

JOSE SACAL A UNIVERSAL MEXICAN

When thinking of José Sacal (1944 -2018) the first words that come to mind are experimentation and freedom. Here is an artist that recognizes no boundaries in his sources of inspiration and is not afraid to find new meaning in old forms.

More than twenty of his sculptures are placed in public spaces in México, Israel and the U.S. In 2006, he became the first Mexican artist to have his sculptures permanently displayed in China. In Los Angeles, he has public sculptures in the *Children's Hospital* and the *Museum of Tolerance* among other venues. Sacal occupies a unique place in Mexican art because even though he works within the figurative tradition, his sculptures are never narrative or nationalistic. He elongates, deconstructs and rebuilds the human figure and creates real or imagined animals. Sacal is also a master in recreating images, portraits and icons three-dimensionally.

He studied at the **National Institute of Fine Arts in Morelos** and with masters such as Arthur Khronengold, Enrique Altamirano and especially Francisco Zúñiga, one of Latin America's most important sculptors. But his education is much broader and has to do with his own life experience. When he was a child, his father often left him in charge of the family store. Because of his shyness, he preferred to re-design the store's window displays instead of talking to the customers. He let the objects, beautifully displayed, do the selling. From this experience, Sacal learned how the objects relate in space and how to control the way we look at things.

As a young adult he studied medicine. Like every medical student in México at the time, he received a cadaver to study over an entire semester. He painted the different muscle groups and understood exactly how the body was built. He would later visit psychiatric hospitals where he would also explore the human mind and study how it is reflected in body posture. He would see the enormous range of expression of the human face when there are no social restraints or inhibitions.

When he married Silvia Farca, whose family owned a large wedding dress business, he learned everything about textures and how the body looks when covered. He also was able to travel extensively. José and Silvia Sacal visited the world's great museums, but more importantly, lived in marginal communities in India, New Guinea, China and The Amazons.

The sculptures of this exhibit include two groups of work: sculptures inspired by other works of art and portraits of historical figures. Sacal would describe his creative process when developing sculptures based on other works, *"...first I try to understand its dimension in space, I record it in the unconscious, sometimes I even dream about it, but when I do the sculpture, I let the feelings flow freely. During the creative process I never see photos or drawings, because I would end up copying."*

The question he always asks is, “*What is the essence?*” In the sculpture of *David* the importance is beauty, in *Moses* strength, in *Monalisa* happiness. Some sculptures are a synthesis of the artist’s work and their life. Such is the case of *Modigliani*. Here, in addition to Modigliani’s paintings, Sacal also recreates the features of the artist’s beautiful lover, Jeanne Hebuterne. In *Grant Wood*, the sculpture is a fusion of both characters from *American Gothic*. Sacal’s interpretation of Munch’s *Scream*, makes us feel as if we could touch the anguish, fusing the image with the undulating water behind. From Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* he made two sculptures, *The Wailing Woman* and the *Horse*. Their suffering is expressed in the striations Sacal incorporates into the figures. This is further magnified in his depiction of the horse, where the animal’s gnashing teeth evoke a sense of primal despair and agony. Sacal says, “*Whenever we suffer we show our teeth. These sculptors were informed by my experience working with the mentally ill, they always painted eyes and teeth.*” There are occasions in which Sacal looks inside the painting, in *Las Meninas* for example, where he provides an intimate glimpse underneath her clothing.

In his historical portraits, it was important for Sacal to understand not only the character’s features, but also the historical context in which they lived and the objects they used. He visited flea markets especially México city’s “*Lagunilla*” where he found all kinds of objects that often became the departure point of the portraits. Such is the case with the roller skates in *Chaplin*, the Chess figures in *Napoleon* and the trumpet in *Louis Armstrong*. In other sculptures, like the portrait of the Aztec emperor *Cuahutémoc*, objects are used purely for aesthetic reasons. In this case, spoons become feathers. In *Einstein*, he blends the image with the form of a violin and together they adopt the form of a note. In *Churchill*, the portrait emerges from the rubble of war and a real Nazi helmet impinging on him from the side.

The portraits are also the consequence of travel. Sacal recreated the journey of slaves from Africa, and concluded that the best portrait of *Lincoln* was the act of the Abolition of Slavery, instead of a face, he places the chains that needed to be broken. In some portraits he juxtaposes opposite symbols. In *Gandhi* there is the contrast between the elephant hoofs representing strength and the flexibility and fragility of Gandhi’s body. In other portraits he explores technical aspects such as color as in the portrait of *Marcel Marceau*; or creates sculptures where the audience can interact dynamically by rotating it, such as in *Cervantes*. When talking about his portraits, Sacal asserts that, “*Art cannot be explained, it is a spark that reveals a new reality. The artist infuses clay, bronze or stone with a life of their own.*”

I like to think of JOSE SACAL as a universal Mexican, unbounded by cultural borders. For him no culture was foreign, he embraced all he encountered. Mexican sage Alfonso Reyes would agree: “*Todo lo bueno es nuestro.*” “*Everything good is ours.*”

GREGORIO LUKE
Curator

