Contributor: Theresa Avila

**Valenzuela, Rosa Mena**

Born: 1913 – San Salvador, El Salvador; Died: 2004 – San Salvador, El Salvador

As a pioneer of **Expressionism** in El Salvador, Rosa Mena Valenzuela is responsible for some of the most radical transformations in Salvadoran art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Valenzuela began her own exploration of materials and form prior to her journey abroad in the 1960s and hers were the earliest expressions in El Salvador of developing international trends and experiments. Valenzuela transgressed artistic traditions with her unique abstract and expressionistic style, as well as in her experimentation with diverse mediums and materials. Valenzuela worked on an intimate scale and developed her own unique language for and approach to the two dimensional plane where she painted, drew, and collaged various materials, such as paper, cardboard, fabric, industrial paint, aluminum, and cement. The spontaneous and energetic nature of her line simultaneously creates and erases both a sense of form and atmosphere. Line and color are concomitant elements of her visual language, her images often filled with vibrant colors, and at times subdued given way to narrative. Another important aspect of Valenzuela’s work is the effort to reveal if not highlight her process and materials, which can be interpreted as some of the more significant aspects of what makes her work unique to Salvadoran art.

She began her art studies in 1953 at one of the two art schools in the country, The Valero Lecha Art Academy, which was established in 1936 and closed in 1968. The artist began to show her work nationally in 1960, her first solo exhibition taking place at the Salvadoran Institute of Tourism. Although artist Valero Lecha followed strictly formal academic standards, his school hosted many of the artists who would challenge traditional forms of art and shape modern Salvadoran art. Some of these artists traveled, lived, and studied abroad in Mexico and Europe, and eventually returned to El Salvador bringing with them new art concepts, forms, and techniques. Unlike her fellow artists, Valenzuela did not live and study abroad, although during the early part of sixties she did travel throughout parts of the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. These travel experiences resulted in a series of work exhibited as *Recuerdos de viajes (Travel Memories)* in 1965 now at the El Salvador National Library. Her travels allowed her access to the work of great masters and exposed her to new trends and she would remain in dialogue and experiment with an international aesthetic throughout her career.

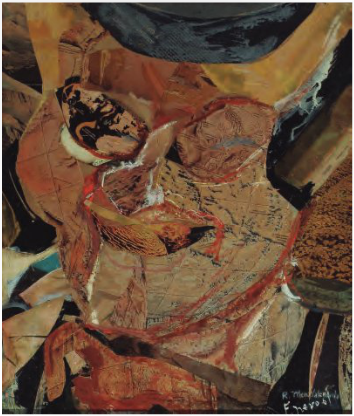


Figure 1. Rosa Mena Valenzuela, *Autorretrato*, 1961, collage on canvas, 63.5 x 53.5 cm., Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE).

**Link to Material (if online):** <http://marte.org.sv/>

**Image can be found in Croquer, L. (2004) *Rosa Mena Valenzuela: transformaciones, provocaciones, y diálogos*,** San Salvador: Asociación de Arte Moderno de El Salvador.

**Copyright holder:** Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE)

The above works were once part of Mena Valenzuela’s private collection and are now part of the MARTE permanent collection.

Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE) holds the self-portrait from 1961 and 50 other works by the artist that she donated upon her recent death in .

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It is her self-portrait from 1961, an abstract collage made of cut-up pieces of an Atlas, that marks the beginnings of Valenzuela’s lifelong experimentation with materials and form in art. The portrait was unique, breaking with traditional art techniques and aesthetics. The maps pieces incorporate random geographic patterns and were cut into imperfect and odd shapes that create an animalistic, almost primordial, visage. The application of collage, the abstract nature of the image, and the nature of the materials being both flat and rich in surface design make evident the artist’s awareness of and interest in the Cubist collage work of **Pablo Picasso** and **Georges Braque**. Another significant source of inspiration for the artist is **Kurt Schwitter’**s collage technique and his incorporation of non-traditional materials, such as found objects, bus tickets, old wire, or fragments of newsprint. Other connections can be made between her work and that of the **Abstract Expressionists** of the United States, such as the drawing element found in **Willem de Kooning**’s work, or the erasure of composition seen in the drip paintings of **Jackson Pollock**, and the hybrid formulations in **Robert Rauschenberg**’s ‘combine paintings.’ Additionally, Valenzuela’s work is simultaneously figurative and abstract, her diffuse intermingling and twisted forms gesturing toward the work of **Marc Chagal**l.

**No image available.**

Figure 2. Illustrations from Periolibro dedicated to the Chilean anti-poet Nicanor Parra, 1990s, Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE)

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Although Valenzuela challenged Lecha’s academic standards, she followed in his footsteps when she founded the Rosa Mena Valenzuela Academy of Drawing and Painting in El Salvador in 1973. Two years later Valenzuela was honored with a published survey of her work and during the same year received the “Scroll of Recognition” given by the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador. In 1985, the artist was included in a set of national stamps that honored contemporary painters who had also dedicated part of their talents to teaching. In the 1990s, Valenzuela illustrated UNESCOS’s *Periolibro* dedicated to the Chilean anti-poet Nicanor Parra. This work was part of the traveling exhibition of the *Periolibros IBEROAMERICA PT* Project, which opened in 1998 in Spain. That same year the National Council for Culture and the Arts organized a retrospective exhibition of the work of Rosa Mena Valenzuela at the National Exhibition Hall in San Salvador. Valenzuela has been recognized by major national and international institutions and organizations for her important contributions to the arts and culture of El Salvador, making evident she is one of the most significant artists of Central America. As an artist and teacher Valenzuela was productive up until her nineties.

**Further reading:**

Rodriguez, B. (1992) “Rosa Mena Valenzuela,” *Art Nexus* 3: 171-172; English Translation 223.

Croquer, L. (2004) *Rosa Mena Valenzuela: transformaciones, provocaciones, y diálogos*, San Salvador: Asociación de Arte Moderno de El Salvador.

Cazali, Rosina, et al (2009) *Tres mujeres, tres memorias: Margarita Azurdia, Emilia Prieto, Rosa Mena Valenzuela*. San José, Costa Rica: TEOR/éTica.

Castrillo, M. (2013) *Aproximación a la obra de Rosa Mena Valenzuela*

<http://www.contracultura.com.sv/aproximacion-a-la-obra-de-rosa-mena-valenzuela> April 2014.

Tomás Andréu (2013) *Rosa Mena Valenzuela: Artista futurista que nació hace 100 años.* <http://www.elsalvador.com/mwedh/nota/nota_completa.asp?idCat=47976&idArt=8171645> April 9, 2014

**List of Works:**

Rosa Mena Valenzuela, *Autorretrato*, 1961, collage on canvas, 63.5 x 53.5 cm., Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE).

Rosa Mena Valenzuela, *Las Holandesas*, 1964, collage on canvas, 99 x 91.5 cm., Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE).

Rosa Mena Valenzuela, *Retrato de Valero Lecha*, 1970, collage, Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE).

Rosa Mena Valenzuela, *La guerra es un fuego oscuro*, 1984, collage on cardboard, 111.5 x 90 cm, Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE).

Rosa Mena Valenzuela, Illustrations for *Periolibro dedicated to the Chilean anti-poet Nicanor Parra*, 1995, Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE).