

THE ART OF RAMÓN CONTRERAS AND THE MEXICAN MURALISTS MOVEMENT



SAN BERNARDINO ARTIST PAINTED IN MEXICAN MURALISTS TRADITION

Works of Ramón Contreras will be shown in **The Art of Ramón Contreras and the Mexican Muralists Movement** in the Schuiling Gallery at the San Bernardino County Museum in Redlands from March 21 through October 25. The exhibit is free with museum general admission.

Dr. Ann Marie Leimer, assistant professor in the Art and Art History departments at the University of Redlands, will be guest curator for this exhibit. Dr. Leimer will provide commentary on the technical, social, and cultural components of Contreras' work. She specializes in contemporary Chicana and Chicano art and Art of the Americas. Her research interests include photography, spirituality, textiles, and issues of gender and sexuality. In 2004, the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies awarded Leimer the Frederick A. Cervantes Premio for her work on Codex Delilah, the subject of her dissertation.

Ramón Contreras' work reflects the stories his family members told him about life in Mexico before and during the Mexican revolution. In the tradition of the Mexican Muralists, his subject matter includes scenes from daily life in a rural setting, Catholic iconography, and pre-Columbian references.

Ramón, born in Mexico, came to San Bernardino with his parents when he was one year old. According to family historians Michelle Sanchez and Diana Taggart, Ramón knew he wanted to be an artist—a muralist—by the age of 10. As a teenager, he worked in graphic arts, creating window advertisement posters for the Harris Co. department store in downtown San Bernardino.

By the time he reached the 11th grade at San Bernardino High School, Ramón was already a skilled painter. Art teachers at the school noticed his talent and encouraged him to perfect his techniques and further his art. As a student at the school, he painted a large mural in the original library building depicting scenes from daily life in the countryside of Mexico, filled with allegorical symbols. This mural now graces the walls inside the theater building of the school. Ramón went on to garner recognition for his work, receiving an award at the San Francisco Exhibition in 1937, and studying at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles.

He experimented with print-making, illustration, and works that call to mind animation cels. His association with other mural artists including Diego Rivera, graphic artists, and studios positioned him to become a well-known muralist of the period, if it had not been for his death at the age of 21 in 1940. One of his lithographs is held by the Smithsonian Institution.

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SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY MUSEUM

MARCH 21-OCT. 25, 2009

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“Ramon had his own part to play in what became a true public art revolution in our area” said curator of history Michele Nielsen. “Today, his mural at San Bernardino High School is a part of the mural tradition in our region from the 1930s and 1940s, including works by Alfredo Ramos Martinez, Jose Clemente Orozco, Milford Zornes, Dean Cornwell, Millard Sheets, and others.”

The exhibit will feature more than a dozen of his works, including smaller oils depicting scenes of “country life” as he termed them, mostly from private collections or held by descendants, along with information about the Mexican Muralist Movement. “Artists living and working in Ramon’s time have had a strong and lasting impact on public art, with a legacy that continues into the present day,” said Nielsen.

“It’s very important to remember the historical context within which he painted,” she continued. “Before the Mexican revolution, Mexican art was heavily influenced by the European tradition. Depicting Mexican heritage, particularly pre-Columbian lifestyles, was considered to be a radical and controversial departure, both artistically and politically. Contreras was painting in the 1930s—just a decade after the end of the revolution and at the height of the Mexican Muralists Movement. This work was informed by immense social changes brought about by the revolution, profound changes that affected both the Mexican people and those of Mexican heritage.”

The San Bernardino County Museum is at the California Street exit from Interstate 10 in Redlands. The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays and holiday Mondays from 9am to 5pm. General admission is \$6 (adult), \$5 (student or senior), and \$4 (child age 5 to 12). Children under 5 and Museum Association members are admitted free. Parking is free. For more information, visit www.sbcountymuseum.org.

The museum is accessible to persons with disabilities. If assistive listening devices or other auxiliary aids are needed in order to participate in museum exhibits or programs, requests should be made through Museum Visitor Services at least three business days prior to your visit. Visitor Services’ telephone number is 909-307-2669 ext. 229 or (TDD) 909-792-1462.