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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO-VISUAL PROGRAM

SETS 221, 222 HONDURAS JOSE ANTONIO VELASQUEZ, Naive Painter

José Antonio Velasquez was a primitive artist of national glory. Born in the remote village of Caridad in Honduras in 1906, he lived to glorify his homeland by creating paintings of tree-green mountains and tropical foliage lushly encircling the homes and buildings of San Antonio de Oriente and Tegucigalpa. These communities smothered in hibiscus and jacaranda trees are framed by mountains encrusted with pine trees that appear as verdent neve. Finally, he washes the entire landscape in tranquil protective light.

Without classical artistic training, Velasquez pursued a passion to paint. Although his primitive style never changed throughout his lifetime, he nurtured color and balance until the self-taught artist assimilated both discretion and judgment. Patiently, he meticulously laid down cobblestone streets and tile roof tops with the craftsmanship of a stonemason or a carpenter + one at a time.

The repetitious quantity of curved lines captures the tranquility of the village. Humped bushes and cone-shaped trees, together with bubbly cobblestones dominate the scene. In total, his pictures are a composite of terraced strata making cultivated landscape patterns of architectural value. Through his pre-Renaissance eye, he drew naively one object behind the other ascending an imaginary hill.

Oil was Velasquez's first medium; he later switched to commercial enamel perhaps to intensify the large, showy flowers of the hibiscus or the smooth shiny leaves of the jacaranda tree. Even with the heavy proliferation of foliage in nuances of green, Velasquez's themes are simple because he maintains the innocence of "trusting his dreams."

The priest, a constant figure in his spiritual life; the church, a constant reminder of his destiny; and the dog, a constant friend; all are like the occurrences of daily life: they appear again and again in his work, stressing their importance in twentieth century village life. Velasquez swiftly and intuitively understood what to paint in order to accomplish the feeling of personality of village life. The lofty cathedrals and saints of the Venetian Renaissance paintings are recalled as he humbly presented the priest, not in a study, pen in hand, but out-of-doors, mingling with the villagers, an ever-present dog nearby, not as a show piece, but as a contribution to the mosaic of village life where dogs are seen in abundance.

A childhood memory of the joy and beauty of the out-of-doors characterizes Velasquez as the painter of naive landscapes. In his scenes, he paints first the flora infused with greens a hundredfold, then he paints the fauna in lesser measure. The roof tops, beautifully etched like stone furrows, are all he allows



us to see of the village homes.

Again, as in early Venetian Renaissance paintings, Velasquez chronicles the Christian traditional love of pageantry. In his painting, "Palm Sunday," he shows the piety without pomp. He structures a passion play as we watch from the end of the procession, the multiple heads pantomiming the last glorious moments in the life of Christ. In this scene, Velasquez presents his strongest motif, the dorsal side of man. He did not realize serious figure art; he painted few, if any pretty faces, and the people he chose to illuminate daily village life or to walk in the Palm Sunday procession, are turned from the viewer displaying the backs of their heads - like repoussé work, lifeless but symbolic. These figures presented Velasquez with an opportunity to consummate his dual career as a painter and as the town barber. His familiarity with the "crown position" accounts for his inclination to reveal the tops of everything from roof tops and heads to a birds-eye view of the textural surfaces of the cobblestone streets.

Through his independent struggle to paint, Velasquez realized and cherished light as native to his landscape. He did not, however, use light for modeling and volume, but rendered it with a passion and appreciation of a colorist, as his figures remained flat with the discipline of a true primitive. A transition of style, removing Velasquez briefly from a primitive to classical artist, took place in 1980. In the painting, "The Eye of God," a single penetrating eye falls upon the viewer, capturing and holding his presence. This departure from previous flat patterns was his one serious change. Whether or not this change was simply chance, or if he had mastered the techniques of chiaroscuro - expressing gradations between dark and light - is unclear, as the canvas is empty - empty like the large white corona of the eye; a space in which the eye could float around and around on the canvas, seeing all. Here, Velasquez consciously avoids filling the canvas, a personal artistic challenge.

This ductile, naive work of José Antonio Velasquez is formidable in the genre of naive art. Through a keen sense of design and an inherent appreciation of color he interpreted the highest level of beauty. His paintings are "pretty miniatures on a large scale."

In his last painting, an unfinished piece, Velasquez unveils the underpainting or basic foundation of this or any work. The clean white lines of the village homes are unobstructed by foliage. His usual green messages trumpeting the lovely life are replaced with the solid white walls echoing the tolling of church bells.

Velasquez, like all the primitives who lived with nature and studied its character, respected his own special heritage through emphasis on the natural beauty of the flora and fauna, which he placed in timeless spaces to honor his homeland.

Text by: Therese C. DesRosiers.
Photographs by Angel Hurtado.



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AUDIO-VISUAL PROGRAM

SET 221 HONDURAS JOSE ANTONIO VELASQUEZ, naive painter

221 A View of San Antonio de Oriente. Oil on canvas. 1949.

Here Velasquez emphasizes the tile roofs. From the house tops, the eye jumps to the cone-shaped trees, all of which have similar lines pushing upward. To soften the picture, he has placed rounded bushes in the center of the painting.

221 B Detail of the View of San Antonio de Oriente. Oil on canvas. 1949
This is a view of Velasquez's beloved church. With this close-up, Velasquez blends the natural with the man-made for unity and balance.

221 C Detail of San Antonio de Oriente. Oil on canvas. 1954.
As always, Velasquez gives us the exterior view of village homes, but never a peek inside. The two light poles and a cross on the church property are mindful of the crosses on Calvary.

221 D View of San Antonio. Oil on canvas. 1957.
This is Velasquez's finest hour of landscape design. He salutes rocks, rivens, stone walls, and the irregularity of the land masses.

221 E Church of San Antonio. Oil on canvas. 1966.
Here, Velasquez gives us colonies of design. A group of cone-shaped trees dotting the hills, the rocks in the foreground setting the form and textures for the roofs and streets, and a rotunda of bushes echoing the shape of the rocks, are all plotted to order.

221 F San Antonio in Grey. Oil on canvas. 1967.
The geometric shapes are dominate in this picture. Three of Velasquez's strongest motifs; the priest, the dog, and the dorsal side of man are presented here also.

221 G Morazan Plaza in Tegucigalpa. Oil on canvas. 1969.
Velasquez has frozen time and space in more than a post card view of Tegucigalpa. The church and horse statue are symmetrically flanked by trees spaced to lead the viewers' eyes into the plaza scene, a sophisticated use of space and perspective.

221 H View of San Antonio. Oil on canvas. 1969.
The church of San Antonio is centered in a variety of textures; linear pines in the background, soft round masses of jacaranda trees, and blossoming flowers. The rounded tiles on the church roof are repeated in the tile forms of the roofs leading down to the stone wall where the girl stands. Velasquez surrounds the church with flowers



like a child preparing a May altar.

- 221 I Detail of View of San Antonio. Oil on canvas. 1969.
In the detail Velasquez's mastery of design, texture, and pattern dominates his underdeveloped handling of the figure in his art.
- 221 J September 15, Anniversary of Independence of Central America.
Oil on canvas. 1970.
The variety of texture, forms, pattern, gathering villagers reiterate characteristics found in most of Velasquez's paintings.



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AUDIO-VISUAL PROGRAM

- SET E22 HONDURAS JOSE ANTONIO VELASQUEZ, naive painter
- 222 A Hondurean Landscape of San Antonio de Oriente. Oil on canvas. 1971.
Velasquez barely acknowledges the existence of colors other than green. With small touches of grey, brown, and purple, this picture is kept alive because of Velasquez's unique approach to light.
- 222 B View of Tegucigalpa. Oil on canvas. 1971.
The capital city of Honduras is painted in his style found in the landscapes of San Antonio de Oriente. The paved street leading into the city towards the high-rise building in the background invites the viewer to enter the Honduran landscape.
- 222 C View of San Antonio de Oriente. Oil on canvas. 1972.
Velasquez produces a moving contrast with white walls and patterned trees and roof tops.
- 222 D Palm Sunday. Oil on canvas. 1980.
Flat but symbolic figures proceed to the church holding palms and heralding in Holy Week with the traditional love of pageantry.
- 222 E Detail of Palm Sunday. Oil on canvas. 1980.
The artist uses the human figure as a tool of design, never developing individual figures. The dorsal side of his figures create a uniformity of pattern and design elements that capture the expression of his Hondurean culture.
- 222 F Detail of Palm Sunday. Oil on canvas. 1980.
Even though the artist understood the use of light, he used it to produce atmosphere and not for modeling a rounded figure.
- 222 G Village Scene. Oil on canvas. 1980.
Velasquez has surprised us with this overture to depth. The light purple mountains grab us as a new step in his artistic development. Once again the humped mountains repeat shapes.
- 222 H The Eye of God. Oil on canvas. 1980.
This religious, symbolic picture departs from Velasquez's usual dense textured, flat forms. The strong penetrating eye shows the use of some chiaroscuro.
- 222 I Village Scene. Oil on canvas. 1982. Collection of the White House.
The light on the roof tops stun the viewer with blinding lumination. The white exterior walls of the houses enclose the village.



222 J Unfinished Landscape. Oil on canvas. 1983.
Velasquez painted up until the time of his death. This unfinished painting reveals the composition and skeletal form found underneath his usually dense textured paintings. Observe the division of the canvas for compositional layout. The house in the foreground echoes back to the shape of the mountain in the background.