

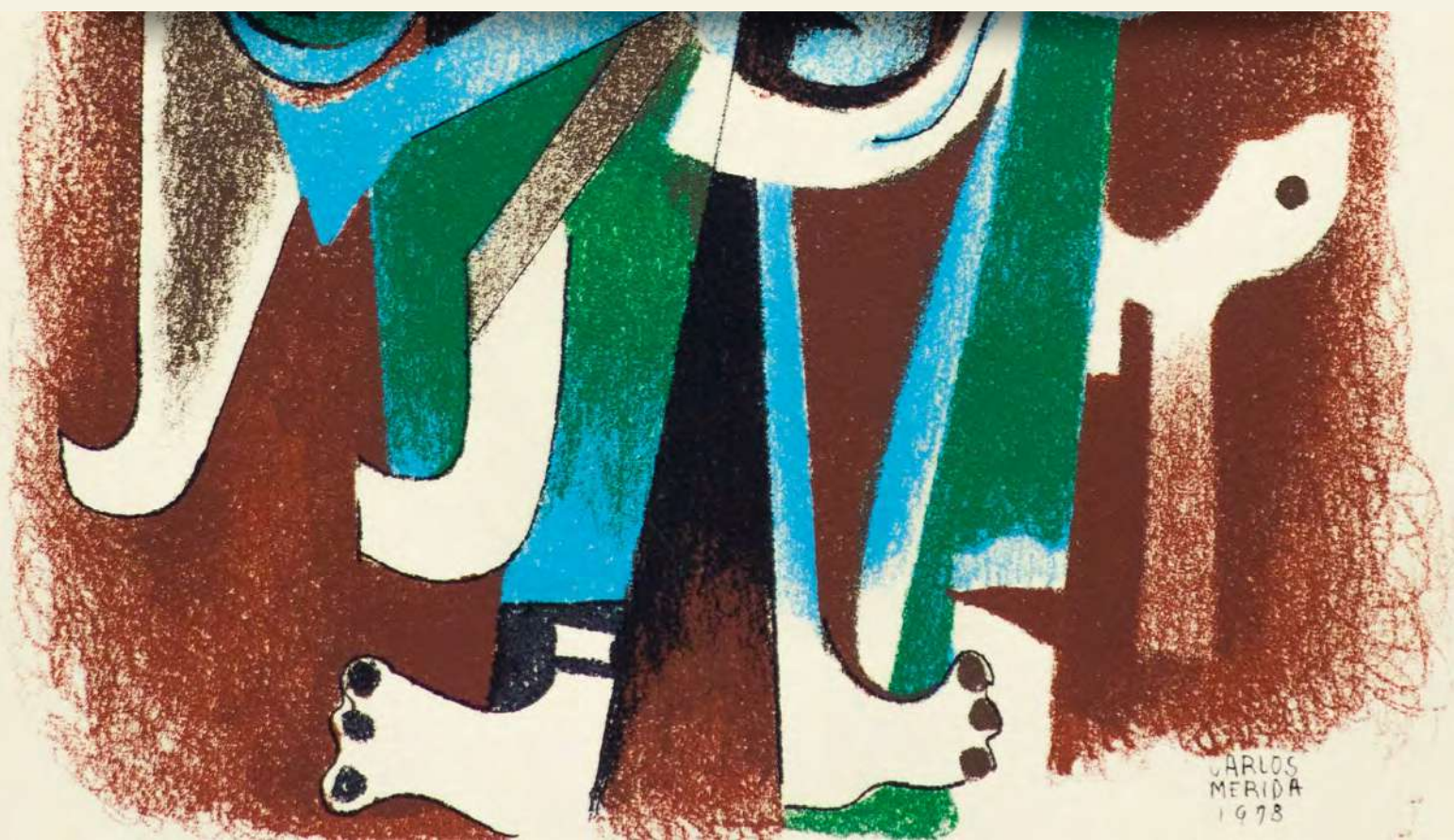


MuseoRalli
Marbella

CARLOS MÉRIDA
AN APPROACH TO AMERICAN ABSTRACT ART

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Silvia Sánchez Ruiz



CARLOS MÉRIDA

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Presentation

The exhibition *American Abstraction. Carlos Mérida* includes a series of nine screen prints by the Guatemalan artist Carlos Mérida, forming part of the album "A Poem to the Sacred Book", created in 1978. This title refers to the Sacred Book of the Maya or Popol Vuh, which narrates the history and cosmogony of the Maya-Quiché lineage.

Both in his work and in his life, Mérida defends the idea that the American tradition is the result of an inheritance from the pre-Columbian world. In Mérida's words, *"if we want to do fine painting, a current national expression, let us proceed along with the aboriginal artificers: let us saturate ourselves with the environment, let us know how to capture the intimate content of things and listen to our self, 'our idiosyncrasies', our nature."*¹

As well as this commitment to everything "national", Mérida understands that art should not imitate reality, but rather develop as a parallel and subjective universe in which elements lose their former meaning to become a poetic and aesthetic object.

"A painting, a picture, must be an organism that is COMPLETELY DETACHED FROM ANY LITERARY INTERPRETATION; in itself, it constitutes a relationship between forms. The emotion must come directly from the painting itself as a structure, presupposing form and colour."

Carlos Mérida, "Abstracción y Americanismo" (México, 1957)²

1. Quote taken from: MÉRIDA, Carlos. "Dos pintores nacionalistas: Ricardo X. Arias y Erasto Cortés", Nuestra Ciudad, Órgano del Departamento del Distrito Federal, 1930, p.10, FDCM. Taken from: TORRES, Leticia. Aproximación a las ideas estéticas de Carlos Mérida. Ensayos Abrevian. INBA, Mexico, 2013. P. 6. ISBN 970-9703-58-7. Available at: <https://cenidiap.net/biblioteca/abrevian/5abrev-LeticiaTorres.pdf> [date consulted: 13/02/2022]

2. MÉRIDA, Carlos. "Abstracción y Americanismo" (México, 1957). In: <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/es/item/868536#?c=&m=&s=&cv=1&xywh=99%2C299%2C1462%2C818> [date consulted: 15/02/2022]

In this sense, the screen prints that make up this exhibition must be understood as visual poetry, rather than as illustrations of texts from the sacred book which were intended to offer new versions containing the essence of the poem that makes up the text.



“The fragments of the text that serve as the theme for the screen prints in this album were taken from Adrián Recinos’ version. [...] They concentrate this extraordinary realm into a few lines and place us within their very spirit, where the screen prints aspire to originate. Our purpose was not to create an illustration or an allegory, but to penetrate the mythological prodigy in order to nourish ourselves and offer very free versions that have something of the poem’s character.”

*Carlos Mérida. A Poem to the Sacred Book. Galería Arvil, 1978*³

His notion of plastic art had a great deal to do with his initial musical training (which he had to give up due to hearing problems), his Maya-Quiché heritage and his contact with European avant-garde movements, especially Cubism, Surrealism and abstract art.

Carlos Mérida’s geometric abstraction language based on pre-Columbian elements is considered one of his great contributions to art, to which can also be added his ethnographic work in recovery and research into indigenous traditions linked to dance, as well as his contribution to architecture and integrated art.

Throughout his career Carlos Mérida employed a wide variety of techniques in his work, including oil paint, engraving, watercolour, gouache, pencil, parchment, plastic, glass, ceramics and tempera. In these pages you will find out more about the life and art of Carlos Mérida; we analyse the origin of the screen prints, “A Poem to the Sacred Book”, that lie at the heart of the exhibition, and we reflect on the variety of artistic languages present in Mérida’s work. Furthermore, we reveal the story behind the artist and demonstrate the importance of his work, linked to the Mesoamerican tradition and indigenous communities, music and dance, in keeping national identity alive.

3. Texts on the album “A Poem to the Sacred Book”, lent by the National Museum of Modern Art Carlos Mérida: *Carlos Mérida. A Poem to the Sacred Book*, edited and published by Galería Arvil. 1978.



Chapter 1.

Carlos Mérida, a walk through his life

Silvia Sánchez Ruiz

Carlos Mérida

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 2nd December 1891 – Mexico City, 21st December 1984.

Born in Guatemala, his links with Mexico and its art earn him a place in the Mexican art scene as one of the country's greatest painters.

Mérida was from a middle-class family in the city of Quetzaltenango. His heritage was Maya-Quiché (k'iche') on his father's side, and his mother, who was a teacher, was Spanish.

Training and first steps

He started his music training at a young age but was soon forced to give up this discipline due to hearing problems (he suffered from otosclerosis, a disease that eventually left him deaf). With his greatest passion frustrated, Mérida continued to develop his skills and training in plastic arts, his other interest from childhood. He studied painting at the Institute of Arts and Crafts of Guatemala. Here he was to meet the painter Carlos Valenti, whom he befriended, accompanying him on a trip to Paris in 1912.⁴

After living through his friend's tragic suicide just four months after his arrival in France, Mérida was devastated and left the country. He set off on a journey around Europe, visiting countries such as Spain, where he took geometric design classes at Anglada Camarasa's academy on the recommendation of Picasso himself. He later returned to Paris.

Throughout his time in Europe, Mérida came into contact with Latin Americans residing there, including Diego Rivera, and met other European artists who would have a great influence on his work, such as Picasso, Mondrian and Modigliani. The Guatemalan artist also got to know the work of other important artists like Cézanne, Klee and Miró.

4. There are different versions of the date on which Carlos Mérida arrived in Paris. We find confirmation of the date of Mérida's arrival in France in a statement by the artist himself in relation to the death of his friend Balenti: "...My name is Carlos Mérida, I said in my poor French. I am 21 years old. I am Guatemalan, a mix of Spanish and indigenous. I am a musician but more a painter. What are you doing in France?, they shouted at me. We arrived together, he and I, five months ago on 15th June 1912, on a cargo ship called the Odembalt. We paid one hundred dollars each..."

Taken from: FERNÁNDEZ ORDÓÑEZ, Rodrigo. "Carlos Mérida a mano alzada" [online]. UFM. Available at: https://educacion.ufm.edu/carlos_merida_a_mano_alzada/ [date consulted: 10/12/2022]

With regard to the European artistic avant-garde he was interested in questioning established canons. Of all the movements, he was particularly interested in Cubism and abstract art, which once again focus on the artistic object and on formal and aesthetic topics, or in other words, on the essence of the painting. Mérida was to use these reflections to develop his contribution to art in the Americas, in which novelty and tradition meet to create a timeless, anachronistic and ahistorical art.

Return to the Americas and the search for a national art

He went back to Guatemala in 1914, with the First World War on the verge of breaking out in Europe. Upon his return, Carlos Mérida himself and his art immediately started to take hold and take off. He held his first exhibition in Quetzaltenango, his hometown, in 1915. He travelled to New York two years later, and in 1919 he exhibited in Paris, Quetzaltenango and Guatemala.

Between 1915 and 1917, Mérida's work focused on depicting scenes of daily life and local tradition, in tune with the work of other artists and contemporaries who were also his friends. They came together and based their work on the idea of a common national character, which Mérida would later call the "pro-indigenous movement".⁵ During this period, predominant themes were depictions of indigenous women wearing traditional dress and carrying their children; or representations of indigenous traditions like offering corn or allegories in which women were also the protagonists.

In 1919, coinciding with the end of the Mexican Revolution, Mérida travelled to Mexico and settled there. This was to have a marked effect on his work and the history of Mexican art alike.

In 1922 Mérida worked as Diego Rivera's assistant on the latter's mural Creation in the Bolívar Amphitheatre at the Former College of San Ildefonso. Despite these beginnings in the art world, he would soon detach himself from the concept of national art proposed by the Mexican School of Painting to commit to a language of local references that in turn were based on international art. He therefore became part of the so-called Breakaway Generation, which also included artists like Rufino Tamayo and José Luis Cuevas. This was not a movement in itself, since it was not organised and had no uniform approach; instead the term covered a group of artists whose theories on the subject were far from the predominant ones formerly established by the School of Painting.

Mérida proposed a new national art linked to the pre-Columbian heritage and formalistic theories of art; a type of art based on plastic and formal themes, far from narrativity.

5. ESPINOSA CAMPOS, Eduardo. "Notas sobre la relación de Carlos Mérida con la música y la danza". In: *Entre acordes y pinceladas: La música mexicana en imágenes pictóricas*. Coord.: ZAMORANO NAVARRO, Beatriz. ADDENA, N14, 2006. Pág. 48. Available at: <https://docplayer.es/14237035-Entre-acordes-y-pinceladas.html> [date consulted: 10/12/2022]

Mérida's work therefore evolved from its figurative and narrative beginnings in which he represents the tradition and daily life of native cultures, to abstraction based on pre-Columbian elements. This was the start of a language that was to be one of his great contributions to art.

From Surrealism to pure geometric abstraction

He travelled to Paris again in 1927. During this second stay, his language leaned towards lyrical abstraction, with references to indigenous culture being strongly present. Continuing with the simplification of his language, his line softened and his compositions became more dynamic. In his works from the 1930s and 1940s we can see the influence that modern European painting had on him, especially Surrealism, with which he was linked, and the work of artists like Miró, Klee, Kandinsky and Picasso. However, Mérida was to maintain his pure essence of the Americas and his search for art that reflected national identity.

Between the 1950s and 1960s Mérida worked on art with an architectural vision, meaning that he conceived it as an integral part of an architectural whole (which he calls "integrated art"). Geometry returns to his work, allowing him to transform his Indian figures and integrate them into architecture, making monumental creations, just like the architecture itself. His language maintains its lines and textures.

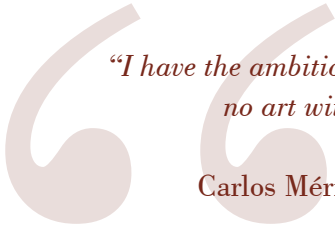
In the 1970s he reached his highest level of geometrisation, with even more rectilinear forms, but preserving the vitality of colour (reds, blues, browns, turquoises, oranges).

His language is based on the combination of figurative pre-Columbian elements with abstract modern language, which combines muralism, Cubism, Surrealism and the Mesoamerican artistic tradition.

Throughout his career Carlos Mérida employed a wide variety of techniques in his work, including oil paint, engraving, watercolour, gouache, pencil, parchment, plastic, glass, ceramics and tempera (mural).

Alongside his art, Mérida developed his facet in critical writing, with texts in which he spoke about and explained his point of view on national art, different trends and formal and artistic matters, as well as how he approached specific techniques like photography and film. Through these writings we can get an idea of not just what was happening at that time, but also a first-hand view of Carlos Mérida's artistic theories.

Despite the fact that when talking about Mérida's work we tend to place it within styles and chronologies, in truth the artist did not conceive language as something immovable. He went so far as to declare that style is a "consequence" of the intention to create poetry, which for him was the meaning of art.



"I have the ambition to do poetic painting because I believe that there is no art without poetry [...]. The style comes as a consequence."

Carlos Mérida, "Abstracción y Americanismo" (México, 1957)⁶

We thereby see how Mérida develops his own languages and moves between aesthetics; this can occur in isolation or coincide in time depending on his creative and expressive needs, but should not necessarily be understood as a one-way evolutionary path.

This also highlights several contradictions in Mérida's theories. Alongside his defence of purely formalist art, we find that care and attention are paid to content with a pre-Columbian origin, both formal and thematic and symbolic alike, as we see in the work he does on recovering ancestral indigenous dances. This is discussed in chapter 2.

Likewise, we therefore understand that compositions with a high degree of figuration reappeared at the end of the 70s, the stage to which the series of screen prints "A Poem to the Sacred Book" corresponds, while other works were produced within lyrical abstraction and pure geometry. In chapter 5 of this publication, Alba Jiménez offers a more detailed study of this artistic and linguistic theme, along with an analysis of the link between musical tone and the use of colours in Mérida's work.

6. MÉRIDA, Carlos. "Abstracción y Americanismo" (México, 1957). In:
<https://icaa.mfah.org/s/es/item/868536#c=&m=&s=&cv=1&xywh=99%2C299%2C1462%2C818> [date consulted: 15/02/2022]



Chapter 2.

Carlos Mérida, music and dance

Silvia Sánchez Ruiz

Not as well-known as the rest of his work, but equally relevant, is Mérida's role within the fields of music and dance, linked to recovering, protecting and enhancing autochthonous traditions in both disciplines.

In this publication, we would like to dedicate a special section to this subject to highlight it, as well as focus on different aspects that this artist shared with other works and artists that are part of the Ralli Collection and that can currently be seen in the museum.

Having looked at his career and life, in this chapter we would like to return to his work on music and dance.

Shortly after arriving in Europe for the first time in 1915, Mérida accompanied the ethnomusicologist Jesús Castillo on a research project on Maya-Quiché music. The project consisted of exploring the indigenous communities of Guatemala whilst bringing together traditional and present-day music and rituals from this culture.

He was later appointed director of the School of Dance by the Guatemalan Ministry of Public Education between 1932 and 1935. Whilst in the role he developed a series of initiatives to promote research, documentation and recovery of dance and all the elements that accompany it (costume, set design, associated narratives like mythology), as well as elevating the discipline of dance to the category of a superior art.

Once he left his position as director, from 1935 and 1979 Carlos Mérida worked on set and costume design for a total of 17 productions. They include the costume designs for the production "Ixtepec" (1935), recreating the landscape and daily life in the Istmo region of Oaxaca; and "The Day of the Dead" or "The Triumph of Good over Evil" (1947), which recovers popular representations of the devil, death and dancers. Mérida bases all of these works on designs for indigenous dances with ancestral roots, distancing himself from them in order to evoke them, not to transfer them directly, or in other words, not making a literal interpretation. Beyond any sources of inspiration he may have had, creative freedom always prevails in Mérida's work.

As a frustrated musician, Mérida also kept musical qualities in mind within his artistic production. He himself speaks of "tone", "rhythm" or "cadence" when referring to his artworks, based on formal or figurative elements.⁷

In relation to Carlos Mérida's link with dance, the historian Eduardo Espinosa Campos also points out that he produces works that seem to be inspired by the figures of dancers found in archaeological remains from the Oaxaca region in particular. Some examples of these are works like "Dance of Death" and "Red Earth", both from 1948.

However we also see this theme in later works, such as his monumental mural "The Dancers" (ca. 1965), originally used as a stage curtain in the old Cine Manacar. After its disappearance in 1995, it was recovered in 2018 and installed in the lobby of the same building, currently a shopping centre called Torre Manacar. Another example of a mural with this theme can be found in the work "Mayan Dancing Priests" (1963-1966), located inside the Banco de Guatemala. It is made up of 2,000 enamel plates on copper, with a marble background.

Likewise, his anthropological work is of interest, first in Guatemala with Jesús Castillo, as we have already mentioned, and from 1921 in Mexico, collecting written testimonies of rituals and dances, as well as producing illustrations with a strong testimonial component of the clothing. He compiled folders and albums of these illustrations and made large print runs to ensure their contents reached a larger audience. As Alba Jiménez points out in chapter 3, it would not be entirely unreasonable to imagine that the album "A Poem to the Sacred Book" was part of these projects for the recovery and dissemination of ancestral indigenous culture.

7. In an interview, the writer Aláide Foppa asked him about his relationship with painting and music, to which Mérida replied: "My works are no more than certain themes with many variations, or perhaps one theme with variations. These depend on my mood. Now I paint with a lot of colour, with bright colours, but if I am low in tone the tones are earthy, opaque. As you see, I am talking about tones" (as in musical tones). Taken from Eduardo Espinosa's talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1l-IEiCk2hQ> and in ESPINOSA CAMPOS, Eduardo. "Notas sobre la relación de Carlos Mérida con la música y la danza" Op. cit. p. 53.



Chapter 3.

Carlos Mérida's screen prints. "A Poem to the Sacred Book"

Alba Jiménez Sánchez

Screen printing, originating from China, was a popular engraving technique in the 20th century. This technique consists of colour printing that, like lithography, does not require traditional scoring.

In screen printing, the colours are filtered through the silk by pressing on a palette or roller and are then waterproofed with glue or another material such as varnish in the areas where we do not want colour to filter through.⁸

Carlos Mérida produced a large amount of screen-printed work. He released his first production of screen prints, "Images of Guatemala", in 1928. From then on we find numerous series that make up illustrated books or albums, as is the case of the works in this exhibition.

However, the artist was not pigeonholed solely in screen printing. He also used other engraving techniques such as lithography. In chronological order, his production of engravings is as follows: "Images of Guatemala" (1928), "Three Motifs" (1936), "Dances of Mexico" (1937), "Carnival in Mexico" (1940), "Mexican Costumes" (1941), "Prints from the Popol Vuh" (1943), "Mexican Regional Costumes" (1945), "Indigenous Costumes of Guatemala" (1951), "A Poem to the Sacred Book" (1978) and "Luminous Skies" (1979).

Tradition, Mexican and Guatemalan customs, and Maya-Quiché mythology are reflected in the themes embodied in these engravings. The language of each reflects Mérida's artistic aspects as we discover figuration, lyrical abstraction and geometric abstraction.

It is important to emphasise that Mérida made large print runs of this series as his aim was to reach a wider audience.

In addition, we should remember that Carlos Mérida developed a facet as a set designer and we cannot rule out the idea that "A Poem to the Sacred Book" might be one of these designs.

8. "The history of screen printing" Ora Labora Studio. At: <https://oralaborastudio.es/historia-de-la-serigrafia/> [date consulted: 21/03/2023]

The exhibition *American Abstraction. Carlos Mérida* includes nine of the ten screen prints that make up the album "A Poem to the Sacred Book" from 1978. In them, the artist illustrates scenes of the creation of the world as recounted by the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Maya, how the Earth was formed, the living things that inhabit it and, of course, the main gods and heroes.

In 1978, the Galería Arvil in Mexico edited and published a book that brought together the texts⁹ along with the specific mythological scenes that accompanied each screen print and, in addition, explains how this project was devised:

"The fragments of the text that serve as the theme for the screen prints in this album were taken from Adrián Recinos' version [...] They concentrate this extraordinary realm into a few lines and place us within their very spirit, where the screen prints aspire to originate. Our purpose was not to create an illustration or an allegory, but to penetrate the mythological prodigy in order to nourish ourselves and offer very free versions that have something of the poem's character. We do not believe there is another way to have the audacity to accompany a text that is filled with such a remote and dark world, one so dense with poetry and, for this very reason, still alive in our present, but rather to return with the simplicity of the clay before the potter, in an effort that we did not want to be original but originating, and in a direct and ancient form of art and of elementary simplicity, wanting to maintain the unity through the melodious motif of the legendary divine characters of the text."

Carlos Mérida. A Poem to the Sacred Book. Galería Arvil. 1978.

Mérida illustrated the mythological narration based on a geometric language, although at times he reached total abstraction when depicting elements and characters in the scenes. The conjunction of geometric shapes allows us to recognise figures and attributes¹⁰ that help identify deities and sacred spirits from the Mayan tradition.

As we have already referred to in previous chapters, in Mérida's work we will always find direct or indirect allusions to the Maya-Quiché tradition, hence the themes depicted show this tradition and ancestral cosmology. Therefore, "A Poem to the Sacred Book" becomes an illustrated poem, perhaps an ode, to the sacred texts in the Popol Vuh.

9. The texts that accompanied the illustrations were taken from the version of the Popol Vuh by Adrián Recinos, a Guatemalan politician, essayist, historian, diplomat and translator.

10. In iconography, an attribute is what allows us to recognise who or what is represented. Characters appear with a series of elements, whether they are objects or specific characteristics that allow us to see what or who appears in the work.

Despite Mérida's defence of formal art far from narrativity, it is interesting to note that the artist frequently uses engraving to illustrate small texts, both of which are always numbered, giving rise to series of engravings that he classifies into albums. We could mention "Prints from the Popol Vuh", an illustrated book that was edited and published by Talleres Gráficos de la Nación in Guatemala in 1943.

If we carefully analyse and compare Mérida's screen-prints, we discover that it is difficult to pin down the Guatemalan master under the premises of one artistic current or another, but we can recognise great fluidity in his work when it comes to addressing the aesthetics of each of his art projects, because in the same year we can see works by an abstract-lyrical Mérida, and in others an abstract-geometric language, total abstraction or geometric figuration. We will go into this interesting question in more depth later on.

"A Poem to the Sacred Book" (1978)

Texts taken from the Popol Vuh, translated into English by Delia Goetz and Sylvanus Griswold Morley from Adrián Recino's translation from Quiché into Spanish

In this chapter we include a selection of texts taken from the Popol Vuh that Carlos Mérida used to produce this album of engravings, taken from the homonymous publication by the Galería Arvil, *"Carlos Mérida. A Poem to the Sacred Book"* (1978), and on loan from Guatemala's Carlos Mérida National Museum of Modern Art.

Each numbered text is accompanied by the works that are part of the exhibition, including nine of the ten works that make up the album "A Poem to the Sacred Book"; the screen print corresponding to number IV is not present. To maintain the flow of the narrative, in the absence of an image of sufficient quality and to differentiate it from the other pieces in the exhibition we have included text IV alongside a depiction of the work that would accompany it.

There was nothing standing; only the calm water, the placid sea, alone and tranquil. Nothing existed.

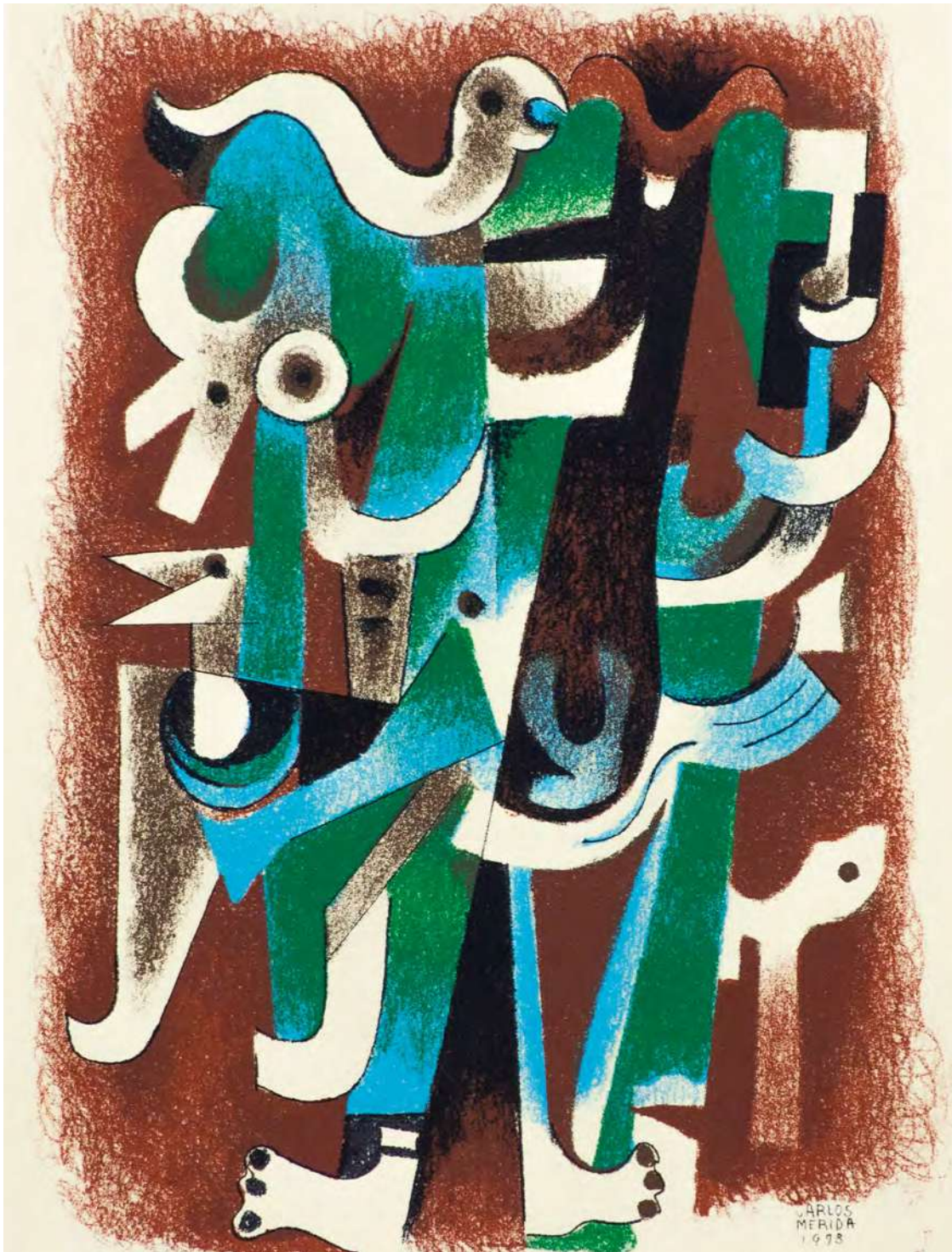
There was only immobility and silence in the darkness, in the night. Only *the Creator, the Maker, Tepeu, Gucumatz, the Forefathers*, were in the water surrounded with light. They were hidden under green and blue feathers, and were therefore called Gucumatz. By nature they were great sages and great thinkers. In this manner the sky existed and also the Heart of Heaven, which is the name of God and thus He is called.



A Poem to the Sacred Book I (1978). Ralli Collection.

Then they made the small wild animals, the guardians of the woods, the spirits of the mountains, the deer, the birds, pumas, jaguars, serpents, snakes. vipers, guardians of the thickets.

And the Forefathers asked: "Shall there be only silence and calm under the trees, under the vines? It is well that hereafter there be someone to guard them."



A Poem to the Sacred Book II (1978). Ralli Collection.

III

And the creation of all the four-footed animals and the birds being finished, they were told by the Creator and the Maker and *the Forefathers*: “Speak, cry, warble, call, speak each one according to your variety, each, according to your kind.”

So was it said to the deer, the birds, pumas, jaguars, and serpents.

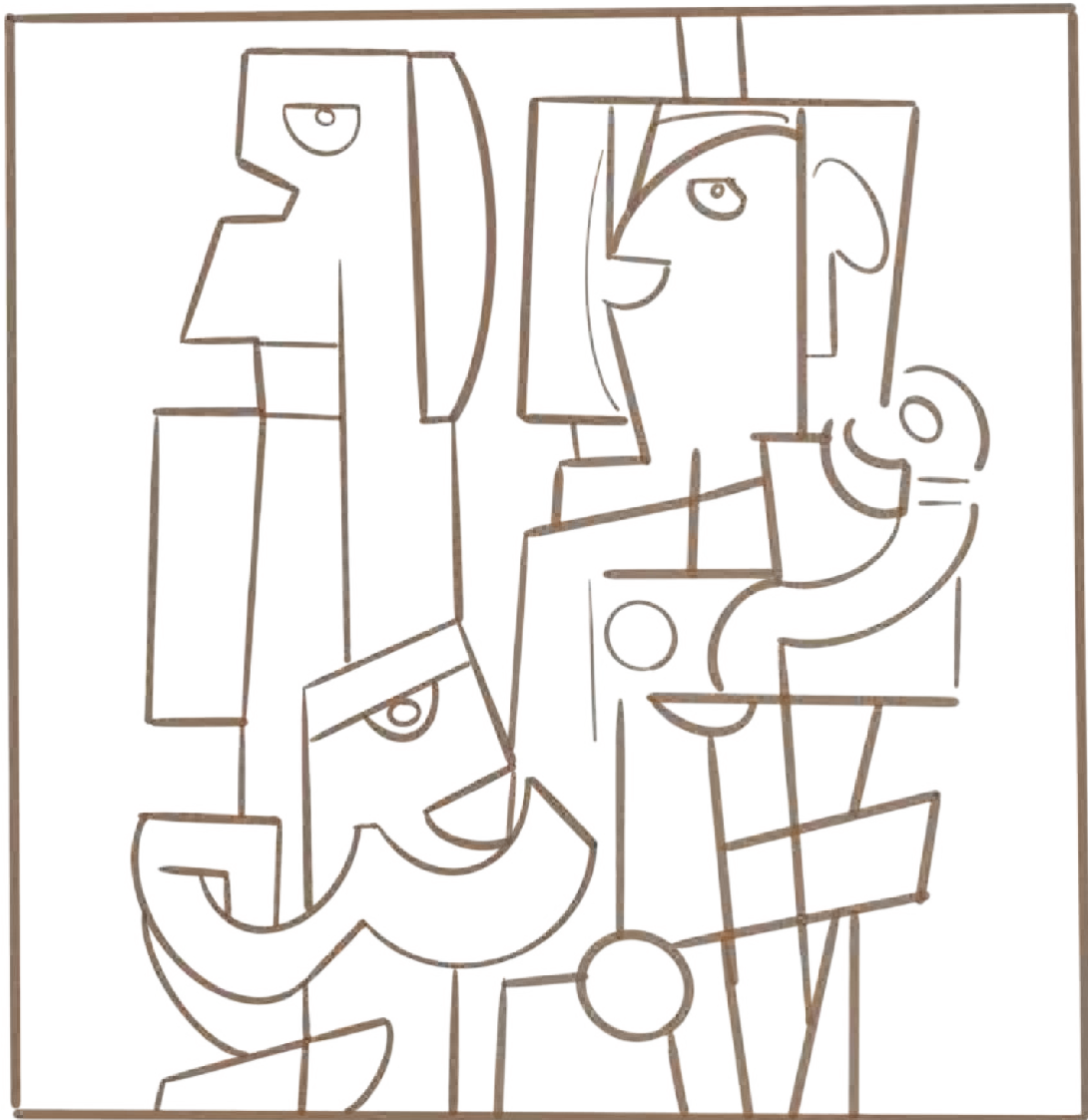


A Poem to the Sacred Book III (1978). Ralli Collection.

Thus they spoke when they conferred again:

“Let us say again to Xpiyacoc, Xmucané, Hunahpú-Vuch, Hunahpú-Utiú: Cast your lot again.
In this manner the Creator and the Maker spoke to Xpiyacoc and Xmucané.”

Then they spoke to those soothsayers, *the grandmother of the day, the grandmother of the dawn*,
as they were called by the Creator and the Maker, and whose names were Xpiyacoc and Xmucané.



schematization of the work *A Poem to the Sacred Book IV* (1978)

“Let your nature be known, Hunahpú-Vuch, Hunahpú-Utiú, twice-mother, twice-father, NimAc, Nima-Tziís, the master of emeralds, the worker in jewels, the sculptor, the carver, the Maker of *beautiful plates*, the Maker of *green gourds*, the master of resin, the master Toltecat, grandmother of the sun, grandmother of dawn, as you will be called by our works and our creatures.”



A Poem to the Sacred Book V (1978). Ralli Collection.

Beginning the divination, they said: “Get together, grasp each other! Speak, that we may hear.” They said, “Say if it is well that the wood be got together and that it be carved by the Creator and the Maker, and if this (*man of wood*) is he who must nourish and sustain us when there is light when it is day!”

“Thou, corn; thou, tzité; thou, fate; thou, creature; get together, take each other,” they said to the corn, to the tzité, to fate, to the creature. “Come to sacrifice here, Heart of Heaven; do not punish Tepeu and Gucumatz!”



A Poem to the Sacred Book VI (1978). Ralli Collection.

VII.

Of tzité the flesh of man was made, but when woman was fashioned by the Creator and the Maker, her flesh was made of rushes.

These were the materials the Creator and the Maker wanted to use in making them.



A Poem to the Sacred Book VII (1978). Ralli Collection.

It was cloudy and twilight then on the face of the earth. There was no sun yet. Nevertheless, there was a being called Vucub-Caquix, who was very proud of himself. The sky and the earth existed, but the faces of the sun and the moon were covered. And he (Vucub-Caquix) said: "Truly, they are clear examples of those people who were drowned, and their nature is that of supernatural beings.

"I shall now be great above all the beings created and formed. I am the sun, the light, the moon," he exclaimed. "Great is my splendour. Because of me men shall walk and conquer. *For my eyes are of silver*, bright, resplendent as precious stones, as emeralds; my teeth shine like perfect stones, like the face of the sky. My nose shines afar like the moon, my *throne is of silver*, and the face of the earth is lighted when I pass before my throne."



A Poem to the Sacred Book VIII (1978). Ralli Collection.

IX
This is the beginning of the defeat and the ruin of the glory of Vucub-Caquix brought about by two youths, the first of whom was called *Hunahpú* and the second, *Xbalanqué*. They were really gods. When they saw the harm which the arrogant one had done, and wished to do, in the presence of the Heart of Heaven, the youths said:

“It is not good that it be so, when man does not yet live here on earth. Therefore, we shall try to shoot him with our blowgun when he is eating. We shall shoot him and make him sicken, and then that will be the end of his riches, his green stones, his precious metals, his emeralds, his jewels of which he is so proud. And this shall be the lot of all men, for they must not become vain, because of power and riches.”



A Poem to the Sacred Book IX (1978). Ralli Collection.

Now Vucub-Caquix had two sons: the first was called Zipacná, the second was Cabracán; and the mother of the two was called Chimalmat, the wife of Vucub-Caquix.

Zipacná played ball with the large mountains: with Chigag, Hunahpú, Pecul, Yaxcanul, Macamob, and Huliznab. These are the names of the mountains which existed when it dawned and which were created in a single night by Zipacná. In this way, then, Cabracán moved the mountains and made the large and small mountains tremble.

And in this way the sons of Vucub-Caquix proclaimed their pride. “Listen! I am the sun!” said Vucub-Caquix. “I am he who made the earth!” said Zipacná. “I am he who shook the sky and made the earth tremble!” said Cabracán, In this way the sons of Vucub-Caquix followed the example of their father’s assumed greatness. And this seemed very evil to the youths (Hunahpú and Ixabalanqué).



A Poem to the Sacred Book X (1978). Ralli Collection.

Chapter 4.

Carlos Mérida and the Maya-quiché tradition. Abstraction from the earliest times

Alba Jiménez Sánchez

The idea behind the exhibition *American Abstraction. Carlos Mérida* is to value the avant-garde principle defended by the artist himself, appreciating the artistic object in the way that Mérida himself conceived the idea of art. This idea affirmed the belief that art was a conjunction of shapes and colours giving rise to an artistic piece.

If we put ourselves in an artist's shoes and understand this principle, the use or arrangement of colours and geometric shapes give rise to artistic compositions with one language or another. This is artistic production that leans towards figuration (not realistic) or abstraction. Both are present in this exhibition: we recognise geometric figuration and composition elements that bring us closer to abstraction and also go beyond what is visual, meaning that these screen prints are closer to the original concept of abstraction.

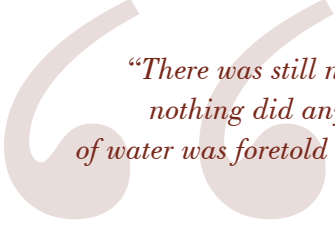
We will dedicate this chapter to understanding the concept of abstraction from its beginnings, from its origin according to the Maya-Quiché tradition. Later we will deal with the content, geometric figuration, and two abstract aspects that are seen in Carlos Mérida's work.

Firstly, it is interesting to highlight that Carlos Mérida's abstract principles were intrinsic to his work, long before he knew about and ventured into different movements like abstraction, geometrisation or Surrealism.

Based on a note from the artist himself, found in a compilation of texts from the newspaper *La Jornada* published in 2018, we know he had two branches that influenced his work: one was the European avant-garde based on synthetic cubism and lyrical abstraction, and another was the formal synthesis of Mayan art and music. He said: "*The sense of abstraction, in which my ancestors were masters [...] Painting for the sake of painting, the enjoyment of painting, with the same frenetic passion of enjoying music for sounds. There is in me, undoubtedly latent, a potential musician who only manifests himself through colours [...] Abstract painting provides the best path for this.*"¹¹

11. Collection of news items on the exhibition *Carlos Mérida. Retratos Escritos (1891-1984)* from the newspaper *La Jornada* (2018). At: <http://www.arvil.com.mx/carlosmerida2018.html> [date consulted: 16/03/2023]

According to the Maya-Quiché tradition, the very origin of the universe tells us that everything that is found on Earth today already existed before it materialised. The edition of the Popol Vuh translated by Agustín Estrada Monroy uses a term akin to “germ” to speak of the essence of things, which take their first form through the word of the Creator and Maker. Therefore, everything in its original origin was abstract.



“There was still nothing brought together, nothing made any noise, everything was still, nothing did any harm. There was nothing standing, nothing existed. Only the essence of water was foretold in the placid sea, among the serene waves. Only the silence, the repose, the darkness, were felt in the night.

There was only the Creator and Maker together with the essence of all things placed in the water by him in all purity. [...] And it was then that the word of the Creator and Maker reached Tepeu (Hidden Greatness) and Gucumatz. He arrived in the darkness, but his voice was heard within them.”

Popol Vuh. First Narrative: The Formation of the Universe.
Translation to English based on the Spanish translation
by Agustín Estrada Monroy, 2022.¹²

Therefore, the abstract language that we recognise in Mérida's works has greater complexity than simply understanding artistic abstraction as language or movement. It is a philosophical exercise that involves looking far beyond the visual, recognising shapes and colours. Recovering the Mayan-Quiché principle, we refer to the germ, or essence, of abstraction.

12. “First Narrative: The Formation of the Universe”. In: *Popol Vuh: El libro sagrado de los mayas*. ESTRADA MONROY, Agustín Trad. Errata naturae, Madrid, 2022.P. 45-46. ISBN: 978-84-19158-17-8.

Capítulo 5.

Carlos Mérida, Lyrical abstraction or geometric abstraction? A comparative analysis and hypothesis on variation in his language

Alba Jiménez Sánchez

When we talk about Carlos Mérida, the first thing we associate him with is geometry. But if we analyse his work, we see that it is somewhat complicated to pigeonhole him into a particular language at a specific point.

For the comparative analysis of this chapter, which aims to reflect on the question raised, as a starting point we will use the series "Prints from the Popol Vuh" (1943) and "A Poem to the Sacred Book" (1978), covering the 1940s to 1978.



Death and Resurrection of the Twins. Lithograph. 1943.
Blaisten Museum Collection, Mexico.

Firstly, the engravings in the "Prints from the Popol Vuh" series use an abstract-lyrical language to depict scenes and characters from the sacred book. Predominant features are bright colours and organic lines that generate the figure of the protagonists.

The lithograph "Death and Resurrection of the Twins" from 1943 has an organic drawing line and a range of colours with great expressiveness.

If we place this work within the context of the 1940s, we can clearly see the influence of European painting, in this case close to lyrical abstraction, the basic principle of which was the rejection of the objective representation of reality. In addition, it is important to remember that one of the keys to this artistic current is to ensure that the work conveys the artist's emotion.

In a statement he made about a self-portrait, the artist himself pointed out that he had two sources of influence: the first, Synthetic Cubism and lyrical abstraction, and the second, the synthesis of Mayan art and music.¹³

This helps us recognise that the Guatemalan artist's work combines both stylistic tendencies with his indigenous roots.

Considering these points and taking into account that Mérida's work in the 70s contained more geometrisation, as mentioned by Silvia Sánchez in chapter 1, the screen prints in this exhibition present a geometric language that may well remind us of the aforementioned Synthetic Cubism.

In the "A Poem to the Sacred Book" pieces, we see this evolution towards a more geometric language, close to the basic principles of Synthetic Cubism, which sought to break with the three-dimensional vision in the work and resorted to the fragmentation and recombination of elements. In the screen prints that make up this album, we recognise figures and certain elements, so we cannot speak of total geometric abstraction, although it is much closer to the principles of this artistic current.

For example, in the work "A Poem to the Sacred Book IX", we see the scene in which the twins Hunahpú and Xbalanqué plan to kill Vucub-Caquix. If we pay attention to the geometric language, we see how the figures of the twins are generated thanks to the composition and structuring of shapes like triangles, trapezoids and semicircles.

13. Collection of news items on the exhibition *Carlos Mérida. Retratos Escritos (1891-1984)* from the newspaper *La Jornada* (2018). At: <http://www.arvil.com.mx/carlosmerida2018.html> [date consulted: 16/03/2023]

In addition, the faceted composition allows us to see all the main elements of the scene in a single plane. Firstly, we have the twins Hunahpú and Xbalanqué made out of geometric shapes, allowing us to recognise their figures. One is seated and the other stands right in front of him. In their hands the brothers are holding an object that they have placed to their mouths: these are the blowguns that they will use to attack the evil Vucub-Caquix. Also interesting is the element located in the centre of the work between the two figures. This could be the tree owned by Vucub-Caquix, which he climbed to feed on its fruits. The blowguns and the tree alike are depicted as a kind of rectangle where the artist has applied the same colour to refer to the wood.

We should not miss one of the elements that make this one of the most interesting works. On the tree, to the upper right, we can see the final main figure in the scene who appears above the brothers. The first two figures have a brown skin tone and a blue headdress or hair, and thanks to pareidolia, an ability to assimilate and associate elements, we can distinguish a face in this figure, allowing us to recognise the third, Vucub-Caquix. In this way, the third component of the print takes shape using several lines and two colours in the purest abstract style.



A Poem to the Sacred Book IX.

Screen print. 1978

Ralli Collection



Detail from the work *A Poem to the Sacred Book IX*.

As we know, the aim of Synthetic Cubism was to break away from three-dimensionality. Artists showed all the faces and planes of the composition in a single plane, that of the support. Carlos Mérida therefore manages to capture this scene on paper, totally breaking down the planes that make up reality.

This last fact allows us to uphold Mérida's mastery in achieving abstraction in the same work where a priori, we would not speak of total abstraction. In other words, we are witnessing his ability to combine a certain degree of figuration and abstraction in the same space.

So, to understand Carlos Mérida's stylistic tendencies a little more, we could refer to some pieces he released a year after this series. These works belong to "Luminous Skies" (1979) where we once again see the presence of the line and the vividness of colour. Of course, it cannot go unnoticed that Carlos Mérida reaches a higher degree of abstraction in these screen prints, but still far from geometry.



Screen print from "Luminous Skies", dated 1979.
Galería Stern Fine Art.



The Golden House. 1979.
Colección Ralli.

On the other hand, in works like "The Golden House",¹⁴ produced the same year as the previous one, we again find geometry and much more subdued colour choices.

We certainly cannot ignore the colour. As Silvia Sánchez points out in chapter 2, *Carlos Mérida. Music and Dance*, we know that Mérida uses one colour tone or another depending on his mood. Colour tones become a tool for the artist's expression, a characteristic of lyrical abstraction. In the same way, Mérida himself establishes a further relationship with respect to colour tones, in that he closely links the musical tone and the tone of the colour, due to his hearing problem which caused him to abandon his music practice.

14. Currently in the Ralli Museum in Santiago de Chile.

The links that the Guatemalan artist creates between the elements that make up his work are of interest, as he seems to associate organic lines with vibrant colours and straight lines with more subdued colours.

These comparative analyses, which focus on pieces produced between the 1940s and the late 1970s, aim to break with the idea of pigeonholing Carlos Mérida as a purely geometric artist; as we have shown, depending on the artistic project Mérida leans towards geometric figuration, lyrical abstraction or figurative abstraction. In addition, intuition also tells us that the style or aesthetic that predominates depending on the work perhaps does not arise from a previous idea or formal study, but rather arises from within, from emotions and sentiment. And as Silvia Sánchez indicates in the introduction, in the end Mérida's wish was to write poetry.

We will conclude this chapter by again highlighting Carlos Mérida's ability to jump from one language to another, from one principle to another, the result of his artistic training, the influences of other European and Latin American artists, and the Mayan-Quiché tradition rooted in the core of his being.

In the end, it is a misconception to understand Mérida as a purely geometric artist. He is a combination of elements and ideas that coexist even though some of them oppose and contradict each other. The result of this combination is artistic production that is stylistically very varied and, of course, much more complex than what we can see with the naked eye.

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Image "Luminous Skies" (1979). Artsy platform:
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