

## Oswaldo Guayasamín: An Art that Transcends Time

Nadie pudo  
recordarlas después: el viento  
las olvidó, el idioma del agua  
fue enterrado, las claves se perdieron  
o se inundaron de silencio o sangre.

[No one could  
remember them afterward: the wind  
forgot them, the language of water  
was buried, the keys were lost  
or flooded with silence or blood.]

-Pablo Neruda, *Amor America (1400)*<sup>1</sup>

"Imaynatan munanki chaynallataq munasunki."  
[Just as you love others, they will love you.]

-Quechuan Proverb

The *avant garde* artistic developments that arose in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Expressionism, Constructivism, Surrealism, and Cubism, entered Latin America as part of a "vigorous current of renovation" in the 1920's.<sup>2</sup> These movements, while European in origin, were immediately adapted in individual, imaginative, and idiosyncratic ways by myriad artists throughout the Latin American sphere, who, although spanning multiple regions and countries, nonetheless shared an affinity for the pioneering aesthetics and techniques vital to the new Modern art. Collectively, these artists celebrated modernity and its ideologies of progression and experimentation; however, they also sought to make art that was relevant to their own cultural heritage, social and economic circumstance, detached from those of their European counterparts. The manifestation of these ideas resulted in an innovative aesthetic tendency; one which exhibited a return to the pre-Hispanic past, rich

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<sup>1</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Canto General*, trans. Jack Schmitt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Dawn Ades et al. *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 125.

in symbolic forms and historically charged content, simultaneously with an artistic engagement with contemporary societal issues relating to oppression and injustice in the Latin American present.<sup>3</sup> Oswaldo Guayasamín Calero, born in Ecuador in 1919, was one of the artists to seize these ideologies, applying and infusing them within his art, rising to become one of the most important modernist painters in Latin America. Proud of his indigenous Ecuadorian ancestry, he signed his artwork with the single Quechua surname *Guayasamín*: “Flight of the White Bird.”

Guayasamín was born in Quito, Ecuador, to a native Quechua father and mestizo<sup>4</sup> mother. The artist’s upbringing—the eldest of ten children, and raised in extreme poverty—his ethnic identity, and social circumstance, would together exercise a profound influence on his worldview and the content of his art throughout his career.<sup>5</sup> Guayasamín enrolled at *La Escuela des Bellas Artes* (The School of Fine Arts) in Quito at the age of fourteen, where he received traditional academic training but was also exposed to the trends surrounding pictorial Indigenism. *Indigenismo*, a movement in Latin American art and literature, began to gain momentum in the early 1930’s and manifested itself in the re-discovery and re-evaluation of indigenous American cultures and in the proliferation of Indian-related themes and subjects.<sup>6</sup> Broadly defined, Indigenism was a “Pan-Latin-American intellectual trend that denounced the political and economic exploitation of Native American populations”<sup>7</sup> through literary, artistic and social projects.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>4</sup> A person of mixed European (esp. Spanish or Portuguese) and non-European parentage; *spec.* (originally) a man with a Spanish father and an American Indian mother; (later) a person of mixed American Spanish and American Indian descent. Hence, more generally: any person of mixed racial origin. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Ades, et. al., 151.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>7</sup> Michele Greet, *Beyond National Identity: Pictorial Indigenism as a Modernist Strategy in Andean Art, 1920-1960* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), xiii.

In 1939 the *Sindicato de Escritores y Artistas Ecuatorianos* (Ecuador's Writers and Artists Union) recognized the importance of Indigenism as an artistic movement with the founding of the Sal6n de Mayo,<sup>9</sup> the first annual art exhibition in Ecuador to be sponsored by a non-governmental organization. The open, un-juried format of the exhibit stimulated the creation of new art and allowed Indigenism to flourish in Ecuador.<sup>10</sup> Guayasam6n participated in the Sal6n's initial exhibition, submitting various oil paintings and pastels typical of the artist's early work, depicting socially volatile themes and Indigenous content. Of the fifteen works Guayasam6n presented, critics singled out *La Huelga* (The Strike, 1940, Fig. 1) for its social significance, and it received critical acclaim. One of the few narrative works created by the artist, *La Huelga* specifically denounces the oppression of workers by the Ecuadorian government. Amidst the brutal suppression of a strike, a frightened woman drags the limp body of her son off the street, which is littered with dead and wounded bodies. Behind her, "*Hoy Paro*" [Today I Strike], is inscribed on the wall in the background, and parts of two uniformed figures can be seen in the upper right corner of the image. In the foreground, a man lies facedown on the pavement in a pool of his own blood, while another writhes in an impossibly contorted position after being shot in the back. The men are naked from the waist up, indicating their status as members of the working class and highlighting their vulnerability.<sup>11</sup>

Guayasam6n's early compositions have often been described as adhering to the tenets of social realism, an artistic movement whose primary subject matter is the

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<sup>8</sup> Indigenism in art thus represented distinct attitudes toward the "Indian" subject, promoting an attitude of praise and fostering native values as an official national policy.

<sup>9</sup> [Jacqueline Barnitz, \*Twentieth Century Art of Latin America\* \(Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001\), 88.](#)

<sup>10</sup> Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 141.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

archetypal working-class hero. Artists working in this style emphasize social injustice, economic hardship and the plight of the indigent and exploited members of society. Although Guayasamín's work features unvarnished, raw examples of contemporary reality and society's vices, it resists such identification. The figures in his *La Huelga* are elongated and distorted, heightening the emotional effect of the image. His limited color palette of russet earth tones and somber grays contributes to the oppressive, dismal nature of the scene. *La Huelga*, a characteristic example of Guayasamín's early Indigenist style, is focused on the tragic moments in the lives of workers and Indians. Despite receiving numerous accolades for the work, the artist would not continue to paint direct, conspicuous representations of contemporary injustices after *La Huelga*.<sup>12</sup>

By 1940, critics had started to interpret Indigenous subject matter as an emblematic display of ethnic identity and/or Latin American regionalism, rather than a critique of specific unsympathetic social circumstances. As social realist Indigenism started to lose its status as a progressive artistic phenomenon, Guayasamín began to disassociate himself from the movement and its artistic expressions. While he retained its primary content, he re-conceptualized his use of form. By the mid- to late forties the artist began to direct his focus on symbolic content, altering his technique by eliminating both deep space and narrative composition. Guayasamín started to apply impastos in a thick, tactile manner as a strategy to stylistically "update" and modernize those Indigenous themes he had previously rendered almost exclusively in a realistic manner. For the remainder of his career, Guayasamín experimented with unconventional and avant-garde artistic methods and techniques, appropriating traditional Ecuadorian subjects but using a modern aesthetic relevant to a contemporary audience.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 151.

After graduating from art school Guayasamín's career quickly progressed and his fellow Ecuadorian, social realist and Indigenist painter Eduardo Kingman, took notice of the young artist's precocious talent. With the opening of his gallery, *La Galería Caspicara* in 1940, Kingman provided a gathering place for artists who shared similar political interests, creating a nurturing atmosphere for artists seeking social reform.<sup>13</sup> A veritable Soapbox, Caspicara incubated the ideologies of social realism in the minds of various artists and institutions working within the movement. The attention Guayasamín had received at the Salón a few years prior did not go unnoticed, and in 1942 Kingman offered the artist his first one-man show at the gallery. One piece stood out in particular, *El Silencio* (The Silence, 1941, Fig. 2) for showcasing Guayasamín's stylistic evolution and shared enthusiasm for societal development. Addressing social issues in a manner different than his previous works, *Silencio* "documented social tragedy" in a simplified yet poignant image.<sup>14</sup> In an unconventionally reductive composition, Guayasamín removes all aspects of narrative and instead emphasizes the social status of the Indian as a representative member of the poor and exploited underclass.<sup>15</sup> Five figures stand against a dimly lit abstract background close to the picture plane, creating a sense of ambiguity in both time and place. The composition is dominated by five bust-length Indigenous men (and perhaps women, the majority of indeterminable gender), whose deeply-lined faces and rugged physical appearance conveys centuries of suffering and oppression. Their worn features are emphasized in thick impasto, accented by dramatic chiaroscuro and a Caravaggesque tableau of shadow.<sup>16</sup> They gaze outward towards the

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<sup>13</sup> Barnitz, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 153.

<sup>15</sup> Ades, *Art in Latin America*, 195.

<sup>16</sup> Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 153.

viewer blankly, their eyes conveying a sense of vacancy and enduring sadness. The body of the woman in the foreground creates an implicit triangular form, appearing as if she herself were a mountain in the Andes; she appears ancient, weathered and eroded. The gnarled hand at her chin is echoed by the skeletal hands behind her.

By the close of 1942, Indigenism had fallen out of favor as the progressive artistic strategy of choice, and artists like Guayasamín began to avoid characteristic Indigenous motifs or interpreted them in new, imaginative ways. Coming into his own as an artist at the height of the crisis surrounding pictorial Indigenism (the thematic conflation of imagery as indicative of nationalist policy and/or regional esteem), Guayasamín was undoubtedly aware of this crisis, however, he never rejected the trend altogether. The artist reinvented this highly charged subject matter, manipulating both style and content in order to create a “new approach to indigenous subjects,”<sup>17</sup> which no longer favored idealized, realistic narrative scenes depicting the plight of workers and Indians. The controversy surrounding Indigenism likely reinforced Guayasamín’s decision to eliminate narrative from his work, and avoid subjects that could be construed as political propaganda.<sup>18</sup> *El Silencio* is an example of Guayasamín’s definitive shift from history and narrative to an emphasis on Indigenous people as “symbols of human suffering.”<sup>19</sup> His men and women cannot be located in a specific time or a place, but rather represent a shared human condition.<sup>20</sup> *El Silencio* also marks a new emphasis on formal values, in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 155.

which Guayasamín employed the Indigenous body as a tableau for experimentation with progressive artistic techniques.<sup>21</sup>

Guayasamín again showed work at the Caspicara Gallery in addition to several other galleries around Ecuador in 1942. Two paintings from that year, *Los Niños Muertos* (The Dead Children, 1942, Fig. 3) and *La Procesión* (The Procession, 1942, Fig. 4), demonstrate how Guayasamín continued to differentiate his art by means of newfound experimental techniques. *Los Niños Muertos* graphically depicts a pile of nude children's bodies, emaciated and entangled, one lying dead atop of another. Guayasamín provides no indication of the circumstances that led to these tragic deaths; his piercing image instead serves as a general condemnation of human suffering.<sup>22</sup> The value of the work does not lie in its emotional impact alone; it is also an exceptional study in surface and texture. In applying thick, painterly impastos and layers of viscous pigments, Guayasamín highlights the play of light and shadow within the composition through heavy ridges of paint applied dimensionally to the surface. By incorporating the same rich texture on the areas surrounding the bodies as on the figures themselves, the artist effectively blurs the distinction between figure and ground.<sup>23</sup> Guayasamín rejects perspective and eliminates any view into deep space, opting again for a shallow picture plane, as seen in *El Silencio*. He uses the intertwined, elongated bodies of the dead children to create a harmonious undulating pattern, foreshadowing the Modernist techniques the artist would come to admire greatly. Dedicated to a subdued, organic palette of colors, Guayasamín demarcates the figures with only subtle variations of muted browns and grays along with the direction of the thickly applied brushstrokes.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 155.

In *La Procesión*, the identifiably Indigenous figures, reminiscent of *El Silencio* from the previous year, include a grieving Indian peasant woman who shields a lit candle with her bony, knobby fingers. She leads a cortège of figures who advance towards the viewer amidst a funeral procession. Guayasamín again leaves the viewer in the dark; the deceased are unidentified, and the cause of death is undisclosed. As in *El Silencio*, the viewer is once again left to the devices of his imagination. For the artist, the deceased is both no one and everyone. Expanding beyond the restrictive depictions of particular and exclusive societal groups, Guayasamín advances an effort to address universal themes that are the connective tissue of all mankind.<sup>24</sup>

On an expansive visit throughout Latin America, avid collector and influential U.S. businessman Nelson A. Rockefeller experienced Guayasamín's art firsthand at a gallery in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Having resigned as president from the Board of Directors of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1940, Rockefeller became the Coordinator of Commercial and Cultural Relations for Latin America at the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA). That same year he traveled to Central and South America to observe the economic and working conditions of various "Pan-American" regions (and also to collect art).<sup>25</sup> Rockefeller purchased four of Guayasamín's works from the gallery, all non-narrative figural compositions of Indigenous people. Apparently moved by the emotional and symbolic intensity of Guayasamín's work, he recommended that the artist receive a travel grant to the United States to participate in an organized tour for observation and study at various American museums.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 166.

Appointed *cultural attaché* for his native Ecuador, Guayasamín arrived in the United States on invitation from the State Department in 1943. His tour would bring Guayasamín in contact with European, American and other South American artists and expose him to important collections of modern art, especially at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City.<sup>27</sup> This contact with major works of modern art would inspire the artist to continue to transform his aesthetic vision and evolve his artistic style. Those who were especially inspiring for Guayasamín included contemporary Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco, Rufino Tamayo, and the famous Spaniard Pablo Picasso.<sup>28</sup> All of these artists clearly influenced Guayasamín's artistic development, and he would emulate their innovative, avant-garde styles in the work he made upon his return home and throughout his career.

The modern, experimental art Guayasamín experienced in New York further solidified his artistic distance from "archetypal Indigenism," especially his contact with Cubism, which produced a visual language Guayasamín felt was better adapted to express the changes brought about by a rapidly modernizing and industrializing world.<sup>29</sup> Through technique, therefore, Guayasamín renewed the themes of his predecessors, distancing images of Native Americans from political ideologies and didactic programs, and instead employing them as sites for Modernist experimentation.

On Guayasamín's return trip to Ecuador from the United States in 1943, the artist stopped in Mexico and worked briefly with famed Orozco on the latter's murals of the Apocalypse in the Templo de Jesús in Mexico City.<sup>30</sup> Afterwards, Guayasamín traveled

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>29</sup> Ades, *Art in Latin America*, 126.

<sup>30</sup> Barnitz, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America*, 90.

extensively within his native South America, visiting Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina before finally returning to his studio in Quito in 1945. Equipped with a global perspective and vast arsenal of artistic influences, Guayasamín began a new phase in his stylistic development, an artistic microcosm of the international styles and innovative processes of Modern art.<sup>31</sup>

The project entitled *Huacayñán*, Quechua for *El Camino del Llanto* [Road of Tears], eventually totaled 103 works, which were completed over the span of a ten-year period (c. 1952). In this project Guayasamín explored a new pictorial vocabulary, which was inspired by important modernist works that he had seen first hand, including Picasso's *Guernica*, which was on display at the MoMA during his time there<sup>32</sup> (Fig. 5). Guayasamín developed thematic groups within this project, which he divided along ethnic lines into the Black, the Indian and the Mestizo. Each of these thematic groups began with a landscape, which represented the region that the group had traditionally (or stereotypically) inhabited; for example, the Blacks were placed in the jungle, the Indians in the mountains, and the Mestizos in the city of Quito.<sup>33</sup> Each composition included one or two figures, varied subtly in pose and technique, situated against an abstract background, and entirely void of narrative. To distance himself from the regional specificity and dogmatism associated with Indigenism, Guayasamín utilized the symbolic power of metaphor throughout the *Huacayñán* series.

The influence of Picasso is undeniable in many of the *Huacayñán* works, specifically *Tema Negro*; *El Ritmo: Música* (Black Theme; The Ritual: Music, 1953, Fig.

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<sup>31</sup> Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 177.

<sup>32</sup> On display at the MoMA during Alfred Barr's Retrospective of Picasso, 1939-1945, respectively. The work currently resides in Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid. See Figure 5.

<sup>33</sup> Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 178.

6). The abstract, curvilinear forms recall the Spanish master's Synthetic Cubist style, which employed undulating lines and spherical forms interspersed with flat areas of color and claw-like appendages. These *Guernica*-esque forms, according to Guayasamín, approximated the rhythmic quality of African tribal music. He explains:

I resorted to abstract painting because Blacks are a human group made from primitive essences, where tradition has been maintained through their music...and the abstract, in essence, is primitive form, analyzed mathematically in a cold, conscious and cerebral way; therefore abstraction would be the most adequate pictorial form to express the Black spirit, full of legends, primitives, because there are no subtle transitions and everything is round, brilliant, and definitive.<sup>34</sup>

Guayasamín's simplistic and stereotypical definition of Blacks as "primitives," is linked to the formalist concepts of the artistic Modern trajectory. The government-sponsored *Huacayñán* series, funded by the Casa de la Cultura, was meant to symbolize a cohesive national identity. The Casa de la Cultura also published multiple ethnographic and anthropologic studies,<sup>35</sup> and the visual similarity between the photographic documents in these studies and Guayasamín's work suggests that the artist was profoundly influenced by them as well. Guayasamín's segregation and definition of the various Andean groups recalls the racial typologies of the nineteenth century, rudimentary theories of geographic determinism and the naïve portrayals of *Costumbrista* art. However, in this series Guayasamín is not interested in the scientific classification of ethnic types or detailed depictions of their "strange" customs; rather, he employs variation in technique to distinguish between the Indians, Mestizos and Blacks.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>35</sup> See Michele Greet's examination of the study, "Los Cuestiones Indigenas del Ecuador," *Beyond National Identity*, 178-179.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 179

Guayasamín's Indigenous-themed works from the series, such as *Tema Indio: Cansancio* (Indian Theme: Fatigue, 1953, Fig. 7) display angular, geometric constructions reminiscent of Cubism.<sup>37</sup> *Cansancio* depicts a Native American man hunched over the sleeping forms of his wife and child, curled up in a warm embrace at the foot of the bed. Set against a richly textured flat brown background, the figures are framed by rectangular fields of color, and are once again rendered in the artist's characteristic earth tones. The solid, block-like forms evoke the architecture of the Incan Empire. This is in keeping with Guayasamín's view: "Our continent's power, and especially that of Ecuador, comes from the Indian, who continues to be the cement, the structure of our nationality."<sup>38</sup>

The body of the Indian was not only the foundation of the country; their history of suffering and sacrifice was likened to the Passion of Christ, as seen in *Tema Indio: Flagelamiento II* (Indian Theme: Flagellation II, Fig. 8) of the *Huacayñán* series. Unlike the more literal manner of his early Indigenist style, here Guayasamín depicts a kneeling, lacerated black male figure with outstretched arms, set against a background of vivid red and orange flames. Flanked by two mourning women, the Indian-Christ seems to embody several simultaneous stages of the passion: the Flagellation, Crucifixion and the Lamentation.<sup>39</sup> Symbolically, just as Christ "died for sins, once for all,"<sup>40</sup> thousands of Indian populations suffered and were killed as a consequence of the European invasion and colonization of the Americas.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 184

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 180

<sup>39</sup> Bartz, *Twentieth Century Latin American Art*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Peter 3:18, New Revised Standard Version.

In another symbolically rich composition, *Tema Mestizo: La Corrida* (The Bullfight, Fig. 9) Guayasamín creates a work that is the result of a self-conscious engagement with the traumatic events that occurred during the early modern Age of Exploration, a historical period that had a profoundly negative impact on the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Guayasamín may have consulted any number of works from this period, including the Waldseemüller map, the letters of Hernán Cortes, and Italian humanist Peter Martyr’s *De Orbo Novo* (The New World, 1530), an early and highly influential description of the Americas and its peoples that drew heavily on the writings of Columbus. Guayasamín’s *Tema Mestizo: La Corrida* depicts two virile Mestizo “matadors” subduing and killing a bull, with a chalk-white figure lying dead beneath them. Reminiscent of images of animals from the 1940s found in the work of his contemporary, Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo (Fig. 10), here Guayasamín employs the image of the bull as a symbol of Spain.<sup>41</sup> The cadaverous white victim, ribs protruding, symbolizes the European race; the painting implies that the Mestizos will emerge as the *new* dominant race, resulting from the conflict and contact between the Spanish and the Indians.<sup>42</sup> This “dominant” race is described as a hybrid, a “mix of the passion of the Spanish spirit and the serenity of the Indian temperament”<sup>43</sup> by Guayasamín. A self-identified Mestizo, the artist depicts this mixed heritage, which lacks a strong political or cultural trajectory and has neither a robust nor a definitive structure. The Mestizo is suspended between identities; Guayasamín employs “the color gray, between black and

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<sup>41</sup> Barnitz, *Twentieth Century Latin American Art*, 92.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 180.

white, as a range of color that expresses this non-conforming, non-resolute condition of the Mestizo.”<sup>44</sup>

The culminating work in the series is a portable mural consisting of five painted interchangeable panels entitled *Huacayñán: Ecuador* (The Road of Tears: Ecuador, 1951, Fig. 11). Without this final mural, the series seems to perpetuate the stereotypical classification of Ecuador’s ethnic “types.” However, with this final set of images, Guayasamín provides a counterpoint to the entire series’ structure. Consisting of highly abstracted forms, geometric shapes, and flat planes of bold primary colors, Guayasamín demonstrates how modernist aesthetic tendencies could be adapted to Indigenous content, fusing national and international ideologies.<sup>45</sup> The mural was intended to communicate a constantly shifting vision of human potential via an amalgamation of unidentifiable and unclassifiable figures, none of which settled comfortably in any of the specific ethnic categories, but it disconcerted critics and viewers who seemed unclear of its intended message. Such mixed reviews would directly contradict the “universalism” Guayasamín sought to convey through his art, and the artist would never again delve into complete abstraction.

Returning to a clearer, more concise figurative aesthetic in the 1950’s and 1960s, Guayasamín focused more intently on expressing the theme of the universal human subject in his next series, *La Edad de la Ira* (The Age of Wrath, 1963-65), and thus maintaining an allegiance to the figural for the remainder of his career. *La Edad de la Ira* specifically addresses human suffering caused by war, poverty and discrimination that could be felt on a global scale. Guayasamín’s insistence on maintaining a social message

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 184.

in his art, continued to link the artist with Indigenism. For Guayasamín, art could never be separated from politics, nor its political message extracted completely.<sup>46</sup> By the early 1960's, Guayasamín had visited Cuba as a guest of Fidel Castro's government agency, solidifying his leftist political stance and belief in social change. The series, which he began in the late 1950's and was not completed until the late 1960's, eventually consisted of approximately 300 works, which all thematically explored crimes against humanity.<sup>47</sup> Continuing to focus on the victimized members of society, Guayasamín explores the expressive potential of faces, hands and bodies to convey a range of human sentiments. In two antithetical pieces, *Hands of Anger* (Fig. 12) and *Hands of Tenderness* (Fig. 13), Guayasamín showcases raw human emotion through expressive color and gesture. Coarse and skeletal, both figures' hands are made huge and exaggerated, confronting the viewer and dominating the canvas. These figures do not clearly belong to any particular ethnic group, but recall earlier works such as *El Silencio*, albeit through a broadened, more universal theme. Guayasamín's belief that his art could serve a greater human purpose promotes this transformation in technique:

The painter, simply because he has a special sensitivity to form and color, cannot remain indifferent to the dramatic problems of humanity; this is the fundamental reason why the artist reflects political preoccupations in his paintings.<sup>48</sup>

The impetus behind Guayasamín's conception of *La Edad de la Ira*, the denunciation of human suffering, echoed the social ideology of the Indigenist movement; Guayasamín's art had come full circle.

Upon his death in 1999, Oswaldo Guayasamín's career had spanned approximately sixty years and undergone various transformations; he had evolved into

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>47</sup> Barnitz, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America*, 93.

<sup>48</sup> Greet, *Beyond National Identity*, 191.

one of the most influential and important artists of Latin American Modernism and modern art in general. Guayasamín continually reinvented his style and technique in order to symbolically convey significant human themes, often using the body of the Indian as his vehicle, which can also be seen in a late work, an extraordinary cycle of lithographs that he created in the 1980s to accompany a Latin and Spanish edition of Peter Matry's *De Orbo Novo* (1530) (see web exhibit). Guayasamín rejected the early realist Indigenist style, instead turning to forms derived from Cubism as a way of updating his art and "universalizing" his subjects; Guayasamín's response to the national/universal dichotomy defied critics' agendas.<sup>49</sup> Frequently in Latin American art, beliefs, values, and stories that have been passed down over multiple generations are a major source of inspiration and subject matter. It was these traditions and stories that helped nurture Guayasamín's precocious talent; his heritage as well as his own life experiences became rich resources for his art.<sup>50</sup> Guayasamín offered the viewer a coherent and organic view of life in Ecuador, Latin America, and the world in general. His art continues to reach far beyond the angular figures and vibrant colors that infuse his canvases, prints and murals.

Guayasamín created with purpose, invoking the historical past and living present within a single unified humanity: his characters pulsate with emotion and his rich evocative pigments bring to life a vehement, passionate consciousness. It is through Guayasamín's subjects, whether distinctly Indian or completely universal, that the viewer is both impacted and continually impressed. As contemporary Chilean poet and Nobel

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>50</sup> Katherine Manthorne, "Oswaldo Guayasamin", *Latin American Art*, Vol. 3, No. 4, December 1991, 56.

Prize winner Pablo Neruda instructs, “think before approaching [Guayasamín’s] painting, because it will not be easy to withdraw.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Oswaldo Guayasamín and Pablo Neruda, *America: My Brother, My Blood* (New York: Ocean Press, 2006), 2.

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