

Exhibits

A Unique Watercolor Museum

"Welcome to this house of paintings. The flowers I offer you with my jade flute are water colored a hundred different ways.

Let my song reach your heart in the same way as art was revealed to me. A long time ago, when all art and all science was just beginning, Quetzalcoat¹ taught us to paint with the black ink and the red..." Alfredo Guati Rojo, founder and only head the Mexican Water-Color Museum has ever had, is also a poet. The excerpt above belongs to one of his poems which used to decorate the entrance to the museum when it was in Colonia Roma.

This museum, since it opened on December 21st, 1967, had always had the same address: 141 Puebla Street, Colonia Roma. But after the September earthquake, when it was seriously damaged,

¹ A Prehispanic god.

it had to start looking for a new home.

According to Guati Rojo the only show-place in the world dedicated specifically to water-colors couldn't disappear so easily. In order to help out the Friends of the Water-Color Museum Society was formed, and together with the district administration they managed to move it to 88 Salvador Novo Road. The people of Coyoacán have a new museum.

The Water-Color Museum opened its doors for the second time on May 15th. It's now located in an area of narrow streets and old stone houses, where one tends to forget the problems which plague large cities. It has

a big garden with a hundred year-old elm trees and a swimming-pool where a gallery will soon be built. In fact, it's completely different to the art nouveau building damaged by the quake.

The Water-Color Museum believes that "water painting is, because of its very nature, the oldest technique known by man", and that is why it stresses the importance of the Pre-Hispanic codices as real works of art. As one goes into the museum one can see magnificent copies of the Borgia, Selden, Bodley and Colombino codices. They are proof enough that the history of this sometimes wrongly called "minor art" shouldn't only concentrate on XVIII century English artists.



Pastor Velázquez

Mujer indígena (Indian Woman)



Photo by José Fuentes

Front of the Watercolor Museum.

The works on show at this museum are divided into three sections: the Pre-Hispanic period, famous for its murals and codices, the XIX century, when water-colors after having been practically forgotten during colonial times became important again as an "ally of the litograph technique", and the XX century. The main characteristic of this last period was a depuration of the techniques used; this dates from the time Pelegrín Clavé and the Italian landscape artist Eugenio Landesio arrived at the Academy of San Carlos.

We feel the presence of the XIX century in the miniature portraits painted on ivory. We see serious-looking ladies, half-turned profiles and frilly dresses which barely show the bust. After that, there appeared a number of artists who, though they still painted portraits by commission, were interested in landscapes. Félix Parra is one of them.

But the XX century brings along a great number of changes in the subjects painted. Artists start working on landscapes, the Iztaccihuatl and the Popocateptl, the "village nook" and the "sunset at Chalco". Dark women holding earthenware pitchers become as abundant as French-looking ladies carrying dogs.



Manuel M. Ituarte

Dama con perro (A Lady carrying a dog)

Great painters such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Alfredo Martínez, Ignacio Rosas and many others also produced magnificent water-colors. Nevertheless, only a few artists dedicated themselves exclusively to this technique. Severo Amador, Manuel M. Ituarte, Gonzalo Arguelles Bringas, Pastor

A Coleccionist's Singular Effort

Professor Guati Rojo and his wife Berta Pietrasanta bought and donated most of the paintings in the Water-Color Museum so that everybody could see them. Together with the Friends of the Museum Society, created after the 1985 quake, they work here everyday for free.

— Mr. Guati, how did this museum begin?

— Well, this of course is something which I did privately. As I myself am a water-color artist, I started collecting all these paintings. First from my teachers, my friends and other artists who are no longer alive. My collection got bigger, and there came a point when I felt I should no longer enjoy it just by myself. I felt I should open it up to the public, that's when the museum materialized.

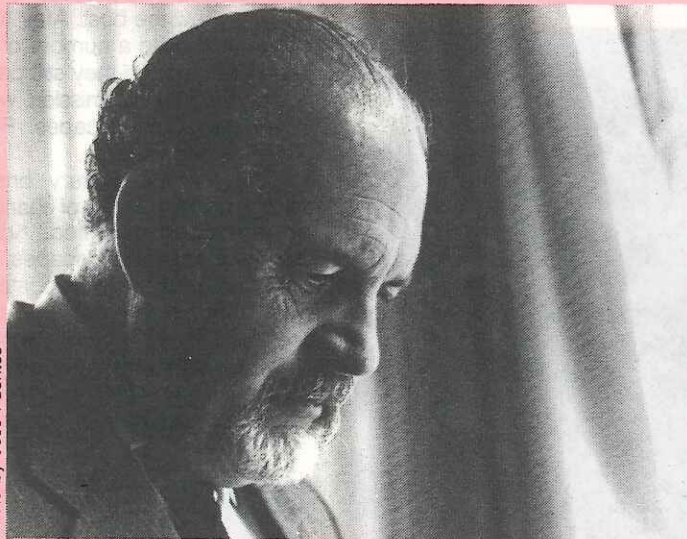


Photo by José Fuentes

Alfredo Guati Rojo, founder and director of the Museum.

I invited Agustín Yáñez, who was then Secretary of Education, to inaugurate the museum. Its address was then 141 Puebla Street. At that time the collection consisted of ninety paintings which I symbolically handed over for him to take charge of officially. At present, there exists the Guati Rojo Collection Trust, through which we donated all of our paintings, and by this I mean not only the 120 pictures on show.

— How important do you think this museum is?

— Well, it is the only water-color museum in the world. People from abroad visiting Mexico have told us so.

— Does it concentrate on any particular style?

— No, not at all. Here we have examples of abstractionism, realism, surrealism, etc. But as I was saying, water-color painting is no longer thought of as drawing, it's considered a plastic creation where exaggerated outlines no longer exist. It's another conception. The Mexican Water-Color Salon is open to all tendencies. Nevertheless, contemporary paintings are accepted only if they have received a prize at the annual salons. This helps the collection to maintain a certain level as far as quality goes. Not any artist's paintings figure here. There is a reason for this: if the Water-Color Salon is supposed to give us a sample of what is considered to be important, then the artists taking part in the event should be the ones to go on show at the museum. This is what we have done up to now and what we will continue doing in the future.

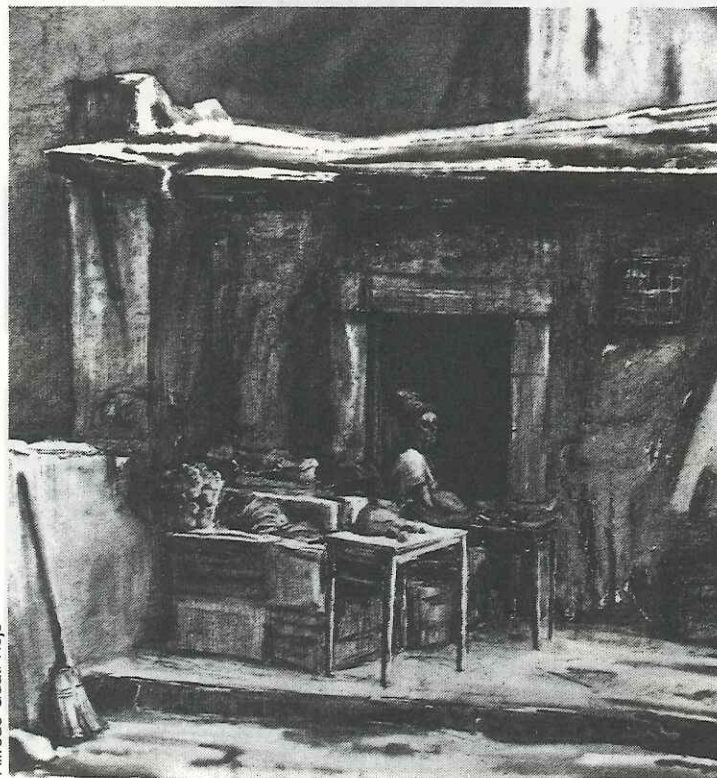
Regarding artists of the past, we shall include only the best-known. Yet we don't have any water-colors by Diego Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros and Tamayo. This is because I was the one who bought the paintings, and when I tried to purchase some by these artists, I found them out of my reach. But, as I said to President De La Madrid when he inaugurated the museum, we are at present trying to borrow water-colors by these artists for an indefinite period of time.

Velázquez, Agapito Rincón Peña and Carmen Jiménez Laborda belong in this second category.

The contemporary movement made its first appearance at the studios of the now much changed National School of Plastic Arts, where Pastor Velázquez worked as a teacher for twenty years, starting in 1935. Gustavo Alaniz, Alfredo Guati Rojo, Jesús Ochoa, Rafael Muñoz López, Edgardo Coghlan, Leopoldo Macías and Manuel Arrieta all passed through here.

During the second half of the XX century artists began to question the "too conservative" rules which governed this genre. This coincides with the opening of the first Water-Color Salon in 1957, an exhibition organized by the Art Institute of Mexico.

The creation of this Salon marked a turning-point in the production of water-colors. In 1960 the Institute established annual prizes for water-colors and pointed out how necessary it was



Alfredo Guati Rojo

La espera (The waiting)

to make these paintings larger, for until then they had belonged in the small category. This is how the Salon helps to organize and improve the production of water-colors.

A greater range of subjects gradually begins to appear. Beta in 1966 discovers new ways of seeing reality. "Rocky Terrain of San Angel", with its diffuse outlines, is an example of the new techniques for painting landscapes. Angel Mauro Rodríguez paints "The Jazz Rhythm", Guati Rojo creates "A Ladder of Life" with three rungs to it which must be worked out and José Montiel and Luis Toledo produce abstract paintings such as "Taurus" and "Sentimental Torneé".

Though it is difficult to talk about "isms" regarding water-colors, in this museum we do get examples of realist, surrealist and abstract art, all of which show the degree of maturity Mexican art has achieved.

José Fuentes Salinas