

# RUFINO TAMAYO

*A Pictorial Concept*

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Photos: Rufino Tamayo Museum Documentation Center

*The Great Galaxy*, 1978 (oil on canvas).

*Nature teaches us to see. I am constantly  
looking; I like to feel dry leaves, stones.  
Sometimes I draw from nature, plants.  
Above all, I look, I look all the time.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Rufino Tamayo by Rafael Squirru, *Américas*, Vol. 15, No. 11, Washington, D.C., November 11, 1963, p. 27.

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*Man at the Door*, 1980 (oil on canvas).

Essentially an innovator and a versatile artist, Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991) was always convinced that art came from personal investigation and a commitment to the material, but, above all, of the value of freedom as nourishment for the imagination and creative genius. Even though, as he feared, he did not live long enough to continue delving into the heart of painting, his work survives, revealing the pleasure of a man who knew how to look at the world attentively.

His keen sense of observation allowed him to hone his style, to enrich and transfigure his sources. From heading up the Department of Ethnographic Drawing of the National Museum of Archeology, he learned to value composition and the symbolic nature of pre-Hispanic sculpture and pottery. Years later he would develop an affection for these objects and begin a large collection, currently housed by the Rufino Tamayo Museum of Pre-Hispanic Art in the city of Oaxaca.

The expressiveness of the colors and textures of traditional art seduced Tamayo's sensibility, as did the fruit, flowers and other commonplace objects in Mexican culture that contributed to diversifying the formal techniques that he used.

His admission to the National School of Fine Arts in 1917 and his later links with modern art, as well as his interest in painting as a value in and of itself—stories or narration aside—also contributed to his education as an artist. He made good use of his knowledge of some of the

avant garde schools (Fauvism, Futurism, Metaphysical Painting, Surrealism) and later directly, while living in New York and Paris, with the work of Braque, Picasso, Matisse and Dubuffet.

Tamayo took what he thought most useful to his pictorial conception from these trends and developed a vast body of iconographic ideas that underlined the metaphoric character of his work. "My aim," he said, "is to use elements of my country's great artistic past, Mexican forms and colors, and meld them into a modern international unit."<sup>2</sup>

Tamayo was convinced that artists should maintain a critical distance from nature; that is, they should have the necessary sensitivity, but should be committed to an intellectual rather than instinctual attitude, and thus be able to create a new reality: the work of art. Writing about his mural *La naturaleza y el artista* (Nature and the Artist), he said, "The art student must educate himself from the very beginning in the correct attitude that the artist must have vis-à-vis nature, the [great] source of elements which should not be used literally, but refashioned so the final result is creation, not imitation.

"The student must also know what the correct attitude of the spectator must be when looking at the work of art, which should not be judged on the basis of its similarity to nature,

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Victor Alba in *Coloquios de Coyoacán con Rufino Tamayo*, Colección Panorama, Mexico City, 1955, p. 87.



*Man in Red*, 1976 (oil on canvas).



*Watermelons*, 1968 (oil on canvas).

but as an independent entity, with a life and problems of its own.”<sup>3</sup>

Tamayo thought of painting as a poetic form; that is, he conceived of it as a truly creative act, as opposed to what many other artists thought. What is more, he thought painting should be sufficient unto itself, without subordinating to other expressive ends. “I am absolutely convinced that the only thing that gives painting validity are its plastic qualities and its poetry. Poetry is message, humanity, life, which give the plastic elements their reason for being. Painting is not

literature, nor journalism, nor demagoguery. Painting is, I repeat, the wonderful union of poetry, with its message, and the plastic qualities that are the vehicle for transmitting it.”<sup>4</sup>

This is why Tamayo did not take the same road as the painters of the Mexican School, Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros. Even though at the beginning of his career he did paint a great number of pastoral scenes with indigenous figures, they did not have the movement’s social and political message.

Following the road of poetry, then, Tamayo exalted the essential forms of reality with harmony as his maxim.

The size and location of the forms, the balance and use of few colors, although in a broad range of tones, and drawing as the structure of the painting, all come together in his work rhythmically and in concert.

“Nothing is isolated,” he said. “The eye scans the whole canvas without stopping. The distribution and size of the forms, the weight of the colors, the sketch, all this must have a rhythm that the eye can follow without obstacles. Of course, I don’t believe in a photographic likeness. I eliminate details, for example, eyes, if I don’t need them. I aim for the essential, until I say what I want to say with fewer and fewer elements.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Published in *Bulletin No. 24* of the Smith College Museum of Art, October 1943, and quoted in *Letras de México*, a monthly literary and artistic bulletin published by Octavio G. Barreda, Year VIII, Vol. IV, No. 15, Mexico City, March 1, 1944, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> “Unas palabras de Tamayo,” in *Espacios*, a magazine of architecture and plastic arts, Mexico City, No. 3, June 1949.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Víctor Alba, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

Man, the world and the celestial unfold in his universe like plastic metaphors, but the genesis and the course of these images in time do not travel in a single direction. Rather, they are proposed as a river with different tributaries. Thus, Tamayo's work is sometimes predominantly figurative, and others, he tends more decidedly toward abstraction, particularly geometrical abstraction.

His permanent interest in experimentation with different materials and techniques, adapting them or inventing them, led him to visualize his work as a laboratory.

"In general, I work directly on the canvas, without prior notes, and I go right to the transportation of the real forms that motivated the painting....

"Although I have painted on all kinds of material, I think the extraordinary texture of canvas offers the most possibilities for painting....

"I have never worked with artificial light because I think only natural light gives colors their true tonal value....

"I paint with all kinds of tools because each produces a different texture, and that's how you achieve more richness....

"Because many manufactured colors don't have enough body, I prepare my own to my liking."<sup>6</sup>

The possessor of a world of secrets, Tamayo, who classified himself as a cultural worker, painted eight hours

a day and concentrated on solving the demands that his art made on him.

"It's important to have your feet firmly planted on your own ground, sunk in if necessary," he said. "But in my opinion, keeping your eyes, ears and mind wide open, scanning all horizons, is the right way. Fearlessly picking up and using experience from all over at the same time that you enrich it with local contributions is the only way of making our message universal."<sup>7</sup>

Tamayo was able to transcend the frontier of time and space and achieve his desire to make his work—and Mexican painting—a theme of contemporary world culture. 

<sup>6</sup> *Rufino Tamayo: obras recientes*, Modern Art Museum-National Institute of Fine Arts, Mexico City, February 1986.

<sup>7</sup> *Tamayo: 20 años de labor artística*, National Museum of Plastic Arts-Palace of Fine Arts-National Institute of Fine Arts, Mexico City, 1948.



*Women*, 1971 (oil on canvas).

Photo: Isaias Remba



## A BRIEF JOURNEY THROUGH HIS LIFE

Rufino Tamayo was born in the southern state of Oaxaca, August 24, 1899, and died at the age of 91. He is considered one of the best Mexican painters of the twentieth century.

Tamayo attended the School of Fine Arts in Mexico City, but, dissatisfied with the traditional art program he later studied independently. In 1921 he became head of the Department of Ethnographic Drawing at the National Museum of Archeology in Mexico City where he developed an interest in pre-Columbian art. Tamayo reacted against the work of the Mexican muralists, such as Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros, who dominated Mexican art after the 1910 Revolution, because of the epic proportions and political rhetoric of their paintings. He chose to work using Cubist, Surrealist and other European styles, merging them with Mexican subjects: figures, still lifes and animals. Tamayo generally used vibrant colors and solid compositions to depict natural subjects in a symbolic, stylized, or semi-abstract mode.

By 1930 he was a well-known artist in Mexico; he designed the murals for the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, and in 1948 a retrospective exhibit of his work took place at the Palace of Fine Arts. Among many other prizes, awards, honors and retrospective exhibits, in 1950 the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris gave Tamayo a one-man show; Italy's Venice Biennale honored him with a special exhibit; in 1954 the French government decorated him with the Legion of Honor; and he was awarded the International Prize at the Sao Paulo Biennial. A month before his death, Tamayo was honored with membership in El Colegio Nacional in Mexico City.

Tamayo's generosity included the building and funding of the Olga Tamayo Home in the city of Cuernavaca and a home for the aged for the city of Oaxaca.

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