

Alan Samuel Spotlight Paper 2019

# Rojo y Blanco, 1964

## Gunther Gerzso



Twentieth Century Mexico has a remarkable artistic legacy dominated by figuration. Gunther Gerzso is Mexico's great exception, an abstract artist of world stature. As early as 1948, Gerzso discovered a new pictorial space for abstract painting, one which acknowledged the flat restricted space of cubism while at the same time exploring the endless vistas of late Surrealism. Despite his painting's intriguing affinities with European Modernism, Gerzso's work remains distinctly his own, **a unique synthesis of geometric abstraction and landscape architecture of pre-Columbian Mexico.<sup>1</sup>**

## **Background information**

**Gunther Gerzso (1915-2000) was born in Mexico City to Oscar Gerzso, a Hungarian immigrant, and Dore Wendland, who was German by birth.** His father died a few months after he was born and his mother married a German jeweler. The family fled to Europe in 1922 and two years later returned to Mexico where his mother divorced. She was unable to provide for the children so she sent Gunther to Lugano, Switzerland to live with his uncle who was an influential man in the world of fine art. Gunther, then a teenager, met Paul Klee and lived among his uncle's collection of paintings which included works by Pierre Bonnard, Rembrandt, Paul Cezanne, Eugene Delacroix and Titian. During his time in Lugano, he also met Nando Tamberlani, a noted set designer who would introduce him to the world of theater.

In 1931, his uncle sent Gunther back to his mother in Mexico City. He was influenced by Mr. Tamberlani and, back home, he started doing sketches for set designs and writing plays. Two years later, he started working in a local theater company. In 1935 he was offered a scholarship to study at the Cleveland Playhouse where he created more than 50 set designs over the course of four years. During the 1940's and '50s, he made various set designs for Mexican, French and American films. He collaborated with directors like Luis Bunuel and John Huston.

In the late 1930's, Gerzso started painting as a hobby. The steady parade of beautiful actresses and interesting people he met in show business provided him a great inspiration for his canvases which showed a mix of European and Mexican influences. His friends convinced him to enter the annual arts exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art where two of his pieces were selected. This is when Gunther Gerzso started considering himself a painter more than a set designer. In 1941, Gerzso and his wife moved permanently to Mexico City. In 1944 he joined a group of Surrealist painters that had taken refuge in Mexico from the Second World War.

**Of all the formative experiences in Gerzso's life, one of the most important was these encounters with an extraordinary group of talented foreigners in Mexico City. They more or less represented European Surrealism that most inspired him.<sup>2</sup>** These artists were Benjamin Peret, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Alice Rahon and Wolfgang Paalen. Gerzso was as foreign to Mexico as they were. His work from this period shows a clear Surrealist influence which he later abandoned when he started working on his famous abstracts.

## **Impact on the art world**

**His mature paintings, often referred to as architectonic abstractions, synthesized the geometric style of LeCorbusier with motifs found in pre-Columbian art.** According to art historian Octavio Paz, Gunther Gerzso was one of the greatest Latin American abstract painters along with Carlos Merida and Rufino Tamayo who opposed the idealistic aesthetic movement into which muralism had denigrated.<sup>3</sup>

### **Technique and Methodology**

**Gunther Gerzso's paintings appear as a combination of colored geometric planes or walls layered one upon another.** Broad surface areas with textures modulated from rough to glass-smooth are contrasted with recessed areas suggesting inner space beyond the field of vision. Gerzso uses architecture analogically and, as such, a passageway into both body and the mind. Meticulously executed, his works are imbued in every detail with an approach to painting the artist refined over half a century. The formal perfection of Gerzso's abstractions suggest only one aspect of their power to engage the viewer for they are at the same time highly personal, richly associative objects.

Going against the grain of Mexico's dominant artform – figurative murals with social and political messages – Gerzso became the nation's leading abstract painter. His signature works are luminous geometric abstractions inspired by Pre-Columbian architecture and intricately crafted in crisp squares and multiple layers of thin, translucent layers of pigment. Despite being abstractions, Gerzso's paintings can be seen as landscapes, grounded in the vast and varied geography of Mexico.<sup>4</sup> When read topographically, these paintings are about the abstraction of distance. Surfaces may appear to suggest jungles, high desert mesas or bodies of water but remain so far away we are unable to make clear distinctions. The illusion of distance forces the viewer to use his imagination to complete the picture. Paradoxically, the same painting read conventionally on a horizontal and vertical axis can be seen as a close-up or detail of a much larger composition. This effect is reinforced by the way Gerzso crops his compositions to suggest their continuation beyond the frame line. By the artist's exquisite attention to detail, he draws the viewer into the nuances of glazing and surface texture and by the cellular division of form with the larger frame of the overall composition.

Gerzso was a superb colorist with a palette uniquely his own. He could, according to his desire, create transparent jade greens cut so thin that the light illuminates its razor edge or the earthy greens of Mexico's southern lowlands. His oranges are tropical, warm and saturated with sunlight. In the next passage, they appear harsh and denatured like streetlights in Mexico City.

### **Analysis**

**Rojo y Blanco, 1964, oil on Masonite, was inspired by Gerzso's interest in Pre-Columbian art and architecture.** Having personally visited many Pre-Columbian sites, it became evident to me how these architectural properties influenced his work. The Temple Mayor in Mexico City was built and added on to over many centuries. The Aztecs, instead of replacing

existing edifices, built larger pyramids atop these buildings. Pyramid upon pyramid was added to the original creating structures that rose 5-layers deep. Gerzso was deeply influenced by the layers of colored forms indicating enigmatic chambers reminiscent of ancient Mesoamerican temple ruins.<sup>5</sup> The porcelain-like surface and saturated, luminous colors were achieved by layering thin, transparent colors and applying traditional glazing techniques. Rooted in antiquity yet distinctly contemporary, the large geometric forms he created appear to float revealing a mysterious yet evocative space. Gerzso's Rojo y Blanco may appear remote. It does not give up its secrets easily. However, with repeated viewings Gerzso reveals a unique artistic presence: at once luminous, impermeable and beyond the reach of time.

During his lifetime, Gerzso held solo exhibitions at several museums including the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Also, his works were exhibited at the Musee Picasso in Antibes, France, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Diego Museum and others. Until his death at the age of eighty-five, Gerzso continued to make paintings that combined a highly developed sense of poetry with pictorial exploration.

### **Impact on the art world**

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### **Comparisons and Contrasts**

**Gerzso's Rojo y Blanco and Thomas Demand's Fabrick share colorful architectural clusters of flat rectangles that glow mysteriously against an all-white background.** Similarly, their works are luminous geometric abstractions. Both share an abrupt transition found between color areas which are often of one unvarying color.

His work also shares with Robert Natkin's Homage to Louis Sullivan a passion for color saturation. Both exhibit color drenched in itself; color that is confined for eternity.

Contrasting Gerzso's work, one might examine the difference between Rojo y Blanco's geometric, architectonic shapes with swirl art compositions like Pico by Claire Falkenstein. Where a geometric abstraction is based on the use of basic geometric forms, swirl art infuses movement on a static canvas making images seem to burst from the walls of the room. Swirl art is playful, colorful and bold. It accentuates action making everything around it come alive.

### **How to tour Rojo y Blanco**

**Rojo y Blanco may be toured depending on the demographics of the group by comparing it to other abstract expressionist paintings and pre-Columbian art and architecture.**

- What first attracted your attention to the painting?
- What colors and shapes are most evident to you?
- How are the shapes arranged? How are they connected to each other?
- Do you think these shapes look more like landscapes or buildings?
- Would you want this in your classroom or bedroom?

When touring children also concentrate on the colors and shapes within the painting.

### **Bibliography/Sources**

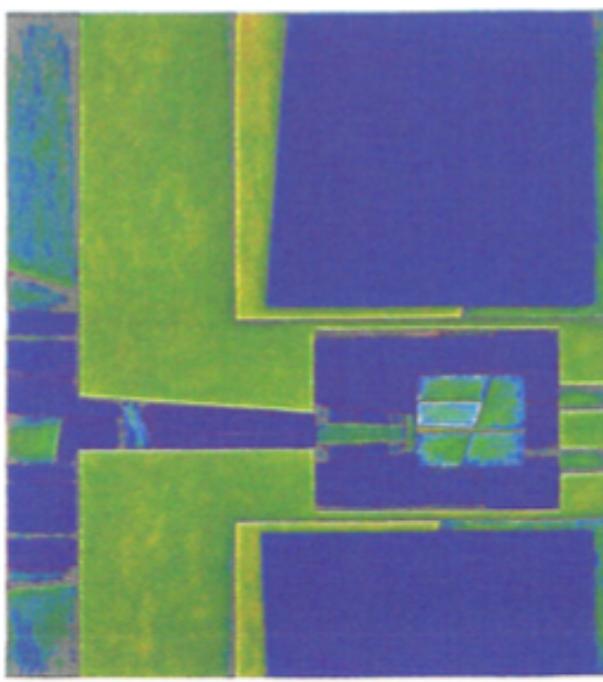
- 1,2. **Looking at Gerzso**, William Sheey
3. **Gunther Gerzso: Latin American masters**, Dory Ashton, 1999
4. **Just For Art**: New York Times, Aug. 26, 1999
5. **Artnet**: Gunther Gerzso

For further analysis on the life and work of Gunter Gerzso see:

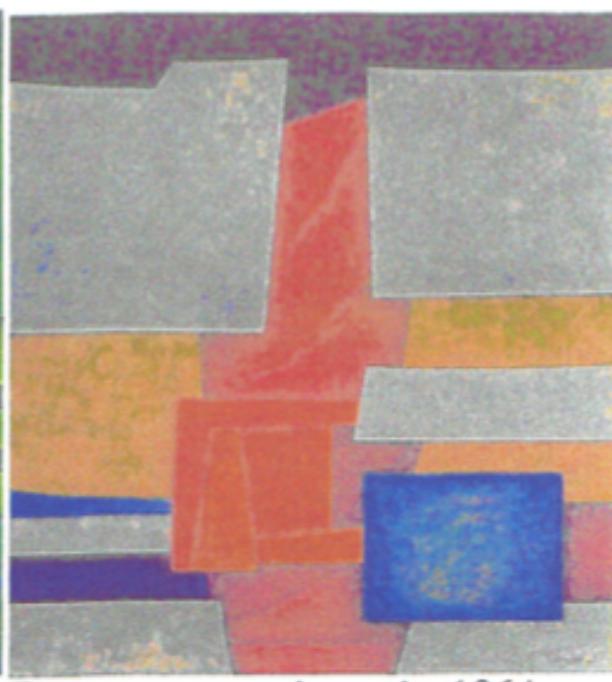
**Artspace**: Rojo y Blanco (Red landscape) by Gunther Gerzso

**Meeting Benches**: Gunther Gerzso (1915-2000) Mexican painter

**Picasso Mio**: Gunther Gerzso Biography



Estructuras Verdes, 1964



Estructura en gris y rojo, 1964

**1**

**2**

**3**

**4**

**5**