

MAJOR PAINTING BY INDIGENOUS BOLIVIAN ARTIST ALEJANDRO MARIO YLLANES  
ACQUIRED BY BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART



Brunswick, ME—February 6, 2024—The Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) has acquired *Estaño Maldito (Cursed Tin)* (1937), an important painting by the Indigenous Bolivian artist Alejandro Mario Yllanes (1913-c.1960), and the first painting by this accomplished modernist to enter a museum in the United States. Executed after Bolivia’s defeat in the Chaco War, the work offers a scathing portrayal of the dire conditions faced by Indigenous miners in the nation’s lucrative tin industry. In addition to the painting, the Museum has also acquired *Elegia* (1944), a wood engraving by the artist reflecting his signature style. A socially conscious artist, Yllanes drew inspiration from Mexico’s muralists, especially Diego Rivera—who became a supporter and mentor—and he created a compelling and powerful body of work, including paintings and many works on paper, before he disappeared. It will soon go on view in the Museum’s galleries as part of the “Currents” installation that explores new ways of thinking about the Museum’s modern and contemporary art.

“We are absolutely thrilled to bring this powerful painting into the museum’s collection,” said Frank Goodyear, Co-Director of the BCMA. “With its vital political message and masterful execution, *Estaño Maldito* will be a signature piece supporting our exploration through art of issues of such as environmental exploitation, labor abuses, and the enduring impacts of colonialism.” Added Co-Director

Anne Collins Goodyear, “As we continue to focus on the diversification of our collection and broadening the narratives of art history that we present, these works are powerful additions, bringing together South and Central American influences with Indigenous traditions, from an artist who deserves wider recognition for his impact and influence.”

*Estaño Maldito* depicts two figures toiling under evidently harsh conditions inside a mine—leaning into and pushing a very full cart that is seen on a rail; the figures’ eyes are hollow, and their limbs are both sinewy with muscle and yet clearly exhausted. The painting appears to include a self-portrait, a device the artist used frequently in his work—but in this case it also reflects his personal connections to this narrative, since he had worked in mines in his youth.

“Yllanes demands that we bear witness to the treatment of people and communities, whether they are poor, Indigenous, or otherwise overlooked and overworked,” said Casey Mesick Braun, curator at BCMA. “At the same time, Yllanes’ work, as is the case with these two acquisitions, is not merely conveying a narrative of despair. Instead, the idea of resistance was central to the artist’s understanding of his work and his own mission in life.”

Alejandro Mario Yllanes was born in 1913 to an Aymara mother and mixed-race father. Primarily self-taught, he embraced modernism while drawing inspiration from Bolivia’s pre-Hispanic Tiwanaku culture to develop a distinct “tahuanacota” approach in his socially conscious art. As an advocate for Bolivia’s marginalized Indigenous peoples, Yllanes created prints, murals, and paintings that confronted the economic exploitation and mistreatment they endured. This activist art brought him recognition across Latin America and exchanges with famed Mexican artists including José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and particularly Diego Rivera, who became a supporter and mentor. During his time in Mexico, a major exhibition of his work was held at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City in June and July 1946.

By the late 1940s, Yllanes had relocated to the United States, in part with backing from a Guggenheim Fellowship. He continued to produce works, which were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the New York Public Library. However, his career was cut short under obscure circumstances: sometime between 1950 and 1960 he vanished, leaving behind a trove of art works that were subsequently cared for by his landlord, and were later acquired by private collectors who recognized the importance of the material and the need to properly preserve it. Though overlooked for decades, recent scholarship is underscoring Yllanes’ lasting influence as both a revolutionary artist and champion of Indigenous resistance movements.

Scholar Dr. Michele Greet (Bowdoin Class of 1993), a recognized expert in Latin American modern art, said “Yllanes has for too long remained an obscure figure in the history of modern art, overshadowed by peers. While this is no doubt in part because of his mysterious disappearance, *Estaño Maldito* reveals his aptitude as both artist and activist. Having learned the concept of ‘indigenismo,’ promoted by Latin American philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui, Yllanes saw an opportunity to express these ideas, to advocate for Indigenous communities, through his art. Across his known body of work, whether paintings or works on paper, his subjects are passionately portrayed and boldly figured. And while they evidently fit within a Latin American tradition, Yllanes had a style and approach that was very much his own.”

Both Yllanes works were acquired through Ben Elwes Fine Art, London.

### **Bowdoin College Museum of Art**

The Bowdoin College Museum of Art is the cornerstone of the arts and culture at Bowdoin. One of the earliest collegiate art collections in the nation, it came into being through the 1811 bequest of James Bowdoin III of 70 European paintings and a portfolio of 141 old master drawings. The collection has been expanded through the generosity of the Bowdoin family, alumni and friends, and now numbers more than 20,000 objects, including paintings, sculpture, works on paper, decorative arts and artifacts from prehistory to the present from civilizations around the world. [www.bowdoin.edu](http://www.bowdoin.edu)

###

For more information, please contact:

Suzanne Bergeron

Bowdoin College Museum of Art

207-725-3124

[sbergero@bowdoin.edu](mailto:sbergero@bowdoin.edu)

Sascha Freudenheim

PAVE Communications & Consulting

917-544-6057

[sascha@paveconsult.com](mailto:sascha@paveconsult.com)

Image caption:

Alejandro Mario Yllanes (1913-c.1960), *Estaño Maldito*, 1937 (142 x 197 cm), signed lower left: A M Yllanes / 37. Image courtesy of Ben Elwes Fine Art, London.