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

AUDIO VISUAL PROGRAM

FRANCISCO ZÚÑIGA
ENGRAVING AND SCULPTURE
COSTA RICA - MEXICO

SET 249

"Perhaps the secret of Zúñiga, the artist, is that all of his work, whether on paper, in stone, or bronze, is not merely life like, but ALIVE as is the man himself."

Rod McKuen - 1971

Francisco Zúñiga, the son of a sculptor, was born December 27, 1912, in San José, Costa Rica. As a youth he worked with his father assisting him with carving and painting religious figures. At the age of fifteen, his parents enrolled him in the School of Fine Arts in San José, where his formal training as an artist began. Anxious to learn all he could about his chosen career, Zúñiga read every book and studied every sculpture available in San José. He continued to work with his father for the next seven years and by the age of 21, 1934, he was working on his own in wood and stone, carving and painting. In 1935, he was awarded the first prize in a Central American Sculpture competition for his large sculpture, "Maternity" (Mother and Child - granite, height 51").

In 1936, Zúñiga was preparing for study in Europe, when the Spanish Civil War broke out and forced him to change his plans, traveling instead to Mexico. Zúñiga's own words best describe those early years, "The need to earn a living combined with my desire to learn all the secrets of a nearly forgotten profession, buried in art museums, led me to work for a long time as an assistant in sculptors' workshops." Any spare hours were spent studying in the old Museum of Archeology with its great collection of Pre-Hispanic sculpture that he recalls revealed to him, "a magic world, the myth of life and death in aggressive, rounded figures with a heaviness, vitality and formal equilibrium so at variance with Egyptian art. At that time a study of their aesthetics was not important, ...it was not a matter of a return to the past, nor an archaic repetition of decorations and symbols, but rather a contact, a well-spring of tradition and its dramatic plastic interpretation."

As Zúñiga's knowledge and experience grew during those early years, his confidence in his own theories of sculpture developed. In his autobiographical notes, he comments, "I rejected an obsession with anatomy, with baroque dynamics, with the entire dictionary of Western sculpture up to the nineteenth century. I felt it natural for me to begin with a tradition if not cultural, at least belonging to an environment that constituted America."

Zúñiga's work has been profoundly influenced by his environment. Travelling through Mexico, he recalls "...the arid land, desert spaces, and rocky contours pleased by spirit." It has been said that Zúñiga's monumental female sculptures

museum of modern art of latin america



and drawings were born of that earth, reflecting in their contours, the rocks and mountains of the Mexican landscape, reconciling the artist's own poetic and intuitive vision with his direct response to nature.

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Contact with the works of several European artists, Archipenko, Brancusi, Rodin, Moore, Maillol and Gauguin combined with strong cultural roots in the evolution of Zúñiga's individual style. By 1938, he was well known as a rising young sculptor and that year was appointed professor at the Esmeralda School of Painting and Sculpture of the Secretaria de Educación Pública; a position he held until he retired in 1970.

In the 1940's Zúñiga devoted himself to his sculpture, working in the studio of Guillermo Ruiz, he perfected his technique of bronze casting. By 1943, the Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased a Zúñiga sculpture (the head of a Mexican child). That same year, Zúñiga, along with a number of other artists, founded an art workshop that throughout the years has trained many gifted artists. It was in this workshop, he met Elena Laborde, a student and painter. They were married in 1947 and have three children. Elena has modeled for many of her husband's drawings and sculptures during their years together.

In the years that followed, Zúñiga was awarded many government commissions. He designed and constructed monumental works throughout Mexico and Latin America. Between 1946 and 1964, he produced 27 major public sculptures. During the 1950's, he became a member of the Plastic Integration Group, collaborating with architects to create works that would harmonize with their surroundings. 1957 began an important change in the direction of Zúñiga's sculpture. He was turning away from the earlier monumental "public art" style to explore a more free, humanistic approach.

It was not until 1967, that Zúñiga finally travelled to Europe, to study first hand the works that he had only seen in photographs and reproductions. His impressions from this first trip only convinced him that his ideas about sculpture were correct.

1972 marked an important development in the range of Zúñiga's art. That was the year he completed his first series of lithographs, working with the master printmaker, Ernesto Desoto in San Francisco. Two of these lithographs were included in the well known portfolio, "Mexican Master Suite", along with the works of Siqueiros, Tamayo and Cuevas. His lithographs revealed from the beginning a technical skill developed over a life time in which drawing was and still is an everyday activity. Zúñiga considers drawing the primary discipline in his work. He says, "Drawing to me, is the beginning of everything, of sculpture, painting, everything." From his drawings, Zúñiga eliminates, refines and simplifies until the result is a lithograph or sculpture that is an accurate synthesis of what is important to the artist. According to the critic, Burt Chernow, "It was exactly because of this continuous uncompromising involvement with the act of drawing that Zúñiga emerged, almost instantly, as one of the most significant graphic artists of the 1970's and 1980's." Printmaking has allowed Zúñiga a new vehicle for revealing luminosity and color, density and texture, expanding the range of his visual language without altering his intent as an artist.

By 1973, Zúñiga had begun working with another master printer, Andrew Vlady, in a print workshop near his home in Mexico City - the Kyron. Working together, Zúñiga and Vlady produced a series of lithographs that gave the artist an opportunity to master a variety of techniques. Critics have noted that in all of Zúñiga's graphic work done at the height of his career, there is a consistency that makes it difficult to select the most important works.

In 1975, Zúñiga traveled again to Europe for his second work/study trip. He made another trip in 1979, to Carrara, Italy, to work with the famous marble from that region. And in 1981, Zúñiga travelled for the first time to Egypt.

Zúñiga's work has addressed itself to one of the most constant themes that has preoccupied Latin American artists during this century - the dignity of the common man. His point of departure, the female form. As he says of his life work, it has been, "a continuous representation of femininity." Burt Chernow describes Zúñiga's powerful work in the following passage, "Dominating his prints and sculpture are women who have the startling presence of ancient goddesses as they might appear in the contemplative situations of daily life. They are staunch and monumental females, timeless madonnas with Indian features, solemnly poised and at one with their environment. Present in each massive personage is an existential sense of isolation and the unmistakable potential for nurturing and regenerating life. In his printmaking, as in his other art, Zúñiga has created a silent archetype of woman that is without anxiety, incapable of hostility and securely contained in her own tranquil grace."

Zúñiga sees himself as a realist, "I fashioned a more realistic form with very clear ideas, full of the human values that we find in ourselves, the dignity of the working man; all these things were motivations in my work...the clearest and least sophisticated form...I am interested in man."

Photographs by Angel Hurtado
Text by Nicole Ober

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SLIDE SET 249
Francisco Zúñiga.

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- 249 A "Muchacha en una Silla" 1982.
Girl in a Chair
Lithograph in 5 colors
23 1/4 X 17 5/16"
Printed in the Kyron - Mexico.
- 249 B "Domitila" 1980
Lithograph in 2 colors
22 9/16 X 17 1/2"
Printed in the Kyron - Mexico.
- 249 C "Compesinos" 1980
Country People
Lithograph in 6 colors
27 3/8 X 19 5/8"
Printed in the Kyron - Mexico.
- 249 D "Niñas con Panes" 1980
Girls with bread
Lithograph in 8 colors
22 1/4 X 31 7/8"
Printed in the Kyron - Mexico.
- 249 E "Mujer en el mercado I" 1980
Woman in the Market I
Lithograph in black on beige paper
26 3/4 X 22 7/16"
Printed in the Kyron - Mexico.
- 249 F "Dos Mujeres Mayas" 1983:
Two Mayan Women
Mixograph
21 X 30"
Printed by Taller Graphics - Mexico.
- 249 G "Reclining Nude of Delores"
22 X 38 X(width) 24"
Bronze
- 113 249 H "Mujer"
Woman
Bronze
- 111 249 I "Seated Juchiteca" 1973
43 3/8"
Bronze - Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.
- 117 249 J Detail of 249 I.