

Book Reviews

Robert Goldwater, *Rufino Tamayo*, New York, Quadrangle Press, 1947. 122 pp., 80 plates. \$15.

This is a beautiful book about a worth-while artist, concerning whom up-to-date published data was scarce, especially in the English language. The format, typography, brilliance of the color plates and the amply legible size of the halftones deserve praise. Robert Goldwater communicates with unaffected sincerity in his text what knowledge he has of Tamayo's Mexican cultural background and a firsthand connoisseur's reaction to Tamayo's paintings.

Unavoidably, a few *quidproquos* arise from the difficulty of translating Amerindian concepts into Saxon ones. At the mention of the artist's aunt, who ran a wholesale fruit business, refrain from a mental image of ordered rows of apples individually wrapped in tissue paper or of oranges branded with a rubber stamp and dipped from stem to navel in orange dye. Picture instead piles of naked tropical fruits, cluttering corridors and sidewalks and heady with gamy perfumes. The market of *La Merced*, where the young boy lived, is still today crowded with disorderly throngs that squat and barter, buy and sell, with a hue and cry and passion reminiscent of those of a medieval fair or pilgrimage. And over the conglomeration of wooden booths and canvas tents, as a castle gathers to itself a village, rises the ex-convent of *La Merced* in its dilapidated colonial magnificence—its lone dweller, at the time Tamayo was a lad, being Dr. Atl, perched on its roof for an eyrie.

Excellent on the whole, the panoramic report of Mexican art at the beginning of the twentieth century can stand minor retouching. The august Academy of San Carlos, founded in 1786, hardly deserves to be the villain of the piece when most of the great Mexican painters are indebted to the institution. A school that, in our day, started on their way men of the stature of Siqueiros, Orozco, Rivera—and Tamayo—must have its good points. The truth is that Mexico's academic art was a much more vital product than its European counterpart, due in part to the magic *décalage* in time that qualifies Mexican styles.

When the artist, as seems the case here, scruples to recount his past, valid means may be used to fill in, ever so slightly, biographical gaps. By the use, premature as it were, of the historical method, Tamayo may be specifically linked to the local cultural background so ably described by the author. Though we cannot quite "tell of the first drawing done," we may come a few years closer to it than does Goldwater: in June, 1918, Ramos Martinez, though not yet director of the San Carlos school, offered cash prizes for the best student sketches, with emphasis laid on atmosphere and movement rather than on a rendering of static form. In this contest, nineteen-year-old Rufino Tamayo rated an Honorable Mention, this first printed appearance of his name being found in *Boletín de la Universidad*, 1, 2, November 1918.

First published appraisals of Tamayo's painting style, of interest since no pictures of that period are known today, appeared in 1921, in conjunction with the annual student show of the San Carlos Academy. In *El Universal*, October 2, critic Vera de Cordova singles out his work: "Tamayo, a disciple of Montenegro, but more divisionist in his color and making use of a Cézanne-like structure." And Rivera, just returned from Europe, speaking of the same entry in *Azulejos* for October: "Quickness of notation, sensitiveness and good understanding of planes, quite a painter."

Vera de Cordova's quote suggests that the artistic first steps can hardly be evaluated fairly without at least a mention of Roberto Montenegro, whose name should end the search of the author for "the first great man met who saw the child's talent." More than Ramos Martinez, with whom Tamayo never had other than marginal contacts, Montenegro can be said to be his master. First muralist to receive a commission from José

Vasconcelos—in 1920, the refaction and decoration of the ex-church of San Pedro y Pablo—Montenegro, before Rivera's return, had gathered around himself a phalanx of young artists that included Tamayo.

That same year saw the large-scale adoption in primary schools of the drawing method of Adolfo Best Maugard, devised to conjure long-forgotten racial images out of the national subconscious. This method, mentioned in the text as part of the whole cultural tableau, deserves to be underlined as one of the stylistic ingredients that came to be digested and transformed by Tamayo, as one of the small, hand-picked group of teachers groomed to launch the method. While he freed his small charges, mostly Indian, from the forced obeisance paid to Greek art—contacted in public schools in the form of plaster-cast models—the young teacher watched them splash color on paper, inspired to careless rapture at the sight of the wobbly fruit-dishes, calligraphic watermelons and tattooed pineapples that enlivened their new textbook. Students' drawings of the period artlessly prefigure some of the charm, pungent color and sensitive line of their master's forthcoming "ice-cream" period. Some of the childish "papers," invited and hung at the New York Independents of 1923, stole the show from the adult work sent from Mexico. In that same show, Tamayo himself made his United States debut with a *Young Man* listed in the catalogue.

Does it add to Tamayo's respectable stature to belittle what had gone on before him? Legitimate is the use of quotations from the artist for the subjective light that they throw on his choice of esthetic paths, but should some of the statements go unqualified they might be accepted by most readers as history. Surely the tagging of the Mexican muralists' achievements as provincial, the suggestion that their grasp of esthetic problems was only halfhearted, and their knowledge of the international scene deficient, bears correction. Their provincialism was not one of ignorance but of choice.

Drastic had been the temptation for Rivera to forget his small *patria* and remain in Europe, a successful expatriate. He was not merely a traveler through the School of Paris, having added his own stone to the imposing construction.

Similarly, Siqueiros knew well the Parisian milieu, and Picasso had praised his painting. In Spain, he edited an art magazine a little ahead of up-to-date. In Italy, besides worshipping Masaccio, he worked awhile in the idiom of *pittura metafisica* just launched by Carlo Carra and de Chirico.

Of more than usual interest in this monograph are the plates that relate to archeological sources. The masterly directness of the drawings that have pre-Hispanic carvings or modelings for models constitutes in itself a justification of the use of a material that, in other hands, would acquire self-conscious overtones. The sequence of four plates related to *Dog and Serpent* is especially rewarding. To ease the change of mood from the gentle pre-Hispanic one to the fierce enigma of the modern picture, additional material from Tamayo's own ancestral Zapotec art would be helpful, especially a photograph of one of the stylized black clay vampire bats.

The references to Picasso as another stylistic influence explain the ready toe-hold, as it were, that men thoroughly conversant with idioms of the Parisian school can achieve in the art of Tamayo, even if they do not know beforehand of his other, Amerindian, models. That Tamayo himself is not spoiled by the welcome mats spread on 57th Street was proved to me by a single small fact on a visit to a gallery that handled his work. The admiration felt by the dealer for some of his best pictures, dark and very close in values, was tempered by the fact that they could hardly be photographed; thus throwing out of gear the complicated machinery needed to launch and to sell an artist; thus reassuring me as to an integrity unswayed by success.

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