

THE ART OF RAMÓN CONTRERAS AND THE MEXICAN MURALISTS MOVEMENT



THE LIFE OF RAMÓN CONTRERAS

Ramón Contreras was born in Zacapu, Mexico on January 21, 1917 to Antonio and Senida Contreras. His father, a blacksmith during the Mexican Revolution, made horseshoes for Pancho Villa's army. Antonio, with his pregnant wife Senida and Ramón, fled to America and settled in San Bernardino, California. Ramón did not return to Mexico until 1937.

Ramón, the oldest of 13 children in the family, decided to be a mural artist at the age of 10. In his junior year at San Bernardino High, he took a commercial art class. One of his assignments was to visualize a travel project using colored inks. He produced a picture of Mexican life. His art teacher, Hester Leaverton, recognized Ramón's talent and mentored him during his remaining school years.

Ramón's art style reflected his vision of a Mexico based on the stories of his family. He said, "You know I had never seen Mexico, but I have always painted Mexico, as my people (parents) made me see it in the stories they told me."

In 1935, Ramón entered the National Higgins Ink Drawing Contest, earning fourth place among more than 3,000 entries. For two years he represented his school with a one-man exhibit at the annual exhibit of the Pacific Arts Association for public school and college art. In 1936, he painted a mural for the San Bernardino High School library. Measuring 70 x 4 feet, it depicted the everyday life of old Mexico. This mural was later moved into the school's auditorium, where it still hangs. During this year, Ramón painted other murals at Glenn Ranch, California; the Desert Inn in Palm Springs; and the Los Angeles Public Library. His art was shown in San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento, Los Angeles, Laguna Beach, and Hollywood. He was the only student ever accepted in major galleries including the Stendahl Galleries of Los Angeles, Laguna Beach Art Gallery, Barker Bros. of Los Angeles, and the Desert Inn Gallery.

In 1937 Contreras returned to visit his birth country of Mexico where he met Diego Rivera. Rivera said, "Ramón — you must go on as you began, study by yourself, observing and listening to your own." He graduated from high school in the winter of 1937 and began studies at Chouinard Art School in Los Angeles on a two-year scholarship.

Ramón was the youngest artist ever invited to attend the San Francisco International Exposition, held in 1939 and 1940. He showed "Going to Church" at both expositions. His last painting, it took him nine months complete.

In 1939 Ramón was diagnosed with cancer. He died at the family home on July 31, 1940. He was 21 years old.

Extracted from biographical information by Michelle Sanchez (3rd generation) and Diana Taggart (2nd generation)

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