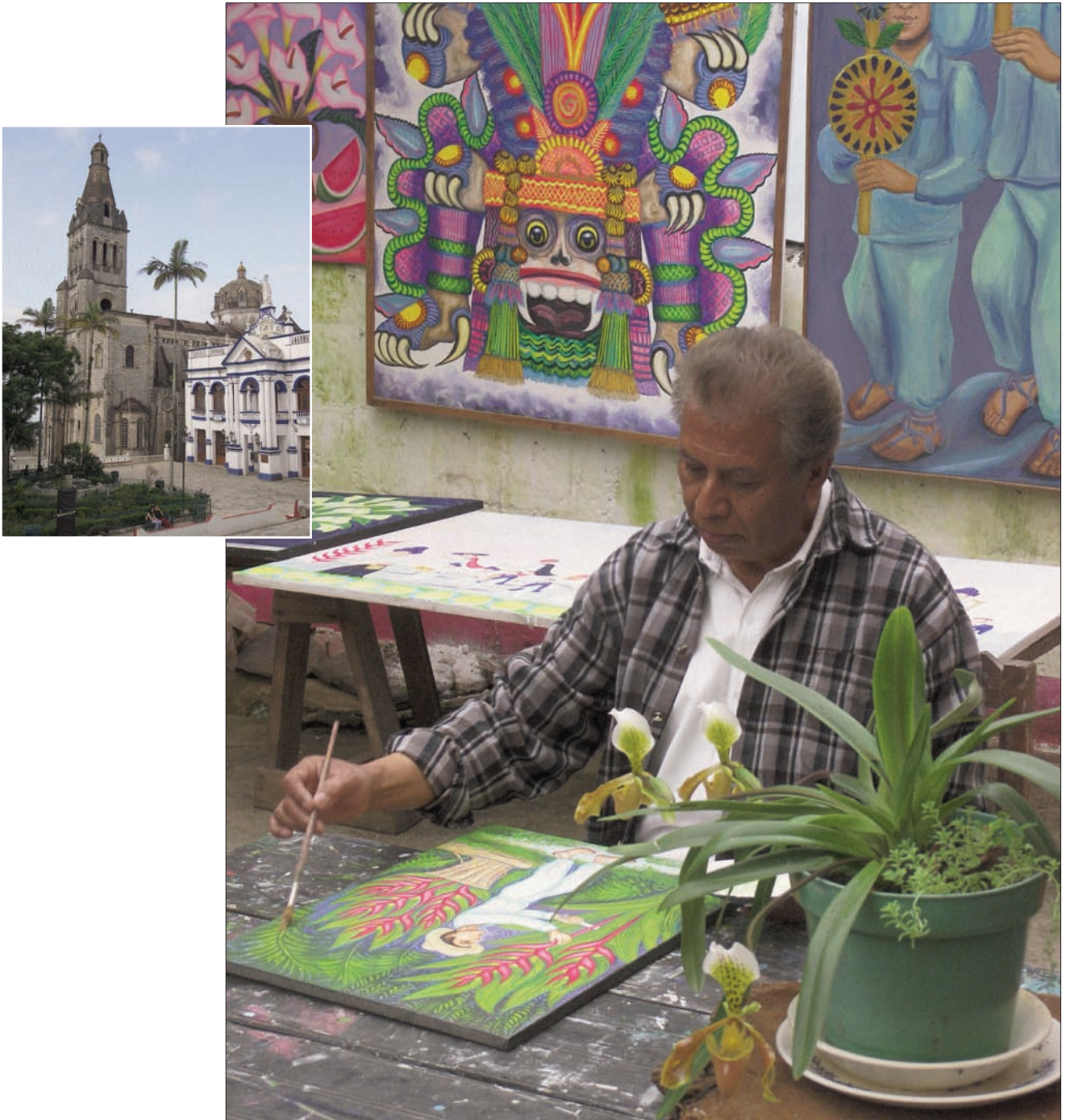


# *In the Splendor of the Mountains* The Painting of Gregorio Méndez

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*Procession (acrylic).*



*Woman from Cuetzalan (acrylic).*



Gregorio borrows the color of his land, rearranges it and turns it into paintings that can be found throughout Cuetzalan.

He was born wrapped in the intense greens of Puebla's Sierra Norte and the multi-colored garments of his indigenous brothers and sisters. But, in contrast with them, who often do not seem to notice the explosions of color surrounding them, since they are part of them, Gregorio Méndez Nava has always been attracted by the sparkle emanating from his region's many flowers, textiles and fiestas.

Gregorio borrows the color of his land, rearranges it and turns it into paintings that can be found throughout Cuetzalan, the town where he now lives in the state of Puebla, although his work has traveled to several cities in the rest of our country and even abroad.

The "painter of Cuetzalan" was born in 1944 in the little community of San Andrés Tzicuilan, near the mountainous, tropical city that still has a strong indigenous presence. Here, every street suggests a frame to the photographer and motifs to the painter or to any other sensitive eye, ready to enjoy

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Photos courtesy of the author.

a picturesque, sweet Mexico that long ago disappeared from many other places.

“Painting here is easy. The themes are around every corner; they walk into my studio,” he says.

You only have to go to Cuetzalan to believe him: the constant humidity that comes in from the Gulf of Mexico is responsible for the green of its mountain cloud forest; its right angles contrast with the tortuous curves of its streets, difficult for cars to navigate, but easy for romanticism to travel. In the surrounding areas, rivers and waterfalls run to the sea, while flowers and orchards compete with the colors of Totonac and Nahua residents’ clothing.

Méndez Nava is a Nahua Indian who has painted all his life. He began as a teenager, recreating his town’s waterfall with watercolors purchased in a local stationary store. “I continue to paint it; I have done it many times, and each time it comes out different.” He began to draw and paint in oils

formally when he moved to the neighboring city of Teziutlán to go to high school. There, he met and forged a great friendship with Vicente Lombardo Toledano, a politician and cultural promoter born in Teziutlán who encouraged Gregorio to continue working in the visual arts. He also met David A. Siqueiros at a ceremony honoring Lombardo Toledano in Mexico City’s Palace of Fine Arts where Gregorio went in representation of Nahua indigenous young people from Puebla’s Sierra Norte.

Circumstances prevented him from having a formal visual arts education, so he became self-taught. “In the home of Lombardo Toledano, I saw the work of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros up close, and that stimulated me to keep painting and find my own style.” In 1971, he participated in his first collective exhibition in Teziutlán. Around that time, he decided to experiment with different techniques and materials: watercolors, pastels, charcoal.



*Jaguar at Night* (acrylic).

“Sometimes I include materials like stones or river sand to get different surface finishes. The spectrum of hues of acrylics has captivated me because it allows me to portray better the colors of my surroundings, the themes that I usually paint. I continue to be impressed, very impressed, by the color of my land. I believe that I will never come to the end of it.”

Méndez Nava’s painting is direct, simple, just like the people and life in Cuetzalan; just like he is. His work seduces you with its liveliness and naiveté: defined lines, flat surfaces, “halfway there” realism, but with style —small-town naïf, perhaps— and sprinkled with reminiscences of Mexico’s great painting.

Sparkling cascades come down off his canvases; blue jaguars peek through the foliage, wallpapered in stars. Scenes of the daily life of indigenous people in the countryside and the market abound; women in their traditional headdresses

can be seen from several angles; scenes of regional dances seem to be rainbows on his canvases; the “flying men” unwind around an enormous pole; and the queens of the different fiestas celebrating coffee and traditional *huipil* blouses are also central characters in his painting.

Other canvases are cages full of parrots and toucans, windows that giant ferns peek through, calla lilies out of Diego Rivera and the beautiful false birds-of-paradise (*heliconias*) typical of the region, with their flaming spikes sticking out of their stalks. Just like a modern *tlacuilo*, or illuminator of the pre-Hispanic codices, Gregorio portrays mountain life and scenes in his paintings-codices every day, trapping the colors of his land, which in turn, capture the gaze of anyone who looks at his work.

He has received many prizes and his work has left Cuetzalan to go to the great cities of Mexico and abroad. His paint-



*Day and Night* (acrylic).



*Tonatiuh (acrylic).*



*Chamaquis Vendor (acrylic).*

ings have traveled equally to New York and Lithuania, but it is in Cuetzalan where they can be found everywhere. Private collectors and hotel and restaurant owners buy them and keep them on display, proud to show the local scenes and traditions.

Anyone who goes to his gallery on the edge of town to buy a canvas or simply admire his work will also find a very pleasant refuge to pass the time of day.

Otilia Mercado, a buyer from Mexico City, says, “Gregorio Méndez Nava’s painting has taken on a personal style visible in its simple proportions, its color combinations, in the faces and expressions of its figures and, obviously, in his unmistakable, unique themes. If he had had more tutoring in technique, he might well have already lost the touch of purity, the charm that attracts many of us.”

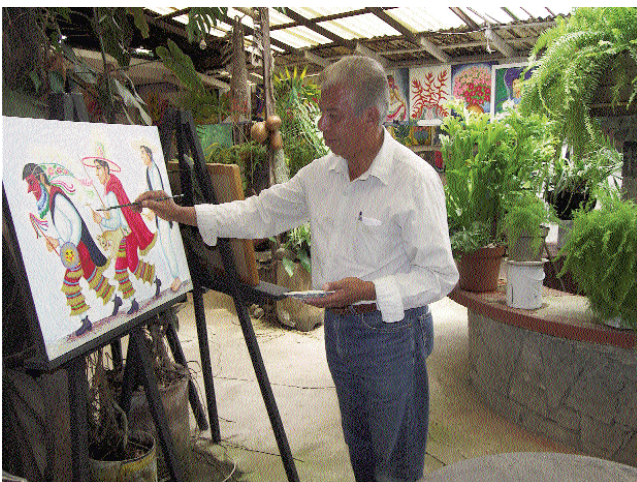
Whether he exhibits in regional shows or in important cities like Xalapa and Mexico City, his work never goes unnoticed. As the catalogue for a 1998 exhibit in the National Autonomous University of Mexico Institute for Anthropological Research says, “We have the pleasure of presenting to the university community this exhibit as recognition and



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*Indigenous Couple (acrylic).*



stimulus for a body of artistic work that contributes to leaving a record of a Mexico that unfortunately is disappearing.”

And it is true; it will not be many decades before the mirth and natural and cultural wealth of this place in the far-off mountains of the Western Sierra Madre are lost. Fortunately, Gregorio’s paintings will be part of our people’s historic memory.

“I paint for the pleasure of it,” he says, “but I am also committed. I paint to preserve what is being lost, so that testimony will remain of what is going: plants and animals that are disappearing; clothing and customs that were part of daily wear and daily life that are almost never seen anymore; things that identified my people to the world and that now can only be seen in photographs and, I hope, in my canvases.” **MM**