

Life and Culture

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At the momentum of Gauguin

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For Sprague, if the master of French Impressionism had remained in Panama, it is more likely that after painting the tropical landscape he would have taken a fancy to the Panamanian polleras and there would have been no place for this Panamanian gringo to be so successful and so successful has reflected in his canvases the most representative dress and dances of the country, could become one of the pioneers of this artistic movement. "I'm glad he went to Tahiti," he jokingly points out.

To the wine to the world in the city of Columbus the 21 of December of 1938 and was baptized with the name of Alwin. She has a passion for art in her blood, as her mother was a fashion designer, her father was a painter in Austria and her maternal grandfather was a jewelery designer. He himself began painting at the age of 17 and has not stopped since then, although he recognizes that today, at 71 he is painting less frequently than before, but getting better.

And as colors are mixed in his palette of painter, in his soul were mixed the inclination for art, the skills to develop it and the color and heat of the tropics that saw him born. From that mixture was born the love of Sprague for the Panamanian landscapes, the daily life of the people, the sea and the fishermen, the murmuring palms and the beauty of the woman playing a tamborito or a cumbia and wearing a pollera.

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and body bent over by arthritis, Al expresses an immense gratitude for two women that have meant a lot in his artistic life: his mother, who was his greatest influence and 'who believed in me all the time and pushed me to paint' and his wife Marsha, with whom to share his achievements.

It was his mother who in 1956, when Al was 18 years old, prepared his first exhibition at the Hotel Panama. By then Sprague painted the isthmian landscapes, the beaches, the city, the houses, the people and the palm trees. He delayed reproducing the colors of the mango trees and the reflections of sunlight on the surface of the lakes. In his eagerness to learn, he even experimented with a submersible camera following the adventures of underwater divers and fishermen picking up their nets. A few years later, in 1968, he painted memorable scenes of the Panama Canal. + 3B

COMES FROM THE COVER From 1974, when he painted his first pollera - which is in the headquarters of the Chase Manhattan Bank in the Panamanian capital - he has not stopped painting. 'I think the most beautiful thing I could see is the skirt. The women in Panama are the most beautiful in the whole world,' says the painter who does not hide his passion for Panama and its folklore. 'After seeing Panama you do not need to paint anything else', he emphasizes. 'Panama has it all, from the simple and less expensive montuna to the luxury pollera, there is nothing that compares it to beauty', exclaims the artist.

Although he recognizes himself as a pioneer in this current, 'because I started when almost no one painted polleras in Panama', Al says he does not dare to claim that he is the most famous or the most important painter of polleras and, despite being convinced of the quality of his work and after 55 continuous years of painting, he affirms that it will be 'the Panamanian people who will judge me when I am no longer there and determine how good and valuable my painting was and is'.

Accompanied by his wife Marsha and his representative in Panama Arlene Lachman, who serve as interpreters to overcome the language barrier - his Spanish is not very good despite the years in the country - Al explains that his technique is semi-abstract and that his style is fundamentalist. "I bring the essence of dance to the canvas with fluidity and movement," he explains. "The dancers stop being it and they become fairies and nymphs wrapped in a magic halo. I was lucky to be in Panama where that magic is produced and it's there waiting for you to take it," the artist says with emotion.

Sprague says that his skin still bristles when he sees the Panamanians dancing. The posture and movement of their hands, their heads, their proud necks, the details of each fragment of the trembling, the combs, the specks, the ruchas and the embroidery. And 'when that is combined outdoors, it is the light of Panama,' he says enthusiastically. When comparing his first pollera painted 36 years ago with the last one (made this year), Sprague considers that he paints

better, manages the materials better and his work is more fluid. 'I am not a religious person,' Sprague continues, 'but when I paint I ask God to guide my hand,' he concludes.

Most of his works are in the hands of private collectors in Panama and the United States. According to the artist, it depends on his representative to get to know each other in other countries. Today in the Pentagon in Washington, 19 reproductions of original paintings on the American invasion of Panama are exhibited, when he was named official painter of the Operation Just Cause of 1989. Originally there were 20, but after one was burned in the attacks of 11 September 2001, the remainder were replaced by copies.

Among the personalities who have acquired a work of Sprague include the former French president, François Mitterrand; the former Spanish president, Felipe González; the former president of Panama Ricardo de La Espriella who gave it to Ronald Reagan and the late actor Anthony Queen, among other celebrities. Also the Jimmy Carter Library in Georgia, United States, has one of his paintings and several canvases on ships are in the Panama Canal Authority.

This Panamanian gringo, who as he says, despite being born in these lands does not look like a native, feels Panamanian and 'although it does not seem that way, my eyes made me look at Panama like many other Panamanians have not seen it. I see the beauty of the light illuminating the vendor of pibá, the fish cleaner, the fisherman dragging his trammel or the skirts spinning. I see the scraper with his hat upside down, with all its colors and I savor that vision as well as others savor the scraping,"he says with suppressed emotion.

Sprague gets up from the chair where he has remained during the interview and leans on the wooden stick that arthritis has condemned him to use. On the hilt is a small bronze sculpture that perfectly reproduces his face and, leaning on himself, leaves the room leaving behind several skirts, mounds and palm trees painted in recent years. All of them will be part of a retrospective of the artist that will take place next January at the Interoceanic Canal Museum.

Almost as if in a prayer, he slowly mutters that he would like to be remembered as a Panamanian artist with roots in the United States, that he feels that both countries have always been united and above their differences, and that he hopes that his paintings will be remembered as such good works. that people come to Panama to see them. And almost without wanting to add that he would like there to be a museum that housed his works. 'But that's a lot to ask,' he says with a sigh.

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La mayor parte de sus obras se encuentran en manos de coleccionistas privados en Panamá y Estados Unidos. Según el artista, depende de su representante que se conozcan en otros países. Hoy en el Pentágono en Washington, se exhiben 19 reproducciones de pinturas originales sobre la invasión estadounidense a Panamá, cuando fue nombrado pintor oficial de la Operación Causa Justa de 1989. Originalmente fueron 20, pero después de que una se quemó en los atentados del 11 de septiembre de 2001, las restantes fueron sustituidas por copias.

Entre las personalidades que han adquirido una obra de Sprague figuran el ex presidente francés, François Mitterrand; el ex presidente español, Felipe González; el ex presidente de Panamá Ricardo de La Espriella quien se la regaló a Ronald Reagan y el fallecido actor Anthony Queen, entre otros famosos. También la Biblioteca Jimmy Carter en Georgia, Estados Unidos, cuenta con uno de sus cuadros y varios lienzos sobre barcos están en la Autoridad del Canal de Panamá.

Este gringo panameño, que como él mismo dice, pese a haber nacido en estas tierras no tiene la pinta de nativo, se siente panameño y 'aunque no lo parezca mis ojos hicieron que mirara Panamá como muchos otros panameños no lo han

visto. Veo la belleza de la luz iluminando a la vendedora de pibá, al limpiador de pescado, al pescador arrastrando su trasmallo o las polleras girando. Yo veo al raspadero con su gorra al revés, con todos sus colores y saboreo esa visión así como otros saborean el raspado', dice con emoción contenida.

Sprague se levanta de la silla donde ha permanecido durante la entrevista y se apoya en el bastón de madera que la artritis lo ha condenado a usar. En la empuñadura lleva una pequeña escultura de bronce que reproduce perfectamente su rostro y, apoyado en sí mismo, abandona la sala dejando atrás varias polleras, montunas y palmeras pintadas en los últimos años. Todas ellas formarán parte de una retrospectiva del artista que se realizará en enero próximo en el Museo del Canal Interoceánico.

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