

RUFINO TAMAYO

OCTAVIO PAZ / JACQUES LASSAIGNE



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Texts by
OCTAVIO PAZ
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Translated by: KENNETH LYONS
Translation advisor: RICHARD REES

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Ward

Publisher's Note

A universal creator and yet, at the same time, genuinely Mexican, Rufino Tamayo was not only blessed with immense artistic talent but also possessed a humanist vocation patent both in the subject matter of his oeuvre and in his activities as a collector, a major legacy of which is the Museum of International Contemporary Art which bears his name and which, at the express wish of the master, since 1986 forms part of the national system of museums of the Mexican Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Until his death in 1991 Rufino Tamayo, an indefatigable experimenter and innovator, remained faithful to his aesthetic ideals which now constitute a major point of reference in Mexican art; by virtue of its variety and extent, his work is the synthesis of a natural and cultural reality in which the younger generations of artists should see the path towards a genuinely autochthonous and original form of expression.

Four years after the death of Rufino Tamayo and shortly after that of his wife, Olga, Ediciones Polígrafa, who in 1982 published a valuable monograph on the artist's work with texts by Octavio Paz and Jacques Lassaigue, has decided to produce a new edition of the book, updated and enriched with reproductions of the last period in the life of the artist.

Barcelona, November 1995

Tamayo: Geometry and transfiguration

1

There are many ways of approaching a painting: in a straight line where one stands before it and contemplates it face to face, as it were, in an attitude of interrogation, defiance or admiration; obliquely, like somebody exchanging a look of secret understanding with a passer-by; in zigzag fashion, advancing and retreating with strategic movements that recall either those of chessmen or military manoeuvres; measuring and feeling with the eyes, as a greedy guest will eye the fare on a table spread for dinner; or circling round in spirals, like a sparrow hawk before it swoops or a plane waiting to land. The frank way, the conniving way, the reflective way, the hunter's way, the way of the magnetized gaze... For over twenty years now I have been circling round the painting of Rufino Tamayo. I first tried to formulate my impressions in an essay that endeavoured to place him in his most immediate context: modern Mexican painting. Later I wrote a poem, and after that an article of art criticism properly so called: "Tamayo in his painting, his vision of space, the relationship between colour and line, geometry and feeling, volumes and empty surfaces." And now, more cautiously, I am writing these notes: not so much a summing-up as a fresh start.

How can I define my attitude to Tamayo's work? It is a thing of gyration and gravitation; it attracts me and at the same time keeps me at a distance, like a sun. I might also say that it generates a sort of visual appetite: I see his painting as if it were a fruit, incandescent and untouchable. But there is another, more exact word: *fascination*. The picture is there in front of me, hanging on a wall. I look at it and little by little, in slow but inexorable stages, it becomes an opening fan of sensations, a vibration of colours and shapes in an ever-widening series of ripples: a space that is alive, a space that is happy to be space. Later, and just as slowly as before, the colours are furled up again and the picture closes in on itself. There is nothing intellectual about this experience. I am simply describing the act of seeing and the strange though natural fascination that seizes us as we contemplate the daily opening and closing of flowers, fruit, women, the day on the night. Nothing could be further from metaphysical or speculative art than Tamayo's painting. When we look at his pictures we are not witnessing the revelation of a secret; we are sharing in the secret that all revelation amounts to.

2

I have said that Tamayo's painting is not speculative, but perhaps I should have said that it is not ideological. In that essay I wrote in 1950 I pointed out that Tamayo's *historical* importance within the context of Mexican painting consisted in his having called in question, with his exemplary radicalism, the ideological and didactic art of the muralists and their followers. It should be added that Tamayo's true originality — I mean his

originality as a painter — does not lie in his critical attitude to the confusion between painting and political literature in which Mexican artists were floundering in those days, but in his critical attitude to objects. In this sense we would be justified in speaking of speculative painting. For it is painting that subjects its object to an inquisition regarding its plastic properties and is an investigation of the relationships between colours, lines and volumes. It is critical painting: the reduction of the object to its essential plastic elements. The object is seen, not as an idea or a representation but as a field of magnetic forces. Each picture is a system of lines and colours rather than a system of signs. The picture may refer to this or that reality, but its plastic meaning is independent.

In Tamayo's first period we find many still lifes, the *Music* mural, the *Homage to Juárez* and other compositions that show a certain affinity, inevitable and natural, with the work of other Mexican artists of that time. But soon he was to give up this style for ever and embark on a very different adventure. Between 1926 and 1938 he painted a great many oils and gouaches, still lifes and landscapes: arches, cubes and terraces that place him, as García Ponce has pointed out, in the line of Cézanne. By going a little further along this road he was to come to Braque. It was not cubist painting but one of the consequences of that movement, one of the roads opened up to art after Cubism. In other canvases of those years we find a freer, more lyrical inspiration that might be described as the exaltation of everyday life through colour, sensuousness rather than eroticism: Matisse. In Tamayo, of course, there is an exasperation and ferocity that we do not find in the work of the great French painter. Other elements in those pictures — and other pictures painted around the same time — brought him close to that other great centre of irradiation, Picasso. Here, however, the lesson he learned was not one of meticulousness or sensuous balance but of passionate violence, humour and rage, the revelations of dreams and of eroticism. Not painting as an investigation of the object or as a plastic construction, but painting as an operation that ravaged reality and at the same time was its metamorphosis. At the end of this period Tamayo began to paint a series of violent canvases, sometimes sombre and sometimes exuberantly excited, but always intense and highly concentrated: dogs baying at the moon, birds, horses, lions, lovers in the night, women bathing or dancing, lonely figures gazing up into an enigmatic firmament. Nothing theatrical or dramatic: never was delirium more lucid or more self-controlled. A tragic gaiety. It was in those years that Tamayo discovered the metaphorical powers of colour and form, the gift of language that is painting. The picture became the plastic counterpart of the poetic image. It was not the translation into plastic terms of a verbal poem — a device favoured by several of the Surrealists — but a metaphor already in plastic form, something closer to Miro than to Max Ernst. And so, by a continuous process of assimilation and change, Tamayo turned his painting into an art

of transfiguration: that power of the imagination that makes a sun out of a mamey fruit, a half-moon out of a guitar, a stretch of wild countryside out of a woman's body.

I think that the names I have mentioned form a constellation that helps us to situate rather than determine Tamayo's endeavours in the early stages of his career. Which leads me to recall that in the formative period of the Spanish language the word *sino* (fate), which could also be a variant of *signo* (sign), literally meant "constellation". Fate-sign-constellation: Tamayo's fate, and at the same time his signs, as he began his exploration of the world of painting and of that other, more secret world that was his own being, as a man and as a painter. Points of departure for a journey towards himself.

3

Defining an artist by his antecedents is as vain a task as attempting to describe a mature man by the identifying marks of his parents, grandparents or aunts and uncles. The works of other artists — all that comes before, after or simultaneously — can situate the work of an individual, but they cannot define it. Each man's *oeuvre* is a self-sufficient whole that begins and ends in itself. The style of a period is a syntax, a corpus of conscious and unconscious rules with which the artist can say everything that may occur to him, except commonplaces. What counts is not the regularity with which the syntax operates, but the variations: the violations, deviations, exceptions — everything, in short, that makes the work unique. From the very beginning Tamayo's painting has been distinguished from that of all other artists by the predominance of certain elements and the singular way in which he combines them. I will first endeavour to describe these, albeit in a very general way, and then I will try to show how the combination of these elements is equivalent to the transformation of an impersonal, historical syntax into an inimitable language.

Tamayo judges his own work severely and has imposed a strict limitation on himself: painting is, first and foremost, a visual phenomenon. The theme is a mere pretext; what the painter proposes is to set the paint free: it is the forms that speak, not the artist's intentions or ideas. It is the form that emits meanings. Within this aesthetic, which is that of our age, Tamayo's attitude is characterized by its refusal to yield to the easy temptations of literary fantasy. This is not because he regards painting as anti-literary — something it has never been and could never be — but because he insists that the language of painting — its handwriting and its literature — is not verbal but plastic. The ideas and myths, the imaginary passions and figures, the forms we see and those we dream, are realities that the painter must find *within* the painting; something that must spring from the picture, not something inserted in that picture by the artist. Hence

Tamayo's urge to achieve pictorial purity: the canvas on the wall is a two-dimensional surface, closed to the world of words and open to its own reality. Painting is an original language, and one just as rich as music or literature. You can say everything you want to in painting — in painting's own language. Tamayo, of course, would not formulate his proposals in this way. Even in enouncing them thus summarily and verbally, I am afraid of betraying him: his practice of his art is not orthodoxy but orthopraxis.

These preoccupations have led him to a slow, continuous, tenacious pictorial experimentation, an investigation of the secret of textures, colours and their vibrations, the weight and density of materials and impastos, the laws — and their exceptions — governing the relationships between light and shade, tactile values and volume, line and mass. A passion for what is material, painting that is materialistic in the true sense of the word. Imperceptibly guided by the logic of his investigation, Tamayo passed from a criticism of the object to a criticism of painting itself. An explanation of colour: "as the number of colours we use decreases," he once said to Paul Westheim, "the wealth of possibilities increases. From the pictorial point of view, it is more worthwhile to exhaust the possibilities of a single colour than to use an unlimited variety of pigments." Time and again we have been told that Tamayo is a great colourist; but it should be added that this richness of colour is the result of sobriety. For Baudelaire colour was harmony, an antagonistic and complementary relationship between a hot colour and a cold one. Tamayo takes this quest to extremes, creating harmony within a single colour. In this way he produces a vibration of light in which the resonances, though less far-reaching, are more intense: the furthest point, so taut as to be almost immobile, of a note or tone. Thus limitation becomes abundance, giving us blue and green universes in a pinch of pollen, suns and reddening earths in an atom of yellow, dispersions and conjunctions of hot and cold in an ochre, sharp-painted castles of grey, precipices of white, gulfs of violet. But there is nothing gaudy about this abundance. Tamayo's palette is pure; he loves plain colours and, with a kind of instinctive healthiness, shuns any sort of dubious refinement. Delicacy and vitality, sensuousness and energy. If colour is music, there are some pieces by Tamayo that make me think of Bartók, just as the music of Anton von Webern reminds me of Kandinsky.

The same severity characterizes his handling of line and volume. Tamayo draws like a sculptor, and it is a pity that he has given us only a few sculptures. His drawing is that of a sculptor in the vigour and economy of the line, but above all in its essentiality: it indicates the points of convergence, the lines of force that control an anatomy or a form. It is synthetic drawing, with no hint of calligraphy: the true skeleton of painting. Full, compact volumes, living monuments. For the monumental character of a work has nothing