Contributor: Amy Winter

**Paalen, Wolfgang** (Vienna 1905-1959 Taxco, Mexico),

Wolfgang Paalen, exiled from Paris and living in Mexico, the United States and Paris between the years 1939-59, and best known as a Surrealist in 1930s Paris, was an important artist and theorist in the modernist culture of the twentieth century. Painter, philosopher, critic, collector, editor, and ethnologist, Paalen was a highly influential figure whose art and ideas were seminal for artists in Latin America, the United States and Europe in the 1940s, providing them with the most current philosophical, scientific, anthropological, political, and cultural thinking of the period. His involvement in European and American modernist movements—particularly Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism—as well as his knowledge of the cultural, social, and political histories in which they developed, catalysed a change from the nationalist dominance of *Muralismo* and influenced the development of **Abstract Expressionism.** From Motherwell’s *Mexican Sketchbooks* (1941), produced while working with Paalen in Mexico, to correspondences in the artworks and writings of Motherwell, Pollock, **Mark Rothko** and **Barnett Newman,** beginning in 1942, Paalen’s imprint is clearly visible. In the last issue of DYN (no. 6, 1944), he lent the emerging group members Motherwell, Pollock, Rothko, Smith, and Baziotes unprecedented support by reproducing them in the same pages as European modern masters like Calder, Chagall and Moore.

Through his organisation of the *Surrealist International* at the Galería de Arte Moderno in Mexico City in 1939, and through his publication of the avant-garde art review **DYN** from 1942-44, Paalen challenged and continued the **Surrealist** project, and delved into problems that absorbed international artists at that time. DYN advocated transnational modernism and included a large following of Latin American, European, and American artists, writers, and anthropologists, such as Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Miguel Covarrubias, César Moro, Carlos Mérida, Martin Chambi, Roberto Matta and Alfonso Caso; Henry Moore, Alexander Calder, Marc Chagall, Gordon Onslow Ford and Alice Rahon; Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, David Smith and William Baziotes; and Valentine Penrose, Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin, who contributed art, poetry, photographs, fiction, articles and essays to DYN, along with Paalen himself. This enterprise, and Paalen’s own synthesis of art and ideas, can serve as key models for the discourse on global exchange, community, and transformation prevalent today. His humanistic and visionary art and ideas, published in his DYN, still resonate in the twenty-first-century.

Renowned as an intellectual and connoisseur, and celebrated as a key proponent of non-Western art and culture, Paalen synthesized the primitivism and “Americanism” of German, Parisian, and American cultures, cosmological models of natural history and post-Einsteinian (quantum) physics, and modernist aesthetics and theory into a new model for twentieth-century art. He believed that art was at the core of culture, science and technology, and proposed a synthesis of philosophical values to reintegrate art into Western society in the manner of indigenous societies. Unlike other primitivists, Paalen’s awareness of the sophistication of the art, sciences, and social organisation of non-Western, indigenous cultures led him to fuse Western and non-Western traditions into a new model of intercultural, global, and even cosmic dimensions.

Paalen’s artistic production is characterised by various stylistic periods corresponding to the modern art movements in which he participated, and the descriptive classifications of his production, which he himself devised. These series were the ‘Cycladic’ (Abstraction-Création, circa 1935–1936) in which he created abstract figurative works related to ancient Aegean idols in his personal collection; the ‘Totemic’ (Surrealist, circa 1937–1939), which fashioned haunting Surrealist landscapes that combined painting with Paalen’s automatic invention of ‘*fumage*’-‘drawing’ with the smoke of a candle -related to his personal collections, his own history and memory, the natural sciences, and anthropological ideas; the ‘Cosmic’ (Mexican/post-Surrealist, circa 1939–1949), which synthesised elements of modern art with principles of quantum physics in a dynamic new painterly and abstract style; the ‘Mosaic’ (California, circa 1949–1951), which built upon the ‘Cosmic’ period but stylistically referenced Amerindian art of the Americas, particularly pre-Columbian mosaics; the ‘Telluric’ (post–World War II France and Mexico, circa 1951–1956), which comprised new painterly abstractions with new post-Cubist representations of space; and the ‘Floral’ (late Mexican, 1957–1959), which continued the practice of painterly abstraction while exploring the physics of color and light.

**Further Reading:**

Neufert, Andreas (1999). *Wolfgang Paalen: Im Inneren des Wals* (*Wolfgang Paalen: In the Belly of the Whale*) Vienna: Springer International (with a catalogue of works).

Schrage, Dieter, ed. (1993) *Wolfgang Paalen: Zwischen Surrealismus und Abstraktion.*

*Museum Moderner Kunst—Stiftung Ludwig Wien* (*Wolfgang Paalen: Between Surrealism and Abstraction).* Frankfurt: Ritter Verlag; and *Wolfgang Paalen, Retrospectiva* (1994). Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Alvar y Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Mexico City: Imprenta Madero.

Winter, Amy (1995) “Wolfgang Paalen, DYN, and the American Avant-Garde of the 1940s.” Ph.D. dissertation, The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

Kloyber, Christian, ed. (2000) *DYN, The Complete Reprint.* Vienna and New York: Springer*.*

Winter, Amy (2003) *Wolfgang Paalen, Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde.* Westport, CT and London: Praeger.

**List of Works:**

*Deux têtes IV*, ca. 1935, oil/tempera on canvas, 13 x 16” (33 x 40.5 cm), copyright Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, CA. (CYCLADIC)

*Nature morte à la mouche*, 1937, oil and fumage on canvas, 15 ½ x 13” (39.5 x 33 cm), Collection of Mark Kelman, New York. (FUMAGE)

*Paysage totémique de mon enfance*, 1937, 28 3/8 x 38 5/8” (72 x 98 cm), Collection of Harold and Gertrud Parker, Tiburon, CA. (TOTEMIC)

*Space Unbound*, 1941, oil on canvas, 44 7/8 x 57 1/8” (114 x 145 cm), copyright Lucid Art Foundation. (COSMIC)

*The Cosmogons*, 1944–45, oil on canvas, 96 x 93” (244 x 23 cm), previously in the Collection of Robert Anthoine, New York. (COSMIC)

*Planetary Face*, 1947, oil on canvas, 59 x 55 ¼” (149.9 x 140.3 cm), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase. (MOSAIC)

*J’y allais souvent*, fumage/oil on canvas, 19 ½ x 25.5” (49.5 x 65 cm), Collection of Harold and Gertrud Parker, Tiburon, CA. (TELLURIC)

*Migracion de Yucatan*, oil on canvas, 43 3/10 x 47 ¼” (110 x 120 cm), Collection of Museo Carillo Gil, INBA, Mexico City (FLORAL)