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FREE

Oaxacan Brush Meets California Pen in Magical Story of Healers and Cats

30 of April Children's day coincides with the release of a new children's book set in Oaxaca. "THE TWENTY FIVE MIXTEC CATS". Here, the author relates that experience and how the project came about.

Sunlight whitened silver clouds as the jet from Mexico City blasted off at day-break. It was the stretch before spring, 1990. "Oaxaca, Oaxaca," murmured my friend, Patrick Dickson. His mission was to meet a Oaxacan artist whom he collected--a young, reputedly cheerful, painter interested in folk ways, animals, masks and death. I, who had never been to Oaxaca, was along for ride.

Twin volcanic peaks filled the oblong window as Dickson conceived our travel plan: we would land in the Oaxacan Valley amid prehispanic ruins, breakfast with "Leo" in the 16th century square, greet Zapotec weavers at work by their looms and have as much fun as possible for 29 hours. After this period, Dickson would return home, and I would be free to do whatever I saw fit.

"Leo," and I had hit it off from the start. He allowed me to base my trip out of his studio. Patiently, he began

teaching me the most colorful Oaxacan slang for the deferred pleasure of howling when the phrases cropped up in my speech. We toured weekly markets, studied local dress and wares, and began to build an inventory of common references that served us later: simmering goat *barbacoa* in Tlacolula, cooking chocolate made fresh in Zachiila, spices and herbs sold outdoors from sacks; healers, magic workers, an infamous town drunk.

To learn more about the state, and to allow my host time to paint, I ventured by bus into the Mazatec highlands. On the night ride to Huatla, I heard soft-toned dialects, murmurings as if from the mountain fog. Oaxaca, so ethnically and geographically diverse, seemed a microcosm of a world I wanted to know better. Indigenous farmers huddled around me in ponchos. Foreign though their lifestyles were, almost every one could speak Spanish. The Conquest, I realized, for all its injustice, had made Mexico accessible, for even out in the deepest hinterlands, one could use English cognates!

The night before I went home, Leovigildo broached a plan. "Mateo, you're a writer, and I am a painter. Come again, and we'll work on illustrated stories." Although he'd never

been to the States, he desired to share Oaxaca with children from "El norte."

In the months that followed, I sloughed off the idea as the sort of whimsical remark heard often in Mexico, a wish that, while motivated by good intent, dissipates into the congenial atmosphere between friends. I was on a translation team for the television show,

"Peter Pan and the Pirates." Increasingly, I wished to write episodes myself, though I wasn't much a fan of tv. Picture books, meanwhile, seemed less entangling than animation--less money, certainly, but more freedom to create. When the Peter Pan gig ended, I packed my bag again, timing this second trip with Days of the Dead.

With a cassette player, I recorded tales of ghosts and greed. I staged more excursions into the state's interior. An asset of Oaxacan lore seemed that it was not age specific. Like fiestas, for which everyone stays up late, such yarns were spun for adults and children alike. When Leovigildo related stories of healers he'd heard as a child, I asked if I could visit such a practitioner myself. The next day, we took a ride to the outskirts of Zachiila. No appointments, no medical forms, no insurance, no pharmacy.

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THE TWENTY-FIVE MIXTEC CATS



by Matthew Gollub pictures by Leovigildo Martinez

"The Twenty-Five Mixtec Cats," just out from Tamborine Books, a division of William Morrow and Co., Inc., New York.

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Oaxacan Brush Meets . . .



Matthew Gollub-Leovigildo Martinez

"What ails you?" the *curandero* asked when I entered his shack.

I liked visiting him as a patient and not some writer. "There are times I find myself worried," I replied. "My country's about to wage war for cheap oil, the over-consumption of which is poisoning the earth."

The healer nodded, asked more open questions and had me sit in a chair over the dirt floor. His manner was quiet, like that of a mystic. I was admiring the animal relics he kept on a shelf—a tropical bird preserved in a plastic sandwich bag, the skeleton of a snake—when the healer began swishing herbs over my head. Then, as if to silence my commentary—which was now becoming a political diatribe—he cupped his hands to the back of my neck and pressed his lips to his thumbs.

"Poohhh!" he exhaled mightily, to displace the bad *aire*. The antic so startled me, I jerked up from the chair. He handed me herbs wrapped in a sleeve of paper and suggested I make bitter tea with them three times a day.

From then on, I knew a healer belonged in "Twenty-Five Mixtec Cats." The Days of the Dead trip yielded six stories, originals rooted in the folklore of the region. With the exception of "Cats," they revolved around the afterlife, not easy sells in the American children's market. The next hurdle, we realized, was to find a willing publisher.

We found luck in the summer of '91 when, with Leovigildo's art samples in hand, I attended the American Booksellers' Association Convention in New York.

"My partner and I wish to publish a children's book about Mexico," I began.

"This will not be a Spanish translation of a European folktale. Rather, it will be germane to Oaxaca...Excuse me? Oh, I've made a mistake...So as doorman, you have little say over editorial matters."

I was new at marketing manuscripts in person, but eventually managed to meet our editor. Two months later, "Mixtec Cats" had been purchased, as well as a second story due out next year. Now, we surmised, the real labor would begin.

The challenge for Leovigildo, a fine

artist, was to repeat the same challenge on page after page. Clothing and features had to be consistent. Close-ups had to tell the story visually with expressions. The challenge for me was to chop the verbiage permitted for me and keep only the essentials for the kids could sit still.

The Sound of Labor, the Importance of Breakfast

My next trip to Oaxaca coincided with Christmas and Night of the Radishes. Work mornings began in Leovigildo's orderly studio amid downtown Oaxaca's spectrum of sound: mechanics clanging doggedly on cars, parakeets chirping if on caffeine, and the loud-speaker filtered water trucks rasping. "Agua!" they trundled past. I, an unreproducible night owl, would say little. Leovigildo, a picture of morning cheer, would giggle, paying me back for evenings when I'd rambled on past midnight.

A wrap on the door meant papaya juice was ready: thick, squeezed, the consistency of a shake. I would thank the confectioner's daughter from next door, impale the fluid with straws and slurp. Thus fortified, we pick up our scissors. I typically would have to ax more text. Leovigildo would decide how many cats to draw on each page.

Both lovers of music, we'd often purchased cassettes. Cumbias with which record shops overflowed, often seemed in sync with the mechanics across the street. Thanks to Leo's foreign admirers there were also tapes from abroad.

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1	Labor day.-	Most stores will be closed
1	San Felipe del Agua	North side of the city-all day
3	Santa Cruz day	Parades around the Zocalo
5		Celebration of the famous battle of Puebla
10		Mothers Day
15		Teacher's Day
11-16		2nd. Week of May, Loma Bonita Tuxtepec (4 hrs. by 1st. class bus) pineapple festival-Animal exhibit Rodeo-San Pedro Ixcatlan (4 hrs. by bus)
		"La Puta Chichi" The regional dance that has been performed many years. Horseraces popular dance at night with tropical music
30		Yanhuitlan Mixteca (2 hours by city) fireworks cockfights-Mixtec game. Good opportunity to see beautiful Dominican convent of the XVI century.

CULTURAL EVENTS

Oaxacan Brush Meets ...

Floyd, Frank Zappa, Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

One morning, about the time the crepe man dinged his triangle, we began to consider more substantive fare. The best breakfast we knew of was at his grand-mother's food stall--La Perenita, in the food mercado on 20 de Noviembre. We started with hot chocolate and egg yolk bread for dunking. A loving woman with a neat, gray ponytail, his grandmother has put in seven-day weeks for decades. Early to bed, early to rise, she serves Oaxacan standards with eyes that see all.

Indigenous women stopped by the stall to show us their hand-made letter openers and combs. Black beans, fried cheese and pastries appeared before us with additional belts of restorative juice. Then, no later than the *entomatadas* arrived (tortillas smothered in tomato sauce with dried cheese and onion), Leo's grandmother offered us fileted pork or beef. Back home, I explained, I'd make do with granola. But here a no thank you was cause for concern.

"Mateo," implored Leovigildo, "why won't you have a *chuleta*?"

I looked over my breakfast's untouched remains: sweet rolls, salsas, *huevos revueltos* and greens.

"Because it's only eight o'clock in the morning!"

By 8:15, we were back in the studio, with the cumbia tapes bouncing sassy lyrics off the walls. Leo let loose a hair-raising whistle, signalling the *agua* boys to replace his five-gallon jug. He set about drawing, happy, content; feeling no more pressure than a child stringing beads. What I needed was a deadline--or a two-hour nap.

"Mateo!" he slapped his thigh, "this is turning out great!"

"You Mexicans," I marvelled, "are an awesome race."

--Matthew Gollub

Vitamin "T," Culinary Shock

Though Leo and I understood each other (with humor, pantomime and onomatopoeia, if not Spanish), our collaboration was not without its culinary shock. One night, after much discourse over how the cats should swish and swoosh, I noted that it was 10:30 and we still hadn't eaten dinner. "I'll order some

Vitamin T at the corner," I shrugged and left Leovigildo sketching at his desk. Vitamin T was our code word for most any food from the street: tacos, tostadas, tortillas, taquitos, tasajo, tamales, tequila, tortas. In this case, I was referring to tlalludas, the humongous crunchy corn tortillas (50% larger than a championship Frisbee) that had been playing an important role in our nutrition.

I walked outside along the breezy street. A *senora* worked a picnic table she set up each evening. I pointed to fresh vegetables.

"Washed in boiled water?" I asked.

"Yes, they're disinfected." By now, she was accustomed to my peculiar demands.

Munching a raw radish, I eyed a dish of liquidy meat.

"Is that tonight's special?"

"*Seso*," she nodded, "the cerebrum of pig."

"Ah, I see. Well, as I was saying, I want two vegetarian tlalludas, one for us each. With beans, cheese, salsa and no meat. No meat whatsoever, all right?"

A few minutes later, I returned to the stall with Leo. "What's in the bowl?" he asked.

"*Seso*," I gasped.

"*Seso? Estupendo!*" he clapped, "I'll have two!"

Leovigildo experienced such horrors in reverse the first time he travelled to California. We'd taken off driving in my car from Los Angeles to install of 5-part mural in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I pulled off Highway 10 to refuel near Palm Springs. A hot wind whipped across the

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LAS VELAS

In ancient times "Las Velas" were dedicated to the Zapotec Gods such as: El Lagarto, (Alligator god) El Cruelo, (Plum god), El Camote (Sweet Potato god)

Las Velas honor a saint in relation to a sacred place, his occupation and name. Las Velas are celebrated for one night with abundant food drink and dance. They are organized by the mayordomos at great expense and each year a new couple is chosen in advance. The mayordomos are the persons in charge of the organization and expenses of the Velas.

May

Velas

- 3 Salina Cruz (4 hours by bus) Vela de la Santa Cruz
- 15 Union Hidalgo-Vela de San Isidro Labrador.
- 3 Juchitan-Vela Guzebenda or the fisherman Vela
- 5 Juchitan Vela Quinto
- 8 Juchitan Vela Guigudhjata
- 10 Juchitan Vela Cantarito
- 13 Vela San Isidro Guete
- 15 Vela Guela Beeñe
- 16 Juchitan Vela Iqu



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Oaxacan ...

desert at high noon, parching our throats and drying our sweat.

I loaded the gas nozzle into my tank. "Why don't you go in and get us something to drink?" It was Leo's first brush with American convenience stores but I figured he'd make out—as long as he didn't get interested in souvenir key chains or hats.

Ten minutes later, he emerged with a shopping bag brimming with what he felt were exotic foods: a six-pack of Dr. Pepper, sour cream flavored-potato chips, Bubble Yum, a Three Musketeers bar, pretzels and spicy jerky.

Two or three sodas back into the trip, we were no less thirsty than before. My Subaru's AC was out, the swirling winds were oppressive. We discussed our strategy for mounting his mural in Cafe Pasqual's. Then Leo became subdued. He tilted his seat backward as if to take a nap, sated with Dr. Pepper and the sour cream-flavored chips.

"Mateo," he predicted sadly, "you Americans won't last, eating the kinds of foods you do."

--Matthew Gollub

About the Mixtec People

Pronounced "Mees-tec," "Meesh-tec," "Mis-tec," or "Mish-tec," the Mixtec are one of Oaxaca's largest indigenous groups. Seventeen eth-nic minorities contribute to the state's dazzling array of music, arts and crafts. The seventeen peoples speak as many different languages, some of which are further split into mutually unintelligible dialects.

Before the Spanish Conquest, the Mixtec were famed for their buildings, pottery, gold work and hiero-glyphs. For periods, they administered ancient cities such as Mitla and Monte Alban. Today, the Mixtec remain largely agricultural and live mainly in the northern and western parts of the state. They are also admired for their crafts and textiles. There are approximately 280,000 Mixtec speakers. Most speak Spanish as a second language.

About Oaxacan Healers

To this day, healers play an important role in Oaxaca in the physical and spiritual wellbeing of their communities. They are particularly well-known in villages like the one in "The Twenty-Five Mixtec Cats," where modern, medical facilities don't exist. When a patient is treated by a healer in Oaxaca, the patient leaves an offering in return. A chicken, beans or corn will do if the patient's money is tight. Belief in bad *aires* (airs) is still strong in the

BEYOND THE CITY

Attractions are listed according to their direction from Oaxaca

MONTE ALBAN: 10km (6mi) west, on an artificially flattened mountaintop. One of the most important archaeological sites in Mexico. Large ceremonial plaza surrounded by the ruins of religious and public buildings. Small museum, cafeteria, shops. Tues-Sun 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

SANTA MARIA ATZOMPA: (or Atzompa) about 8km (4mi) northwest, a short distance off Hwy. 190. The village produces a green-glazed pottery and unglazed pottery figures.

NOTE: Here, and at other craft-oriented villages, stop at any home or shop that gives indications that the craft is practiced within, or simply ask the way to artisan's homes.

CHUILAPAN DE GUERRERO: About 14 km (9 mi) southwest on the Zaachila road. Contains what was once the Dominican Monastery of St. James the Apostle, begun in 1555 but never finished. Much of the structure stands roofless. Daily 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Zaachila: 5 km (3 mi) beyond Cuilapan. Zaachila was the Zapotec capital when it fell to the Spanish in 1521. Little of the archaeological zone has been explored, but a palace and two tombs can be visited. Daily 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

SAN BARTOLO COYOTEPEC: (or Coyotepec) About 15 km (9 mi) south on Hwy 175. The village is famous for its pottery. Valente Nieto, the son of Dona Rosa, who is credited with the black pottery, still practices the craft and gives demonstrations for visitors Fri. 9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

SANTO TOMAS JALIEZA: About 10 km (6 mi) beyond Coyotepec, off Hwy 175. A center for the weaving of cotton belts, sashes, table runners, place mats, and other items. The products are sold from a central location across from the village church.

OCOTLAN DE MORELOS: About 17 km (10 mi) beyond Coyotepec on Hwy 175. Market town and the home of the Aguilar Family, producers of clay figures painted in bright colors.

SANTA MARIA DEL TULE: About 14 km (8 mi) east-southeast of Oaxaca on Hwy 190. Its main attraction is a gigantic Ahuehete, or Mexican Cypress, in front of the village church. The tree is estimated to be about 2,000 years old.

provinces. Healers use *limpias*, or cleansings, to displace them, stroking the patient's body with pungent herbs. Rue and rosemary are typical supplies. Incense, and drops of water or mezal help to purify as well.

The healers' knowledge is passed down through generations. They not only learn which plants help cure ailments but also which plants are available in their locales. The market is a common place to find roots and herbs, but often healers harvest the materials themselves—from the sea shore to the mountains to hidden groves—even if they must travel twelve hours by bus!

TLACOCUAHUAYA: About 20 km east-southeast of Oaxaca off Hwy 190. Home of native artists.

TEOTITLAN DEL VALLE: 2 km from Tlacochahuaya and about 3 km from the highway. Main wool weaving center. Local crafts people produce colorful tapestries in traditional and modern designs.

TLACOLULA DE MATAMOROS: (3 mi) beyond Lambiyeo. Principal site of the 16th century Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, Tlacolula.

YAGUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONE: About 10 km (2 mi) farther along Hwy 190 (about 1 mi) off the road. Large archaeological site. Includes a large ball court and the ruins of several patios. Daily 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.

SAN PABLO VILLA DE MITLA: About 5 km (3 mi) beyond Mitla on Hwy 190. Then 4 km (2 mi) down a turnoff to the left for lightweight woolen and cotton goods which are sold in a large market area. Center for the production of an intoxicating drink distilled from the maguery plant.

MITLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONE: Remains of a large Zapotec population that had been influenced by the Mixtec by the time of the Spanish conquest. Includes groups of ruins, the most interesting being the Group of the Columns. Group of the Columns open daily 8:30 a.m. - 6 p.m.

There are several villages outside Oaxaca which are famous for their crafts. Even if you do not intend to buy anything, going to any of these villages can be an interesting experience as each village is unique and offers something different to offer.

There are various ways to get to the villages. You can catch a bus at the second class station, which is located next to the Mercado de Abastos. Or, you can take a collectivo. Collectivos are also located at the Mercado de Abastos. A minibus service is located at the sixth block of Armenta y Lopez. The minibus goes to Ocotlan, Coyotepec and Miahuatlan and Santo Toma's. The last day of the week there is a market in the village and another of the nearby villages.

Matthew Gollub's
delightful new book

"The Twenty-five Mixtec Cats"

illustrated by
Leovigildo Martine

from
Tambourine Books, New York

is now available at

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