Negotiating Surrealism
Carlos Mérida, Mexican Art and the Avant-garde

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In June 1929, the Belgian arts journal V*ariétés* published a special number, "Le Surréalisme en 1929," edited by French Surrealists Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard. The journal included a map, captioned "Le monde au temps des surréalistes" (The World in the Time of the Surrealists). In this representation of their worldview, the Surrealists exaggerated and enlarged various regions of the globe while they virtually eliminated others (including the United States). Among the places they chose to expand was Mexico, a country that played a vital role in the surrealist landscape from the beginnings of the movement. Mexican art and references to Mexico often appeared in surrealist projects in the 1920s and early 1930s, but the Surrealists' knowledge of the country came from second-hand sources. Later, particularly during World War II, many Surrealists traveled to and lived in Mexico, where they engaged in collaborative projects with Mexican artists and anthropologists.

While scholars have addressed the relationship between Surrealism and certain Mexican artists at length—Frida Kahlo, for example—one Mexican painter who engaged in surrealist projects, Carlos Mérida, has received little attention. Mérida's connection to Surrealism was never highly visible, but contributed to the Surrealists' understanding of Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s. Surrealism, in turn, offered Mérida a tool for the creation of a uniquely Mexican modernism—one that opposed the standard "Mexican School" aesthetic embodied in the work of painters like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco.[1]

Surrealism and Mexico: 1924-1938

Surrealism's relationship to Mexico underwent significant shifts between 1924

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and 1952, the year of an enormous exhibition of Mexican art in Paris that coincided with the waning of the surrealist movement. Initially Mexico attracted the Surrealists as part of a larger interest in ethnography. The Surrealists believed non-Western cultures offered alternative aesthetic and cultural models in which the artist moved between the worlds of myth, dream, and everyday life. Much of their early knowledge of non-European places, including Mexico, came from the dark and dusty halls of Paris's Trocadéro ethnographic museum, where unlabeled objects lay jumbled in overcrowded vitrines.[2] The Trocadéro's displays, which decontextualized and aestheticized the objects they contained, produced exactly the kinds of incongruities and juxtapositions that delighted the Surrealists, but also tended to elide the specific cultural histories within the museum's collection.

Because of such limited, second-hand sources of information about Mexico, the Surrealists focused on the country's pre-Columbian past in the early years of the movement. André Breton and Paul Eluard began collecting pre-Columbian art in the 1920s. Mimicking the jumbled ethnographic displays of the Trocadéro, the Surrealists often exhibited pre-Columbian art alongside their own work, as in a 1927 show of Yves Tanguy's paintings alongside *"objets d'Amérique,"* for which both Breton and Eluard wrote catalogue essays that imagined a mystical ancient Mexico of bloody rituals and fantastic temples.[3] In 1936, the "Exposition surréaliste d'objets" included a piece of Zapotec pottery alongside surrealist creations, found objects, and African sculpture. In these exhibitions the Surrealists drew analogies between their own work and their imaginary view of ancient Mexico. At the same time they suggested that Mexico's past was somehow surrealist.

After years of a vague fascination with Mexico, in 1938 Breton embarked on a four-month journey to the place itself. His visit marked an important shift in the Surrealists' vision of the country. While there, he stayed in the home of painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, met with Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky, who was then living in exile in Kahlo's family home, and traveled through the country visiting ancient ruins and rural villages and collecting objects. On his return to France, he mounted "Mexique," an exhibition of the pre-Columbian and popular art objects he had collected, as well as paintings by Frida Kahlo and photographs by Manuel Alvarez Bravo. He wrote essays for the exhibition catalogue and also for the journal *Minotaure* that not only glorified the Aztec past but also echoed the nationalist ideology that flourished following Mexico's Revolution of 1910. After the Revolution, Mexico's theoretically socialist government had worked in collaboration with artists and writers to throw off centuries of imitation of European cultural models and to instead promote a vision of Mexico grounded in a renewal of the country's indigenous and *mestizo* cultural heritage. Indigenism

became the basis for a renewed, uniquely Mexican culture within a broader framework of progressive and socialist politics. Whether or not this was an accurate representation of post-revolutionary Mexico, it was one that artists such as Rivera and Kahlo adopted. And despite the Surrealists' virulent anti-nationalism, some of the nationalist rhetoric that dominated the Mexican art scene of the period crept into Breton's own presentation of Mexican art. Ultimately, though, Breton understood Mexico as a place of affinity to Surrealism.

His texts reflected the fact that he continued to view the country through a surrealist lens, claiming he had found in Mexico "the surrealist place *par excellence."* In an essay he wrote on his return, "Souvenir du Mexique," he commented, "A part of my mental landscape—and, by extension, I believe, of the mental landscape of Surrealism—is manifestly delimited by Mexico."[4] Throughout the essay Breton organized his text and illustrations to refer to characteristic aspects of Surrealism that he encountered in Mexico, including surprise, juxtaposition and the dialectical conciliation of opposites, such as Spanish and native, reality and dream, grandeur and decay, and life and death. The essay suggests that a spontaneous or natural Surrealism is inherent to Mexico. In an interview, he claimed to find the country surrealist in "its topography, in its flora, in the dynamism that the mixture of its races confers on it, as well as in its highest aspirations," and named one of these aspirations: "that of ending the exploitation of man by man."[5] A number of the aspects of Mexico that Breton identified as surrealist were also among the bases of post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism, such as its mixture of Spanish and indigenous peoples (*mestizaje*) and its attempt to end exploitation through social revolution.

Mérida, Mexican Nationalism and the Search for a Mexican Modernism, 1920-1927

By the 1950s, the Surrealists' vision of Mexico had evolved yet again. The Mexican artist on whom they focused their attention was neither Rivera nor Kahlo but Rufino Tamayo, who worked in an abstract style more in line with international avant-garde movements than with the Mexican School. In 1950 Breton celebrated the artist's work in a catalogue essay for a Tamayo exhibition in Paris.[6] In 1952 Tamayo illustrated Benjamin Péret's lengthy poem *Air mexicain (Mexican Air),* which Péret wrote in 1949 after living in Mexico for a number of years during World War II.[7] Tamayo's illustrations, such as one of the Aztec feathered-serpent god Quetzalcoatl, utilized a modernist, abstract visual vocabulary to represent ancient Mexican themes.

At the time that Tamayo collaborated with Péret, many of his fellow artists in Mexico regarded him as an apolitical, socially irrelevant and purely decorative artist. His selection as one of four artists—along with Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco

and David Alfaro Siqueiros—who would receive individual galleries in the 1952 exhibition "L'art mexicain du précolombien à nos jours," organized by the Mexican government and mounted at the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris, triggered a firestorm of criticism that Rivera and Siqueiros spearheaded.[8] These attacks were of course not accurate. Tamayo had in fact been a member of Mexico's LEAR (League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers) in the 1930s. And, one might argue, his adoption of indigenous themes given his mestizo heritage was neither apolitical nor less socially engaged than the indigenism that drove artists of the Mexican School.[9] What's interesting is that an artist *perceived* as apolitical, disengaged and not representative of the Mexican School by his Mexican colleagues found champions among the Surrealists, avowed Marxists who earlier promoted the didactic and politically strident murals of Diego Rivera as Mexico's authentic art at the very

Fig. 1. Carlos Mérida, *La mujer de la rosa* (The Lady with the Rose), ca. 1912, oil on canvas, private collection, courtesy of Galería Arvil, Mexico City

moment that Rivera and Siqueiros were most stridently attacking Tamayo. One of the factors that led to the collaboration between the Surrealists and Tamayo lies in the work of Carlos Mérida and in his engagement with Surrealism in the 1930s and 1940s.

In many ways, the trajectory of Mérida's career, from a deep interest in pre-Columbian and popular art to experimental abstraction, anticipated the shifts in the Surrealists' own relationship with Mexico.[10] Born in Guatemala in 1891, Mérida spent most of his life in Mexico, where his career spanned decades. Like many Latin American artists, he studied in Paris early in his career, from 1910-1914.[11] During this period he began to experiment with modernist aesthetics. *La mujer de la rosa,* 1912, reflects the impact of European artists such as Amadeo Modigliani, whom Mérida himself described as an important influence on his work.

Mérida's return to Guatemala in 1914 inspired a radical shift in his art. He later said, "The impressions I received overshadowed everything I had learned in Europe."[12] His re-discovery of Guatemala's peoples, dances, arts, pre-Columbian ruins and his own Maya-Quiche heritage inspired a new body of work.[13] Shortly after he returned, he began a series of paintings of the people and landscapes of Guatemala that utilized the flattened, outlined and schematized figural style he had developed in Paris, but also borrowed from local textiles and pottery in their use of planar composition, repetitive geometric motifs and hieratic views. In *La India del loro* (1917) and similar paintings, Mérida schematized female figures, adorned them with local textiles and located them within geometric, decorative borders. After four years in Paris, Mérida now utilized Guatemala's pre-Columbian and contemporary popular art as the basis for a uniquely American modernism, blending the aesthetics of avant-garde Europe with local content and forms.

While in Paris Mérida had encountered members of the Mexican expatriate artistic community including Diego Rivera and Roberto Montenegro, who lived next door. He later said that his proximity to Montenegro made him feel that he was "in some way, part of Mexico. From then I only thought of coming to this country that little by little had become mine.[14] In 1919, Mérida left Guatemala for Mexico, where he would center his career for the rest of his life.[15] The following year, he mounted an exhibition at Mexico's National Academy of Fine Arts that reverberated throughout Mexico's artistic community. In the exhibition brochure Mérida wrote that his art sprang from his conviction that it was necessary to create an art that was "completely American." Painter Roberto Montenegro offered an introduction to the brochure that said Mérida had been able to "intellectualize" American popular art "without losing its autochthonous character."[16] One critic wrote, "Carlos Mérida doesn't belong to

Fig. 2. Carlos Mérida, *La india del loro* (The Indian with the Parrot), 1917, oil on canvas, private collection, courtesy of Galería Arvil, Mexico City

any… [artistic] school. He simply interprets the autochthonous art of America. For two years he studie[d] the Maya civilization and now he dedicates his efforts to the culture of Teotihuacan."[17] Even Diego Rivera praised the "Americanism" of Mérida's work.[18] The enthusiastic reception of his exhibition suggests that Mexican artists and critics found in Mérida a model for the development of an art rooted in the Americas at a time when they sought a way to separate themselves artistically from Europe.

As the decade progressed, Mérida and those writing about him increasingly used the term Mexican in place of American. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, in fact, he worked as an active promoter of Mexican nationalist ideology in his paintings, writings and illustrations. In the early 1920s he contributed to the

government-sponsored mural projects that were covering the walls of public buildings in Mexico. Mérida also participated in a number of exhibitions aimed at foreign audiences, often North American, in introducing post-revolutionary Mexico to them. These exhibitions served a variety of purposes, from cultural to diplomatic to economic.

In addition to his work as a painter, Mérida was a writer and critic who contributed articles on Mexican art and culture to a number of magazines. Often these writings promoted the vision of an authentic Mexican art that he pursued in his own painting. In the 1924 article "Los nuevos valores en la pintura mexicana," for example, he praised the achievements of Mexico's mural movement, linking it to popular arts traditions as well as to the lessons of cubism.[19] In other writings, he warned against what he would later term the "trap" of the folkloric.[20] He cautioned painters that it was not enough to paint "a *charro,* a *rebozo,* a *china poblana* or a *tehuana,*" referring to characteristic national types and costumes. He said, "indigenous art should be nothing more than a point of departure; it should serve as nothing more than an orientation."[21] An authentic Mexican art would find inspiration in, rather than mimic, pre-Columbian and popular art.

Mérida and Surrealism

Despite the fact that Mérida continued to promote Mexico in nationalist terms into the late 1930s, by 1930 his artistic style shifted radically. He returned to Paris from 1927 to 1929, and it was during this trip that he found a way out of the "trap" of the folkloric. In Paris he encountered new developments in the French avant-garde, including Surrealism. His work was about to undergo an enormous change and his exposure to Surrealism would contribute to the shift. Of his trip, Mérida later said, "I was returning to Paris seeking new roads. I wanted to study again the intimate mechanism of painting at its roots." Although he later said Cubism had a more lasting impact on his work, throughout his career he recognized the influence of Surrealists such as Joan Miró. After returning to Mexico in 1929, he said, ". . . my work underwent a profound transformation. The problem was the same but the answer was different. The sense of abstraction I inherited from the Mayas took shape in me with clarity and precision."[22]

Mérida increasingly identified his own work as surrealist during the 1930s. Shortly after his return from Paris, he traveled to Guatemala, where he gave a lecture on "American Painting." During his talk he asserted that "Every painter [...] is and should be surrealist: `the marvelous is always beautiful; whatever is marvelous is beautiful, there is nothing but the marvelous that is beautiful,' says André Breton [. . .]"[23] The lecture called on artists in Guatemala and Mexico to embrace Surrealism as

a means of developing a uniquely American art. Mérida felt he had begun to achieve this synthesis in his own work; in a set of notes for a lecture on Surrealism, he included himself among the examples of modern surrealist artists, noting next to his own name on the outline "derivations of an ancestral American type."[24] The lecture, which gave a general outline of the basic tenets of Surrealism, provided a series of "antecedents." Among these, Mérida included not only those often proposed by the Surrealists themselves, such as Goya, but Tarascan sculpture of West Mexico and the decoration at the Maya site of Chichén ltzá. Mérida embraced the Surrealists' own insistence that Surrealism was not a movement but a condition that transcended time and geography. Surrealism offered an escape from the folkloric and from social realism that dominated Mexican painting, and allowed him to negotiate the opposing poles of the Mexican School and international modernism, forging a space in between the two. It also gave him the opportunity to artistically engage his own

Fig. 3. Carlos Mérida, *Transparencia de la memoria* (Transparency of Memory), 1936, watercolor, gouache and graphite on paper, private collection, courtesy of Galería Arvil, Mexico City

Maya heritage in a way that was completely different from, and far more lyrical than, the indigenism of many of his colleagues. Rather than reinterpreting pre-Columbian myths within a modernist context, these contemporaries tended to represent them in a didactic and literal manner. Mérida melded the lessons he had learned from the Surrealists with the tendency toward abstraction that he had already drawn from pre-Columbian art in the production of a wholly new approach to painting.

As Mérida increasingly defined himself as a Surrealist, so did Mexico's art critics. In 1931 one exhibition reviewer described him as a "champion of Surrealism."[25] Three years later, Luis Cardoza y Aragón, an important art critic with whom Mérida had a cooperative working relationship and friendship throughout his life, described Mérida as a Surrealist but insisted his art was Mexican first, and that its local specificity gave his work universal value.[26] Critics both in Mexico and abroad continued to refer to Mérida's painting as surrealist into the 1940s, but they almost always couched their discussion in terms of its Mexican roots, particularly its continued engagement with pre-Columbian and popular art.

As the decade progressed, Mérida began to paint in an increasingly abstract style. By the mid-1930s he was making images in which discernible figures had all but disappeared, as in *Transparencia de memoria* (*Transparency of Memory*), 1936. In paintings like this one he drew on Surrealism through the creation of indeterminate organic forms that offer viewers multiple readings. Visually the painting owes more to the lyrical abstraction of Joan Miró than to pre-Columbian sources. Mérida insisted, however, that his work remained grounded in the realities of Mexico and the Americas. Toward the end of the 1930s he made this connection explicit in several series of paintings that took pre-Columbian art as their inspiration. *Creación* (Creation), 1939, for example, was part of Mérida's "Series of Variations on a Mayan Theme." While obviously linked to the biomorphic style of painters like Miró, the figures that float across the image derive directly from Maya art, and share the large heads, abbreviated bodies and elongated foreheads of, for example, figures in the mural paintings of Bonampak, or the recently discovered, carved *Po Panel*. Mérida took a Maya sacred text, the *Popol vuh,* as the inspiration for a set of ten lithographs that appeared as a portfolio in 1943. The portfolio layered the lithographs with translucent pages printed with relevant fragments of text from the *Popol vuh* in both Spanish and English. Mérida's introduction outlined the history of the text, which he called "the most profound but poetic testimony we possess about the divine word of our grandfathers, the creators of the highest ancient civilization in the New World."[27] He described the images in the portfolio not as illustrations, but "free poetic versions of mythological wonders." Two nearly identical figures represent the semi-divine heroes of the *Popol vuh,* whom Mérida shows confronting various abstracted creatures in episodic

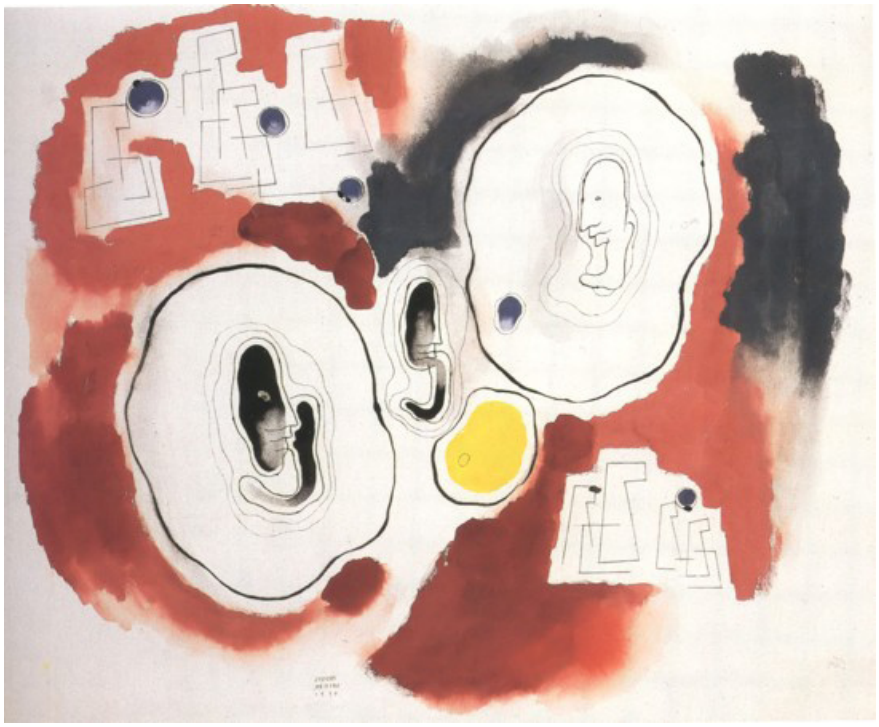

Fig. 4. Carlos Mérida, *Creación* (Creation), from the series *Variaciones sobre un tema maya* (Variations on a Maya Theme), 1939, gouache, pen and black ink on linen on wood, private collection, courtesy of Galería Arvil, Mexico City

scenes. The prints are not only surrealist in terms of aesthetics, but also in their use of fantastic imagery and their exploration of myth, one of the fundamental elements of the Surrealists' attraction to non-Western cultures.[28] In *Estampas del Popol-vuh* Mérida fused Surrealism with pre-Columbian aesthetics and subject matter to create a personal meditation on his Maya heritage. Later projects drew on the history of other Mesoamerican cultures including the Aztec and the cultures of West Mexico.

Mérida pursued his interest in Surrealism from neither an isolated nor a purely artistic position. He actively participated in the movement in several ways. The most important may have been one of which European Surrealists remained unaware: his directorship of the Galería de Arte Moderno in Mexico City. In 1926, Mérida's review of a Rufino Tamayo exhibition devoted three paragraphs to what he saw as an obstacle to the success of artists working in Mexico City, the "lack of…a well-conditioned gallery in a central location."[29] When he returned from Paris in 1929, he arrived with a plan to create the very gallery space he felt Mexico needed. That year,

Mérida established the Galería de Arte Moderno in Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes (then the Teatro Nacional), which he co-directed with colleague and fellow surrealist sympathizer Carlos Orozco Romero until its closing in approximately 1931. A close reading of the history of the gallery alongside Mérida's writings illustrate that he and Orozco Romero intended the gallery both as a site for the display of a Mexican art that engaged international avant-garde tendencies, and as a center for the development of a Mexican Surrealism. Although the gallery ran on government money, under Mérida and Orozco Romero's directorship, the Galería de Arte Moderno emerged as an exhibition space for artists who embraced an avant-garde aesthetic that largely opposed that of the nationalist and social realist Mexican School. In an article he wrote for *Mexican Folkways*, Mérida described the gallery as a space for established artists and emerging artists whose work showed "positive values and

Fig. 5. Rufino Tamayo, *Naturaleza muerta con pie* (Still Life with Foot), 1928, oil on canvas, Colección Andrés Blaisten, www.museoblaisten.org, © D.R. Rufino Tamayo / Herederos / México / 2009, Fundación Olga y Rufino Tamayo, A.C.

original tendencies," subtly conveying the gallery's avant-garde orientation.[30] Many of the artists who exhibited at the gallery were associated with the literary journal *Contemporáneos*, which rejected the strident nationalism current in Mexican cultural circles of the time in favor of a more cosmopolitan, internationalist approach to art and literature. The editors of *Contemporáneos* also used the journal as a platform for the dissemination of surrealist texts and art, and the Mexican artists affiliated with it often made work that conveyed the group's interest in the surrealist movement.[31]

Among the first artists to exhibit with the gallery were María Izquierdo, Rufino Tamayo, and gallery co-director Carlos Orozco Romero, who each experimented with aspects of Surrealism in the 1930s. In their paintings Tamayo and Izquierdo, for example, arranged objects and figures in incongruous compositions evocative of the work of Giorgio de Chirico and of the surrealist love of juxtaposition and decontextualization, such as Tamayo's *Naturaleza muerta con pie* (Still Life with Foot), 1928, and Izquierdo's *Alegoría del trabajo*, 1936. While certainly not every exhibitor at the new gallery would have accepted or deserved the label "surrealist," a number produced work that displayed characteristics of Surrealism, and most actively pursued a modernist aesthetic. In several key exhibitions, Mérida and Orozco Romero used the gallery as a space in which they delineated an internationally relevant Mexican avant-garde. They also used it to display what was becoming known as "pure" or "new" painting, in opposition to the "social" painting exemplified in muralism.

Mérida's writings about the gallery's exhibitions illustrate both his desire to promote a model of pure painting with links to Surrealism, and his anxiety that pure painters would be seen as non-, or worse, anti-, Mexican. Of Tamayo, he writes that the artist understood that "the true picture constitutes a particular object which has its own existence apart from that of the subject which inspired it. His pictorial realizations are therefore completely divorced from any literal, metaphysical or social idea." Following this assertion of the aesthetic independence of Tamayo's work, he quickly reaffirms Tamayo's status as a Mexican painter: "Constant speculation regarding the pictorial theme has not made Tamayo lose his racial or technical characteristics. He has admirably taken advantage of his influences—Who has not had them?—utilizing them, but giving them his own character. His work has a Mexican quality that is ample and universal."[32] Among the paintings Tamayo exhibited was *Arreglo de objetos* (Arrangement of Objects), 1928, typical of the artist's painting during the period. The odd still life juxtaposes a mannequin's arm, a scrub brush, a spool of thread, a bundle of sticks and a pineapple in a flattened composition in which overlapping planes of color make up a background of shifting perspectives. Tamayo frequently painted incongruous still lifes in the late 1920s and early 1930s, often including objects that seem to refer obliquely to Mexico—a pineapple, a mandolin,

Fig. 6. Rufino Tamayo, *Arreglo de objetos* (Arrangement of Objects), 1928, oil on canvas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum Associates, the Bernard and Edith Lewin Collection of Mexican Art, AS1997.LWN.34, © D.R. Rufino Tamayo / Herederos / México / 2009, Fundación Olga y Rufino Tamayo, A.C.

a conch shell or a typical Mexican chair, for example. These paintings that blend an interest in surrealist and metaphysical painting with Mexican subject matter illustrate the dilemma Mérida alludes to above: how could he, Tamayo and their colleagues produce art that resonated on a universal level, yet remained rooted in Mexico? How could they, in their words, "take advantage of influences," particularly Surrealism, yet retain their "racial characteristics"?

These questions were not irrelevant in a country in the throes of establishing a national identity independent of the cultural influences of Europe, and that viewed artists engaged in international movements with deep suspicion. Surrealism received little attention in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, and when it did it tended to be negative.[33] Breton's visit in 1938 triggered massive protests among artists and writers aligned with the Stalinist Mexican Communist Party.[34] Mérida's adoption of elements of Surrealism in his own work and his promotion of artists with ties to Surrealism within the Galería de Arte Moderno were not mere aesthetic postures. Instead they were bold gestures with long-term political and cultural consequences that distanced him from many of his Mexican School colleagues. In the early 1930s, though, Mérida

remained optimistic that his work and that of the artists he exhibited would lead to a more innovative Mexican modernism. In a 1930 essay in the magazine *Nuestra Ciudad* he wrote, "Mexican painting is beginning to liberate itself, fortunately, from a sum of prejudices that…are now completely anachronistic."[35]

Mérida's vision of the Galería de Arte Moderno as a site for the development of a Mexican modernism with ties to Surrealism ultimately clashed with broader expectations of the gallery. The last exhibition held there seems to have been the "Ocho pintores" show of 1931. It included Mérida, Orozco Romero, and five other painters associated with the *Contemporáneos* group shown alongside, oddly, David Alfaro Siqueiros. Reviews of the exhibition stressed the surrealist quality of much of the work exhibited.[36] Despite the subsequent closing of the gallery, Mérida remained deeply engaged with Surrealism in his own work throughout the 1930s, as did several of his colleagues, including Tamayo, Izquierdo, who hosted Antonin Artaud in 1936, and Orozco Romero.

While Mérida's surrealist contemporaries in Europe may have remained ignorant of his promotion of their ideas within the Galería de Arte Moderno, other actions aligned Mérida more visibly with the surrealist movement. During Breton's 1938 visit to Mexico, for example, he was one of a number of artists and writers who signed a publicly distributed broadside defending Breton against the verbal attacks of Mexican Stalinists.[37] In 1940, he showed two paintings in Mexico City's "Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo," an exhibition of European surrealist and Mexican painting that surrealist emigré Wolfgang Paalen organized with Breton's help from Paris, and that of poet César Moro in Mexico. It was with Paalen, in fact, and not Breton, that Mérida would form a working relationship. He was, for instance, the only Mexican painter whose work appeared in the pages of *Dyn,* an arts journal Paalen published in Mexico City. Why, given the obviously surrealist orientation of Mérida's work and his self-identification with Surrealism, did European Surrealists fail to take notice of him until the 1940 "Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo"? Why did Breton not include Mérida's painting in the exhibition he organized in Paris, "Mexique," and fail to mention him in "Souvenir du Mexique," his essay on Mexico in *Minotaure* that otherwise noted many of those Breton had met during his journey?

Part of the answer lies in Mérida's approach to Mexican nationalism and also to pan-Americanism. Despite his active promotion of a nationalist vision of Mexico to foreign audiences through writings and advertising campaigns aimed at generating U.S. tourism to Mexico, he rejected the nationalist aesthetics of the Mexican School in his own work. As a native Guatemalan of Maya descent, his approach to indigenism differed from that of his Mexican colleagues, who tended to focus on the Aztec and on Central Mexican cultures rather than those of Southern Mexico. In his

explorations of folklore and native traditions of Mexico and Central America, he cast a wide net, researching the costumes and dances of peoples throughout the region rather than focusing on Central Mexico. Mérida consistently argued that artistic inspiration—not aesthetic models—lay in the pre-Columbian past, and that a truly American modernism would synthesize lessons from the European avant-garde with that inspiration. When Breton visited Mexico in 1938, he absorbed a vision of the nation shaped by Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and other nationalist artists. He came to define Mexican art as they did, and the work of Mérida likely seemed too "European" for Breton's newfound standards of Mexican authenticity.

Mérida's work instead transcended the boundaries of the Mexican School. In fact, toward the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, he increasingly used the word American rather than Mexican to describe his painting. Although he had called for an authentic "American" art in the early 1920s, through the rest of the decade and most of the 1930s he and critics referred to this work as Mexican. The reappearance of the adjective American in his rhetoric in the late 1930s signaled his desire to move beyond the stylistic borders of the Mexican School of painting. It also coincided with and reflected the rise of pan-American ideology in the U.S. and in Mexico. Although the U.S. had promoted pan-Americanism and the Good Neighbor Policy during the 1930s, it was not until the Mexican government had an urgent need to improve strained relations with the U.S. following the 1938 expropriation of Mexico's petroleum reserves that the ideology became a pragmatic reality in Mexico.[38] Nationalism and pan-Americanism functioned hand-in-hand in Mexico during the late 1930s and early 1940s, and both emerged, often simultaneously, in Mexican cultural projects.

By the time the Surrealist Paalen began publishing his journal *Dyn,* which appeared from 1942 to 1944, pan-Americanism was firmly rooted in Mexico. Mérida, whose work appeared regularly in the journal, contributed to the journal's collage-like and comparative approach to the Americas, an approach that mirrors the pan-Americanist ideas the Mexican government and Mexican intellectuals worked to popularize in the 1940s. Paalen, a painter with a deep interest in ethnography, arrived in Mexico in 1939 after a summer spent traveling through Alaska and British Columbia, collecting Northwest Coast objects and legends. His interest in the ethnography of the Northwest Coast inflected *Dyn,* which, like earlier surrealist journals, explored modern art, literature, ethnography and archaeology. The journal juxtaposed articles about and images from different regions of the Americas in a way that provoked interesting comparisons. Its run included an "Amerindian Number" that explored the Americas from Peru to Alaska. Mexico was part of a larger American whole in *Dyn,* not its focus.

Fig. 7. Page from *Dyn*, no. 6, 1944, private collection

Fig.8. Carlos Mérida, page from *Estampas del Popol-Vuh*, 10 color lithographs, Graphic Art Publications, 1943, as reproduced in *Dyn*, no. 6, 1944, courtesy of Galería Arvil, Mexico City

A shared interest in and approach to the native art of the Americas marked Mérida and Paalen's working relationship.. Each utilized pre-Columbian art as a source for artistic inspiration rather than an aesthetic model. They admired each other's work, too. Paalen, for instance, planned to include Mérida in a small exhibition he hoped to organize, "Homenaje a México" (Homage to Mexico). Mérida wrote enthusiastically of Paalen's arrival in Mexico and his impact on the Mexican art world.[39] They may have inspired artistic innovation in each other's work as well; both experimented with abstract painting on paper, made from Mexican bark and cactus fibers according to pre-Columbian techniques. The most obvious evidence of their collaboration came in the pages of *Dyn,* where reproductions of Mérida's work appeared. In the second number of the journal, Paalen reproduced an untitled Mérida drawing of three abstracted and outlined figures, their faces reduced to gaping holes. Each has a single, elongated arm, outstretched in a gesture that recalls the poses of ancient West Mexican figurines. *Dyn* no. 3 featured two Mérida images on a full page. *A Hunting Design, after a Maya Theme* depicts five tiny figures, resembling Maya figurines, floating around a cluster of odd organic creatures shaped like conch shells. One of the figures holds a spear while another holds a gourd. In *A Little Window toward the Sea*, Mérida painted two elongated and outlined figures, connected at the ends of their arms. A long shadow runs between them and a small window in the upper right offers a view to nothing. These odd biomorphic figures resemble those in other Mérida work, such as the drawing in *Dyn* no. 2. For *Dyn* no. 6, Paalen selected two Mérida images, a lithograph from the *Popol vuh* project, and an untitled painting of outlined figures with varying numbers of limbs and elongated heads hovering against an abstract background featuring stains of color and black geometric forms. The lithograph shows the two heroes of the *Popol Vuh* legend seated in the lower right corner of the page. Their knees drawn up, they hold pipes or flutes in their hands as lightning flashes across the sky. A much larger figure and a gigantic birdlike creature—perhaps a reference to the feathered serpent, which appears throughout the *Popol vuh*—confront each other in the space above. The monstrous creatures, ambiguous spatial relationships and liberation of color from line in Mérida's lithographs link them to biomorphic Surrealism at the same time that they are firmly grounded in Mérida's studies of Maya history. In putting together *Dyn*, Paalen consistently gravitated to Mérida's works that synthesized the pre-Columbian and the Surrealist rather than publish work by painters more in line with Mexican School aesthetics.[40]

In *Dyn* Paalen signaled a rejection of the nationalist vision of Mexico that Rivera and Kahlo had pressed on Breton in 1938. Various factors triggered this shift. The 1939 rift between Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky, whom Breton idolized,

surely led to a strain in Breton and Rivera's relationship. Trotsky's assassination at the hands of a Stalinist operative in Mexico in 1940 must have damaged the Surrealists' remaining illusions about Mexico's potential as the home of a surrealist revolution. The development of a surrealist community in exile in New York, too, meant that Mexico lost its specificity in the Surrealists' vision of the Americas, particularly as American artists began to absorb the ideas of their European émigré colleagues and to explore abstraction and automatism in the development of New York School painting. Finally, Mérida's collaborations with Paalen, and their mutual development of a collage-like and comparative approach to the native art of the Americas, surely contributed to the Surrealists' new mental landscape in which Mexico was part of a larger American whole. Artistically, Mérida offered the Surrealists a new model of the ideal Mexican artist.

Mérida's involvement in the surrealist movement and his influence on their perception of Mexico and Mexican art led them toward their later appreciation of the work of Mérida's friend and colleague Rufino Tamayo, who never actively participated in Surrealism, yet worked in a style that resonated with their aesthetics. By 1952, the year Rufino Tamayo illustrated Benjamin Péret's *Air Mexicain,* a schism with roots in the 1930s fully erupted in the Mexican art world pitting Tamayo and Mérida against many of those artists who continued to work in a politically overt style, including David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera, who were by then avowed Stalinists. As I've discussed, Rivera and Siqueiros published vitriolic articles attacking Mérida and Tamayo as apolitical artists who made art that was merely formal and decorative, had no social or political relevance, and who mimicked the School of Paris.[41] Rivera and Siqueiros were unable to understand Mérida and Tamayo as uniquely Mexican artists who synthesized local subject matter with experimental visual vocabularies.

Siqueiros and Rivera's 1952 attacks on Mérida and Tamayo were to some extent part of the last gasp of the "Mexican School" in its traditional sense. Mérida and Tamayo, not the muralists, were the artists whose work resonated for the next generation of Mexican painters, known as "La Ruptura" ("The Rupture") for their rejection of the social realism that had dominated Mexican painting for decades. [42] Rather than a rupture, however, these artists continued a tradition begun decades earlier by Carlos Mérida. Mérida's synthetic approach to Mexican art and Surrealism allowed him to work in a unique space between the Mexican School and the international avant-garde. His work expanded definitions of Mexican painting at the same time that it contributed to the Surrealists' presentation of Mexico—Breton's "surrealist place *par excellence"*—in their own projects. Most importantly, Mérida's work demonstrates that Surrealism, rather than a phenomenon that developed in

Europe and filtered out to the rest of the world, was instead a dynamic system of exchange and collaboration between multiple locations around the world.

1 I would like to thank the *JSA*'s reviewers for their perceptive and constructive advice in revising this essay. A number of important investigations of the relationship between Surrealism and Mexico exist and include: Lourdes Andrade and José Pierre, *Un listón alrededor de una bomba* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1997); *El Surrealismo entre viejo y nuevo mundo*(Gran Canaria: Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, 1989 [exhibition catalogue]). Leonor Morales, *Wolftang Paalen, Introductor de la pintura surrealista en México* (UNAM, 1984); Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El Surrealismo y el arte fantástico de México* (Mexico: UNAM, 1983); Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Luis Mario Schneider, *Mexico y el Surrealismo (1925-1950)* (Mexico: Arte y Libros, 1978); Juan Somolinos Palencia, *El Surrealismo en la pintura mexicana* (Mexico: Arte Ediciones, 1973); and Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2002). The most thorough study of Carlos Mérida remains *Homenaje nacional a Carlos Mérida (1891-1984): Americanismo y abstracción* (Mexico: Museo de Monterrey: 1983), featuring essays by numerous scholars on Mérida.

2 For more on the surrealists' relationship to the Trocadéro and to ethnography see James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (July 1981): 539-564.

3 Breton and Paul Eluard, *Yves Tanguy & objets d'Amérique* (Paris: Galerie Surrealiste, 1927)

4 "Une partie de mon paysage mental – et par extension, je crois, du paysage du surréalisme – est manifestement bornée par le Mexique." Breton, "Souvenir du Mexique," *Minotaure,* no. 12/13 (May 1939): 40-41.

5 "Mexico tiende a ser el lugar surrealista por excelencia. Encuentro el Mexico surrealista en su relieve, en su flora, en el dinamismo que le confiere la mezcla de sus razas, asi como en sus aspiraciones mas altas." "La de acabar con la explotacion del hombre por el hombre. .." Rafael Heliodoro Valle, "Diálogo con André Breton," *Universidad,* 5:29 (June 1938); reprinted in Fabrienne Bradu, *André Breton en México* (Mexico City: Editorial Vuelta, 1996), 128-129.

6 Breton, "Rufino Tamayo," *Tamayo* (Paris: Galerie Beaux-Arts, 1950); reprinted in Breton, *Surrealism and Painting,* trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Macdonald and Company, 1972), 233.

7 Benjamin Péret and Rufino Tamayo, *Air mexicain* (Paris: Librairie Arcanes, 1952); republished in French and Spanish translation as *Aire Mexicano* (Mexico: Editorial Aldus, 1996).

8 See *Arte Público*, no. 1 (Otober 15-November 15, 1952). Rivera and Siqueiros were members of the editorial board of *Arte Público*, which may only have appeared in a single issue. The publication featured scathing articles on both Rufino Tamayo and Carlos Mérida.

9 For excellent discussions of Tamayo's complicated relationship to the Mexican School and to Siqueiros in particular, see Diana C. du Pont, "Tamayo: Between Spaces, Within Controversies" and "'Realistic, Never Descriptive': Tamayo and the Art of Abstract Figuration," and Marey K. Coffey, "'I'm Not the Fourth Great One': Tamayo and Mexican Muralism," all in *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*, ed. Diana C. du Pont (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007): 22-30, 31-164, and 247-190.

10 During André Breton's visit to Mexico, he, Leon Trotsky and Diego Rivera collaborated on a

manifesto, *Towards an Independent Revolutionary Art* that defended complete artistic freedom as an essential element of Marxist revolution and promoted an art divorced from representation. Despite this theoretical support for abstraction, the artists Breton embraced in Mexico did not make abstract work (although Kahlo's of course did not represent reality). The surrealists' adoption of Tamayo stands out for this reason. For discussions of the manifesto, see Chapter 4: "Surrealism in Mexico/Mexico in Surrealism" in Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde*, 71-84; and Robin Adèle Greeley, "For An Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas' Mexico," in Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss, ed., *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, *Studies in European Cultural Transition*, Vol. 16 (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 204-25.

11 Alicia Sánchez Mejorada de Gil, "Su Relación con las vanguardias," *Homenaje nacional a Carlos Mérida: Americanismo y abstracción* (Mexico: Museo de Monterrey, 1992), 67, 68. Elizabeth Fuentes Rojas, "Carlos Mérida," in Luis Cardoza y Aragón, *Carlos Mérida: Color y forma* (Mexico: CONACULTA/INBA, 1992), 191.

12 Nita M. Renfrew, "An Interview with Carlos Mérida," *A Salute to Carlos Mérida* (Austin: University Art Museum, University of Texas at Austin, 1976).

13 Carlos Mérida, "Autorretrato," reprinted in Luis Lujan Muñoz, *Carlos Mérida, precursor del arte contemporáneo latinoamericano* (Guatemala: Cuadernos de la tradición guatemalteca, 1985), 117.

14 "en alguna forma, parte de Mexico. Desde entonces solo pense en venir a este pais, que poco a poco se ha vuelto mio." Cristina Pacheco, "Carlos Mérida: Un pintor de todo el siglo," *La Luz de México* (Guanajuato, Mexico: Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato, 1988), 220-221.

15 Fuentes Rojas, "Carlos Mérida," 191.

16 Mérida, "Introito," and Roberto Montenegro, quoted in brochure for "Carlos Mérida" (Mexico: Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes de Mexico, 1920).

17 "Una semana artistíca: Una caricatura y dos exposiciones," *El Universal Ilustrado,* August 26, 1920.

18 Diego Rivera, in *El Demócrata* (March 1924), as quoted in brochure for "Exposición de Carlos Mérida" (Mexico: Academía Nacional de Bellas Artes de México, 1926).

19 Mérida, "Los nuevos valores en la pintura mexicana," *Revista de Revistas* (May 18, 1924).

20 Mérida, "Autorretrato/Self Portrait," trans. Agueda Pizarro Rayo, *Américas Magazine* 2, no. 6 (June 1950); reprinted in *Carlos Mérida: Graphic Work 1915-1981* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1981).

21 Mérida, "La verdadera significación de la obra de Saturnino Herrán: los falsos críticos," *El Universal Ilustrado,* July 29, 1920.

22 Patty Koeninger, "Introduction" and Nita M. Renfrew, "An Interview with Carlos Mérida," *A Salute to Carlos Mérida,* 11, 23.

23 "Todo pintor, que sea tal, es y debe de ser surrealista: `el maravilloso es siempre bello; qualquier maravilloso es bello, no hay sino el maravilloso que es bello', dice André Breton [. .]" "Aigunas Ideas Relacionadas con la Pintura Americana: Platica dedicada at grupo 'Triama' por Carlos Mérida," *El Imparcial* (Guatemala), October 18, 1930. Carlos Mérida Archive [CMA], CENIDIAP, Mexico City, Roll 1.

24 "derivaciones de tipo americano ancestral" Mérida, notes for lecture on Surrealism, CMA, Roll 2.

25 Guillermo Rivas, "Eight Modern Mexican Painters," *Mexican Life* (February 1931): 22-26. . CMA, Roll 1

26 Luis Cardoza y Aragón, preface to *Carlos Mérida* (Mexico: Galería de Artistas Mexicanos Contemporáneos, Palacio de Bellas Artes, 1934), CMA, Roll 1.

27 Mérida, introduction to *Estampas del Popol-vuh,* trans. Leah Brenner (Mexico: Graphic Art Publications, 1943).

28 One of the factors that attracted the surrealists to non-Western cultures was the idea of myth and their desire for new myths for the modern age. Myths, they believed, allowed non-Western peoples to live in a state beyond reality that paralleled the notion of a surreality. For more on the surrealists' relationship to myth, see Evan Maurer, "Dada and Surrealism," in "*Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art*, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

29 Mérida, "La obra de Tamayo," *Magazín de El Demócrata*, 18 April, 1926.

30 Mérida, "La nueva Galería del [sic] Arte Moderno/the New modern Art Gallery," *Mexican Folkways* 5, no. 4 (October-December 1929): 184.

31 See, for example, Jorge Cuesta, "La Poesía de Paul Eluard," *Contemporáneos*, no. 12 (May 1929): 129-133; Cuesta, "Motivos: Robert Desnos y el sobrerrealismo," *Contemporáneos*, no. 18 (November 1929): 318-318; and Xavier Villaurrutia, "Fichas sin sobre para Lazo," *Contemporáneos*, no. 2 (July 1928): 120. Work by Giorgio de Chirico, Man Ray, and Salvador Dalí appeared, respectively, in the August 1929, June 1929 and April 1930 issues. The February 1931 issue reproduced the map "Le monde au temps des surréalistes."

32 Mérida, "La nueva Galería del Arte Moderno," 190.

33 See, for example, Genaro Estrada, "La Revolución Supra-realista," *El Universal*, March 4, 1925, p.3.

34 For more on the controversy, see Henri Béhar, *André Breton: Le grand indésirable* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1990); Bradu, *André Breton en México*; and Lourdes Andrade and José Pierre, eds., *Un listón alrededor de una bomba* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1997).

35 Mérida, "Carlos Orozco Romero y su reciente exposición," *Nuestra Ciudad* (May 1930): 30.

36 See Rivas and Gorostiza, cited above.

37 "Al público de América Latina" (1938), reproduced in *Un listón alrededor de una bomba*, 157.

38 Michael Nelson Miller, *Red, White and Green: The Maturing of Mexicanidad* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1999)*,* 30-31.

39 Christian Kloyber, "Wolfgang Paalen: La Aventura de una biografía," *Wolfgang Paalen: Retrospectiva* (Mexico: INBA/Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, 1994), 194; Mérida, untitled ms on plastic integration, CMA, Roll 1.

40 From his arrival in Mexico, Paalen embraced the work of painters affiliated with Los Contemporáneos. The 1940 *Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo*, which he organized at the Galería de Arte Mexicano, featured work by a number of these artists, including Mérida, Agustín Lazo, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, and Roberto Montenegro. (Although Rivera and Kahlo both played a prominent part in the exhibition.) Paalen seems to have developed an affinity for artists who experimented stylistically and transcended typical Mexican School subject matter immediately on arrival in Mexico. Other than Mérida, however, none of these artists' work appeared in *Dyn*.

41 Several of these articles appeared in the newspaper *Arte Público*. See "Muralismo en Contraposición formalista, a la manera de la Escuela de París, en el México del muralismo social" and "Tamayo en el Palacio de Bellas Artes," both in *Arte Público*, no. 1: 1, 6.

42 See *Ruptura, 1952-1965* (Mexico City: INBA/SEP, 1988), the catalogue for an exhibition on this generation of artists at the Museo de Arte Carrillo-Gil in Mexico City.