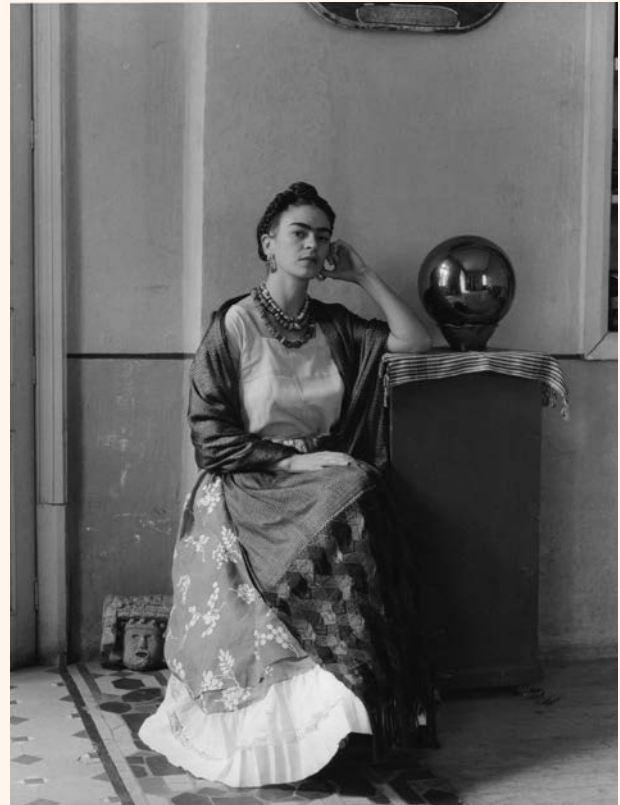


THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MEXICAN ART, A CULTURAL HUB FOR CHICAGO'S MEXICAN COMMUNITY



Marcos Raya, *The Legacy of Manifest Destiny / El legado del destino*, 1995 acrylic on canvas / acrílico sobre lienzo, National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection, gift of Nora Ribadeniera Carranza in honor of her family.

All photos courtesy of the National Museum of Mexican Art.



Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *Frida Seated with Globe*, 1937, gelatin silver print, National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection.

Forty years ago, history teacher Carlos Tortolero — who was born in Mexico and raised in the United States — joined several other educators in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood to found what is now one of the main hubs for Mexican culture. This project began as a way to promote knowledge and appreciation of Mexican culture in the city of Chicago, not only among the Mexican community, but also among US society at large, while centering values such as inclusion and social justice. This museum is now an open-door space housing the exhibition of incredible selections of Mexican art as well as other activities that especially involve the neighboring community. What follows is our conversation with the museum's founder.

Voices of Mexico: How did the idea of bringing Mexican art to Chicago come about?

Carlos Tortolero: Thanks to my work as a history teacher and counselor for the Chicago Public School System, I realized that, even though there's a population of more than 2 million Mexicans here in Chicago and its neighboring suburbs, there was no place to see and enjoy our rich cultural tradition and wonderful Mexican



Alejandro Romero, *The Battle of Puebla / La Batalla de Puebla* 1987 acrylic on canvas, National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection, gift of the Anheuser-Busch Company.

art, and I believed that a population that big deserved a museum. From the beginning, my idea was to create a place for Mexicans who live here, but also to show non-Mexicans just how fantastic Mexican culture is. If one simply reads books or listens to the news, one's perceptions of Mexico would be quite different from reality. That's why I saw it as fundamental to create a museum that would integrate our great culture.

VM: How did the museum get started? Where did you start collecting the pieces?

CT: My idea was always to situate the museum somewhere with a community. From the beginning, I had this working-class neighborhood in mind, rather than more central parts of the city. A lot of people questioned me for wanting to open an art museum in a working-class neighborhood and for having it be free of charge; more than a few people called me crazy. But look at us now, almost 40 years later, we're still here, in a working-class community. We have an art museum, and it's free. Over the years, we've grown a lot and our public has expanded considerably, with the museum's influence reaching other parts of the United States, too.

VM: And with a huge collection!

CT: Yes, we've got 18,000 pieces, and almost all were donated. We've only had to buy a few, thanks to all the people who had and continue to have faith in us. One of our most outstanding collections was created by Leopoldo Méndez, one of the most

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important Mexican engravers of the twentieth century. We have 275 pieces by him. A lot of people come here from Mexico and ask, “How did you get a hold of that?” Well, that's how we've done it, little by little. Plus, we have a borderless philosophy. We not only showcase art from Mexico, but also art by Mexicans who live in the United States. To us, a Mexican from Alaska or San Francisco is just as Mexican as one from Tepic or Mexico City.

We've exhibited plenty of contemporary art, traditional art, popular art, Hispanic art, indigenous art . . . it's all showcasing Mexican art. Mexico has a great culture, and there's always something new to learn from it. A lot of the Mexicans from here are proud of our artistic tradition.

VM: You also often say that your model addresses the need for museums to be in a constant state of change. In what sense do they need to change?

CT: We're the first Latino museum to be accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. I wanted to change what we understand to be a museum, offering alternatives beyond the mere exhibition of art. For instance, during the pandemic, we set up a vaccination site and even offered COVID testing. A group of plumbers also came to us with a proposal. They wanted to raise

funds to feed those in need. Just think about that, plumbers at an art museum! I've always said that we want to be part of the community. And that involves changing our ideas around museums. We need think of them as open to all. If art is only for the few, then what's it worth? Art is for everyone, and everyone should participate, not just people with money.

To me, it's always been important to have lots of events and to make them diverse. One time, we had an event with 200 middle-aged women, all of them Mexican, none of whom had ever had a mammogram. A nurse provided mammograms to all of the women. Other museums lashed out, saying that museums are meant to house and exhibit art alone. But if we have an auditorium, and it's not being used, and there's something I can do to help people, then I'll do it.

We've also created films and supported the production of movies, such as *A Day Without a Mexican*, as well as a film by a young man from Guerrero, which participated in the Cannes festival. So, we're not like other museums. We have a very different idea of what museums should be.

Likewise, we've addressed the subject of racism from day one, and now all the big museums are talking about racism. I think we've successfully changed a lot of conceptions in the art realm, and that fills me with pride because art is for everyone, not just for a select few.

VM: One of your goals is to contribute to social justice through art. How are you doing this?

CT: Yes, that's what we've done from the beginning. Nowadays a lot of museums are addressing this subject, too. For instance, the Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim Museum's websites mention social justice because the topic is in vogue. But back in the day, people used to criticize us for talking about social justice in a museum — but this has always been among our principles.

VM: How has the American public responded to the museum?

CT: Now, with COVID-19, things are different. Our audience has dropped quite a bit, but before that we'd have 160,000 visitors a year. We hold a lot of events outside the museum, because I always say that a museum is more than just a building. A museum is an idea, a concept.

VM: Do you think that across all of these years with the museum, the broader US community has shifted its perceptions of the Mexican community?

“Our goal is to empower people, including students, so that they can interpret their own culture.”



Laura Molina, *Amor Alien*, 2004, oil, fluorescent enamel and metallic powder on canvas óleo, esmalte fluorescente y polvo metálico sobre lienzo, National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection, gift of the artist.



Mariana Yampolsky (1925-2002), *Untitled (Woman Sleeping)*, linoleum print, ca.1950, National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection, gift of the Rogovin Family.



Michael Tropea



Carmen Lomas Garza, *Heaven and Hell (Cielo e infierno)*, 1990, color lithograph with gold leaf / *litografía a color con hoja de oro*, 18/45, 30 1/8" x 22 1/4" (paper dimensions), National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection.

CT: Not entirely, or less than I'd like, because now we're living in a very racist time, but we've transmitted and shared Mexican culture with a lot of people. For instance, when we started celebrating the Day of the Dead in 1986, a lot of people would ask what the Day of the Dead even was, or they'd be scared of it, wondering if it was a devilish thing. But little by little, it's become a very popular celebration in the United States, not just among members of the Mexican community.

Also importantly, the museum's public isn't just Mexican; there's a broader US public, too, and they need to be taught about the greatness of Mexican culture. Some people ask, "how come you're creating a museum with only Mexican culture?" To that, I reply, "Don't ever say that again. Mexican culture is very rich, and it's ancestral. If we have French and Italian art museums, why shouldn't we have a museum for Mexican art?"

VM: How is the museum funded?

CT: The museum has received funding from the Ford Foundation and from MacKenzie Scott, who is Jeff Bezos's ex-wife. This has allowed us to fund very important exhibitions, including the Olmec head we brought in from Veracruz, which I'm very proud of,



Ana Teresa Fernández, *No puedo pasar*. Records of the performance at the Tijuana / San Diego border.

and the exhibition on the African presence in Mexico, the biggest exhibition on the subject to date. The exhibition has travelled through several cities across the United States and Mexico.

VM: How has the Mexican public reacted to the exhibitions you've brought there?

CT: I think that the people in power don't understand us yet. For example, some people tell me that I'm not Mexican. First of all, I was born in Mexico, but that's not what makes me Mexican. My children were born in the United States and they're Mexican. Those people don't have the right to decide whether somebody is Mexican or not. There are 37 million Mexicans in the United States, and that's leaving aside the undocumented. It's not the people, but those in power who view us as less important.

VM: How has the museum impacted education?

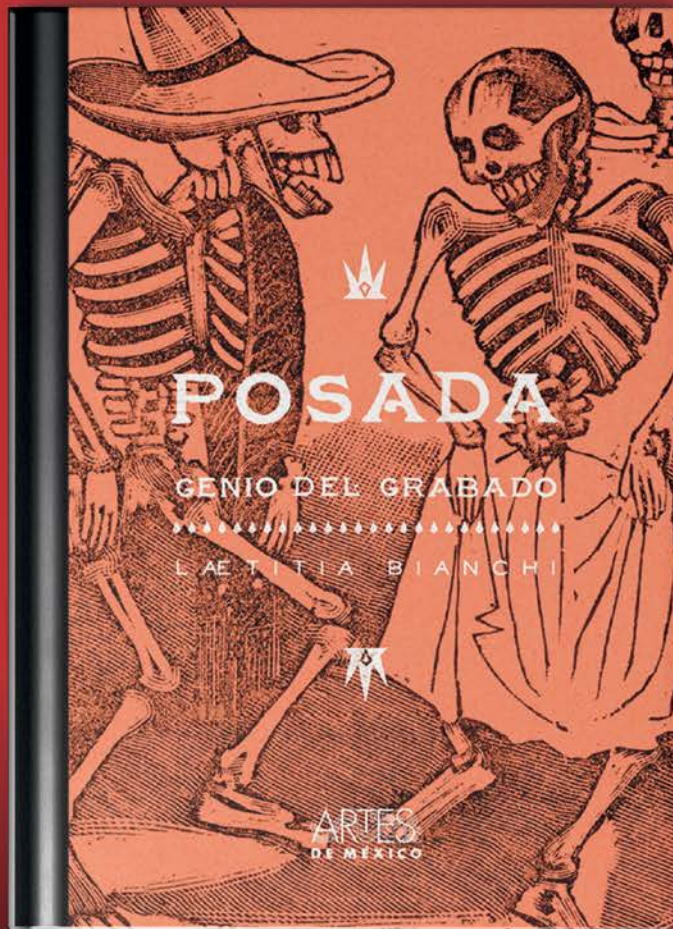
CT: We work with schools a lot. One-third of the museum's personnel is part of our education team, and one-quarter of our budget goes toward education. We're the only group in the United States that's earned two prizes from the White House for educational projects. One was awarded by George W. Bush, and the other, by Barack Obama. Our goal is to empower people, including students, so that they can interpret their own culture. We have an incredible team and a lot of people who support us.

VM: Your fortieth anniversary is happening this year. How are you planning to celebrate?

CT: With more exhibitions and projects that involve and benefit the community. **MM**

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