

Rufino Tamayo
Mexican. 1899-1991
The Volcano (Le Volcan), 1958 Oil on Canvas
Spotlight Presentation by Kirk Dandridge, 2019



Artist' Background:

Rufino Tamayo; Mexican, 1899-1991

Education: In 1917 he entered the National School of Fine Arts but left after 2 years again because of the academic nature of the instruction there which did not fit how he wanted to develop his art.

Influences: Rufino Tamayo has been described as primitive, sophisticated, Indian and a man of the world. But as with a lot of artists who have humble beginnings, his evolution was because of his experiences and influences that came to him during his life.

He was born in Oaxaca, Mexico. At the age of 8, his parents, who were indigenous Zapotec heritage, died and he walked to Mexico City about 60 miles to find an aunt who worked in the Market. His life with his aunt was too restrictive for his imaginative nature and he left to pursue life on his own. Through his adventures he began to discover who he was and his indigenous background. In 1917 he entered the National School of Fine Arts but left after 2 years again because of the academic nature of the instruction there which did not fit how he wanted to develop his art. At this early age, he already had the idea about how he wanted to develop his artistic style.

Through a friend, he was nominated in 1921 to lead the Department of Ethnographic Drawing at the Museo Nacional de Arqueologia. Here he began to study and develop an interest in the Museum's pre-Columbian collection. This would play a pivotal role in the development of his artistic style and collecting practices.

In 1926, he traveled to New York for a conference and this first exposed him to the city's international art scene. This experience helped him begin to develop his international appeal as an artist. His love of New York brought him back many times and he lived there for a while over the coming decades.

In 1933, he met and married Olga Flores Rivas Zarate, a concert pianist, after 3 months of courtship. She asked him to marry her because she said he was shy. Their relationship lasted for 57 years until his death in 1991. She was an integral part of his career and was probably the most influential person in advancing his career. After Olga experienced a severe illness, he promised if she recovered he would forever honor her in his paintings. Since that time, in all of his artwork, where he signs his work, he includes the letter O.

Early in his career as a developing artist in Mexico, the art scene was dominated by the muralist triumvirate of "the three great ones"—**David Alfaro Siqueiros, Jose Clemente Orozco** and **Diego Rivera**. Tamayo however did not choose to join this group of artists and in 1953 declared his independence by telling a journalist "I am neither the fourth, nor am I great.....I am the first in a new modality of Mexican paintings that attempts a universal voice." ⁽⁵⁾

His travels to New York and living there exposed him to an international group of artists, modern art museums and galleries. During this time he developed close relationships with a number of abstract expressionist artists: Stuart Davis, Marcel Duchamp, Helen Frankenthaler and Reginald Marsh. He also travelled to France and met and stayed with Pablo Picasso, whose art he greatly admired but didn't particularly care for as a person. Joan Miro was also an influence on him. Due to his travels, exhibitions in galleries and association with artists, he was gaining international recognition. He regularly exhibited in New York, Paris, Buenos Aires, Houston and Tokyo.

In 1964 Tamayo moved back to Mexico and remained there until his death in 1991. Tamayo always considered himself to be a Mexican artist and drew on his indigenous heritage, the colors of Mexico and the influence of his love of Pre-Colombian art to produce his unique style of art. He was an advocate for the independence of the artist to produce art that was individual. Many critics were concerned that his exposure internationally would change his art but he remained always a Modernist Mexican artist. The Abstract Expressionist, Picasso and the Surrealist movement influenced him but this did not alter his fundamental style for which he was known. Tamayo's declared aim is "to take elements from the country's great plastic past, to resort to Mexican shapes and colors and to fuse them in a contemporary and international way".

Although his initial exposure was to the Mexican muralists, he never really desired to do murals. He preferred medium sized canvas, 3 feet by 2 feet, because he liked its relationship to the dimensions of the human body and found them perfect "for playing with shapes". He always felt that an artist should produce art and he would generally work 8 hours a day, finishing his day with dinner and drinks with his large cadre of friends and of course Olga. "To be a painter, one must paint." ⁽⁵⁾

He would seat himself in front of his easel and outline his design with a stick of charcoal. He would rarely make preliminary sketches or use models. He would simply start straight on the canvas and "struggle there". This allowed the work to unfold naturally and retain its freshness. He worked slowly and methodically. His oils are characterized by a dry chalky surface and vibrant colors. He used earth tones and colors that were typically Mexican, oranges, yellows and reds of varying hues. His works are also frequently very dark with grays, blacks and for a period during the 1930s were very sinister and menacing.

Like most artists, Tamayo experimented with sculpture and figurative art. But, his most significant deviation was in the 1970s was in printmaking. He collaborated with the artists Luis and Lea Remba to develop a new graphic technique: the "Mixographie". This technique consisted of obtaining in engravings a certain relief of different heights thus creating a relief effect similar to a painting.

Over the years like most artist, he also had varying themes. In the 1930s his themes were dark and sinister. After World War II, he was interested in themes related to man and the infinite. He began doing works referred to "the great galaxy" having the theme of the cosmos, probably related to the space age. Also about this same time, he began to grow more colorful and move away from realism. In the 1960s and 1970s, he began to include themes related to wild animals and dogs. These were frequently fierce and menacing works. But, he always returned to what he loved best, his painting of people, which were depicted in full figure similar to the Pre-Colombia art that he revered. Most of these works were frequently somewhat abstract with featureless figures making up most of his subjects.

During his travels, Rufino and Olga amassed two important art collections. Because of his love of Pre-Columbian art, he collected over one thousand ancient art and artifacts of the Americas. And in 1973, the Tamayos donated their collection to the city where he was born, Oaxaca. The collection is housed in the Museo de Arte Prehispánico Rufino Tamayo.

The second collection, because of his association with other international artist, he collected their works. He eventually assembled a collection of more than 168 Modern artists represented by Miro, Picasso, Rothko, Frankenthaler and Stuart Davis. Because of his desire to bring to Mexico these international artists, in 1981 he opened the Rufino Tamayo Museum in Chapultepec Park in Mexico City and donated 315 works from his collection to the Museum along with a number of his own works of art.

Impression and analysis: This work of art generally falls in the era of his career referred earlier to as "the great galaxy". This is one of two works that depict volcanoes. The earlier work done in 1947 is somewhat darker and less colorful. He seldom painted landscapes and preferred people and animals. Since Mexico is a land of volcanoes, then this theme would seem to be appropriate. Several of his contemporary Mexican artist also used volcanoes as their themes.

This work is a part of our permanent collection donated by Gwendolyn Weiner. It is oil on canvas, depicting an erupting volcano. Multiple pyroclastic eruptions in the foreground are hurled into the air with vivid reds, oranges and yellows against a black background and almost invisible volcanic cone in the background. He was capturing the power of the eruption and depicting the force that it displays. He really loved to use vivid and bright colors in his works. Despite the dark nature of the background of this work his colorist tradition is on powerful display. The contrast between the dark background and the erupting colors makes the piece powerful. This conveys the power of the volcano. Of note there is a greenish colored area above and to the left of the volcano. This appears to be a relative sinister vague figure with red eyes. What this represents is unknown and not found in the discussion of this work.

He uses oil that appears to be dry. The painting therefore appears to have a mat finish and does not have a glossy look. This makes the blacks look even darker which enhances the contrast in the colors. In areas, the paint is very thin like it has been worn

away. This exposes the underlying canvas. It looks as if he dragged the painting on the ground and scraped off some of the paint.

His signature in the top right is unusual also. First it is in the upper right corner. Then he signs his full name, the date and then the “o” which is his tribute to his wife, Olga.

Compare and Contrast artwork:

How does this work relate to other works in the Museum?

Tamayo’s body of work is indicative of the other Mesoamerican works, especially Diego Rivera “Bathers”. A lot of Tamayo’s figures are full bodied and featureless similar to “Bathers”. He incorporates his indigenous heritage from the works of the Pre-Columbian artist with which so admired. Nayarit “Pair of Standing Figures” is a good example. A number of these works are on the mezzanine. However, “The Volcano” and his “Reaching for the Moon” work seem to relate to Agnes Pelton’s works. They are both partly representational but with abstract or surrealist aspects to them. Both painted from their experiences and their works incorporate colorful and vibrant themes. And his works that have surrealistic aspects to them, his animals, brings up the relationship that Picasso and his “Angry Owl” has with him.

Rufino Tamayo is considered to be one of Mexico’s greatest artists. And in researching his life and his work, I couldn’t agree more. His works varied in their representations and themes that he painted over his lifetime but he always was true to his heritage and his Mexico. He was quiet but with a strong personality. He was a truly international artist but he loved his homeland and relished in representing it in his art.

Questions to ask about this artwork:

1. Take a minute to look at this piece and then tell me what you see.
2. Given that this gallery is labeled Shifting Ground. How does this work fit into that theme?
3. How does it relate the other works in this gallery? Point out Ed Rusha’s “Atomic Princess” and Teri Rofkar’s “Earthquake Robe”.
4. What do the colors say about this work? The technique?
5. What in this work seems real and what does not?
6. If it could have sound associated with it, what would it be?
7. What is the green area to the upper left of the volcano and what do you think it represents or means?
8. Look at the artist’s signature and what is unique about it?
9. Does this work elicit an emotional reaction in you? And if so what is it?
10. Why do you think Tamayo painted a volcano?

Art References on last page:

Left Upper: “The Family” 1925, Oil on Canvas

Right Upper: “Lion and Horse” 1942, Oil on Canvas, Smithsonian

Left Lower: “Reaching for the Moon” 1946, Oil on Canvas

Lower Right: “Volcanic Eruption” 1947, Oil and Sand on Canvas

Lower Central: Rufino Tamayo with some of his collection.

Article references:

1. Odenheimer, Dorothy (1943), Woman with Bird Cage by Tamayo, Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago (1907-1951) 37(3), pg. 34-34.
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3. Castro, Maria, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tamayo, Olga and Rufino. August 2018.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/libraries-and-research-centers/leonard-lauder-research-center>
4. November 3, 2017 symposium: "A line that birds cannot see": Mexican/US Art and Artists Crossing Borders in the 20th Century-Smithsonian American Art Museum.
<https://americanart.si.edu/research/symposia/2017/crossing-borders>
5. Gruen, John, ARTnews, "Conversations with Rufino Tamayo", February 1979.

