

Wadsworth Atheneum
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Pedro Linares and the
Days of the Dead
MATRIX 91

MATRIX installation of objects related to the
Mexican Days of the Dead, 1986

Photo: Raymond Petke



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This exhibition focuses on the work of Mexican master craftsman Pedro Linares and aspects of his work which are inspired by the traditional imagery associated with the Mexican celebration of The Days of the Dead or Los Dias de los Muertos. An effort has been made to present Linares in his own cultural context. Therefore, the installation in the MATRIX Gallery is made up of three different parts: representative works made by Pedro Linares and his family-run workshop, many examples of the inexpensive handmade crafts commonly sold in Mexican street markets during the week or so preceding Dias de los Muertos, and a typical Days of the Dead altar or ofrenda that might be found in an observant Mexican home.

The Days of the Dead is ostensibly an annual Mexican observance of the Catholic Feast of All Saints (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2). However, pre-Hispanic Indian cultural attitudes toward death pervade the holiday. It is, in part, the perseverance of these ancient Aztec, Mayan, Mixtec, Zapotec and other Indian images and customs which make this celebration of special interest.

These origins also help to explain how this occasion embodies an understanding of death which is quite foreign to us. Pre-Hispanic residents of Mexico considered death to be cyclical. Life and death were not the absolute opposites our culture conceives them to be. Individual death was seen to nourish the entire cosmos. Consequently, human sacrifice was understood to be part of the natural order of things. Says Octavio Paz in The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico, "Life extended into death, and vice versa. Death was not the natural end of life but one phase of an infinite

cycle."

The implications of this attitude help to explain many of the objects in the exhibition. Given this more open acceptance of death, the subject of death in Mexico is not whispered about, hidden or denied. Rather it is openly, and sometimes mockingly, embraced. It is often a surprise to those unfamiliar with such attitudes to learn that The Days of the Dead is a happy and festive occasion. It is a time when families are reunited, the living with the living and the living with dead. The belief is that the souls of departed relatives will return to their homes during these two days. Favorite foods, drink, toys and objects of the deceased are placed on the home altars. Their gravesites are cleaned up and decorated. On the first night, it is thought, the souls of the innocent children return (los angelitos). The second night marks the return of the adults (los grandes). Each night bright candles fill the cemeteries and families gather, visiting among themselves and with friends and neighbors. An intimate, family-oriented festival, it is one of the most sociable events of the year. Many travel great distances in order to be at home during this time. On these two days, even balloon vendors are welcomed into the cemeteries.

A wide variety of objects appear for sale in the public market as preparations for this holiday begin. Small painted plaster skeleton figures feature the personification of the deceased resuming their normal activities: selling wares in the market place, riding bikes, playing music. Various toys for children - pop-up coffins, lotto games, pull-toys and crank boxes - feature similar imagery, all in good fun. The skull imagery,



MATRIX installation of works by Pedro Linares, 1986

Photo: Raymond Petke

so integral to the art and artifacts of the Days of the Dead, can be traced to numerous Meso-American archeological sites such as Palenque, Chichen Itza, and the recently discovered Templo Mayor. Copies of ancient skulls carved in rock crystal are popular today as both jewelry and decorative objects.

The bride and groom are a favorite subject. The wedding vow, "til Death do us part," seems to strike a responsive chord for this holiday. Traditionally, children eat a small sugar skull with his or her name on it, and lovers exchange the same. Special foil-decorated candles are sold for graves and altars. The candlelight welcomes the returning souls back, and delicate pathways of marigold petals help guide the visiting souls to their homes. These yellow marigolds, called *zempasuchitl* were the traditional pre-Columbian flower of the

dead. They symbolized the brevity of man's time on earth. Marigolds, cockscomb and baby's breath are abundant in the marketplace prior to this festival. The "bread of the dead" (*pan de los muertos*) is readily available, with the face of Jesus or a saint painted on "baker's clay" (flour and water) and stuck into the top of a dough body.

The tissue paper cut-outs (*papeles picados*) are made in pads of 25 or 50 sheets with a design drawn on the top and then incised with chisel and hammer. They decorate homes and storefronts everywhere. The designs for these are frequently drawn from the much-loved graphics of Jose Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913). Also drawing inspiration from Posada are trenchant satires in the form of the inexpensively printed *calaveras* which attack the reputations of any and all vulnerable politicians,



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Photo: Raymond Petke

from the local police chief to the president of the country. These seem to remind the beleaguered populace that even the arrogant and powerful will be levelled by death. (Actually, many different kinds of objects made for the holiday are called calaveras: these rambunctious publications, the skulls themselves, and the full-length dressed skeletons.)

Almost all of the items made for sale in street markets are handmade and handdecorated. Most are fashioned from such inexpensive materials as scraps of foil and wood, commercial wrapping paper, tissue, garbanzo beans, string and clay. Though delicate and ephemeral, and usually modest in cost, these artifacts often reflect resourcefulness, inventiveness and highly developed artistic sensibilities.

It is with the Days of the Dead in mind that one can best

appreciate the inventions and traditions which inform the work of Pedro Linares. Linares, now eighty-five years old, has worked in the medium of papier-mache since he was twelve years old. He was taught by his father. Linares, in turn, has taught his three sons, Enrique, Felipe and Miguel, most of his skills. And now his grandsons, the fourth generation, are apprenticing with their grandfather. Linares, supported in his efforts by Felipe and other members of his family, labors in a tiny workshop on the roof of Felipe's small house near Mexico City's Central Market.

Papier-mache, a technique in which the most inexpensive materials of paper and flour paste are formed in molds to make work which, when painted, have a presence beyond their meager means, has been a traditional Mexican craft. Linares is one of a few remaining folk artists,

often called cartoneros, who continue to contribute in new and important ways to the art of papier-mache. It is Pedro Linares who has used these materials in the most technically and artistically precocious ways. He continues to live a simple life full of hard work and long hours, aware of but apparently unchanged by his growing reputation outside his own country.

The process Linares follows includes shaping split bamboo frames as armature for his larger works and making the individual parts in molds. Originally he made the molds of clay but now uses plaster. (His father also taught him potters' skills.) He then applies layers on top of layers of wet paste and paper. When the objects are dry, the careful painting begins. The younger grandsons are called upon to paint large areas of solid color. Family members graduate to increasingly detailed work the more gifted and the older they become. They use paint brushes made with hairs from the family cats. Happily, objects by the Linares family have grown increasingly popular in recent years.

Linares is best known for his enormous Judas figures, his fanciful alebrije (his own name for the images that come to him in his dreams and imagination), and, featured in this exhibition, his Days of the Dead figures. Posada's enduring imagery, used by earlier Mexican artists, including Diego Rivera and Juan O'Gorman, is also a source of inspiration to Linares. Linares has established an especially strong rapport with the work of Posada in his figures for Days of the Dead. He has expanded into three-dimensions the impudent and assertive images drawn from Posada's still popular etchings.

La calavera Catrina, a swaggering female dandy with a parasol, is Posada's modern-day transformation of Quetzalcoatl, one of the dominant deities of pre-Columbian Mexico. Linares's Catrina figures, a creative invention based on Posada, are now highly prized contemporary classics. The pair of boxers, one with a dislocated jaw, eloquently and effectively address directly the pain of racial conflict. Linares has created a range of Day of the Dead images which have taken hold on the public imagination. These figures themselves have now become an important part of modern-day Mexican culture.

The Atheneum, on the occasion of this exhibition, commissioned a work by Pedro Linares based on one of the most popular paintings in the Atheneum's collection, Joseph Wright of Derby's The Old Man and Death (c. 1774). Linares was supplied with a color photograph of the painting and invited to create whatever interpretation of the work he wished. While it might have been thought the work would be translated into a tableaux with a distinctly Mexican flavor, the results seem to reflect a preoccupation with fidelity to the reproduction. A particularly appealing detail is the tear in the old man's topcoat, revealing a striped garment beneath. Even the skeleton is painted in tonalities that depart from Linares' bold white with black articulations in order to honor the apparent tonalities of the original.

The Days of the Dead is fascinating on many levels and for many reasons, not the least of which is the resiliency of pre-Hispanic culture which can be found embodied within this holiday even today. Most definitely not to be confused with the dark and forbidding Halloween, which

is essentially Celtic and Northern European in its origins, the Mexican Days of the Dead is playful, warm and friendly. After all, it is the descendants of the Aztecs, the Mayans, the Mixtecs, and the Zapotecs, among others, who celebrate this holiday today, and they have fused onto the Catholic calendar in Mexico beliefs and practices which preceded the arrival of Herman Cortes and the Spanish conquistadores.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art



Days of the Dead altar

Photo: Raymond Petke

The works in the exhibition, unless otherwise noted, belong to artist, collector and co-curator of this exhibition, Sal Scalora. Mr Scalora is Director of the Atrium Gallery, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Conn.

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Works in MATRIX:

Pedro Linares and family, 1986
The Old Man and Death (based on a painting in the Atheneum collection by Joseph Wright of Derby, The Old Man and Death, c. 1774)

Photo: Raymond Petke

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