

Commentary

## Carlos Sánchez: In search of beauty

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**The purpose of this study is to review the life and works of Carlos Sánchez, a Guatemalan born prolific painter and architect, whose masterpieces were exhibited at Dartmouth College's Hood Museum of Art in Hanover, New Hampshire. His paintings have left an immeasurable legacy to the world of art. Born in Guatemala in 1898, he graduated from Dartmouth College in 1923, and then finished the Yale University School of Architecture in 1927, after having traveled extensively and enrolled in several universities in the US and abroad. After Yale, he worked as a junior draftsman for the well-known architectural firm, Shreve, Lamb and Harmon, in New York, that designed the Empire State Building. He then travelled to Mexico and worked with Diego Rivera. He subsequently, in 1931, became the first artist-in-residence and helped found the Studio Art Department at Dartmouth College. His artistic future seemed bright and promising but God had other plans for him. In his late 40's, he felt the call for priesthood and was ordained as a Catholic priest at the age of 52. Although he initiated a new chapter of his life, he never left his strong commitment for art and beauty, because he was a "seeker of beauty" in the full sense of the word.**

**Key words:** Carlos Sánchez, painting, beauty, abstract expressionist painting.

### INTRODUCTION

On 24 January, 2014 the Hood Museum of Dartmouth College, inaugurated an exhibition: "In Residence: Contemporary Artists at Dartmouth" where two masterpieces of the prolific Guatemalan born painter and architect Carlos Sánchez were exhibited. The exhibition celebrated the history of the artist-in-residence program: "the tradition of inviting practicing artists to Dartmouth College, to make works of art, to interact with students and faculty, and the local community, and to exhibit their works on campus (see "In Residence: Contemporary Artists at Dartmouth, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2014).

This exhibition highlighted the important legacy that the

program "Artist-in-Residence" has had in the life and the history of this prestigious university, which started in 1931 when the young Guatemalan was invited with a scholarship to teach art and work at the painting workshop. Through the years this international program has benefitted novice artists and those with more experience, whose notoriety is well known and recognized. Artists of the stature of Charles Burwell, Walker Evans, José Clemente Orozco, Magdalene Odundo, Robert Rauschenberg, Alison Saar, Paul Sample and Frank Stella, just to mention a few, have passed through the artist-in-residence program and their presence has been decisive to boost the vigor of arts

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at Dartmouth.

Despite the fundamental role that Carlos Sánchez played by being the first “artist-in-residence” at Dartmouth, very little was known about his life and works of art. The Hood Museum undertook an authentic “hunt” to research and locate his family and any remaining paintings of his. The museum finally acquired the two pieces which now are in exposition. It was in the wake of this quest and as a result of the interest the Hood Museum showed for his paintings, which developed in me the desire of this study to know more about him and his works. I decided to explore and research his life and let him speak through his diary, his written correspondence, his paintings and of what others know and remember of him. It cannot be said that I found him, but that I “discovered him” throughout the research. The study of his works confirms that Carlos Sánchez still has a lot to say. His long life with good health (he passed away at 98 years), allowed him to paint a lot and leave an inestimable legacy to the world of art, which is still to be revealed.

Carlos Sánchez was born in Guatemala in 1898, the seventh of ten children from an affluent family in Guatemala. Since he was a boy, he loved colors and his eyes were attracted by forms, which he started to paint since he was very young. At the age of 5, using a wooden stick, he designed the portrait of his brother on sand, which his mother used to say, was a perfect drawing. Notwithstanding his talent and his interest in painting, when the moment came to choose a profession, he thought – influenced by his family – that art, according to what he told himself<sup>(1)</sup>, would not be a secure career or with a lot of upside. He decided instead to study engineering and enrolled in Cornell University, in New York, in 1915. He recalled, after several years away from home, the inner desolation he suffered:

“During those years I lost the faith I had practiced from a child, and the hope to find something certain. I was restless, uneasy”.

He did not find what he yearned for and what he found instead would not fulfill him. He looked for beauty in everything, in landscapes, in facial expressions, in heaven, in the sea. His gaze was in search for the essence of things; but these things escaped from him. Because of that, while at Dartmouth, twelve years later, when the spirit became calm, he wrote:

“Dartmouth was for me the renewal. My old, sage and loving professor, George D. Lord was still there and instead of boring me, he shared part of his beauty. In my classes, the youth of my students with whom I also interlocked friendship, emptied a new vigor in my dry soul”<sup>(2)</sup>

In the interim, he had strayed and moved to different countries and universities. After having attended Dartmouth for two years, he decided to travel to Germany

(Leipzig and Berlin) to study medicine. He was fascinated by the idea of going to China as a missionary, to cure the sick.

He stayed in Germany for about three years studying medicine. He also found himself visiting museums and inspiring himself in romantic art from the Weimar Republic, which opened new ways of artistic vanguard after the ruins which the war had left behind. He finally abandoned the project of studying medicine and returned to Dartmouth, graduating in 1923.

The following year, he attended Yale University, graduating as an Architect in three years instead of four in 1927. He then completed a master degree in architecture, again in Yale in 1928. He then moved to New York, getting a job as a junior draftsman with the well-known architectural firms Shreve, Lamb and Harmon, which at the time were designing the Empire State Building.

Despite his mark edibility for the design in construction, he preferred to track beauty on canvases and brushes. He resolved going to Mexico to work with the connoted painter Diego Rivera, with whom he collaborated with in designing and painting the mural fresco of the second floor of the Cortés Palace in Cuernavaca and in the famous mural titled: “The Epic of the Mexican People” situated in the stairways of the National Palace in Mexico City. “While the master fixed the forms with stucco, the disciples – other artists –we completed it”, wrote Carlos in his diary.

The imprint of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and Juan Soriano in debt with the social realism and expressionism does not go unnoticed in Carlos’ work. One of his masterpieces on oil painting exposed at the Dartmouth’s Hood Museum, (Figure 1) “The Lad with the Bird”, exhibits masterfully the ability acquired from his first stay in Dartmouth. A youngster with red hair has in his hands a bird, of an intense red and translucent at the same time, behind the dark and starry sky. His closed eyes suggest the strong nostalgia of beyond, of a total beauty, though its precise sense is unknown. It stands out in this masterpiece the facility to conjugate the mysticism of the youngster with the tones and density of the red color which he handles with perfection. The dark background contrasts with the paleness and inclination of the face of the youngster and the centrality of the bird or pigeon which flaps on his chest expressing certain spiritual acquiescence.

That same year, 1931, he went back to Guatemala, where he spent three months in Santiago Atitlán living among the native indians. From his stay in Atitlán, there are 22 water colors of beautiful and scapes and indigenous garments, full of color, where one sees his skill in the use of the brush and in the way he lets the patches and drops flow, which one can guess its the figure of an Indian or the cloak of the brothers in the processions, or, the silhouette of a volcano. His water colors and his first paintings in oil exhibit also a debt with the German



**Figure 1.** “The Lad with the Bird” (Painted in 1928, “The Lad with the Bird” exhibits Carlos’ dominion with the brush acquired in Dartmouth. He gave it as a wedding present to his youngest sister Cristina).

expressionist painters from the beginning of the century, who without a doubt were for Carlos a basic point of reference.

His first self portrait, another painting exposed in the Hood Museum, (Figure 2) highlights his mastery of the light and shade, and of the luminous contrasts because instead of being a work of gestation (1923), it is loaded with a tremendous expressive force. The stern and troubled look in his face, embodies the inner conflict through which the artist is going through. What stands out the most in this painting is the agile use of the brush which leaves blank spaces and patches to give more expression to the face. Also in this period, Carlos begins collecting hand embroidered garments from the indigenous natives in Guatemala. This collection was donated recently by his family to the Ixchel Museum of Indigenous Dress from the Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Guatemala. His interest as a collector extended until the end of his life in varied objects and artistic genders.

In 1931, as an already reputable painter, he was offered a position in Dartmouth to be the first artist-in-residence, known at the time as a “fellow in art” in Dartmouth, with a scholarship financed by the Rockefeller family. From 1932 to 1934, the famous Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco resided in Dartmouth and was the second artist-in-residence after Carlos Sánchez. Carlos remained in Dartmouth after his residency and as a result of his work experience with Diego Rivera and his

fluency in Spanish, he became acquainted with Orozco and worked with him during his residency in Dartmouth. Orozco’s work is exhibited in the famous mural of the Baker Library in Dartmouth, “The Epic of American Civilization”. In this mural, Orozco exposes with a pronounced anti European accent and a Marxist perspective, the mythical Quetzalcoatl god embracing the two cultures, the American-Indian and the European with a majestic and heartrending gesture (Figure 3).

Different from other North American institutions, where the socio political criticisms and claims towards Indians were rejected because they were offensive (such as the case of David Alfaro Siqueiros in Los Angeles and Diego Rivera’s mural at Rockefeller Center in New York), Dartmouth welcomed from the very beginning with enthusiasm the mural from Orozco, and honors itself as having it as one of its artistic jewels, and as an example of the liberal spirit which encourages it. In 1932 (March 18 to 20) he poses for Orozco in another mural which has as a title: “Man released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life”. This was a panel that Orozco painted after the war, and symbolizes the mechanization which produces the domination of the technical over the human and expresses the dehumanization of man. The hands which come out from the destructive machine represent slavery, automatism and the transformation of man into a robot without a soul or freedom, and subject to another machine. At the back it raises the figure of a man (Carlos’



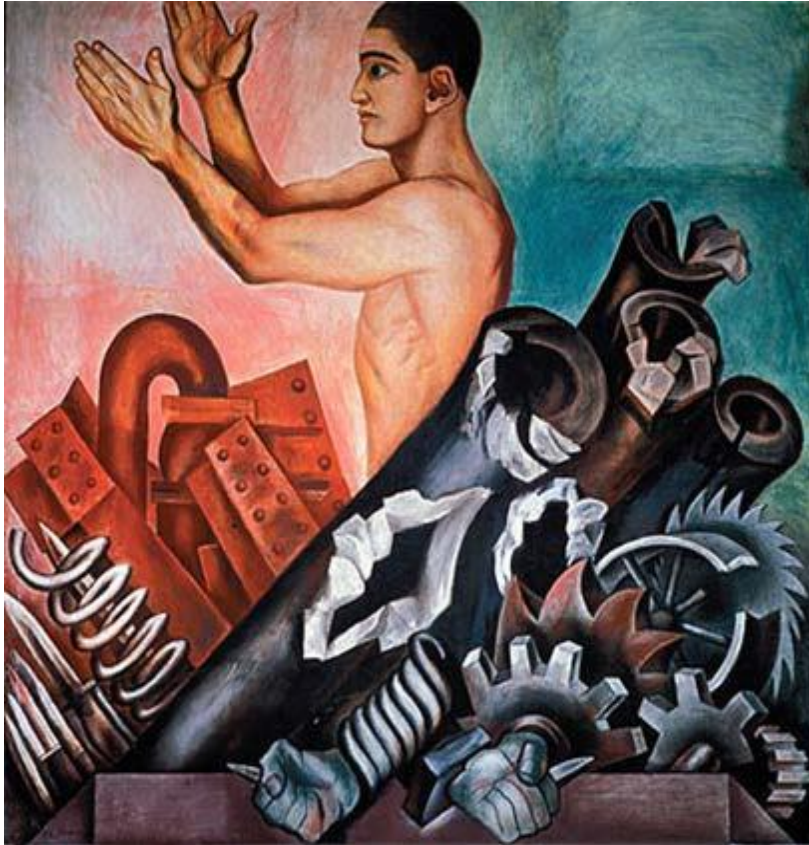
**Figure 2.** Self portrait (Painted in 1923 in Guatemala, this "Self portrait" highlights the splendid use of light and shade in the first period of his painting career).



**Figure 3.** Quetzal coatl (This painting is a detail of "The Epic of American Civilization" from José Clemente Orozco of 1932-1934. Carlos collaborated in the painting when he was a fellow in art in Darmouth).

portrait) with free hands configuring its own destiny. This mural is located in the corridor which connects Carpenter Hall with Dartmouth Library (Figure 4 Orozco's

painting). That same year he becomes acquainted with a young architect, Luis Barragán, who then becomes very well known as first and only Mexican winner of the



**Figure 4.** Orozco's painting (A detail of Orozco's mural painting titled "Man released from the Mechanistic to the Creative Life" of 1932. Carlos was the model for the portrait of the lad. The mural is located in Carpenter Hall at Dartmouth).

Pritzker Price, who Carlos describes in his diary with subtle strokes:

"Yesterday I met Luis Barragán, from Guadalajara, Mexico. He is twenty nine years old, he is tall and slender. He likes tall and thin women, in the style of Degas. On that face, without lust and almost of a child nature has drawn certain voluptuous softness which the latino culture inculcates, has made this set of man of the world a pure spirit, which he has as inheritance – a highly finished type such as the found in Gide literature". Some pages, further on in his diary, he writes:

"We went to eat Barragán, Mrs. Reed, Orozco and myself. (...) Barragán and myself little by little we plunged in a conversation which covered religion, customs and a thousand of other things. It seemed we understood each other (...)"

And he concludes his annotations of that day saying:

"Now it is religion the loop which more profoundly binds Us Barragán and myself" (3).

Carlos could not be better surrounded by artists of predicament, and with an enviable climate to improve his plastic technique and acquire his own personality in painting. His artistic future seemed promising but God had other plans for him. At that moment he felt his call for the priesthood:

"I decided to give up my architectonic and artistic career and surrender myself entirely to God, and get to know more about Catholicism. God arranged things so that the monks of the abbey of Saint Anselm were in need of professors for their summer course and I got in touch with them from Dartmouth" (4).

In another letter he tells a friend what constituted for him this act of self surrender to his strong religious beliefs:

"I knew that I had to submit myself fully to God, but I did not know what to do. (...) Then I decided to leave my career of my whole life and this was the first great sacrifice God helped me to do, because in these days God was with me day and night" (5).

Certainly, he continued to admire beauty surrounding



**Figure 5.** "The Need of God" (This painting belongs to his expressionist and mystical period. It was painted in Baton Rouge in 1982).

him, but beauty with eternal profiles, without menaces of growing old. It was also an invitation to taste life in depth and to dream of a future without an expiration date.

Nevertheless, as a result of the world economic crisis, he had to go back to Guatemala to help with the family business. After a nostalgic wait of over eleven years passed by and when it seemed that he had lost hope of making a reality his desire to turn to God, he obtained a scholarship to study at the Catholic seminary at San Antonio Texas. This happened with the help from a friend from Dartmouth, who himself had become a Jesuit priest and knew of Carlos' spiritual restlessness long time ago (6).

In 1950, at the age of 52, he was ordained as a Catholic priest. He returned to Guatemala and dedicated his next 15 years to fully serve the Catholic church, and was in charge of different parishes during this time. In 1965, at the age of 77, he decided to move back to the US and joined the Baton Rouge, Louisiana, diocese, to continue his priestly life. There he lived until he passed away at the age of 98, and made many friends and a lot of them

remember him as having done a lot of good to them. He kept on painting until the end of his life in 1997.

The search for beauty, which found shelter in the expression of his art by sliding the brush on the canvas, was found when he discovered God. That was for him absolute beauty. As time went by, and his plastic technique deepened, Carlos walked away, more and more from the laws of realism and acquired an unlimited freedom in his painting. There is no interest in painting reflecting reality, instead, there is a need to express his interior life, and he begins to show his experiences and emotions in his work of art.

Without having in mind the conventions of art, he recreates his characters with colors, that do not correspond to any realistic notion as in the image of God the Father and the universe in "The need of God" (Figure 5). The gesture and the gaze of God transmit a sense of divine benevolence and compassion that the artist probably experienced and wanted to convey.

The dynamism of the composition of this painting emphasizes chromatic boldness. Red, blue, black, brown



**Figure 6.** "The Holy Spirit over the Mississippi" (Frame belonging to the family, painted in 1988).

and brush strokes of yellow and white degrade like in a symphony of color, excitement and sense. The symbolic red of the head of God the Father (Divine omnipotence and mercy) contrasts with the blue representing human freedom, and black and brown that reproduce the earthly, this symbiosis of mud and spirit that is in men.

There is a human figure that emerges from the depths of the Earth, holding a bluish circle with afflicted and needy gesture: it's the nostalgia of the creator that grips man when he experiences its limits and feels vulnerable.

Nineteen years before his death, at age 79, Carlos painted the famous painting titled "The Holy Spirit over the Mississippi"(Figure 6). At this point, his painting has experienced a notable shift towards abstract expressionism. Carlos' eye is more open to his own inner life than to the world and external events. Religious concerns have become central in his paintings.

In this painting, the color is a suggestive and dynamic element, and the forms acquire rhythm and movement in time with the incessant burning fire. The night sky appears brighter due to the strength of fire, symbolizing the sanctifying fire of the Holy Spirit in souls. The intensity of the flames is tempered by the shades of color that the fire acquires: ocher, terracotta, reddish brown, bright orange with white strokes that turn pink and stand out against the dark shadow. The mixture of colors is amazing, no extra stroke is needed, nor would it be needed, if it were isolated or out of the whole scene, as in

the work of creation; but the fact that we do not know how to understand the individual elements of beauty, does not diminish the beauty of the composition.

There is "something" in this canvas that speaks of the mysterious crucible (the pain and the purification) God uses to resemble souls to himself, even if we do not know how or when he uses them; that is part of the mystery. There is no doubt that this painting contains the strong expression of someone who is very close to God.

As was earlier said in the beginning of this study, Carlos Sánchez still has much to say. Neither his life nor his work could be understood away from its commitment for beauty and art. As a dedicated artist, he continued working without rest until the end of his days. He was a perennial traveler who discovered how to express with colors what he had inside.

### **Conflict of Interests**

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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## NOTES

1. The author's diary written in English from April 27 1926 to November 1930. Epistolary of the author.
2. Anabelle ARMSTRONG. "Father Sánchez. View from the 14th floor". *The Advocate*, August 28th (1988). (About an article published for his ninetieth birthday in a review from Baton Rouge, La.)
3. Annotations from his diary –written in English- of June 26 1932.
4. Annotations from his diary – written in English- of April 11 1931.
5. Letter by Carlos Sánchez addressed to Abbot Columban Thius, O.S.B. on 11-9-1967. Attached the original text in English: "Around the year 1930, I was teaching art at Dartmouth College, when I had what in old fashioned language would be a "call" from God to know him and him crucified. I determined then to give up my architectural and art career, and give myself entirely to God, and to learn what Catholicism was. God arranged it so that the monks of St. Anselmus' Abbey wanted some professors for their Summer course, and I put them in touch with them at Dartmouth and then arranged to come myself to St. Anselmus' in the winter – I was to receive no pay but I should have my board and room, and they put me to teach Spanish, of which I knew only the spoken language, instead of teaching art which I knew. There I learnt to know Christ in the liturgy."
6. Letter addressed by Carlos Sánchez to Rev Mr. Amadeo Verona, Burgos, written on October 7, 1971. The original is in Spanish.

7. "Ted came to visit me in Saint Anselmus' during his vacation and one day when we were coming back from Manchester, N.H. horrible commercial city towards the monastery we passed by in front of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church and I told in silence to the S. Heart that I left Ted's heart - he was called Theodore V. Purcell – in the tabernacle and I turned back to Ted and told him "Why don't you become a priest?" He says that caused him a tremendous surprise. He went back to Chicago and little by little he started to lock up in his room upon coming back from work instead of going out and have fun with his male and female friends and study the Catholic religion. (...) as soon as he was ordained a priest he wrote me asking me what had happened to me that I had not followed with priesthood. I answered him back saying that unless God presented me with a scholarship to study in a seminary I would not become a priest." Ted, already as a Jesuit priest, plotted and the first thing which I knew and soon was a letter from the rector of the secular seminar in San Antonio, Texas asking me to present myself at the seminar since there was a scholarship for me. I thought I would die. At that time I was in charge of the family ranch with about two thousand heads of beef cattle and also some other small farms and my sister wanted me to administer her coffee plantation. What to do? There was no choice: I could not rebuff Our Lord". (Letter addressed by Carlos Sánchez to Rev Mr. Amadeo Verona, Burgos, written on October 7, 1971).