

Serenity and Revolution Viewed Through Latin American Art

By Ricki Morse



The crowning jewel of our *Serenity and Revolution* exhibition is Wilfredo Lam's *Casting of the Spell*, our cover image this month. What better welcome can we offer than Lam's most famous work, *The Jungle*, combining European surrealism, Afro-Cuban revolution and contemporary cubism.



Wilfredo Lam's *The Jungle*, 1943, gouache on paper and canvas, MOMA, NYC.

I'm sure those of you who have stood before this 8' x 7 1/2' work at MOMA, New York, still feel its power to engage viscerally, drawing you into the shifting figures in the sugar cane, an African dance or figures escaping imprisonment? Wilfredo Lam's heritage and vision are all encompassing. Born in Cuba, the child of a Chinese immigrant father and a mother born to an African slave, Wilfredo Lam (1902-1982) was one of eight siblings, immersed in the rituals of Santeria by his godmother, who was an *orisha* priestess. Santeria arose in Cuba, a mixture of African Yoruba beliefs and



Roman Catholicism, a benign god represented by the sun, moon and stars, honoring man's inherent connection with the natural universe.

Encouraged by his family to enter law school, Lam tried it briefly but enrolled in art school in Havana. He found the academic traditions stifling but discovered the work of Pablo Picasso which resonated with his vision. In 1938 he traveled to Paris and met Picasso, beginning a lifelong friendship, declaring themselves cousins. We see Picasso's cubism in the hands of Lam's priestess casting a spell.

Revolution

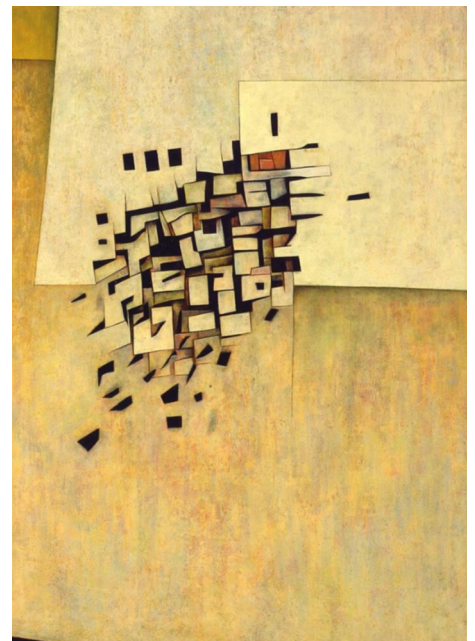
The melding of Cubo-African art with European surrealism and cubism certainly amounts to an artistic revolution. And the increasing influence of European surrealism in

After meeting Picasso in Paris, Lam visited him in Vallauris on the Mediterranean in 1954.

Latin America was widespread and found a ready place in a culture already steeped in magical thinking in its literature and storytelling. Surrealism sprang initially from the work of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and particularly his 1899 book "Interpretation of Dreams."

Fantasy, dreams, and the unconscious mind became valid sources for

Gunther Gerzso, *Mal de ojo*, oil on masonite, 1957, SBMA. The ancient stones of Mayan pyramids, which inspired Gerzso's abstractions, are projected floating in space as the surreal evil eye.



art, particularly surprising when it invades the work of a geometric abstractionist like Gunther Guerszo, whose drawing of Trotsky is in this show.

At the same time political and military revolutions were finding sweeping artistic expression in Latin America. Under the oppressive authoritarian regimes which had replaced colonialism, “Power to the People” and the “Dignity of the Working Man” were drawing followers. Marxism’s message found expression in Mexico through the murals of José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. In *Man Loading Donkey with Firewood*, Diego Rivera captures the strength of the worker as well as his natural relationship with the donkey. The image projects the dignity of his work and the skill required by the task, achieving the Marxist goal of elevating the simple working man to a cultural hero.



Diego Rivera, *Man Loading Donkey with Firewood*, 1938, pencil and watercolor on paper, SBMA

Serenity

Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991) was a contemporary of the great Mexican muralists. Revolutionary political dogma was the official mission of the artist, while Tamayo’s preferred subject was *Mexicanidad*, the quality of being Mexican. He blended pre-Colombian heritage with European avant-garde elements—Impressionism, Cubism and Fauvism—and is credited as the artist who brought Mexican Modernism to the international art world. His themes were tranquility and pleasure in family settings, paintings of his wife.



Rufino Tamayo, *Dancers over the Sea*, 1947, oil on canvas, Cincinnati Museum of Art. The joyful abandon of the dancers projects Tamayo’s world view.

Born in Oaxaca he began playing guitar as a boy, becoming an accomplished guitarist. When his parents died, he moved to Mexico City under the care of an aunt who operated a fruit stand. At 17 he enrolled in the San Carlos of Fine Arts but found the structured academic work boring and at 21 took a job with the National Archeological Museum making drawings of ancient artifacts. His painted images later reflected these archetypal designs, giving the images a quiet, enduring serenity.

Our drawing of Tamayo by Carlos Oroszco Romero shows a relaxed figure with calm demeanor smoking a cigarette, a newly popular habit. Beside it

is Romero’s drawing of another famous but reclusive Mexican artist, Francisco Goita (1882-1960). Happily, we have a Romero painting in our collection which reflects Tamayo’s influence in its quiet celebration of a mother and child’s belonging.

The *Serenity and Revolution* exhibition explores many of the shifts and experiments in the emergence of contemporary art during the 20th century across a vast emotional spectrum.

One visit is not enough. ■



Carlos Oroszco Romero, *Mujer y niño*, oil on canvas, SBMA