

MORE THAN MURALS

THE STORY OF

MEXICAN MODERNISM

IS BEING RETOLD AS COLLECTORS DISCOVER THE
RICH VARIETY OF LESS WELL-KNOWN ARTISTS.

BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ



Ángel Zárraga,
La Femme et le Pantin
(*The Woman and the*
Puppet), 1909.



MUSEO BLAISTEN; POMONA COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

Despite the standard art-history-book summary of Mexican modernism, there actually is much more to this colorful subject than the works, emblematic though they might be, of *Los Tres Grandes* (The Three Great Ones)—Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. Their epoch-defining murals painted in the decades following the 1910–20 revolution that ousted the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz gave enduring expression to a proud people’s still-emerging sense of national identity. In the 1920s they began painting the large-scale murals in schools and government buildings that would become indelibly associated with their names and with uniquely Mexican interpretations of such seminal European modernist movements as Post-Impressionism and Cubism.

With the fall of the Díaz regime, which had suppressed civil rights and allowed wealthy landowners and industrialists to exploit struggling laborers, a new administration put forth a reformist agenda. José Vasconcelos, the federal government’s public education secretary in the early 1920s, supported public art projects like those of the muralists to educate the masses about Mexico’s history and to foster a sense of modern Mexican national identity based on democratic values.

Rivera, a member of the Mexican Communist Party, and Siqueiros, a Marxist who helped establish an artists’ union in 1923, imbued their murals with a socialist spirit. Their political agendas could be detected in their handling of such subject matter as the Spanish conquest of their homeland’s indigenous peoples and the complex history of the Mexican Revolution. The public works they—along with Orozco and several other art-



ists—created well into the late 1940s and ’50s became known collectively as the “Mexican Mural Renaissance.”

Nationalistic in spirit and propagandistic in purpose, the muralists’ grand creations were supported by the state. With such backing, the attitude and the technical character of their works came to define for foreign viewers, and to dictate to their fellow artmakers at home, just what Mexican modern art should look like, the subjects it should address and what it should say. Theirs was a stylized social realism—not to be confused with Soviet-style socialist realism—with little room for abstraction.

Of course, Mexican artists also produced works influenced by Symbolism, Surrealism and other styles and movements. Artists like Frida Kahlo, Rivera’s wife, developed deeply personal modes of image making. Still, the heroic murals cast a long shadow—even over the muralists’ other works. Today, oil paintings, watercolors and drawings by Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco have become pricey and rare. Like Kahlo’s paintings, which have enjoyed a boom in the market and earned a feminist-mystical place in the pop-culture arena,



From left: María Izquierdo, *El Idilio* (*The Idyll*), 1946; Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, *La Ramera* (*The Whore*), 1927; José Clemente Orozco, *Prometheus*, 1930, fresco mural.

they lure ever-higher bids at auction when they do turn up.

But there are other Mexican artists whose works deserve critical attention and who also contributed to modernism's distinctive inflections in Mexico in the 20th century. "Ángel Zárraga, Alfonso Michel, María Izquierdo, Alfredo Ramos Martínez—these are just a few of the noteworthy Mexican modernists who were known in their time but who later fell into relative oblivion," says the Mexico City-based businessman and collector Andrés Blaisten, whose respected Blaisten Collection of many hundreds of paintings, sculptures and works on paper is considered the most valuable holding of Mexican modernist art anywhere in private hands. He adds, "Unlike Rivera and



the others, these artists did not benefit from the state-sponsored muralist movement and enjoy the fame that came with it." In 2007, Blaisten, who began collecting almost three decades ago, allowed a rotating selection of more than 130 works from his holdings to go on permanent display at the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco in north-central Mexico City. Curated by James Oles, a Mexican art-history specialist who teaches at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, this exhibition makes a powerful argument for the richness and diversity of Mexican modern art that stretches far beyond the central themes and familiar styles of the famous muralists' iconic works.

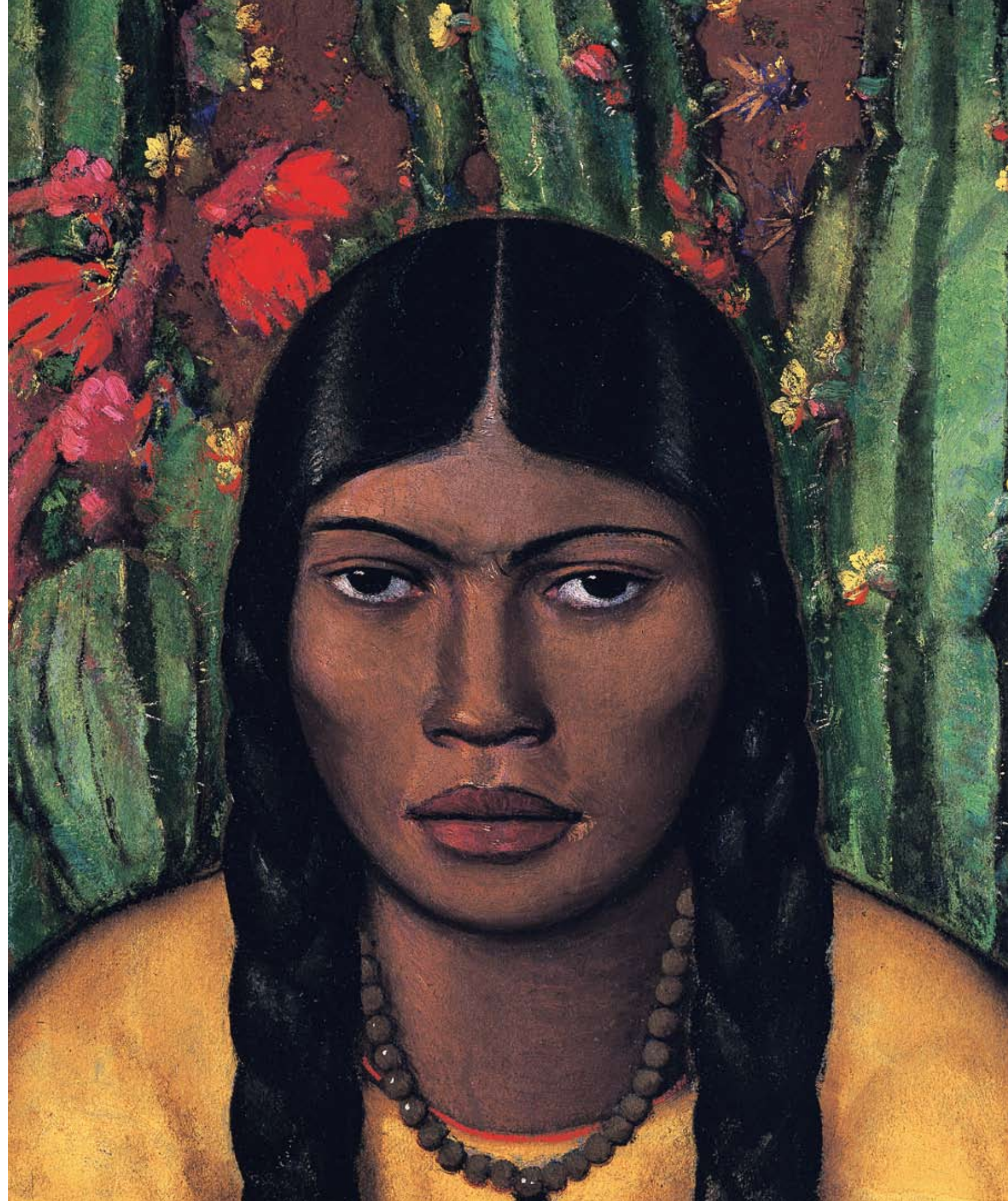
"With his in-depth, passionate way of collecting, Blaisten has changed the way we regard many of these less well-known artists," says Mariana Pérez Amor, codirector of Galería de Arte Mexicano, one of Mexico City's most

venerable galleries. Founded nearly 75 years ago by Pérez Amor's aunt, Carolina Amor, and run by her late mother, the legendary dealer Inés Amor, "GAM," as the gallery is known, has represented or handled the work of just about every major Mexican modernist. Among them are Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, Rufino Tamayo, the landscape painter Gerardo Murillo (who was known as "Dr. Atl"), photographer Tina Modotti and the Guatemalan-born painter-muralist Carlos Mérida, who moved to Mexico in 1919 and went on to earn a lasting place in his adopted country's modernist canon. "Blaisten is motivated by his love of the works he acquires," says Pérez Amor, "but an unmistakable side effect of seriously going after works others have overlooked and bringing them into a distinguished collection is that their market values may increase, even as their aesthetic worth is more deeply appreciated."

Blaisten points to the works of Izquierdo (1902–55), who brought Surrealist influences into her art after meeting the French playwright, poet and theater director Antonin Artaud in Mexico City in the 1930s. With their broad, brushy passages of thick color and sometimes-unusual perspectives, Izquierdo's still lifes and seemingly ordinary scenes can seem charged with restless energy. Blaisten, who argues that Frida Kahlo's work has probably become famous more because of its creator's notorious personality than for its inherent aesthetic qualities, believes Izquierdo, although still largely overlooked, "is really the most important female painter among the Mexican modernists."

In fact, a catalogue that has been published to document a portion of the collector's considerable holdings points out that, as a female artist, Izquierdo "suffered" because of the "monopoly" the "Three Great Ones" had on government-sponsored mural projects. The book notes that Rivera and Siqueiros "blocked her efforts to paint murals in Mexico City." Be that as it may, when Izquierdo was a student there in the late 1920s, Rivera himself had lauded her work, and in 1930 she became the first female Mexican artist to present a solo exhibition in New York. Later, Izquierdo would observe that she had sidestepped overtly political themes because they did not "have expressive or poetic strength."

Other artists featured in Blaisten's collection include Zárraga (1886–1946), whose 1909 oil-on-canvas *The Woman and the Puppet* offers a dark stirring of Symbolism's literary-theatrical airs. In the picture, Zárraga, who came from a well-to-do family and studied and showed his work in Europe in the early 1900s, depicts a nude young woman sporting only jewelry and a mantilla around her neck and, attached to strings she can manipulate, a grimacing, man-marionette in garish makeup—the aristocratic lover she has seduced and dominated, wearing a costume that symbolizes his humiliation. Mérida's 1919 oil-on-canvas *Mayor of Almolonga* presents a vivid example of



MUSEO BLAISTEN

From left: Julio Ruelas, *La Domadora (The Dominatrix)*, 1897; Alfredo Ramos Martínez, *Mancacoyota*, 1930.



the way regional artists used the era’s styles and techniques to render local subjects “modern”; here, the painter portrays a male figure using broad, Matisse-like passages of bright, flat color and simple outlines to define his towering form. Only his traditional, embroidered shirt boasts pattern and detail. Mérida (1891–1994) would go on to become known for boldly colored geometric abstractions. He made paintings, prints and works on paper, including precise, preliminary sketches for large-scale murals.

Dreamy in spirit and sometimes richly textured, the canvases of Michel (1897–1957) clearly show their roots in Cubism and other early 20th-century European approaches to painting. Like most Mexican modernists, Michel never went completely nonfigurative. Recognizable subjects, some more obviously Mexican than others—a female nude holding a traditional fan, Day of the Dead skulls—turn up even in his most abstract pictures. Ramos Martínez (1871–1946) also employed modernist techniques, especially a reduction of his subject matter—Mexico’s indigenous peoples were a regular theme—to simple, strongly outlined forms.

By contrast, artists like José Luis Cuevas, Lilia Carrillo, Francisco Toledo and Alberto Gironella, who came to prominence in the 1950s and ’60s, represent what Mexican art historians refer to as the generation of *La Ruptura*, or The Rupture. Rejecting the didactic, nationalistic celebration

of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) emphasized earlier by the muralists, some of these younger artmakers produced gestural abstractions that called attention to the textures of paint on canvas. Others did not abandon the human figure; Cuevas, imbuing his art with a heightened sense of psychological awareness, made himself the subject of many of his works—he is seen posing for self-portraits, working in his studio and, often, frolicking in bed with a female lover-playmate-muse. “Cuevas was three years old when he drew his first self-portrait,” explains Manuel Alegría, curator of the José Luis Cuevas Museum in Mexico City. “His work has always been deeply personal and has had nothing to do with the more common themes of Mexican modern art.”

In recent years, especially as works by Mexico’s best-known modern masters have fetched prices in the millions of dollars at auctions in the U.S., collectors interested in Mexican modernism have, like Blaisten, sought pieces by accomplished but less-familiar painters and sculptors. GAM’s Pérez Amor points out, “After World War II numerous Americans moved to Mexico, and they bought works by both well-known stars like Rivera and Siqueiros and by other talented modern artists. Over time, some took those pieces back to the United States. Now, many of the works American collectors acquired in those days are coming to auction in the U.S.”

However, according to Pérez Amor, if an artwork cre-


ated by a Mexican artist is in Mexico and has been classified by the National Institute of Fine Arts as part of the nation’s cultural patrimony, it cannot be exported. If it is brought into the country from abroad it cannot leave again. As a result, although collectors might want to acquire Mexican modernist works, they might be dissuaded from going after them if their handling of such pieces will be legally constrained. “The government doesn’t understand that freedom of movement for works of art is vital in the international art market,” Pérez Amor says.

One result of the art establishment’s long-standing focus on the famous muralists of the early 20th century and of the freedom-of-movement restriction appears to be a proliferation of fakes. Santiago Toca, a young art dealer in Mexico City, says, “Landmark pieces by Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco and Kahlo have been harder and harder to locate, and their prices have soared. Further complicating the market are the high numbers of fake Rivera and Siqueiros works that are floating around.” Toca notes that he routinely receives inquiries about pieces that turn out to be fakes. (Pérez Amor says that she does, too.) Toca adds, “Unfortunately, the three big-name muralists for so long have long overshadowed other noteworthy Mexican artists who came before or after them, that, even now, some people would rather buy a dubious Siqueiros or Rivera than acquire a superb piece by another, less-famous artist.”

In fact, savvy collectors are starting to make sense of—and establish new values in—the Mexican-modernist field. At Christie’s Latin American sale in New York last November, Ramos Martínez’s circa 1930 oil-on-canvas *The Twins*, depicting the side-by-side faces of two indigenous Mexican women, sold for \$698,500 including the buyer’s premium. Toca recommends scouring Mexico City’s antiques shops for overlooked modernist works that could turn out to be valuable.

Elsewhere, there are also whole bodies of Mexican modernist works that are still waiting to be discovered, documented and brought to market. Take, for instance, the art of Fernando Ramos Prida, a grandnephew of Ramos Martínez who died in 2007. In his late works, Ramos Prida developed a distinctive, painting-carving technique that he used to create semiabstract tableaux. The compositions were marked by a deeply personal iconography that included skulls, birds and human faces that obliquely alluded to such enduring Mexican folk themes as death and the forces of nature. They also reflected the spirit of Art Brut (deeply expressive paintings, sculptures or carvings made by isolated autodidacts). In the last decade of his life Ramos Prida had withdrawn from the art world. His widow, Clara Ramos, says, “As a young man, Fernando was very friendly with Carlos Mérida, with whom he enjoyed a meaningful artistic dialogue. In addition to whatever aesthetic value Fernando’s work may hold, it is also a carrier of so much history.”



The Argentine critic Damián Bayón, in a survey of Latin American art history published in Mexico in 1974, noted that the decline of the muralism movement marked the end of an act in the “great play of history, which ... we are always interpreting.” Bayón’s focus was on art history, whose abundant legacy is always up for reevaluation. Thanks to the efforts of private collectors like Blaisten and a growing interest in Mexico’s other significant modernists, a new, more inclusive and complete interpretation of modern Mexican art history is being formulated—right now. 

Bond Latin Gallery, San Francisco
415.362.1480 bondlatin.com

Gary Nader Gallery, Miami
305.576.0256 garynader.com

Latin American Masters, Santa Monica, Calif.
310.829.4455 latinamericanmasters.com

Mary-Anne Martin Fine Art, New York
212.288.2213 mamfa.com

From left: Alfonso Michel, *Naturaleza Muerte (Still Life)*, circa 1954; Carlos Mérida, *Untitled*.

MUSEO BLAISTEN; OPPOSITE: BOND LATIN