



Oaxaca Times[®]

The Inner Life of Oaxaca

Issue 22/4

July-August 2006

www.oaxacatimes.com



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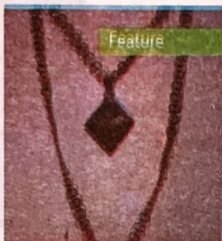
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By DAVID BIRDWELL

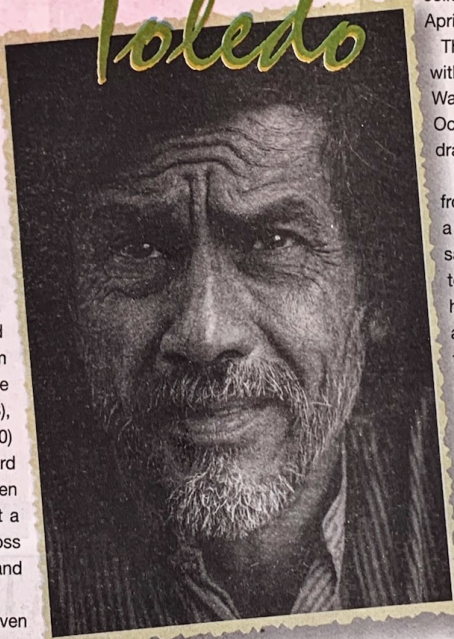
At an age when many people spend their days looking for a shady bench on the Zocalo, Francisco Toledo has no time for such luxuries.

As it is, the days aren't long enough for the Oaxaca state native.

Toledo, 67, is considered to be one of Mexico's foremost artists. His graphics, paintings, sculptures, ceramics and textiles have earned him worldwide acclaim, including the Mexican National Prize (1998), the Prince Claus Award (2000) and the Right Livelihood Award (2005). His works have been exhibited in Tokyo and at least a dozen U.S. cities as well as across wide swaths of Latin America and Europe.

In Oaxaca, however, he is even more revered as a promoter and protector of the city's cultural community. As the founder or a major contributor to at least a dozen projects over four decades, including such standouts as the Instituto de Artes Graficos de Oaxaca and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca

Toledo



(MACO), Toledo has had a profound effect on the city's cultural offerings.

And he's far from finished.

El Museo Textil de Oaxaca, an institution dedicated to the world of textiles and kick-started by Toledo, one of three benefactors who donated a

collection of 4,000 pieces, opened in April to great fanfare.

The artist also said he is working with an organization from Seattle, Wash., group that is organizing an October kite festival expected to draw visitors to Oaxaca.

"There are going to be people from Guatemala because they have a tradition of kite-making," Toledo said. "(The organizers) already came to Oaxaca ... Some of the kites are huge, and they need a large space and went to CASA (the center for the arts) to check them out and also the paper. So they will use the paper from the factory in St. Augustin Etla."

Watching over so many projects is a full-time job, one that deprives Toledo of time with the skills that arguably have made him his country's finest living graphics artist.

"Periodically, I feel like going away to dedicate myself solely to my paintings," he said on a March evening at a local restaurant. "But the places where I'd like to go are far away. I would rather use that money on my projects than on my personal goals. Also, if I go away, I would be thinking what's going on in Oaxaca and I wouldn't have peace

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of mind."

Even in Oaxaca, where uneasy tensions still lie below the surface after deadly 2006 protests that eventually were put down by thousands of federal troops and state police, that peace of mind sometimes is elusive. Toledo said he worries about the city's future, as well as his own.

"The problem is continuing because we didn't have any solutions," he said of the seven-month protests, which began as a drive to give the state's teachers pay raises and escalated when protesters began to demand the resignation of state Gov. Ulises Ruiz. "I also feel that the people of Oaxaca are a little depressed, because the problem was never resolved, even though we felt some of the demands were fair and just. "Problems were growing, and we couldn't see them because we're so busy. We couldn't see the magnitude of the problems, and we didn't get anything good."

In the face of such uncertainty, will Toledo stay in Oaxaca?

"It depends on the future months," he said. "There might be more violence and more protests, and there might be more repression. If that happens, it might be time for me to leave. Right now, I haven't changed my plans."

If he goes, Toledo said, people shouldn't worry about Oaxaca's cultural future.

"All the institutions can still work without me," he said. "If I'm here, I'll still work with them. If I'm gone, they will continue to work."

Toledo, a son of Zapotec parents

(his father was a poet, his mother an artist), was born on July 17, 1940, in the southern Oaxaca city of Juchitán. The road to the budding artisan's remarkable career began at age 17, when he entered the Escuela de Bellas Artes de Oaxaca. From there, he went on to Centro Superior de Artes Aplicadas del Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico City.

By age 20, he was living in Paris, where he expanded his horizons further under the tutelage of the late British surrealist painter and printmaker Stanley William Hayter. Toledo returned to Mexico five years later and has lived in Oaxaca ever since. His instincts for philanthropy quickly kicked in.

"I don't like that word," said Toledo, noted for his modesty and desire to avoid the spotlight. "I don't even remember when I started contributing. I started by donating books to (the Escuela de Bellas Artes). I got my start in that school, so I felt like I should return something. I knew the library had needs.

"I like to give spontaneously, not (as

a way of) going to heaven." Toledo's generosity hasn't been confined to his home city. He routinely donates books to outlying villages, and even prisons. Yet, he acknowledged that his mission – persuading children to read early and often – usually falls short.

"I have been donating books, but I don't have the resources to organize the authorities of these towns," he said. "... I would love to train people to teach these kids to wake up to life and have reading workshops. But it's only a dream because I can't do it alone."

* You can see Toledo's work in the Santo Domingo Cultural Center on July and August 2008. Free entrance.



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GRAFFITI

ART OR AN EYESORE?



By TRACY GAUDREAU

Oaxaca is a beautiful colonial gem with charming brightly coloured buildings in the historic centre set in a valley of mountains. Unfortunately, the lasting impression that stays with a lot of travelers is: "that city with all the graffiti." Its true Oaxaca has become overrun with graffiti. They are everywhere, buildings, businesses, walls, fences, phones, any free space spray paint finds a way of getting there. Some of them advertise the next Banda concert, some declarations of love, a lot of graffiti especially in Oaxaca are politically driven but that is a whole other article that would span many pages. There are some that are elaborate works of art. The wall you will find on Jesus Carrenza is an ever changing canvas of mater pieces. Previously you would have been greeted by a monstrous naked

woman with a manly face as you entered the street from Porfirio Diaz. Beside her was a face painted figure, jaw wide open with the city's name Oaxaca blazed beneath him. Next my personal favourites, a mysterious woman without a face wearing a multi-coloured dress and a girl with a solemn face, eyes closed, in black and white holding an umbrella in the rain with a whimsy dress that curls upwards. Most graffiti however are just tags (a graffiti artist's signature) messy and scribbled, an eye sore on a historic building.

Are Graffiti works of art or ugly acts of vandalism? This

is an ongoing debate. Most people including myself are on the fence about this topic. In my unprofessional opinion, I believe graffiti on a building are like tattoos on the skin - they can either take away or add to the natural beauty of the canvas.

With so many artist and creative minds in and flocking to Oaxaca, its no wonder there are so many graffiti. Everyone is vying for a spot to showcase their work. Alma Rosa Mendoza Rojas, a local art student at Centro de Educacion Artistica Miguel, says that graffiti art is, "a form of modern expression, very urban. For me it signifies something like a manifestation of ideas and a little anarchist because the meaning to do it is to do it hidden from the police." She doesn't like graffiti because it is a form of pollution because of the aerosol cans that they use which are harmful to the environment. She does

accept however that there are graffiti that are very chidos (cool). Alma finds other creative ways to express her artistic ability, as I was once a model in an art exhibit put on by her school in the Zocalo where she painted my back to look like a traditional Guelagueta blouse.

Art or teens tagging their names, either way these buildings do belong to someone and as a business owner Edmondo Amaya owner of Don Pimento (a restaurant on Tinoco y Palacios) states that it affects his business having to spend time and money repainting again and again and for bad graffiti. He believes that the majority of graffiti is not an art expression but a hobby of people who have nothing else to do.

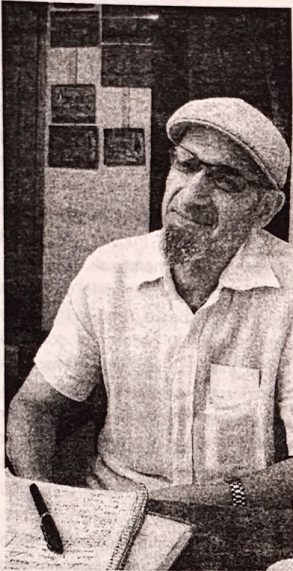
Can there be such a thing as responsible graffiti? Could it be allowed in certain places but only if it's a decent work of art? The gallery called Tinoco y Palacios (on the street of the same name) showcases graffiti and encourages taggers to put their best work to the test to be criticized or praised by the experts, but so far it has only attracted measly scribbles. Should graffiti just be in galleries? Wouldn't that take away from the purpose of it? Its like displaying tattoo designs but never touching a needle to skin.

Graffiti has existed since ancient times with examples going back to ancient Greece, the Roman Empire and even the Mayan site of Tikal in Guatemala. Back then it was curses, magic spells, alphabets, political slogans and famous literary quotes mischievously scrolled on walls, not too different from today.

Like a tattoo you can cover it up, try to remove it but graffiti will always be here especially in Oaxaca, a city of artists and revolutionaries. Love it or hate it, believe it is art or an eyesore, in the end you will have to do what my mother did when she was in her teens and discovered her name tattooed on my dad's wrist, just learn to live with it. Eventually, it becomes a part of the fabric and history of a place and its people to be later dissected by future anthropologists.

Seeing the world through different eyes

A fascinating Youth Media Project in Oaxaca



■ By ANNAMIEKE BUURSINK

Leslie Pulé, an innovative teacher from New York City and the founder of the non-profit organization Global Sharing Matters (GSM), talks passionately about the third Youth Media Project 'Sharing our Stories' that starts the 15th of July in Guelatao de Juárez, Oaxaca. Sixteen local high school students and a team of ten skilled volunteers and technicians will take part in this multilingual (Spanish-English-Zapotec) project.

Through photography, shooting and editing short videos, keeping journals and group discussions, the students will share their ideas about various aspects of identity, culture and environment. This creative exchange of visions between students from different cultural backgrounds, will not be limited to the community of Guelatao, but will extend to Oaxaca in a meeting with university students and younger street kids. It will also reach a global level by virtually connecting the Mexican participants with the multicultural students of public schools

GSM activities in the city of Oaxaca

July 10 at 7pm

Presentation of the third GSM Youth Media Project and exhibition of the projects in Bolivia and India
Centro Fotográfico Álvarez Bravo
 Calle M. Bravo 116 esq. García Vigil,
 Centro Histórico
www.cfmab.blogspot.com

August 16 at 11am

The Final Exhibition of the Youth Media Project in Mexico
Casa de la Cultura
 González Ortega 403
www.casadelaculturaoaxaquena.blogspot.com

Website Global Sharing Matters:
www.globalsharingmatters.org

in New York, which is the base and origin of the organization.

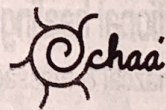
During the five intensive weeks of workshops, fieldtrips and research the students from the Bachillerato high school in Guelatao will not only be exploring their cultural backgrounds, traditions and personal ideas, but will also learn a foreign language, the basics of digital photography, documentary filmmaking and process writing through new non-formal, project based teaching methods. Pulé, who has twenty years of experience as a teacher of English as a second language (ESL), wants to break away from 'the traditional role of the teacher' and be part of the group of participants as well as the international staff, creating an interesting mixture of age, profession and culture.

Furthermore the students will be given the freedom to adjust the subjects of the workshops to their personal interests within the general theme of

the project and will carry part of the responsibility for the documentaries and exhibitions.

The interesting results of the first two pilot projects in Bolivia (La Paz) and India (Dharamsala), a meeting between kids of distinct cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, will be shown during the presentation of the Mexico project on Thursday the 10th of July at 19.00 in the Centro Fotográfico Álvarez Bravo in Oaxaca. It is a fascinating mix of languages and creative expressions including rap and poems.

On the 16th of August the students from Guelatao will also share their stories through the exhibition of photos, mini-documentaries, fragments of journals and a performance in the Casa de la Cultura in the historic center of Oaxaca. The use of many different forms of communication, hereby overcoming language barriers, makes this exposition a great opportunity to see the world from the perspective of Oaxacan youth.



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