department of the Metropolitan Municipality of Lima had programmed the recovery of the Municipal Art Gallery within its goals, for which a diagnosis of the state of the collection was necessary. The collection was not open to the public, only a few historians knew of its existence; there was no professional team in charge of its conservation and dissemination. For several years the collection had had a supervisor who had before held other administrative roles such as gallery treasurer, he was an art enthusiast but did not have an academic background in art history or any discipline akin to the arts, reason for which the gallery did not play an important role within the cultural environment of Lima, as it had decades before.

My first task was to verify the facts within the inventory, which involved visiting the different spaces in

which the collection had been distributed, as most paintings were in exhibition in the various halls and offices of the Municipal Palace as part of the adornment of the building. A small group of prominent art pieces were in the Lima Art Museum under a loan for use contract.

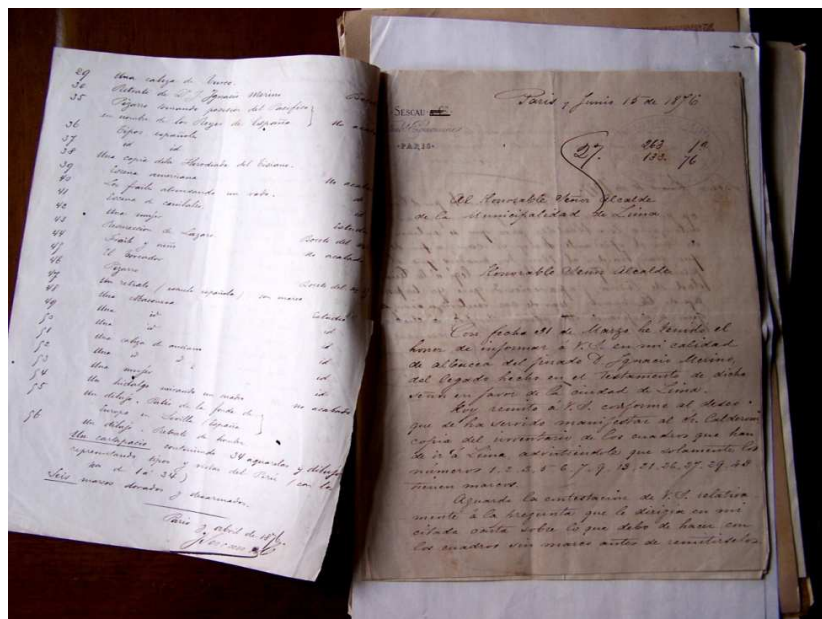
I was able to identify that the pieces were in a poor state of conservation and that the recorded names of the paintings were incorrect. Furthermore, to my surprise there were two paintings in the inventory that were marked for elimination, in other words, paintings that were to be removed from the collection due to their poor state of conservation and their null value. The previous administrator had placed this indication, and in his reports insisted on the elimination of these two paintings, both of which were later on restored and exhibited.

My diagnosis found that the collection had serious problems of conservation and that it was missing many important historical facts with respect to its pieces, which impeded the study and analysis of these. The first measure to be taken was to come up with a conservation and restoration plan for the collection, which was approved and the first items to be restored were the watercolors of Pancho Fierro, which had been stored in the basement of the Municipal Government, placed in moth-infested frames and protected by mold-covered glass.

During the restoration process we were able to discover that on the reverse side of the watercolors there were some manuscripts describing the scenes represented. The famous costumbrist writer Ricardo Palma, who had collected the watercolors, wrote these documents. The documents helped us to understand the traditions of 19th century Lima that at first sight we had not been able to understand.

It was proposed to me that I continue with the work of enhancing the value of the collection, for which I was hired for two more years. This work entailed getting to know the collection, the written documents within it being of utmost importance. For a long time it was considered that art pieces deserved restoration whereas the documents that speak of the history of the pieces did not deserve the same attention.

Another important discovery was finding the original will of painter Ignacio Merino, a document written by a French lawyer detailing the art pieces that had been brought to the capital city. The will was crucial for identifying the titles of the art pieces and also for realizing that several paintings and the file with wash drawings and pencil drawings had disappeared.



Document written by a French lawyer detailing the art pieces. Paris, 1876

In the inquiry and data actualization we reviewed old inventories and other documents that came up, donation acts and purchase notes. All this documentation was dispersed throughout town council books, municipal records and loose documents at the Municipal Library as well as the Historical Archive of the Municipality of Lima.

Through these documents we also identified the movement of the pieces of the collection, which for various reasons were moved from one space to another. An important moment that we were able to identify was the safekeeping of the largest number of pieces during the 1879 war between Peru and Chile, in which Chilean troops looted the city of Lima. Pieces were kept in the house of mayor César Canevaro, who took the initiative and became a custodian for the collection, as well as for the old *cabildo* (colonial municipal corporation) books, important documents from the Colonial period. Concluded the Chilean occupation, the collection was handed over to the director of the National Library in 1884 for its exhibition.

One of the most emblematic paintings within Peruvian art was not kept safe from the looting and became a war trophy of sorts, as it was moved to Chile alongside other museum and national institution pieces - a painting called *Los funerales de Atahualpa* (Atahualpa's Funerals), painted in Florence in 1867 by Luis Montero. After the war had ended, through the negotiations of Ricardo Palma, director of the National Library, the painting returned to Peru in 1885. It was the most famous painting of its epoch, as it represented the dramatic encounter between two cultures, the Spanish represented by the military and the church and the Andean by the dead Inca Atahualpa and his women, the *ñustas*, in grief. It is the only painting to have been represented on a Peruvian bill, as numismatics until then had only carried symbols brought by English and U.S. money houses.



*Los funerales de Atahualpa* (Atahualpa's Funerals), 1867



Peruvian bill, 1879

The painting Atahualpa's Funerals continues to be of great national interest. It is an art piece that was commissioned by the Peruvian Congress to Montero, but it has been a part of the Merino Municipal collection since its first inventories in 1892. Unfortunately we were not able to locate a document verifying its entry into the collection, reason for which in 2006, the Congress of the Peruvian Republic legally petitioned for possession of this painting, showing its proof of purchase from the artist. If the report of the donation from Congress to the Municipality of Lima had been located, this art piece would not have been returned.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the old Municipal Palace suffered a great fire. As it was built of adobe and wood, the colonial building had to be taken down, and in its place, a new four-floor palace was constructed in neocolonial style. In its wide halls were to be exhibited paintings by Ignacio Merino and the most important Peruvian artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we can appreciate today. A portion of the Merino collection paintings were also taken to the Lima Art Museum, know in that time as the *Palacio de la Exposición* (Palace of Exposition).



Palace of Exposition, 1904

The documentation found also provides us with information concerning the restoration work, the names of restorers, their procedures and the terminology they used in their times. Unfortunately this documentation was also found dispersed throughout several locations, and to this day remains incomplete. It is a process that requires much time, so as to go through the archives and consult experts in conservation.

As part of the project to enhance the value of the Municipal Art Gallery, two books were scheduled to be published, one concerning the history of the gallery and one focusing on the watercolors of Pancho Fierro. For this endeavor we hired two prominent Peruvian art historians, Luis Eduardo Wuffarden and Gustavo Buntinx, with whom we worked for the recognition of the names of the artists and the titles of the paintings.

In the book, Ignacio Merino Municipal Art Gallery: LXXX Anniversary, published in 2005, we decided to publish the photographs and facts of the pieces that had been stolen from the collection, so as to report the theft and in hopes of being able to identify the pieces. A paradigmatic case was the recovery of the *Retrato de Simón Bolívar* (Portrait of Simón Bolívar), painted by an anonymous artist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; piece that was taken from the Municipality of Lima headquarters in 2001 and recovered in 2009 from an antique store in the Lima district of Miraflores.



*Retrato de Simón Bolívar* (Portrait of Simón Bolívar)

Today, the Ignacio Merino Municipal Art Gallery has its collection on display for public viewing, an exhibition space, and also organizes educational activities and loans its pieces for temporary exhibitions in museums and cultural centers. Despite this, there is still a lot to do with respect to documentation, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century documents are still kept in the Library and the Municipal Historical Archive, limiting access to the information. My proposal is the digitalization of these documents, and their organization under different headings: inventories, photographs, cataloguing indexes, donations, acquisitions, movements of pieces, cultural activities and restoration and conservation treatments.

Having these documents organized would enable us to better manage the information with respect to the collection, and to access knowledge concerning an important part of art history and Peruvian culture.