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Mexican Folk Artist, Brilliant and Cursed, Triumphs as a Painter

His Canvas Is Bark Paper, His Admirers Are Ardent; Mr. Lorenzo's Sad Life

By Bob Davis Staff Reporter of *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

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AMEYALTEPEC, Mexico -- Since his schizophrenia was diagnosed in 1991, Alfonso Lorenzo Santos has divided his time between a psychiatric clinic in Cuernavaca and his tiny lime-green house in this remote mountain village. At home, he often gets so violent his neighbors chain him to a wall.

Yet despite his anger and terrifying delusions, Mr. Lorenzo has become one of Mexico's most innovative folk painters, piling points upon points of paint on paper, like tiny tiles in a mosaic. To his psychiatrist, Mr. Lorenzo paints as if he were blinded by the sun and sees floating black dots in front of him. To Francesco Clemente, a celebrated Italian artist who encourages Mr. Lorenzo's work, the Mexican appears "to see images through a telescope -- he breaks things down to their elemental level."



Alfonso Lorenzo Santos

Mr. Lorenzo, now around 54 years old -- he was orphaned and doesn't know his age exactly -- is part of a generation of Mexican-Indian artists from the Balsas river region, about 75 miles from Acapulco. These artists started painting in the 1960s for tourist dollars on bark paper, called amate in the Nahuatl language. Colorful amate paintings of birds and villages still sell for a few dollars at Mexican tourist sites.

Some young artists showed extravagant talent, and attracted backers who hoped the art would one day fetch the thousands of dollars that some Haitian folk painters get. That hasn't happened. Even the best amate paintings generally sell for less than

\$1,000. But Teresa Tate, a Smithsonian Institution researcher, compares amateur artists to Frida Kahlo, who was largely untrained but became a Mexican icon. "So too are the amateur paintings becoming a face of the Nahua people in Mexico," she says.

One group of amateur painters moved to Cuernavaca in the 1970s to live with Edmond Rabkin, a New York expatriate who introduced them to Western literature and music. Those artists, especially Marcial Camilo Ayala, whose work is now displayed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, often paint romantic visions of village life.

Some Ameyaltepec artists developed a harder edge, especially Mr. Lorenzo, whose figures rarely smile and whose birds have menacing claws. In the 1970s, Mr. Lorenzo moved to Mexico City, where an art dealer promoted him as the descendant of Aztec princes, and where he had his first psychotic episode, says Gobi Stromberg, a Cuernavaca art patron. Complaining to friends that his heart was exploding, he returned to Ameyaltepec around 1980, wandered the arid mountains, cursed at neighbors and flung stones at them. Barely 5 feet tall, but stocky, Mr. Lorenzo became a threatening figure. After villagers decided he had to be restrained, several volunteers wrestled him to the ground and chained him to a wall in his house, where he remained for several years.

"It was medieval," says Jonathan Amith, a U.S. anthropologist who visited Mr. Lorenzo. "There was a hook attached to the wall. He had on underwear and shorts, and he was incoherent." His wife eventually left him. Says Mr. Lorenzo: "They grabbed me and put me in chains." He says he doesn't know what made them do that, though he acknowledges he gets violent and can't stop himself.

Cristino Flores Medino, an Ameyaltepec artist, says that the village, which doesn't have a psychiatrist or police force, had little choice. In 1991, after Mr. Lorenzo was arrested for assault in a nearby village, a group of artists arranged for his release and sold paintings to pay for a round of therapy with Cuernavaca psychiatrist Alberto Guerrero Ochoa, who runs a residential clinic. Dr. Guerrero, 50, has continued to treat

Mr. Lorenzo in exchange for a few dozen of his paintings. A Oaxaca psychiatrist, who treats another artist who cuts himself and uses his blood as paint, consults on Mr. Lorenzo's treatment.

Mr. Lorenzo fell into a distressing cycle, says Dr. Guerrero. The artist would visit the clinic every month or two and take a course of antipsychotic medication, which would calm him enough so he could return to Ameyaltepec to paint. There, he would eventually skip his medicine, get violent and wind up chained to a wall, with only a sketchpad to occupy himself. The drawings illustrate his decline: The fierce birds of the early pages trail off into simple outlines of houses a child might do.

Mr. Lorenzo often paints village scenes such as this one of a young man courting a woman.

In the Nahua culture, mental illness is seen as a force beyond individual control -- something like a curse. Traditional psychotherapy isn't useful, says Dr. Guerrero, who treated Mr. Lorenzo instead with various medications and also encouraged Mr.

Lorenzo to focus on his painting. "The therapy is to give him what it takes for him to feel well," the psychiatrist says.

As Mr. Lorenzo's delusions intensified, he has lived for longer periods at the clinic, where he often paints village scenes including one in which a young man is courting a woman. In a shaded courtyard, he has lucid moments in which he talks of improving his Spanish and of his desire "to paint and sell, paint and sell, paint and sell." Then he's off on a riff about how he's the president of Acapulco or conversing with an invisible band of musicians who, he says, follow him.

His painting has taken on an increasingly religious tone. One painting, done in the style of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting, shows a fierce face of God, with eyes made up of other tiny tiled eyes. A second shows a nude woman by a tree that resembles a crucifix. "He likes the goriness of Catholicism because it depicts a kind of scary world he lives in," says George Mason University professor Tyler Cowen, who has written a book on amateur paintings.

But when his delusions are most intense, he is at a loss for themes and direction. One still life of fruit on a table, painted from an overhead perspective, is smeared on one side because Mr. Lorenzo collapsed over the work. Sometimes he takes his inspiration from small religious prints sold outside Mexican churches, says Dr. Guerrero.

A painting by Mexican artist Alfonso Lorenzo Santos depicts God in the style of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

Mostly, he longs to go home again, and Ms. Stromberg, his patron, agreed to take him there by taxi late last month. Initially pleased, the painter insisted that his imaginary

musicians come, too. Ms. Stromberg didn't blanch. She figured that if they were in his head in Cuernavaca, they would travel that way to Ameyaltepec.

But the next day, Mr. Lorenzo hardly got the welcome he was hoping for. Ms. Stromberg offered to pay 1,000 pesos a month, nearly \$100 -- big money to villagers -- to someone who would feed him and check to see that he takes his medicine. But his brother turned him down, as did an elderly uncle and aunt, who live in a house made of mud and straw. Even when Mr. Lorenzo stuffed the money into his uncle's hand, essentially begging for his help, the uncle told him no, switching to Nahuatl for emphasis.

But as Mr. Lorenzo stared imploringly, the uncle wordlessly relented. Once Mr. Lorenzo had left the hut, another family member explained the family's hesitation: "Alfonso can be so violent, he even hit his son's wife."

At a village meeting a week later, Mr. Amith, the anthropologist, says Mr. Lorenzo told him that he's working on a painting he started at the clinic. It's his interpretation of a Titian portrait, "Ecce Homo," showing Christ with his hands bound.

—*Sara Schaefer Muñoz contributed to this article.*

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