

## MODERN MEXICAN PAINTING

Neal Finer

The following lesson applies the key ideas approach to contemporary Mexican culture, in this case "Modern Mexican Painting." The lesson is designed to serve as a model for teachers to develop further lessons on Latin American culture in general and Mexico in particular. It emphasizes the use of multimedia methodology and has been tested by in-service and preservice teachers in both monolingual and bilingual classroom settings in art, Spanish, ESL, and social studies. Judging from student attitude inventories, the lesson contributes to developing cultural awareness, both cognitive and effective.

### Key Idea

Modern Mexican painting (1950s-76) increasingly reflects international modern art trends blended with underlying indigenous, national accents—producing a varied, sophisticated Mexican international style quite unlike the nationalistic muralism of the early modern period (1910-50s).

### Student Objectives

1. To perceive the variety and sophistication of modern Mexican painting (1950s-76), quite unlike the nationalistic muralism of the early modern period (1910-50s).
2. To become aware of the international art trends that increasingly are blended with underlying indigenous, national accents—producing a Mexican international style—through observation of paintings by leading Mexican artists.

Two books to help teachers with this lesson include

*Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change*, by Shifra M. Goldman. Austin,; University of Texas Press, 1981.

*Painted Walls of Mexico: From Prehistoric Times until Today*, by Emile Edwards. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966.

### Materials Checklist

1. Pictures of pop, op, abstract painting by Warhol,

Vasarely, and Pollock.

2. Wall Chart—posterboard with the tentative hypotheses written out.
3. Pictures of five paintings by leading Mexican artists: Tamayo, Cuevas, Niernan, Friedeberg, and Toledo.
4. Dittos: Handout A—Guide to Five Recent Mexican Paintings; Handout B—Highlights of Recent Trends in Latin American Visual Arts.
5. Pictures of ten additional samples of recent modern Mexican painting.
6. Tape recordings of quotes by Jorge Manrique and Rufino Tamayo.

### Activities

#### Introduction

Begin the lesson with the following questions:

Q: What do you think when you hear the terms "modern art"? "modern painting"? Ask whether students have seen examples of modern painting in their homes, in the school, or in an art museum? If so, ask them to describe the example they find most appealing to look at and tell why. Does it reflect a modern value, ideal, or cultural trend? Does it have an identifiable style, such as pop art, op art, abstract art? Ask whether students are familiar with these international art trends and refer to specific definitions of each (previously written on the blackboard).

Note the value, ideal, or cultural trend each reflects:

- a) Pop art—art reflecting popular commercial values of contemporary life.

b) Op art—art reflecting the optical, media-centered trend of modern culture.

c) Abstract art—art with little or no reference to objects in nature, often reflecting the modern search for pure, ideal elements of design.

Show pictures to illustrate these definitions, e.g. Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup can—pop art; Victor Vasarely's repetitive circle in a square design—op art; Jackson Pollock's poured paint expressions—abstract art. (Sources: Faulkner, *Art Today*, 386-479; Fearing, *Art and the Creative Teacher*. 245, cover.)

### Development

Now have students apply these considerations to Mexican art.

Q: What do you think when you hear the terms "modern Mexican art"? "modern Mexican painting"? Ask whether students have seen examples of recent modern Mexican painting (1950s-76) in books, media, museums, or in a firsthand visit to the country? If so, ask them to write a one-paragraph description of the type of painting(s) they recall, noting whether it reflected an identifiable style, value, ideal, cultural trend, or some unique element that gave it a distinctive accent. Follow with a brief directed discussion, pointing out that these descriptive paragraphs can be viewed as a tentative hypothesis on one aspect of recent Mexican painting worthy of testing for accuracy. Summarize the discussion by proposing a tentative hypothesis on the overall nature of recent Mexican painting that will be tested for accuracy. Refer to a wall chart (a posterboard on which the tentative hypothesis is written): *"Recent modern Mexican painting (1950s-76) increasingly reflects international modern art trends blended with underlying indigenous, national accents—producing a varied, sophisticated Mexican international style quite unlike the nationalistic muralism of the early modern period (1910-50s)."*

Proceed to an examination of evidence (visual and verbal) to prove or disprove the hypothesis.

Present a prerecorded tape quoting noted Mexican art critic Jorge Alberto Manrique, "Contemporary Mexican Art," *The Art Gallery: The International Magazine of Art and Culture* (October-November 1975), 83-159:

Mexico is not an island as far as recent modern painting production is concerned. Mexico does have characteristic features and an individual way of doing things. . . . Mexico participates in the contemporary art world... absorbing international trends but always accepting them by passing them through a filter of its own (national accents such as the emphasis on color and indigenous elements such as pre-Columbian design,

symbolism, local concerns, values, etc.).

It should be noted that although the nationalistic muralism continues to dazzle foreign observers and has some continuing government support . . . it is a dead letter in what might be called the informed world of Mexican art. The new and vigorous focus in Mexican painting stems from a rebellion by a few young painters in the mid 1950's who took issue with the smothering nationalism and limitations of muralism. This artistic rebellion appeared as a sudden stance for the freedom, depth, breadth of international art trends (and as a manifestation of the post World War II trend toward internationalization especially apparent in the economic programs initiated under President Miguel Alemán, 1946-52. (Source: Parkes, *A History of Mexico*, 428-30, 439-40). However, not until 1966 with the exhibition (Confrontación "66") at Mexico City's palace of Fine Arts did this new international movement receive official government acceptance and support as the new direction of Mexican painting. It was likewise the official death certificate to the previous domination by muralism. In view of the importance attached to this official sanction (stemming from the long historical tradition of patronage of the arts by the Spanish monarch and later the government), since 1966 the international directions of Mexican painting have been steadily increasing in variety, sophistication, and acceptance by widening sectors of the population.

Show five pictures (or opaque projections) of recent paintings by these leading (Mexican international) painters; Rufino Tamayo, José Luis Cuevas, Leonardo Nierman, Pedro Friedeberg, and Francisco Toledo (Sources: *Art Gallery*, 83-159; exhibition catalogs—for photos and texts—as noted in the source list).

Distribute Handout A for students to read through (an illustrated, detailed background guide to these five works). As students view each painting, ask them to look for evidence or lack of evidence for the following (written on the blackboard):

- a) International art trends—pop, op, abstract art, etc.
- b) Underlying indigenous, national accents—emphasis on color, pre-Columbian design, symbolism, local concerns, values, etc.

Through directed discussion, ask students to describe the blended Mexican-international style of each painting in light of the above two criteria.

Q: What (international or Mexican) value, ideal, or cultural trend does each work reflect? Does the painting appeal to you? Why?

Expand the focus on the variety and sophistication of the Mexican international style by showing ten addi-

tional pictures (or opaque projections) of paintings by these prominent artists: Pedro Coronel, Manuel Felguérez, Enrique Guzmán, Vicente Rojo, Fernando García Ponce, Juan Soriano, Brian Nissen, Francisco Corzas, Raúl Herrera, Kasuya Sakai (Source: *Art Gallery*, 83–159; exhibition catalogs in source list). Point out the broad range of new approaches; the depth of technical refinement; the freer plastic expressions in easel painting—quite unlike the sociopolitically oriented, representational approach of nationalist muralism. (Source: Finer, *Mexican Experience*, 41–47; Reed, *Mexican Muralists*.)

### Conclusion

Verify student progress by asking perceptual and descriptive questions based on the lesson objectives to determine the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of the tentative hypothesis on the overall nature of recent Mexican painting.

1. On the basis of the evidence examined (visually and verbally), write a one-paragraph description of how you now perceive the variety and sophistication of recent modern Mexican painting (1950s-76). Include how it differs from the earlier nationalistic muralism (1910-1950s).
  2. On the basis of your observation (as well as Handout A and the detailed discussion) of five works by leading Mexican painters, select the two examples you felt most clearly illustrated the blending of international art trends with underlying indigenous, national accents. Write one paragraph (for each work) describing in detail the blended elements.
  3. On the basis of the evidence (or lack of it), assess the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of the tentative overall hypothesis.
- Through directed discussion ask, How has your final assessment differed from your initial hypothesis?

### Reinforcement

For an added dimension, play a prerecorded tape quoting Rufino Tamayo (the renowned Mexican international painter) speaking on the development and future directions of the Mexican international style. (Source: José Bernúdez, "A Word with Tamayo," *Americas*, August 1974, 33–38).

It has always been my hope and conviction that contemporary art in the Americas (Mexico in particular) would become increasingly more significant. Fortunately nationalism—especially the trend that began in Mexico as a result of the 1910 Revolution—is not as influential as it used to be. As you know, I was one of—I was the first who rebelled against the narrow approach of

muralism's extreme nationalism. I have always believed that *art is the universal language to which we can add our own accents* (national and local). To want to create and maintain a totally nationalist art is now more impossible than ever because of international communications. This is certainly true in Mexico where national mural painting (in the style of Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros) no longer predominates. . . . It had its day (made its contributions) and that day is now passed. . . . It taught graphic lessons in social history and political propaganda but also sacrificed many of the truly fundamental, deeper values of painting and plastic expression. To me the new international style of painting in Mexico is now concerned with these deeper aspects. . . . The future of this approach encompasses a very broad horizon with many directions to be explored. . . . The younger Mexican painters are aware of their underlying indigenous roots but are no longer confined within the bonds of a national style of expression. They are aware of all that goes on internationally and are very talented . . . the future of Mexican painting is in their hands. Follow up with an open-ended, directed discussion, considering the wider implications of Tamayo's statements:

Q: Do you see this trend toward internationalism (with national or local accents) in the arts as a uniquely Mexican experience? Do you know of parallel developments in other countries? (in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, etc.)

Distribute Handout B, noting highlights of these new directions in the visual arts of Latin America. (Source: Catlin and Grieder, *Art of Latin America Since Independence*, Yale–University of Texas Exhibition Catalog.) Now assign students to search for graphic examples (in magazines, newspapers, etc.) of recent paintings in other countries that parallel the new directions observed in Mexico to be brought to class for further discussion and bulletin board display.

### Sources

Bernúdez, José Y. "A Word with Tamayo," *Americas* 8, no. 8 (August 1974): 33–38. (Excellent insights from Rufino Tamayo on the new directions of Mexican art.)

Catlin, Stanton L., and Terence Grieder. *Art of Latin America since Independence*. Yale–University of Texas Exhibition Catalog. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966. (Outstanding text and quality visualizations presenting an overview of the development of painting in Latin America, 1800–1965, emphasizing international parallels.)

*Exhibition Catalogs of Contemporary Mexican Painters*. Galería Mirachi, Génova 20, Zona Rosa, México, D.F. (Tamayo, Cuevas, Friedeberg); Galería

Arvil, Hamburgo 241, Zona Rosa, Mexico, D.F. (Toledo); Galería Juan Martín, Amberes 17, Zona Rosa (Toledo, Felguérez, V. Rojo, García Ponce, Corzas, Sakai); (Inéz Amor's) Galería de Arte Mexicano, Milán 18, Zona Rosa, México, D.F. (Soriano, P. Coronel); Galería de Pintura Joven, Río Marne 18, México, D.F. (E. Guzmán); Galería Pecanins, Hamburgo 103, Zona Rosa, Mexico, D.F. (Herrera, Nissen); Galería Mer-Kup, Avenida Polanco 328, México, D.F. (Nierman, Cuevas); Perle Gallery, 1016 Madison Avenue, New York (Tamayo); B. Lewin Galleries, 266 N. Beverly Dr., Beverly Hills, California (Nierman, Tamayo); Covo de Iongh, 519 Sul Ross, Houston, Texas (Friedberg, Toledo); Museo de Arte Moderno, Reforma y Ghandi, Bosque de Chapultepec, México 5, D.F. (General Resource).

Faulkner, Ray, and Edwin Ziegfeld. *Art Today*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969. (Recent contemporary international art trends are treated in detail with clear illustrations of each.)

Fearing, Kelly; et al. *Art and the Creative Teacher*. Austin, Texas: Benson and Company, 1971. (Innovative, well-illustrated resource for concept development in art and social studies.)

Fernández, Justino. *A Guide to Mexican Art, from*

*Its Beginnings to the Present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969. (A background work on Mexican art with good visuals.)

Finer, Neal. *The Mexican Experience: Teacher's Guide and Resource Manual*. Austin, Texas: Dissemination and Assessment Center for Bilingual Education, 1975. (An illustrated series of lessons on Mexican art and architecture at the secondary level based on the *Key Ideas About Latin America*, Austin: University of Texas Latin American Curriculum Project, Bulletin 4, 1967, Clark Gill and William Conroy, directors.)

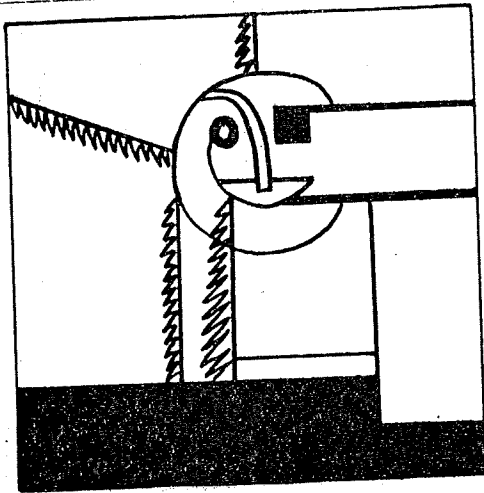
Manrique, Jorge Alberto. "Contemporary Mexican Art," *The Art Gallery: The International Magazine of Art and Culture* 19, no. 1 (October-November 1975): 83-159. (An essential, detailed overview of the recent Mexican international art scene with excellent photographic examples, produced by noted Mexican art critic and director of the University of Mexico's Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Jorge Manrique.)

Parkes, Henry Bamford. *History of Mexico*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1966 (Valuable historical reference.)

Reed, Alma. *The Mexican Muralists*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1960. (Well-illustrated reference for nationalistic aspects of muralism.)

## HANDOUT A

Guide to Five Recent Mexican Paintings: (a) international art trends, (b) underlying indigenous, national accents



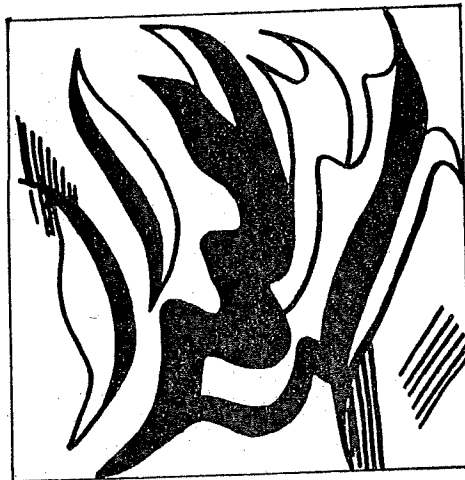
**"Head" 1971**

1. Rufino Tamayo—internationally acclaimed Mexican colorist who is frequently ranked with Picasso, Braque, etc.  
(a) Note the abstract treatment of the head, broken into basic, pure geometric forms in keeping with the ideals of international cubism, similar to Braque.  
(b) Observe the muted organic colors and vibrant design that Tamayo attributes to the natural light of his native Oaxaca and fresh forms from his Zapotec roots.



**"Goya" 1969**

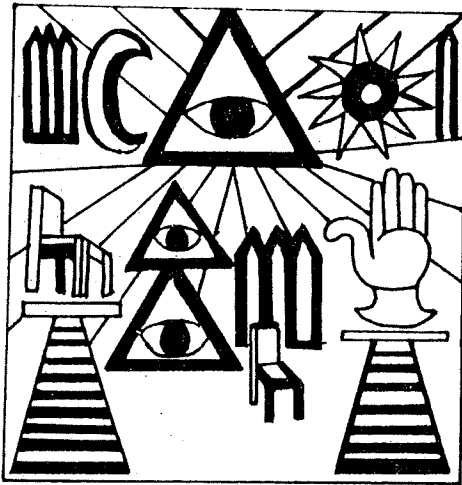
2. José Luis Cuevas—internationally recognized Mexican painter whose potential has been compared to Picasso.  
(a) Note the use of interpretative line drawing, combining abstract and realistic elements (like Picasso).  
(b) Observe the haunting eyes and morose mood of Goya reflecting Cuevas' own morose concern with human grotesqueness as seen in Mexico's lunatic asylums.



**"Vuelo" 1970**

3. Leonardo Nierman—known internationally for his fiery poured paintings and sleek sculpture.  
(a) Note the sophisticated use of poured paint designs reflecting a dynamic freedom, reminiscent of the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock.  
(b) Observe the rich blend and sharp contrast of fiery colors reflecting the wide variety and volcanic intensity of colors found in the Mexican ambience.

**"Isabela Católica" 1971**

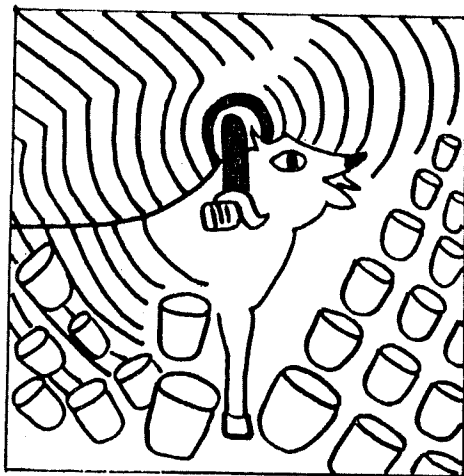


4. Pedro Friedeberg—internationally recognized innovative painter and designer of "hand-foot" furniture.

(a) Note the "pop-art" treatment of two types of chairs (the standard square commercial type of chair and the unique, hand-shaped, exotic type of chair reflecting two levels of contemporary values: manufactured crassness and natural organic beauty) reminiscent of Andy Warhol's reflection of popular values.

(b) Observe the use of pre-Columbian symbolism, e.g. sun and moon, pyramids, and eyes—clear references to underlying cultural foundations and indigenous values.

**"Cow of the 1,000 Pails" 1974**



5. Francisco Toledo—a young Mexican painter who is increasingly being recognized internationally. Tamayo has called Toledo "the best of the young Mexican painters who is becoming very important internationally."

(a) Note use of "op art" elements such as repeated spheres and undulating lines causing a retinal effect (as noted in the works of Victor Vasarely).

(b) Observe the use of earth tones characteristic of his Indian artistic roots. Also, observe the national, social comment on contemporary Mexican consumerism with its heavy demand on cattle for milk production to meet the needs of the exploding population trend.

## HANDOUT B

### *Highlights of Trends in Latin American Visual Arts, 1950s-1976*

Art trends in Latin America increasingly reflect the international art tendencies of innovation and experimentalism. Abstraction (particularly in painting) characterizes much of the plastic arts produced in Latin America since the 1950s. (It should be noted that this tendency toward abstraction began appearing well before the 1950s—with cubism in Argentina, German expressionism in Brazil, and modern experimentalism in Uruguay—at the same time that Mexican muralism was flourishing.) The recent visual arts reveal multiple levels of sophistication and great cultural diversity in Latin America; however, two common characteristics are apparent in the concern for (1) freer, universal modes of artistic expression, and (2) individualized accents (national or local).

These innovative and experimentalist tendencies are apparent in the abstract works of Torres García (constructivist) in Uruguay; Nemesio Antúnez (pop art), Echaurren Matta, and Jaime González in Chile; Armando Morales (informalist) in Nicaragua; Fernando de

Szyszlo (expressionist) in Peru; Alejandro Obregón (cubist), Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, and sculptor Edgar Negret in Colombia; designer Carlos Villanueva (integration of the arts), Narciso Debourg, Carlos Cruz Diez, Jesús Rafael Soto, and Alejandro Otero (op art, kinetic art) of Venezuela; Marta Boto, Antonio Asis, Luis Tomasello, García Rossi, and Julio Le Parc (op art), Carlos Squirru and Marta Minujín (pop art—social irony), Ernesto Deira, Rómulo Macció, Noé, del Vega, Seguí (neofigurist), Clorindo Testa and Mario Pucciarelli (informalist, free, intuitive abstractions), Sara Grillo, and Fernández Muro of Argentina; Carlos Mérida, and Rodolfo Abularach of Guatemala; print-maker Oswaldo Goeldi, designer Oscar Niemeyer, Manabu Mabe (informalist), engraver Livio Abramo, Wesley Lee (magic realism), and Marcello Grassman of Brazil; María Luisa Pacheco (informalist) in Bolivia; José Ignacio Bermúdez, Jorge Camacho, Wilfredo Lam of Cuba.