Contributor: Valentina Locatelli

**Tamayo, Rufino (1899-1991)**

Born: August 26, 1899 – Oaxaca, Mexico; Died: June 24, 1991 – Mexico City

A Mexican painter and muralist of indigenous heritage, Rufino Tamayo was one of the most important representatives of figurative abstraction and poetic realism in 20th century Latin American art. A supporter of the universalistic approach to art, in the late 1940s he started a controversy—the so called ‘polémica Tamayo’ — by positioning himself against the classical Mexican school and its ‘Big Three’, the muralists José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and Alfaro Siqueiros. Contrary to the stress they put on art as political, Tamayo focused on its poetic and emotional aspects. Tamayo’s art is based both on Mexican figurative traditions (characterised by the rigour and geometry of pre-Hispanic sculpture and its imaginative and magical character), and on the influence of European and North American avant-garde movements, especially Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. His sensibility for nature and spirituality, his interest in ordinary people, and his ability to synthesize different pictorial languages with Mexican folk art and beliefs, have made him a very popular artist, nationally and internationally. Throughout his career Tamayo directed his effort “towards the salvation of painting, the preservation of its purity and the perpetuation of its mission as translator of the world”.

Born in the city of Oaxaca, only a few kilometres away from the pre-Hispanic temples of Monte Albán and Mitla, Tamayo spent the first years of his life surrounded by the symbols and traditions of the Zapotec culture, at the same time directly experiencing the political and social turmoil of the Mexican Revolution (ca. 1910–20). Shortly after the death of his mother, in 1911, Tamayo moved to Mexico City to live with relatives. There, while working at the family fruit store in the Merced Market, he had his first encounter with art, taking classes and collecting and copying postcards of paintings by renowned international artists. In 1917, after a brief attempt to study finance in order to take over the family business, Tamayo finally enrolled the famous Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (better known as the Academia de San Carlos). In 1921, he was appointed head of the Department of Ethnographic Drawing at the Museo Nacional de Arqueología in Mexico City under the guidance of José Vasconcelos. In 1928, he taught painting at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, then directed by Diego Rivera. In 1934, Tamayo painted his first mural, *El canto y la música* (*Song and the Music*), in the Escuela Nacional de Música, where he met his future wife, the musician Olga Flores Rivas.

The beginning of Tamayo’s artistic career reveals an affinity for Mexican mural painting of the post-Revolution years, as his painting *Homenaje a Juárez* [*Homage to Juárez*] clearly demonstrates both in the use of more figurative, plastic and monumental forms and in the selection of the subject itself. In 1926, Tamayo organised his own first solo exhibition in an ephemeral gallery in Mexico City. He then moved to the United States in search of a less ideological and more open and dynamic artistic environment, choosing to reside in New York twice: off and on from 1926 till 1929, and later again between 1934 and 1949, when Abstract Expressionism was in ascendance. His work was well received, especially after the success of his second solo show at the Valentine Gallery (1940). During these years, Tamayo’s art achieved creative maturity. His work was dominated by three modes: a compositional approach in the line of Paul Cézanne and George Braque; a ‘more lyrical inspiration that can be described as the celebration of daily life through color’; or by a certain ‘passional violence’ that follows Pablo Picasso, as the Mexican artist’s friend and admirer Octavio Paz eloquently summarized. Tamayo’s *Autorretrato* [*Self-portrait*] of 1946, which the artist repainted in 1967, is a good example of how the artist fluently interpreted and combined all these different sources of inspiration through his career.



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After World War II, Tamayo’s oeuvre is characterized by the introduction of movement; his figures gain a dynamism which was missing in his first creative period, as can be observed in the paintings *Animales* [*Animals*] and *Niños jugando con fuego* [*Children Playing With Fire*]. In 1950, two years after his first extensive retrospective, *Rufino Tamayo: 20 años de su labor pictórica,* took place in Mexico City at the I.N.B.A. (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes), Tamayo was invited to Italy to represent Mexico at the 25th Venice Biennale, together with Rivera, Siqueros and Orozco, who had died the year before. European critics and art dealers, among them Lionello Venturi, André Breton, Jean Cassou and Georges Wildenstein, praised his work, a fact which soon convinced the Mexican painter to abandon the New World for Paris, where he resided for the following decade, before permanently moving back to Mexico.

The long Parisian residency had a visible impact on the artist’s palette, which during the 1960s turned increasingly to darker and more melancholic tones. Nevertheless, Tamayo’s ability to create a richness of chromatic impressions by using only a few degrees of the chromatic scale, with a clear predilection for red-ochre and green-blue tones, can still be appreciated in the works of these years. While in Paris, Tamayo was commissioned to paint several works, including a mural for the UNESCO Headquarters, *Prometeo entregando el fuego a los hombres* [*Prometheus Bringing Fire to Mankind*]. He began to be internationally recognized, and his works entered the most prestigious museums and private collections in Europe. By the 1960s, Tamayo was an established artist and received numerous official international commissions. In 1964, he painted the mural *Dualidad* [*Duality*] for the entrance hall of the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Chapultepec park, a metaphorical representation of the struggle between the pre-Hispanic deities Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. In 1964, Tamayo was awarded the renowned Premio Nacional de Ciencias y Artes by the Government of Mexico. In 1967 a monographic exhibition celebrating 50 years of his artistic career opens at the Palacio des Bellas Artes, followed in 1979 by the important retrospective *Rufino Tamayo: Myth and Magic,* mounted at the Guggenheim Museum in New York on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

During the 1970s, Tamayo demonstrated a new attention for vivid and almost lavish colours and for a new aesthetic based on the synthesis of geometric forms. In the 1980s and 1990s he finally turned to canvases of monumental dimensions and dedicated himself to sculpture. In 1974 Tamayo funded and created the Museo de Arte Prehispánico de México Rufino Tamayo in Oaxaca, and in 1981 he opened the Museo Tamayo in Chapultepec park, which hosts over 300 works of modern and contemporary art that the artist collected during his life. Tamayo died in Mexico City aged 91. His ashes were interred in the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, which he founded.

**Further Reading:**

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**List of Works**

1. Rufino Tamayo, *Homenaje a Juárez* (*Homage to Juárez*), 1932, oil on canvas, 60 x 75 cm, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City

2. Rufino Tamayo, *El canto y la música* (*Song and the Music*), 1933, fresco, Coordinación Nacional de Arqueología, Mexico City, before Escuela Nacional de Música

3. Rufino Tamayo, *Animales* (*Animals*), 1941, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 101.6 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

4. Rufino Tamayo, *Niños jugando con fuego* (*Children Playing With Fire*), 1947, oil on canvas, 127 x 172.5 cm, private collection

5. Rufino Tamayo, *El hombre frente al infinito* (*Man Contemplating the Firmament*), 1950, oil on canvas, 94 x 129.3 cm, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

6. Rufino Tamayo, *Prometeo entregando el fuego a los hombres* (*Prometheus Bringing Fire to Mankind*) 1958, fresco, acrylic on canvas, 4.5 x 5 m, UNESCO, conference hall, Paris