

Tamayo, Rufino, The Family, Accession # 60.4

North America, Mexico

oil on canvas

1936

G-376

Social/Historical Context

Mexican writer Octavio Paz describes his country as having an “invisible history”—specifically, the Aztec model of domination, ritualism and human sacrifice, which continues to affect events and attitudes in the present. Mexico is part modern and part ancient, half Indian and half Spanish, Paz says. “Duality is not something added, artificial or exterior: it is our constituent reality.” No Mexican artist has better expressed that reality than Rufino Tamayo. While some of his subjects and his choice of colors were informed by Mexican art and culture, his flattened compositions and abstract forms derive from European modernism.

Tamayo was at odds with the politically motivated narrative paintings of the Mexican muralists —Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—whose work was shaped by the 1910 Mexican Revolution, and the continued belief that art should serve revolutionary ideals. Tamayo sought to create a more universal art form based on modernist principles. "I had difficulties with the Muralists, to the point that they accused me of being a traitor to my country for not following their way of thinking," said Mr. Tamayo. "But my only commitment is to painting. That doesn't mean I don't have personal political positions. But those positions aren't reflected in my work. My work is painting."

Tamayo said, “my country is tragic. It is tragic because of a long history of foreign domination since the Spaniards. Such circumstances can hardly be expected to produce happiness. The coloring which I consider Mexican is a reflection of economical conditions in my country. Mexico is poor and, consequently, the colors generally used by her people are very cheap.” His palette often reflected the earth colors similar to the reds and oranges of ancient pottery, because these were easily obtainable colors. At other times his palette reflected the brilliant colors typical of the tropical climate in Mexico.

Artist's Biography

Rufino Tamayo is one of Mexico's best-known artists. He was born on Aug. 26, 1899, in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, one of the Mexican regions most heavily influenced by native Indian culture. He was the only child of Florentina and Manuel Arellanes Tamayo, both of Zapotec Indian descent; his father was a businessman. In 1911, after both parents had died, he went to live with an aunt who had a large wholesale fruit business in Mexico City. Later on he spoke with fondness about his years with her, when his love of tropical fruit began.

In 1921 he was appointed the head designer of the department of ethnographic drawings in the National Museum of Archeology in Mexico City, where he was surrounded by pre-

Columbian objects. "It opened my eyes," Mr. Tamayo said, "putting me in touch with both pre-Columbian and popular arts. I immediately discovered the sources of my work -- our tradition."

Leaving Mexico City for his first visit to New York in 1926, Mr. Tamayo found that his political estrangement from the Mexican painting scene was a blessing in disguise, opening broad new horizons of artistic education and experience that were to keep him in the United States and Europe for a total of more than 20 years in the next three and a half decades. "I went to New York to get to know what painting really was," said Mr. Tamayo, who taught art at the Dalton School in Manhattan among other jobs for several years. "We were blind here, and New York made me aware of all the trends and currents that existed in those years. It showed me what art was."

With the help of his wife, Olga, a former concert pianist who proved to be as skilled and dedicated to managing and selling his work as he was to creating it, Mr. Tamayo quickly gained international stature, drawing particular attention for his innovative composition and original use of colors, including bright oranges, earthy reds and deep, pastel blues. The couple then moved to Paris, finally permanently returning to Mexico in the early 1960's

Mr. Tamayo believed in universality. Many of his paintings have a generic quality. Their slightly schematic, gestural, figurative style, shaped by modernist developments like Cubism, Surrealism and Expressionism, can seem so familiar that they could have been painted almost anywhere.

But if modernism helped him explore the possibilities of an international language, his inspiration remained the presence and continuity of Mexican traditions. The earthiness, the transcendent power of simple things, and his mask like faces and statuesque figures are rooted in his Indian origins and in his study of Mexican folk art and pre-Columbian sculpture. From beginning to end, his painting is saturated with Mexican color and light.

Tamayo said "Subject matter is not my primary concern at all. In my painting, subject matter practically doesn't exist. Even the titles I use are very simple...The subject should be subordinated to the essential problems of painting, design, the use of space, the relationship of forms and colors."

Rufino Tamayo died of pneumonia at the age of 91, in 1991.

Key Points

Rufino Tamayo is one of Mexico's best known artists. His work incorporates both ancient Mexican art and culture, as well as modern European influences. Unlike other well-known Mexican artists of his time (such as Diego Rivera), his work was not political in nature; his choice of themes centers on the fundamental relationships of man to man and man to nature that have dominated Mexico's indigenous art for thousands of years.

In looking at *The Family* it's helpful to pay attention to the different kinds of windows the artist has conveyed. The first window is the actual frame of the painting, through which a man, woman and child stare back at the viewer. This is a generic family; the generic name of the painting offers no clues. In Tamayo's world of symbols and color theory, black represents no

color; he intends for the the family's identity to be generic, so that all viewers can relate to and identify with this family. *The Family* is a statement of the artist's perception of things Mexican and, at the same time, universal.

The painting itself is rendered as a window framed by red curtains. The figures are situated on a balcony, peering back at the painting's viewers. In this way the artist forces the observer to become a participant in his visual narrative.

The oval shape on each window pane is similar to the Mayan calendric system symbol for the "day", or for "man." The plural form of the Ahau symbol represents humanity. Tamayo once said "I am interested in Man. Man is my subject, man who is creator of all scientific and wonders. To me that is the most important thing in existence."

The white bird to the right of the window, perched on the roof is another symbol for gazing. The bird looks into the oval as if it were a mirror or a window. Tamayo does not depict a refraction. This oval is another frame that suggests nature's dependence on visual relationships and identity.

The multiple ways of looking at *The Family* suggest opportunities for both gazing and self-contemplation. The black human figures are a family, and we the viewers are a family.

Questions

What's going on in this painting?

Who do you think these people are? What are they looking at? Where are they?

What things in the painting are realistic? What is abstract, or not realistic
If you could ask the artist one question about this painting, what would it be?

Possible Tours

Families
Made in America
Symbolism
VTS
Line, Color, Shape
Art of Everyday Living

Resources

Object File, MIA
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
www.mexconnect.com

Submitted by Lin Stein