

## THE ARTS



"Las Tres Etapas de México (The Three Stages of Mexico)" by Carlomagno Pedro Martinez.

Photos by Andy Coughlan

# CARLOMAGNO PEDRO MARTINEZ EXPLORES MEXICAN CULTURE IN AMSET EXHIBIT

by Andy Coughlan  
BEAUMONT ENTERPRISE

When a young boy watches a revolution, it is a story that he will tell forever and pass down through generations. But how does that story match with history? The young boy is an unreliable narrator, but his story has inspired his artist grandson to create a masterpiece that incorporates history and myth to tell a truth that is far grander than mere facts.

The Art Museum of Southeast Texas is showing "Collecting a Master: Carlomagno Pedro Martinez from the John Gaston Fairey Collection of Mexican Folk Art" through March 12, 2023.

It is an epic show. But epic is scale and scope. The exhibit features only eight installations. How is that epic, you may ask? What if I told you that the works comprise 306 pieces and that each piece is hand sculpted to be unique in itself?

I have visited the show several times and plan several more visits before the end of its run. It is so much more than an art piece. It has all the depth of an epic poem. Each individual piece of Barro Negro (black clay) is brilliantly placed to tell the story of Mexico.

The triptych that greets the visitor to the exhibition is really an abstract for the pictorial essay one will see inside. "Las Tres Etapas de México (The Three Stages of Mexico)," from 2019, introduces us to Carlomagno's work. These are relief panels except they are not carved into the clay, but instead each

individual component is attached to a wire frame.

We read the triptych from right to left (follow the exhibition clockwise from there), as it symbolizes Mexico's history in three distinct parts — Pre-Colonial, Post-Colonial and Contemporary.

The three panels all feature skeletons that symbolize the Mexican people. The first panel features Mesoamerican imagery, such as maize and agave plants. At the feet of the central skeleton is a jaguar, which the Aztecs chose as the symbol of their warriors. The butterfly wings represent the soul.

The middle panel features an embrace of two skeletons. The Spanish crown sits atop the jaguar and a feathered headdress is above the figures. There's a crucifix, the symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as well as the feathered serpent deity of the Aztecs, Quetzalcoatl. The butterfly wings are attached to both figures.

The left panel symbolizes contemporary Mexico. On the surface it has the feel of traditional folk art, but the maize and plants have been replaced by a cell phone, a computer and an airplane. A rooster and an owl signify the passage of time, and the recurring butterfly wings demonstrate of how the lifeblood of Mexico still continues.

Here we should note that while the artworks have the feel of what we usually think of under the umbrella term "folk art," Carlomagno, who lives in San Bartolo Coyotepec in Oaxaca, is considered a "fine artist." He is self-taught, which would designate him as a folk artist, but he comes from a family of craftsmen and women working in this style.

Carlomagno not only learned from his parents, but he also went

to workshop schools in Mexico, where artists such as Diego Rivera would study. It is an important part of artistic training, but different from in the United States. He has been designated

The black clay process is an Oaxacan tradition that goes back 500 years and is created using an oxygen reduction firing process. The fire's smoke attaches to the clay's surface to give it its black matte finish.

It is impossible to break an epic narrative poem down to a few hundred words, and it is equally impossible to describe in detail the complexity of Carlomagno's visual stories. Of course, one can, and should, take the works on face value, marveling at the craftsmanship. But if one could equate the visual with the history, the respect for the work multiplies.

Let's just focus on one of the installations to represent the whole. "Niño Zapoteca Recuerda la Revolución Mexicana (Zapotec Boy Remembers the Mexican Revolution)" is a large tabletop installation comprising 160 pieces. This is Carlomagno's grandfather's story, which reads like a piece of magical realism. The events depicted are true, but how reliable is the narrator?

At the beginning of the story, we see La Calavera Catrina, the skeletal figure in feathered hat and European style dress that has become synonymous with Día de los Muertos celebrations. She represents the Mexican people. She is flanked by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa -- two of the leading Mexican revolutionary generals. Carlomagno said she is flirting with them, not necessarily in a light-hearted way, but they are flirting with the future of the country. It is a

serious business.

Behind them, a band serenades them (hold onto that thought, we shall see them again later). This also references the grandfather's memory of villagers playing instruments to ward away a plague of locusts from the crops. Musical instruments also provided an income for lower class Mexican villagers.

Carlomagno's grandfather is depicted in the young boy sitting at the base of a tree, on top of which sits Porfirio Diaz, the seven-term Mexican president/dictator. He has devil horns and a tail, and a mace which represents the power of God, absolute power. He is surrounded by cherubs in revolutionary garb, while skeletons in revolutionary garb hang from the tree. Carlomagno's grandfather said he use the see the hanged men on his way to the market, punished for suspicion of being revolutionaries.

Carlomagno is careful to balance the imagery. In any war, there's going to be positive and negative consequences of that. The artist is pointing that out, laying all the facts us to see. But it's still based on his grandfather's memories, so there is a biased narrative.

There are priests and farmers, devils and angels, mythological creatures, men and devils.

The tableau is throwing everything at us, the entire history of Oaxaca, so much so that it is almost overwhelming. But we read on because Carlomagno deftly leads us through the story.

The artist's grandfather's side came from noble blood as indigenous people. Through the practices of Porfirio and the Spanish colonization they became poor. The revolutionaries sought to take back what was lost. The flowers that grow

at the base of the tree symbolize the spirit of Oaxaca that continues to grow.

The horse references the time the revolutionaries showed up in Carlomagno's grandfather's village. He thought they were going to be the heroes to save them. But they had emaciated horses, worn uniforms and old guns. There was a disillusionment and realization at the enormity of the fight, what this fight was going to be about how difficult it was.

Two bodies lie at the center. The first is buried with maize, the symbol of Mexican life, growing from the grave. The other is mestizo, a mixed-race Spanish and indigenous Mexican. The crucifix on his chest represents the Catholic church and the oppression of the crown on the lower class. Only through death is he liberated. In that liberation he feeds and sustains future generations.

Three smaller stories round out this particular chapter of the exhibition. Each has a skull rack as a backdrop. The Aztecs would take their enemies skulls and bore holes into them and make walls to scare others away. One has five old women sitting on a bench. They symbolize the 500 years of written Mexican history. Next to them, is a devil sitting on a treasure chest. He's joined by an angel also on a chest. They suggest we are neither wholly good or evil, and the revolution was the same. This is a contemplation of the future of Mexico during and after the revolution.

Earlier we saw revolutionaries hanging from a tree with Diaz presiding over the hangings. Now we see some revolutionaries who were caught stealing musical instruments from villagers. The revolutionaries were actually turned over to the government by the other

villagers, and they were put before a firing squad. Remember, there is plenty of gray areas in everything. Interestingly, the members of the firing squad are the first government people apart from Diaz who actually have faces, are actual people instead of skulls.

Two robbed figures bear witness to the story. Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón, Mexican journalists and politicians who whose works inspired the revolution. Carlomagno said they're forgotten in the historical retelling of Mexico, which is why they are wrapped all the way up to their chins.

In front of the final skull rack, five skeletons cradle Quetzalcoatl in a reference to Michelangelo's Pieta, which depicts the Virgin Mary holding the body of Christ (Carlomagno is well-versed in historical allusions). Nearby Emilio Zapata is now depicted as a devil. He was great and helped lead the Mexican Revolution but also displayed poor leadership and bad decision making. Once again, Carlomagno depict the ambiguity of who people are. Zapata is portrayed as a devil but was also celebrated as a Christ figure during his life.

And here ends book one. Carlomagno's work is visually stunning and also a literary masterpiece. "Zapotec Boy" is the largest piece, but the other installations require the same respect. The symbols repeat, the story continues. Take the time to see how the images consistently weave through the work. Visit it once, then visit again. Take the time to feel the story.

Carlomagno Pedro Martinez is a master craftsman, a fine artist and wonderful storyteller.

AMSET is located at 500 Main St. in Beaumont. For more information, visit [www.amset.org](http://www.amset.org).