

Mariana Yampolsky's Profound Mexico



Antonio Nava / A/E Photo

Photographer Mariana Yampolsky was born in the United States, but lived in Mexico, a country she liked so much that she made it her own. She took out Mexican citizenship regardless of the fact that she was leaving behind “a First World country”, as someone told her when she made her application. Her traveling lens journeyed throughout Mexico tirelessly to portray it with the depth of an eye that knew how to see.

Yampolsky was born in 1925 in Chicago and lived there until 1945 when she graduated in arts and humanities from the University of Chicago. That same year she traveled to Mexico, which would capture her heart. She first decided to reside here and then to take out Mexican citizenship, which she was awarded in 1954. She studied at the La Esmeralda School of Painting, Sculpture and Engraving and became part of the movement that founded the Popular Graphics Workshop, where she worked with artists like Alfredo Zalce, Pablo O'Higgins and

Leopoldo Méndez, among others. Yampolsky worked as an engraver and organized collective exhibitions of the workshop's production in different countries until 1958.

But sketching and engraving, in which she worked for the first few years of her professional career, would give way to photography. The camera that she initially carried with her as a back-up in her sketching outings soon became the basic tool with which she would capture images of locales, towns, indigenous groups, folk art, dances, ceremonies, architecture and anything else she came across that stirred her emotions. Because Yampolsky accepted herself as an emotional photographer, something which never turned her into a banal artist. She said, “I don't arrange anything or expect anything. I use my camera as an extension of my heart and not of logic.”¹ In an interview months before her death, she said, “When a photograph is taken with knowledge of the facts, it clarifies things;

it makes a gift to us of emotions....The eye that knows how to see is more than all the profound feelings evoked by seeing certain things. A photographer can be in love with trees or can photograph things made by hand or by children, and he is not necessarily a romantic. All these things are important, but you have to differentiate between a banal photograph and one that searches, inquires or even reinvents.”² Emotion and rigorosity were always the two maxims of her camera.

In 1948 she made her first inroads into photography with the images in the book *Lo efímero y lo eterno del arte popular mexicano* (The Ephemeral and the Eternal in Mexican Folk Art), to be followed by many others. From then on, she would roam through the country on whatever means of transportation was available, bus, car, bicycle and even on foot, to photograph mainly indigenous and rural Mexico. Her pictures of fields of magueys, indigenous faces and folk ways often led her to be classified as a photographer of indigenous peoples, something she accepted as part of her love for this country and its people.

In 1950, she collaborated in editing the film *Memories of a Mexican*, and a year later, with other artists, she founded the Salon of Mexican Visual Arts. In 1960, she had her first one-woman show, the first of many exhibitions of photographs and engravings that traveled the world over. Works of hers are part of the collections at the Modern Art Museums of New York, San Francisco and Mexico City, The Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., the San Diego Photography Museum and the Saint Petersburg Art Museum, to mention just a few.

To her colleagues, students and friends, Mariana Yampolsky was generous and warm and had a great sense of humor; she chaffed at injustice and liked to fight for justice. A concern for fame and public recognition did not keep her awake at night, since they are ephemeral, though she did admit that “in the heart of hearts of any artist is a disproportionate desire to be recognized.”³

One of Yampolsky’s concerns was that her work remain in Mexico after her death. “They want all my work in the United States, but I’m very clear on this point: I’m Mexican and my work stays here.”⁴ To that end, she gave her more than 60,000-negative archive to one of her best friends, photographer Alicia Ahumada, to keep until a Mexican institution could be found to preserve them and give them the dissemination they deserve. One possibility is the Pachuca Photo Archives, in the city where Ahumada lives, as the most appropriate place for the collection, but the members of the Mariana Yampolsky Cultural Foundation, formed precisely to protect her legacy, say that it is too soon to make a decision. First, they say, the archives should be classified since there are many unknown works in it and the copyright should be protected.

During her lifetime, Yampolsky received many different prizes and distinctions; she was an editor, professor and contributor to several national dailies. When she died last May, she was working on an inventory of her own work and left an unfinished book she was preparing for the National Ecology Institute.

Photographers speak through images. More than 14 publications—like *Tlacotalpan*, *La raíz y el camino* (The Root and the Road), *Lo efímero y lo eterno* (The Ephemeral and the Eternal), *Mazahua*, *Haciendas Poblanas* (The Haciendas of Puebla) and two English-language books published in the 1990s, *The Edge of Time: Photographs of Mexico by Mariana Yampolsky* and *The Traditional Architecture of Mexico*—testify to what was in Mariana Yampolsky’s heart. Mexico was fortunate in having had a woman who knew how to portray it with love and elegance and who left a legacy of thousands of images to illustrate its memory.

Elsie Montiel
Editor

NOTES

¹ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 4 May 2002.

² *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 8 May 2002.

³ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 4 May 2002.

⁴ *Ibid.*