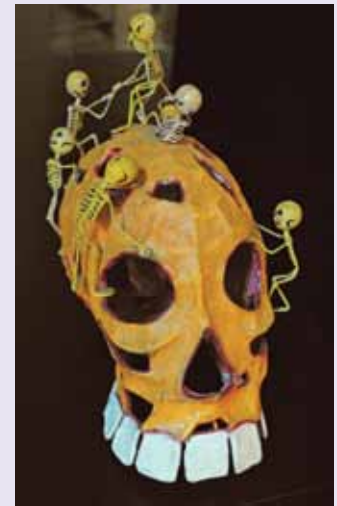




ANONYMOUS HANDS, All of Our Souls

Teresa Jiménez*



Zaulo Moreno, *Thinking Cranium* (wire, cardboard, acrylic, and multicolored paper). Private collection.

*The more native the art,
the more it belongs to the whole world.*

DIEGO RIVERA



Anonymous, Huichol art (beadwork). Private collection.

When you visit a museum, you usually look for art works with first and last names: the canvas by such-and-such a painter, the sculpture by so-and-so, the room filled with the genius of a celebrated artist. . . . But in the Folk Art Museum, most of the pieces have been crafted by hugely talented but anonymous hands, inspired in the collective imagination. Despite being a relatively new venue —it opened in 2006—, many of the pieces come from ancient traditions, which in turn dialogue with techniques and contemporary motifs from every region of Mexico, resulting in innovative expressions of contemporary art.

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All photos are courtesy of the Folk Art Museum.



As you walk down Independencia Street in Mexico City's historic downtown area, you notice a splendid white building in art deco style. If you let your imagination soar, it's not at all hard to confuse it with an emblematic Miami Beach hotel from the 1930s, whose lobby would be peopled by glamorous celebrities. But no. What you could find here only a few decades ago were criminals and detectives, mountains of money, streams of water, and some old ocean navigation charts. The building that now houses the Folk Art Museum dates from 1928 and was originally home to General Police Headquarters, then the Central Firefighters Offices, then the Treasury, and finally the Ministry of the Navy, until the 1985 earthquake damaged its structure. Almost two decades later, it was remodeled by architect Teodoro González de León and loaned free of charge to the museum.

The building has four floors arranged in a square where the permanent collection is exhibited. All the rooms give out onto a splendid glass-dome-covered central patio where temporary exhibits are sometimes held.

The museum's collection includes pieces purchased all over Mexico and has been enriched by donations from important private and institutional collections from Mexico and abroad. In addition to bringing together innumerable objects to demonstrate the wealth of this artistic patrimony from all over the country and every era, the museum was created with a mandate, which it has completely fulfilled since its foundation: to foster and promote folk art. Today, this



Los Olvidados Workshop, *Sara García* (papier-mâché).
Folk Art Museum Collection.



Cenorina García Nepomuceno, *Tortoise* (smoothed clay).
Private collection.

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Anonymous, *Doll* (*cartón piedra*, or "stone cardboard," a technique similar to papier-mâché). Friends of the Folk Art Museum Collection.



Hilano Alejos, *Pineapple* (glazed molded clay decorated with clay appliques). Private collection.



involves more than eight million people who continue to contribute their knowledge and talent to our nation's artistic patrimony.

The permanent collection is divided into four parts and the museography alludes to the origins and evolution of artistic development; more than any chronological order, it is in a creative order. The first room, called "Essence of Mexican Folk Art," safeguards Mexico's cultural wealth, beginning with primitive forms and ancient motifs, like stone utensils and household items, representations of pre-Hispanic deities or artifacts on which the ancient inhabitants of Mexico portrayed their world view. While these pieces are no longer reproduced in exactly the same way today, they do continue to be an inspiration for modern artistic creations and designs. This room is a kind of bridge between past and present; to paraphrase historian Miguel León Portilla, a country's history explains its folk art, the art that results from the meeting of several cultures.

As you continue your visit, you come to Room 2, dedicated to folk art and daily life, which could remind you of any home in Mexico. Rarely do we notice that in



A visit to the Folk Art Museum is a journey through time, but it also means witnessing the day-to-day, since our surroundings are full of these artistic manifestations that translate our origins, our culture, and our history.

Alfonso Castillo Orta, *Cowboy*
(multicolored clay with clay appliques). Private collection.



Oscar Sotelo Elias, *Tree of Life (Folk Dances)* (multicolored modeled clay). Private collection.

our homes, we have objects of daily use that are true works of art, the result of the labor of artists and artisans from all over the country working with the materials around them with ancestral techniques handed down from generation to generation. Beautiful objects with utilitarian or decorative functions like Talavera pottery sets of dishes, cast copper pots, clay cooking pots, unique pieces of basketry, carved wooden utensils, and colorful textiles, among many others, are part of our daily lives.

Room 3 concentrates very symbolic pieces of folk and sacred art. It exhibits work expressing the relationship of human beings with their deities down through time, in a combination of earthly and spiritual representations. From pre-Hispanic pieces to syncretic representations from the colonial period, to contemporary figures of the Christ and virgins, as well as rites and ceremonies, it is impressive how the artists manage to express concepts like magic, life, and death. With an immense gamut of colors and representational and abstract forms, as well as the most diverse of materials like coconut, bone, animal horns, or sugar, the soul of Mexico has been engraved in its art.

Your trip through the museum ends in Room 4, in a fiesta of originality: the room is dedicated to folk art and the fantastic. This space overwhelms the imagination to create fantastic, mythological figures like the famous *alebrijes*, made from wood or papier-mâché, combining body parts from different animals and painted in bright colors. The clay-working tradition is represented in the trees of life, which originally narrated passages from the story of creation from the Bible, but which today have diverse meanings and are true works of art. The struggle with the *nahuales*, people with the power to transform themselves into animal form, or the burning of the “evil humor,” personified in a papier-mâché devil, are other practices that are part of the Mexican people’s imagination.

The beliefs of a people, its joys, its fears, its questions, its answers, its fantasies, its desires, its games: all of this comes together in this museum’s hundreds of works of art born of the talent of Mexico’s folk artists. A visit to the Folk Art Museum is a journey through time, but it also means witnessing the day-to-day, since our surroundings are full of these artistic manifestations that translate our origins, our culture, and our history. How right was Dr. Atl when he said that the most Mexican thing about Mexico was its folk art.¹

A diversity of styles, techniques, materials, colors, forms, and objects: pottery, ceramics, basket-making, metalwork, jewelry-making, carving, painting, feather art, textiles, toys, figures made from sugar. One after another, each of the pieces in this museum is dazzling, not only because of its beauty, but also its narrative. To understand the history of Mexico, a visit to this museum cannot be missed. **MM**



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Open to the Public Tuesday to Sunday,
10 a.m. to 6 p.m.;
Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

NOTES

¹ Dr. Atl was the pseudonym of Mexican painter and writer Gerardo Murillo (1875-1964).

