

# CONTRIBUTORS

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# MAGAZINE OF ART

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Aztec figure of Coatlicue (*detail*), National Museum Mexico City. Photo by Leo Katz . . . . . Cover

The Americanism of New England Painting. By James Thomas Flexner 122  
*A discussion based on the recent "Old and New England" exhibition at the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design.*

The Development of Russian Architecture. By Talbot Hamlin . . . . . 128  
*"Some knowledge of this development may have a more than merely historical importance."*

Art and Archaeology in the Aztec Figure of Coatlicue. By Leo Katz . . . 133  
*"We must immediately realize that we are not dealing with a mere stone but with the creative work of a living man although no name or birthdate is available."*

Rufino Tamayo. By Jean Charlot . . . . . 138  
*"Tamayo's evolution steers its able course equally far from the somersault turned stale and from the paunch grown at the academy."*

Contemporary Cottons Based on Plates from the Index of American Design . . . . . 142  
*"Among the 30,000 plates of the Index are many patterns which, if skilfully used, could serve the 20th century as well as they have served preceding ones."*

John Piper. By John Russell . . . . . 144  
*The English abstractionist who has become a topographical painter.*

Experts Disagree. By Childe Reese . . . . . 148  
*"... if artists agree on disagreeing with the public, they seldom agree among themselves."*

New Books . . . . . 154

Calendars: April and May Exhibitions in America; Competitions . . . 160

Previous issues are indexed in *Art Index* and *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*

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## RUFINO TAMAYO

By JEAN CHARLOT

TWENTY YEARS ago a small group of Mexican artists, eschewing the international style centering in Paris, brought forth an essentially local esthetic. The travail entailed shows in the results, especially the murals frescoed in the twenties. The magnitude of the areas covered, the scope of the heroic subject matter, bespeak a gigantism that jarred certain sensibilities. A Mexican witness writes in 1924, "This itch to paint decalogues, transcendental symbols, philosophical concepts, revolutions and revelations, is either a joke or childish delusion. . . . Riverism says 'I yearn for monumental painting, easel painting is petty. I wish to brush great frescoes and leave behind something to rival Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. What of it if the bourgeois shrieks or if I get ruptured trying.'"

Though a youthful prize-winner at the San Carlos Academy in 1918, Rufino Tamayo came of age as a painter about 1926, when the first energy of the mural movement was already spent, when some ears, sated with the routine of pipe organs going full blast, sighed for chamber music. He, and others of similar mind, witnessed with amused awareness the sport of fellow painters pushing Sisyphian rocks uphill. Surrounded by red banners, closed fists, open mouths, clanging chains, and eviscerated money bags, it was a most natural thing for the dissidents to rediscover for themselves with delight *l'art pour l'art* with its exquisite soul searching, and the aristocratic monologue of a subconscious talking aloud to itself.

Indianism was a major note of the renaissance. Whatever his inclination, Tamayo could hardly discard a racial heritage that was not for him a cerebral option but a biological fact. His colleagues had picked the most gigantic of antiquities as touchstones against which to assess their muscles—the monolithic moon-goddess from Teotihuacan, the geometric serpent heads dug up in the Zocalo, the colossus *Coatlilcue* girded with snake rattles, displaying baubles made of human hands and hearts (see page 133—Editor). But a whole valid vein of Mexican art remained closed to the muralist intent on size

and scope—the archaic terra cottas of people making music, holding hands, giving birth, delousing each other's manes, yet remaining minute pellets of clay stamped with the functional thumbmark of the potter. Tamayo adopted them as stylistic ancestors, and also the Tarascan fat man sculptured in baseball attire, raising their bats at equally fat dogs with shamrock shaped ears and wagging stubby tails. Instead of the grinning mask of the death god, he warmed to smiling Totonac heads, halfway between the *Mona Lisa* and kewpies.

The dualism of mood of pre-Hispanic times held true of our day as well. While the self-appointed painters to the Indians frescoed brown giants with thunder on their brow and lightning in their fist, the Indians themselves produced their own art as usual: they embroidered or lacquered arabesques bearing a crop of buds and birds, patted black clay into the shapes of monkeys and owls, dressed fleas, wove straw horsemen astride petate horses, painted pigs, and ex votos where people suffer, pray, are cured, all happening in silence within cloistered hearts, with not a fist, not a flag, not a streamer in evidence.

All this was in accord with Tamayo's own life. Born in tropical Oaxaca, he lived in Mexico City in the quarter of La Merced, the district of markets and wholesale fruit dealers. His adolescent eye took in mountains of bananas—of green gold, yellow gold and copper—heaps of mangoes—the whole gamut of cadmiums from lemon to purple, their bloom enhanced with leopard spots of black—of still more lush papayas, *chirimoyas*, and round brown *zapotes*. At home, genteel baskets smothered with ribbons displayed paper flowers, and fruits again—wax fruits this time.

The early muralists had solved the relationship between local and international art by turning their backs on the School of Paris, on which most had been nurtured. Their hearts set on plastic oratory in the grand manner, they felt an affinity with such old masters as Giotto and David, masters of propa-

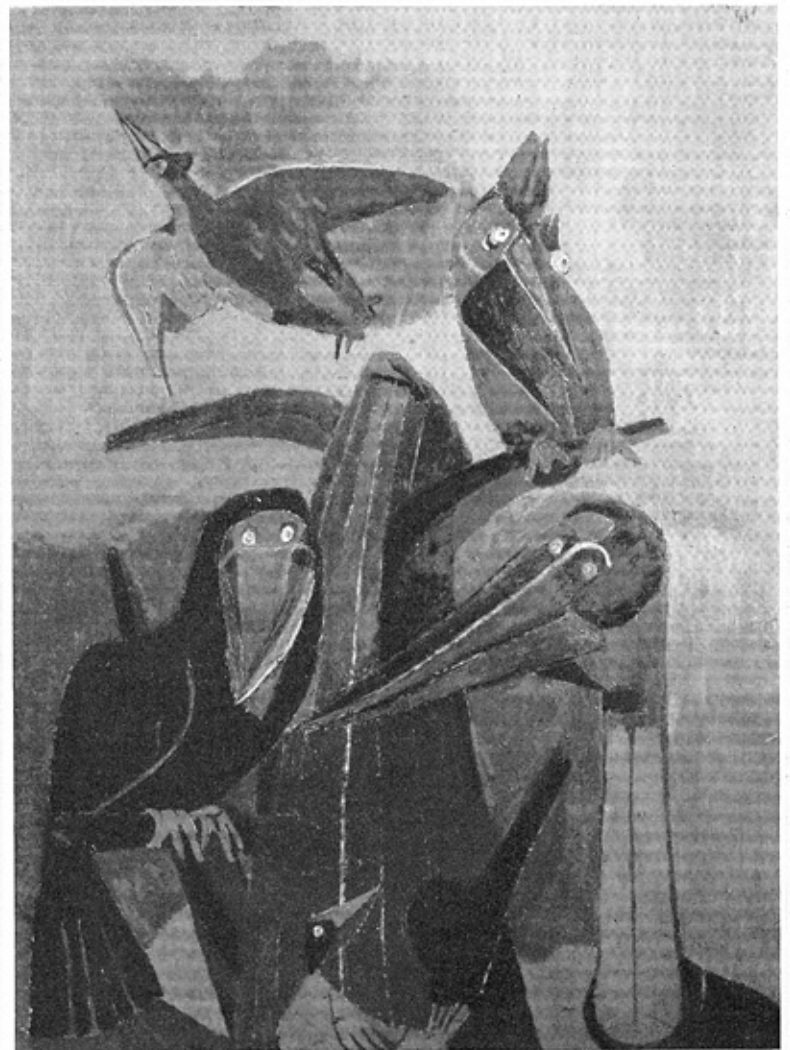
ganda in paint, and could seek no compromise with the Parisian attitude that tabooed substantial themes as subject matter. For Tamayo no such harsh choice arises. There is a kinship between those he loves, gentle Indian "old masters" and folk artists, and the brittle masterpieces of Dufy and Laurencin. In his early work, traditional Indian and modern Parisian styles coexist in peace, with an easy grace and an unassuming relaxation that contrast sharply with what is usually understood by Mexican style.

While his fellow painters favored heroic themes, Tamayo chose humbler models. His early still lifes heap childish wonders—mangoes, ice cream cones, electric bulbs—juggle with them for the sake of color in a palette not intended to be soaked through the eye, but gustatory as it were, not in the esoteric sense suggested by Rimbaud, but as if the motor reflexes of childhood experience remained miraculously alive. André Salmon holds that painters' climates should be common human currency, suggests the weather report: "Today Tiepolo skies, tomorrow Rembrandt clouds." In turn, Tamayo greens and Tamayo pinks equate celestial pistachios and raspberries.

Born to it, Tamayo is one of the few who can validly claim as his the picturesque subject matter of tropical Mexico. With postcard splendor, native Oaxacanian markets display, besides their colorful wares, bronzed Tehuana types with naked feet hugging the ground, full-pleated skirts, embroidered blouses, natural flowers braided with their hair. Add palms and parrots, varicolored houses, and mangy dogs. All this subject matter is to be found in the artist's work, but used with a tremulous sense of responsibility to the rules of good taste and good painting. This race of women that started many an ethnologist babbling of a lost Atlantis roams through his canvases as bell-shaped pyramids, with a flaring starched ruffle at ground level weighing more heavily in the painter's hierarchy than the featureless heads. His curiosity clarifies the nameless shapes that peeling coats of paint produce on an otherwise plain wall. The hot sun is culled and sieved into color patterns that studiously avoid the rendering of sculptural bulk. The tropical scene is "recreated" if you wish, "abstracted" if you want.

Artists are often tempted to play the Peter Pan, inertia suggesting caroling and carousing in collegiate fashion as an easy way to grow up. Endowed with a personal style, shown and sold by New York dealers who appreciate the affinity between his vision and that of the School of Paris, Tamayo could have hardened his early success into the mold of a well balanced formula: enough sophistication to intrigue the layman, with enough naiveté to delight sophisticates.

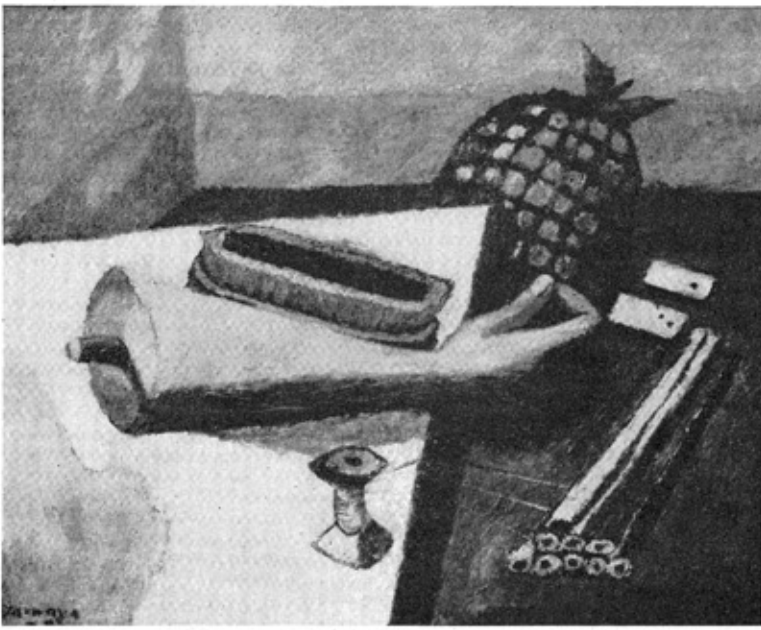
No such fate awaits this painter, whose evolution steers its able course equally far from the somersault turned stale and from the paunch grown at the Academy. A break in style, esthetic *pedimento* or plastic *mea culpa*, is nowhere in evidence, and yet the difference between the early and present work is emphatic. A change of psychological approach signals a shift of seasons, as the slow summer fullness of maturity takes its hold. The long residence of Tamayo in New York results paradoxically in a depurated inner comprehension, a sifting of racial quintessence. The picturesque allusions in modern guise that his northern public had come to expect, the toy shapes, the candy hues, fall short of this new urge whose far-flung motors feed on more disquieting strains. Distortions of the human figure are no longer meant for purposes of wit—as plastic puns. They are bona-fide distortions of passion. While Greco's mark holiness, Tamayo's liberties with man's frame suggest a ripper's surgery, or the craft of the Mexican village witch baking bits of hair and nail filings from the intended victim inside a clay doll, with deadly purpose. In these later



Tamayo: BIRDS, 1941, oil, 32 x 38. Valentine Gallery, New York City.

Tamayo: WOMEN, 1945, oil, 34 x 42. Valentine Gallery, New York.



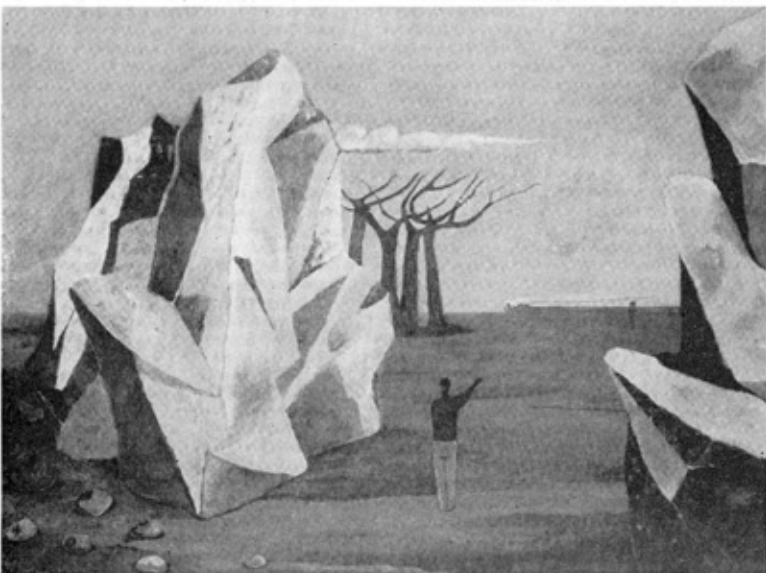


Tamayo: STILL-LIFE, 1928. Photo courtesy Weyhe Gallery, N. Y. C.



Tamayo: GIRL STANDING, woodcut, about 1930. Weyhe Gallery, N. Y.

Tamayo: LANDSCAPE, 1939, gouache, 30 x 22, Valentine Gallery, N. Y.



pictures, certain dogs or dragons open jaws as barbed with teeth and as ravenous as the vampire-headed beings that sit, Buddahwise (but with none of Buddah's static acceptancy), on the Zapotecan funeral urns dug up in the painter's native Oaxaca.

In the twenties, taking no part in the mural movement, Tamayo pitted purification of means against sheer size and scope. Later, perhaps because he felt secure enough in his acquisition of pure plasticity, perhaps simply because he is a Mexican painter, Tamayo painted murals. That of the Academy of Music of Mexico City, frescoed in 1933, is close to his easel pictures in mood, if not in physical size. With the same relaxed subconsciousness, the same delight of the brush, and the same racial validity, it also shies from didactic purpose. Indian angels pluck string instruments and play at being but still lifes—if not Cézanne's apples, at least Tamayo's zapotes.

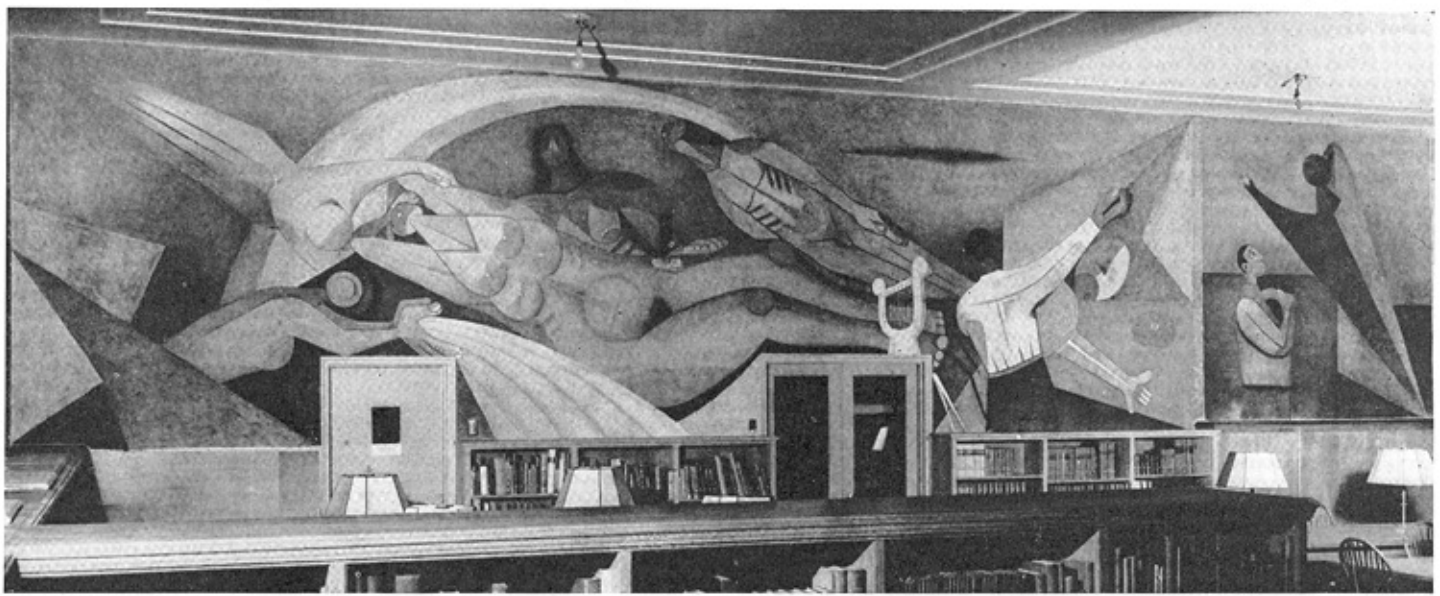
His 1943 mural in the library of the art department of Smith College signalizes, however, a wish to tell a complex story in terms of giant size and in collaboration with the architecture. In this fresco the artist tackles unafraid a theme that some of his non-objective colleagues would irreverently call a hoary chestnut. In Tamayo's own words, "The first panel is entitled NATURE AND THE ARTIST . . . the group representing Nature is composed of five figures . . . the figure of Nature is of heroic size. It has four breasts and lies in an attitude of surrender, to symbolize abundance and generosity. From the rocks . . . there springs a blue female figure from whose hands flows a stream of water. This figure symbolizes Water. . . . Above Water is a male figure in red, symbolizing Fire. . . . Another female figure, coffee colored and representing Earth . . . is represented as holding in its arms the figure of Nature, to show that it is in the Earth that we see Nature in all her magnificence. At the right a blue male figure . . . represents Air. The whole group is capped by a rainbow which . . . symbolizes Color, the basic element of painting.

"Another male figure represents the Artist engaged in producing the Work of Art . . . between the Artist and the group representing Nature there are a lyre and a compass, to show that the Artist, when he looks at Nature in search of plastic elements, should do so through the medium of poetry and knowledge . . ."

This description may conjure up for those who have not seen the actual wall, ladies in Greek veils toying with operatic accessories, such as a 17th century *peintre d'histoire* bent on moralizing could have conceived. The chosen subject implies the representation of three different degrees of reality: the artist, his vision, the work of art, in decreasing order. Such a program would tax even a realistic painter, though he could lavish on the figure of the artist all the tricks of his trade and taper toward lesser realism. Tamayo manages to carry his complex program to completion without once falling into photographic vernacular, as he doses with sagacity diverse degrees of abstraction.

In the microcosm that the artist orders to taste on those 400 square feet of wall, geometry rates over anatomy—shapes elbows, knees, and shoulders after the rigid fancy of ruler and compass. Bodies as we know them are made violence, breasts are multiplied, fingernails swell to the size of heads, heads shrink to thumbnail size—while prismatic hues sally forth out of the rainbow, seize on any skin as their prey, or fight for possession in a piebald meleé.

While Nature is given true weight and a sculptural mass, Fire and Air remain buoyant, their two-way traffic streaking diagonally the dense earth-colored sky. Patches of brown on blue mark Water's subterranean origin. Earth emerges between



*Tamayo: MURAL IN THE HILLYER ART LIBRARY, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. Fresco, 1943. Colten Photo.*

the mountainous hip of Nature and the prismatic fluorescence of the rainbow, like a star-nosed mole, claws clamped at the egress from its shaft, as it senses the unwanted sky. Observing this semi-abstract vision from the side, the painted painter abstracts it further in a geometric scheme that deliberately sheds what still clings to the model of bulk, weight, texture, and story-telling. Style shifts by imponderable transitions from the massive Nature born out of the steaming Mexican loam, to the international style in which the artist is working.

In spite of its size, its brilliancy, its eloquence, this fresco affects the observer more through the handling of the brush

than through its intellectual planning. One is prone to overlook the didactic purpose and to relish instead modulations of color, especially those passages from red ochre through darker ochres to burnt cork, culminating in the figure of Earth.

This huge mural should put Tamayo's mind at rest as to his ability to produce the kind of full-throated pipe-organ music that he questioned twenty years ago. It should not make us forget his other, major claim, staked in more recondite grounds of Mexican esthetics with those easel pictures that strike two contrasting chords, the white magic of his early toyland and the brown magic of his maturity.<sup>77</sup>

*Tamayo: OLGA, 1941. Rhode Island School of Design.*



*Tamayo: CARNIVAL. Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington.*



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