

When the Avant-Garde Was Popular: The Mobilization of Art in Nationalizing Regimes in Italy, Spain, and Argentina

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Why did 20th-century authoritarian regimes support the avant-garde? Contrary to their conventional portrayal as exclusively promoting traditionalism and reducing art to propaganda, state support for avant-garde art was prevalent in fascist Italy, Francoist Spain, and Peronist Argentina. Using archival methods and comparative-historical analysis, I argue that these regimes invested in avant-garde painting and sculpture through state acquisitions, prize competitions, national exhibitions, and international biennials to articulate modern, unifying national cultures. The primary sources I analyze in three case studies highlight how state officials justified cultural policy and identified the propagandistic value of new artistic currents. To explain the unexpected presence of state patronage of avant-garde art under authoritarianism, I consider the problem of national unification in Italy, Spain, and Argentina, arguing that folklore and traditional culture were volatile and fractious due to the persistence of regional, ethnic, and linguistic divides. By exploring how and why these regimes brought so-called “high art” to the masses through public programs, this paper pioneers a new agenda for cultural sociology and demonstrates how visual art was enmeshed in processes of national unification, mobilization, and subjectivation. The paper also reveals the contradictions of authoritarian governance, examining why these regimes preserved a level of autonomy within the artistic field while engaging in repression across other spheres of civil society. Taken together, my findings highlight how authoritarian states mobilize civil society in unexpected ways—with implications for our understanding of art and mass politics as well as the role of culture in contemporary authoritarian movements.