

Latin American Artists in the Art Institute



The Earth Is a Man (1942) by Matta

GALLERY 398

Greatly affected by the execution of his friend and renowned Spanish poet Federico García Lorca in 1936, Chilean artist Roberto Matta expressed his grief and anger with an experimental screenplay entitled *The Earth Is a Man*. The emotional, apocalyptic text became the principal source of Matta's highly conceptual paintings, culminat-

ing with this piece of the same name. Matta aimed to visually represent various states of consciousness in his paintings, calling the often turbulent forms “Inscapes” or “Psychological Morphologies.” His Surrealist-inspired, biomorphic style profoundly influenced American Abstract Expressionists, including Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell.



Study for *The Jungle* (1942) by Wifredo Lam

GALLERY 397

This study belongs to a series of works related to *The Jungle*, Wifredo Lam's Cubist masterpiece and major statement about his rediscovery of African Cuba. Although none of the forms in this study match up exactly with those in the final version, it's easy to identify several motifs that made it into *The Jungle*. Lam depicts nude “hybrid” figures with multiple faces and disproportioned features, a tropical environment that mixes trees and foliage with human limbs, and a pair of threatening scissors. Just as in his

seminal work, the sexualized imagery in the study expresses both the material exploitation of Cuba and the threat of emasculation posed to the West by the more “primitive” society. Lam embraced these Afro-Cuban themes, opening a new, culturally aware perspective on modernity.



“Untitled” (1989) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

GALLERY 291

Cuban-born American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres consistently created work that merged the public and private spheres. *“Untitled,”* a self-portrait in the form of painted words and dates, blends historical events and personal milestones into a running text along the ceiling's edge. This commemorative form dates back to traditional friezes on

ancient temples as well as the façade of the Art Institute's Allerton Building, where artists' names are chiseled around the exterior. Unlike a painting or sculpture, *“Untitled”* evolves during every installation—events may be added (or subtracted) to keep the work both relevant and dynamic. In this way, Gonzalez-Torres grants himself and his work a form of perpetually renewable life.



Portrait of Marevna (c. 1915) by Diego Rivera

GALLERY 271

Though famous for his murals depicting Mexican political and cultural life, Diego Rivera earlier enjoyed a brief, but brilliant, career as a Cubist painter. After studying in Mexico City, the artist traveled to Europe in 1907 and, during World War I, joined a group of Cubist painters that included Albert Gleizes, Juan Gris, and Jean Metzinger. This dramatic portrait depicts Rivera's lover at the time, the Russian painter and writer Marevna Vorobëv-Stebelska, identified by her blunt blond bob and prominent nose.

Choosing a rich and somber palette, Rivera employed color to indicate depth, the brighter tones appearing closer while darker hues recede to the background.



Zapata (1930) by José Clemente Orozco

GALLERY 263

Together with his fellow muralists Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco charged his work with political and social meaning. In this painting portraying the revered rebel commander Emiliano Zapata, Orozco curiously placed the heroic figure in the background, focusing instead on the people for and with whom Zapata fought—oppressed peasants and courageous soldiers. Additionally, by placing a sword just under Zapata's eye,

Orozco alludes to the leader's vulnerability and eventual assassination. Radically defying the traditions of heroic portraiture, Orozco highlights the cause and community for which Zapata gave his life rather than glorifying the leader himself.



Woman with a Bird Cage (1941) by Rufino Tamayo

GALLERY 263

While the major Mexican muralists focused their art on political and social issues, Rufino Tamayo believed that painting should be concerned first and foremost with color, form, and lyrical expression. The Oaxaca native developed his own unique style that blended pre-Columbian art traditions with the modernist innovations of Georges Braque, Paul Cézanne, and Pablo Picasso. His singular fusion is exemplified in *Woman with a Bird Cage*.

The fragmented planes of the woman's face and upper body draw on Cubism while the exaggerated features and sculptural weight stem from West Mexican terracotta figures. A big fan of such ceramics and sculpture, Tamayo donated his collection of over 1,000 pieces to the people of Oaxaca as the Museo de Arte Prehispánico in 1974.

Find more works by Mexican artists including Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros in the special exhibition *Modern in America: Works on Paper, 1900–1950s* through April 4.

And please join us on March 6 at 12:00 for “Artists Connect: Stephanie Brooks Connects with Felix Gonzalez-Torres” and on May 20 at 6:00 for a lecture by Luis Pérez-Oramas, Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.