

The National Folk Cultures Museum

*Sol Rubín de la Borbolla**



Photos by Dario Barrera

The National Folk Cultures Museum was born in 1982 as part of the overall proposal by a generation of anthropologists and other social sciences scholars about what should be

understood by folk culture. The proposal highlights the need to “foster awareness of [folk culture] and recover the value placed on cultural achievements to promote respect for pluralism and strengthen national identity.” The proposition also included a different conception of museology from the traditional one.

That “school” of thought has given way to folk cultures having a place in academic and cultural milieus and the establishment of numerous museums on this model the world over, not only in Mexico.

The discussion about folk culture is ongoing. The most important ideas dis-

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cussed at the time our museum was set up continue to be valid today: a) it was not created to hold a collection and, although it has formed collections down through the years, the goal has always been that they permanently tour the country; b) it is open to creators and bearers of folk culture, who also participate in planning and presenting different activities; and c) in accordance with the theoretical underpinnings of the museum, one of its objectives is to reinforce the multicultural understanding of our nation, and today it is an open door to that cultural diversity.

Becoming a critical, educational, pleasurable and commercial space for urban and rural, indigenous and mestizo cultures, for the defense of age-old traditions and for making proposals of new cultural expressions has been the permanent challenge for the museum in its 16 years.

Music, theater, dance, gastronomy, folk arts, rites and traditions, literature and graphic arts are all expressions of peoples'

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cultural creativity, and they are presented with an attempt to show their relationship with the dynamics of day-to-day life.

In general, a topic of national interest is selected and activities are organized to approach it from different angles in order to be both critical and pro-active. On some occasions, however, the topics deal with a particular aspect of a cultural manifestation or with a specific social group.

This year, the general topic was folk music. Around this theme, a large exhibit was mounted to show the history and development of a specific genre: the *son*. Smaller exhibits have complemented the large one, like, for example, photographs of indigenous musical bands and illustrating music on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border. The museum organized workshops for children to learn about and make musical instruments; classes in lute playing and dance were given to young people and adults. Several musical groups have performed and presented their recordings.

In addition, several exhibitions presented Mexico's wealth of textiles from different viewpoints: the use of natural dyes, brocade work and tradition as a source of inspiration for artists, photographers and set designers, like Luis Márquez Romay.

The part the black population plays in folk culture was the subject of an ethnographic focus. Craft techniques with long traditions were also exhibited, like lacquers from the state of Michoacán and cut paper from Papantla, Veracruz. Novel techniques, like *paquimé* ceramics from Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, were also presented.

In an effort to keep popular traditions alive, the following activities were pro-

gramed: a contest of dressing Christ child figures; the Tamale Fair and the publication of a pamphlet on the February 2 Candelaria Fiesta; the Judas doll contest in Easter Week, the exhibition of Diego Rivera's Judas doll collection and the publication of a catalogue of it; the exhibition and publication of a pamphlet about the Holy Cross; the offerings and events to celebrate the Day of the Dead; a nativity scene competition and exhibit and performances of Christmas pageants.

Guided tours, particularly those programmed for school children, which include workshops for pre-schoolers to junior high school students, and weekend children's workshops allow them to learn through play about natural dyes, the technical principles of a loom, paper-making, paper cutting, Judas doll making, folk sculpture and piñata making.

The states of Mexico periodically send the museum their most representative artisans, foods and artistic activities for temporary shows. The facilities include a bookstore-gift shop with folk art and culture, a cafeteria and a specialized documentation center.

The museum is located in Coyoacán, one of Mexico City's traditional neighborhoods, where visitors flock to see its architecture, parks, beautiful little nooks and crannies and bookstores, to stroll along its plazas, buy crafts and enjoy a good meal. The museum occupies both remodeled houses and a new building for exhibition rooms and offices, and therefore combines several architectural styles, harmoniously united by patios and walkways. The grounds and facilities make it possible to carry out many kinds of activities, but since it is a museum, exhibition rooms are the center of the facilities:



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A tree of life

today, the museum has five; next year, two more will be opened.

In 1999, we invite you to the following exhibitions: "Mexican Cooking," "Vernacular Architecture," "The Women Artisans of Cuetzalan," "Salt in Mexico" and "Mexican Ribaldry," among others.

The wealth of culture is immeasurable. Every day, men and women, as artisans, as artists, as bearers of tradition, forge and recreate the cultures that make up our country. The museum is only a window in Mexico City of that enormous diversity that can be found traveling through all of Mexico. **MM**

National Folk Cultures Museum

Avenida Hidalgo 289

Colonia del Carmen Coyoacán

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Tuesday to Thursday

10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Friday to Sunday

Admission free.