RUFINO TAMAYO (1899–1991), one of the most celebrated artists of the twentieth century, formed many of his ideas about art during his extended sojourns in New York City between 1926 and 1949. Tamayo came of age during the cultural renaissance that followed the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). Like many of his Mexican contemporaries, he considered his country’s indigenous and mestizo (racially mixed) heritage a defining element of national identity. Yet Tamayo’s exposure to international modernism in New York, coupled with his firsthand study of pre-Columbian and Mexican folk art, led him to reject overtly politicized art, especially the muralism of Los tres grandes (the three greats)—Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—in favor of his own synthesis of modernist styles and Mexican culture.

This exhibition is the first to consider how New York—its sights, artists, critics, collectors, and art venues—nurtured Tamayo’s vision of modern Mexican art. In this context, he created an art that resisted clear narratives, emphasized the creative rather than political underpinnings of art making, and mined the ancient myths and forms of indigenous art to express the existential crisis of World War II. By the 1940s, his richly colored and abstracted compositions modeled an alternative “American” modernism that challenged social realism and dovetailed with a rising generation of abstract expressionists who were also seeking a visual language that fit their uncertain times. Tamayo: The New York Years reveals how a Mexican artist forged a new path in the modern art of the Americas and contributed to New York’s dynamic cultural scene as the city was becoming a center of postwar art.

Tamayo: The New York Years is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

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Before going to New York, our [Mexican] tradition was most important. This continues to be so for me, but I acquired a sense of the universal, that art must be understandable in all the corners of the world.

—Rufino Tamayo

*Girl Attacked by a Strange Bird*

1947
oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Zadok

New York, New York
When Tamayo arrived in New York in 1926, the city was becoming a destination for artists from Latin America and Europe. He settled in Greenwich Village, the city’s creative hub, and befriended Reginald Marsh, Stuart Davis, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and other artists who were experimenting with subjects tied to their local milieu. Tamayo visited the city’s galleries and museums to absorb an expansive range of modern European art. Seeing how modern artists drew on non-Western art reinforced Tamayo’s interest in pre-Columbian and Mexican folk art. As Americans grew more fascinated with Mexican art and culture in the 1920s, Tamayo and other Mexican artists found an interested audience. The muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros in particular became very influential in the United States. They painted murals in various cities, and socially concerned artists eagerly followed their careers. Tamayo’s first trip to New York was stimulating but emotionally and financially challenging. He was forced to go back to Mexico in 1928 because of an illness, returning briefly to New York in 1930, when the Great Depression made it again impossible to stay.

*The Family*

1925
oil on canvas
William and Christopher Brumder Collection
As a young artist, Tamayo drew inspiration from Mexican popular culture. In this family portrait, the couple’s formal attire and setting recall Mexican studio photography, in which subjects often posed in front of painted landscapes. The figures’ reddish skin color points to Mexico’s indigenous and mestizo (racially mixed) populations, a preoccupation in the work of Tamayo, who himself was of Zapotec ancestry. Tamayo brought this painting to New York and exhibited it at the Weyhe Gallery, one of the first galleries to promote Mexican artists.

*Seashells*

1929
oil on canvas
Private collection
*Seashells*, with its unconventional perspective and juxtaposition of natural and consumer objects, stems from a period of intense experimentation when Tamayo was exploring diverse approaches to painting. The blue light bulb and cigarettes, for example, recall the compositions of Stuart Davis, who employed similar objects as signifiers of modern urban life.
**Nude**  
1931  
oil on canvas  
Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas Art Association Purchase  
While in New York, Tamayo likely saw Giorgio de Chirico’s 1928 exhibition at the Valentine Gallery. Like de Chirico, Tamayo experimented with atemporal scenes that juxtapose the ancient past with his modern surroundings. In this example, a female nude, modeled after the generous proportions of pre-Columbian sculpture, is set within a complex evocation of Mexico’s past and present. A rock wall and a sleeping dog point the viewer to pre-Hispanic iconography, while bricks and telephone wires return us to the industrialized present. This nonnarrative approach set Tamayo apart from his Mexican muralist peers.

**Leader of a New School of Mexican Painting**  
Between 1928 and 1936, Tamayo lived primarily in Mexico, where he experimented with new approaches to painting. His firsthand exposure to modern art in New York informed his turn toward still lifes and nudes, which he infused with local references. He continued to study pre-Columbian and Mexican folk art as inspiration for his own art, and joined forces with other Mexican artists interested in cosmopolitan culture. He secured two mural commissions but devoted himself primarily to easel painting. Tamayo especially adopted surrealist strategies to create works that resisted clear story lines and emphasized the imaginative aspect of art making. As his emerging outlook countered the leftist politics of the muralists, some critics hailed Tamayo the leader of a new direction in Mexican painting.

**Mandolins and Pineapples**  
1930  
oil on canvas  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, Acquired 1930  
Tamayo’s densely arranged still life juxtaposes pineapples, tropical fruits associated with Latin America, and mandolins, instruments commonly represented in the still lifes of Picasso and other European modernists. Tamayo was briefly in New York in 1930 when this work was shown in the *Mexican Arts* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There, Duncan Phillips, founder of the Phillips Collection, saw the painting and immediately purchased it for his Washington gallery, becoming the first prominent US art collector to acquire Tamayo’s work. In a letter to Mexican-art promoter Frances Flynn Paine, Phillips wrote, “It seemed to me about the best [picture] in the Mexican show at the Metropolitan.”

**Academic Painting**  
1935  
oil on canvas  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966  
Over his long career, Tamayo created numerous works depicting the artist in the midst of creation. Here many sources of inspiration, including a classicized nude, a flying victory figure, and a Mexican clown, surround a painter in front of his easel. Viewers are confronted with two works of art simultaneously—the painting before them and the one represented within the canvas—suggesting an infinite set of aesthetic possibilities.
Factory Workers’ Movement  
1935  
oil on canvas  
Collection of Brian and Florence Mahony
Tamayo rejected the idea that politics should penetrate art, yet the rise of European fascism and violent anti-labor Mexican groups informed his turn toward revolutionary subjects in the 1930s. This painting portraits workers holding huacales (handcrafted Mexican crates) outside a vast industrial factory. In the distance, a lone figure raises his arm, urging a call to action. Tamayo's cramped scene does not depict a historic event or person, but instead brings viewers face-to-face with the harsh realities of the common laborer. The humanist undercurrent of Factory Workers’ Movement hints at Tamayo's future response to the turbulent events of World War II.

Homage to Juárez  
1932  
oil on canvas  
Museo de Arte Moderno—INBA
*Homage to Juárez* presents an unconventional portrait of Benito Juárez (1806–1872), Mexico’s first indigenous president. Rather than recount the history of Juárez, as Diego Rivera had done a year earlier in a monumental mural at the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City, Tamayo creatively reimagines Juárez’s bust in public space. Several components are densely overlaid: a woman walking in the foreground, modern and neoclassical architecture, and a mysterious figure that appears to chase a descending globo de cantolla, a homemade balloon used during festivals. While these elements suggest a commemorative celebration, the tone of the painting is far from festive, and Tamayo offers little narrative clarity.

Carnival  
1941  
oil on canvas  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, Acquired 1942
Much like the Museum of Modern Art’s 1940 exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, Tamayo’s *Carnival* brings together multiple eras of Mexican visual culture. Although the scene clearly depicts a couple donning colorful masks for a festival, this reading is complicated by Tamayo’s rendering of the woman’s body, which is nude and divided into geometric components through color and line—sttialized elements reminiscent of the pre-Hispanic ceramics of western Mexico. Popular and ancient Mexican art had fascinated Tamayo since the early 1920s, but it was likely his encounters with Picasso’s work that encouraged him to mine these traditions further in his own painting.

The Lovers  
1943  
oil on canvas  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase with the aid of funds from W. W. Crocker
*Lovers*, probably a portrait of Rufino and Olga Tamayo, was painted around the time Olga was hospitalized at Bloomingdale, a New York sanatorium. While the female figure’s head overlaps with a caged bird, suggesting her psychological inaccessibility, a large red form envelops the pair, visualizing their emotional bond.
The Doctor
1939
oil on canvas
Collection of Stanley and Pearl Goodman, a promised gift to the NSU Art Museum, Fort Lauderdale, FL
The war period also proved personally challenging for Tamayo and his wife, Olga. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Olga endured two miscarriages and suffered from psychological problems that led to her hospitalization. The Doctor may relate to these intimate crises. The figure’s stare, large hands, and lit cigarette conjure an intense conversation that point to Olga’s delicate health.

Woman with a Bird Cage
1941
oil on canvas
The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Joseph Winterbotham Collection
After seeing many of Picasso’s early cubist paintings that relied on African art, Tamayo reignited his interest in pre-Columbian and Mexican folk art, including Mexican masks. In Woman with a Bird Cage, Tamayo appears to blend the toothy grin of masks from Jalisco and the segmented color fields of masks from Mexico City. He achieved great success during these years. The Art Institute of Chicago immediately acquired this painting for its prestigious Joseph Winterbotham Collection, which traditionally featured only modern European art.

Encounter with Picasso
In 1939, two seismic cultural events in New York brought about a dramatic change in Tamayo's art: the Valentine Gallery’s showing of Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, the monumental tour de force painting that denounced the Nazi bombing of a village in Spain, and Picasso’s retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Picasso’s example as an artist engaged in the crises of his day encouraged Tamayo to address the mounting uncertainties of World War II. Inspired by Picasso’s imagery and reliance on African art, Tamayo reconsidered the forms and myths of Mexico’s pre-Hispanic and folk art as the basis for a series of wartime paintings featuring aggressive and deprived animals. Tamayo and his supporters had always emphasized his indigenous roots, yet in response to his bold, new style, critics intensified their long-held claims that the artist and his art were inherently “primitive.” His rising reputation drew the attention of New York artists, including Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko, who, taking their cue from contemporary anthropology and psychology, also turned to ancient myths and to Native American art to express the terror of their momentous times.

Photo reproduction of Pablo Picasso’s Guernica
1937
oil on canvas
original artwork: 137 x 306 in.
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid
Picasso drew on several cultural and artistic references, including the Spanish bullfight and Francisco de Goya’s Disasters of War etchings, to create his indictment of the Nazi bombing of Guernica. Painted in somber monochromatic colors evocative of newsprint, the mural-sized painting united symbolic imagery—like a wounded, screeching horse—with fiery and tragic scenes that directly evoke its wartime subject. New York critics viewed Guernica as an anti-war statement, which some argued steered clear of artistic propaganda. New York artists responded in different ways to Picasso’s example: Tamayo absorbed his imagery and conviction to confront contemporary events; Jackson Pollock was drawn to Picasso’s animal imagery and his linear style, which was even more evident in the preparatory sketches for Guernica that were also shown in New York.
Animals
1941
oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Inter-American Fund
Two barking dogs, rib cages exposed, stand in a barren landscape littered with bones and a rock. The source of their aggression remains unclear. *Animals* was the first animal-themed painting Tamayo created after seeing Picasso’s *Guernica*. Like the Spanish master, Tamayo came to view animals as allegories that could convey the anxieties and injustices of war. Tamayo often modeled his animals after pre-Columbian art, including terra-cotta dog sculptures from Colima that were used in burial contexts, an appropriate reference for works that ponder the destruction of war. The connection between Tamayo and Picasso was so strong during these years that one reviewer called Tamayo “the one artist to paint the Mexican *Guernica*.”

Mad Dog
1943
oil on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Herbert Cameron Morris, 1945
Some of Tamayo’s animal paintings include specifically Mexican references, perhaps signaling his intent to reimagine national emblems on his own terms. The desperate, rabid dog seen here is set in a Mexican landscape suggested by a nopal cactus, a plant associated with the pre-Columbian Mexica pictograph that still appears on the Mexican flag.

Dog Barking at the Moon
1942
oil on canvas
Private collection
*Dog Barking at the Moon* may have been inspired by two different sources. Its subject recalls Joan Miró’s *Dog Howling at the Moon* (1926), which Tamayo would have seen at the Museum of Living Art, one of the leading modern art venues in New York between 1927 and 1942. The dog’s posture also resembles pre-Columbian sculptures that Tamayo increasingly turned to for inspiration in the 1940s. Critics at the time often linked Tamayo’s indigenous ancestry to his chosen subjects, with some suggesting that his art sprang from an innate inner source, rather than the artist’s intentional aesthetic choices. For example, in 1943 a reviewer for *Art News* described the dog seen here as “a member of that breed which Tamayo’s pre-Columbian ancestors once fattened as a table delicacy.”

Lion and Horse
1942
oil on canvas
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, University purchase, Kende Sale Fund, 1946
A lion with red eyes and teeth circles a horse that raises his front legs in response. Tamayo’s warring animals, which stand near a fallen column and beneath an unnatural green cloud, convey aggression and suggest the environmental aftermath of warfare.
Photo reproduction of Rufino Tamayo’s America, 1955
Vinylite and sand on canvas
original artwork: 158 x 560 in.
Originally commissioned by the Bank of the Southwest, Houston, Texas
Private collection
Tamayo’s portable murals from the 1950s reconceived the form and subjects of Mexican muralism. Commissioned by the Bank of the Southwest in Houston, Texas, America envisions the epic origins of the hemisphere. Tamayo’s mestizo allegory—situated between the personifications of Europe and indigenous America—recalls the centrality of Picasso’s horse in Guernica. Yet rather than evoke the tragedies of war, the figure conjures the distant past. Her open mouth and outstretched arm can suggest the shock of birth or the violence of conquest. The three figures are surrounded by symbolic motifs including corn, a Christian cross, a serpent representing the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl, and an oil geyser, a possible allusion to a Texan industry. By the time Tamayo painted this mural, some US critics dismissed his figurative art. Tamayo remained undeterred because his figuration was key to his definition of humanism and his desire to communicate with his audience.

Women Reaching for the Moon
1946
oil on canvas
Private collection, Courtesy of Christie’s

Man Searching the Heavens
1949
oil on canvas
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Gershinowitz
Tamayo partially attributed his interest in the night sky to the advent of nuclear warfare: “Immediately after . . . the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki [in 1945], I started thinking about the implications of a new space age and did the first paintings of constellations.” While the title Man Searching the Heavens seems to address man’s existential quest for meaning in the universe, this painting also veers toward science fiction, visualizing a link between a person and a circular object in the sky. Tamayo continued mining the cosmos and humankind’s place in it in his work until the end of his life, in 1991.

Heavenly Bodies
1946
oil with sand on canvas
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venezia (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York)
Tamayo probably first saw Joan Miró’s Constellations paintings in 1945, when they were smuggled out of Europe and exhibited at Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York. Painted during the chaotic onset of World War II, those works depict colorful biomorphic figures that appear to cavort beneath crescent moons and stylized stars. Tamayo, who shared Miró’s interest in the cosmos, addressed the subject more literally here, representing constellations as distinct beams of light zigzagging across a network of stars. As in many of his celestial paintings, Tamayo anchored the scene with an abstracted human figure who contemplates the night sky.

The Full Moon
1945
oil on canvas
Private collection
Cataclysm
1946
oil on canvas
Private collection
Following World War II, Tamayo and his abstract expressionist contemporaries, among them Jackson Pollock and Adolph Gottlieb, used their canvases to grapple with existential questions, looking to ancient mythology and the night sky for meaning. In *Cataclysm*, Tamayo fused the chaos and destruction he had witnessed in Picasso’s *Guernica* with the celestial phenomena that had captivated him since childhood. Here abstracted figures flee an apocalyptic and compressed landscape as a volcano erupts alongside a solar eclipse. The absence of any temporal markers implies a timeless and universal man, one perhaps linked to the early star watchers of pre-Hispanic Mexico.

New York Seen from the Terrace
1937
oil on canvas
FEMSA Collection
*New York Seen from the Terrace* registers Tamayo’s continued fascination with the modernity of the city. He portrayed himself looking through a monocular at a dramatic skyline. The gray monoliths suggest the metal cladding of recently built skyscrapers like the Empire State Building. He also peppered the composition with playful elements, including white spheres spread on the terrace floor. Tamayo prominently displayed watermelon resting on a table, an iconic fruit associated with Mexico. Here the artist staged an encounter between Mexican and cosmopolitan culture. The fruit and the skyline are equivalent: both were sources of artistic inspiration that Tamayo arranged at will.

Carnival
1936
gouache on paper
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment 2017.22
Coney Island was a favorite haunt of many New York artists who wanted to capture modern urban life. Tamayo dedicated at least three works to the subject, with two on view here. While small in scale, *Coney Island* offers a panoramic view of the park’s iconic rides, performers, and cheering audiences. *Carnival* focuses on Luna Park, a section within Coney Island known for its electric lights. Tamayo captured Luna Park’s distinctive features—including its heart-shaped and crescent moon decorations, parading clowns, and crowded spectators—but it is the inventive way he married these references with abstract patterns that takes center stage.

Coney Island
1931
gouache and watercolor
Collection of Gianfranco Arnoldi
Return to New York
In 1936, Tamayo returned to New York for his longest and most significant tenure. Joined by his new wife, Olga, he intended to come for two weeks but instead stayed until 1949. This lengthier residence, always peppered by the couple’s summers in Mexico, was decisive for Tamayo’s art and reputation. He once again immersed himself in a thriving cultural scene with greater access to international art. A teaching position at the Dalton School—where he taught a young Helen Frankenthaler—provided financial stability. During these productive years, Tamayo shifted between capturing scenes of modern New York and producing unconventional takes on Mexican subjects. He also found a receptive art market and critics increasingly open to his divergence from muralism. His active presence in the city’s art scene made him, in the words of one reviewer, “a fixed star in New York’s art world.”

*Strawberry Ice Cream*
1938
oil on canvas
Collection of John Fox and Sandy Allen
Tamayo was drawn to the unique visual culture of New York. *Strawberry Ice Cream* disjointedly juxtaposes the features of soda fountain cafés—a soda jerk, a child, a checkerboard table, ice cream, and ornate mirrors—with no narrative thread to unite them. Some critics dismissed Tamayo’s New York–themed paintings, arguing that he should focus instead on “Mexican” subjects. Yet for the artist these works were modern still lifes and statements about the creative act of art making.

*Three Ice Creams*
1938
oil on canvas
Collection of Mrs. J. Todd Figi

*Man and Woman*
1926
woodcut
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1976.27

*Man with Maguey*
1931
linoleum cut
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase 1980.4.2

*Head II (Grief)*
ca. 1926–28
woodcut
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of W. G. Russell Allen

*Virgin of Guadalupe*
1926–27
woodcut
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Eleanor A. Sayre Fund
**The Woodcutter**
c.a. 1926–30  
woodcut  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Carl Zigrosser, 1930

**Two Mermaids, One Playing a Guitar**
c.a. 1926–30  
woodcut on Japan paper  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Jean Charlot, 1931

The Mexican Revolution (1910–20) ushered in a renaissance in printmaking, especially among the country’s leftist artists and activists. Woodcuts in particular allowed artists to quickly produce large quantities of political posters, illustrations, and manifestos for public distribution. Tamayo’s woodcuts from this period demonstrate his interest in the aesthetics of the medium: the prominent wood striations underscore the prints’ status as autonomous artworks. At the same time, much of his imagery is specifically Mexican, relating to the rural and indigenist concerns of the post-revolutionary period. In *Man with Maguey*, a peasant soldier stands in a field of agaves holding a rifle. The face in *Head II (Grief)* resembles the pre-Columbian masks Tamayo studied at the Museum of Archaeology in Mexico City. Several of these prints were included in Tamayo’s first solo exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery in New York, where they appealed to American audiences increasingly captivated by Mexican art.

Société Anonyme
Exhibition catalogue, *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, 1926  
John Henry Bradley Storrs papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Founded by artist and arts patron Katherine Dreier and the artists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray in 1920, the Société Anonyme promoted the appreciation of modern art in the United States. During his first trip to New York, Tamayo likely visited their *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. In addition to presenting an extraordinary range of modern art, from German Expressionism to cubism, futurism, and early surrealism, the installation juxtaposed international works in divergent styles, with little regard to national origin. Such eschewing of national classifications must have been striking to Tamayo, who came from a stridently nationalist Mexican context.

*Rufino Tamayo: Paintings, Gouaches, Drawings, January 12th to 30th, Julien Levy Gallery*, 1937  
Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago

The Julien Levy Gallery was an anchor of surrealist art in New York. Tamayo’s one-man exhibition there in 1937 placed him in the company of such major artists as Salvador Dalí and René Magritte, prompting some critics to label him a surrealist. Tamayo’s mysterious imagery, like the scene printed on this small brochure, lent some credence to this claim, despite the fact that he never identified as such. For others, Tamayo’s enigmatic compositions distinguished him from his Mexican contemporaries. Critic Eleanor Jewett, for example, identified Tamayo as “one of the few Mexicans who is heading more toward surrealism than propaganda.”
**New Masses**  
January 1927 and April 1927  
Columbia University Libraries  
Tamayo contributed several illustrations to the leftist journal *New Masses*, where his friend the Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias served as an editor. Tamayo's contributions often addressed the indigenous and proletarian subjects that US audiences expected of a Mexican artist, such as the peasant couple that illustrates the January 1927 cover. It was the modern city, however, that captivated Tamayo during these first years in New York. His illustration of well-dressed women in conversation, perhaps on the subway, echoes the “New Woman” archetype represented by working women in public space that also appeared in the paintings of Tamayo's acquaintance Reginald Marsh.

*B* **Shower**  
1936  
watercolor and pastel on paper  
Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Deposit from the Work Projects Administration, United States Government, 1943

*B* **Waiting Woman**  
1936  
watercolor on paper  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Extended loan from the United States WPA Art Program; Fine Arts Collection, Public Buildings Service, General Services Administration  
When he returned to New York in 1936, Tamayo joined the Federal Art Project, a government program that employed artists to create artworks for public buildings. *Shower*, a somber street scene that may convey Tamayo's impressions of the Great Depression, was created during this tenure. He also produced dreamlike scenes like *Waiting Woman* that recall the evocative compositions of his Mexican colleagues María Izquierdo and Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Tamayo, along with other foreign nationals, was discharged from the FAP in 1937. Nonetheless, his artwork continued to circulate in federal exhibitions like *New Horizons in American Art*, which was initially presented at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936.

*B* **The Pretty Girl**  
1937  
oil on canvas  
Private collection  
With its expressionless young girl standing amid incongruous objects, *The Pretty Girl* is an enigmatic image. The painting was inspired by a childhood photograph of Olga Tamayo and her sister. By the time it was shown in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* (1940), a blockbuster exhibition organized by New York's Museum of Modern Art, critics had already begun to distinguish Tamayo from his peers Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Henry McBride, a prominent art critic, argued that “[among] these living Mexicans it is Tamayo who carries aesthetics the furthest. He may be as political as the rest of them for all that I know, but when he paints he is not a politician but an artist. His ‘Pretty Girl’ is a delightful picture.”
The Family
1936
oil on canvas
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of Noma and William Copley
Tamayo frequently portrayed figures with very dark skin, as in the grouping seen here. His depiction was not always literal. Dark brown skin could signify a subject's implied mestizo or indigenous identity. Nonetheless, Tamayo was likely aware of Afro-Mexicans, and was familiar with African Americans, since his close friend, caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias was deeply immersed in New York's Harlem cultural scene. The Family may relate to Tamayo’s exposure to African Americans, even if the painting’s ambiguous elements—the circular toy hanging in the sky, a bird perched on the roof, and the expressionless faces of the three figures—make it difficult to place culturally or geographically.

Two Women
1939
gouache on canvas
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Mary B. Jackson Fund

Women of Tehuantepec
1939
oil on canvas
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1941
Tamayo tackled iconic Mexican subjects with a joy for the act of painting. His Tehuana series hones in on native women from the Tehuantepec region who became potent national symbols in Mexican art in the early twentieth century. Tamayo’s figures, while they do retain references to their distinctive ensembles and braided hair, are also fields on which the artist plays with paint, color, and composition. Women of Tehuantepec is arranged like a stage set, with layers of rectangular forms that recede into the distance. The skirt of the most visible figure in Woman is so abstractly rendered that it looks like unfinished canvas dripping with paint. Mystery, on the other hand, suffuses Two Women, where the figures walk through a moody landscape pierced by a diagonal earth-toned wall.

Woman
1938
oil on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Estate of John Hay Whitney

Guernica exhibition brochure, 1939
Valentine Gallery, New York
National Gallery of Art Library, Rare Books
The display of Guernica and its preparatory studies at the Valentine Gallery, a leading commercial gallery that represented Tamayo in the 1930s and 1940s, was a major artistic event. The American Artists’ Congress, an antifascist group headed by Stuart Davis and Max Weber, helped secure the venue and organized two symposia during the run of the exhibition. Guernica later traveled to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago before returning to New York, where it was featured in the Museum of Modern Art’s major retrospective Picasso: Forty Years of His Art. Guernica remained in MoMA’s care until it was returned to Spain in 1981.
In 1955, Tamayo unveiled his enormous *America* mural at the Bank of the Southwest’s new modern building located in Houston, Texas, a kind of geographic gateway linking the United States and Latin America. Tamayo’s symbolic depiction of the origins of the Americas suited Cold War and corporate tastes that favored his cosmopolitan style over a waning social realism.

Knoedler and Co. exhibition brochure, 1954
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Tamayo continued to find patrons in New York, even after he relocated to Paris and Mexico. In the 1950s, he was represented by Knoedler, a prestigious gallery located on 57th Street in Manhattan. There his art was increasingly framed as Mexican, as implied in this exhibition brochure, which marries Tamayo’s name with the design of the Mexican flag.

“The Painting of Tamayo and Gottlieb”
*Revista Belga* (April 1945)
The Barnett Newman Foundation
In 1945, when he was more active as a critic and curator, artist Barnett Newman published this article comparing Tamayo and Adolph Gottlieb. Newman hailed both artists’ efforts to unite the lessons of the School of Paris with “the great art traditions of our American aborigines.” He believed Tamayo and Gottlieb had achieved this synthesis and were pointing the way toward “a truly American art” that could have an impact on the hemisphere and Europe.

*Tiger’s Eye*, no. 1 (October 1947) and no. 9 (October 15, 1949)
Yale University Art Gallery
Artists and critics who supported a burgeoning generation of abstract expressionists knew and followed Tamayo’s career. Tamayo’s paintings were featured in *Tiger’s Eye*, one of the most widely read avant-garde magazines of the 1940s. For their inaugural issue, editors Ruth and John Stephan invited Tamayo to write a statement about his art. His poetic contribution prefaced several illustrations of his and Mark Rothko’s work. In keeping with his questioning of clear narratives, Tamayo characterizes true painting not by its subject, but by the balance of its plastic elements, such as form, color, proportion, and line.

*Fire*
1946
oil on canvas
Collection of Mrs. J. Todd Figi
In the 1940s, Tamayo depicted several fiery scenes. Here an unclothed man and woman with flailing arms, perhaps representing universal human beings in a state of vulnerability, run from a burning building. While beautifully rendered in bold colors and abstract forms, *Fire* reminds us that Tamayo was part of a generation of artists that wrestled with how to represent the destruction of war.

*Total Eclipse*
ca. 1946
oil with sand on canvas
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer Jr.
Depicting the Epic Modern Age
Shaken by the catastrophes of World War II, Tamayo and his New York peers looked to ancient and non-Western myths in order to explore the modern condition from a timeless, humanist perspective. In the mid-1940s, Tamayo also began painting celestial scenes that referred to both the dawn of the nuclear age and the hope for spiritual renewal after a crisis. His human figures became more simplified, reduced to basic shapes that represented universal humankind. By 1949, as tastes in the United States moved away from figurative art, Tamayo began to spend more time in Paris and Mexico. While his mature style brought him international success in the coming decades, his contributions to the midcentury New York art scene receded into history. By modeling an alternative to social realism that was still rooted in the concerns and visual culture of the Americas, Tamayo’s art had already contributed to the debates that transformed New York into a leading center of modern art.