

The Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art

In 1968, with a view to repopulating the historic centre of Caracas, the Venezuelan Government decided to construct a large residential, administrative and commercial complex incorporating 2,500 apartments, 90,000 m² of office space, the Anauco Hilton Hotel, a large convention facility, an extensive shopping centre and various cultural institutions. Among the latter is a new museum of contemporary art.

Launched on a modest scale in February 1974, the Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art (CMCA) has had – under the efficient guidance of Sofia Imber de Rangel – a successful career marked by major exhibitions on Cubism, the Dada movement, Klee, Herbin, Vasarely, Soto, Cruz-Diez, Bacon, Botero, Torres-García, Motherwell, David Smith, Tsai, Larry Rivers, Richard Smith, Francisco Narvaez, Cuevas, Zitman and many other distinguished national and international artists. With the official opening on 22 April 1982 by the President of the Republic, Luis Herrera Campins, of the new headquarters building, the museum doubled its surface area and facilities. This inauguration also brought the welcome bonus of a substantial increase in the institution's material, human and financial resources. The new expanded museum has in the process been transformed into one of the most outstanding museums of Latin America.

The CMCA's collection and its new building

The Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art is unique, in Latin America, in being an independent foundation receiving state support. With this support, the institution has succeeded in assembling, in the ten years of its existence, a collection including works by Picasso, Matisse, Léger, Miró, Dubuffet, Calder, Fontana, Albers, Vasarely, Soto, Cruz-Diez, Schöffer, Magnelli, Poliakoff, Bacon, Botero, Torres-García, Kienholz, Marisol, John Davies, Latham, Adami, Telemaque, Monory, Larry Rivers, Richard Smith, Negret, Tsoclis, Larry Bell, Francisco Narvaez, Alejandro Otero, Cornelis Zitman, Arman, Tadini, and many other

well-known artists too numerous to name. The museum aims to cover the extremely varied currents of contemporary art (particularly post-1945 trends) through the acquisition of genuine masterpieces. Thus it has adopted a rigorous and selective acquisition policy aimed at building up a collection composed solely of the latter, albeit at the cost of some restriction in size.

The second major reason for the significance of the CMCA is the quality of its building and facilities. With the recent inauguration of its new extensions, constructed by the Centro Simón Bolívar on plans drawn up by Siso & Shaw Associated under the supervision of the architect Nicolás Sidorkovs, the CMCA now has at its disposal an area of approximately 5,000 m², distributed over five floors. Three of these house the exhibition halls, the library and a large multi-purpose hall or lecture room; the other two storeys are given over to laboratories, offices, special-events workshops and a shop. Built of reinforced concrete, iron, glass and other modern materials ensuring structural stability and durability, and with a relatively flexible internal structure adaptable to a variety of functions depending on the specific event or circumstances, the new CMCA building has been designed and equipped to meet all the requirements of a modern museum. The technical facilities were in fact installed under the guidance of the specialized architectural firm E. Verner Johnson & Associates of Boston (see p. 44). The exhibition halls have been equipped with technical apparatuses to ensure a properly controlled environment (air conditioning, temperature and humidity control, air purifiers). To solve the tricky problem of lighting, a system has been introduced whereby the entry of natural light is controlled by absorbent film that filters out ultraviolet rays. Artificial lighting has been arranged in such a way, having regard to angles of incidence and light reflection, as to avoid the annoyance of unwanted reflections. In the same way, incandescent light controls have been introduced for those works whose technical characteristics require it (paper, fabric, etc.). Finally, the dividing walls and

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The *Works from the Collection* exhibition.





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The new museum building in the Parque Central complex.

panels on which works of art will be hung have been coated with a special paint to reduce their luminosity.

In addition, complementing the essential work of the museum's guards, the various halls of the CMCA have been equipped with round-the-clock closed-circuit television.

In short, the CMCA has taken particular care to adopt all the necessary measures to ensure the effective protection of its works of art and the highly professional and responsible management of its activities as a museum.

The CMCA in the life of Caracas

The real value of this institution in the Venezuelan context lies in the part it plays in the life of the capital and its contribution to the development of the nation. One of the most original features of the CMCA is the fact that it is solidly integrated in the life of the Venezuelan community and, in particular, in the life of the capital, Caracas. This integration is apparent both on the physical level and – to a much more significant extent – on the cultural level.

The physical integration of the CMCA in the life of Caracas takes three forms. Firstly, far from being – as is usually the case with traditional museums – an isolated and remote precinct jealously segregated from residential areas, the CMCA is, on the contrary, situated in the very heart of the huge Parque Central residential, administrative and commercial complex. This makes our museum a transit point and landmark for all residents of, or visitors to, the Parque

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The Works from the Collection exhibition.

Central. What we are dealing with is not a museum that exists alongside the city, but one that has its place within city life. Secondly, situated as it is in the area fortunate enough to contain the country's main cultural centres (the Central University of Venezuela, the Fine Arts Museum, the National Art Gallery, the National Science Museum, the Botanical Garden, the Teresa Carreño Theatre, the Caracas Athenaeum, the Museum of Keyboard Instruments, the Audiovisual Museum, the Museum of the Child), the CMCA inevitably becomes a point of departure, transit or, indeed, destination for all who visit this area of Caracas in response to cultural needs. Thirdly (and this makes it unique among Venezuelan museums), the CMCA – with the aim of achieving a more effective coverage and of reaching the local population more successfully – has established two new suburban branches, the Sala Cadafe (inaugurated in 1978) and the Sala Ipostel (opened in 1980), situated respectively in the urban development of El Marqués and in the San Martín district. The Sala Cadafe is situated in an upper-middle-class area (in the eastern part of the capital) and the Sala Ipostel is to be found in a working-class, underprivileged district (in the western part of the city), while the museum's headquarters in the Parque Central is situated in an intermediate area, at the point of intersection and convergence of the working-class and middle-class districts. The CMCA has thus succeeded in integrating itself physically and operating effectively at all socio-economic levels in the life of the city of Caracas.



The CMCA in the cultural life of the nation as a whole

Much more important – because it operates at a deeper level and is of greater scope – is the contribution made by the CMCA to the cultural life of the nation as a whole.

Designed to serve simultaneously as a meeting place and point of interchange between artists and the public, as an information and documentation centre on contemporary art and as a focus for cultural action and activities, the CMCA is making an effective contribution to cultural progress and to improving the quality of national life.

An essential feature of this cultural contribution is its vigorous educational programme. Among the CMCA's rich and varied range of educational resources, special mention should be made of the library (which already contains over 16,000 volumes, making it one of the largest specialized art libraries in the country), the educational material accompanying every exhibition (catalogues, research documents, video programmes, audio-visual displays, study guides, display panels, guided visits, courses on the visual arts, activities workshops, lectures, round tables, etc.) and the continual assistance given to teachers, students and the public in general. The CMCA also organizes travelling exhibitions, cultural events in secondary schools and other centres, seminars for art teachers, books and monographs on artists, and critical and analytical essays on art published in national or foreign newspapers and reviews.

The aim underlying the CMCA's use of all their educational media is not only to convey facts but also to offer approaches to learning and the experience of life. It attempts therefore to educate by stimulating people's creativity, their powers of observation, analysis and assimilation and their individual judgement. It also seeks to foster a humanist approach capable of countering the dehumanization that characterizes our excessively technically oriented consumer society.

The CMCA is the first museum in Venezuela to cater for people with physical handicaps. In order to help the country's blind to appreciate art, the CMCA is bringing out a Braille version of a series of study guides and educational texts previously produced by the institution for the general public. Similarly, to facilitate access for the blind, special signs leading directly to the lifts have been placed in the parking area, and the lifts and other public areas have been equipped with a Braille system. The toilets have been designed to take account of the needs of the handicapped.

On another level, the CMCA has set itself the basic goal of being part of the mainstream of the life of its society and its time, contributing to the development of the nation in the most varied spheres. In the aesthetic field, the CMCA is concerned not only with traditional plastic arts (painting, sculpture, engraving, ceramics, tapestry work, etc.) but also – and to a significant extent – with the new art-forms of the technological and computer age (photography, film, video, computer art, non-conventional art,

'performances', music, literature etc.). In the political field, the museum seeks to arouse interest and canvass effective support among political leaders on behalf of culture – the practical effect of which has been the frequent granting of budgetary allocations and financial aid by the government and, more spectacularly, the regular inauguration of the museum's major exhibitions by the President of the Republic. Finally, in the social sphere, the CMCA is using its headquarters premises and two suburban branches to take the museum to the people (particularly underprivileged groups), without waiting for them to come to the museum. This is being done not only through the educational means previously described, but also through the activities of its staff in areas not covered by the state's educational action, such as urban fringe and underprivileged communities and cultural groups.

[Translated from Spanish]