

# The Brady Museum

## A Collector's Item in Cuernavaca

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Photos by Daniel Munguia

Entrance to the museum from the patio.

When visitors walk through the massive carved cedar doors they enter the private world of Iowa-born collector and artist Robert Brady (1928-1986) whose will stipulated that his “house be open to the public as a museum.” The original adobe and stone sixteenth-century structure has been added to and remodeled over the centuries. Now it is filled with more than 1,200 objects of arts and crafts exactly as Brady arranged and enjoyed them.

The Brady Museum bears the imprint of someone who not only loved artistic objects from all cultures of the world, but who had the

taste and the courage to display them in his own way. Visitors enjoy the decor in the red bedroom, the yellow living room and the tiled kitchen and bathrooms surrounded by the effusive semitropical vegetation of the gardens and the patios.

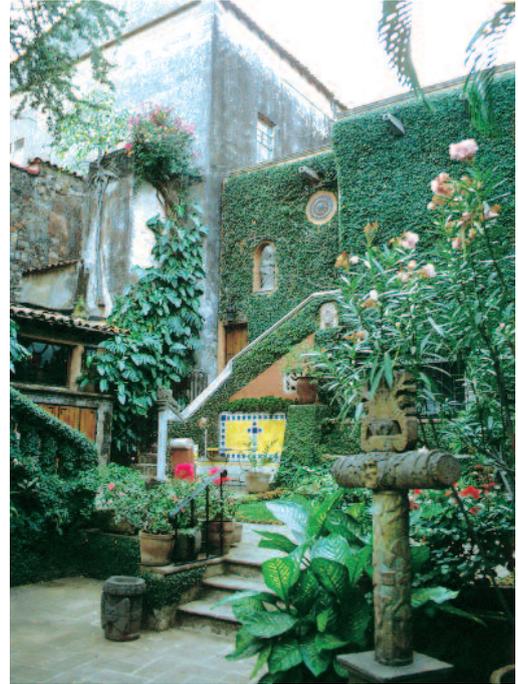
Since childhood, Robert Brady loved painting and drawing, no doubt encouraged by his mother who gave art classes. The first piece of art he collected, at age 13, was a small ebony figure of a Balinese dancing girl, now on exhibit in the master bedroom of the house-museum. After high school, Brady pursued a career in the fine arts which led him to a degree at Temple University then on to further study in the Barnes Foundation outside Philadelphia. The arrangement of the art in the Brady house as well as the

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Clay figures from the state of Guerrero.



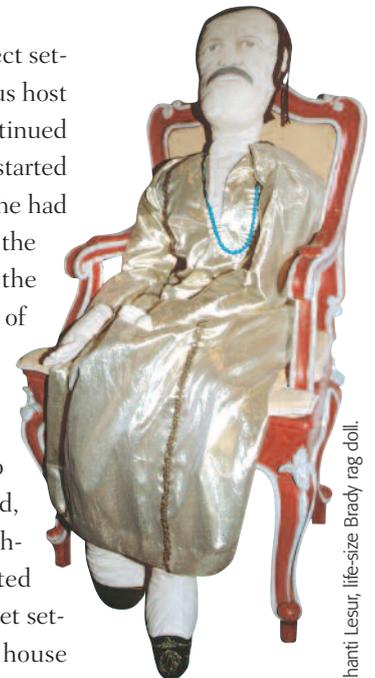
The main patio.

variety of cultures and countries in the collection reflect the teaching of his mentor, the collector, Dr. Albert C. Barnes. With his formal schooling behind him, Brady left the United States, never to reside there again permanently. After two years of travel in Europe, Brady settled in Venice for six years, from 1953 to 1959. Among his many friends in Venice was Peggy Guggenheim, who like Brady, left her home, the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, and art collection as a museum. Peggy is buried in her garden next to her dogs in Venice, as her “Mexican” friend, Robert Brady, is in Cuernavaca. Brady’s portrait of her hangs in the Cuernavaca house. It is an unusual, full-length portrait of Peggy wearing outrageous sun glasses and surrounded by her dogs. This and other paintings by Brady were exhibited in Europe and the United States before he left the Old World for the New in 1961.

Attracted by the exotic, the foreign and the colorful, in 1961 Brady visited Mexico and fell in love with the country. From then on he considered Mexico his “spiritual home.” The following year, he purchased an old house called Casa de la Torre at number 4 Netzahualcōyotl Street, adja-

cent to Cuernavaca’s magnificent Cathedral. Originally, the house was part of a Franciscan monastery built by the conquering Spaniards in the mid-sixteenth century. During the 24 years that Brady lived there, he dedicated much time and effort to the colorful decoration of the house and the iconoclastic placing of his art.

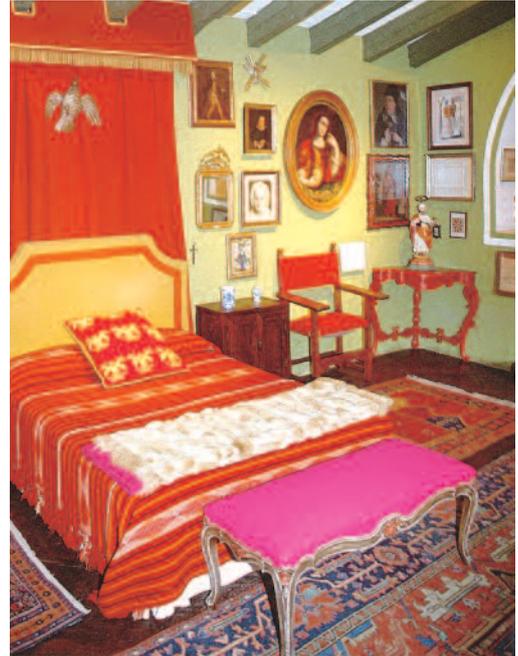
The Casa de la Torre became the perfect setting for the artist to work in and —gracious host that he was— to entertain in. Brady continued to paint until the early 1970s, when he started designing large colorful tapestries which he had woven by a family of craftsmen from the town of Chiconcuac. Guest books in the Casa de la Torre read like a collection of theater playbills, glittering with names like Rudolf Nureyev, Lily Pons, Sophia Loren, Dolores del Río, Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, Erich Fromm, Octavio Paz, David Hockney, Brady’s close friend, Josephine Baker, and his devoted neighbor, Helen Hayes. The list is punctuated with the names of diplomats, artists and jet setters, many of whom have returned to the house since it became a museum. At first they are



Shanti Lesur, life-size Brady rag doll.



The kitchen.



Bedroom.

taken aback to see that so little has changed and they almost expect their former host to greet them warmly as he always did.

Brady not only produced art but collected it as well. He collected everything from Balinese masks, Senufo chairs, pre-Columbian pieces and African padlocks to canvases by internationally well-known painters. Unswayed by trends and fashions, Brady acquired only what he liked and for this reason the many pieces in his eclectic collection have marvelous consistency. Brady's eye —his love

of color, design, pattern and form— served to unite the seemingly unrelated objects. Some of the juxtapositions of the art are startling: Huichol beaded doves perch atop a beaded table from Cameroon; Mexican colonial carved crucifixes hang beside similar images from Puerto Rico, Nigeria and Italy; a French wooden doll of Josephine Baker clad only in her famous banana skirt stands beside an African female Fanti figure. Was this whimsy or insight? Probably both.

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Among the best-known artists represented are Rufino Tamayo, Frida Kahlo, Graham Sutherland, Marsden Hartley, Milton Avery, Paul Klee, Maurice Prendergast and Miguel Covarrubias. Curiously, some of the Mexican art was acquired in the United States and returned to its country of origin —for example, Rufino Tamayo's outstanding 1937 "Still Life" which hangs in the bright yellow living room. Fine examples of anonymous carvings and canvases from colonial Mexico abound, as do first-rate pieces of tribal art from Africa, Oceania and the Americas, enlivened by Mongolese belts, Nepalese goddesses and Egyptian Faience figures.



Mali, harvest fertility symbol.



The pool.



Covered terrace filled with primitive art, mostly pre-Columbian and African.

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After Brady's death in June 1986, preparations began for converting the private residence into a public museum. Two parallel foundations were established: the Robert Brady Foundation in Mexico and a similar non-profit organization in the United States, both supported by private donations.

Once the legal structure was in place, work began on the house and the collection, which needed repair, cleaning and restoration. Although Cuernavaca's much acclaimed year-round "eternal spring" is kind to residents, the voracity of the local termites offsets the meteorological benevolence. The adobe walls of the sixteenth-

century structure were sound but most of the beams in the roofs were hollow, and many wooden statues and frames had been invaded by the local vermin. A team of skilled restorers from the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Cuernavaca worked for more than two years conserving and restoring the art, while a crew of architects, masons and carpenters worked on the structure. Paintings were relined, frames and mats replaced, the damaged beams changed and electronic security and museum lighting installed. However, while everything was done to preserve the house and its contents for generations to come, extreme care was taken to make sure that none of the original beauty and symmetry of Brady's house was altered, so that visitors will find this unique collector's item intact.

The house-museum is open to the general public from Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. It has a small cafe in the main patio, a gift shop and an audiovisual projection room. Several areas are available for private luncheons and dinners. In 1999 the museum received over 24,000 visitors from Mexico and foreign countries. **MM**



Brady's favorite piece, the head of a saint.