Transnational Transitions: Rufino Tamayo and the Cultural Politics of the Mexican Couple
In 1926 Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo inaugurated his international artistic career with his first individual shows, one in Mexico City and the other in New York City.\(^1\) Peculiarly, the young artist included in both shows two works bearing the same title and subject matter. The painting *Man and Woman* (Figure 1), today in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was showcased as an example of the artist’s oeuvre in a rented storefront at Avenida Madero 66 in Mexico City in April of that year. The homonymous print (Figure 2), one impression of which is preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was included in the solo exhibition held at the Weyhe Gallery in New York City just six months later, decorating the frontispiece of the show’s brochure.

Figure 1: Rufino Tamayo, *Man and Woman*, 1926, oil on canvas, 69.8 x 70.2 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

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Both works depict a Mexican peasant couple and emphasize the indigenous phenotypical traits emerging from their mixed ethnic origins, or *mestizaje*, by adopting some of the essentializing tropes through which Mexican people were represented at that time on both sides of the border. Morphing in medium, format, and rendition, the image of the Mexican couple frames the inception of Tamayo’s transnational trajectory and responds, in different ways, to the politics of representation in Mexico and the United States. This paper discusses the two iterations of *Man and Woman* in relation to the state-sponsored ideologies that celebrated rural, *mestizo* Mexicans as embodiments of the nation in post-revolutionary Mexico on the one hand, and on the other the primitivizing myth of “otherness” that motivated a fascination for all things Mexican during the 1920s in the United States.

Although visually different and produced for distinct audiences, these two works evoke a realm of purity and timelessness. In the aftermath of the bloody revolution that tore Mexico apart between 1910 and 1920, the Mexican government sponsored a broad cultural project to endow the state with stable, all-encompassing myths of origin. These myths celebrated Mexico’s pre-Hispanic past, as well as the alleged
survival of this history in rural folk art and the bodies of mestizos who displayed indigenous phenotypical traits. Indeed, the generic title Man and Woman, the physical closeness of the two figures, and their marked features link Tamayo’s works with the rhetoric of Mexican intellectuals like Manuel Gamio and José Vasconcelos, who celebrated the native Mexican traits common among the poor, rural classes as physical and spiritual links to a remote past unique to Mexico. Several Mexican artists fostered this conflation of indigenous ethnic traits, rural work, and nationalist narratives by personifying the newly reunified Mexican land in dark-skinned figures symbolizing fertility and prosperity, such as in Diego Rivera’s 1925 painting Flower Day (Figure 3).

At the same time, North American collectors and institutions had started to create a taste for Mexican pre-colonial art and contemporary popular artifacts, valuing them as manifestations of “authentic” ways of life conducted in isolation from progress and modernity. Mexican modern art was still just beginning to be shown at the time of Tamayo’s visit to New York, and, when it was exhibited, it was often featured alongside archaeological and anthropological works, as in the case of Rivera’s solo show at the Modern Gallery in 1916. Entertaining the fantasy that their geographical neighbours inhabited completely non-industrial and non-urban environments, North American museum-goers and tourists idealized Mexico as an uncivilized land permeated by an ancestral mysticism and connected with nature. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, American-based artists like Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Marsden Hartley, and Josef and Anni Albers travelled to Mexico, incorporating in their works signs of their attraction to Mexico’s pre-Hispanic past, folkloric traditions, and dramatic landscapes through representations of subjects such as Mayan pyramids, Oaxacan jars, and volcanoes.

Both versions of Tamayo’s Man and Woman visually reiterate these tropes. The intense crimson colour of the painting connotes the Mexican landscape as a volcanic

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4 For a study of this subject see Helen Delpar, The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015).


realm, which in turn projects a sense of primordiality onto the couple. Similarly, the bold incisions in the woodcut make the mountains appear as if they were either covered in lush vegetation or submerged by streams of lava, conveying an impression of abundance and drama. Indeed, Tamayo’s double portrait of a heterosexual couple evokes both the myths of origin that constellated the post-revolutionary art scene in Mexico and the North American conception of Mexico as a primitive, ancient place. At once evoking the Edenic couple and the last representatives of a lost civilization, the figures in these works activate conceptually divergent but visually compatible tropes. A similar ambiguity characterizes the reception of Tamayo’s work, which was consistently labelled according to his Zapotec ancestry. Despite the different social and cultural standings that Tamayo held in his native country and abroad, and regardless of the fact that he could not speak any native Mexican languages and had grown up in the major provincial town of Oaxaca, critics in Mexico and the United States attributed the powerful expressivity of Tamayo’s work to his ethnic lineage, heralding him as either a direct embodiment of Mexico’s history or a mysterious “noble savage.”

Because of his experience of essentialization, Tamayo was likely aware of the exclusionary nature of the tropes governing the images of Mexican people in this period. I argue that the differences between Tamayo’s two versions of Man and Woman correspond to his attunement to the varying connotations attached to the figure of the Mexican peasant on both sides of the border, in turn demonstrating the artist’s critical engagement with the same clichés that came to label his own work as “innately” Mexican. While Tamayo’s portrayal of the Mexican couple seems to align his work with propagandistic or primitivizing artistic trends, both the painting and the print visually undermine the biases that conflated the mestizo peasant with either nationalist discourses in Mexico or some sort of primordial state of innocence in the United States.

This project not only complicates the scholarship on Tamayo, which, with some exceptions, generally neglects the politicized aspects of his work and does not address his challenge to visual taxonomies of race, but it also underscores Tamayo’s sensitivity to the different cultural and political connotations with which artists operating on a transnational scale have had (and continue to have) to come to terms. I will first discuss Tamayo’s painting in light of the cultural politics of post-revolutionary Mexico, and then compare

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7 For an early discussion of the relation between Tamayo’s work and his alleged Zapotec background, see Robert Goldwater, Rufino Tamayo (New York: Quadrangle Press, 1947). For an analysis of the slippery grounds on which the myth of Tamayo’s “otherness” was built, see Teresa del Conde, “The Words of Others” in Rufino Tamayo, edited by Teresa Del Conde and Juan Carlos Pereda (Naucalpan de Juárez, Mexico: Smurfit Cartón y Papel de México, 2011), 89.
the variations introduced by the print in relation to Tamayo’s status as a foreign artist in New York City.

The Philadelphia painting portrays the man and the woman enlaced in a tight embrace. The couple evokes a sense of unity that parallels the aspirations of the post-revolutionary Mexican state, which similarly echo in the impression that the two figures, alone in a mountainous landscape, embody one of the many foundational narratives visualized by Mexican artists of this period. The two figures’ joined arms recall a fresco that José Clemente Orozco executed in 1926, in which he portrayed an elderly Hernán Cortés and his indigenous lover, Malinche (Figure 4). Locating the genesis of modern Mexico in a couple, Orozco depicts the amalgamation of indigenous and Spanish lineages as the first instance of mestizaje. Interestingly, Orozco renders Malinche’s body with the same earthy colour with which he paints the mountain behind her, establishing a visual relation between the indigenous body and the Mexican landscape. In a similar manner, Tamayo orchestrates connections that essentially equate the generic mestizo couple and the land around them. Not only does Tamayo use the same flaming red to colour the figures’ bodies and the earth, but he also matches the shape of the peasants’ hands with that of the mountains, constellating them with the very land that they work for a living.

![Figure 4: José Clemente Orozco, Cortés and Malinche, 1923-1926, mural on the ceiling of the Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso, Mexico City.](image)

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Orozco underscores the violence that permeates Mexican history by painting the defeated corpse of an indigenous man under Cortés’ foot while also addressing the power imbalance between the white, masculine Cortés and the heavily racialized and sexualized Malinche. On the contrary, Tamayo’s painting appears more harmonious. In contrast to the *machista* hierarchies that submitted women to the authority of men in 1920s Mexico, especially in the rural context of Tamayo’s work,⁹ the figures are enveloped in each other’s arms in a manner that suggests balance and equality. While the man’s hand solidly holds the woman’s elbow, her arm encircles his body and her right hand presses on his shoulder. Yet Tamayo injects a sense of instability in this tender image, complicating the impression that the painting echoes the unity of the Mexican people. The copper glow emanating from the painting certainly connotes love and affection, but its intensity simultaneously evokes alarm. Similarly, the couple’s tight embrace suggests tenderness, but also defensiveness. Crushed under the high horizon line, the figures’ stiff bodies curl inwards as if facing an unknown threat coming from outside the frame, their rigid expressions frozen in angst.

This ambivalence epitomizes Tamayo’s uneasiness with the dynamics through which urban, educated artists like Rivera manipulated the image of *mestizo* peasants to visualize an inclusive state, while in reality the Mexican government (led by Álvaro Obregón and then Plutarco Elías Calles) did little to include the poor, rural classes in the modernizing project of the state.¹⁰ Tamayo would actively voice his disdain for overly picturesque renditions of Mexican subjects in a 1933 essay entitled “Nationalism and the Pictorial Movement,” in which he criticized the tendency of some of his fellow Mexican artists to engage with merely “epidermal” visualizations of national identity.¹¹ Already an established artist by this later date, Tamayo openly urged his colleagues to shape a national style by developing original visual idioms rather than objectifying the physical features and cultural traditions of rural populations as tourists would. Accordingly, the figures in Tamayo’s painting are less romanticized than Orozco’s Malinche or the couple

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in his teacher Alfredo Ramos Martínez’s painting *Indian Wedding* (Figure 5). Tamayo depicted the man and the woman as dignified and fully clothed rather than naked or adorned with garments that inevitably label them as primitive or exotic. Additionally, he projected a psychological dimension by portraying the figures according to the humanistic three-quarter view typical of Renaissance portraits and by orchestrating an impression of ambivalence through the tender awkwardness of their embrace.

More importantly, though, Tamayo imbued the painting with a pervasive sense of artificiality and theatricality that directly anticipated the concerns that he would express in his 1933 essay. The blazing colour of the figures’ skin and the exactitude with which their hands overlap with the configuration of the landscape appear almost caricatural, while the flatness of the couple’s faces and the angularity of their noses make them look as if they are wearing masks. Indeed, their faces bear a similarity to Tamayo’s later representation of a schematized Mayan mask in the 1940 painting *Red Mask* (Figure 6), which shares the same highly geometric nose and sculpted cheekbones. In this work, a dark-skinned figure plays a bandolón, an instrument closely associated with Mexican popular culture that often appeared in representations of national identity. Overlapping and exaggerating the tropes of colour that defined politically under-represented groups of Mexican citizens, the artist exposes the fictive nature of the idealized stereotypes behind which the state concealed the concrete marginalization of many of its people. Tamayo’s exaggerated rendition of the man and woman’s features may thus directly reference the process of distortion and obliteration implicit in the nationalist celebration of the very subjects that he himself represents.
The notion of masquerade recurs in another 1926 painting that Tamayo exhibited alongside *Man and Woman* in his Mexico City show, titled *Family* (Figure 7). The figures in this work are strikingly similar to those in the Philadelphia painting, with the difference being that here Tamayo portrays a family of Mexican *mestizos* in their Sunday best. The background is so shallow and intensely colourful that it infuses the image with a sense of affectation even stronger than in *Man and Woman*. As Karen Cordero Reiman has noted, *Family* is reminiscent of the staged photographic portraits that had been popular in Mexico since the late nineteenth century.\(^\text{12}\) This observation equally applies to the sheer flatness and schematic rendition of the background in *Man and Woman*, but in this case the subjects look much more uncomfortable before the invisible presence of the camera.

In *Family*, Tamayo dresses his *mestizo* subjects in elegant clothes, contradicting the recurrent representations that linked dark-skinned people, whose phenotypical traits recalled their indigenous ancestry, with the working classes. In this way, Tamayo questions the inconsistency of politicians, intellectuals, and artists who celebrated Mexico’s ethnic and cultural amalgamation

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while at the same time relegating mestizo subjects to subservient socio-political roles and stultifying them as passive illustrations of nationalistic tropes. Although Tamayo hints at the aggression through which Mexican mestizo subjects are reduced to specimens of an ancestral, exotic ethos in *Man and Woman*, in *Family*, the artist challenges the assumed connections between mestizaje and lower-class status, thus openly challenging his audience’s expectations.

Tamayo executed *Man and Woman*’s corresponding woodcut at the request of Carl Zigrosser, then director of the Weyhe Gallery, shortly after arriving in New York City. An important exhibition and publication venue, the Weyhe Gallery was instrumental in exhibiting the work of artists like Orozco and Rivera to the North American public. Tamayo’s exhibition was the first solo show that the gallery dedicated to a Mexican artist, and it exemplified Zigrosser’s eagerness to create a market for Mexican modern art. The checklist of the exhibition (Figure 8), which survives in the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art in Washington D.C., illustrates that Tamayo repurposed some of the works that he had executed in Mexico City, such as the painting *Family*. The fact that three of the pieces included in the list carry the title *Man and Woman* suggests that the print, merely marked as *Woodcut*, may have hung alongside the Philadelphia canvas. The visual dialogue between the two works is undeniable: like the painting, the print dramatizes the subject of the Mexican couple by recreating the telluric intensity of the landscape through bold incisions that manage, in absence of the expressive element of colour, to communicate a sense of primordial energy linking the figures and the landscape.

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Unlike the painting, however, the print includes a number of stereotypes that the Weyhe Gallery’s North American audience would have readily recognized as emblems of the artist’s native country.\textsuperscript{16} The maguey plants that frame the couple were among the favourite subjects immortalized by tourists travelling to Mexico, as Edward Weston’s 1926 photograph \textit{Maguey Cactus, Mexico 1926} (Figure 9) attests, and would have been seen as typical components of the Mexican landscape. Moreover, Tamayo covers the head of the man with a straw hat that consistently functioned as a class marker to the detriment of individual representation in portrayals of Mexican people, as in Tina Modotti’s 1929 \textit{Campesinos Reading ‘El Machete’} (Figure 10).\textsuperscript{17} These and other clichés had been popularized by what Helen Delpar calls an “enormous vogue of things Mexican”: a North American fascination for Mexican people and customs romanticized as “authentically” undeveloped, primeval, and mysterious.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} For a discussion of the themes deemed to represent quintessential Mexican elements in both Mexico and the United States, see Karen Cordero Reiman and James Oles’s essays in James Oles, ed., \textit{South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914-1947} (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1993).

\textsuperscript{17} For a study of Weston and Modotti’s experience in Mexico, see Sarah M. Lowe, \textit{Tina Modotti & Edward Weston: The Mexican Years} (London: Merrell, 2004).

\textsuperscript{18} Delpar, \textit{The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican}, 1-14; 125-164.
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Figure 9: Edward Weston, *Maguey Cactus, Mexico*, 1926, gelatin silver print, 18.73 x 23.65 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

Figure 10: Tina Modotti, *Campesinos Reading ‘El Machete’*, 1929, platinum print, 7.5 x 10 cm. Helsinki Art Museum, Helsinki.

Tamayo’s introduction of these visual tropes in the print, absent in the painting, goes hand in hand with the increased sense of “otherness” with which the artist imbues his subjects. Here portrayed as full figures rather than busts, the man and the woman become visible in all their raw physicality; their light, undecorated clothes cling to their bodies in a way that makes them appear almost naked, with their feet bare. More similar to Ramos Martínez’s *The First Americans (Mexican Adam and Eve)* (Figure 11) than to the
painted version of Man and Woman, this print seemingly embraces a representation of Mexican rural people as remnants of a primordial past.

Figure 11: Alfredo Ramos Martínez, The First Americans (Mexican Adam and Eve), 1933, oil on canvas, 203.2 x 147.3 cm. Collection of Susan H. Albritton, Los Angeles.

Tamayo may have replaced the sympathetic portrayal in the painting with these primitivist accents after having observed the works of artists like Picasso and Matisse, many of which were exhibited in New York City at the time when he was working on the print.¹⁹ According to Anna Indych-López, Tamayo was eager to align his work with that of the international avant-garde, and at the same time was aware that his works would receive particular attention among the New York City public if it fostered an image of Mexico as a place unadulterated by civilization and progress.²⁰ Both in its small size and in its materiality, the woodcut Man and Woman recalls the genre scenes that were captured by or sold to tourists visiting Mexico, and suggests that Tamayo may have compromised the painting’s biting challenge to the objectifying stereotypes of Mexicanness in order to gain visibility in a foreign art market.²¹

However, like the painting, the print displays a tension between the picturesqueness of the image and an underlying sense of aggression that complicates this straightforward reading. Indeed, the very elements that distinguish the print from the painting illuminate the sophisticated ways in which Tamayo addressed two related but autonomous cultural contexts. If in the painting the couple’s tender embrace responded to


²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ For a discussion on the expectations that Tamayo’s New York audiences may have had about his work see James Oles, South of the Border, 49-213.
the tropes utilized by Mexican artists to convey a sense of national unity, in the print the artist established an uncomfortable imbalance between the two figures which deviates from the otherwise pleasurable allure of the image. The man and woman no longer appear as intensely committed and instead face one another almost confrontationally, implying a gender hierarchy. Erect in the center of the composition, the man sternly stares down at his companion from a position of control, with his legs solidly stamped on the ground and his wide chest communicating strength and potentially violence.

Tamayo’s reworking of the relation between the two figures mirrors the shift of his status from urban intellectual on the Mexican art scene to exotic outsider in New York City. Even more than in Mexico City, New York critics labelled Tamayo as a “primitive” artist expressing ancestral drives rather than operating within an international modernist network. Zigrosser himself introduced Tamayo in the brief exhibition brochure as someone whose work “ha[d] little European influence in it, and derive[d] almost entirely from Mexican and Indian sources.”22 Under this light, the similarity between the male figure in the print and a self-portrait that Tamayo executed in New York in 1927 (Figure 12) is striking. In this work, Tamayo stresses the fullness of his lips and the width of his nose while rendering his skin with a dark brown, vaguely assuming the appearance of an African American man. If in the painting the figures’ faces recalled pre-Hispanic masks, in the print and the self-portrait the men’s features are somewhat “Africanized.” The slight distortions that Tamayo projects onto his own image, along with the sheer frontality of the composition and the shallowness of the background, align his self-portrait with the more blatant theatricality staged in Family, suggesting the artist’s attunement to visualizing identity not as a stable inscription on one’s body but rather as a fluid set of poses.

Figure 12: Rufino Tamayo, Self-Portrait, 1927, watercolour and gouache over black chalk, 25.2 x 17.7 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.

In her discussion of the 1927 self-portrait, Indych-Lopéz argues that Tamayo manipulates his looks in order to portray himself as a “different kind of other,” frustrating the expectations of North American viewers eager to identify him in terms of a purely Mexican fantasy. Accordingly, the print juxtaposes the stereotypical markers of Tamayo’s homeland with a rendition of the human face that recalls the primitivist works of the School of Paris or the German Expressionists rather than the indigenous features that North Americans were eager to identify in Mexican people and which Tamayo himself was supposed to embody. Indeed, both the woodcut and the self-portrait suggest that Tamayo deliberately complicated the patterns according to which critics and viewers would classify his work and his persona.

The power dynamics between the man and the woman in the print may mirror the patronizing economic, political, and cultural attitudes of the United States towards Mexico, exemplified by the popular demand of images reducing the country’s complexity to a series of palatable clichés. Indeed, the reduction of Mexico’s people and land to tropes like the maguey cactus and the sombrero is reiterated in the woman’s obliterated face, demonstrating Tamayo’s awareness of the defectiveness entailed by dominating modes of looking. At the same time, however, the fact that Tamayo overlaps his own image with that of the masculine figure signals a gesture of re-appropriation by the artist, who expresses his resistance to being reduced to a curiosity performing for the pleasure of his North American audience.

The look of the man in the print does not function merely as a self-referential meditation on the construction of Tamayo’s artistic persona in the United States. Through a *mise-en-abîme* of ethnically charged representations, Tamayo undermines the assumption that his subjects represent the *mestizos* homogeneously populating North American fantasies of Mexico. The stereotypes of the sombrero and the maguey cactus accompany the semblance of an African American figure, referencing those United States’ citizens who, just like the visiting Mexican artist, were mistreated as outsiders. This idea reverberates in an image that Tamayo designed for the cover of the January 1928 issue of the leftist journal *New Masses* (Figure 13), which explicitly portrays two...

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23 In Indych-López’s words: “Rather than attempt to determine what is or is not Tamayo’s ‘real nature,’ his self-portrait suggests the extent to which he constructed his own image and positioned himself at the interstice between Mexican *indigenismo* and modern primitivism.” Anna Indych-López, “None of Those Little Donkeys for Me,” 347.
Afro-Mexicans in yet another visualization of the peasant couple. The pose of the two figures here recreates the defensive proximity of the bodies in the Philadelphia painting, although the format and composition of the image more closely approximate the print. At the same time, the contrast between the dark colour of the two figures’ skin and their white garments (especially the woman’s enveloping veil) introduces a racial binary that complicates the trope of mestizaje and distances this image from a purely Mexican frame of reference. By establishing a visual connection between the two exotic representations of a Mexican man and woman and the image of an Afro-Mexican couple, the artist expands his subtle critique of the United States’ imperialist politics to encompass internal power imbalances such as the systematic persecution and marginalization of people of African descent. Through this visual link, the print exhibited in the Weyhe show recreates the resistance against racial taxonomies that Tamayo embedded in the painting and recasts this resistance in response to the cultural politics of the United States.


In conclusion, Tamayo’s double representation of the Mexican couple in the 1926 painting and print reveals the artist’s desire to challenge the dominant tropes governing the representation of Mexican subjects within two distinct cultural contexts: those of post-revolutionary Mexico and the United States in the 1920s. In these two works, Tamayo depicts his subjects according to the normative modes of representation fostered by Mexican nationalism and

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24 Like other countries in the Americas, Mexico’s population included a large number of citizens of African descent. See Chege Githiora, Afro-Mexicans: Discourse of Race and Identity in the African Diaspora (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008).

25 Tamayo’s critical representations of black bodies recur throughout his career, as Red Mask and a 1936 version of Family demonstrate. The artist’s interest in this kind of imagery ranges from works that depict Mexican subject matter to paintings referencing New York City as well as cosmic realms, providing a sort of fil rouge in his oeuvre. This topic and its implications still call for a thorough analysis, which I hope to undertake in my future research.
North American imperialism while subtly undermining the validity of these very canons by embedding a tension, even a sense of aggression, in the two images. This tension particularly encompasses the stereotypical connections between race and national belonging that were central, although in different ways, to the exclusionary politics on both sides of the border. While the painting subverts the validity of a state-sponsored aesthetic program celebrating the *mestizo* peasant as a living emblem of Mexico’s unity and prosperity, the print challenges the North American demand for images of Mexico as a primitive realm, criticizing the racism that permeated the relations between the United States and Mexico and in turn divided the citizens of the United States.

Both versions of *Man and Woman* mirror the visual and conceptual complexity with which an artist labelled as “quintessentially” Mexican responded to objectifying modes of representation in Mexico and the United States. Tamayo’s ability to rework the subject matter of the Mexican couple according to the divergent cultural politics of the two countries demonstrates not only that the artist embedded powerful political connotations in his works much more subtly and more critically than his muralist compatriots, but also that his transnational trajectory, which continued for several decades, was marked by a deep sensitivity to regional injustice.


