

# El Chopo University Museum

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El Chopo University Museum UNAM



## THE VENUE

A building made of assembled metal pieces, designed by Bruno Möhring for the Düsseldorf, Germany Exposition of Art and the Textile Industry, in the early twentieth century, and acquired in 1902 by the Mexican Company of Permanent Expositions. It was brought to Mexico in pieces and reassembled between 1903 and 1905 in the Santa María de la Ribera Neighborhood. It was named after the street where it was placed, El Chopo (or black poplar). These are only some of the specifics of a museum that, after 100 years, indisputably belongs to the inhabitants of this part of the city.

Its vocation for art has been constant. In 1909, the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts rented the building to use as the Museum of Natural History. Before that, it housed the exposition of Japanese industrial art, part of the fiestas for the Centennial of Independence. By 1922, it had become Mexico's most popular museum, receiving more than 1000 visitors a

day. Since then, it has been familiarly known as the El Chopo Museum.

In the 1960s it fell into disuse and its important collection was scattered among different museums. In 1975, after several years of salvage and restoration work, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) turned it into the El Chopo University Museum, a space for the dissemination of culture, particularly experimental work by young artists.

Characterized by its innovative, inclusive, pluralist vocation, from that time on it has been an obligatory reference point for avant-garde art.<sup>1</sup>

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Photos by Patricia Pérez.



# KAMI-ROBO

## Little Paper Giants

Part of the Japanese Pavilion celebrating 100 years of artistic exchange with Japan, Tomoshiro Yasui's work, more than 400 robot-fighters, reflects not only how significant, up-to-date, and popular this country is, but the globality of popular art.

Born in 1971, Yasui began his adventure 33 years ago. Inspired by 1970s television characters, he created the world of the Kami-Robo. According to Japanese puppet theater Bunraku tradition, puppets come alive and acquire a soul independent from the humans handling them. This is what the Kami-Robo are like: 15 to 20-centimeter-high little giants that feed their fans with passion and drama. Their physical genesis, based on folded paper like origami, gives them jointed shoulders, hips, elbows, knees, wrists, and ankles, allowing them to move freely and smoothly. This is important because

they are designed for fighting. In addition, they each have a definite personality: every design is unique and, when they're in the ring, we are told "who's who."

What had been a child's game became known thanks to Yasui's friends from the Kyoto University of Art and Design, who presented his fighters in a ring in front of an audience that rooted for them, got excited, and suffered in every bout. Today, they are arranged in a genealogical tree and each has an ID card to help us visualize the friendships and blood relations among them, their records, likes and dislikes, and whether they are still competing or have retired after hard battles and injuries.

The Kami-Robo are popular in their native country; it could be said they are cult objects, collectibles, and valuable among their fans, who also create their own robots. In Japan,



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Pink Princess.

As a fan of professional wrestling and pop art, Tomoshito Yasui shares his childhood companions with the world.

anyone who makes a toy is considered an artist deserving respect.

In Mexico, they are understood and empathized with by young people, who have grown up with the Japanese anime and manga (animated cartoons and comics, respectively) thanks to television series broadcast starting in the late 1970s, and later, in the 1990s, the Pokemon anime or the Evangelion manga series, that appeared to live in children and teenagers' imaginations. We should also not forget the Mexican cult of wrestling and enthusiasm for figures both as old and current as El Santo.

A fan of professional wrestling and pop art, artist Tomoshito Yasui shares with the world the companions of his childhood because they are something he likes and is important to him. In his comments for this exhibition, he said, "If the Kami-Robo make you happy and help you revive the dreams of your childhood, I'll be delighted."



Each Kami-Robo has a unique design and its own personality.



## Xavier Esqueda's Musical Interpretations



*Samrat Yantra*, object art, 2004.

After a more than 40-year career as a visual artist, Xavier Esqueda presents 42 pieces in a visual symphony: “The Colors of Music,” with works created between 1983 and 2004, on the perfect stage for the young people who come to see them. Through paintings, box-objects, art objects, and ensembles, he pays his own homage to music. A declared melomaniac, he nevertheless admits, “I know nothing about music; I can’t read it; I can’t play anything; but I have loved it more than painting ever since I was a child.”

Life-sized or scale models of musical instruments collected on his many travels around the world are transformed into marvelous pieces and accompanied by an eclectic soundtrack: the visitor may identify Kansas and Creedence, but he also





*Temperamental Lamellophone,*  
object art, 2005.



*Darbuka Doumbek from Marrakesh,*  
object art, 2004.

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includes compositions by Maurice Ravel and Georges Bizet, all seasoned with surprising Veracruz rhythms of equal weight. These are compositions Esqueda has grown with, that have given intensity to his life, and that remain stored in his melodic memory.

A particularity of his work is the box-object, an idea taken from the New Yorker Joseph Cornell. “My box-objects are a constant in my work,” he says. Each of them describes a melodic episode: a white T-shirt lettered with the name “Werther” in red, wounded in the heart and watched over by a line of bullets (*Homage to Jules Massenet*, 2000), a piano concerto for pears covered with musical notes (*Homage to Erik Satie*, 1983), or maracas and details of Huichol art (*The Colors of Music*, 2003).

“On my travels, I have bought ethnic instruments, since I was thinking of doing an exhibition of object art. As such, music is an object art,” reflects Esqueda, who tries to transport us simultaneously to sound worlds from different regions of the planet: to Africa with the xylophone, and at the same time to Veracruz, with its guajes (pods) that are resonating percussion instruments. He also reminds us of Istanbul’s Grand Bazaar, the Spanish pasodoble, and the soundings of Andean winds.

His art is not limited to his affections; it also reflects his aversions, like Paganini. “He’s a virtuoso, but mediocre,” he says, materializing his criticism with a violin leaning down toward a bleeding ear, while the chords break one after the other (*Paganini’s Caprichos*, 2005). The maestro protests against jazz by threading pieces of twine through a sheet of music so they move up and down the musical scales. “I detest jazz; it is the worst canvas I’ve ever done,” he says.

His pictorial work is emotional: a sad Ravel, a rainy Debussy, or a bloodied Stravinsky. Besides proposing aquatic and fiery sheets of music, he presents us with an *Adagio*, forming



*Homage to Joni Mitchell,* object art, 2004.



*Paganini’s Caprichos,* object art, 2005.

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constellations, a sunny *Andante*, and melting treble clefs. This is how Esqueda creates a new discourse between music and painting.

Francisco Gabilondo Soler is one of this space's heroes. "Cri-Cri was a great connoisseur of music," explains Esqueda before a representation of the singer/songwriter just as children knew him: a cricket playing a violin over an old radio (*Homage to Cri-Cri*, 2004). He creates moods inspired in Debussy's opera, proposes scenery for *Pelléas et Mélisande* (2003). Meanwhile, elsewhere, he includes music business symbols (*Hypnosis of Sounds*, 2004), a dog in front of a phonograph as though it were listening, the RCA emblem, with a bass accompaniment.

Xavier Esqueda was born in 1943. He is self-taught. At 17 he was already selling his work in the Sullivan Street public art mart. With what he made, he took his first trips to the United States. In 1965, he had an exhibition in the Antonio Souza Gallery, one of the 1960s' most important. He lived in San Francisco for three years, which was a platform that allowed him to organize art shows in Houston, Miami, Flo-



Homage to Claude Achilles Debussy, "The Colors of Music" series, 2000 (oil on canvas).

rida, and Los Angeles. In Mexico, he has exhibited in almost all the existing museums, from the Anthropology and History Museum to the Modern Art Museum. "The only places I haven't exhibited are the Carrillo Gil and the UNAM Contemporary Art Museum; in all the other I have had shows," he says.

Many place him in neo-Mexicanism or post-modernism because he developed at times when the muralist school was fading to give way to the abstract discourse. What is certain is that Esqueda cannot be labeled, nor is he married to any particular current. Perhaps this is because he forged himself. Now, with this exhibition, he has erased the frontiers between the visible and the invisible, color and music, describing emotions that speak about loves, hatreds, and fascination. **MM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.chopo.unam.mx/historia.html>.



Homage to Cri-Cri, "The Colors of Music" series, 2004 (oil on canvas).

#### MUSEO EL CHOPO

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Open to the public:  
Tuesday to Sunday from  
10:00 a.m. to 19:00 p.m.  
Admission is free on Tuesday

Ongoing events and exhibits:  
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