

G U I L L E R M O G Ó

A VIRTUOSO OF LANDSCAPING



View of the Volcanoes from Puebla, 40 x 120 cm (oil on canvas).

HIS LIFE

Guillermo Gómez Mayorga is one of those figures who, despite the simplicity of the way he worked, is considered as a virtuoso of Mexican art because of the qual-

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Photos by Carlos Contreras and Ramón Outón. All paintings are from a private collection.

ity of his painting. He was born in the city of Puebla, the capital of the state of the same name, February 10, 1887. The unfortunate dearth of archival information about this great painter makes it impossible to know how his life unfolded and how he carried out his trade. His family descend-

ed from Martín de Mayorga, viceroy of New Spain between 1779 and 1783. Gómez Mayorga, however, never boasted about that; if the topic was not mentioned, he never brought it up.

Reputedly an excellent student at the academy of his native city, he was awarded

M E Z M A Y O R G A

Lupina Lara de Elizondo*

Photos reprinted courtesy Lupina Lara



a scholarship to study in Europe by President Francisco I. Madero. The tumultuous events of the Revolution, beginning with the president's assassination, however, made it impossible for him to go immediately.

It was at that time, exactly in the year 1910, that the Puebla home of Aquiles

Serdán¹ was taken by assault and its owner killed. The young Gómez Mayorga did a painting on the topic, with Serdán lying on a stretcher. Today, this painting hangs in the Serdán home, now a museum. It won him a scholarship to study in the San Carlos Academy in Mexico City, where

he was an outstanding student esteemed by his teachers, among them, Saturnino Herrán, Félix Parra, Mateo Saldaña and Germán Gedovius. At that time the academy's director was Alfredo Ramos Martínez, from Monterrey, recently returned from Europe. In his book, *Guillermo*



Xochimilco, 33 x 44 cm (oil on canvas).

Gómez Mayorga,² Hugo Cervantes says that Ramos Martínez wrote a letter of introduction to Leopoldo Kiel, general director of primary schools, praising his student in the hope that he be given a post as teacher. "I have the pleasure of introducing and tendering my very special recommendation for Guillermo Gómez Mayorga, a very good student of this academy." Teaching was one way that painters were able to make a living. The letter continued, "You may assign him a drawing class with the complete assurance that he will execute it admirably."

Records tell us that when the armed movement had subsided, Gómez Mayorga was able to travel to Europe to perfect his knowledge. We know that he studied in France and Italy, specializing in

landscapes. Most of his paintings were done at special times, when the coloring the sun gave to nature brought out the most in its beauty. Very few painters were as able as he in rendering so faithfully the wonderful spectacle of dawn and twilight.

Those who had the opportunity of meeting and sharing with him remember him with affection as a dreamer, somewhat like a Don Quixote, of great human worth; despite his repeatedly precarious economic straits, he was always willing to aid anyone who asked for help. He had an exceptional imagination which he expressed inventing stories and fables to entertain his children and sometimes his friends for hours on end as they paid rapt attention. At one time the rumor circulated that Gómez Mayorga painted his

seascapes without ever having seen the sea. His relatives, who cite the long periods he spent in Acapulco, being inspired and working on innumerable paintings, have roundly denied the allegation.

After 60 years of artistic endeavor, this artist of incalculable worth to our nation died in 1962. Like few others, he loved his art and devoted himself to it with the only aim of leaving his best possible interpretation behind him.

HIS WORK

The artists of the colonial period painted landscapes as settings for religious scenes, and it was not until the nineteenth century that a whole new panorama opened



Laudresses of Puebla, 50 x 70 cm (oil on canvas).

up for this wonderful genre. The romantics gave nature a special place, and through them landscapes made their way forward in our painting. Initially these motifs were interpreted with rigorous realism, little by little allowing different representations to emerge. Here, we must mention the influence traveling painters had on the development of landscape art in Mexico: they traveled the country painting its valleys, mountains, canyons and riverbanks to try to capture its wonders. We must remember that independence opened the way to our territory, which had been the exclusive domain of the Spaniards for more than 400 years. Among the artists who visited the Americas were Thomas Egerton of Great Britain, the Germans Auguste Löhner and Johann

Maurice Rugendas, the Italian Claudio Linati and Friedrich Waldeck from the city of Prague, among others. (The Soumaya Museum, in Mexico City, has a very complete collection of their work.)

José María Velasco was one of the inheritors of this artistic legacy, when he studied under the Italian teacher Eugenio Landesio. His wonderful paintings show that he surpassed his teacher and it took no time at all for him to become part of the teaching staff at the San Carlos Academy. There, he trained a generation of extraordinary painters who loved landscapes, like Cleofas Almanza, Carlos Riera, Francisco de Paula Mendoza, Dolores Soto and Mercedes Zamora. Germán Gedovius, later the teacher of Gómez Mayorga, also attended his classes.

In his book *Arte moderno y contemporáneo de México* (The Modern and Contemporary Art of Mexico),³ Justino Fernández was quite right in saying, “Gedovius represents the last attempt to bring the formalism of the past into the present.” We could say the same of his student, the young Gómez Mayorga, who worked in a period in which modernity and the avant garde had taken over his contemporaries while he always upheld the classicism of the old masters.

Like his colleague Armando García Núñez, Guillermo Gómez Mayorga was one of the Mexican landscape artists who with singular beauty painted Mexico’s volcanoes. His paintings were done from nature; he used to go out into the country carrying his materials in search of the



View of Popocatepetl from Cholula, 62.5 x 90 cm (oil on canvas).

perfect place. He sketched lines, prepared the backgrounds and patiently waited for the exact time of day when the colors were contrasting, that moment when well defined shadows appear and the setting sun creates a spectacular scene. It is at that instant in which the light plays with golden tones, coppers and oranges; the clouds and the skies are cast in violet and the mountains darken from intense greens to purples. He knew how to capture the voices of nature with the chromatic lyricism of his palette, invading our senses and unleashing our emotions. This is the case of the three-panel mural *View of the Valley of Mexico with Volcanoes*, considered one of his masterpieces because of its monumental size and splendid execution.

What can we say about *View of the Volcanoes from Puebla*, painted when the sun has completely set and only a few shafts of its light are left? It is a piece you want to continue looking at because, without us noticing, it wraps us in its space. The only thing breaking the quiet of the moment is the humble peasant driving away the cold before the flames of his fire. The same series of paintings includes *Popocatepetl*, a view of the volcano from Xochimilco. The canals seem full of lilies; the white snows cover the mountain tops; the clouds have mixed in with lilacs and oranges; and the darkness begins to cover the pines, the eucalyptus and the meadows.

Later, Gómez Mayorga painted *Popocatepetl Seen from Cholula*, in which the

sentinel watching over our valley seems to be doing honor to his name, spouting columns of smoke. This piece is noteworthy for its transparency, like that of Velasco's paintings, in which the air itself has been painted. The light snow on the sides of the mountain and the clean color of the sky make us think it is one of those February days when the wind has blown hard.

Usually, Gómez Mayorga signed his paintings, but he did not always write in the date, and the only indication of the period is the style, the kind of canvas and the changes in topic. In his paintings *Xochimilco* and *Laundresses of Puebla*, the way figures are represented and the polished brush work lead us to think they are early pieces.

He was an extraordinary painter of seascapes, a very difficult genre; inexperi-



Rocks and Sea of Nayarit, 39 x 49.5 cm (oil on canvas).

enced artists fall into using speckled colors, making the scenes look artificial. This was not Gómez Mayorga's case, however; his work showed both a domination of his technique and mature sensibility. Here we comment on three seascapes of extraordinary quality: *The Sailboats*, *Beaches of Veracruz with Palm Trees* and *Rocks and Sea of Nayarit*. The first is one of his early works, in which we can observe a marked influence of European painting. The treatment of space and light are part of the craft of an outstanding artist, which Gómez Mayorga undoubtedly was. *Beaches of Veracruz with Palm Trees* clearly shows his artistic security, since such an austere theme offers a great many challenges, which he resolved with mastery, giving the painting a spectacular naturalism. The

third seascape, *Rocks and Sea of Nayarit*, depicts a marina at sunset when the sea seems to be rough, breaking with fury on the craggy rocks colored orange by the afternoon sun. Recently another painting on the same theme, done on a very large canvas, was sold; both pieces are worthy of a museum. The majority of his seascapes are equal in quality and beauty to those of his predecessor, Joaquín Clausell,⁴ from the state of Campeche, who would have enjoyed sharing with Gómez Mayorga the visual feeling of the surrounding seas.

Gómez Mayorga also painted flowers as did many other artists of his period like Saturnino Herrán, Alfredo Ramos Martínez and Ignacio Rosas. These works are few, but of singular beauty. One example is a jug of Talavera pottery from Pue-

bla, with a dark background in which we find details from European painting mixed with very Mexican ingredients.

We remember Guillermo Gómez Mayorga with great affection and satisfaction, for his talent, his dedication and his love for his work and everyone around him. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Aquiles, Máximo and Carmen Serdán were among the first to support Madero's anti-reelectionist campaign against Porfirio Díaz. They decided to organize an armed insurrection when they heard that Madero had been taken prisoner, but they were betrayed, their house attacked, the two brothers killed and Carmen arrested. [Editor's Note.]

² Hugo Cervantes, *Guillermo Gómez Mayorga* (Mexico City: Fernández Cueto Editores, 1998), p. 33.

³ Justino Fernández, *Arte moderno y contemporáneo de México* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1959).

⁴ About Clausell, see *Voices of Mexico* no. 40, pp. 39-44. [Editor's Note.]