

# MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO

## RETRATOS de MÉXICO PORTRAITS of MÉXICO



# Quijote

addressing Sancho:

**“...what looks like a  
barber’s bowl to you looks  
like Mambrino’s helmet to  
me, and to someone**

**else it will look like  
something completely  
different.”**

**Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra**

# MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO, PORTRAITS OF MÉXICO

*“Manuel Álvarez Bravo is a hypersensitive man, with a profound, incisive mind, open to every experience and favorable to every curiosity. When he felt the need to express himself artistically, it was no accident that he chose photography as his medium. The precise, rigorous technique of this practice was, without a doubt, the kind that least threatened to come between his sensitivity and the work itself. That is why deep, subtle poetry and fine, wild irony emanate from Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s photos through the particles suspended in the air, which reveal a ray of light as it pierces a dark room.”*

Diego Rivera

**Manuel Álvarez Bravo** (1902-2002) is the pioneer of artistic photography in Mexico and among the founders of modern photography worldwide.

On the level of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo in painting, and of writers like the generation of Contemporáneos (Contemporaries), he is an emblematic figure of the movement known as the Mexican renaissance, following the Revolution. The significance of this period results from the fortuitous, if not always peaceful, coexistence between a zeal for modernization and the search for an identity with its own roots, one in which history, archeology, and ethnology all played a relevant role – a role parallel to the arts. Álvarez Bravo embodies both tendencies in the field of visual art.

His work encompasses various genres: the study of forms, scenes, landscape, experimentation... and, of course, portraits, which became part of his commissioned work in the 1930s and ‘40s when he also photographed muralists’ work. His interest in the origins of photography led him to organize, in 1932, an exhibition of portraits and old photographic techniques, which resulted in the book by the Fernández Ledesma brothers *La gracia de los retratos antiguos*.

His archive, which contains around 35,000 negatives, includes 8,000 portraits largely related to daily life, to the trades, to farmers and indigenous communities, to the street scenes of his home city.

This exhibition brings together a selection of 36 portraits printed on silver/gelatin and on platinum/palladium, taken from the showing organized in 2011 by the Instituto Moreira Salles in Rio de Janeiro and based on the book *Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Photopoetry*, translated into six languages. It includes masterpieces such as “El ensueño,” “Muchacha viendo pájaros,” “La hija de los danzantes,” “Retrato de lo eterno,” and “Obrero en huelga, asesinado.”

Both famous and anonymous people simply pose, evoke their profession, or indicate everyday contexts spotlighted by Álvarez Bravo’s highly personal poetry. Writers, a notary public, painters, workers, dancers, an urban clown, young indigenous girls...

“La buena fama durmiendo” is the only nude in this exhibition; it is accompanied by five images from this famed photographic session and the account as told by Álvarez Bravo himself.



**Kings of the Dance**

Huejotzingo, Puebla    ca. 1931

Platinum-palladium print







**Fire Workers**

Mexico City

1935

Platinum-palladium print





**Daydreaming**

Downtown, Mexico City

1931   Gelatin silver print





**Girl Looking at Birds**

Cholula, Puebla

1931 Gelatin silver print



**The Daughter of the Dancers**

Cholula, Puebla

1934

Gelatin silver print





**Miss Juárez**

San Blas, Oaxaca

1934

Gelatin silver print



## All Souls' Day

La Merced Market, Mexico City 1932 Platinum-palladium

People believe that there is a love of death, but they do not understand that it is not simply this -- and that what in fact there is in Mexico is an ancient awareness of the duality of life and death, death being the end result of life, and that it is impossible to treat the two terms separately. This concept of duality we Mexicans receive as children -- when in November, on the Day of the Dead, we are taken to the fair and buy toy figurines of death and skulls made of sugar, which we eat. Eating is an activity which sustains life, and this life is sustained by a skull.

*Interview with Tom Picton and Marcos Valdivia  
Camera Work, april 1976*





**Striking Worker, Murdered**

Tehuantepec, Oaxaca

1934

Gelatin silver print

Attended, in the great movements of his inspiration, by the strangest sense of quality, and simultaneously by an unerring technique, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, with “Striking Worker, Murdered,” has ascended to what Baudelaire referred to as “eternal style.”

*Excerpt from the prologue by André Bréton  
Renou & Colle Catalogue  
Mexico, 1939*



**Mayan Boy from Tulum**

Tulum, Quintana Roo 1943

Gelatin silver print





**Margarita of Bonampak**

Bonampak, Chiapas 1949

Gelatin silver print



**Tableau of Atlatlahucan**

Atlatlahucan, Morelos 1950-58

Gelatin silver print







**Portrait of the Eternal**

Mexico City 1935

Platinum-palladium print



**Box of Visions**

Mexico City

1938

Gelatin silver print





**Dr. Marín Bandaging Alicia**

Mexico City

1938-39

Gelatin silver print





**The Unbandaged Woman 2**

Mexico City

1938-39

Gelatin silver print





**The Bandaged Woman**

Mexico City

1938-39

Gelatin silver print

# La buena fama durmiendo

"It was in the year 1938 that I made the photograph called *La buena fama durmiendo* (*Good reputation sleeping*). At the time I was a teacher at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City. André Breton was in town making arrangements for an exhibition of surrealism at the Gallery of Mexican Art.

One day I was standing in line to collect my salary and I received a telephone call from someone who spoke in the name of Breton... This person indicated that Breton wished me to do a photograph for the title page of the exhibition catalogue.

(...) in the group waiting for salary was a model named Alicia who had posed in the nude in my photography class. I asked her if she would go up to the rooftop of the school to make a photograph.

Then (...) I spoke to a friend of mine, Dr. Francisco Marin, to ask if he would come to the school to bandage a model. The doctor thought this must be some urgent case, and he arrived with great rapidity in his car (...)

Meanwhile, I had sent the school watchman to the nearby marketplace, "La Merced," to buy some "abrojos." These are very strong thorns produced by a type of cactus that grows in rocky ground. In Spanish, "abrojos" means "abre ojos" or open eyes. The thorns are called "abrojos" to remind one to keep on the lookout, because they are very sharp and can penetrate the skin through the shoes.

Then I asked the watchman to lend me the blanket he used at night. The doctor arrived. He bandaged the woman and I took the photograph. I worked very suddenly and very rapidly, obeying a sense of surrealist automatism. People ask me, "Why the bandages? Why the 'abrojos?'" I have also thought, "Why the bandages and 'abrojos?'"

I saw bandages used for the first time when Anna Sokolow's dance troupe came to Mexico (...) I had the opportunity to make photographs, and the thing that especially interested me was photographing the rehearsals (...). Their feet were strongly bandaged for the exercises. Since this happened in 1937, not long before the making of *La buena fama*, there undoubtedly remained with me, in the archive of my visual memories, the question of the use of the bandaged body for purposes other than those of surgery (...).

In surrealism there are elements of the dream, and in this connection one can think about the reactions that may have stimulated this photograph. It is possible that the person lying down, Alicia, can be thinking of herself in relation to danger, produced by the idea of the thorns. I believe it is possible that this idea of unconscious danger while sleeping can be related to the influence of the painting *Sleeping Gipsy* (*La bohémienne endormie*) by Henri Rousseau (...). Danger is signified by the lion, as it is signified in *La buena fama* by the thorns.

This interpretation has been a long time in unfolding; it is only about two years ago that it came to me completely. I repeat it now with the motive of answering the many questions that have been put to me, and I believe that it is all I have to say in respect to *La buena fama durmiendo*.



## Good Reputation Sleeping

Mexico City

1938-39

Gelatin silver print

Valdivia: It is said that Mexico is essentially a surrealist country.

**Manuel Álvarez Bravo:** That is what Breton says. In fact, Mexico can be a dramatic country, a country full of contrasts, even bordering on the fantastic, which does not precisely fit in the concept of surrealism, which, like any other “ism”, is an academia term. Perhaps I can understand what Breton said as meaning a country where the artist can produce fantastic or surrealist art. In the case of my own work, for instance, I do not think it can be considered as surrealist except for three or four photographs like “The Bandaged Woman,” but all the others are fantasy-inspired by the country itself.

*Interview with Tom Picton and Marcos Valdivia  
Camera Work, april 1976*









## José Clemente Orozco

Mexico City

1930s

Gelatin silver print

**José Clemente Orozco** (*November 23, 1883 – September 7, 1949*) was a Mexican social realist painter who specialized in bold murals that defined the Mexican Mural Renaissance, together with murals by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and others. Orozco was the most complex of the Mexican muralists, drawn to the theme of human suffering, but less realistic and more fascinated by machines than Rivera. Mostly influenced by Symbolism, he was also a genre painter and lithographer.





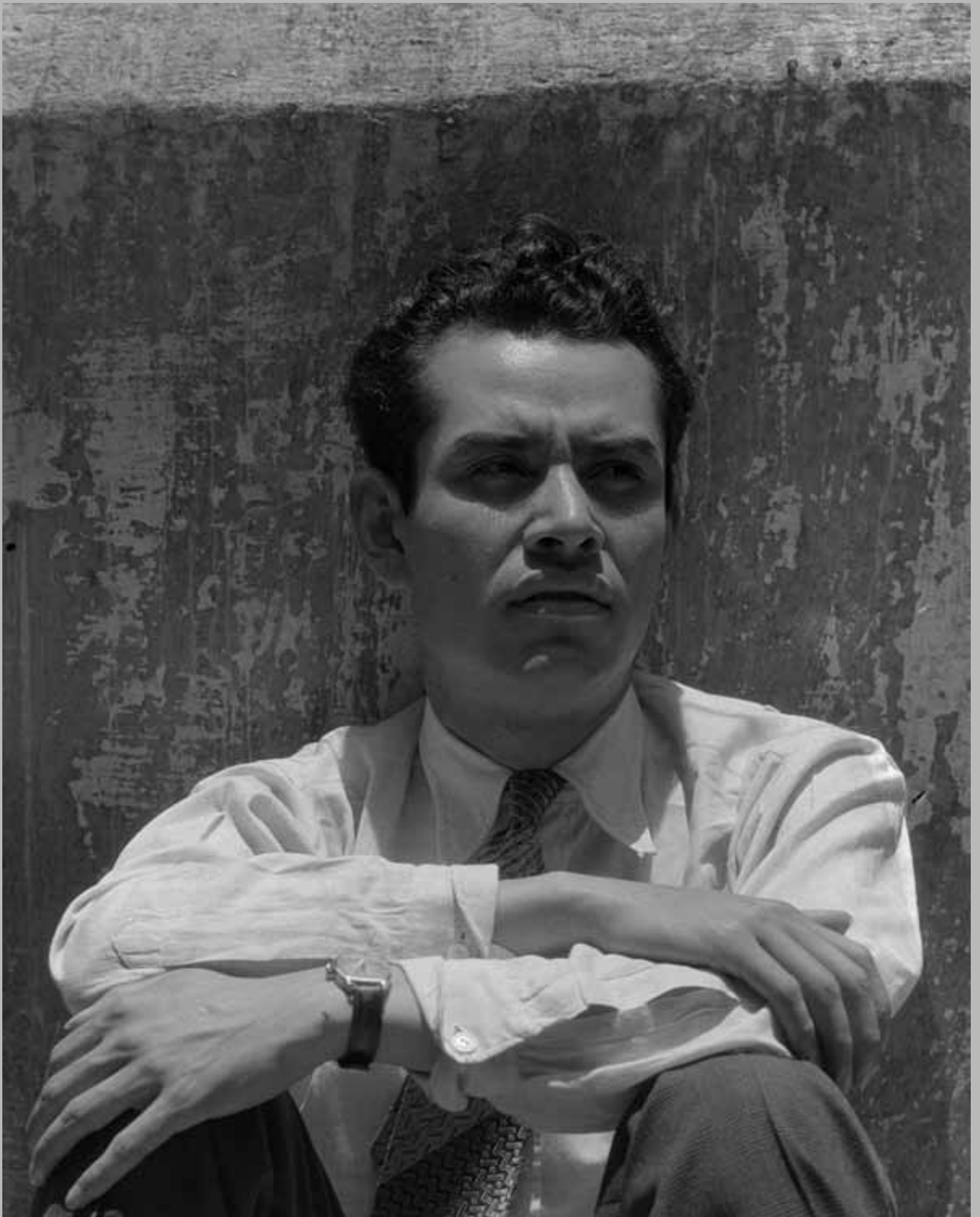
**David Alfaro Siqueiros**

Mexico City

1930s

Gelatin silver print

**David Alfaro Siqueiros** (*December 29, 1896 - January 6, 1974*) was a Mexican social realist painter, better known for his large murals in fresco. Along with Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, he established Mexican Muralism.



## Rufino Tamayo

Mexico City

1930s

Gelatin silver print

**Rufino Tamayo** (*August 26, 1899 – June 24, 1991*) was a Mexican painter of Zapotec heritage, born in Oaxaca de Juárez, Mexico. Tamayo was active in the mid-20th century in Mexico and New York, painting figurative abstraction with surrealist influences.



**Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Returning from the USA**

The Port of Veracruz    1940s

Gelatin silver print

**Diego Rivera** (*December 8, 1886 – November 24, 1957*) was a prominent Mexican painter and the husband of Frida Kahlo (1929–39 and 1940–54). His large wall works in fresco helped establish the Mexican Mural Movement in Mexican art. Between 1922 and 1953, Rivera painted murals in, among other places, Mexico City, Chapingo, Cuernavaca, San Francisco, Detroit, and New York City. In 1931, a retrospective exhibition of his works was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.





### **Frida Kahlo Painting “Itzcuintli Dog With Me”**

Mexico City      1937      Gelatin silver print

Frida Kahlo de Rivera (*July 6, 1907 – July 13, 1954*) was a Mexican painter, born in Coyoacán, Mexico City, who is best known for her self-portraits. Mexican culture and Amerindian cultural tradition are important in her work, which has been sometimes characterized as Naïve art or folk art. Her work has also been described as “surrealist”, and in 1938 André Breton, principal initiator of the surrealist movement, described Kahlo’s art as a “ribbon around a bomb.” Kahlo had a volatile marriage with the famous Mexican artist Diego Rivera.



**Diego Rivera Painting “El Cárcamo del Río Lerma”**

Mexico City 1951

Gelatin silver print



## Carlos Fuentes

Coyoacán, Mexico City 1980

Gelatin silver print

Carlos Fuentes Macías (November 11, 1928 – May 15, 2012) was a Mexican novelist and essayist. Among his works are *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), *Aura* (1962), *The Old Gringo* (1985) and *Christopher Unborn* (1987). In his obituary, the *New York Times* described him as “one of the most admired writers in the Spanish-speaking world.”





## Juan Rulfo

Mexico City

Ca. 1935

Gelatin silver print

**Juan Rulfo** (16 May 1917– 7 January 1986) was a Mexican writer, screenwriter and photographer. One of Latin America's most esteemed authors, Rulfo's reputation rests on two slim books, the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and *El Llano en llamas* (1953), a collection of short stories. There are more than 6,000 negatives of his photographs at the Juan Rulfo Foundation.



**Sergei Eisenstein**

Mexico City

Ca. 1930

Gelatin silver print

Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein (23 January 1898 – 23 July 1948) was a pioneering Soviet Russian film director and film theorist, often considered to be the “Father of Montage.” He is noted in particular for his silent films *Strike* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927), as well as the historical epics *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1958). *¡Que viva México!* (1930) was left unfinished.



**Leon Trotsky**

Mexico City

1939

Gelatin silver print

Leon Trotsky (7 November 1879 – 21 August 1940) was a Russian Marxist revolutionary and theorist, Soviet politician, and the founder and first leader of the Red Army. Trotsky's ideas were the basis of Trotskyism, a major school of Marxist thought that is opposed to the theories of Stalinism.



**“He has shown us  
everything that is poetic  
in Mexico: wherever**

**Manuel Álvarez Bravo has  
stopped to photograph a light, a sign,  
a silence, is not only where Mexico’s  
heart beats, but also where the  
artist has managed to sense,  
with a singular vision, the wholly  
objective value of his own emotion.”**

**André Breton**



**André Breton**

Mexico City

1939

Gelatin silver print

André Breton (19 February 1896 – 28 September 1966) was a French writer and poet. He is known best as the founder of Surrealism. His writings include the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (*Manifeste du surréalisme*) of 1924, in which he defined surrealism as “pure psychic automatism.”

# CRONOLOGY

- 1902** Born in Mexico City on February 4 in a building behind the Metropolitan Cathedral on 20 Guatemala Street. He will live there until adolescence and will later take the photograph “*El ensueño*.”
- 1908-1914** He attends elementary school at the Patricio Saénz boarding school in Tlalpan.
- 1915** Leaves elementary school to help support his family.
- 1916** Hired at the National Treasury.
- 1922** Edward Weston arrives in Mexico, accompanied by his model, Tina Modotti.
- 1924** Buys his first camera.
- 1925** Marries Lola Martínez de Anda and moves with her to Oaxaca. Works in the Ministry of the Treasury.
- 1926** Wins first prize in a competition organized by the Regional Livestock Fair in Oaxaca with an image of two lovers in a boat.
- 1927** Returns to Mexico City with Lola; they turn their apartment into a portrait photography studio. His work is selected for exhibition in the First Mexican Hall of Photography.
- 1928** Once Tina Modotti is expelled from Mexico, Álvarez Bravo is left in charge of photographing the works of the most important painters of the day: José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, among others.
- 1929** Wins first prize in a competition sponsored by the cement manufacturing company La Tolteca with his image “*La Tolteca*.” Diego Rivera is one of the judges.
- 1931** First solo exhibition, Galería Posada, Mexico City.
- 1932** Meets photographer Paul Strand on the set of *Redes*.
- 1933** Works for several months as a photographer for the Museo de Arte Popular del Palacio de Bellas Artes (Folk Art Museum of the Palace of Fine Arts). Supported by Rufino Tamayo, he secures a job as an art teacher in two elementary schools. Travels to Tehuantepec, where he takes the photo “*Obrero en huelga, asesinado*” (“*Striking Worker, Murdered*”).
- 1934** Meets Henri Cartier-Bresson and separates from Lola.
- 1935** Exhibits with Henri Cartier-Bresson at the Palacio de Bellas Artes.
- 1938** Meets André Breton at Diego Rivera’s home. Takes the photo “*La Buena fama durmiendo*” (“*Good Reputation Sleeping*”).
- 1938-1939** Teaches photography at the Escuela Central de Artes Plásticas.
- 1939** André Breton publishes “*Souvenir du Mexique*” in the *Minotaure* magazine. Surrealist exhibition in Galerie Renou et Colle, Paris.
- 1940** In the gallery belonging to Inés Amor, he participates in the surrealist exhibition organized by André Breton. The MoMA in New York includes two of his ambrotypes and his image “*Muchacha viendo pájaros*” (“*Girl Looking at Birds*”) in *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*.
- 1943** Starts working in the national film industry, joining the Section of Technicians and Manual Workers of the Film Industry Union. He will remain there until 1959.
- 1945** Exhibition in Sociedad de Arte Moderno. The curator is Fernando Gamboa.
- 1949** He collaborates with José Revueltas in an experimental film, *Coatlicue*. Travels to Bonampak to photograph murals for the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (“Margarita de Bonampak”). Marries the American anthropologist Doris Heyden.
- 1957** Works as still-man in *Nazarín*, a film by Luis Buñuel.
- 1959** Together with Leopoldo Méndez, Gabriel Figueroa, Carlos Pellicer and Rafael Carrillo, he founds the Fondo Editorial de la Plástica Mexicana (Editorial Fund for Mexican Plastic Arts).
- 1962** Separates from Doris Heyden and begins a relationship with Colette Urbajtel.
- 1966** Exhibition at Inés Amor’s gallery.
- 1968** Exhibition at the Palacio de Bellas Artes commemorating four decades of Álvarez Bravo’s work.
- 1971** Exhibitions in the Pasadena Art Museum and MoMA, New York.
- 1972** *Manuel Álvarez Bravo: 400 fotografías*. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City.
- 1973** Donates his personal collection of photographs and cameras to the INBA (National Institute for Fine Arts). The Mexican government acquires four hundred of his photographs for the archives of the Modern Art Museum.



- 1974** Receives the Elias Sourasky Arts Prize.
- 1975** Receives the National Prize for the Arts in Mexico and a Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.
- 1978** Exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.
- 1980** Begins forming a collection of photographs for the Fundación Cultural Televisa.
- 1982** Octavio Paz and Manuel Álvarez Bravo publish the book *Instante y revelación* (thirty poems by Paz and seventy photographs by Álvarez Bravo). He is named Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres by the French government.
- 1983** Exhibits at Jerusalem's Israel Museum.
- 1984** Receives the Erna and Victor Hasselblad Prize (Gotemburg, Sweden).
- 1985** Travels to Spain to attend his exhibition at the National Library in Madrid.
- 1987** Awarded the Master of Photography Prize by the International Center of Photography in New York.
- 1991** Wins the Hugo Erfurth International Photography Award and Agfa Gevaert Prize in Leverkusen, Germany.
- 1993** Named Creator Emeritus by the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Council for Culture and the Arts).
- 1994-1995** Exhibition *Evidencias de lo invisible, cien fotografías* (*Evidence of the Invisible, One Hundred Photographs*) in New Delhi, Beijing and Lisbon.
- 1995** Gold Medal Award from the National Arts Club in New York; Leica Medal of Excellence and Grand Cross of Merit Order in Portugal.
- 1996** The Centro Fotográfico Manuel Álvarez Bravo is opened in Oaxaca. Exhibition at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid.
- 1997** Exhibition at the Museum of Photographic Arts in Kiyosato, Japan. *Retrospective* in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. *Variaciones*, in the Centro de la Imagen (Image Center), Mexico.
- 1998** Exhibition of *Espíritus Arbóreos. Manuel Álvarez Bravo y Octavio Paz* (*Arboreal Spirits. Manuel Álvarez Bravo and Octavio Paz*), as part of the XXVI Festival Internacional Cervantino in Guanajuato, taken from *Variaciones*.
- 1999** *Arboreal Spirits* in the Fundación Octavio Paz, Mexico City.
- 2001** Retrospective at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California.
- 2002** National homage to Álvarez Bravo. The book *Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Cien años, cien días* (*Manuel Álvarez Bravo, One Hundred Years, One Hundred Days*) is published. Dies in October of that year at the age of one hundred.
- \*\*\*\*\*
- 2005** The Asociación Manuel Álvarez Bravo is founded with the objective of researching, conserving and disseminating his work.
- 2008** "Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Photopoetry" (Thames & Hudson) is published, with 374 photographs, translated into six languages.
- 2011-2012** The exhibition "Manuel Álvarez Bravo, fotopoesía" is presented at the Instituto Moreira Salles in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil.
- 2012** Commemoration of the ten-year anniversary of his death and the 110-year anniversary of his birth with the exhibitions "Un photographe aux aguets" in the Museo del Jeu de Paume, Paris; the Fundación MAPFRE in Madrid; and "Una biografía cultural" at the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico.

**MANUEL  
ÁLVAREZ BRAVO**

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