



Photos by Dante Barrera

## THE CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM OF OAXACA

*Jorge Pech Casanova\**

The Contemporary Art Museum of Oaxaca (MACO) was founded in 1992 by the state government under the prompting of a group of members of the public and artists, among them several of Oaxaca's most important painters. Their aim was to preserve and increase the state's cultural patrimony with a space where modern art could be viewed by residents and visitors alike.

The MACO is located in the historic downtown of Oaxaca's capital in a mansion built in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by the Pinelo Lasso de la Vega family. In this colonial building, modern art finds a space for itself and gives an unexpected dynamism to the aged, fretworked, green stone walls where fragments of the frescos that decorated the house hundreds of years ago are still visible.

Local inhabitants wrongly call this building "Cortés' House," but the Spanish

conquistador Hernán Cortés died in 1547 and the Pinelo Lasso de la Vega began construction more than a century later.

There is certain evidence, however, that Mexico's conquistador built a home (that he never lived in) across from what is today the Benito Juárez Market, one

block from Oaxaca's central plaza, or *zócalo*. Perhaps Cortés' being named marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca by Emperor Carlos V contributes to the misconception that he actually made his residence there. What is historical fact is that he had property line conflicts with the first inhabitants of the town of Antequera (Oaxaca's previous name) in the course of which he tried three times to stop the king from proclaiming it a city and expelled residents by force, all the while issuing lofty—and ultimately useless—decrees.

The city of Oaxaca prospered despite Cortés' disapproval. The contemporary panorama its historic downtown area still preserves is ample proof of that prosperity: centuries later, its streets once again paved with stone stave off the doubtful "progress" of asphalt.

Amid these colonial surroundings, the Contemporary Art Museum of Oaxaca merges viceregal history with an aim that includes but transcends modernity: exhibiting avant garde art so it can be assimilated.



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lated and reshaped by a public with an acute aesthetic sense.

Oaxaca's ambiance, in addition to being steeped in tradition and history, is appropriate for developing new art thanks to the vision and contributions of a handful of creators who visually nourish the imagination of an entire people. It is no coincidence that in the land of Rufino Tamayo, Francisco Toledo and Rodolfo Morales, contemporary art occupies a privileged position from which it can be disseminated and reshaped.

The Pinelo Lasso de la Vega mansion passed from hand to hand down through the centuries and in 1986 was sold to the Oaxaca city government which used it for the City Museum for six years. Mexico's National Fine Arts Institute, the Oaxaca state government, the Friends of the Monterrey Contemporary Art Museum Association and the Rufino Tamayo and José F. Gómez Foundations all joined efforts to create the Contemporary Art Museum of Oaxaca. As a result of that unprecedented collaborative effort of the public, artists and government officials, the MACO opened in the former Pinelo mansion February 28, 1992.

The MACO has not limited itself to showing contemporary Oaxacan art, but has also exhibited a wide selection of Mexican and international works: from Alechinsky to traditional African carving; from Zúñiga's sculpture to landscaping from the pre-Hispanic times of Nezahualcōyotl.

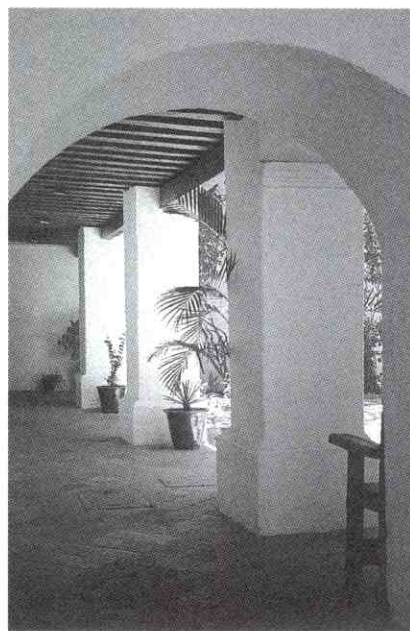
But, does pre-Hispanic, traditional work not contradict modernity? Modernity is a convention that can be invested with different values. One of them, however, is its essence: the standpoint of the viewer. So, to an eye that values surprise, a work of



pop art is no more modern than an eighth-century Teotihuacan container; an early twentieth-century African fetish is no less disquieting (and therefore, "modern") than the metal structures reminiscent of hospitals that Thomas Glassford fashions on the eve of the twenty-first century.

Oaxacan visual arts have created a tradition in the twentieth century thanks to their greatest exponents: Rufino Tamayo, Francisco Gutiérrez, Rodolfo Morales, Rodolfo Nieto and Francisco Toledo. And the MACO shows the work of these five artists regularly.

The museum also offers visual arts workshops to start children off in paint-



ing, clay modeling and engraving; courses on visual arts and literature; concerts; lectures; book launches; guided visits; and other cultural activities. The building's third patio is given over to the La Veranda restaurant.

New proposals in painting, sculpture, photography, architecture and multimedia all find a place in its rooms. Founded on a site of the Renaissance of the Americas, today, under Oaxacan skies, the museum continues to project artistic expressions that give new meaning to the visual arts in a world moving toward a new millennium.

August 1999 marked the centennial of Rufino Tamayo's birth, for which the MACO prepared a series of exhibits from August 27 to October 27 to honor this Oaxacan master. The most important, "Living a Century," includes 67 of Tamayo's sketches and watercolors, many exhibited in public for the first time, as well as some of his personal belongings.

"Cardinal Point. Homage to Tamayo" presents the work of 31 painters and sculptors, organized around Tamayo's work *The Sleeping Women Musicians*. Among the participating artists are Francisco Toledo, Leonora Carrington, Gunter Gerzso, Vicente Rojo, Manuel Felguérez, Roger von Gunten, Rodolfo Morales, Gilberto Aceves Navarro, Gabriel Macotela, Miguel Castro Leñero, Roberto Turnbull, Sergio Hernández, Filemón Santiago, Boris Viskin, Demián Flores, Rubén Leyva, Germán Venegas, José Villalobos and Alberto Ramírez.

Finally, a photo exhibition by Rogelio Cuéllar "Glances in the Sanctuary," completes the museum's homage to Tamayo at century's end. **NMM**