

Oil Painting Class

The Hybrids Pt 2: Surrealism and Modern Painting in Mexico and Cuba

Hey Art Class, we are back in Central America, and will now look at the bigger picture in terms of the influence of Surrealism.

Surrealism was a broad movement in art, cinema, literature and poetry. There were many women painters who participated in the Surrealism movement that was initially centred in Paris: Leonor Carrington, Leonor Fini, Remedios Varos and Dorothea Tanning contributing their unique visions. Many of the Surrealists were in couples and Max Ernst was involved with a number of women Surrealists.

Here's Tanning with Max Ernst in Mexico 1948:



And here's an amazing painting by Leonora Carrington.



Leonora Carrington, *The Cockcrow*, 1946, oil and gold leaf on canvas.

Leonora Carrington settled in Mexico in 1942, fleeing war-torn Europe. For Carrington, the country came to be a source of inspiration and wonder, particularly its history, culture, and ancient practices. And look at this - it's Leonora Carrington in 1964, still channelling Mexico in a painting called "Juan Soriano De Lacandón".



Leonora Carrington, *Juan Soriano De Lacandón*, 1964, oil on canvas.

It's really amazing how modern this painting looks – it could have been painted yesterday!

In the 1920s and 1930s, European Surrealist artists in Europe developed a fascination with Central and South America - Pre-Columbian Art, ancient rituals, hybrid religions and religious practices. You could say that Central and South American art was for European Surrealists what African art was for Cubism. But the Surrealists were interested in things beyond the visual appearance of artefacts; they were interested in the broader culture and society, the ritual uses of art works, myths and storytelling. And it was more of an exchange - Cubism appropriated the formal devices of African and Oceanic sculptures and ritual objects, whilst the Surrealists immersed themselves in the historical and contemporary culture of Central America. Mexico itself occupied a very important place in the imagination of many these artists—poet and self-appointed leader of the Surrealist Group, André Breton called it the "Surrealist place par excellence"

Artists such as Kahlo, Rivera and Wilfredo Lam, who we'll come to in a minute, channelled Surrealism, but the Surrealists were also channelling Mexican influences, so in a way, it was a type of 'feedback loop'.

Before next week, when we head down to Brazil and then up to the United States we are going to look at the extraordinary paintings of Wilfredo Lam. Lam was born and raised in Sagua La Grande, in Cuba. He was of mixed race ancestry and his family, like many others, practiced Catholicism alongside African traditions. His contact with African spiritualism was his greatest artistic influence, and he combined this with the influences of Cubism and Surrealism. In 1923 he travelled to Madrid and there encountered Picasso, Matisse and the European avant-garde, moving on to Paris in 1938.

Here he is in Madrid, probably on his way to the Prado...



When Lam arrived in Paris, Surrealism was in full swing and he became part of a transatlantic milieu which included Kahlo and Rivera, Peruvian Surrealist poet César Moro, André Breton, Joan Miró and Óscar Domínguez.

He sought to portray the enduring Afro-Cuban spirit and culture and created a unique style, which was ultimately characterised by the prominence of hybrid figures, incorporating elements of Afro-Cuban imagery. In this painting from 1940 we can see also see the influence of Picasso very clearly.



Je Suis, Wifredo Lam, Oil on Canvas, 1940

And in this painting, the type of compressed pictorial space were have come to recognise from Cubist techniques is made evident.



Wilfredo Lam, The Jungle, Oil on Canvas, 1943

While Lam was active member of the Surrealist movement, he also stated that 'surrealism gave me an opening, but I haven't painted in a surrealist manner'. After eighteen years away, Lam returned to Cuba in 1941 as part of the exodus of refugees fleeing the German occupation.

Here he is back in his studio in Havana:



I love these images of Lam in his studio. Lam increasingly made reference to Cuba within his work, stating "I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country".

Like Kahlo, he often depicted the flora and of his home country vegetation; he used an earthy colour palette as well as the vibrant greens, reds and oranges of the Caribbean isles.



Wilfredo Lam, Horse-Headed Woman, Oil on Canvas, 1950

At this time, Lam also became fascinated with the Santería religion, in which rituals and beliefs from West Africa are overlaid with the iconography of Catholicism. During both Santería and Voodoo rituals, the latter of which he encountered on an extended visit to Haiti, the worshipper is allegedly possessed or 'ridden' by a spirit. The influence of these ceremonies is evident within Lam's work, which commonly depict mask-like faces and hybrid figures including the 'horse-headed woman'...

See you in Brazil for the next episode...!