

The Reflection of a Surrealistic Life In Las Pozas de Xilitla

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Photos by Jaime Abundis

Floral Columns.

Eccentric, attractive, offensive, incredible, costly, extraordinary, free, senseless: these are just some of the adjectives used to describe Las Pozas, near Xilitla, a town in the San Luis Potosí Huasteca region. On the rugged southeastern side of the Xilitla Mountains, a part of the Sierra Madre Oriental range next to Querétaro's Sierra Gorda,¹ amidst the exuberant vegetation of indescribably beautiful scenery, the Augustinian hermit friars established a monastery on the little site of Xilitla in

the mid-sixteenth century, the nucleus of today's settlement.

Toward the bottom of the canyon on the northeastern edge of the town flows a little stream. On the banks of this stream, millionaire Edward James acquired a coffee-growing estate in 1948, where he would express his deepest feelings in one of the most expensive of ways. Visitors to the area have very different and contradictory reactions, but everyone is excited and surprised.

Edward Frank Willis James was born in Gullane, Scotland, August 16, 1907. His father, a U.S. businessman and landowner married

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the daughter of a Scots nobleman; they had five children, of whom Edward was the youngest and the only boy. The death at a young age of his father and his mother's desire to turn him into an aristocrat imbued with the values and aspirations of his class meant that James first went away to school at Eton and then to



Large Multicolored Flower.

Oxford. He showed inclinations toward literature, particularly poetry, rather than the politics or business favored by his mother. But, he also entered into the spirit of new philosophical trends espoused by the avant garde.

André Breton and Philippe Soupault wrote a series of texts together published under the name *Magnetic Fields* in 1920. These have been considered the main starting point for the surrealism that Breton formalized in 1924 with his *Surrealist Manifesto*. His followers tried to bring together the individual's external and internal realities in order to liberate his/her perceptive abilities and increase action, thereby generating an "over-reality" (*surréalité*). This proposal drew from what were then the novel ideas of Sigmund Freud about the subconscious and proposed the free expression of thought without the conventional ties or moral or aesthetic concerns. Different visual artists like René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, Wolfgang Paalen and Alice Rahon used these ideas to begin to express themselves in the direction indicated by Breton.

While he studied at Oxford and after a few attempts at poetry badly received by the critics, James was attracted by these ideas, particularly the so-called "critical-paranoid method" proposed by Dalí, before surrealism made its official debut in England at the June 1936 International Surrealist Exposition. On the death of his mother Evie in 1929, James inherited an enormous fortune and left Oxford shortly before graduating to live a creative life supporting visual artists and composers. His fascination for the surrealists increased and, just like them, he tried to reconstruct his reality, frequently flying in the face of established values. His failed marriage to the Austrian dancer Otilie (Tilly) Losch and fleeting funding of the Les Ballets 1933 company were followed by his beginning to collect art works during his constant travels through Europe and his patronage of new composers. By the end of his life, his painting collection was enormous. James met Dalí around 1934 and established a close

friendship and fruitful collaboration. Together they explored interior design in an attempt to “surrealize” daily life in James’ London residence and at his Monkton cottage in West Sussex. In 1939, James and Dalí went to New York to set up the Dream of Venus Pavilion at the World’s Fair; this would be their last project together. A year later, James moved to Taos and then to Los Angeles, where he would live for almost 30 years.

An old Oxford schoolmate invited James to take a vacation at his Mexican home in Cuernavaca. During his 1944 visit there, James met painter Leonora Carrington and telegraphist Plutarco Gastélum Esquer, a Yaqui Indian who would become his intimate friend and faithful companion. On a trip to look for a place to set up an orchid garden, the two went to Xilitla in 1945, where three years later James would buy the La Conchita estate and build a little hut there. James frequently traveled throughout the world, returning every year to Xilitla laden with orchids, exotic plants and wild animals to spend a few weeks with Gastélum and his family. His hobby of collecting animals prompted him to build cages and special spaces for them on the estate that he baptized Las Pozas because of the many pools that formed along the stream crossing the land.

An unexpected frost put an end to the orchids in Las Pozas, but also made James decide to create something that would resist the elements, house his beloved animals and allow him to continue “surrealizing” his fancies.

With the help of a few local masons and the carpenter José Aguilar, over a period of almost 10 years, James’ designs were turned into poured concrete structures that populated the forest and stream of Las Pozas. The sale of a few works from his art collection financed the enterprise. About 20 units and other isolated elements with such suggestive names as *Homage to Max Ernst*, *Column of the Stegosaur*, *Structure of Three Floors That Could Be Five*, *Door of Saint Peter and Saint Paul*, *Homage to Henry Moore*, *The Movie Theater*, *Bat*

Vault or *Eduardo’s Plaza* sprang up, scattered through the property as an expression of his life force more than as a surrealist experiment. These structures, with no logic whatsoever, columns holding up nothing, stairways going up or down to nowhere, phytomorphic towers contrasting with the surrounding trees



Waterfalls abound in Las Pozas.



Homage to Henry Moore.



Exit through *The Serpent's Corridor* and *The Queen's Ring*.

and flowers or concrete bamboo curtains that compete with the extraordinary natural surroundings of musical cascades and transparent water make up James' playful labyrinth that never stops surprising the visitor.

While many have seen Las Pozas as genuinely surrealistic—it remains to be decided whether sculptural or architectural—its origins in its maker's conscious and subconscious go beyond that. In the last years of the eighteenth century, the aesthetic taste of the educated British nobility had turned its attention both to the classical Mediterranean and its own medieval worlds, amidst the dominant romanticism. The appeal of Piranesi's engravings of imagined jails, the journeys through the Mediterranean seeking out the ruins and monuments of classical antiquity, the fascination with nature echoed in landscape artists, the creation of elaborate gardens and the reemergence of Gothic architecture that gave rise to the revivals were all factors that continued to live among young British aristocrats for many years. James did not escape their influence. He spent his childhood in the neo-Gothic mansion his father bought in 1891 in West Dean, surrounded by vast, well tended gardens. In Las Pozas, with the appearance of a garden full of ruins, all these manifestations joined together to the benefit, finally, of those who value them.

James divided the last years of his life between Las Pozas and the creation of the foundation that bears his name, to which he donated his property in West Dean and most of his art collection. When he died in San Remo, Italy, in December 1984, Edward James had realized his desire of fostering creative ideas, but, above all, of liberating his life force to its full capacity. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Xilitla is a mere 87 kilometers east of Jalpan de Serra, the main town in the Sierra Gorda Mountains, on the road that joins Tamazunchale to San Juan del Río.