

## WESTBURY ARTS CELEBRATES HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH

### FANNY RABEL, nee Rabinovich Painter, Muralist and Social Activist (1922 – 2008)



***“Her painting is not personal, but social. She is fundamentally concerned with class issues and has observed, with an exceptional maturity, the character and style of her models, always endowing them with vital emotions. All of this without pretensions, and full of the femininity and class that make her so complete.” Frida Kahlo – 1945***

Fanny Rabel was the first modern female muralist and one of the youngest associated with the Mexican muralist movement of the early 20th century. Her work is in the collections of New York Public Library; the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; the Royal Academy of Denmark; the National Library in Paris; Casa de las Americas in Havana, Cuba; and the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, among others. Her most important mural, "Ronda En El Tiempo," created 1964-1965, is in the permanent collection of the Museo Nacional de Antropologia.



Fanny Rabinovich, better known by her artistic alias Rabel, was born in Poland in 1922. Her parents made their living as traveling actors and, as the daughter of actors, she did not lead a stable life. She traveled with her parents throughout Europe and spent her early childhood between trains and hotels. The family eventually settled in Paris in 1929. However, due to the rise of Nazism and the growing possibility of war in Europe, they relocated permanently to Mexico. Fanny was 16 years old, and she embraced her adopted country and Mexico shaped her as an artist and as a person.

***[ Left: lithograph by Fanny Rabel titled 'Maternidad (Motherhood)' ca. 1975]***

Rabel first attended the Escuela Nocturna para Trabajadores (Night School for Workers), where she took classes in drawing and engraving. Her interest in art as activism increased because of World War II, and she began to work with other politically minded artists at the Taller Grafica Popular (Peoples Graphic Workshop). In 1940, at the age of 18, she worked as an assistant to Alfaro Siqueiros, one of the founders of the modern school of Mexican mural painting, on "Retrato de la Burguesia" (Portrait of the Bourgeoisie), an anti-war mural depicting Nazi atrocities painted on the walls of the Mexican Electricians Union.

In 1942, Rabel met legendary Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. She was invited to attend classes at Kahlo's famed Casa Azul (Blue House), and in 1945 she participated in her first exhibition with oils, drawings, and engravings. Frida Kahlo, in addition to being her teacher, became her friend and mentor. Rabel became a part of a small group of artists known as "Los Fridos" because the elements from Kahlo's style were visible in their work. *[The photo to the right shows Frida Kahlo and "Los Fridos" including Fanny Rabel on the left]*



The Mexican revolution (1910 –1917) was a powerful force in shaping the visual arts in Mexico and its influence can be seen in the ideological references to social conditions in the artist's work. The revolution was rooted in the dreams and aspirations of the common people. During the post-revolutionary period (1920 – 1940) the European-inspired cultural traditions, that



*[Frida Kahlo, Fanny Rabel and other alumni of the School of Painting (de la Escuela de Pintura y Escultura) at the inauguration of the murals on walls of the pulquería La Rosita Casasola ca. 1943]*

had thrived during the 300-year colonial period, were replaced with an emphasis Mexico's Indian roots prior to the Spanish conquest. Visibility was given, not only to a pre-colonial cultural heritage but contemporary Indian and native cultural traditions as well. The Mexican mural movement was an important part of this revolution in art. Primarily painting murals in public buildings served to provide access to the “the masses” in a way that easel paintings that hung in museums or private collections did not. The murals also served as an effective method for disseminating knowledge of Mexico’s cultural past to people who could not read and who, could now view that past from the perspective of “the Indians,” “the workers” and “the people.”

In 1950, Rabel assisted Diego Riviera when he made his most famous mural, “The History of Mexico,” for the National Palace in Mexico City. This series spans three large walls within a grand stairwell of the National Palace. Here Rivera represents important scenes from Mexico’s history, including scenes from the Spanish Conquest, the fight for independence from Spain, the American war, the Mexican Revolution, and an imagined future for Mexico in which



a workers’ revolution has triumphed. Although this mural spans hundreds of years of Mexican history, Rivera concentrated on themes that highlight a history that is driven by class struggle as well as the struggle of the Mexican people against foreign invaders and the resilience of Indigenous cultures. In Rivera’s words, the mural represents “the entire history of Mexico from the Conquest through the Mexican Revolution . . . down to the ugly present.”

Fanny Rabel's art, like her teachers and friends, centered around social activism. Rabel's body of work must be viewed in the context of post-revolutionary Mexico. She focused on the problems and social situation of poor women and children, bringing attention to their plight, as well as the oppression of Mexico's working class and indigenous populations. Rebel wanted to depict mankind's pain, not happiness. The children in her portraits, their beautiful faces, reflecting their native ancestry, frequently look sad or hungry.

To this day, her painting and lithographs create a feeling compassion, sadness and anger at the circumstances in which the children find themselves. Some examples are illustrated below:



**Top: (L) Niña Con Perro (R) Niño de Mexico**

**Bottom (L) Bolero de Campeche (R) La Nina con Canasta**



The mural "La Ronda En El Tiempo" (The Round of Time) 1965-65, located in the Educational Services for Children Department at Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, is considered Fanny Rabel's masterpiece. The massive mural, measuring 8 ½ by 63 feet, strategically located near the lobby where groups of children gather before beginning their tour of the Museum. Rabel tells the story, in pictures, of education and the passing down of knowledge, tradition, identity, and culture from the time of the ancient Aztecs to the present day.



Starting on the right one sees an Aztec teacher sitting with a group of children who are focused and curious. The imagery on this side of the mural symbolizes the Aztec past. Children linking hands, "ring around the rosie" style, stretch across the entire center of the mural. The style of clothing that they wear, ranging from Aztec loincloth to modern dress, indicates the passage of time and references important periods in Mexico's history.

The scene on the far left compliments the initial scene, but with a modern woman who is sitting near Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) masks. The architecture in the background also illustrates the passage of time, as the landscape changes from Aztec pyramids to modern skyscrapers as you move to left.

In her master's thesis titled "The Female Voice in the Mexican Story," Andrea Carolina Zambrano observed:

***"The mural tells the continuous story of education between generations and its everlasting importance between ancient times and the present day. Rabel illustrates to viewers, especially children, how much Aztecs valued education, and how highly they valued their children. One example is the Aztec Goddess Coatlicue, a major deity regarded as the earth-mother goddess, who is carved in the temple on the far right of the painting. Coatlicue is one of the most respected deities in Aztec culture, often represented as an elderly woman, the almighty mother, and the first bearer of life. She is placed behind the teacher and serves as the "backbone" to the Aztec teachings happening in front of her."***

***“This resistance to total Spanish control is represented by a boy in the middle of the mural. Placed at the turning points between the pre-Hispanic and colonial era, this child represents the blending of Aztec and Spanish cultures. He wears pants, an article of clothing introduced by the Spanish. The preceding children to the right, wear loincloths. The boy's physical features allude to the emergence of the mestizo mixed race. His arms are stretched out, holding on to the full Aztec boy, to the right. On the left, he holds hands with a post-conquest girl wearing a more modern simple pink dress. He is between the old and new worlds. There is a look of uncertainty yet determination on his face. The determination to not let go of the past but to integrate it into the future.***

You can view the entire mural on the video posted here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MgpeEmgFBg>

Fanny Rabel married urologist named Jaime Woolrich and had two children, Abel and Paloma Woolrich, both of whom became important actors in Mexican movies, television and theater. Fanny continued to work until well into the 1980s, exhibiting nationally and internationally. Sadly, near the end of her life, she lost most of her memory to Alzheimer's. Rabel died on November 25, 2008 and was buried at the Panteón Israelita. Her son, Abel, predeceased her in 2006 and she is survived by her daughter Paloma, and her grandchildren.

***Fanny is an example of honesty and artistic sincerity. Her pictorial work, especially the heads of children, are of solid execution and deep feeling, since she is a great connoisseur of the bitter reality of the town.***

#### **TO LEARN MORE**

#### **Videos in Spanish**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXJ6G7bpVeU> Luces 2, Fanny Rabel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MgpeEmgFBg> mural fanny rabel en museo de antropología.avi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1MynouFwYs> Presentación Fanny Rabel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4OGS9HvueU> Entrevistas retrospectivas de Fanny Rabel