The Eye

Beach, Village + Urban Living in Mexico
Huatulco · Issue 162
November 2026
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Before It Was Art:
Objects From Copalita

Oaxaquia: Where Art Meets the Land

Death: Muse of American Art

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The "Other" Diego Rivera Murals

The Art Issue

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Editor's Letter

"Great art picks up where nature ends."
~Marc Chagall

I get very excited when I see a piece of art that resonates with me. And when I can afford to acquire it, I am besotted. Art that I love doesn't just sit on the wall. I will sit and stare at it the way one watches the sky for birds.

I have no idea why some pieces affect me so profoundly, but I suspect it has something to do with the creative impulse we all begin life with. As children, our creativity was encouraged; to play an instrument, to paint, to draw, to write poems and stories, to nurture this creative force each of us has within. Up to a point. As we get older these pursuits are treated as childish rather than essential to life. Art has always presented itself as a contradiction.

What is it that causes us to make art? Dogs don't appear to do it and they seem perfectly content. Birds may indeed consider their nests art; a collage of sticks and *objets trouvés*.

In the ocean, off of Seattle, in a patch of garbage it has been discovered that Giant Pacific octopuses are flourishing. These are not the small octopus we eat grilled for lunch, these are huge badass octopi whose arms can span 20 feet. They are creating all sorts of stuff with the things they find. One was found to have made a sort of apartment out of an old fridge and another had collected hundreds of golf balls and arranged them into interesting designs.

Some orb-weaving spiders add zigzags, crosses and other decorative silk patterns to their webs. Scientists still debate their precise functions, which may include attracting prey or warning larger animals away. Whatever the purpose, they produce something that looks remarkably like deliberate design. Maybe we aren't the only species trying to find some order in this world.

Art is rarely a waste of time, even if it isn't good art. Artistic expression is the moment when we sit with ourselves. It is not about finding perfection in a reproduction of what we see before us; it is about conveying some truth that lives within our soul.

Conveying is communication, and maybe that is all decent art is: something that transmits to the viewer an aspect of our collective experience. A painting might capture the light in a certain way or combine colors that remind us of a moment of loss. Someone else might see the same painting and remember something entirely different. That is the magic of art.

While art can be about beauty, I think good art is most often about truth.

See you next month,

Jane

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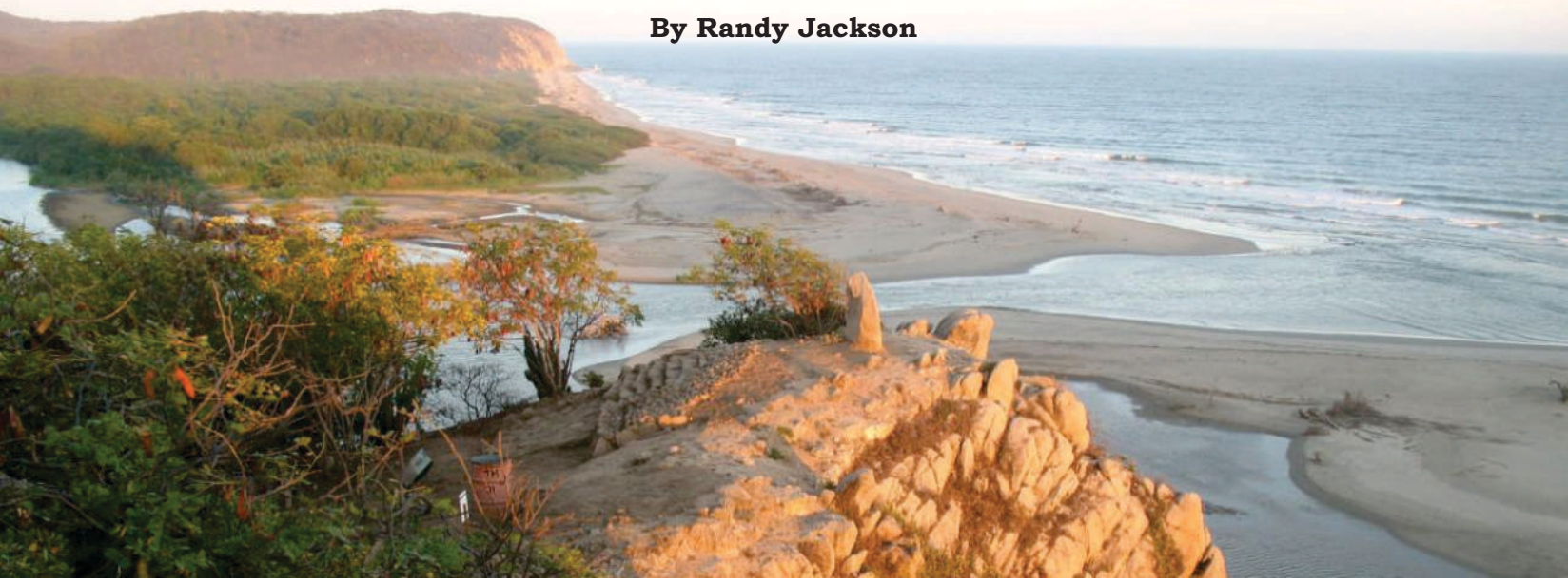
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Before It Was Art: Objects From Copalita

By Randy Jackson



Around the turn of the twelfth century AD, the Mixtec conqueror 8 Deer Jaguar Claw demanded tribute from a town at the mouth of the Copalita River, the place now known as the Copalita archaeological site (Parque Eco-Arqueológico Copalita). We know this because a highly skilled Mixtec artisan painted the conqueror's story on a long strip of deerskin. That brightly coloured 'book', now called the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, is housed in the British Museum, where it is admired as a masterpiece of ancient art.

Art, as we now understand it, is the work of individual creativity, made to be displayed and admired for its own sake. The codex was not created primarily to be admired as art. It was created to proclaim authority. Yet an object's purpose does not exclude its beauty, nor does it keep us from appreciating it on our own terms. Like the codex, objects found at the Copalita archaeological site are often beautiful, and knowing what they were made to do can enhance our appreciation of them.

The Axe-money Stone

The axe-money stone is one such object, and its location, the site's ball court, is significant. Every Mesoamerican town of any consequence had a ball court, and this one had its court by about AD 600. It shows the town was a civic and religious centre, sharing the same ritual world as great cities such as Monte Albán.

Axe money, represented on a carved stone in the ball court, was a form of currency made of flat, thin pieces of copper shaped like small, stylized axes. People often used the pieces to pay tribute. Archaeologists have found them bundled in burial sites, suggesting they represented not only wealth but also symbolic or ceremonial value in the afterlife.



Why the axe-money symbol was carved in the ball court is unknown. It could declare prosperity, or even indicate that the ball court hosted high-level, elite competitions in which axe money was wagered or awarded as a prize. Whatever the reason, like the codex, the stone was not made to be admired as art. It had a job to do.

Clay Figurines

On the hillside above the Copalita River, archaeologists have uncovered household compounds dating back more than 2,000 years. At the time, homes were not the private refuges we think of today, nor were the objects found there decorative art. Among the finds were many clay figurines, nearly all of them women, and most were broken.

Examples of similar clay figurines from the same era, found in central Mexico, are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection in New York. We see them today as art, but that was not their original purpose.

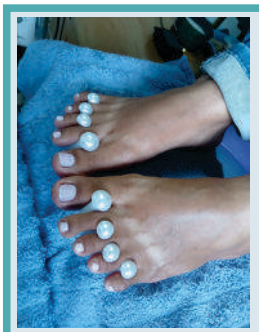


Each figurine was hand-shaped, so no two are alike, and each was small enough to fit in the palm. This craft tradition lasted for centuries. Archaeologists have found them in homes and graves, suggesting a ceremonial role, perhaps tied to fertility or daily rituals, though exactly how they were used remains unknown.

Although their original purpose was not art, their stylized depictions of the human form are themselves artistic. The anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake calls this impulse "making special": making something ordinary extraordinary. It may be where creativity and art begin. The broken figurines found in ordinary homes on the hillside above the Copalita River testify to that artistic impulse.

What the Codex tells us

For the ancient inhabitants of Copalita, appearing in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall was no honour. It shows that Copalita was conquered and owed tribute (and it makes no mention of the beach). But the fact that Copalita was represented in some way speaks to something fundamental in Art: Representation.



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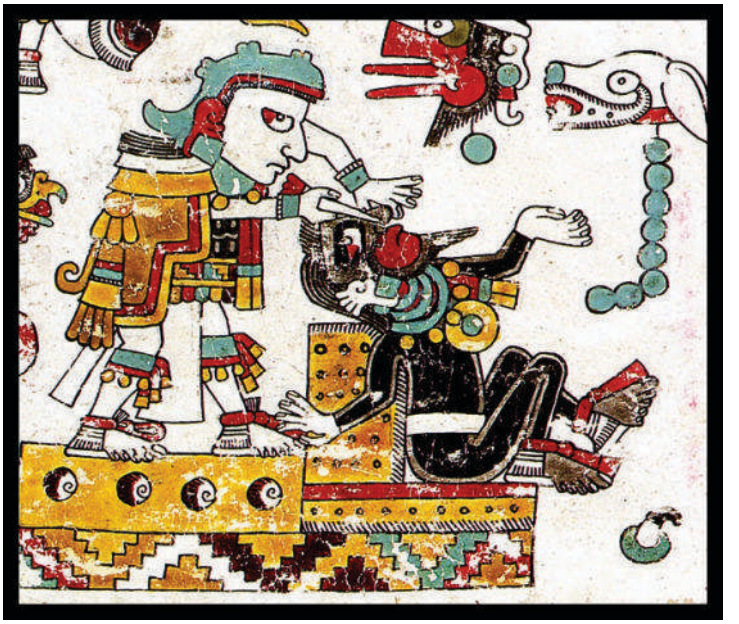
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Take, for example, the conqueror himself, 8 Deer Jaguar Claw. His illustration was not an attempt at realistic portraiture, but a representation of his name and his power. For centuries, the codex's representations have served multiple purposes. Art is only the latest.

The Codex Zouche-Nuttall is an eleven-metre strip of deerskin coated in white plaster, folded like an accordion into 47 panels, painted on both sides. One side is dedicated to the founding and ruling families of several Mixtec kingdoms. The other side is devoted to 8 Deer's biography, conquests, and rank as king. Taken together, it functions like a title deed for his kingdom and a claim to legitimacy for his descendants.

One panel in particular shows the ceremony in which 8 Deer received a turquoise nose ornament, a symbol of Toltec royal authority. These are representations within representations: the ornament represents royal authority, the codex represents 8 Deer receiving it, and the British Museum now represents the codex as Art.

The three objects discussed here tell us something about this ancient place at the mouth of the Copalita River, and something about Art. For the people who lived here, these objects and the images on them were familiar, and they carried meanings everyone understood. The artisans who made them put their time, care and attention into making them as beautiful as they could. Centuries later, those meanings have faded, but the care remains. The makers gave these objects their beauty, a gift for all time. We gave them the name Art.

Randy Jackson blends local reporting from the perspective of a seasonal Huatulco resident with explorations of life and change in Huatulco, Oaxaca, and Mexico. Email: box95jackson@gmail.com

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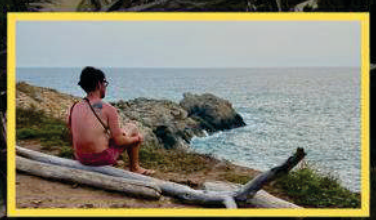
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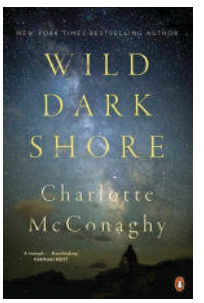
Looking Back: Satisfying Reads of 2026, Part 1

By Carole Reedy

Reading is a deeply personal undertaking that, on reflection, can reveal an unknown side of the reader. It continually gives us new ways to view the world and the roles we choose to play in it.

The following books proved most satisfying to me this year, all unique in theme, approach, and style.

Wild Dark Shore by Charlotte McConaghy

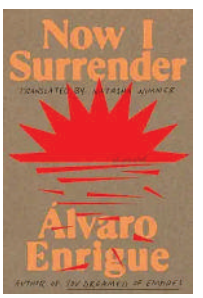


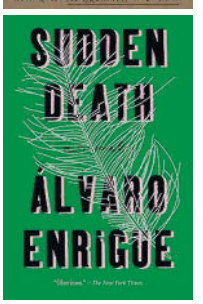
The biggest surprise of the year was this compelling read by an author totally unknown to me. The core of the novel is a topic outside my interest zone, but a rave recommendation by a respected editor/friend piqued my curiosity.

The story takes place on an island off the coast of Antarctica, where an environmental research team has just closed its operation due to rising waters, which will soon overwhelm the entire island.

One family remains to finalize the departure, and this is their story. It's an exciting, intricately plotted story, with twists and turns that kept me on the edge of my seat.

Now I Surrender by Álvaro Enrigue
Sudden Death by Álvaro Enrigue





You Dreamed of Empires, Álvaro Enrigue's highly energetic and entertaining novel, recently brought him deserved attention from both north and south of the border.

Enrigue's newest, *Now I Surrender* (these words spoken by Geronimo), is a more serious yet equally engaging novel.

Although the story's emphasis focuses on the Apaches, including Geronimo and The Long Walk, it reveals the truly convoluted history of the struggle in the region, now Arizona, New Mexico, Chihuahua, and Sonora, in the early nineteenth century.

Varying points of view zero in on the manipulations of those in power within Mexico and the US in an effort to annihilate the Apaches and other tribes. The manner in which Enrigue analyzes the governments of Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt addresses the cultural differences of the parties involved and reveals the author clearly in his element.

It is truly a work of art.

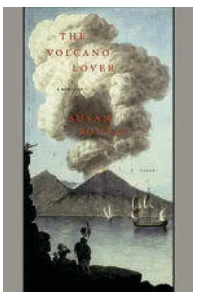
I couldn't stop there. I had to read more of Enrigue's work.

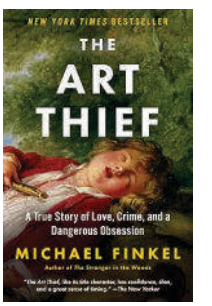
Sudden Death (2016) is a rollicking novel starting and ending in the sixteenth century with a tennis match between the controversial dynamic Italian artist Caravaggio and the Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo, both well known for hot-headed impulsiveness.

The novel roams from the court of Henry VIII, in which the locks of Anne Boleyn's severed head play a role, to the conquest of Mexico, where Hernán Cortés and his Indigenous interpreter and adviser, Malintzin, play central roles.

Enrigue's imagination and style are unmatched, and his talented translator Natasha Wimmer deserves equal praise.

The Volcano Lover by Susan Sontag
The Art Thief by Michael Finkel





These two books come from different eras. Sontag's novel is set in eighteenth-century Naples, while Finkel tells a true story from the late twentieth century. The lifestyles and circumstances also couldn't be more disparate.

The tie that binds them is an obsession with collecting. The main character in both books is a collector who is fixated beyond reason with obtaining the objects of his desire.

It's difficult to accept the facts of *The Art Thief*. Between 1995 and 2001, a young man named Stéphane Breitwieser casually slipped into 172 European museums in broad daylight and left just as easily with 239 works of art.

He never sold one piece. He simply took them to his mother's house, up to the attic, where he also lived. Here he had the joy of looking at them. In his own mind, perhaps, he was a pure collector, interested not in selling the works but in possessing them.

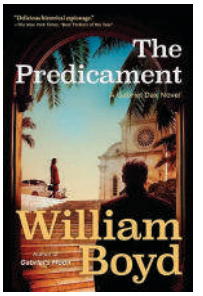
Finkel does a marvelous job of telling this story straightforwardly from start to finish. It's both this simplicity as well as the writing that make the book deeply engaging.

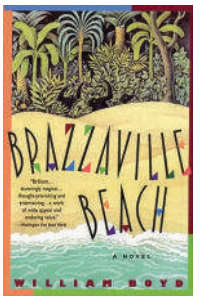
The Volcano Lover is a longer, richly detailed story, highlighting the consummate collector British Envoy Sir William Hamilton, who dedicates most of his life in Naples (1764-98) to collecting objects of beauty. He is particularly obsessed with the vases of Italy and elsewhere, becoming a most famous collector held in high regard.

The other significant character in the novel is Mt. Vesuvius, the active volcano that dominates Naples' coastal landscape as well as the lives of the Neapolitans in its menacing shadow.

The outstanding feature of the novel is, of course, the descriptive atmosphere Sontag provides with her precision prose.

The Predicament by William Boyd
Brazzaville Beach by William Boyd





I find it impossible not to be thoroughly engaged by a William Boyd novel. You sense that each of his books was as smoothly and easily written as it is to read. Of course that cannot be true, as we know authors spend hours mulling over their words. Their editors and copyeditors give equal blood, sweat, and tears to the final product.

Boyd's subject matter varies widely, but never the quality of his writing. In these two diverse selections, one is set at a research facility in Africa and the other is a political detective thriller spanning the globe.

The Predicament is the second novel in Boyd's Gabriel Dax trilogy. British Dax is a travel writer who finds himself caught up in the midst of some rather dicey situations. This gem takes us from Guatemala to Berlin and the US. You don't have to be an espionage fan to become engaged in Dax's adventures. The novels are more about the human condition, focusing on human reaction more than complex plotlines.

The first in this trilogy is Gabriel's Moon, and the third, Cold Sunset, is already published in the UK and scheduled for US release in November. Fans, including yours truly, are eagerly anticipating it.

Brazzaville Beach is definitely not a lighthearted beach story. In fact it's quite the opposite. This serious novel draws in part on Jane Goodall's research in Africa.

Its main character, Hope, is studying the behavior patterns of chimpanzees and is not always in tune with her colleagues' assumptions. Hope also is dealing with conflict from her husband on the home front.

More of my best books of the year to be continued in the December 2026 issues (both Huatulco and San Miguel de Allende editions) of *The Eye.*

Carole Reedy has been writing for The Eye since 2011. She is an avid reader who has made Mexico her home for many years.







When the Sign Becomes the Artwork

By Jesús Rafael Arguelles Rangel

A hand-painted sign does more than tell you where to buy tacos, get a haircut, repair a tire, or order a glass of agua fresca. In Mexico, the sign itself often becomes part of the place: letters lean, swell, cast shadows, turn gothic, or explode into color; a smiling pig may advertise carnitas, a fish may point toward a seafood stand, and a price can be painted with as much personality as a mural.



That visual language is easy to overlook precisely because it belongs to everyday commerce. Rotulismo grew as a practical trade, not as something made for museums. Sign painters learned to make a business visible from across a street, often working directly on walls, shutters, glass, metal, or food stalls. The result was advertising, but it was also authorship. Two shops selling the same thing could look completely different because the hand behind the brush was different.

Today that distinction matters more than it once did. Printed vinyl, digital templates, and standardized branding can make a sign cheaper, faster, and easier to reproduce. They can also make one neighborhood look more like another. A hand-painted sign carries small decisions that are difficult to standardize: how thick a shadow should be, which word deserves red, whether a letter should stretch to fill an awkward corner, whether a mascot should be funny, elegant, or slightly absurd.



Those choices have begun to receive formal cultural recognition. In late 2025, Mexico City's Galería José María Velasco opened *Los rótulos no deben morir*, an exhibition that brought together nearly one hundred pieces and presented rotulismo as craft, visual language, and urban memory. In February 2026, the gallery also hosted *Encuentro Rotulismo*. Tepito, where sign painters, artists, researchers, and the public gathered around an art form long associated with neighborhood businesses rather than elite institutions.

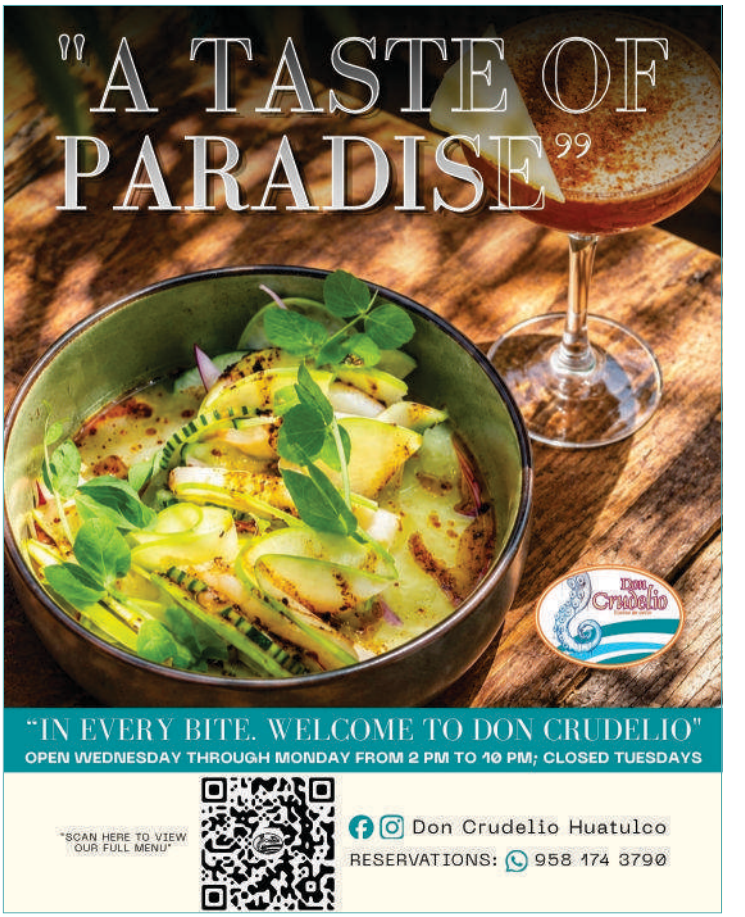
The lettering itself tells stories. Researchers at UNAM have noted how gothic forms, for example, continue to appear on food stands, bakeries, wrestling-related businesses, product logos, and tattoos, where they can suggest tradition, age, prestige, or toughness. In a hand-painted commercial sign, typography is never only typography. It becomes a social signal: a promise about what kind of place you are entering and who it is speaking to.

That is why the old question - is it design or is it art? - may be too narrow. Rotulismo has always needed to work. It must identify, persuade, and survive weather, dust, grease, repainting, and changing businesses. But usefulness does not cancel expression. If anything, the constraint makes the creativity more visible. The painter has to make something memorable while obeying a wall, a budget, a deadline, and a client's request.

A printed banner can do the job. A hand-painted sign can do the job and leave a trace of the person who made it. That trace is what turns a commercial object into part of a city's visual memory. When the sign disappears, the business may still be there, but one small piece of the neighborhood's voice is gone with it.

Jesús Rafael Arguelles Rangel is a Mexican writer and creator whose work explores culture, identity, and storytelling across literature and digital media.


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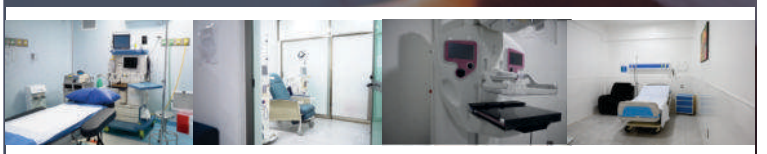

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November in Huatulco

By Britt Jarnryd

By November, Huatulco is beginning to welcome back its winter visitors. Restaurants and beaches are getting busier, familiar faces are returning, and the town is settling into another season.

But at El Sueño Zapoteco/A.C. Bacaanda Foundation, our work continues year-round.

The beginning of the school year in August and September is always our busiest period. We welcome and train new community educators participating in our Smart Rural School program. Hundreds of iPads must be cleaned, updated and programmed. Equipment and internet connectivity are checked, and teachers receive training in technology and our Spanish, mathematics, reading and writing programs.

By November, the school year is well underway, and our focus shifts to supporting educators in their classrooms. Our team continues to visit rural communities, some more than three hours from Huatulco, providing teacher training and educational guidance. We also meet with parents because their involvement is essential to their children's education.

Our Continuing My Dream scholarship program is also in full swing. This year, we are supporting 26 students from rural communities as they pursue their high school education. Each receives financial assistance for enrollment, uniforms, shoes, school supplies, an iPad, transportation and meals.

Beyond this practical support, students receive mentoring in mathematics, English, study habits, emotional and social development, community projects and spelling. Our goal is to help them develop the skills and confidence they need to navigate both academic and personal challenges.

Alongside our educational programs, we continue organizing fundraising events, welcoming volunteers and donors, and developing new projects.

While Huatulco prepares for another busy tourist season, we remain focused on ensuring that growing up in a rural community does not limit a child's opportunities to learn, grow and build a better future.

But we cannot build this dream alone. Every donation, every volunteer and every person who shares our mission helps us reach more children and young people.

To those who have supported us over the years, thank you for walking alongside us. And to everyone returning to Huatulco this season, we welcome you back with open arms and a special invitation: come and be part of this dream.

Transform a Child's Future in Rural Oaxaca



For nearly 17 years, El Sueño Zapoteco A.C. / Bacaanda Foundation has been creating Smart Rural Schools—equipping classrooms with technology, training teachers, and connecting communities through education. Your donation helps provide satellite internet, digital tools, and ongoing support for rural teachers—giving hundreds of children access to opportunity.

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The Long Political Tradition of Murals in Mexico

By Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken

When the word "art" is mentioned in the same sentence as "Mexico" our minds leap to our memories of outstanding "murals." Whether in the largest cities of Ciudad de México or Guadalajara, or small special places such as San Miguel de Allende or Huatulco, during return visits we are drawn back to experience again the murals that are etched in our minds. And we are always astonished to see details that have eluded us and to learn more about the history that inspired them during our many decades of exploring them.

It seems that a blank wall stimulates human artistic creativity. Some of the walls of caves in the mountains of Europe are decorated with prehistoric drawings of animals that were hunted or perhaps worshipped in the past. And although we found these 50,000-year-old creations awe-inspiring, they did not prepare us for the breathtaking murals in Bonampak, deep in the jungle of the state of Chiapas. In bright colors and detailed drawings, each of the murals in three temple rooms open a window to the life the elite Maya lived there more than twelve centuries ago. Displaying wars, musical events and religious rites, the Bonampak murals also have a political intent that is innate to the best and most famous of Mexican murals through the centuries – in this case establishing the hereditary right to rule of the portrayed nobility.

Centuries later, after the Spanish invasion, Catholic orders also used murals to demonstrate their right to rule New Spain and subjugate the indigenous people. Using artists' techniques developed in Europe during the Renaissance, including understanding of human anatomy and ability to portray visual perspectives, the murals often presented the lineage of specific Catholic orders in tree-like form, tracing the founders and current religious heads of that era back to Jesus. We frankly find these monochromatic murals adorning convents and other religious buildings in cities around central Mexico including Cuernavaca, San Agustín de Acolman, and Malinalco, less memorable and inspiring than earlier and later works. Rather than drawing on the creativity of the native muralists, they were copies of prints from Spain that were painted by people who had been enslaved by the religious orders.

The Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910, challenged the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and helped inspire one of the most prolific periods of mural art in Mexico. But even before the upheaval in 1910, the writing was literally on the wall. In 1906, Gerardo Murillo, known as Dr. Atl, published a manifesto calling for a distinctly Mexican art inspired by the country's Indigenous cultures rather than European models. Closely allied with President Porfirio Díaz, Treasury Minister Alberto Pani, and the revolutionary Venustiano Carranza, Dr. Atl became the hero and teacher of three major muralists after the revolution: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros.



These "three greats", although linked together by art school affiliation (San Carlos Academy), revolutionary ideology and chronology, had radically different backgrounds. Diego Rivera, born in 1886 in Guanajuato, was a child prodigy producing drawings as early as age 2, including sketches on the walls of his home. His parents encouraged his art studies in the San Carlos Academy in Mexico City and then in Europe. Rivera was part of the now well-known avant-garde group breaking traditional forms of art, including Pablo Picasso. Although he was immersed in the paintings of the Impressionists including Gauguin and Matisse, he developed a style that was much more rooted in Mexican indigenous art, using bright colors and flat perspectives.



Orozco, on the other hand, was born in Jalisco in 1883 and as a child moved to Mexico City where his parents struggled financially. They decided that José should become an agricultural engineer and sent him to study in a rural area. Orozco contracted rheumatic fever and returned home to Mexico City. Shortly after, his father died of typhus and, to help support his family, Orozco became a draftsman and then was commissioned to paint portraits of recently deceased people. His interest in art was sufficient to begin classes at the San Carlos Academy. But before he could establish himself as an artist, another tragedy occurred; while he was mixing chemicals for fireworks, an explosion greatly injured his left hand and arm. His left hand and wrist needed to be amputated after they became gangrenous. Orozco struggled on, taking menial artistic jobs – but he was forever sensitized to poverty and pain in the world around him. These are reflected in the grey and red murals he eventually produced.



Siqueiros, the youngest in the triad, was born in Chihuahua in 1896 to a well-to-do family who supported his desire at age 12 to study art and architecture in Mexico City. The young Siqueiros was a firebrand and soon was part of the prerevolutionary activists who demanded social change – including a successful student strike at the San Carlos Academy. He joined the Mexican Revolution Army at age 18 and advanced rapidly through the ranks. His political activism continued long after the Revolution, and he later became an outspoken Communist whose convictions shaped both his art and his life. His military career continued in Spain during the Spanish civil war. As part of this career, Siqueiros developed a passion for new technology. His murals reflect both the horrors of wars and the influence of technology.

In the decade following the revolution, all three of these artists received government grants to adorn much of the historic central area of Mexico City with their murals. These works are accessible today in the Palacio de Bellas Artes and other government buildings. The House of Tiles, (currently a restaurant and store owned by Sanborns) also has a fine example of a mural by Orozco. The intent of all these murals was less an appreciation of art than political propaganda – portraying the grandiloquence of both the Mexican and Russian revolutionaries. The murals pitted the excesses of capitalism (especially Rivera's) and fascism (Siqueiros') against the dream of the working class achieving independence. Both for Rivera and Siqueiros, fascination with new technology and its promise of freeing the masses from back-breaking labor became a staple topic in their work. For all three, documenting the pain and oppression of humanity under repressive regimes was paramount.

In Guadalajara, Orozco created monumental murals exploring Mexico's history, from the struggle for independence to the violence, contradictions and aspirations of modern society. They are located in the Government Palace of Jalisco, the Museo Cabañas, and the Museum of Arts at the University of Guadalajara. As the fame of the three spread throughout the world, universities and philanthropists, especially in the US, commissioned murals – but for their artistic value and technological portrayal. Some of those who commissioned the murals had not done their homework and were aghast when the portraits of Russian revolutionaries appeared on their walls; in fact, Nelson Rockefeller ordered a mural by Rivera in Rockefeller Center covered up and then destroyed because it included a portrait of Lenin. But many murals are still accessible in major US cities and universities. Most of the art is still there as well as the political history.

Drs. Marcia and Jan Chaiken have been married for 62 years and have published many justice system research reports together.





Death: Muse of American Art

By José Palacios y Román

For the Indigenous civilizations of the Americas, death was not simply an ending but part of an eternal cycle connecting the living, their ancestors, and the spiritual world. This understanding found expression in stone carvings, codices, murals, ceramics, and ritual objects.

The Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Mexica, among others, developed artistic traditions that reflected their beliefs about life, death, and the cosmos. At Teotihuacan, the famous Tlalocan mural depicts a paradise associated with the rain god Tláloc, illustrating how art gave visual form to ideas about the afterlife.

Following the Spanish conquest, Indigenous beliefs encountered Catholic traditions, creating new forms of religious and artistic expression. Over centuries, these influences contributed to the imagery associated with Día de Muertos, including decorated altars, marigolds, candles, and offerings for departed loved ones.

Death also became a subject of humor and social commentary. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, printmakers Manuel Manilla and José Guadalupe Posada popularized images of skeletons and calaveras. Posada's satirical figures reminded viewers that death makes no distinction between rich and poor. Later artists, including Diego Rivera, incorporated these images into their own work, helping establish the calavera as a recognizable symbol of Mexican identity.

Today, artists continue to explore mortality, memory, and cultural heritage through painting, sculpture, ceramics, printmaking, and mixed media. Traditional symbols are reinterpreted, connecting ancestral beliefs with contemporary artistic expression.

This November, Art Gallery Copalli and the collective La Magia del Color present *México Is Memory, Color and Life*, an exhibition of selected works from their 2026 painting competition.

The award ceremony and exhibition opening take place on November 2 at 6:30 p.m. in Tangolunda, Huatulco.

The exhibition continues through November 30, with free admission, offering visitors an opportunity to discover how contemporary artists interpret Mexico's traditions of remembrance.





Copalli Art Gallery

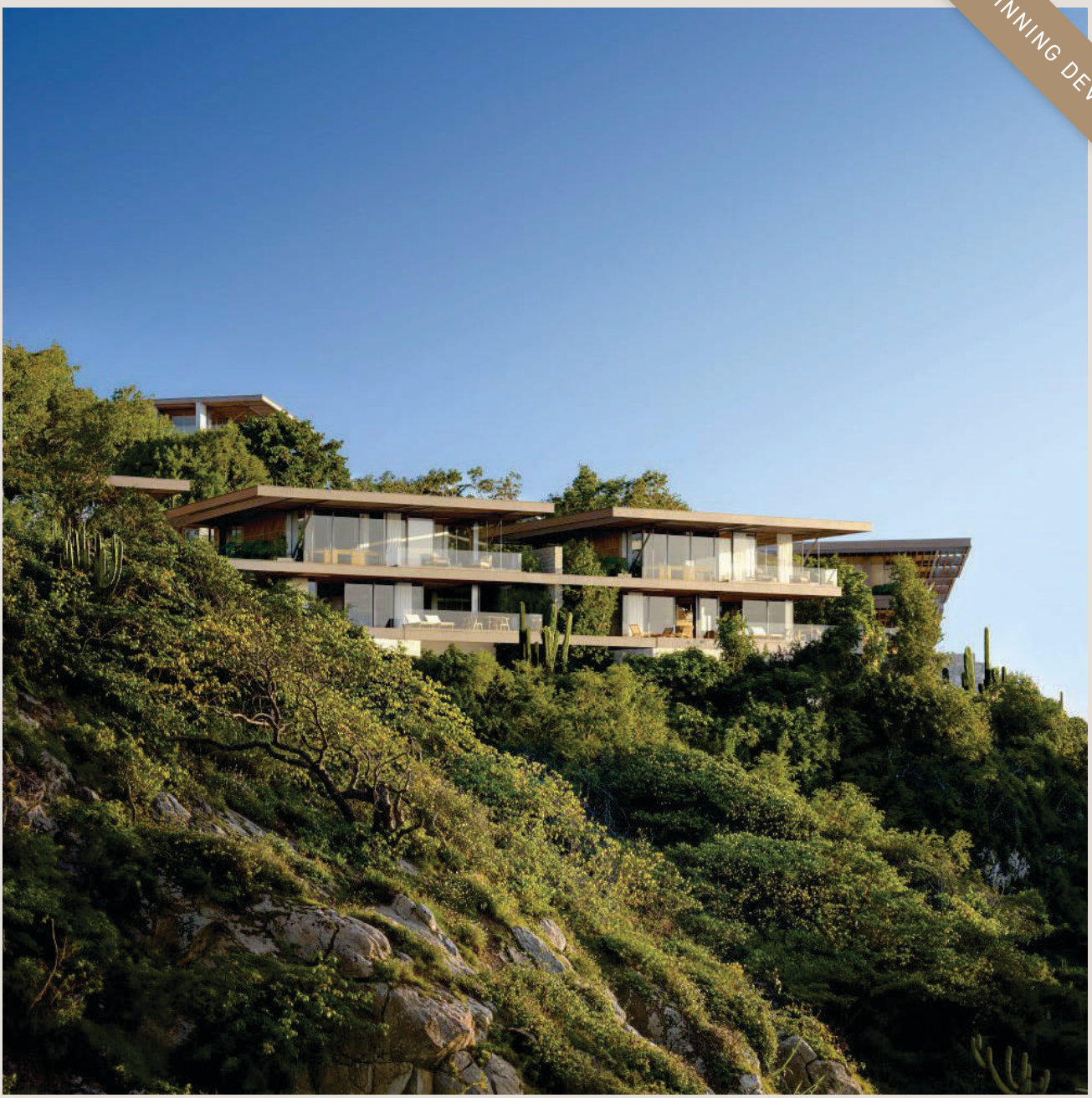
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Three Oaxacan Textile Communities

By Nancy Reyes

When travelers talk about Mexican art, conversations often turn to gallery walls, museum displays, or colorful market souvenirs. Yet across Mexico, art is much more than a decorative object. It is a living dialogue—a continuous thread connecting ancestral knowledge with contemporary cultural identity. Long before European artistic traditions reached the Americas, Indigenous weavers across Mesoamerica transformed cotton and maguey fibers into intricate textiles on backstrap looms, or telares de cintura. Their work brought together practical skill, aesthetic expression, and understandings of the world passed down through generations.

As The Eye Mexico explores art this November, we turn our attention to three Oaxacan communities where textile traditions preserve living history. In these towns, thread is not merely material: it is memory held in cloth, an expression of collective identity, and an art form continually renewed by the hands that practice it.

Teotitlán del Valle:

Nestled in Oaxaca's Central Valleys, Teotitlán del Valle is a Zapotec community with a long-standing weaving tradition. Following Spanish contact in the sixteenth century, local artisans incorporated sheep's wool and European treadle looms, or telares de pedal, into their textile production. Over time, these materials and tools became integral to a distinctive weaving practice that continues to evolve.

Although synthetic dyes became widespread during the twentieth century, artisan families and workshops in Teotitlán continue to preserve and develop natural dyeing techniques. Cochineal, or grana cochinilla—an insect cultivated on prickly pear cacti—produces brilliant reds. Indigo, or añil, yields deep blues, while walnut hulls and marigold flowers can provide earthy browns and golden yellows. The resulting palette reflects both the surrounding environment and the knowledge required to transform natural materials into lasting color.



The geometric motifs woven into Teotitlán's textiles draw on a rich visual repertoire. Stepped patterns, diamonds, and grecas, or geometric fretwork, connect contemporary designs with forms found in Zapotec architecture and other cultural expressions. Their meanings may vary among weavers, families, and individual works; they should not be reduced to a single, fixed symbolic code.

Today, weavers combine inherited patterns with contemporary abstraction and personal experimentation. Their work demonstrates that preserving a textile tradition does not mean leaving it unchanged. It means sustaining the knowledge that allows it to grow.

San Antonino Castillo Velasco:

Located in the Ocotlán Valley, south of Oaxaca City, San Antonino Castillo Velasco is a Zapotec community celebrated for its intricate embroidery. Passed down through generations, this work transforms garments into richly detailed compositions of flowers, foliage, and other decorative motifs inspired by the surrounding landscape.

Two techniques contribute to the distinctive character of San Antonino's garments: deshilado and hazme si puedes. Although they may appear together on the same blouse, they involve different processes. Deshilado, or drawn-thread work, requires the embroiderer to remove selected threads from the fabric and work the remaining threads into delicate, lacelike patterns.

The technique known as hazme si puedes—"make me if you can"—combines fine pleating with embroidery to create tiny figures across a gathered section of fabric. These figures, often described as little people, lend the garment a remarkable sense of detail and rhythm.



A blouse combining floral embroidery, drawn-thread borders, and hazme si puedes can require months of careful work, depending on its complexity and the time the embroiderer can devote to it. Its value lies not only in the finished garment but also in the practiced hands, concentration, and accumulated knowledge behind every stitch.

As embroiderers adapt their work to contemporary garments and changing markets, they continue to affirm the importance of recognizing the people and communities responsible for these designs. Innovation and continuity meet in each piece: new forms emerge without erasing the skills that make them possible.

Santa María Tlahuitoltepec:

High in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte, Santa María Tlahuitoltepec is an Ayuujk (Mixe) community where Indigenous autonomy, language, and artistic expression remain closely intertwined. The phrase los nunca conquistados—"the never conquered"—is often associated with Mixe identity and expresses a powerful tradition of cultural resilience.
Tlahuitoltepec's embroidered blouse is recognizable for its contrasting colors and distinctive arrangements of geometric and stylized motifs. Far from being merely decorative, these designs express relationships among the community, its environment, and its worldview.

Motifs associated with mountains, plants, water, and other elements of the landscape connect the garment to the place where it is made. Rather than assigning a universal meaning to every curve or line, the embroidery is better understood as a living visual language whose significance emerges through community knowledge, practice, and interpretation.

In 2015, this textile tradition became the focus of an international debate on cultural appropriation when community members accused French fashion designer Isabel Marant of reproducing elements of their blouse in her Étoile spring/summer collection without acknowledgment or consent. Local authorities and community representatives publicly defended the design as collective cultural heritage, challenging its use for commercial purposes without recognition of its origins.





The controversy highlighted a question that extends well beyond a single garment: who has the right to reproduce, market, and profit from a community's cultural expressions? For Tlahuitoltepec, defending the blouse also meant defending the knowledge, identity, and collective history embodied in its embroidery.

The garment thus carries significance beyond its aesthetic qualities. It is an expression of belonging and a visible affirmation that Ayuujk culture is not confined to the past. It continues to be worn, interpreted, and renewed in the present.

In Mexico, an old saying reminds us that recordar es volver a vivir—"to remember is to live again." Textile art gives tangible form to that remembrance. Through the woven patterns of Teotitlán, the delicate pleats of San Antonino, and the distinctive embroidery of Tlahuitoltepec, memory becomes something we can see, touch, and carry.

These traditions connect past and present not because they remain unchanged, but because each generation finds ways to sustain and reinterpret them. Their continuity depends on artists whose work deserves recognition, respect, and fair compensation.

As you explore Oaxaca's cultural landscapes this November, look closely at the garments and woven pieces around you. Behind every thread are an artist's skill, a community's knowledge, and a living heritage that continues to shape the world.

Nancy Reyes, a native of Mexicali with a PhD in Language Sciences, combines teaching and storytelling to explore Mexico's layered cultural heritage.



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Ascenso:

When Art Lifts the Soul

By Michael Garroni

An exploration of nature, the human spirit and the remarkable diversity of Oaxaca's artistic traditions. A bird rising on the wind, a ray lifting from the ocean depths, a tree reaching towards the light: nature is full of moments of ascension. Art has a similar power. It can lift us out of our daily routines, open our eyes to new perspectives and connect us with emotions and ideas that are otherwise difficult to express.

These ideas inspire Ascenso, an exhibition bringing together 26 artists whose work explores ascension in its many forms, from the movement of the natural world to spiritual and emotional growth. The exhibition invites us to consider what it means to rise—and how art can help us see the world, and ourselves, differently.

In Huatulco, where mountains meet the Pacific, the theme feels particularly appropriate. The wind, ocean, changing light and biodiversity of the coast provide endless inspiration. Yet ascension can also be found in cultural memory, personal struggle, creative discovery and the act of seeing something familiar in a new way.

The artists participating in Ascenso approach these ideas from different perspectives. Their backgrounds range from decades of professional practice and international exhibitions to the early stages of an artistic career. Four artists, in particular, offer a glimpse into the breadth of talent represented in the show.

Artist Highlights

Tomás Pineda Matus



Born in Chicapa de Castro, in Oaxaca's Isthmus region, Tomás Pineda Matus has built a distinguished career spanning painting, printmaking and other artistic disciplines. Drawing has always been central to his practice, while the landscapes, animals and cultural traditions of his Zapotec heritage provide a rich vocabulary for his work. His imagery frequently incorporates bulls, horses and elements of the natural world, transforming personal memories and regional identity into expressive visual narratives. With an exhibition history extending beyond Mexico, Pineda Matus represents the depth and international reach of contemporary Oaxacan art.

Ixrael Montes



Born in San José de las Flores, Jamiltepec, on Oaxaca's Costa Chica, Ixrael Montes has developed a distinctive artistic language over more than three decades. Working across painting, encaustic, printmaking and sculpture, he draws inspiration from the cultural mixture of Mexico's southern Pacific coast, including Mixtec and African influences. Masks, fantastical creatures and figures connected to the sea appear in a world where lived experience meets dream and mythology. His work has been exhibited internationally, including in Japan and at prominent Mexican museums. Montes's ability to transform cultural roots and the natural world into something mysterious and deeply personal makes his work particularly compelling.

Manuel Trapiche



Originally from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Manuel Trapiche draws on the vivid colours, forms and traditions of his Zapotec heritage. Traditional dress, music, landscapes and pre-Hispanic art inform a practice developed over more than 15 years in printmaking, alongside painting and tattoo art. His love of drawing and colour becomes a way of maintaining a living dialogue with the symbols and atmospheres that shape his identity. His work reflects the continuing vitality of Oaxaca's cultural traditions and their capacity to inspire contemporary expression.

Alejandra Salazar



A self-taught artist who has lived in Bahías de Huatulco for more than 30 years, Alejandra Salazar approaches painting through realism and meticulous observation. Working primarily in oil and acrylic, she explores the details, light, textures and contrasts that give each subject its individual character. Her development has come through sustained practice, discipline and a desire to capture not simply the appearance of a scene, but something of its essence. Her work demonstrates how an attentive eye and a commitment to artistic growth can turn everyday observations into meaningful creative expression.

Together, these four artists illustrate that there is no single path to artistic achievement. Experience and experimentation, cultural inheritance and personal soul-searching, technical mastery and the courage to share their creations all contribute to a creative landscape that is continually evolving.

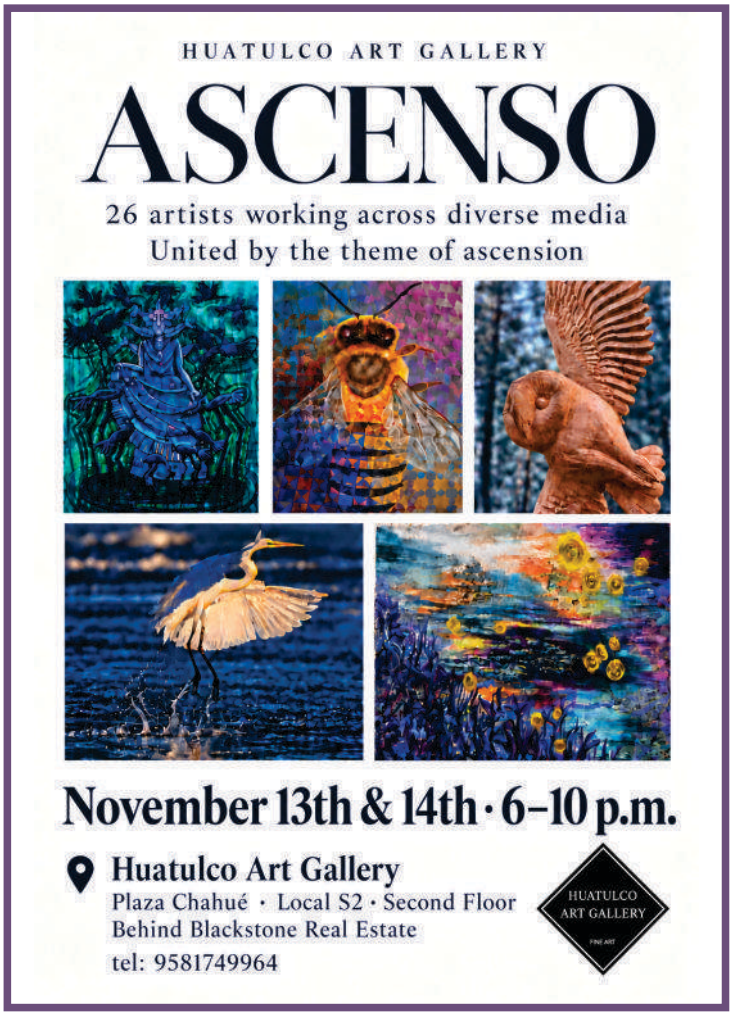
A Meeting Place for Art

This diversity is at the heart of Ascenso, presented by Huatulco Art Gallery. The gallery has sought to broaden the local cultural experience by introducing audiences to established artists from Oaxaca and across Mexico, while also giving emerging regional talent opportunities to exhibit alongside them. Its exhibitions and cultural events, including presentations featuring Mexican and Oaxacan musicians, reflect a wider belief that the arts enrich community life when people have opportunities to encounter, discuss and experience them directly.

The exhibition brings this spirit together through paintings, sculpture, wood carvings, ceramics, textiles, photography and other forms of artistic expression. With 26 participating artists, visitors will encounter a range of approaches, from established voices to newer talents from across Oaxaca.

Ascenso takes place on November 13 and 14 at Huatulco Art Gallery, located in Plaza Chahue, Unit S2, behind Blackstone Real Estate, at 95 Benito Juárez Boulevard in La Crucecita.

Michael Garroni is a musician and former scientist who co-runs the Huatulco Art Gallery and Oaxaca Pottery Company.







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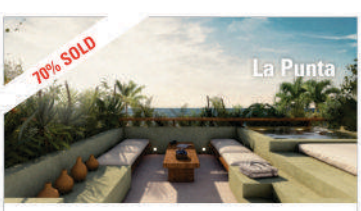
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Oaxaquia: Where Art Meets the Land

By Jesús López Aguilar

Oaxaca's extraordinary cultural diversity is reflected in its art, architecture, traditions and landscapes. In Huatulco, a collective of artists is exploring the connections between these elements through a travelling exhibition that brings together traditional techniques and contemporary technology.



Founded in March 2014, Colectivo Tilcoatle has spent more than a decade promoting art and cultural activities in Santa María Huatulco. Its work includes workshops, outdoor educational programs, concerts, exhibitions and community gatherings, all intended to create opportunities for artistic expression and cultural exchange.

In 2023, the collective launched Oaxaquia, an artistic installation featuring 16 Oaxacan artists working across a range of disciplines, including painting, printmaking, ceramics, embroidery, botanical printing, wood and bone art, projection mapping, and virtual and augmented reality.
The exhibition takes its name from a geological concept that offers an unusual perspective on Oaxaca's cultural identity.



An Ancient Land
According to research by geologist Fernando Ortega, Oaxaquia was an ancient continental fragment whose geological history stretches back approximately one billion years. Its formation involved complex movements and collisions, connecting territories that today form parts of Oaxaca, Hidalgo and Tamaulipas.

Over geological time, this ancient landmass became part of what is now Mexico. Its history helps explain the region's remarkable landscapes, ecological diversity and concentrations of endemic species.



For the artists of Colectivo Tilcoatle, this geological past provides a starting point for exploring the relationship between land, culture and artistic expression. Oaxaca's mountains, forests, coastlines and communities have inspired generations of artists, craftspeople, musicians and architects. Oaxaquia brings these influences together, examining how traditional knowledge and contemporary creativity intersect.

Sixteen Artists, Many Forms of Expression
The participating artists represent different generations and approaches to making art.

Established painters and printmakers such as Sabino López Aquino, Ixrael Montes, Edna Guzmán, Jesús Edel Bustamante Cruz and Heriberto Palafox contribute perspectives rooted in Oaxaca's visual arts traditions.

Armando Manuel, León Arrazola and Antonio Osorio Pineda explore aesthetics and iconography associated with Mesoamerican cultures, while Flora Abel and Luis Alonso work with textiles and pigmentation, drawing on techniques and materials associated with Oaxaca's artistic heritage.

A younger generation, including Gam Bernardino, Eduardo Talledos, Mick Escobar, Carlos "Spenk," Noé Jacinto and Francisco Escobar Bautista, brings large-scale mural work and digital art into the conversation.

Together, these artists explore the relationship between tradition, worldview and modernity, demonstrating that Oaxaca's artistic identity is not fixed in the past but continues to evolve.

At Residencial Meridian in Huatulco, projection mapping transformed the building's façade into an enormous canvas. Colourful abstract imagery and intricate geometric patterns spread across the architecture while visitors gathered below to watch. Inside the exhibition spaces, paintings explored subjects ranging from Indigenous imagery and cultural traditions to marine life. The contrast between monumental digital projections and individual works on canvas illustrates the range of artistic approaches brought together by Oaxaquia.

A Museum Without Walls

One of Oaxaquia's distinguishing features is its travelling format. Rather than occupying a permanent museum, the exhibition adapts to different architectural settings, making art accessible in spaces not ordinarily associated with formal exhibitions.

In Huatulco, previous editions have been presented at Casa Tilcoatle, Casa Nabani, Casa Herradura and Residencial Meridian. The project has also travelled to Restaurante Xcanda in Puerto Escondido and to Oaxaca City, where it was exhibited at the state newspaper archive during the 2024 Guelaguetza celebrations and at Casa Macorina in 2025.

This approach is particularly significant in Santa María Huatulco, where dedicated cultural exhibition spaces are limited. By bringing art into different locations, Colectivo Tilcoatle creates opportunities for residents and visitors to encounter the work of Oaxacan artists and engage with the region's cultural heritage.

The next edition, Oaxaquia Volume IV, is planned for February 2027 in Huatulco.

Those interested in supporting the collective's activities through donations or arranging a visit to the Colectivo Tilcoatle gallery can contact the organizers at casatilcoatle@gmail.com or via WhatsApp at 958 100 1273.

Photographs courtesy of Meridian and Bossón de Hux.



20 de Noviembre

By Alicia Flores



November is Revolution Month in Mexico. If you're visiting, you may notice schoolchildren dressed as revolutionaries, horses in the streets, and parades filled with music, flags, and reminders of a defining chapter in Mexican history.

But what exactly are we celebrating on November 20, and why is Emiliano Zapata on our cover?

November 20 marks the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, when Francisco I. Madero called for an uprising against Porfirio Díaz, who had ruled Mexico for most of the previous 34 years. Under Díaz, Mexico experienced considerable economic growth, but wealth and land were concentrated in relatively few hands. For millions of Mexicans, particularly rural communities, life was marked by poverty and inequality.

Enter Emiliano Zapata.

Born in 1879 in Anenecuilco, Morelos, Zapata became one of the Revolution's most recognizable figures. With his enormous sombrero, distinctive moustache, and fierce commitment to land reform, he led the Liberation Army of the South under the rallying cry *Tierra y Libertad* — Land and Liberty.

For Zapata, the Revolution was not simply about replacing one president with another. It was about returning land to the communities that had worked it for generations. His 1911 Plan de Ayala demanded sweeping agrarian reform and challenged revolutionary leaders who failed to deliver meaningful change.

The Mexican Revolution was long, violent, and complicated. Its leaders frequently disagreed, alliances shifted, and Zapata himself was assassinated in 1919. Yet his legacy endured, particularly in the struggle for land rights and social justice.

Today, November 20 is commemorated with civic ceremonies and parades throughout Mexico. In Huatulco, keep an eye out for local celebrations, where students often recreate scenes from the Revolution in traditional dress.

More than a century later, Zapata remains a symbol of resistance, dignity, and the belief that the land belongs to those who work it.

And that is why he's on our cover.



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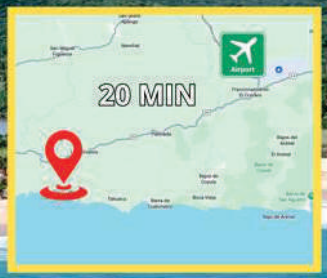
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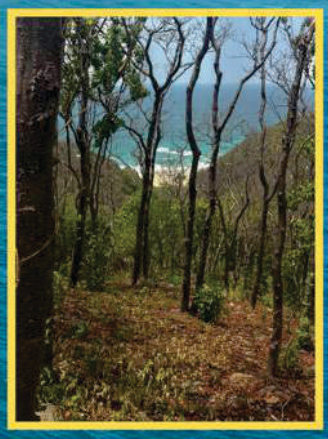
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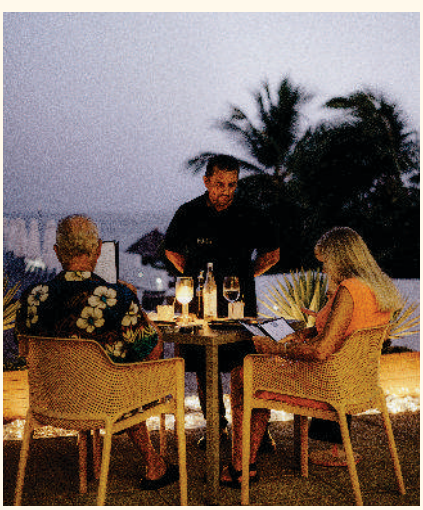




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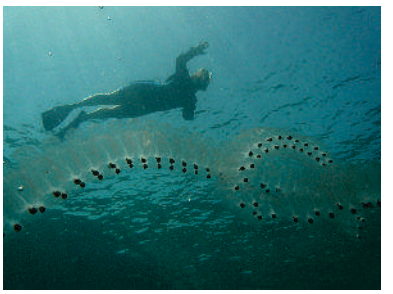
Salps

By Julie Etra

Salps are not jellyfish

Despite superficially looking a bit like jellyfish due to their jelly-like, translucent bodies, salps are members of the Tunicata, a group of animals also known as sea squirts or tunicates, appropriately named for their tunic-shaped bodies. They are of ancient evolutionary origin. For the biologically curious, one can find an enormous amount of information without much effort regarding these fascinating creatures, so I will just highlight their most interesting characteristics.





Oddly enough, they are more closely related to humans than to jellyfish. While they are pelagic organisms, meaning they live in open water, they can occasionally drift into coastal areas and be washed ashore, where they often break apart. Although they can be solitary, they often form chain-like structures. They also produce circular rings. I see them almost every year on the beaches of Huatulco, usually as part of a broken chain; I have not seen them in open water.

Physiology

Salps are classified in the phylum Chordata and are therefore related to all animals with backbones, including us, Homo sapiens. However, salps themselves do not have backbones. They move through pulsating contractions of bands of muscles, basically an extremely efficient jet propulsion system, sucking in and forcefully pushing out water.

They can reproduce both sexually and asexually. They typically live from a few days to a few months and can grow extremely rapidly, with some species reaching maturity in a remarkably short time.

Habitat and diet

Although widely distributed in equatorial, temperate and cold waters, salps can be particularly abundant in the Southern Ocean around Antarctica, where there are high concentrations of their preferred food, phytoplankton.

They are filter feeders, consuming phytoplankton and other small organisms and particles in a large variety of sizes. Occasionally, small fish seeking refuge from predators are known to swim inside salps.

Adding to their efficiency, when they find an abundant source of food, their populations can increase rapidly through reproduction, including the production of clones that form long chains. With dense phytoplankton blooms and resultant rapid growth, they can form dense, slimy aggregations.

Jellies

We do have numerous species of jellyfish in the bays, locally known as mal agua (bad water). These belong to a completely different group of organisms, with varying sizes, shapes, taxonomy and degrees of toxicity. Some species deliver venom through specialized stinging structures known as nematocysts, which they have in common with sea anemones. The harpoon-like projection occurs when the stinging cells are triggered by contact.

One of the species found along the coast is Stomolophus meleagris, popularly known as the cannonball jellyfish.

Contrary to what I thought I had been told, and to my personal but limited observations (we typically arrive in November and are gone by mid-April), jellyfish along the Oaxacan coast can be more common in warmer water, though their numbers also fluctuate with ocean currents and other environmental conditions.

So, the next time you come across a strange, gelatinous creature washed up on one of Huatulco's beaches, take a closer look. What appears to be a jellyfish may actually be a salp, a rather remarkable animal with an important role in the ocean's ecosystem.

Julie Etra is a vegetation restoration specialist and botanist.

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Mexico City's Best-Kept Secret: The "Other" Diego Rivera Murals

By Carole Reedy



They really aren't a secret, per se, as they appear in just about every guidebook's top-ten list. But even though they're located in mero Centro Histórico, in the building of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (República de Argentina 28), just a block from the Templo Mayor, this series of Rivera murals is often missed by visitors and residents alike. Even by foreigners who have lived in the megalopolis for more than 40 years!

It's quite a mystery, and one for which I don't have a sensible answer. Upon seeing the murals for the first time, "Why have I never seen these before?" is a common response.

Just a few blocks away sits the National Palace, housing Rivera's famous sweeping mural (1929–35), which hugs the grand staircase and continues along the second-floor corridors. Rivera began work on the murals in the Education Building in 1923, completing the project in 1928. The building itself occupies a former convent complex dating from the colonial period.

Today, the building is home to the Museo Vivo del Muralismo, which opened in 2024 following restoration work. Visitors can explore the murals and additional exhibition spaces Wednesday through Monday, from 10 am to 6 pm. Admission is free. Unlike the old government-building arrangement, the museum now welcomes visitors on weekends. Check current arrangements before setting out, particularly on holidays.

At the Secretaría de Educación building, dozens of Diego Rivera murals flow across three floors, enough to put visitors in a tizzy. Take your time to view them all. The ground floor is dedicated largely to the traditions and daily lives of the people of Mexico, including religious and political festivals. The second level explores themes of work, knowledge and social life. On the third level, my favorite, you'll find powerful images of labor and revolutionary struggles.

A red ribbon floats above a series of murals where the sentiments of revolutionary corridos are written, including The Ballad of Zapata, Agrarian Revolution of 1910 and Thus Will Be the Proletarian Revolution. The allegorical murals are a scathing criticism of the rich and opponents of the Revolution. Favorites include The Arsenal, depicting Frida Kahlo distributing arms to revolutionaries, and another showing a fancy dinner party where wealthy diners are served gold.

When you visit the murals in the Secretaría de Educación, I highly recommend you start or complete your visit at El Mayor terrace restaurant, just half a block away, at the corner of Donceles and República de Argentina. This seems to be another spot overlooked by both tourists and residents of Mexico.

The terrace itself is located above a large Porrúa bookstore. Find the elevator that will take you directly to the restaurant. Here you can sip a glass of wine or cappuccino while enjoying a relaxing breakfast or lunch and contemplating the Templo Mayor Aztec ruins below, with the Zócalo just beyond.

Looking to the right, the view is dominated by the huge cathedral the Spanish built near the ruins of the Aztec ceremonial precinct, an architectural imposition repeated throughout Mexico. (On one of your visits to this most diverse of countries, be sure to head toward Cholula, Puebla, where you can visit the church above ground and explore the ancient pyramid beneath it.)

Diego Rivera is one of the best-known and most renowned muralists of the twentieth century. His works are recognized as masterpieces depicting the lives and struggles of Mexican people. While studying in Europe, he was influenced by Cubism as well as the murals of Italy. The Mexican and Russian Revolutions were passions of Rivera and his famous wife, Frida Kahlo. Rivera's murals grew out of these political convictions and the couple's involvement in Communism.



A visit to the National Palace, located on the Zócalo, is also worthwhile when public access is available. Visits to Rivera's murals may require advance registration and can be affected by official activities, so confirm arrangements before going. Here the painted history of Mexico and the struggles of the Mexican people line the stairway to the second floor, where the murals continue. The blend of colors, both bright and muted, the details of the faces and the rolling landscapes transport you to different periods in the turbulent history of the country.

The Palacio de Bellas Artes houses one of Rivera's most famous murals, Man, Controller of the Universe, painted in 1934. This work reimagines the mural commissioned by the Rockefeller family and destroyed in New York after controversy erupted over Rivera's inclusion of Communist leader Vladimir Lenin.

Frida's Blue House in the neighborhood of Coyoacán is a tourist's delight, filled with her and Diego's paintings, personal rooms and her studio. She and Diego lived here for many years, as did Leon Trotsky for a short period before moving to another home just a few blocks away. Be sure to visit Trotsky's home, too, the place where he was assassinated. Advance tickets are recommended for the Blue House.

In the neighboring colonia of San Ángel, near the San Ángel Inn, Rivera's art studio and the adjoining houses of Frida and Diego are open to visitors. You may recall that at one point in the topsy-turvy relationship of the pair, they lived in separate houses connected by a bridge.

Regardless of how often you visit Ciudad de México, something new awaits, very often just around the corner.

Visitor information: Museo Vivo del Muralismo, República de Argentina 28, Centro Histórico. museovivodelmuralismo.sep.gob.mx

Carole Reedy has been writing for The Eye since 2011. She is an avid reader who has made Mexico her home for many years.

This article is an updated version from our April 2016 edition.

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