

Rufino Tamayo *Contemporary Art Museum* **A Window Inside a Forest**

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◀ *Two Women*, 182.5 x 132 cm, 1981 (oil on canvas). Rufino Tamayo Contemporary Art Museum-INBA-Conaculta Collection. © D.R. Rufino Tamayo/Herederos/México/2015/Fundación Olga y Rufino Tamayo, A.C.



In art, there are no legacies. There are discoveries, conquests, affinities, abductions: re-creations that are really creations.

Octavio Paz¹

Perhaps for some inhabitants of this planet, a forest is not the most common place for an art venue. But, in the Chapultepec Forest, the Rufino Tamayo Contemporary Art Museum co-exists with spaces that symbolize certain moments and yearnings in the history of Mexico, like the National Museum of Anthropology and History, the Chapultepec Castle, or the Modern Art Museum. So, the yearning for the Tamayo Museum originated with the artist who gave it its name: Rufino Tamayo.

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Photos courtesy of the Rufino Tamayo Contemporary Art Museum.

Born of indigenous parents on August 26, 1899 in the city of Oaxaca, Rufino Tamayo created his own style far removed from Mexican muralism and the nationalism that dominated his time. In 1911, he moved to Mexico City, where he began his studies at the National School of Visual Arts. Always open to what was going on in other parts of the world, in the 1940s, he went to New York, where he lived for almost 20 years, and in 1949, he had several exhibitions in Europe. In 1964, he returned to Mexico with his wife Olga, where he would continue painting until his death in 1991.² In one of his essays about Tamayo, Octavio Paz writes,

The modern aesthetic opened his eyes and made him see the modernity of pre-Hispanic sculpture. Later, with the violence and simplicity of every creator, he took over those forms and transformed them. Using them as a basis, he painted new and original forms. Certainly, folk art had already nourished his imagination, preparing it to accept and assimilate that of ancient Mexico. However, without the modern aesthetic, that initial impetus would have dissipated or degenerated into mere folklore and decoration. If we think about the two poles that define

Tamayo's painting, visual rigor and the imagination that transfigures the object, we immediately note that his encounter with pre-Colombian art was a true conjunction.³

It was precisely that conjunction motivated by the impetus to open himself up to different international artistic forms of expression that guided Tamayo's artistic production and thinking, that made him international and at the same time a representative of Mexico in the world. At the end of the 1960s, his interest in international contemporary art led him to begin a collection of twentieth-century works. For Tamayo it was fundamental that Mexico look outward and be enriched by other aesthetic experiences, which is why he donated his collection and decided to promote the creation of a museum to hold it. Its construction was headed by architects Teodoro González de León and Abraham Zabludowsky. In his speech at its inauguration, Tamayo said,

The collection of international contemporary art that from today on will be permanently housed in this museum . . . is a donation that my wife and I make with enormous affection to the





▲ *Watermelons*, 130 x 195 cm, 1968 (oil on canvas). Rufino Tamayo Contemporary Art Museum-INBA-Conaculta Collection. © D.R. Rufino Tamayo/Herederos/México/2015/Fundación Olga y Rufino Tamayo, A.C.

country, in the firm conviction that it is going to substantially enrich its cultural wealth and at the same time open it up to new horizons.

We believe very sincerely that Mexico is already winning a place of certain significance in the international order and, as a result, we think it is time that in the field of culture it definitively break through that stultifying nationalist fence that has impeded it until now from frank and open communication with the rest of the countries of the world, sharing with them our fortunate experiences, but also recognizing the value of their own, using them without prejudice for our own benefit.⁴

Inaugurated in 1981, the Rufino Tamayo Museum discretely harmonizes with its surroundings. Its shapes and volumes, made of reinforced concrete and white marble, seem to burst out of the forest; and, although it is only 150 meters from Reforma Boulevard, one of the city's most important thoroughfares, visitors do not really see it until they are in its welcoming esplanade. Despite being so close to the city's traffic and hustle and bustle, the space around it manages to establish a distance and create a tranquil atmosphere thanks to the vegetation, the forest's huge trees, and the fountains that the passers-by find in their path on the way to the museum. Its pyramid shape, with its grass-covered slopes, echoes pre-

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Hispanic buildings and at the same time is one of the emblems of contemporary architecture in Mexico.

Just like in Tamayo's work, this museum is a sample of the integration of tradition and modernity, of the specific and the universal, since the architects visited museums of distant countries as part of their research to create a space that would meet the needs of contemporary art. A place situated in one of the city's most important green areas where visitors peek in, curious, to find other interpretations and ways of conceiving art.

Once inside, the natural light that flows in through the skylights uncovers the venue's central patio from where the rooms fan out. Ramps and stairways lead to them to begin the visit. At certain moments during the visit, you come across windows that look out onto the forest, an opportunity for pausing, perhaps to meditate about the exhibition or to sit and leaf through one of the books placed on a table before

a huge window. The views to the outside make us turn our eyes to the place where we're situated.

The Tamayo Museum fulfills its job of disseminating the expressions of international contemporary art by exhibiting work by outstanding artists from different parts of the world. It recently hosted the exhibition "Infinite Obsession," made up of work by the celebrated Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, which sparked great interest among Mexico City residents, particularly young people. So many visitors came that the museum decided to open its doors in the evenings and until the wee hours. The wooded surroundings even favored people camping out, as though waiting for a rock concert. This exhibit was followed by "Story of a Negotiation," by Belgian-Mexican artist Francis Alÿs, who, through his work, paintings, and videos reflects on political, social, and cultural problems in different parts of the world.

In addition to traveling exhibits, the museum offers exhibitions of the permanent collection donated by Rufino Tamayo, like the one that accompanied Alÿs's, entitled "Superpositions: Latin American Art in Mexican Collections." That show is part of a program that invites curators to explore the museum's collection of more than 300 works emphasizing the painting and sculpture of Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Asia, from 1945 to 1975. Some of the artists included are Armando Morales, Rogelio Polesello, Roberto Matta, Julio Le Parc, and Jesús Soto. The exhibition offers the opportunity to find these Latin American artists' links to international expressions of art.

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Finally, the Rufino Tamayo Painting Biennial was created to foster artistic production today, supported by the Olga and Rufino Tamayo Foundation. The seventeenth biennial will be held in 2016.

Although your visit is about to end, the museum still offers certain surprises, such as the "modular," a space dedicated to the consultation of books about contemporary art and its representatives and about Rufino Tamayo himself. A kind of library made up of blocks of wood used for sitting to read. This place is part of the museum's expansion, directed by architect Teodoro González de León from August 2011 to August 2012. Closed to the public in that period, the work added new exhibition rooms, a documentation area, a cafeteria with a terrace, expanded office space, the store, and the bookstore, increasing its total area from 4 798 square meters to 6 846 square meters, but retaining its character and form, ensuring that the new spaces harmonize with the originals.⁵

The museum's rooms unveil the world seen by the artists who inhabit it, transform it, imagine it. Before leaving, I look toward the vestibule where, tucked away, is a work by Tamayo, "Homage to the Indian Race" (1952). The explanatory plaque reads,





Its pyramid shape, with its grass-covered slopes, echoes pre-Hispanic buildings and at the same time is one of the emblems of contemporary architecture in Mexico.

The matriarchal figure rises up imposingly, its form and color reminiscent of the black clay figurines produced in Oaxaca. It is a simple scene: a woman of the people seen by Tamayo in some market in Oaxaca, whom he elevates, turning her into the essence of the indigenous. The simple transformed into the complex; the ancestral, renewed, becomes a modern allegory of what is profoundly Mexican.

Rufino Tamayo wanted a venue for Mexicans where they could approach and become familiar with international contemporary art. He himself was international without stopping being Mexican, since he knew how to look at the work of other artists and find in modernity, in the vision of his contemporaries, the connection with the indigenous past and present, with Mexican culture. The Rufino Tamayo Contemporary Art Museum is the legacy of an artist who yearned for Mexico to have a window on the world that would enrich the production and study of art. A space through which it could discover not only the differences, but the commonalities

among national and international artists. A window in a forest surrounded by history, where you can look at the contemporary other and, in the reflection, look at yourself. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Octavio Paz, "Tres ensayos sobre Rufino Tamayo," *Los privilegios de la vista II* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995), pp. 281-286, ICAA Record ID: 1126421, accessed July 8, 2015.

² Juan Carlos Pereda, "Semblanza y cronología. Rufino Tamayo," <http://www.rufinotamayo.org.mx/wp/tamayo/semblanza-y-cronologia/>, accessed July 8, 2015.

³ Octavio Paz, op. cit.

⁴ The author found this text of Tamayo's inaugural speech in a book, open and on display under glass at the museum.

⁵ "El nuevo Tamayo," August 20, 2012, <http://www.arquine.com/el-nuevo-tamayo/>, accessed July 7, 2015.

RUFINO TAMAYO MUSEUM

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Open to the public: **Tuesday to Sunday**
10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
<http://museotamayo.org>