

Chapter 27 – Patricia Jones Lopez – Art Dealer, Oaxaca, Oaxaca

Patricia and I stuck up a conversation because I used to live in Oaxaca State in Puerto Escondido and we know some of the same people. I caught up to her again when she was at an art show displaying and selling works from artists from all over Oaxaca. Business was slow. People were buying mainly the lower-priced small works rather than the larger and more detailed exquisite works she'd brought with her. It was that kind of crowd, that kind of day. Patricia is fifty-one years of age.

Would you care to comment briefly on Mexican artistic expression?

I think that we have in Mexico very authentic and truly artistic expressions. Starting with painters, especially in Oaxaca, we people who have very deep feelings of what is the expression in painting. For example, we have living examples of many artists, plastic artists like Francisco Toledo who is living right now.

[AUTHOR'S ASIDE – Francisco Toledo <http://www.franciscotoledo.net> was born in Juchitán, [SPELLING CHECKED] Oaxaca in 1940. He is involved in social concerns as well as artistic pursuits. He was instrumental in founding the *Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca*. (Contemporary Art Museum). He received the Mexican National Prize in 1998 and the Right Livelihood Award in 2005. The later is awarded to recognize those who work in human rights, environmental protection, sustainable development and peace, among other categories.]

And there are people who have passed away, like Tamayo and Morales. A lot of young people are starting to paint, but they have a very different concept of painting in oil or in another technique their profound moods of background and the way they see the modern world and the way we live our culture every day.

Would you say that the historic culture of Mexico is being lost by the internationalization of the world?

No, I don't – maybe because I live in Oaxaca. Oaxaca is one of the ... if you speak economically, Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico. Maybe that is true. But artistically speaking, we have the purest expressions in arts and crafts and painting. Economically, maybe we are behind away other Mexican states like Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, Mexico City or Puebla because we are a very difficult state geographically and the road network is difficult. If you want to go to the coast, it is maybe four or five hours and it is a very rough road. But it helps the culture to prevail. The languages prevail. Culture prevails. The way the native people dress prevails. Right now there is a huge movement in Mexico of recovering our background – our Indian background, our bi-cultural background, like Spaniards who came to Mexico. They left us some of their culture and we mixed it with ours. And another way of recovering is recovering our

Indian background – Zapotecas, Mixtecs, Náhuatl and other tribes of the human groups that were there in Mexico when the Spaniards came.

In northern Mexico – Nuevo Leon, Sonora, Tamaulipas and so on, some say there is discrimination against the native Mexican people. They say that the darker-skinned people and the Indian people are considered second-class. But in Oaxaca, it is different, yes?

In Oaxaca, we have a very profound respect for the culture because we see that the natives are very skilled people. If you are looking for someone to do a certain job, you can see that an Oaxacan worker can learn faster than a worker from other states. They are very skilled with their hands and very, very intelligent and practical. They can put their skill and practicality to any job you put them in.

You have lived in the United States, right?

Yes.

But you prefer to live in Mexico?

I prefer to live in Mexico because my family business is there and my children are there, but I like to come and go. I enjoy the United States very much, too.

Could you describe what you see as the benefits of living in Mexico and what's good about living in the United States? What's good about each culture?

The benefits of living in the United States is mainly trust. If you do business with someone in the States, everything is based on your word and everybody is very honest about their deals – even the government. [She said the following with a sense of wonder]. They believe you. They believe how much you sold and how much you should express that you should pay as taxes, for example eight percent of your sales. And they believe you.

In Mexico, it's very difficult because they never believe you. Perhaps some people are used to lying and saying they sold less and they tried to cheat the government. For example people here in the United States, people are very respectful of the law. If they say you should go thirty miles an hour, everybody goes thirty miles an hour. In Mexico, usually people are not used to respecting, in general, applied law, like stop signs and taxes and things like that.

Personally, I prefer a freer environment based on truth, confidence – trust mainly. Because it is a very comfortable way of living.

On the other hand, I think all the commodities, like air-conditioning, good water, things like that – we do have that in Mexico. Maybe some parts of the far-away places from the main cities are not as clean as we would like them to be. But let's understand that

Mexico is sixty years behind the United States in understanding the environment and care of the surroundings and things like that. But we will get there.

Some Mexicans I have interviewed, especially on the border, say they prefer Mexico because it is freer. And this is what they mean by that – that if I get a ticket, I can pay a mordida, I don't have to have insurance, they can drive drunk and so on.

They want to cheat. No, I don't think cheating is a good way of living or that it is desirable. Because we have to think of other people. For example, if I drive drunk, I might kill someone. I wouldn't want to live with that. Maybe I wouldn't want my children to be injured by someone who's been drinking. And here this is much punished. I like it.

Do you feel that there is more alcohol abuse in general, in Mexico than in the United States?

I think it is equal. I see a lot of people that drink in the United States and I see a lot of people drinking in Mexico. But I see one difference. In Mexico it is a cultural thing imposed by the Spaniards. When they came, they conquered us. This is unlike in the United States, which was colonized. That is a big difference. We were conquered by the Spaniards and the priests. When they made the religious fiestas, they made them like we have to drink, we have to get drunk, and we have to dance. The dances were mixed culture happenings. There were like a little bit Indian and a little bit Spaniard, so the Indians could understand what they wanted to achieve. On the streets, you can see a lot of drunken people, but I don't think there are more drunks than in the U.S., they are just more obvious. Maybe they won't drive drunk here, but they drink.

Do you see differences in the family in the United States between the family in Mexico?

[She spoke slowly, as if hesitant to criticize Americans, but still wanted to answer the question, though diplomatically]. I see a difference. Families in Mexico are very close. They share a lot of things. You see kids in their twenties and thirties at family gatherings. In the States, I believe the custom is for the kids to go away and make their own families as soon as they can. I think they see their parents once a year. It is my belief that some American parents want their children to go out on their own, working and living in their own house. This is desirable in the United States. In Mexico, it's desirable, but not really encouraged. We like to see our children. We like to gather and see the grandchildren. Usually the families are huge: five children, twenty grandchildren and more.

With these huge families, it seems like everyone is somebody's primo [cousin]. Do you think that this makes it hard to get a job somewhere if I am not related to the person doing the hiring?

It happens sometimes, yes, but it is not a valid generalization. Let's say I have a company. If I have an opening and a nephew and someone more skilled is also applying,

I think first for my company, then for my family. I am thinking of the wellness of my company and would hire the other guy.

Would that get you in trouble with your family?

Maybe, but they forget that.

They forget?

[Laughing]. Oh yeah, they forget. I mean Mexicans are not vengeful and angry people. [Emphatically]. We're not. We're not.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: This has not been my experience. But maybe I just have a knack for getting people really upset with me and desiring to get even].

OK on a personal note, I have had the opposite experience. Whenever I have insulted someone they seemed to remember it. So you don't think that is not common.

[She spoke slowly again]. Well, you may find some Mexicans very [she hesitated, choosing her words carefully] against Americans. You do find them. In every state – even in the border states. As well you find Americans who are very, very strongly against Mexicans.

When I lived in Puerto Escondido back in the 1980's it was very inexpensive. Land prices and housing prices have gone up tremendously since. Is it true that the increase in real estate prices on the coasts of Mexico is due to the influx of Americans? If so, how do Mexicans feel about this?

[With absolutely no hesitation] Yes. We can say it is true because you can see, if you make an analysis of the demand for land where you can spend the winter at a very low budget, you see the paths of the Americans and Canadians coming to Baja and Mazatlan and Jalisco.

They are flowing southward?

Yes. They make the price higher. But it is not because they are Americans. It's not because they are Canadians. It's because of demand, the law of supply and demand. So if a lot of people are asking for land on the beach, the sellers will ask more money for it.

Does this cause some resentment among Mexicans?

No. We see that, suppose you buy a piece of land from me, they understand that if you go to live there, you will hire a maid, you will hire a gardener, you will spend money at the grocery store, you will buy gas, you will use the taxis, you will go to the market. So the money you will spend will go for everybody. And Americans are very welcome in Mexico. Really.

The people who have moved to Puerto [it is common for people who live there to call it simply 'Puerto' instead of 'Puerto Escondido'] now, do you feel that they want to know more about the culture and the people or do they stay insulated?

No, no, they have friends. And they are invited to the parties, the baptisms, the weddings. They coexist. Americans are invited to the Mexican parties, but Mexicans are not invited to the American parties. Take Thanksgiving. You don't see any Mexicans at those parties. Maybe the guy who takes you fishing, who is your pal and his wife and his children, for example.

There are some people who move to Mexico who don't want to know Mexicans. They want to live a life apart.

What do you think about the cost of living in Mexico today?

Mexico is not a cheap country anymore. I think that land is cheaper in Mexico than in the United States. I'm talking about land on the coast. In towns like Mission or McAllen, you can buy a house for around \$150,000. In Oaxaca, you can't buy a similar house for \$150,000. But in Mexico you pay very low rates of taxes. Here for example you pay much more in taxes. So when you compare the cost over ten or fifteen years, it is a lot more expensive to live in the USA than in Mexico.

But the services are better here. The highways, the public services are working much better here. Your taxes are working here. And maybe in Mexico, no. They are more likely to be spent to smaller, poorer towns. For example, the taxes you pay in Oaxaca City may go to the mountains to provide drainage for a small town and sewer treatment plants. So you don't see the results of your taxes.

But do you feel the taxes you pay are actually going to these small towns.

[With a wry smile]. They say. They say. [Laughs].

Do you feel that women are equal in Mexican society to men?

Yes. Maybe like fifty years ago, it was not that way. But we have been conquering spaces in our own family companies, we have been going to college, so we are treated as our brothers. Like my generation. My mother, my aunts were not treated as equals. They just stayed home and took care of the children. They didn't know anything. Now you can talk to your brothers as equals. You know the same things they do. You learn a business.

So education was the key to changing that?

[Emphatically] Education is the key to **everything**.

Could this be a class distinction? I mean that in a lower socio-economic class people generally don't have much education. In a lower economic class than yours, do you feel women are considered second-class?

Not really second-class. But they are working really hard. And the government has been implementing some social policies on behalf of women. For example, for poor people or lower middle-class, the government gives money (a *beca* a scholarship) to send girls to school.

Girls specifically?

Yes. Girls to school. And they will give you some goods for the family. This is goods, not money. Food, necessities, so that the family does not put the girl to work to earn money for the family. You have plenty, so let the girls go to school.

Could you explain the beca, please?

The *beca* is money; it is to buy books and clothes. It is only for the girls. In a small Mexican town it is about fifty dollars. In a large town it is a little bit more.

Most Americans who have not been to Mexico, and even some who have, believe that most Mexicans would prefer to live in the United States. What do you say about that?

That's a huge mistake. Maybe thirty years ago there were plenty of opportunities for Mexicans in the United States. But I think that today, if someone is willing to work hard, they could do as well in Mexico as they could in the United States. The thing is that competition is fierce in America. In Mexico if you are good, you stand out faster.

My personal opinion is that, for my three brothers and my sister, we had the chance to live in the United States, legally. I and my three brothers all preferred to stay in Mexico. My sister moved to the United States because she got a job. She was hired by Bank of America. She's been living here for sixteen years. My children went to school in Monterrey and they stayed there. They are very happy. They have good jobs and are happy living in Mexico.

This is a generalization, but some people have said that living in the United States is more focused on making money and those living in Mexico are more focused on living life.

You can make money and enjoy life in Mexico. If you don't try to fool someone or fool the system, you can make money, as well as you can make money in the United States.

Put another way, some people say that in the USA we live to work and that in Mexico, you work to live.

That is true in the larger cities – Monterrey, Guadalajara, Mexico, and Puebla – where people live to work. But in the smaller towns you can have a life and enjoy life besides

your job. Why is that? Because in the smaller town, you have time to come back home and have lunch with your wife or husband or your children. You see your family more.

Is the siesta still a common practice?

[She smiled] Oh yes. Yes, very much, it is a good thing to do.

I take mine every day, for sure.

Yes, it is healthy.

But in the big cities, do they still have a two-hour lunch break?

In some companies, they have a set of hours from nine to five. Because they do business with Asia and Europe and the United States, they have work in one block of time.

Do you know anyone with a child who has disabilities?

Yes.

Since you have lived in the United States, do you feel it would be better to have a child with disabilities in the United States or in Mexico.

[Without hesitation] In the United States. In Mexico, not very long ago, they used to conceal them [the children]. You see the families of five or ten years ago, they started founding special schools for special children. You see that it is not something to be ashamed of anymore. The Catholic Church taught that having a child with a disability was punishment for some kind of sin, because somebody in the family, generations ago did something wrong. Now they know it is a genetic thing. We formed a lot of schools and everybody gives money for that. It is changing.

How about the attitude towards parents or grandparents who have disabilities like Alzheimer's? In the United States, we put them in nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Would you do that in Mexico?

[She got really sad at the thought]. No, no, no, no, no. We would not do that. It is socially, at any level, it is a very bad thing that you take the father, mother, grandfather, grandmother to a nursing home. You are seen as a heartless person. You learn that you have to take care of your own, especially the elder ones. Because what you do to the elder ones, your children will do to you. It's not something you have to say, they just watch you. So if you take your father or mother to a nursing home, you will probably end up there yourself.

In conclusion, what would you like to say to my readers to dispel the misconceptions we have about Mexicans?

The most positive thing I can say about being Mexican and living in Mexico is the people. Not the money. You can have a lot of money and be very unhappy. And you can have enough money. What is enough? Enough is not to have to important needs uncovered and to have a good life. I would say that maybe Mexicans are more concurrence with having enough money than having a lot of money and having a good life at the same time.

Thank you very much.

Oh you are welcome.

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