



Oaxaca Times

The inner life of Oaxaca

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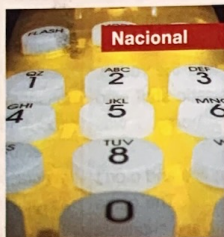
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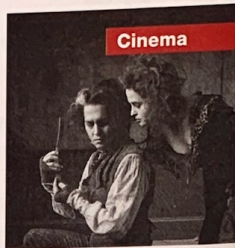
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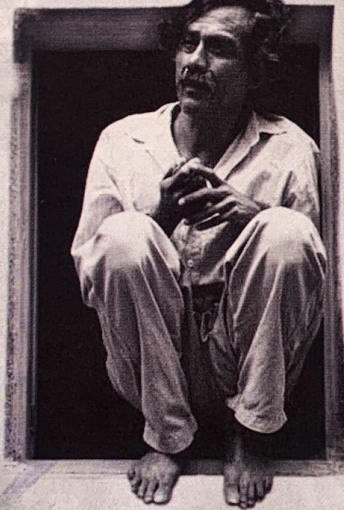
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El Hombre de Oaxaca

■ FIONA CHAMNESS

As with most public figures, there is a certain amount of mystique surrounding Francisco Toledo, the great Mexican artist and Oaxacan political force. He walks the streets of the city, it is said, but doesn't like to be recognized. He won't speak to you or answer your questions. This may be so, but during the interview we conducted on Tuesday, December 30th, it couldn't seem further from the truth.

Maestro Toledo is a venerable personage here in Oaxaca. His art, to be sure, is highly important, and the thing he's best-known for outside Mexico's borders. Here in Oaxaca, however, his philanthropic generosity and political clout have earned him just



as much fame. The city's botanical gardens, IAGO Art Center, and free movie theater are all thanks to him, as well as the conspicuous lack of a McDonald's in the Zócalo, the main square: to prevent its arrival, Toledo held a protest in the Zócalo in which everyone was given free tamales. A preserver of culture, then; Toledo on Tuesday seemed well-preserved himself. Though undeniably graying, his face was still full of life, and his interest in continuing to learn and grow as an artist and human being seemed characteristic to a man much younger than his nearly 70 years.

His latest project, he says, is taking him in a new direction. A friend gave him a book in which he saw a picture of one of the slave ships used to transport captive Africans to the New World for forced labor. The image fascinated him, and

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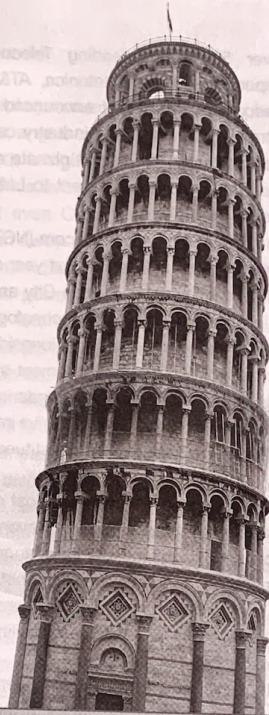
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he is now working on a project to bring to light the history of Africans and slavery in Mexico. There is not a lot of information available on the subject, and the misconceptions that do exist have led us to a present in which, he tells us firmly, "there is still racism in Oaxaca." He is willing and eager to delve into the unexplored depths of his subject, from the fact that slaves, not just native peoples, were integral to the construction of the famous Cathedral, to the different varieties of torture implements used to control black slaves here and elsewhere. It is heavy subject matter, but the Maestro is unafraid.

It might, in fact, be that lack of fearlessness that best characterizes Toledo at this point. Though he speaks extremely pragmatically concerning the forces of politics and government, it is apparent from his actions in Oaxaca that he cannot be made to fear them, nor can he be kept from doing exactly the art he wishes to do. Toledo may be described as "quiet" and "timid" by those who have seen him walking Oaxaca in his exceedingly simple way, but the man we met seemed to have an accurate, if humble, sense of his own power. As an artist, a public figure, and – perhaps most importantly – as an individual, Toledo seems comfortable with his place in the Mexican consciousness: Maestro Toledo, or, simpler still, "El Hombre de Oaxaca."

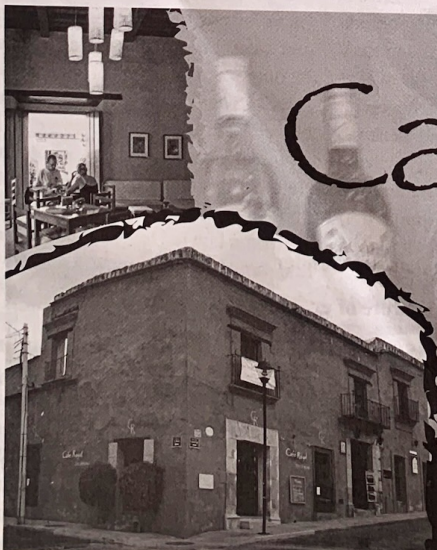
Palacio Borghese: Oaxaca, Italian Style



■ FIONA CHAMNESS

A beautifully appointed new hotel in the heart of Oaxaca is seeking clients. It markets itself to the discriminating traveler looking to experience the city in comfort; billed as a "boutique hotel," it offers six fully furnished rooms, an in-building restaurant, and a rooftop bar ("Il Piacere") open nightly from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. As its name suggests, the hotel is Italian-themed, with Renaissance-style portraits on the walls and rooms named – and decorated – after Italian cities. The building's architectural style, however, is fairly traditional to Oaxaca, making the hotel a happy compromise for those wanting a calm base from which to explore all the city has to offer. Though the price, at 2360 pesos a night, is fairly steep, it is inclusive, and the staff confirms that it can be paid with any Visa or Mastercard credit card. There are no special discounts for larger groups. There is access to the Internet, and Wi-Fi as well. Adalberto, manager of the small but courteous staff, suggests that the hotel would be an ideal choice for sweethearts, but wishes to emphasize that at Palacio Borghese, all guests are "really welcomed."

Those wishing to contact the hotel for more information or to make a reservation can call (951) 501-0901 or mail palacioborghese@hotmail.com.



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Canadian exhibition celebrates the day of the dead in mexican style

■ VALENTINE WATSON RODGER

Harvest of Dreams, at Toronto's prestigious Gardiner Museum of ceramic art, is inspired by Mexican beliefs and customs associated with the Day of the Dead and also invites us to reflect on the cycle of human life and the farmer's year which mirrors it. While many of the artefacts presented remind us, not too gently, that the Grim Reaper is coming to us all, their dominant message is extremely positive: let's enjoy life to the full while we can. I started by revelling in this exhibition.

A great red earthenware tree of life, branchless but intricately detailed, greets visitors at the door. The work of Metepec artist Tiburcio Soteno Fernández, this is a homage to Mother Earth and her generosity, to the workers on land and sea who harvest her gifts, to the women whose loving hands prepare this abundance for their families, for us all. Tiburcio explains that its complex symbolism also unites the living and the dead - and of course the exhibitions's two countries, Canada and Mexico, with clasped hands of friendship.

One wall is dominated by a white satin ofrenda, or home altar, of the kind Mexican families build to honour loved ones who have died during the year. This one was built on site by artisans who travelled from Puebla last September. In front of it, a group of skeletal black pottery figures by Carlomagno Pedro Martínez of San Bartolo Coyotepec pull their many-textured blankets around them and huddle together close to their leader, seeking the warmth they will not find again.

Oaxacan woodcarvers Jaime and Eloy Santiago Morales, and Martín and Plácido Santiago Cruz of La Unión Tejalapán are splendidly represented by a brightly-coloured and expressive procession, wending its way to the cemetery under the watchful eye of the Virgin of Solitude. Leading the procession, three musicians ride in a horse-drawn cart; the singers follow; then comes the coffin surrounded by

weeping women and a crowd of peasants; angels are next, mingling with the dead; bringing up the rear, the devil and his evil crew taunt the mourners. Not even Oaxaca's patron can keep them away.

From San Antonino, near Ocotlán, blind potter José García Antonio has sent Toronto a sturdy 4' red clay figure, his charming Queen of the Birds. A dove nests in her crown; another perches on each shoulder, one more on each hip; there is a peacock at her feet.

Of the large papier mâché artifacts on display, my favourites are two life-size campesinos, the husband cultivating the ground while his wife sows the seeds. Both figures are skeletons: in the midst of life, we are in death. Other skeleton workers busy themselves preparing pulque; two cheery skeleton revolutionaries ride a skeleton horse. There is a selection of mechanical wooden toys made for the Day of the Dead (anyone want to play at putting the corpse into the coffin?). A low table is covered with smaller and humbler pieces of decorative pottery made in rare moments of free time by some of the Mexicans who come to Ontario each year under the guest worker programme. A series of handsome black and white photographs by Toronto photographer Vincenzo Pietropaolo documents their lives in Canada and at home.

Though the exhibition is not large, the Gardiner Museum, with help from the Mexican government and a co-sponsor, has surrounded it with events that give it remarkable cultural dimension. To me, the most exciting thing of all is that they have brought artisans from Mexico and put them to work right in the exhibition space. On my first visit, Carlomagno Pedro Martínez from Coyotepec was busy forming clay figures that he would later fire in the museum's own studio; and sisters Margarita and Crispina Navarro Gómez were doing intricate weaving on their back strap looms, just as they do in Santo Tomás Jalieza.

On my second visit, these three had gone home and Tiburcio Soteno Fernández had taken their place. Later, there will be workshops on toy making and crafting piñatas. The public is invited to conversations with some of the artists; lectures are scheduled and documentary films will be shown. Early in November, Toronto's gourmets got to sample authentic Mexican cuisine when first Juana Amalia Ambrocio Escobar from Metepec and then the Navarro Gómez sisters from Santo Tomás teamed up with celebrity chef Jamie Kennedy and his staff to prepare two delicious dinners. The first meal featured nopalitos, chicken with red and green mole, tamales and a dessert made from sweet potatoes; café de olla was one of the traditional beverages. The Oaxacan meal included quesillo, shrimps with spicy pipián, chicken with black mole, and cinnamon-flavoured rice pudding. There was chocolate de aqua to drink, and mezcal to sip. Some essential ingredients were of course brought from Mexico: you can't find quesillo or mezcal at your local market here in Ontario!

The exuberant personalities, the sheer joie de vivre of everyone involved in this show and the events surrounding it touch the heart. They bring much-needed colour and sunshine to Toronto as our days grow short and our grim Northern winter closes in.

