

# Abel Quezada and Rufino Tamayo

Abel Quezada, a great humorist  
Abel Quezada (1920-1991) created the modern cartoon in Mexico. In 1989 *Time* nominated him as one of the ten best cartoonists in the world.

His life was always ruled by humor, a quality which made him one of the most famous and popular cartoonists in the country. Quezada always said that without humor, people would die of boredom. But then again, he warned, one must not take humor too seriously, lest one run the risk of becoming a clown; humor, he proposed, should be used in small doses, like sugar in coffee.

He commented that Mexicans have a very developed sense of humor, but not when it comes to laughing at themselves; they tend to get offended and are incapable of doing what such humor demands: offering themselves willingly and in good humor as objects of mirth.

He defined cartoons in the following way: "They have always been the outspoken critical voice of the people," and said that cartoonists as interpreters of the masses should not put passion before the interests of the country.

A different man, a green man  
Abel Quezada, was born in Monterrey, Nuevo León, on December 13, 1920, and died of leukemia at his home in Cuernavaca on the 28th of February of this year.

Quezada described himself as a *green man*: "There is no name for what I do. I can't say I'm a caricaturist, since I do not know how to create real caricatures. I can't say I'm a cartoonist because the word does not really describe my work. I do illustrated texts. Thus, when I define my profession, I like to say that I am a draftsman. And drawing is a pleasure that few people know, a secret weapon, equivalent to another language. We who were blessed with this gift don't have to worry about anything. We'll never lack anything. We are like the bearded lady, or the green man. That is, we're different."

The time he lived in Comales, a small town in the state of Tamaulipas, marked his *green heart*, and he continually referred to it later, calling it the capital of the civilized world.

Abel Quezada and Rufino Tamayo, two great Mexican artists, died this year. Both were recognized in New York and both retired to Cuernavaca, an hour away from Mexico City. Voices of Mexico honors their memory in recognition of their artistic contributions to the vibrancy of modern Mexican cultural life.



Abel Quezada, Portrait of a Young Lady in Cuernavaca.

Quezada used to tell people that in 1951 he was introduced to a beautiful young woman and that he immediately said to her: "Pleased to meet you, Yolanda, would you like to marry me?" Although she was offended at first, a few minutes later they got married and had three children.

In 1965, when he was 45 years old, following the advice of his father-in-law, he started painting. In that field too he was successful, but more than anything it appears to have brought him personal satisfaction, judging from his remark, "When they gave me my first brushes and canvases, they also gave me the greatest blessing in life anyone could have asked for."



Abel Quezada, Cambridge Station.

**The anguish of the blank page**  
Quezada began his day early in the morning, routinely spreading one or two newspapers on the table. Standing, he read headlines and waited for ideas to come. When they didn't he started the day off with aching bones. This is how he described it: "Pain is physical and I suffer when I have no ideas... I remain doubled up, defeated there at the table, with a blank sheet of paper in front of me and my head in my hands... I feel empty from top to toe and the pain crushes me, wounds me, tortures me... But finally an idea comes into my head. It may come from an inner spark or a friend's



conversation or from the wind... Putting the idea into text with a sketch is not the problem.

The hand moves on its own, as if it followed a line already drawn on the paper. It is the breaking out of the tunnel into the light.

Ever since the age of fifteen he managed to publish cartoons on a permanent basis in newspapers. In 1956 he was hired by one of the biggest papers in Mexico, and the characters he invented soon became popular. On October 3, 1968, the day after the student movement was put down, in which many were killed in Tlatelolco, Quezada covered the whole space reserved for his cartoon in black ink, with the title: "Why?"

For more than five decades Quezada portrayed politicians, businessmen, society ladies, intellectuals, ecologists, policemen,

sportsmen, soldiers, peasants, communists, capitalists and scientists. His peasants and his newspapermen are so thin and starving that they have to be held up by sticks.

Quezada forayed into the advertising world in the United States and won an international prize for a comic strip advertising a toothpaste. Years later he designed the front cover of *The New Yorker* (1981) and, later on, collaborated with *The New York Times*, *Time* and other publications in Japan, England and Spain.

In 1975 he won the Mexican Press Club's Prize and in 1980, the National Press Award. In 1989 he decided to say good-bye to cartoons with a series of comic strips that were published simultaneously in all the newspapers in Mexico.



Abel Quezada, Young Yucatecan Girl with a Slight Physical Defect.

#### Color and humor

Twenty years after he took up painting, he exhibited for the first time. In 1984 the Tamayo Museum organized an exhibition of his newspaper work, with two of his oil paintings. The exhibit broke all previous attendance records. Each time Quezada visited the exhibit, he stood in line and paid the entrance fee.

The Museum of Modern Art in Mexico showed his oils in 1985 and

in 1990 he exhibited both at the Sforzesco Castle in Milan and the Nesle Gallery in Paris. As a painter he recognized that his art was influenced by Van Gogh, Gauguin and Modigliani.

While his family obtained all the pictures they asked him for or ordered, only a few of his friends managed to get pictures "on loan for 99 years", as is the case with Gabriel García Márquez, who finally managed to "extract" a picture from him almost 30 years after he had been promised it.

During his lifetime Quezada published: *Cartoons by Abel Quezada* (1958); *The Best of Impossible Worlds* (New York, 1962, Spanish version in 1963); *Images of Japan* (1963); *48 Thousand Kilometers in Line* (1973); *The Mexican and Other Problems* (1976); *Times Lost* (1979); *The Comedy of Art* (1985); *We, The Green Men* (1985); *A Life in Mexico* (1988); and *The Muse Hunter* (1989, an anthology of his paintings with a selection of 111 works, published in Italian, English and Spanish).

The anthology of his paintings is divided into seven subjects: "Ladies First"; "Couples"; "Landscapes and their Inhabitants"; "Military and Civilians"; "Sports and Sportsmen"; "Ports, Stations and Means of Transport"; "Furniture, Objects, Cigar Boxes and a Bit of Bullfighting".

In *The Muse Hunter*, Quezada did not leave out his great sense of humor. In addition to the titles of his works, 44 pictures also have texts in which



Abel Quezada, Cyclists with Black Hats.

he elaborates certain details he wants to stress. In the *Portrait of a Young Lady in Cuernavaca*, he wrote: "Altamira cave paintings illustrate that man began painting animals and women. I followed the same pattern in my own work. I painted animals and women, but soon left the animals out." He even seeks to make people participate with him. In *Young Yucatecan Girl with a Slight Physical Defect*, he challenges viewers to find the hidden defect.

Another sample of humor in his pictures can be seen in the way he signs his pictures. The signature (generally "AQ") may be right on a railroad track, on a sewer cover, branded on a horse, embroidered

on the handkerchief peeking out of a diner's jacket pocket, on the inside of a cigar box lid or on the back of a chair.

According to Quezada *Latins are Lousy Lovers* (the title of one of his pictures) and dancing is a key element in the art of courting. In his picture *Rainbow Room* (in English in the original), he wrote: "Soft music in the moonlight. Love. Cheek to cheek. The pleasure principle."

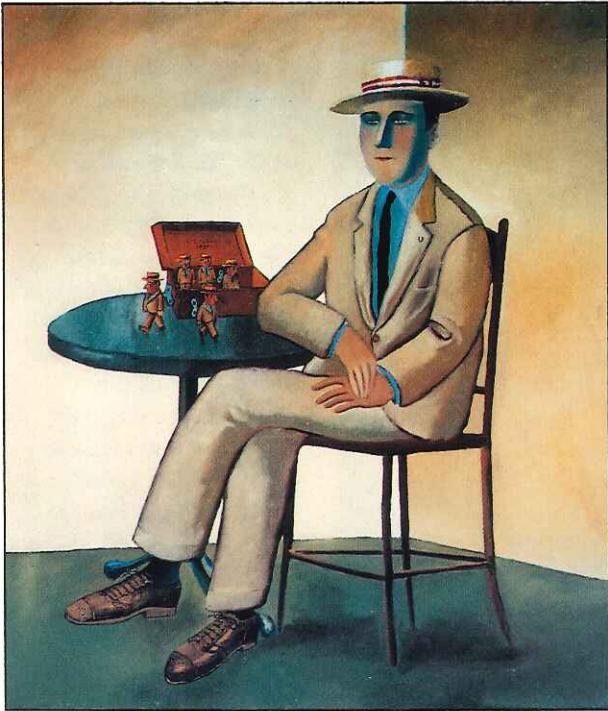
"We green men," he remarked, "suffer and enjoy working. As suffering becomes more acute, pleasure becomes more intense. Suffering is worthwhile. Something always comes of it. Sometimes something surprising, sometimes beautiful, sometimes okay but always new. And that is our mission in life: to make something new every day. My wealth is the ability to communicate

with all people, from the very poor to the president."

#### Tamayo, a visual artist

Rufino Tamayo is sometimes known as the solar artist since his work invariably includes a visible or invisible sun. Tamayo was, without a doubt, among those "chosen by the Gods of our ancestors," in particular the Sun God; until now he has received the highest degree of international recognition among Latin American artists.

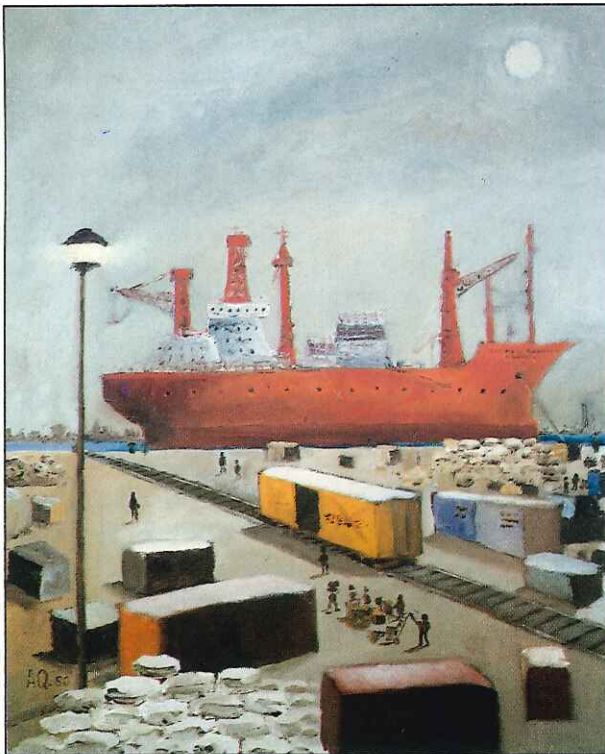
Tamayo defined art as the expression of absolute freedom: "I have faced two choices from the time I was very young: the beaten path and that of searching for myself



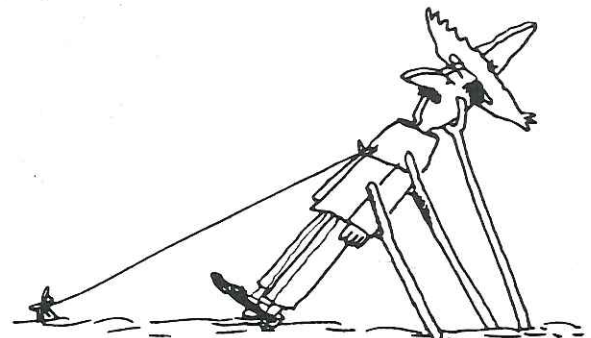
Abel Quezada, The Manipulator of Men.



Abel Quezada, Portrait of Bertha in Black.



Abel Quezada, The Great Red Cargo Ship.



on an unknown road, sometimes hard to reach and sometimes leading nowhere. I preferred to experiment, I was sure that the academic route, that of precise reproduction, was not the true nature of art. Art expresses essence not appearance.

"The way one captures essence varies with one's sensitivity, spirit and work. Many get lost on the way. However, the expectation of new creation is worth taking a risk. To risk itself means freedom. I am not satisfied unless I go beyond, farther and farther. Art is open, with an unlimited perspective, open to ongoing experimentation.



Rufino Tamayo, Cow Swatting Flies, 1951.

"The world of the artist is frequently invoked. I believe that world belongs to us all, abstracted from reality, although it may have been sensed and revealed for the first time by an artist. We create worlds that will never be more than metaphors of reality. Metaphors, not reflections or copies.

"Although art has tried to represent the ideologies of various social classes throughout history, it has not found its sustenance, that which keeps it alive, in ideologies. Political and religious passions pass without having been the subject of a painting, but the artist's lines, forms and colors survive.

"A work of art is not judged by subject or ideas, but its quality and

ability to create poetic order. When viewers appreciate pretty colors, communication is established between them and the work of art, as well as with the artist. Art reaches the senses, without reasoning. This is the reason that it is interesting to listen to 'the people' when they talk about art; simple people don't rationalize, they feel."

Tamayo saw art as the instrument to counteract dehumanization, "I must say, not without a deep sense of disenchantment, that the many changes brought on by science and technology this century, especially during the latter half, have led to a recognizable

process of dehumanization. Man, surrounded increasingly by more machines and mechanical instruments, has gradually turned his life into mechanical activity.

"Often, many forget the opposite vision: considering machines as extensions of

people's capacities. A new type of people is developing, one ruled by technology, obsessed with things, anxious to be at the forefront of innovation, but with a poor understanding of well-being.

"Art must reflect the changes that come with scientific and technological development. The process of evolution keeps moving, especially the evolution of people and their problems. Thus, art becomes an essential complementary ingredient that balances a civilization where humanism can find a niche. Artists become witnesses by balancing the subjective and the objective. Thus, the artist, like any other citizen, should participate actively in

developing the surrounding community."

#### A cultural laborer

Rufino Tamayo was born in Oaxaca on the 26 of August, 1899, and died in June, at the age of ninety one, after a bout with pneumonia.

Tamayo dropped his paternal name, Arellanes, and used only his mother's maiden name as his own, "I have no reason to use the name of one who I did not know and to whom I owe nothing."

Tamayo was brought up and cared for solely by his mother. When he was eight years old, his mother died and his aunt took over. They lived in Oaxaca until he was eleven, when his aunt left Oaxaca to start a fruit business in Mexico City.



Rufino Tamayo, Watermelon Eater, 1949.

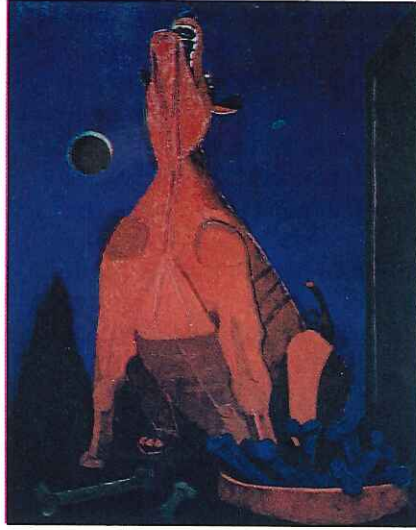
This period influenced Tamayo's work deeply, "It may be that it was then I saw the fruit that I paint today," he said, "I was fascinated by form and color."

Tamayo enrolled at the National School of Arts at the age of eighteen, and left three years later, discouraged by the European system of drawing a

model and having a professor correct his work. Feeling misunderstood and left out, Tamayo took the funds from the first art he sold and travelled to New York in 1926.

Tamayo worked and travelled back and forth exhibiting both in New York and in Mexico. In 1934 he married Olga, whom he charged with managing their practical and social life.

New York recognized his talent. "It was there that I really got into my work and understood the true meaning of art. When I took Olga the first thing I did was to show her the art world of West 57th Street. This is where the best galleries are, I told her, and I promise you that one day you will see my work exhibited in these galleries. I kept my promise. I knew I could, I always believed in my own work."



*Rufino Tamayo, Dog Barking at the Moon.*

By 1935 Tamayo had built up a clientele of collectors in the United States (New York, Washington, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Cleveland,

Nebraska and Milwaukee), although this did not translate into economic success. Twenty years later he would regret that his work was more widely recognized abroad than in Mexico. He identified himself as a cultural laborer because, he said, he worked eight hours a day and didn't waste any time talking with friends about this or that artistic theory.

#### The Tamayo polemic

The Valentine Gallery in New York gave Tamayo his first one man show in 1939. The critics wrote: "Tamayo is the only Mexican painter today who is on his way. He paints as an artist, not as a politician." His Mexican colleagues criticized him for his popularity abroad.

In 1947 Tamayo launched an open attack on three of his colleagues. He said: "Mexican art has been in a



*Rufino Tamayo, Galaxy II, 1982.*

sorry state of decline for some time. Diego Rivera has not done anything worthwhile since [his murals in the chapel of] Chapingo. Orozco has gone down drastically in the last few years after what he had done. As far as Siqueiros goes, he's always done the same thing. Mexican art, initiated twenty years ago, was vibrant and revolutionary. Today all it does is

period many of Tamayo's former detractors repented and his work enjoyed increasing acceptance at home.

#### A flood of recognition

Mexico first recognized Tamayo's work in 1948 with a twenty-year Retrospective Exhibit at the Palace of Fine Arts.



Rufino Tamayo, Bird Hunter, 1950-51.

repeat itself." A long controversy, known as the "Tamayo polemic" ensued, each side supported by different intellectuals.

Twenty seven years later, Tamayo would say, "I consider Diego, Siqueiros and Orozco's work important. Before the revolutionary movement, Mexico's art was colonial. We could say we were under the influence of Paris. At that time, it was necessary and healthy for us, in support of our nationalism. However, they chose to be a bit too radical."

By 1960 Tamayo acknowledged his admiration for a new generation of Mexican painters (Pedro Coronel, Gironella, Felguérez and Lilia Carrillo) which had finally broken away from the old notion of a single school of Mexican painting. "A liberation movement has sprung up." In this

The Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris gave Tamayo a one man show in 1950. He returned to Mexico the following year, after living in Europe for almost two years, and said: "My stay in Europe did nothing more than reaffirm the Mexican nature of my work."

In 1954 Mexico mounted a large Tamayo exhibit officially recognizing the artist in honor of his receiving the International Prize from the Sao Paolo Biannual. The French government decorated Tamayo with the *Legion of Honor* three years later. The Palace of Fine Arts' exhibit honored "Fifty Years of Rufino Tamayo's Art" at the end of 1967. The following year, the *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale di Arte di Venezia* in Italy honored Tamayo with a special exhibit of 47 oils painted from 1955 to 1968.

Tamayo was showered with prizes, awards, honors and retrospective exhibits. The Italians decorated him in 1970; the French made him a *Commandeur des Arts et Lettres*. Oaxaca declared him "Favorite Son" in 1972 and Los Angeles honored him with a film, narrated by John Houston with music by Carlos Chávez and a presentation by Octavio Paz. Emily Genauer was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her book on Rufino Tamayo, a first for an art critic.

Tamayo did not accept honors indiscriminately. In 1980 he refused the *Order of the Quetzal* awarded by the Government of Guatemala in protest against all dictatorial governments and as an act of solidarity with oppressed peoples.

Tamayo's success was also reflected by the prices his work brought at auctions. *Indian Woman* brought a record price of forty-seven thousand five hundred dollars at Sotheby's in 1978. *Boy with Watermelons* broke the record price for Latin American work in 1981, and



Rufino Tamayo, Total Eclipse, 1946.

*The Smile* sold for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars at Sotheby's, another record for Latin American art. By 1985 the figure rose to three



Rufino Tamayo, Eclipse, 1959.

hundred and thirty thousand at Sotheby's and last year *Women Singing* brought seven hundred and seventy thousand dollars at the Marlborough Gallery in New York.

Olga and Rufino Tamayo, a childless couple, have been generous with the people of Mexico. They donated their collection of more than one thousand pieces of Pre-Columbian art to the Museum of Pre-Columbian Art in Oaxaca. The Museum of Contemporary International Art that bears Rufino Tamayo's name, in Chapultepec Park in Mexico City, houses a large part of Tamayo's art collection including the work of artists such as Pablo Picasso. Tamayo built and funded the Olga Tamayo Home in the city of Cuernavaca and this year the city of Oaxaca received a Home

for the Aged named after and given by the Tamayos.

#### Patience and solitude

Rufino Tamayo built museums, donated a good part of his personal collection, built homes for the aged and promoted works that would benefit those who were most needy. At the age of eighty-eight, he considered himself a successful and fortunate artist, "I am lucky to be

able to share my economic wealth with my people."

At this time, he also said, "I am thankful for aloneness, since it is my best companion for creating. A few days ago I realized that I was old and that is why I don't want to travel as much, or receive so many homages. They only waste my time. What I want to do is paint; it is my personal mission. Life is, unfortunately, too short and very little can be done."

There is still work that we have not seen. Juan Carlos, King of Spain, has commissioned an art book with original lithographs and drawings by ten artists, among them Tamayo, as a gift for every Head of a Free State for the Quincentennial. Tamayo's work for the book is on the theme of the Declaration of Human Rights approved by the United Nations in 1949.

A month before his death, Tamayo was honored with a nomination to *El Colegio Nacional*. The following is taken from his speech, which might be considered his last public words: "I believe in craft, in the patient cultivation of a technique, but I also believe that art is a form of happiness, an instrument in life and a daily



Rufino Tamayo, Singing Man, 1950.

activity such as walking or eating. It takes place in freedom since it is a way of knowing, understanding. The universal aspiration and its unlimited ability to communicate and relate to everything human is confirmed today with this ceremony that welcomes me as part of the highest community of knowledge in Mexico "M

Marybel Toro Gayol

Managing Editor.