

Rufino Tamayo: Animals and Allegory

Looking for Meaning

A key to understanding this work might be to think in terms of the dualities in the natural world and the conflicting forces and ideas in our lives. We might also consider the way animals can be used as symbols for human traits or beliefs.

The Artist in an International Community

Born in Oaxaca in 1899 but schooled in Mexico City, Tamayo's adolescence spanned the years of the Mexican Revolution (1910–21). In 1921, he embarked upon a career as an independent artist. His position as head of the Department of Ethnographic Drawing at an archeological museum in Mexico strengthened the influence that pre-Columbian art had on his life and work.

As a Mexican artist competing in an international art market, Tamayo felt a need to combine his ancestry with European ideas. He also felt a need to disassociate himself from the Mexican Muralist movement of the 1930s. He sought an independent association with the international arts community through the New York art world. He made his first trip there in 1926, and from 1938 to 1950, he divided his time between winters in New York and summers in Mexico City. In 1957, he moved to Paris where he resided for six years, continually building his reputation through his paintings, prints and murals.

The Influence of the Modern Art World

Tamayo believed that perception, expression and myth are universal—that every human being perceives things, expresses her or himself, and creates myths. This belief was embraced by artists in modern European art movements such as Fauvism and Cubism. Tamayo also shared the Surrealists' respect for the unconscious mind and the mythic force of primal cultures.

Technical Features

Tamayo often says that in his work, imagery is not as important as surface and color. While much of the imagery in *Lion and Horse* comes from Picasso, the qualities and meanings of Tamayo's use of color are more similar to the work of Braque and Klee. The upper part of the painting is formed through an underpainting of yellow, revealed to us through the green aura of the moon. The lower part is formed through an underpainting of red, revealed most clearly in the shadow beneath the animal figures. Fully saturated color, which suggests the spiritual or universal, is always somewhat visible beneath the surface of this work.

Tamayo develops forms by applying a dark shade on top of a fully saturated underpainting. The moon and shadow are given form by the darker colors that surround them and seem to press in upon them. The underlying color is allowed to radiate from beneath the shaded surface. In contrast, the figures are defined positively by dark shading. They contain this extreme darkness and lively radiance of the underlying color.

"I am thinking specifically about—but painting in metaphors—how man has permitted technological advances to pollute his natural resources; how they have required and made possible the construction of building of such a scale that they block out our light and air and fence off our streets, and how they produce lethal weaponry. I'm haunted by the fear that technology will reduce men and women to robots and calculating machines, if it even lets them live at all."

—Rufino Tamayo

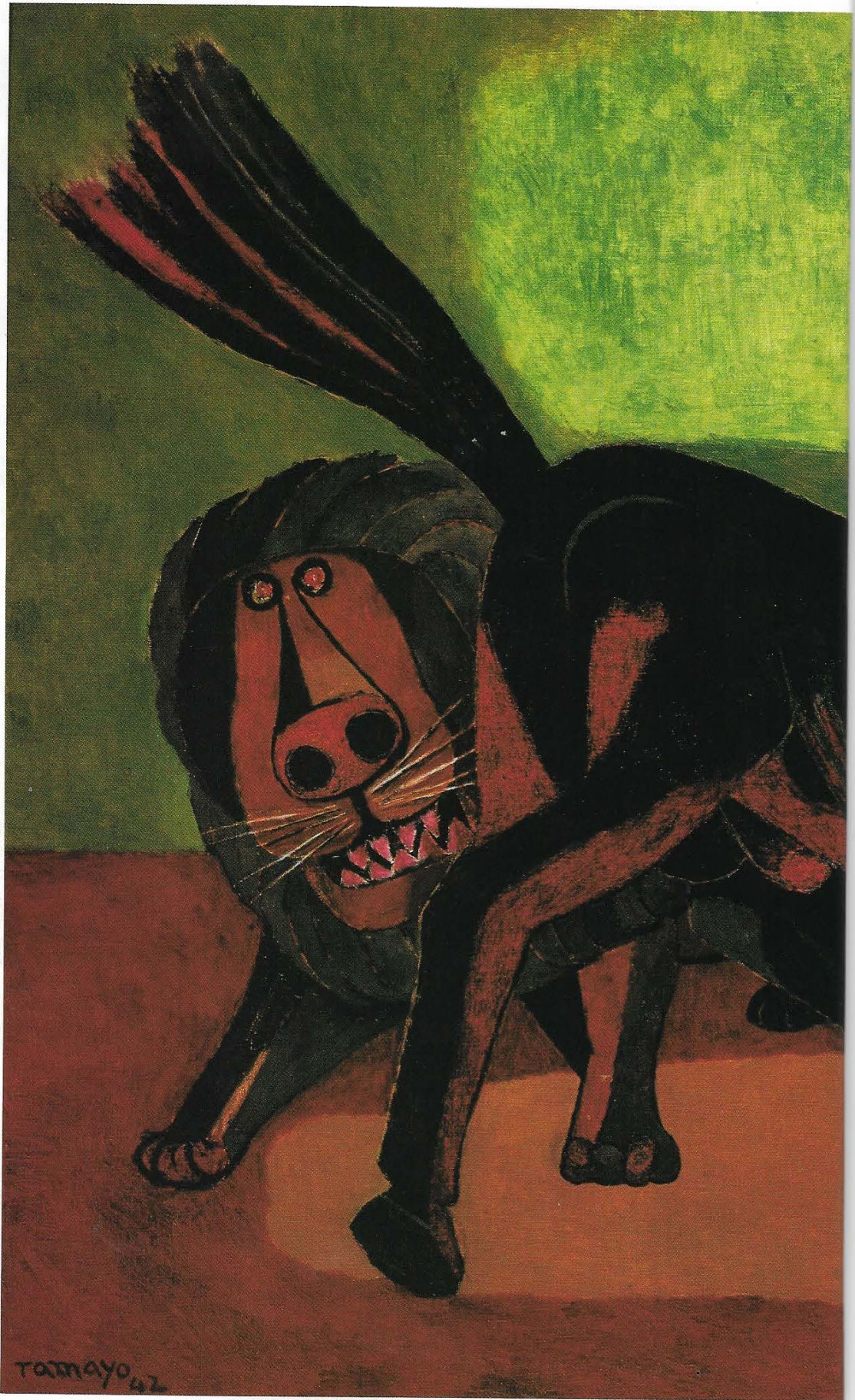


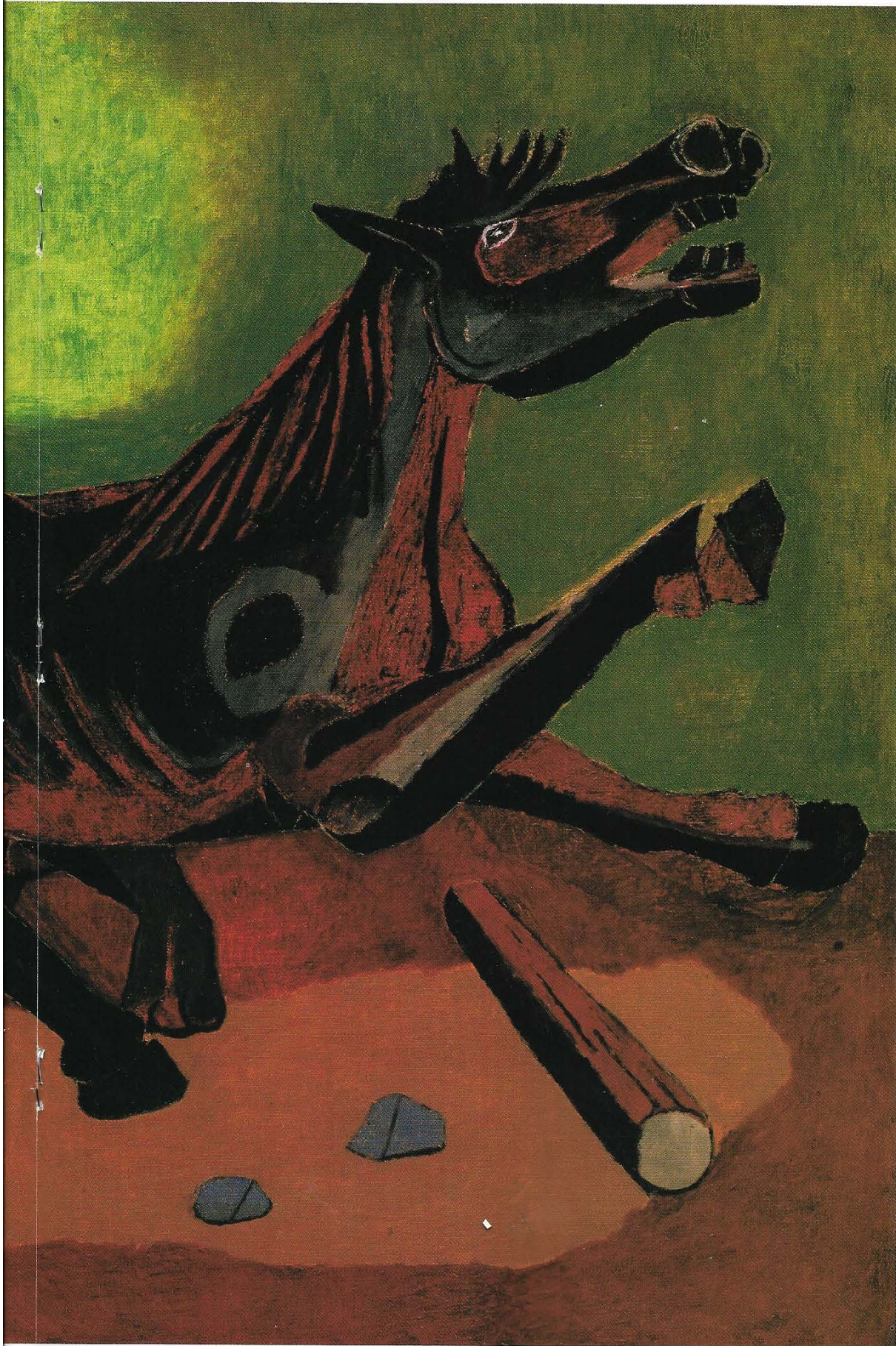
Mary-Anne Martin/Fine Art, New York

Major Themes

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Tamayo experimented with using animals to represent the tensions in modern culture. *Lion and Horse* may have been influenced by pre-Columbian totem poles, although neither the lion nor the horse is indigenous to pre-Columbian Mexico. This lion and horse have closer ties to European Romanticism. Artists of that movement used animals to symbolize the natural world from which people had strayed. This horse is most directly descended from Picasso's *Guernica* in its appearance and in its suggestion of anguish.

In *Lion and Horse*, opposing forces unify rather than destroy the pictorial whole. The sharp-toothed lion is opposed to the frantically flailing horse. The figures are opposed to the nearly bare ground, which in turn is divided into two zones: earth and sky. These material forms—the lion, horse, land and sky—are opposed to the spiritual world of light. This reference to spirit is presented in the form of another duality: the source, a yellow-green moonlight, and its opposite, the orange shadow. The spiritual elements (the glowing moon and shadow) are symbolically opposed to the material forms through color saturation. Tamayo perhaps saw this split as analogous to his native Mexico, where gay colors were used in festivals to transcend an oppressive existence. In *Lion and Horse*, as in other Modernist works, the dualities of an uncertain world are combined into a unified whole.





*Rufino Tamayo,
Lion and Horse,
1942. Oil on
canvas, 36 x 46"
(91 x 117 cm.).
Washington
University
Gallery of Art,
St. Louis,
University
Purchase,
Kende Sale Fund,
1946.*

“Mexicans are not gay, as people think we are. That gaiety is reserved for our fiestas. . . . We were always oppressed, and our sadness, which you see in the Indians particularly, is expressed in our colors. . . . If I wanted my art to be universal but to still speak with Mexican accents, it had to draw on more than the facts of history of sociology or journalism. It had to grow out of everything that was truly Mexican.”

—Rufino Tamayo



Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937. Mural. Courtesy of Ministerio de Cultura, Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

Questions to Ask

- At times, it is useful to think of the world as composed of pairs: good/bad, night/day, etc. Artists do this too. What pairs can you find in this work? (*lion/horse, green/red, light/dark, sky/earth, stick/stones*) What associations can you make with these pairs as they appear in this work? (*lion as aggressor, horse as victim*) What questions might you ask about these pairs? (*What do the stick and stones represent? Could animals represent war?*)
- Artists, like scientists, learn from others. Picasso was an artist Tamayo admired. What do you see in Picasso's *Guernica* that Tamayo might have used to create *Lion and Horse*? (*terrified horse, geometric shapes*) What did Tamayo contribute that is different from Picasso's painting and how does that add to our interpretation of *Lion and Horse*? (*color, simplicity*)
- Pre-Columbian art was admired and collected by Tamayo. *Coyote* is a pre-Columbian figure from Veracruz, Mexico. What characteristics does the lion or horse share with this figure? Which is more like the coyote? How might we say that the coyote, the lion and the horse are like people?
- Artists learn from, respond to and change events occurring in the world. What events were taking place in 1942? (*World War II*) How might we think of different parts of this painting as being analogous to those events? (*dark overcoming light, wild animal attacking domesticated one*)

Suggested Activities

Elementary

- Identify predator/prey pairs such as cat/mouse, mongoose/cobra. Make a sculpture or painting of one of these pairs. Make each animal separately using simple geometric shapes and then combine the two figures. (The same subject can be done with crayon scratchboard or cut paper collage with tissue paper overlays.)
- Think about the possibilities of the peaceful coexistence of animals in an imaginary world. Using clay, model two or more animal figures that can be joined on one base.

Middle School

- Working with the history teacher, research animal subjects associated with your ancestral culture. Relate these subjects to human events and produce an original work that incorporates Tamayo's style with your own animal subjects as symbols for events.

- Using Tamayo's painting and the GalleryCards, compare the way the artists used animals. Choose one reproduction (*Peaceable Kingdom* by Hicks, for example) and write a short, comparative paper focusing on the similarities and differences.

High School

- Working with the science and history teachers, choose a natural process and a historical event from the greater world that are metaphorically analogous. (An army of ants invading a hostile nation or parading peacocks at the senior prom are two examples.) Using Tamayo's technique of shades applied over saturated colors and his concern for surface, create a work in which these natural processes are used to symbolize the human event.
- Discuss how the quotations might provide insight for different interpretations of the painting. Choose one quotation and write an interpretation of *Lion and Horse*, speculating about the meaning of the work based on Tamayo's own words.



Pre-Columbian, *Coyote*, AD 300–800. Remojadas. Clay and paint. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection of Primitive Art. Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1961.

Resources

- Ades, Dawn. *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820–1980*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Genauer, Emily. *Rufino Tamayo*. NY: Abrams, 1974.
- Lynch, James. *Rufino Tamayo: Fifty Years of His Paintings*. Washington, DC: The Phillips Collection, 1978.
- Paz, Octavio. *Rufino Tamayo: Myth and Magic*. NY: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1979.
- Rasmussen, Waldo, ed. *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*. NY: The Museum of Modern Art.

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