

## Octavio Paz and His Essays on Mexican Art.

Lecture by **Erik Somer** on November 12, 2008 for the Danish/Mexican Society in connection with an exhibition of photographs of Octavio Paz at the Mexican Cultural Institute in Copenhagen.

You are sitting here surrounded by pictures of Octavio Paz. With these photographs Octavio Paz also surrounds you all with his human wisdom.

Besides a few words about his life and work this lecture will concentrate on a small fraction of his many-sided activities – what he has told about art and in particular about Mexican art from pre-Columbian times and up to the present.

### Biography.

Octavio Paz Lozano was born in 1914 in Mixcoac, in the outskirts of Mexico City. The house the family lived in, was originally the summer house of his grandfather, a well known newspaper-editor. His father was lawyer and joined Zapata during the Mexican revolution. The family lost most of its fortune during the revolution and this was the reason why they had to move from Mexico City to the dilapidated summer house. The family lived here for many years and here Octavio also became acquainted with literature through his grandfathers rich library.

At the age of 16 Octavio entered San Ildefonso, The National Preparatory School. He became introduced to the art of the modern Mexican muralists (particularly Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros) covering the walls of the school. He also became involved in student life, which as often before and since was of a revolutionary nature. With other students he discussed politics, literature, art and philosophy. He also started to write poetry and became editor of a small literary review, Barandal (Balustrade). The task as editor of intellectual journals followed him through his whole life. The last one – Vuelta – died with Octavio in 1998.



Murals at San Ildefonso

18 years old he joined the university to study law. He also wrote essays about Latin American poets, such as Carlos Pellicer, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda. When he was 22, he abandoned his law studies and left his home in Mixcoac to work as a teacher of peasants and labourers in Mérida.. This lasted only four months. He received a personal telegram from Pablo Neruda asking him to come to Spain during the Civil War for the Second International Congress of Anti-Fascist Writers for the Defence of Culture. The congress was strongly influenced by communists. As Octavio was not a communist, the party was opposed to his participation, but he went there.

He was met by Pablo Neruda, became acquainted with writers from around the world – André Malraux, Antonio Machado, Ilja Ehrenburg and many others. Soon he realized that communists started cruel acts against non-communist supporters of the Republican case against Franco. When the Catalan politician Andreu Nin disappeared he started to investigate the case. He suspected involvement of Commandante Carlos, alias Vitorio Vidali, a leading communist fighter and also living together with the Italian Tina Modotti, a famous photographer, who had been active in Mexico. Commandante Carlos was already involved in the killing of more than 1000 non-communist republicans. Octavio met Tina, who told him that investigating the case of Nin was dangerous for him and could have serious consequences.

After the congress Octavio went to Paris, where he met many famous writers and in particular André Breton, the father of Surrealism. All poems written by Octavio since then were strongly influenced by surrealism.

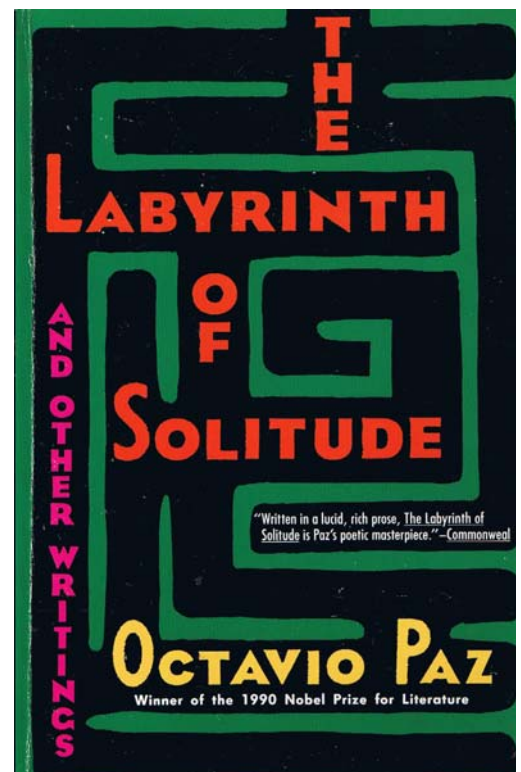
When Octavio came back to Mexico. Lázaro Cárdenas was president. Octavio wrote of him: *"While he was in power, we had the sensation, strange over all, that we were governed by a man, a being like us"*. He invited many exiled intellectuals to Mexico and Octavio made many new contacts. Amongst those was the exiled Soviet writer Victor Serge, who opened his eyes on the realities of life in the Soviet Union and its Gulags..

Despite all of Octavio's literary work, he still had to hold a regular job in order to pay his bills. One of the most unusual involved counting old Mexican pesos before they were burned in a furnace.

In 1942 Octavio went to the United States for studies on a Guggenheim Fellowship and in 1945 he joined the Mexican diplomatic corps. For the next five years he lived and worked in Paris. He again met and renewed friendship with Albert Camus, André Breton and also Jean –Paul Sartre, whom he disliked. In Paris he wrote much poetry as well as prose. By 1950 he was ready to publish his first full-length book of prose, *El laberinto de la soledad*.

Here he explores the history of Mexico, as well as the soul of the Mexican and his habits with fiestas. (In 1969 he added some chapters concerning the latest history of Mexico to a new edition as well as some revisions to earlier editions).

At the end of 1951 he was sent on diplomatic service to India. He spent four months there, deeply impressed by the spiritual sensitivity of the country. Afterwards he was transferred to Japan, whose culture he felt just as exiting as India's.



Octavio Paz had been away from his homeland for nine years when he returned to Mexico in 1952. He said of his return: *"I was reborn when I returned to Mexico in 1952. I was a different poet, a different writer. Had I stayed in 1946, I probably would have drowned in journalism, bureaucracy, or alcohol."* He produced many essays and poetry. He became close friend with the writer Carlos Fuentes.



After spending three more years in France, Octavio returned to India as the Mexican ambassador. During his work in India, the influence of the country on his poetry became more and more evident. Here he also became attracted to a young handsome Frenchwoman Marie-José Tramini. In 1964 they married. He said: *"After being born, that's the most important thing that has happened to me."*

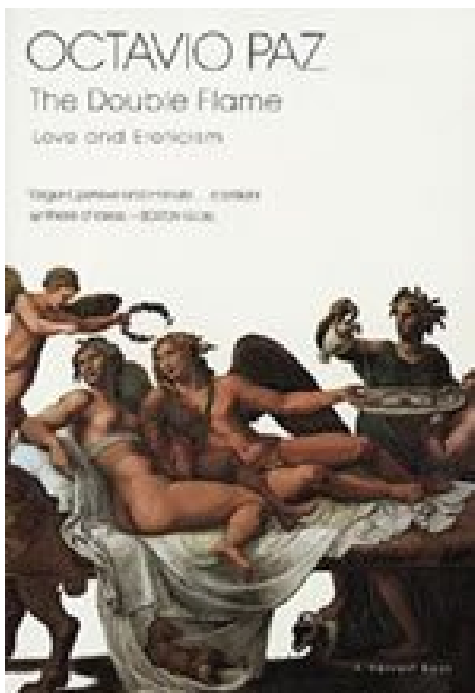
Octavio og Marie-José Paz



Octavio's happy years in India ended with the tragic student massacre in Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968. As a consequence he resigned from government service. He had now the freedom to travel and work as he wished. He spent a year in England teaching at Cambridge University. After a stay in Paris he went to the United States giving lectures at Harvard University. He returned to Mexico in 1971 after 12 years abroad. In the 1970s he released seven books of essays and five books of poetry.

One of his most beloved works after his return was *El mono gramático* (The Monkey Grammarian) published in 1974. It represents Octavio's farewell to India. He combines myths with his personal memories. It takes place amongst the ruins of temples and palaces in Jaipur, where he travelled with his wife. The monkey is the Monkey King, Hanuman, the brave fighter for the king in Ramayana, the old Hindu epos. The book is also a declaration of love to his wife and contains reflections on the nature of language and the meaning of reality.

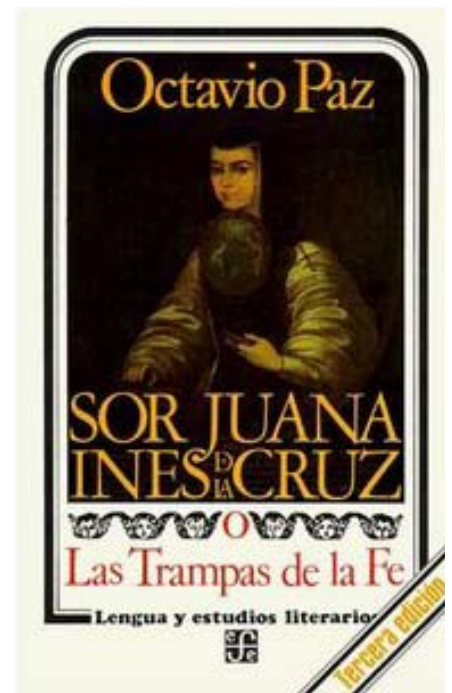
In 1982, he published a biography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a result of 7 years study. This book of more than 500 pages not only tells about the work and poetry of this outstanding woman but also of the art, architecture and daily life in 17<sup>th</sup> century Mexican City.

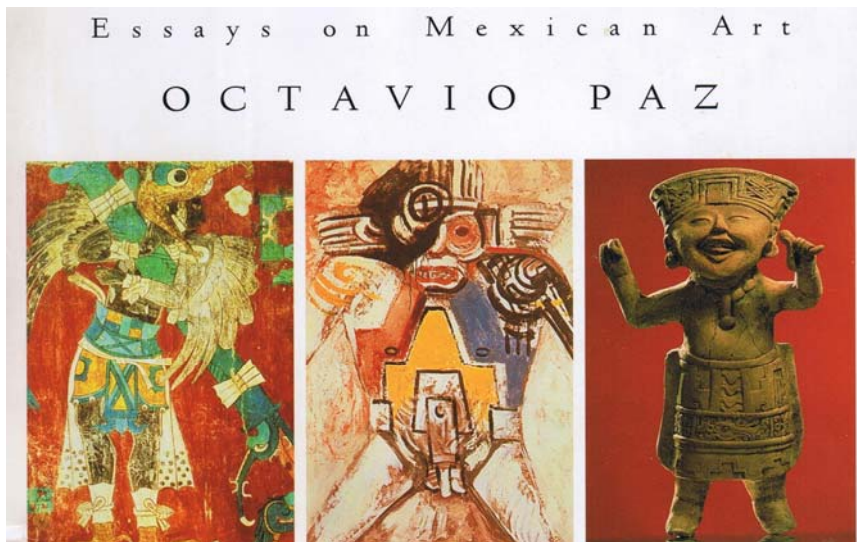


In the following years Octavio got many literary prizes. In 1990 he obtained the Nobel Prize of literature.

In 1993 he published *Essays on Mexican Art* – the subject of my lecture. His last book was *La llama doble* (The Double Flame) 1995. It is a descriptive view through time of the dual nature of sexuality: Love and eroticism.

He died from cancer 19 April 1998.





## Essays on Mexican Art.

The 1993 book with this title has more than 300 pages in Paz' wonderful language (even in translation). I wish I could read all 14 essays for you, but I hope you will be content with a number of samples. As much as possible I will use Paz' own words.

### Relation between the arts in general.

Paz claims that there is an intimate relation between the different expressions of art.

Think of an opera: Song (a combination of poetry and music), ballet, scenography (painting, sculpture and architecture) are here closely related. Paz also includes painting into the combination of poetry and music. He says: "*Symbolism, for instance, has deep-seated affinities with music, painting itself is often regarded as music for the eyes (I am thinking of Monet).*" He quotes Baudelaire, who has constructed a triangle that is a mystery resembling that of the Trinity:

"*Poetry, music and painting are three different arts and yet one and the same true one*". Similarly he finds close relations between architecture and music.

He says: "*The two arts are based on number and proportions....music is architecture made of time*".



Monet: Impression: Soleil Levant



His own introduction into art came when he joined San Ildefonso – The National Preparatory School. He says: "*Each day, as I studied at San Ildefonso, I saw Orozco's murals. With puzzled surprise in the beginning, then later with greater and greater understanding. ... There are also murals by Fernando Real, Fermin Revuelta, Jean Charlot and others.*"

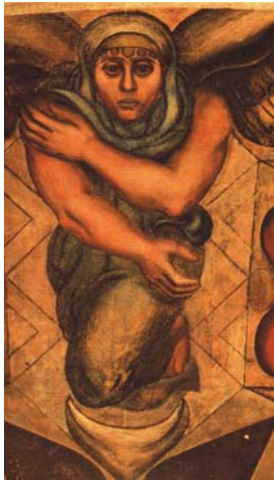


Jean Charlot: The conquest of Tenochtitlan



Orozco: Motherhood



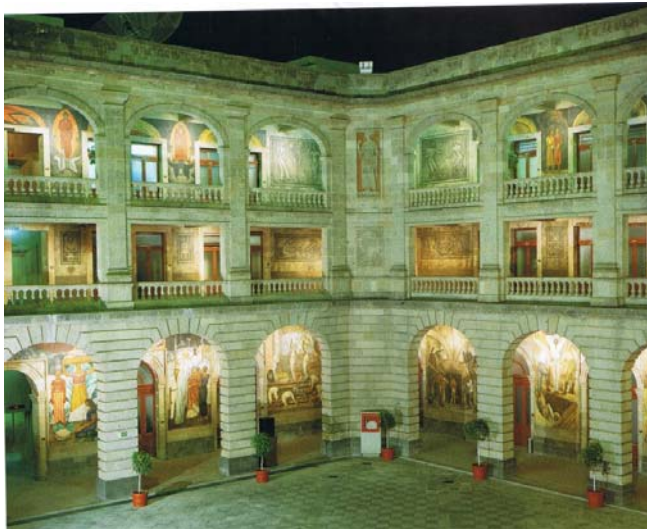


Rivera: The Creation, Bolivar Amphitheater

Siqueiros: The Angel of Wind, San Ildefonso

*“ In the lower school, David Alfaro Siqueiros left a number of murals...they are notable for their almost sculptural energy. In the Bolivar Amphitheater is Diego Rivera’s first mural, full of reminiscences from Picasso to Puvis de Chavannes.”*

*“ A step away from San Ildefonso we could see one of Diego Rivera’s most successful projects, the frescoes in the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP). They are surpassed perhaps only by the chapel of Chapingo.”*



SEP, Court of Labour with Rivera’s murals



Rivera, Chapel of Chapingo

## Pre-Columbian Art.



Paz was highly intrigued by the great statue of Coatlicue, the “Godess of the Serpent Skirt”. He tells about, how it was found and its later fate. *“In 1790 workmen tearing up the pavement of the Main Square in Mexico City discovered a colossal statue. It was immediately taken to the University of Mexico as a “monument of America’s ancient past.” But not for long. after a few months the learned professors decided that it should be reburied because it might revive old beliefs in the Indian’s memories. Only a few notes were taken about this monument and the Aztec calendar stone, found nearby. These notes were not published until 1804 in Rome, where the German explorer Alexander von Humboldt read them. When in Mexico, he asked to be allowed to examine the statue. It was dug up a second time and quickly reburied again. The presence of this gruel statue was unbearable. Many years after Mexico’s independence from Spain it was finally permanently unearthed. It was left in a*

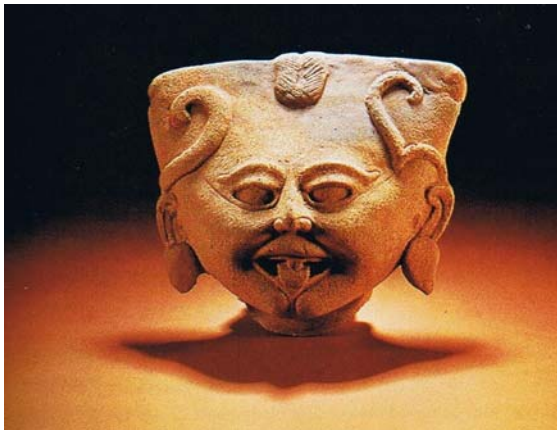
*corner at the University behind a screen, like an object that provoked by turn curiosity and embarrassment. Today she occupies a central place in the National Museum of Antropology.*

*The fate of Coatlicue – turning from goddess into demon, from demon into monster, and from monster into masterpiece – illustrates the changes in our sensibility over the last four hundred years.*

In his further discussions concerning Coatlicue he points out that while all the great cultures of the Old World have had mutual contacts, the American civilisations were different, isolated from the Old World. *“This difference is radical: it constitutes a real **otherness**.”* As Mexican he realises that to recognise this involves a paradox: *“The bridge between myself and the other is based not on a similarity but on a difference. What links us is not a bridge, but an abyss. Humankind is a plurality: human beings.”* He finds that the Mexican Revolution was an attempt, only partly successful, to reestablish the ties with the “others”. *“We discovered in the words of the poet López Velarde to be a Castilian and Moorish land with Aztec streaks”.*

He remarks that there has been a continuity in cultures of Mesoamerica over more than 4000 years and over a wide space from the birth of the first neolithic settlements until the destruction in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## Laughter and Penitence.



Octavio Paz sits in his room where the sun shines through slits in the blinds of the window. *“The sun looks at an object on a bookshelf – a little head with feline eyes, topped by a cap that accentuates the deformation of the forehead, a dimple and two incisions on the cheek. It laughs and looks back on the sun without blinking.”* This is Paz’ introduction to figures of the Totonac-culture. He discusses what the laughter expresses, finds that these figures are associated with some sort of festivity and comes to the conclusion that the festivity included a sacrificial killing of victims. He says” *that this relationship between laughter and sacrifice goes back as*

*far in history as ritual itself. It is found in the bloody violence of bacchanalia and saturnalia. Laughter shakes the universe. Terrifying laughter is a divine manifestation. Laughter is also what we find in connection with caricatures. As Mexican he thinks of José Guadalupe Posada, at some Orosco’s and the most direct and fierce Tamayo.”*

## Reflections of an Intruder.

Archaeologists use terms for the different periods of the civilization of ancient Mexico such as pre-classic, classic and post-classic. Paz finds these terms for too vague and confused. In particular he has never believed that the so-called classical period of the Mayas was a peaceful theocracy, which earlier has been the opinion of specialists in Mexican history such as Morley and Thompson. He is greatly



impressed by the significance of the findings by Linda Scheele and Mary Ellen Miller in their book *“The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art (1986).”* *“A work notable both for the text and for the illustrations and drawings that accompany it...revolutionary”.* He tells about the decipherment of Mayan writing, which has made it possible to reconstruct the dynastic history of various Mayan cities. All these discoveries have caused the disappearance of the earlier hypothesis of “peaceful theocracies”. War was the duty of kings and nobility. The prisoners fate was sacrifice. Also the ball game was connected with sacrifice. Paz mentions a relief in the ball court in Chichén-Itzá, where the winner of the game holds the decapitated head of the loser.



Also royalty makes sacrifices by bloodletting. Paz discusses a number of examples. One example is found on a relief from Yaxchilán., to-day in the British Museum.



(copyright and courtesy President Harward University)

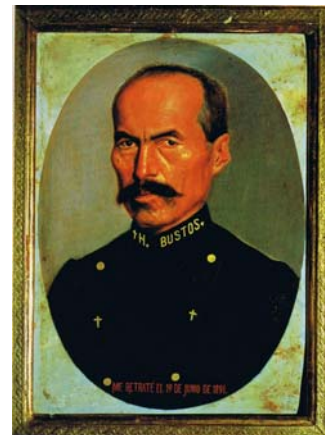
*"It is a stylized portrait of King Jaguar Shield and his consort. The king's head is covered with a plumed head dress, and he is carrying on his back the shrunken head of a sacrificed victim. He holds an enormous torch, doubtless because the ceremony was held at night or in an underground chamber... Queen Xoc is kneeling, dressed elaborately: a diadem, a sleeveless blouse, earrings. She is pulling through her perforated tongue a long cord with thorns. The rope falls into a basket containing blood-soaked paper. The glyphs indicate the day of the ceremony (October 28, 709), the names of the penitents, and the ritual ceremony of taking blood from one's own body."*

### **Hermenegildo Bustos, an Indian Village Painter.** I quote:

*"As I was preparing to write these pages on Hermenegildo Bustos, I thought about his story again and marveled. How to explain it? We are accustomed to seeing in every fact the consequence of other facts, which, linked together, determine it... But the appearance of the painter Hermenegildo Bustos in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, confronts us*

*with a really extraordinary fact. Bustos is neither heir nor the initiator of a pictorial movement. His art begins with him and ends with him. Bustos lived in the village of La Purísima del Rincón in the state of Guanajuato, founded in 1603 and inhabited by Otomi and Tarascan Indians. He was probably born in 1832. He was married at an early age. The marriage was childless and not harmonious. He had several mistresses and children with them. He was handy with all sorts of tools and had an amazing variety of occupations: an ice cream vendor, healer, keeper of a garden and orchard, pawnbroker, musician, tinsmith, construction foreman, carpenter, sculptor and painter. He grew leeches for bloodletting and rented them out. He was a tailor and made himself his suits..... We would not remember him, had it not been for his*

Autoportrait



*excellence as a painter... His works evolved in three directions, painting and murals based on religious subjects, ex-votos and portraits.... Bustos deserves to be remembered for what he really was: an extraordinary portraitist. Bustos was almost forgotten. Only after 1930 we hear about him. Some of his critics call his work primitive, but there is nothing primitive about his portraits."*



## Mural Painting.

Paz made an interview on French television on Mexican Murals. He later on revised it and added 30 pages to a total of 55 pages. I can here only touch on some of the main issues.

He discusses the importance of the Mexican Revolution for the Muralist movement:



*"Without the Mexican Revolution mural painting would not have existed... Our revolution brought forth, as in the delivery of a child, an unknown Mexico. Except that the child, that was born in 1920, had existed for centuries: it was the popular and traditional Mexico, hidden by the previous regime...the revolution revealed Mexico to us. Or better put: it made us look back so to see it...This was the idea, that inspired the new regime and particularly the Minister of Public Education, José Vasconcelos. A man of genius. He summoned artists to collaborate in the task of remaking Mexico. He also believed in freedom and therefore forced no aesthetic or ideological dogma on the artists...."*

*Mexican Muralism owes a great many debts to modern European painting. It must not be forgotten that Diego Rivera spent fifteen years in Europe. He took part in the artistic life of Paris. Rivera's case, moreover, was not unique.... Rivera's art does not spring from within himself. In Rivera there is great ability, but never passion. Exterior painting, the diametrical of Orozco's.*

*Siqueiros was a great inventor of forms, but his ideological simplemindedness works to his detriment....All the painters began with subjects derived from Christian iconography: the Pantocrator, virgins, saints...Only later, under the influence of Siqueiros and Rivera, did it turn into an ideological art... Apart from their ideological similarities their personalities are diametrically opposite. The difference between them lies in the fact that Siqueiros' personality belongs to melodrama and Rivera's to farce. Rivera had something of a clown about him... Siqueiros' political career was reprehensible, at least to a man of my conviction. Rivera's was lamentable and inconsistent.*



Rivera: The Arsenal, SEP. 1928

Orozco was Paz' favorite and he is also mine. There is an essay in the book which exclusively deals with Orozco. I cannot choose between all the most interesting details of this essay. It could easily be the subject of a separate lecture, so I leave it with the quotations and pictures already given.

Orozco, Prometheus,  
Pomona College, Los Angeles  
1930.





## Rufino Tamayo (1899-1991).

There are two essays about Tamayo in the book. Again, I am only able to give a few details of what Paz has to say about this brilliant painter. He is also worth a whole lecture. I quote:

*"To paint, for Tamayo, was and is to learn to see, to sharpen his gaze so as to penetrate reality and discover its innermost recesses. As he starts on his path, he had to discard the stylized idea of reality offered him by the Mexican painters of the previous generation.... By Tamayo's time, mural painting had already been converted from a spontaneous search into a school. It soon degenerated into a formula... Tamayo's first period... includes a number of compositions... that reveal an affinity with Mexican painting in this period. It is his debt to the Muralists, and, in particular, to Orozco. He soon parts permanently with this highly rhetorical manner."*



Tamayo, Planes, 1925



Tamayo, Still Life, 1928

*"Between 1926 and 1938 he paints many oils and gouaches.. that place him in Cézanne's lineage. Later he will arrive at Braque and Picasso..."*



Tamayo: Woman weeping. 1941



Tamayo: Man with flower. 1989

*Tamayo's great creative period begins around 1940 in New York. He lived there for about 20 years. He lives in Paris for a time and in 1960 he returns to Mexico, where he settles permanently... For Tamayo painting is the translation of the world into the language of the senses..."*

### **Loners and Independents.** I quote:

*“Between 1930 and 1940, as I have pointed out several times, a reaction against Muralism takes place. The name of Tamayo is a focal point, but not the only one. A group of painters, each on his own account and without constituting a school follow other part: Amongst them is Carlos Mérida, as well as two remarkable women: Frida Kahlo and Maria Izquierdo.”*

*“Carlos Mérida (1891-1984) proved to have an intelligent artistic independence toward the ideological art of Rivera and Siqueiros, as well as toward Orozco’s Expressionism.... He was a great connoisseur of the avant-garde movements in Europe as well as of Maya-art (He was of Guatemalan origin). Two words define this excellent painter: intelligence and sensitivity, expressed through precise draftsmanship and clear, sharp colours”.*



Carlos Merida, Fireflies and bonfires. 1921



Carlos Mérida, Summer, 1981

### **Frida Kahlo (1907-1954).**

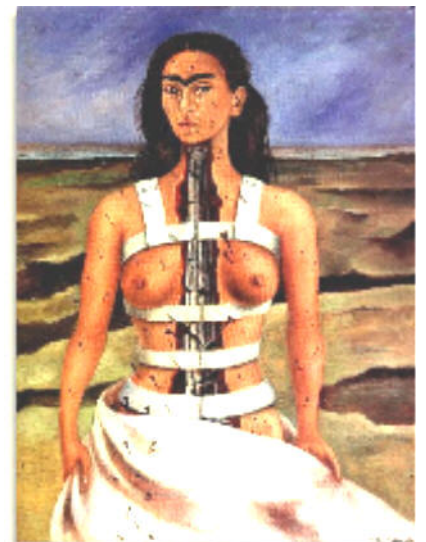
Frida Kahlo, Diego, Me and Señor Xolotl



*“Frida was an artist at once limited and intense, almost always her form was perfect, and that perfection made her dreams, sex, death burn with sumptuous violence.*

Octavio Paz says about the relation between Frida and her husband Diego Rivera: *“ Her relationship with Diego – a fat , spongy figure – was that of a young boy to his immense, oceanic mother.*

Frida Kahlo, The broken column, 1944



*With tremendous originality and mastery, Frida assimilated in her painting the lesson of Surrealist art. Frida endures a great deal of pain. She was brave and she was narcissistic. At times, I must confess, her pathos worries me: It moves me but it does not attract me”.*



**Maria Izquierdo.**  
(1902-1955)

*"Frida and Maria were contemporaries, but their personalities were very different and their works develop in opposite directions. Both of them are indebted to Surrealism, and both of them have a marked preference for Mexican subjects....Maria was a self-made woman, with a bit of help from her lovers, her fellow painters, and certain writers who were on friendly terms with her. Frida had masculine tendencies, while Maria*



Maria Izquierdo, The Cicus, 1939

*was the exact opposite, profoundly feminine. Frida, active: Maria, passive. Maria painted still lifes, landscapes and circus motives. She was influenced by European painting."*

**Manuel Álvarez Bravo.(1902-2002)** *"Bravo's photographic art is essentially poetic in its bare realism, abounds in apparently simple images, which contain other images or produce other realities. At times the image is sufficient unto itself: at other times it uses the title as a bridge that helps us to proceed from one reality to another. For instance in the "Portrait of the Eternal". What is "Eternal" here? The woman sitting combing her hair and raising sparks from her dark hair or the look as she gazes at herself in her little mirror? The woman looks at herself and we look at her looking at herself. Perhaps that is what "the eternal" is: looking at herself, being looked at, looking. The spark, the flash, the brightness, the light in her eyes that ask, desire, contemplate, understand. To see: to shed light, to shed light on oneself.*

*There is another photo, that can be seen as – or rather that is – the visual response to the unformulated question of the first one. On a*



*at a wall we see the traces of a hand. The wall already defaced by shadows, human beings, time. The simplicity of the title "Wall with hand" emphasizes the complexity between humans and things: hands that are acts that are traces that are days."*



Bravo, Wall with Hand, 1940s?

Bravo, Portrait of the Eternal, 1935

Here ends my lecture. In these essays, **Paz makes art, philosophy, religion and the history of the world converge as he celebrates the richness of Mexico.**