

# The Museum of Modern Art

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FEATURE

## **ART OF THE FORTIES EXHIBITION INCLUDES MASTERPIECES OF LATIN AMERICAN ART**

Several modern masterpieces of Latin American art are included in **ART OF THE FORTIES**, a major exhibition on view through April 30 at The Museum of Modern Art. Drawn entirely from the Museum's extensive holdings from the period, the exhibition surveys the creative climate of the forties--a turbulent decade that in many respects reshaped the world. Included are works of various mediums that reflect the history, development of ideas, and evolution of imagery of the decade.

While Europe was in the throes of World War II, Latin America struggled with its own revolutionary past. Many Hispanic artists sought to evoke the world's chaos in their art. Drawing on the rich heritage of Mexican mural painting, they created works of formidable scale, picturing the devastation of war with a unique Latin American pathos. Working abroad, other Latin American artists were influenced by the Surrealism and abstraction of pre-war Europe.

Works by nine Hispanic artists are featured in **ART OF THE FORTIES**, including Francisco Dosamantes, Frida Kahlo, Leopoldo Méndez, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Rufino Tamayo, of Mexico; Wilfredo Lam, of Cuba; Matta (Sebastian Antonio Matta Echaurren), of Chile; and Joaquín Torres-García, of Uruguay.

### **Mexican works reflect revolutionary heritage**

José Clemente Orozco's fresco *Dive Bomber and Tank* (1940), a six-panel mural, opens the **ART OF THE FORTIES** exhibition. Commissioned by The Museum of Modern Art and completed one week after France fell to the Nazis, the fresco

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alludes to this destruction, depicting a mythological being dismembered by the crash of two metallic demons, a World War II dive bomber and a tank.

David Alfaro Siqueiros's beseeching *Hands* (1949) is another large-scale painting appearing in the exhibition. Siqueiros's life was filled with revolutionary activity and this painting is an early example of anti-nuclear protest. When he was jailed in the 1930s and 1960s, his works continued to speak to the masses from small prints and canvases smuggled from his cell.

Two members of the Mexican Taller de Gráfica Popular group are also represented. The group was organized to continue the revolutionary activities of Siqueiros's earlier Syndicate group. Francisco Dosamantes's *Dead Soldier* (1940), a lithograph, and Leopoldo Méndez's *Ballad of Stalingrad* (1942), an illustration for the back cover of a political pamphlet, represent the horrors of war for these two artists.

### **Influence of Surrealism and Expressionism**

Many of the Hispanic painters working in the forties used violent imagery as visual metaphors for their inner turmoil. Matta, a Chilean-born artist who became associated with the Surrealists while working in France and Italy, referred to his early Surrealist works as "inscapes." His painting *Listen to Living* (1941) depicts a volcanic explosion and stormy atmosphere in a swirling blend of brilliant colors. Matta, who trained as an architect, also refers to the destruction of war in the mechanical imagery of his lithograph *I Want to See It to Believe It* (1947).

Mexican-born Rufino Tamayo's *Girl Attacked by a Strange Bird* (1947) portrays violent passion in somber tones. Like Orozco, Tamayo looked to ancient Mexican traditions for his forms. Living in New York from 1936 to

1954, Tamayo integrated expressionist techniques with imagery from the Mayan, Aztec, and Toltec cultures of Mexico.

Wifredo Lam's painting *The Jungle* (1943), measuring over seven square-feet, blends the artist's Cuban past with an industrial present. *The Jungle* depicts a type of ritualistic dance, with humans and animals merging into one another in intense hues of blue, orange, and green. Working in France, Spain, and Italy, Lam was strongly influenced by Picasso and the Surrealists.

Frida Kahlo's smaller-scale, autobiographical works represent a deviation from the mural-like format often used in her native Mexico. Included in the current exhibition is the intimate *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940). Painted at a time of personal turmoil, this image depicts the artist dressed as a man and holding a pair of scissors, surrounded by locks of her own hair. Kahlo, the wife of famed Mexican muralist Diego Riviera, was also associated with the Surrealist refugees.

The Uruguayan-born artist Joaquín Torres-García traveled to Spain, Italy, the United States, and France before returning to South America in 1934. Strongly influenced by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian, his compositions of the thirties and forties combine pre-Columbian pictographs with the grid-like format of geometric abstraction. *The Port* (1942), painted in his native Montevideo, is a whimsical depiction of a bustling harbor.

#### **Widespread recognition of Latin American art**

The forties witnessed the first widespread recognition of Hispanic art beyond Latin America. In 1940 The Museum of Modern Art presented the exhibition **TWENTY CENTURIES OF MEXICAN ART**, tracing the country's artistic heritage. In 1942 the Museum established the Inter-American Fund for the

acquisition of paintings and sculptures from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. With the many paintings by Mexican artists already in the collection, the fifty-eight works acquired that year became the most important repository of contemporary Latin American art in the United States at the time.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the Museum's founding director, wrote in the 1943 catalogue of the Museum's Latin American collection:

Thanks to the second World War and to certain men of good will throughout our Western Hemisphere, we are dropping those blinders in cultural understanding which have kept the eyes of all the American republics fixed on Europe with scarcely a side glance at each other during the past century and a half. In the field of art we are beginning to look each other full in the face with interest and some comprehension.

**ART OF THE FORTIES** was organized by Riva Castleman, deputy director for curatorial affairs and director of the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, The Museum of Modern Art, in consultation with the Departments of Painting and Sculpture, Drawings, Photography, Architecture and Design, and Film. The exhibition is supported in part by a grant from The Bohen Foundation.

The Museum will present a major exhibition titled **LATIN AMERICAN ARTISTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY** in 1993. Organized by Waldo Rasmussen, director of the Museum's International Program, its first showing will be in 1992 in Seville, Spain, to coincide with the 500th anniversary celebration of Columbus's discovery of America.

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