

# Phoenix Art Museum

## NEWS RELEASE

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## **Lure of High Society, Working-Class Struggle and Radical Artistic Innovation Major Themes of Latest Exhibition at Phoenix Art Museum**

*Over a hundred objects shown by innovative Argentinean artist Antonio Berni*

**PHOENIX (June 10, 2014)** — *Antonio Berni: Juanito and Ramona* opens at [Phoenix Art Museum](#) on June 28 and features over one hundred objects by groundbreaking artist Antonio Berni (1905-1981). The included works span a variety of media including paintings, assemblages, sculptures, works on paper, sketchbooks, and printing plates. Berni is little known in the United States, but widely recognized throughout Latin America as one of the most important artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He used a wide array of bright colors and materials in his works to shed light on the realities of the Argentinean working class and their struggles to overcome economic challenges during the 1960s and '70s. A collaboration between the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Malba – Fundación Costantini in Buenos Aires, *Antonio Berni: Juanito and Ramona* is the first Berni exhibition organized by a U.S. museum in nearly fifty years and the first to focus on this iconic series.

Berni rose to prominence early in his career as a leading painter and promoter of “New Realism” in Latin America. In the mid-1950s, motivated by the social distress and poverty he witnessed amid his country’s rapid industrialization and parallel socio-political upheavals, he abandoned painting for a more visceral artistic medium: assemblage. In 1958, Berni began a series of works that chronicled his country's story through the tales of two fictional characters: Juanito Laguna and Ramona Montiel. Juanito was a young boy who left his home in the countryside to seek work in Buenos Aires and ended up living in poverty in the *villas miserias* (misery towns or shantytowns) on the city’s outskirts. Ramona, on the other hand, was a young working-class woman who was lured into a life of high-society prostitution by the promise of expensive gifts and luxurious decadence. Over the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Berni’s invented characters became so well known that they attained cult status in Argentina as popular legends and folk heroes.

Berni constructed narratives of Juanito and Ramona’s lives in his artwork using discards from everyday life. For Juanito he used waste materials like old wood, machine parts, and crushed tin cans found littering the slums of Buenos Aires, while for Ramona he used gaudy costume jewelry and chintzy, second-hand fabrics obtained at flea markets. This link between materials used and the fictional worlds depicted—the substance and the subject—could be characterized as “material realism.” This series developed into a social narrative on industrialization and poverty, underscoring disparities between the wealthy Argentinean aristocracy and the “Juanitos” of the slums, and exposing the political power networks at the core of high-society prostitution.

Phoenix Art Museum’s Shawn and Joe Lampe Curator of Latin American Art Dr.

Vanessa Davidson said, "This landmark exhibition showcases Antonio Berni's creative genius to great effect. The works are fascinating as they document Argentinean society's undercurrents during the 1960s and 1970s and showcase artistic ingenuity and innovation in materials as well as method." She added that, "Berni was a singular artist whose influence continues to be felt throughout Latin America to this day."

"Following on the success of *Order Chaos and the Space Between*, the collection from The Diane and Bruce Halle Foundation, this exhibition will further help to open our audience's eyes to the great diversity of art produced in Latin America," said James K. Ballinger, The Sybil Harrington Director at Phoenix Art Museum. "Berni's artistic radicalism can be compared in the United States to Robert Rauschenberg's pioneering assemblages. Both artists took radical leaps of faith in fundamentally questioning exactly what art could be and what it could be made of," Ballinger continued. He added that, "Berni was a pioneer and a visionary in Latin America, as this exhibition illustrates."

*Antonio Berni: Juanito and Ramona* is organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Malba – Fundación Constantini in Buenos Aires. The Phoenix venue has been made possible through the generous support of The Diane and Bruce Halle Foundation with additional support provided by Peter Banko and Cox Communications. The exhibition will be at Phoenix Art Museum from June 28 to September 21, 2014. For further information about the exhibition please visit [phxart.org/exhibition/antonioberni](http://phxart.org/exhibition/antonioberni).

#### **About Phoenix Art Museum**

Phoenix Art Museum has provided access to visual arts and educational programs in Arizona for more than 50 years and is the largest art museum in the Southwestern United States. Critically acclaimed national and international exhibitions are shown alongside the Museum's collection of more than 17,000 works of American, Asian, European, Latin American, Western American, modern and contemporary art, and fashion design. Visitors also enjoy vibrant photography exhibitions through the Museum's landmark partnership with the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. For additional information about Phoenix Art Museum please visit [phxart.org](http://phxart.org) or call the 24-hour recorded information line at (602) 257-1222.

#### **About the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston**

Founded in 1900, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is among the 10 largest art museums in the United States. Located in the heart of Houston's Museum District, the MFAH comprises two gallery buildings, a sculpture garden, theater, two art schools and two libraries, with two house museums, for American and European decorative arts, nearby. The encyclopedic collection of the MFAH numbers some 65,000 works and embraces the art of antiquity to the present. The MFAH also houses the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA), a major research institute, founded in 2001, and dedicated to research and publishing in the field of Latin American and Latino art. [www.mfah.org](http://www.mfah.org)

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