**Maria C. Tornatore-Loong**

**Morel, Yoryi (Jorge Octavio Morel Tavárez)**

Born: 1906 – Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic; Died: 1979 – Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic

Santiago-born painter, musician and teacher, Jorge Octavio Morel Tavárez (also known as Yoryi Morel), is considered an early progenitor of the Dominican modernist school of painting, together with contemporaries, Jaime Colsón, Darío Suro and Celeste Woss y Gil. As one of the leading *costumbrista* painters in the Caribbean, Morel’s distinct vernacular style eulogised the Dominican landscape, people, architecture and culture while under the oppressive dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo (1930 – 1961). The artist’s early oeuvre integrated Realist and Post-Impressionist techniques with indigenous subject matter depicting street scenes of his native city, Santiago, and the abundant villages and rustic landscapes of the fertile Cibao region, while his mature practice was characterised by a figurative Expressionist mode. A gifted portraitist, Morel depicted local character-types, signifying the interdependent relationship between art and society. Another important feature of Morel’s practice was his preoccupation with popular customs like festivals, religious rituals, ceremonies and gaming activities that accentuated the significance of *merengue* music and dances in Dominican society. These indigenist works not only contributed to the development of Dominican modernism, but defined the spirit of *dominicanidad* (‘Dominican-ness’). As the founder of the ‘Yoryi’ Academy and educator/director at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, Morel was an inspirational master for a generation of artists.

Morel is generally considered to be self-taught; although from the age of eleven he attended formal art classes under the tutelage of Paris-trained Santiago-born landscapist and draughtsman, Juan Bautista Gómez; he also attended violin lessons under the renowned Dominican instrumentalist and teacher Machilo Guzmán. In his atelier-style academy, Gómez championed European conventional modes ranging from Neo-classicism to Romanticism and Post-Impressionism. Importantly, he introduced the young Morel to the work of **Édouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet**, **Camille Pissarro**, instructing his student to paint *en plein air*, in the manner of the **Impressionists**, to capture the spontaneity of atmospheric light within the landscape. Morel was further inspired by the Spanish painter, Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida and his representations of the people and landscape in his native country. In particular, Sorolla’s heavily-impastoed and light-imbued figure studies made a great impact on Morel’s early practice. In May 1927, Morel participated in his first group exhibition with artists from Cuba, Haiti, and Puerto Rico at the Exposición Nacional Interantillana (organised under the auspices of the Dominican Republic’s Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture), in Santiago de los Caballeros. Thereafter, Morel experimented with relief printmaking, publishing caricatures in magazines such as *La Revista Bahruco* (1932 – 1935), and designing book and magazine covers. Many of his early oil paintings were reproduced as engravings in Santiago’s *La Revista Navidad*, which further advanced his career.

In 1932, Morel presented his first solo exhibition in the rooms of Club Nosotras in Santo Domingo with critical acclaim, followed by his second show in 1935 at Ateneo Dominicano. As a ‘seeker of light,’ Morel illuminated the rustic scenery with his treatment of dramatic high-toned complementary colours applied by a sensual application of thick paint that evoked connections with national identity, as in *Paisaje (Landscape)*, 1927, and *Marchanta y otras transeúntas (Landscape, Merchants and other bystanders),* 1930.

During the 1930s, Morel created *costumbrista*-inspired portraits of the country’s socially diverse population including street vendors, farmers, fishermen, peasants and seductive, voluptuous mulattas, among others. Morel’s *Campesino cibaeño (Peasant from Cibao)*, 1941, is an iconic indigenist portrait that simultaneously evokes a sense of the *dominicanidad,* while commenting on the social reality of racial minorities. Morel’s portrait possibly alludes to the October 1937 ‘Dominican Vespers’ massacre (also known as the ‘Parsley Massacre’ and ‘El Corte’ (The Cutting)) of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent by military forces disguised as Campesinos in an ethnic cleansing ordered by Trujillo to decrease the number of Haitians in the country. This impressive work thematically resonates with the indigenist works of compatriots, Woss y Gil, Colsón and Suro, in addition to the *romancero guajiro* paintings of the Cuban vanguardia.

From 1940 onwards, Morel dedicated himself to education, by establishing the ‘Yoryi’ Academy in la Calle Del Sol, Santiago de los Caballeros, where he held classes in life drawing and painting until its closure in 1947. Morel however, continued to exhibit locally and in the United States, where he was awarded the bronze medal in painting at the International Exhibition of San Francisco in California, and invited to participate in la Exposición Arte Hispanoamericana, organised by the Riverside Museum in New York (1939). He also exhibited a selection of works in la Primera Exposición de Belles Artes at the Palácio National during the Interamericana del Caribe Conference (1940), and in la Exposición Nacional en el Ateneo Dominicano (1941) in Santo Domingo, followed by exhibits with contemporaries, Woss y Gil and Suro, at la Feria del Libro Tercera (Third Book Fair) in Mexico in 1945.

Remarkably, Morel’s career reached maturity during the period of national trauma under Trujillo’s corrupt regime (1930 – 1961). In an effort to reinstate his public image after the massacre of 1937, Trujillo instigated a national arts program, establishing the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (National School of Fine Arts) in Santo Domingo and the Primera Bienal de Artes Plásticas in 1942, in which Morel participated. In 1947, the artist travelled to the United States for three months by invitation of the Washington State Department, and visited museums, galleries, art academies, and cultural centres. In the following year, after relocating to the capital, Santo Domingo, Morel was appointed Assistant Director of the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, and later nominated as Deputy Director in 1953. Throughout his teaching career, Morel was an inspirational instructor to many students including Santiago-born Clara Ledesma, Radhamés Mejía, Marianela Jiménez, Jacinto Domínguez, Juan Rodriguez and Rosa Tavárez, to name a few.

During the 1940s and early 1950s, Morel’s practice was characterised by a figurative Expressionist mode, which focused primarily on *costumbrista-*inspired themes based on traditional Dominican festivals, rituals, customs and gambling activities, as in *Pelea de gallos (Cockfight)*, 1950. As a talented musician, Morel recognised the importance of *merengue* music and dances in Dominican society, and illustrated the accordion and other traditional instruments in many works as symbols of indigenous rural life, as in *La bachata (The Party),* 1942, and *Fiesta Campesina (Women’s Festival)*, 1959. In *A la fiesta (At the fiesta*), 1948, Morel reveals his creativity and visual acuity in depicting a Dominican festival located in the fertile Cibao hinterland. As in many of his landscapes, Morel featured the traditional bohío (timber-framed thatched-roofed huts with palm fronds), one of the most popular examples of domestic architecture of the Pre-Columbian region. This motif not only unites Morel’s audience to the idyllic Caribbean tropical landscape and its past, but highlights the significance of festivals in Dominican culture. The artist’s generously applied brushstrokes and intense variations in colour and tone are characteristic of his expressionist mode that alludes to the diversity and complexities of Dominican life. Similarly, there are aspects of realism in his figurative expressionist works of the late 1940s. In *Retrato de Luichi Martinez Richiez (Portrait of Luichi Martinez Richiez)*, 1949, Morel has focused on Afro-Caribbean features, applying dramatic, intense colours with heavily-textured brushstrokes to portray the model’s psychological state.

Throughout his career, Morel received many prestigious awards including, first prize in painting at the VI Bienal Nacional de Arte Plásticas (1952), and *La* *Orden de Duarte en el grado de Caballero* (in the rank of Knight) in 1973, the highest honour presented by the Dominican government. As a regional artist, Morel forged an indigenous modernism that was specifically *dominicanidad* in nationalist sentiment and cultural identity. His artistic oeuvre provides a unique introduction to twentieth-century visual culture in the Caribbean island nation.



Yoryi Morel, *Campesino cibaeño (Peasant from Cibao)*, 1941, oil on canvas, 84 x 74.5 cms., Museo de Arte Moderno, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

**Further Reading:**

García, José Enrique (2007). *Yoryi Morel: fundador y fundamental, 1906 – 1979*, Santiago de los Caballeros: Centro de Arte Ceballos-Estrella.

Gómez, Paula (2006). *Por los caminos de Nuestra expresión: exposicion retrospectiva del maestro Yoryi Morel*, Santo Domingo: Museo Bellapart.

Poupeye, Veerle (1998). *Caribbean Art*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Stratton, Suzanne (ed.) (1996). *Modern and Contemporary Art of the Dominican Republic*, New York: Americas Society and The Spanish Institute.

*Yoryi Morel: Autonomía y Trascendencia* (2007). Exhibition catalogue, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: Museo de Arte Moderno.

**List of works:**

Yoryi Morel, *Paisaje (Landscape)*, 1927, oil on canvas, 41 x 56 cms., Museo Bellapart, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Yoryi Morel, Paisaje, *Marchanta y otras transeúntas (Landscape, Merchants and other bystanders),* 1930, oil on canvas, 40 x 33 cms., Centro Cultural Eduardo Léon Jimenes, Santiago, Dominican Republic.

Yoryi Morel, *Campesino cibaeño (Peasant from Cibao)*, 1941, oil on canvas, 84 x 74.5 cms., Museo de Arte Moderno, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Yoryi Morel, *Pelea de gallos (Cockfight)*, 1950, oil on canvas, 75.5 x 92 cms., Museo de Arte Moderno, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Yoryi Morel, *La bachata (The Party),* 1942, oil on canvas, 100.5 x 128.5 cms., Museo de Arte Moderno, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Yoryi Morel, *Fiesta Campesina (Women’s Festival)*, 1959, oil on wood, 106 x 160 cms., Centro Cultural Eduardo León Jimenes, Santiago, Dominican Republic.

Yoryi Morel, *A la Fiesta (At the Fiesta)*, 1948, oil on canvas, 82 x 105 cms., Museo Bellapart, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Yoryi Morel, *Retrato de Luichi Martinez Richiez (Portrait of Luichi Martinez Richiez)*, 1949, oil on canvas, 57 x 47 cms., Museo Bellapart, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.