

THE SPIRITUAL IN LATIN AMERICAN

CONTEMPORARY ART

I am here as a Latin American artist, I came to speak on the spiritual in contemporary art, or better, on the spiritual in Latin American contemporary art.

It might be convenient then, to make a brief scheme of the ideas that determine the spiritual directions in our art.

Observing the nature of the expression of the Pre-Columbian man, we find that a permanent element is the religious spirit, which take the form of a magic interpretation of the world.

It is the need to transcend the order of the natural world. His vision is supernatural.

The Pre-Columbian man, transcends the material world, through an act of vision, that transforms the natural phenomenae into symbols, into gods, that explains nature forms, in their relation with the universal and the eternal:

Let's see now some examples that will show how this character of magic and supernatural, go through all the different periods of Latin American art and up to our own times.

TEMPLES OF THE PRE-COLUMBIAN PERIOD.

1) Chichen Itzá

Mexico

In this view, one can grasp the aspiration of the Mayan people of Yucatán, to reach the sublime. To be among these stones, is to be in contact with the thought of the early inhabitants of America. Elementary forms, profusely covered by magic religious symbols. It is the overwhelming abundance and voluptuousness of the tropics that covers the monuments.

These barroque Mayan qualities are a permanent character in Latin American art.

## 2) Machu Picchu

Peru

Down in the South, the Incas designed and built one of the most extraordinary sacred monuments of the American continent; the citadel of Machu Picchu, it was built over 2,000 feet in a vertical rock over the Urubamba River. It's only access is a thin road traced over the high peaks of the Andes.

Pablo Neruda calls Machu Picchu:

"Mother of stone, foam of the condors.

High reef of the human dawn".

I have personally felt in Machu Picchu the same emotion, the same sensation of the sublime that I went through, when I first entered the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.

Let us see what makes of Machu Picchu this monument of the spirit. It is the location in the heights, to be in a constant dialogue with the cosmos. It is the selection of this inaccessible place, in the heart of the Andes, over a landscape of vertical heights and deep winding rivers. Here, man conquers and chasms the difficulties that nature poses him.

It is the permanent confrontation between the matter and the spirit. Man masters the material world, to reach the transcendental of his spirit.

## THE SPANISH CONQUEST

### 3) Tepozotlán

Then, the Spaniards arrived, the Indian artisan of old skills, interprets the new art, the Christian Art. He gives to the baroque, his own forms, his ancestral forms; with his profused imagination, with his delirious voluptuousness, he reveals through the exercise of the senses, his true and deep spirit.

4) The Alejadinho.

Brazil

This one prophet, one of the twelve sculptured prophets in Ouro Preto, Brazil, is the work of an extraordinary human being, Antonio Francisco Lisboa, born in 1738, the son of a Portuguese architect and an African slave, who gave him her name and declared him free on the baptism ceremony.

Victim of innumerable handicaps, and exposed to overwhelming difficulties: physical deformities, partial paralysis caused by leprosy, he walked on his knees and tied the chisel and hammer to his stumps, — the Alejadinho, over everything reaches one of the highest and most surprising results in the barroque sculpture not only of the Americas, but of the world.

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I will jump over the nineteenth century in which the artist copies the European academic sterility.

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

5) Rivera  
Orozco  
Siqueiros

The most important movement in contemporary Latin American art is the Muralism in México; it is the movement which has made a contribution of the Latin Americans, to the universal history of art.

These artists through their works, gives the people, the precepts of their revolution, they teach their revolution.

Most of them are marxists, ~~nevertheless~~ they are moved by a deep faith, a faith that transforms materialism into a mystic<sup>ism</sup>, that I compare with the one, Giotto, in other times and in other spiritual levels, when he also, taught to his people the ideas of a revolutionary religion.

6) Tamayo  
of México

The contemporary answer to the muralists, came in the forties with three great artist, Tamayo, Lam, Matta; their interest is to emphasize the relationship between man and cosmos, like their ancestors did.

In Tamayo's work with deep phosphorescent colours, we see the relation man-universe. There are Pre-Columbian shapes extraterrestrial lights and poetry "without it, there is no art" says Tamayo.

7) Lam  
of Cuba

He interprets the mysteries of the jungle; he uses also his ancestral forms, in his case African forms, to create unknown and magic idols. They are the product of surreal and incongruous combinations, nocturnal metamorphosis.

8) Matta  
of Chile

The most complex of the three, incorporates the new mythology, product of the technological era. As Tamayo and Lam use their ancestral forms to create magic idols, Matta goes to the technological world to find the shapes for his beings, premonitories of other possible worlds.

Highly intelectual, gifted with disconcerting graphic strength, Matta, is in the threshold of the primitive and the future, he expands his original vision from the pristine and telluric of his early period, to the convulsive images of the new technology.

His work is delirious, he is a hallucinated and contradictory prophet. poet -

## CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

### 9) Félix Candela of México

In our contemporary architecture, we observe the same quality already enunciated as typical of the Latin American art.

The vaults of Félix Candela ~~is~~ the baroque expressed in complex structures of concrete. Movement, freedom, sensuality, spirit.

### 10) Oscar Niemeyer of Brazil

In Brasilia's Cathedral, Niemeyer shows us once more the search for infinity, the risk of beauty, the happy obsession of the curves, the unending search towards the spiritual.

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We have spoken of the Latin American art, emphasizing its necessity to transcend the material, to reach <sup>the</sup> realm of the spirit, as well as the realm of what is universal and permanent. In its delirious work, the Latin American can secure these aspirations to permanency. I would even say that he considers himself, a predestined.

Perhaps that is the reason why he insists in identifying himself with his own roots, Tamayo, Lam, Matta.

He expands himself from the Pre-Columbian, up the unknown region of a fantastic future, a future that he himself invents.

He is an artist that prefers the unknown to the known, perhaps, we could say, that he dreams a future and an irretreavable past.

He is obsessed by his convulsioned and primary geography.

He believes in the art as a form of premonition. He resembles in this, the scientist that puts names to the unknown, gives titles to the wrinkles of the moon.

x        x        x

In the last generations of Latin American artists, nevertheless, there is a noticeable and marked interest for the art known generally as the School of New York. It is important to note this influence because to some extent it is a deviation of the general characteristic that we have insisted are our own.

I believe that a confrontation of the Latin American spirit, up to now markedly cosmological, with artistic expressions that have their roots in pragmatism, such as characterized the Anglo-Saxon art, tends to pall somehow the innate Latin American tendencies.

If the Latin American art is to survive as such, and to go on contributing to the creative language of the arts, it must dig into his own cosmic soil and find there, the sources of nourishment for his spirit.