

Photos courtesy of Noel López



◀ *Mixtecs Overcoming*, 54 x 27 x 21 cm, 1997 (mahogany and red cedar).

The Motives Behind Noel López's Art

“On the eve of the twenty-first century, graffiti is conceived of as the public art of the new generations who decide to express their problems and social, economic, political and psychological concerns through this medium, that could be described as the expression of contemporary muralism in cities worldwide,” says Noel López, painter, sculptor and engraver, who lives in Mexico City and has dedicated himself to the visual arts for

more than 30 years.¹ “It is a healthy need through which human beings externalize their ideas from time immemorial, expressing them as a problem or as a solution to the problem. If graffiti were studied more carefully, we could find in its expressionism a kind of psychological scream, whose effect is alive in all the world’s societies.”

This is why López says that part of his painting can be classified as graffiti. “It adapts to my needs for expression and returns me to my cul-



▲ *Sunflowers with Mortar and Pestle*, 75 x 110 cm, 1997 (watercolor).



▲ *Mixtec Still Life*, 75 x 112 cm (mixed technique: pastels, charcoal and pencil).

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tural roots, in the Mixtec codices, particularly because of their social nature and their color and design.”

Born in Oaxaca in 1947, López has dedicated his life to the visual arts, a simple, modest life that he never thought to exchange for any other road than that of artistic expression. He went to primary school in his native state and then moved to Mexico City, where he finished secondary school and entered the La Esmeralda National School of Painting and Sculpture. A few years later, with a scholarship from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, he did his post-graduate work in graphic arts in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia.

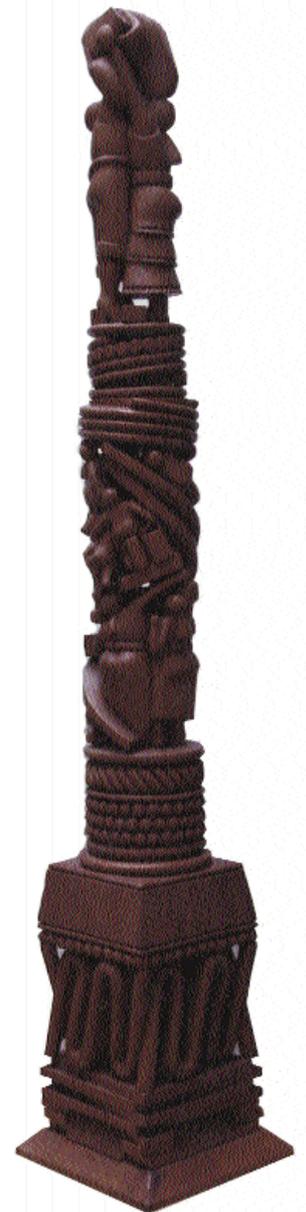
“It was in La Esmeralda when my teacher, Roberto Cuétara, began to show me what the Mexican codices meant, that I was inspired as I am until today.” Visually familiarized with them, López began to watercolor codices for the General Office of Museums, where working with them made them even more familiar. Impressed by their colorfulness, he began to do his paintings-graffiti. “I remember that my teacher Aarón Cruz freed me from the fear of the material that grips you when you’re going to begin painting.”

With no vices and with the sobriety to always take a step forward, López has faced his life and

his painting in an “organized, methodical and disciplined [way], because life lasts only as long as a lightning bolt.” But he does not forget the past, when he went through periods of loneliness and anguish: 1968 in Mexico City, the loneliness of unrequited love, confronting dangers, hunger and late nights, “but always with the conviction that I was master of myself, thanks to my grandmother’s advice.”

All these circumstances have given his painting and sculpture form and character, the form that acquires the discipline and fervor to dedicate yourself to an art that does not always receive the recognition it deserves, but has never been replaced by any other, more profitable activity.

Noel López’s sculpture is outstanding for its earnest carving and the links it evokes. “In the first place, my Mixtec ancestors worked wood from the year 1700; they made saddles for horses. Therefore, they always used chisels and whetstones, hatchets and machetes. In the second place, my interest was born, in part, by chance. One day when I visited the National Museum of Anthropology and History, I noticed some carved bones from the Mixtec culture. I gazed on them with such joy that it seemed like I had seen them before. Their



▲ *Homage to Mixtec Teachers*, 159 x 22 x 22 cm, 1987 (red cedar and red mahogany).



▲ Untitled, 30 x 12 x 15 cm, 1990 (red mahogany and cedar).



▲ Pineapple and Cut Paper, 75 x 110 cm, 1997 (watercolor).



▲ Oaxacan Cow, 70 x 55 cm, 1997 (watercolor).

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rhythm and chiaroscuro are what I later tried to transfer to my wood carvings. I was also impressed by a stone stela from the Mixtec culture. As a child, when I was six, I found it in the home of a neighbor in my town."

Noel's sculptures refer us to the social struggle, self-improvement and mutual aid in the daily life of Mexico's peoples, the *tequio*,² still deeply rooted in the culture of Oaxaca. He also recognizes the influence of the Mexican School and his teachers from the La Esmeralda school, like José L. Ruiz.

López has had one-man shows and collective exhibitions since 1976, both in Mexico and abroad, and has been given several awards that

testify to his commitment to art. This commitment is even more valuable when we realize that his work has never depended on official patronage or belonged to the select circles of the country's main galleries and exhibition halls. It has survived thanks to the profound conviction that only on that road will he always find reasons for keeping on living. **NMM**

NOTES

¹ All quotes of Noel López come from *Voices of Mexico's* September 10, 2003, interview with him.

² *Tequio* is a system of voluntary labor, a tradition in indigenous communities. [Translator's Note.]