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Art Freeport:
The strategic epicenter of art collecting in the American continent, from Ciudad Juárez

It is time to change the narrative. Proposing the first Freeport in Latin America in Ciudad Juárez is not just a bet on the cultural ecosystem, but a macroeconomic vision. It means inserting the city into the dynamics of modern capital, demonstrating that Juárez has all the potential to transition from traditional manufacturing to consolidate itself as a vault, logistics center, and key ultra-luxury services hub for global collecting.

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In colloquial terms—and referring back to their historical origins along trade routes—a "Free Zone" or Freeport is an international transit area; a space that, for tax and customs purposes, is considered as if it were outside the country in which it is physically located. Today, an art freeport is much more than a simple warehouse. It is an ultra-high-security facility, with museum-precision climate controls, designed for the safeguarding of high-value assets such as works of art, precious metals, and antiques.

A great myth exists around these free zones: the idea that by using them "taxes are never paid." This is false. What a freeport actually offers is tax deferral. The artworks deposited there are exempt from tariffs and transaction taxes as long as they remain inside. Taxes are indeed paid, but only when the piece leaves the facility to be definitively imported into its destination country. This is precisely why they are so attractive to the global market—which reached a value of 65 billion dollars in 2023, according to the Art Basel and UBS global report. For Family Offices and the Wealth Management industry, art is a "safe haven asset" against inflation. A freeport allows investors to acquire, store for years, and even resell works within the same facilities without triggering immediate tax burdens. Globally, those in Geneva, Luxembourg, Singapore, and Delaware stand out. However, from Mexico to Patagonia, the map is empty.

Latin America does not have, to this day, an art freeport. Faced with this infrastructure vacuum, the opportunity presents itself as an oasis in the desert, and finds its natural enclave in Ciudad Juárez. It is paradoxical to measure the lack of this space when we map the ecosystem around us: we have Sotheby's headquarters in Mexico City operating for all of Latin America, the leadership of Morton Subastas consolidated at a national level, and the weight of ZONA Maco as the most important fair in Latin America. Looking to the north, the panorama is magnified: we have an enviable proximity to Art Basel in Florida, the colossal purchasing power of Texas—which alone represents one of the largest economies in the world—, the commercial strength of the prestigious gallery circuit of New Mexico just a few kilometers from the border, and the institutional weight of highly prestigious museums and galleries in California. If the market, auction houses, and world-class fairs are already moving millions in this region, the lack of a tax safeguarding hub is an undeniable business opportunity. Mexico is the indisputable bridge to the United States, the world's largest buyer, and right in the middle of this entire global mechanism, is Ciudad Juárez.

But, if the geography is so privileged and the market is active, why hasn't an art Freeport emerged in Latin America until now? The answer is multifactorial. Traditionally, the success of the European model has relied on very long-term international trust, cemented in absolute political and legal stability, as well as in global private banking ecosystems. In contrast, Latin America has historically dealt with cycles of institutional volatility, and governments in the region have used their free zones almost exclusively to generate jobs through manufacturing or the trade of mass consumer goods, not for the safeguarding of ultra-luxury assets. Furthermore, in a region historically battered by illicit financial flows, the art market—already opaque in itself—faces severe scrutiny. A modern Latin American Freeport would have the unavoidable challenge of being born with the highest standards of transparency and regulatory compliance to distance itself from any suspicion. Given the lack of this hyper-specialized infrastructure, major Latin American collectors have chosen to send their most valuable works to vaults in Geneva, New York, or Singapore.

Added to these macroeconomic challenges are local regulatory barriers. In the specific case of Mexico, one of the main problems holding back the domestic market is the legal environment. As I detailed in my article "Mexican art, afraid of international success," published in El Economista, our strict legislation on cultural heritage often operates as a deterrent for global collecting. The Federal Law on Archaeological, Artistic and Historic Monuments and Zones empowers the State to intervene on private works declared an "Artistic Monument," restricting their mobility and obliging owners to request official permits to take a work abroad. This latent threat to private property scares away investment and explains, in part, why the country concentrates only a minimal percentage of global sales. This is where the Freeport model proves revolutionary: by operating under a regime of customs extraterritoriality, it would function as a legal shield. It would provide international investors with the certainty, protection, and free mobility over their assets that the Mexican State's interventionism, paradoxically, denies them in the rest of the territory.

To materialize a project of this magnitude, real infrastructure is required. Juárez is, by definition, an industrial city coded for cross-border exchange. Currently, the city is one of the global epicenters of nearshoring, attracting multinational supply chains due to its security and efficiency. The art industry must do exactly the same. This project would represent the nearshoring of global collecting: transforming Juárez's logistical knowledge—traditionally focused on manufacturing—and elevating it to the preservation requirements of ultra-luxury assets.

I know firsthand the operational viability of this vision. From my position as a gallerist, I have managed the complex logistics of moving works of art to and from Ciudad Juárez: operating their entry for international exhibition projects, coordinating deliveries to collectors, managing the return of pieces to their creators' studios, and channeling international works—coming from South America, Central America, North America, and Europe—for their participation in Morton Subastas. Furthermore, through my gallery's representation of world-class artists—such as Javier

Arizabalo and Stefano Puleo—we routinely orchestrate the complex international movement of their works. The backing of having worked with some 50 artists from more than 15 countries allows me to gauge the magnitude of this opportunity. This is a topic that had never been discussed in the state of Chihuahua, simply because there had been no effort to put Juárez in the contemporary art conversation and on the radar of global collecting.

Added to this operational experience is an unbeatable geographical advantage: connectivity. While the only art free zone in the Americas is in Delaware (anchored to the Atlantic Ocean and Europe), Mexico offers direct access to the Pacific. This connection opens an expedited trade route with China, the second-largest art market in the world. Juárez is positioned right at the threshold of the number one buyer and on the ideal logistical route to number two.

Beyond safeguarding and logistics, a Freeport on the border would detonate a parallel economic ecosystem: luxury tourism. Modern free zones are not dark safes; they house exclusive, highly designed viewing rooms (private exhibition halls). Collectors, curators, and museum directors fly to these facilities to inspect pieces, close transactions, or enjoy behind-closed-doors exhibitions. By integrating cutting-edge technology—such as blockchain traceability to guarantee provenance—Juárez would not only offer a vault, but an unprecedented experience of business tourism and specialized services (restoration, appraisals, insurance) in the country.

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HECTOR DIAZ

What if Ciudad Juárez could become the epicenter of art collecting in Latin America?

In our latest collaboration, Héctor Díaz presents a vision that links art, investment, logistics, and the global economy: the creation of Latin America's first art freeport in Ciudad Juárez.

What is an art freeport? Why have cities like Geneva, Luxembourg, Singapore, and Delaware become strategic hubs for international collecting? And, above all, why might Ciudad Juárez possess the right conditions to become the next major hub?

With its strategic border location, logistics infrastructure, connection to the United States, and access to trade routes to Asia, Juárez could leverage its industrial expertise for a new sector: the preservation, movement, and trading of ultra-luxury assets.

In this article, Héctor Díaz analyzes the potential of this proposal, the regulatory challenges, and the opportunities such a large-scale project could generate for art, luxury tourism, specialized services, and the regional economy.

It is a conversation that is just beginning—one that puts Ciudad Juárez on the map of global art collecting.

Art Freeport: The strategic epicenter of art collecting in the Americas, based in Ciudad Juárez.

By Héctor Díaz

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