

# Surrealism and Mexico

A major art exhibit provokes a remembrance of how this school of art came to be associated with the fantasy of the Mexican people.

*Mexico's powerful reality has often touched a sensitive spot in the soul of European artists. Since the surrealist program is one of beauty, eroticism, black humour and sensuality, it is no surprise that it should find itself at home in a country where the transition between reality and fantasy is an every day occurrence. But what nowadays seem a natural convergence had a great deal of difficulty getting off the ground in the late 1930s. Art critic Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, who put together this exhibit, explains why this was so.*

The exhibit "Surrealists in Mexico" opened last August at the National Museum with paintings by the first European surrealists in Mexico. Starting with Antonin Artaud, it comprises the latest

young painters of this school, and includes the work of Mexican artists not orthodoxly aligned with surrealism but who do respond to what that school of painting sought for in our country: the fantasy of the Mexican people. Although lacking formal links to the French school of painting, these artists were inspired by Mexico's myths and spontaneity, its magic and traditions.

When French Poet André Breton, founder of the surrealist movement, came to Mexico in 1938, the press published a long interview on his impressions. "I dreamt of Mexico—said Breton—and I find myself here... Never before have I felt how reality so splendidly fulfills the promises of dreams."

Breton went on to list the outstanding and unusual that he found in Mexico. "...its ever-active mythical past, the marvelous social melting-pot expressed in the exemplary attitude of its foreign policy in recent years (a reference to President Lázaro Cárdenas' policy toward the Spanish Civil War), and something more intimate, the unique way in which a keen sensitivity shows through in their expressions of black humour, which is very dear to me... Mexico tends to be the utmost surrealist place... I find the surreal Mexico in its highlights, in its flora, in the energy that stems from its mixture of races and from its highest aspirations."



Photo by INBA/SEP

André Breton, Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky in Mexico.

From Mexico's political, social and mythical atmosphere, from its fantasy and folklore, the French poet no doubt singled out characteristics which apparently linked our way of life to surrealist principles. His enthusiasm was all the greater because at the time he visited our country the surrealist movement tended toward the revolutionary left and its projects. Mexico under Cárdenas seemed to be enacting some of the aspirations and petitions that European surrealists included in their Manifesto of 1924.

Fourteen years separated the Breton of the First Surrealist Manifesto from the poet who came to Mexico in 1938, years during which not only the man but surrealism itself changed. Breton arrived shrouded in the fame of controversy, enlightenment and sectarianism, cloaked in the image of the intolerant prophet-inquisitor. He was no longer supported by the friends who originally set out with him on the adventurous attempt to save mankind. Most of them had fallen by the wayside under the pressure of his lashing tongue and of the public indictments meted out by Breton's intolerance toward the contradictions that he exalted in theory. This is why throughout his life the poet was forced to seek out new and increasingly younger followers. We can even understand how the artist's conceit led him to publicly remark on the Mexican press' failure to give adequate coverage to his lectures, since he was explaining none other than the program that art should follow in this atmosphere so potentially akin to surrealism.

When the International Surrealist Exhibit opened at the Mexican Art Gallery in January, 1940 it received the same luke-warm welcome Breton had been given two years before. The show

was organized by a young star of the European movement, the Austrian Wolfgang Paalen, and by Peruvian Poet César Moro. It included works by Dalí, Magritte, Picasso, Masson, Delveaux, Tanguy and other Europeans, along with the paintings of Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera, Guillermo Meza, Agustín Lazo, Frida Kahlo and Remedios Varo. Prehispanic art objects and other so-called works of "savage art" were included along with photographs. The exhibit was mounted conventionally instead of with the excentric flourishes surrealists were notorious for.

Mexican painter Manuel Rodríguez Lozano wrote at the time: "It's naive to bring surrealism to the homeland of marijuana. You don't paint when you're high, you paint when you're lucid, and that's when the reality of the Mexican people is portrayed."

The works of two women painters, Remedios Varo and Frida Kahlo, were included in this now famous 1940 exhibit. Perhaps an analysis of their painting can help explain why the surrealist's program had such a scant following in Mexico and was really only taken up by foreign-born artists, as was the case of Remedios Varo.

This artist came to Mexico from Cataluña in 1942, although one of her works, *Memory of The Valkyrie*, preceded her and was exhibited in 1938. When Remedios Varo came to America she was a fully developed artist with a solid and knowledgeable mastery of her craft. She was firmly rooted in the surrealist school after having lived in Paris with Poet Benjamin Peret, who came with her, and partaking in the close circle of Breton's followers: Paul Eluard, Ives