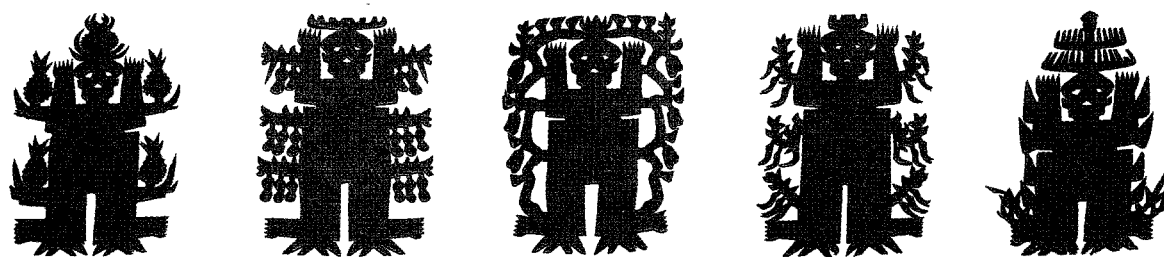




THE



HEART OF ART

VISIT RUTH
LECHUGA'S HOME,
AND STEP INTO
ONE OF THE MOST
EXTRAORDINARY
MUSEUMS IN
THE AMERICAS



IT IS A TEMPERATE, MID-AUGUST AFTERNOON AND I'M inching my way through the crowded makeshift market that is set up every Tuesday along Calle Pachuca in Condesa, a middle-class residential neighbourhood in Mexico City. Condesa, which is just southwest of the trendy Zona Rosa, is said to contain no tourist sites, an opinion shared by the helpful taxi driver who brought me here. But it is, in fact, home to one of the city's hidden gems. I arrive at the doorway to Edificio Condesa, an early 20th-century apartment block, where I have arranged to meet Mexico's foremost curator and historian of traditional arts and crafts at her ►

BY DAVID HAYES

THE MASKS IN LECHUGA'S COLLECTION
WERE ORIGINALLY MEANT FOR RITUAL DANCES
AND CELEBRATIONS, SUCH AS
CARNIVAL AND HOLY WEEK. BY DONNING THE
MASK, THE WEARER ALSO TOOK
ON THE CHARACTER THAT IT PORTRAYED



museum. The din from the street vendors prevents me from hearing the tiny, high-pitched sound of Ruth Lechuga's voice until finally, looking up, I see her face peering through the flowers in a second-floor balcony window box. She drops down a key so I can let myself in.

I've visited a number of grand museums, some of them monuments that are themselves as architecturally and historically noteworthy as the collections they contain. The Ruth D. Lechuga Folk Art Museum, however, ranks as one of the most unprepossessing and, for that reason, one of the most extraordinary museums a visitor is likely to find in the Americas. It occupies 18 rooms plus the entrance foyer – which is to say, almost every square centimetre of space – in Lechuga's home. (A visit is arranged by appointment only: there is no sign, not even a thumbtacked note on the building's front door, and the museum is listed in few guidebooks.)

Mounted on the walls, displayed in cabinets, arranged on the floors and stored in closets, trunks and under beds, is a breathtaking array of ceremonial masks, religious icons, toys, musical instruments, textiles, pottery and furniture made from materials ranging from wood, tin, clay, glass and bone to wool, cotton, cardboard, palm leaves and gourds. Private collections often narrowly reflect the interests and idiosyncrasies of their owners, but Lechuga's collection of arts and crafts encompasses virtually every region and style in Mexico.

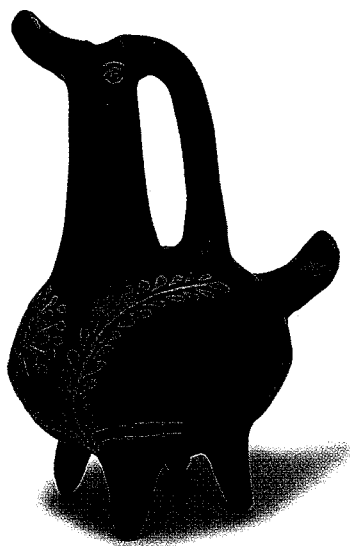
For those of us who live in or near urban centres, Mexican folk art has a bad rep. Its products are among the most ubiquitous in North America, ►

THIS DUCK-SHAPED
VESSEL, BELOW, HELPS TO MAKE
UP LECHUGA'S EXTENSIVE
COLLECTION OF PUPPETS, MASKS (LEFT),
PAINTINGS, FIGURINES,
ELABORATE HEADGEAR AND MORE

with brightly painted, poorly formed pottery, machine-made textiles of synthetic yarns and various trinkets from Mexico spilling off the racks in houseware stores, bargain clothing outlets and cute boutiques specializing in the kind of mass-produced souvenirs you have avoided buying in airports around the world. Even a vacation in Mexico won't guarantee quality, unless you can find a local market that's off the beaten tourist path.

In Mexico City, however, there are opportunities to see an impressive range of fine traditional folk arts and crafts – also known as *artesanía* (handicraft) or, in more dignified terms, *arte popular* ("popular arts") – and, in some cases, to buy them.

As a historian, Lechuga leaves the commerce to others. At 79, she is a tiny, gracious woman, neatly dressed today in a burgundy sweater and slacks and wearing large, round-framed glasses. She has a handsomely structured face with strong cheek-



bones, her grey hair is pulled back into a tight bun. The collection, she explains, is roughly organized according to states and types of crafts – one wall covered in masks from the state of Chiapas, for example; one shelf lined with lacquered trays and boxes from Guerrero; the floor of another room dedicated to pottery from Puebla.

The masks attract a visitor's eye first. They're worn during elaborate ritual dances performed at religious rites and other celebrations throughout the year, and Lechuga's collection occupies most of the available wall space. When someone dons a mask, she explains, the wearer takes on the character of the person, animal or god represented by it. The variety of masks is staggering. They're made of wood, papier mâché, clay and leather, with expressions ranging from comical to ghoulish. Pointing to a series of stunning tiger masks from Chiapas, she says: "The tiger is maybe the most important animal character. It represents the animal-double of Texcatlipoca, an old god who was very powerful. He could give riches to people or take them away. He could decide on life or death, and he is both feared and adored." ▶



EVERY SURFACE OF LECHUGA'S
18-ROOM HOME IS COVERED
IN THE ARTS OF HER ADOPTED COUNTRY.
CLAY PIECES, SUCH AS THIS
ÁRBOL DE LA VIDA (TREE OF LIFE), RIGHT,
FORM ONE CATEGORY OF ARTWORK

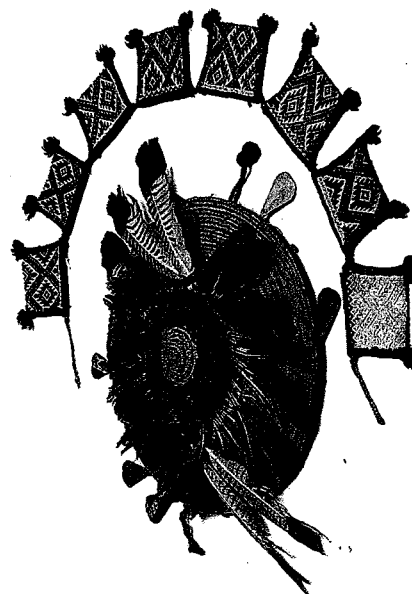
An adjacent wall is covered with masks from Guanajuato, in central Mexico. Lechuga shows me a particularly grotesque one and says: "This is Bárto, a ceremonial clown in Christmas plays. But this is also the character that asks questions about what's going on so the whole story is told and everyone in the village understands the plot."

Asked about her own story, Lechuga says that in 1939, when she was 19, she left her native Vienna with her family shortly before the Nazi invasion. Settling in Mexico City, her father, a businessman whose real love was archaeology, took his daughter, a medical student whose real love was handicrafts, on trips to rural archaeological sites. There they also visited indigenous communities and strolled through the weekly markets. Stroking a collection of garments piled on one side of a sofa, Lechuga says: "My first love was textiles because I could relate to the clothing people wore, and they were easy to fold up and put away. I'd always bought pottery, because it was cheap, but it was difficult to store. Then I became fascinated by masks..."

I point at a clay object on a shelf behind her head. Resembling a candelabra, it's about 45 cen-

timetres tall and decorated with carved angels. Made in Puebla, it's a "tree of life" (*árbol de la vida*), a form of Mexican pottery that is usually ornate – there is one in the next room made of burnished clay that stands a metre tall and is covered in an elaborately carved motif of sun, moon and stars, with fish leaping from the sea at its base. This one is rather less elaborate. "It's old," explains Lechuga. "It was used in a procession ceremony. When they're made today they're much more ornamental, more ostentatious. The more artisans produced work for commercial trade, the more ornamental [the work] became."

I ask her how she feels about artisans making folk art for sale. "People have to live," she replies. "In the first part of the century there was no need to make things to sell to the outside world. People were isolated. They made just what they needed ►





LECHUGA REFUSES TO
CONDEMN ARTISANS WHO NOW MAKE FOLK
ART SPECIFICALLY FOR SALE, NOT USE.
"PEOPLE HAVE TO LIVE," SHE SAYS.
"ALL ART, ALL CULTURES,
CHANGE OVER TIME OR DIE OUT"

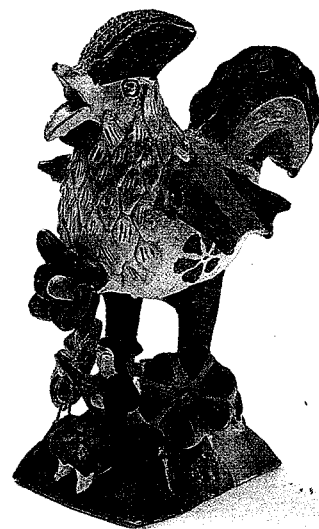
for themselves or to trade with neighbours, because each small village was self-sufficient." Gazing thoughtfully into the middle distance, she says: "All art, all cultures, change over time or die out."

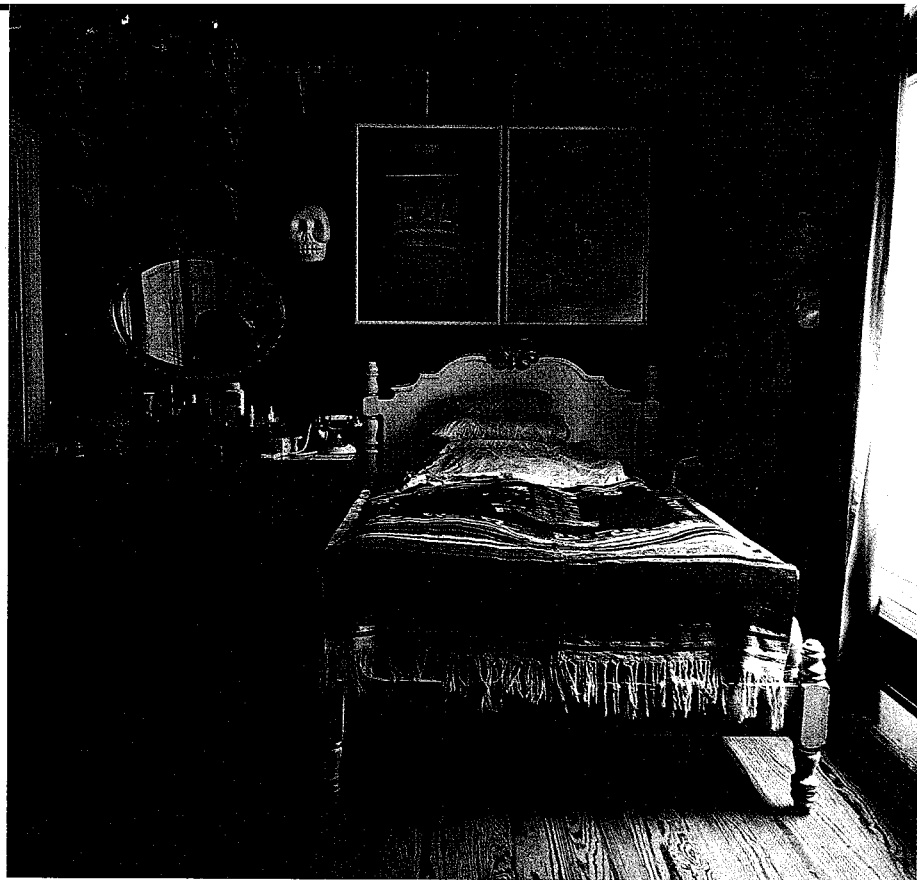
In an essay published last year in the bilingual art journal *Artes de Mexico*, journalist and anthropologist Alfonso Alfaro wrote: "Folk art – like the societies which create it – is far from peaceful territory. It is the battleground for fierce disputes: one trend seeks to cater to the needs of exotic consumerism and mass-market trade while the other is led by the artisan who strives to reconcile innovation with loyalty to tradition, individual expression with community heritage."

Arts and crafts represent an often uncomfortable relationship between economic forces and a country's traditions. One of the crises facing artisans, especially in rural Mexico, is the web of pressures forcing them to alter the traditional techniques that are, often what made their crafts appealing to urban, North American markets in

the first place. I talked to Marta Turok, a friend of Lechuga's and president of AMACUP (Mexican Association of Popular Arts and Culture), a private, non-profit organization that sets up artisan co-operatives and helps in the design, production and sale of popular arts. "It can be a vicious circle," she says. "Artisans produce crafts. Buyers, often from outside Mexico, pit them against each other to lower prices. When they look for cheaper solutions, quality necessarily drops."

By way of example, Turok told me about lacquered gourds. A popular craft among tourists and well represented in Lechuga's museum, the gourds were traditionally made by alternating layers of dolomite – very finely ground quartz ►





and limestone – with chia oil, extracted from a plant. The gourd was then burnished by hand and painted with natural pigments such as indigo. Over time, Turok explained, plaster has been substituted for dolomite, commercial linseed oil for chia oil and industrial colours for natural pigments, with each replacement cheaper than the original materials. Turok, an anthropologist by training and a pragmatic activist by temperament, went to villages where the crafts are made. The artisans, she learned, wanted to go back to the old ways if they could.

With funding from the Bacomer Bank Cultural Foundation, Turok did lab testing on chia oil to demonstrate that it had superior adhesion, drying and durability properties, as well as a sheen that linseed oil couldn't duplicate. She then had industrial designers produce equipment that would make extraction of the oil less expensive.

In one village in Guerrero, the artisans were concerned about the fact that the natural pigments were more splotchy than the commercial ones. Turok, wearing her marketing hat, advised them

to value the splotches, because they were intrinsic to the work, signalling its authenticity. As she told me: "The slight imperfections are what give traditional crafts their character, distinguishing them from mass-produced trinkets."

Back in Lechuga's museum, as we walk from room to room, I think about the curator's refreshingly open attitude toward tradition, in a field where there is often a great deal of narrow categorizing. Some folk art collectors are motivated by quantity, with little interest in understanding the underlying history and culture. Others are only interested in old pieces, believing anything contemporary is by definition inferior. Still others only value work that is made for cultural purposes and is therefore "pure" rather than market-driven.

Lechuga, however, is driven by the aesthetics and originality of each piece; she is as interested in the modern evolution of folk art as she is in its history and traditions. For example, she doesn't believe that masks made for decorative purposes (that is, specifically for sale as a craft) are necessarily of less value than ones that were first used in ceremonial dances – although this distinction is the norm in the commercial mask-collecting trade. (She prefers ceremonial masks, however, and objects when decorative masks make inappropriate use of traditional symbols.) Her collection includes garments woven from natural fibres as well as a few newer ones made of acrylic. ("Indians like synthetic fibres because of the brilliant colours," she explains, pointing out that this change was driven by personal preference in addition to the lower

THE DEATH'S HEAD MASKS
IN HER BEDROOM WERE ALL DESIGNED
FOR DAY OF THE DEAD
CELEBRATIONS. LECHUGA GREET'S THEM
EACH DAY WITH, "GOOD MORNING,
MASKS, I'M STILL ALIVE" . .



price and greater availability of synthetics.) In Lechuga's museum, there are large bold pieces and microscopically subtle ones – huge urns fashioned into men's heads, for example, along with test tubes containing carved and painted toothpicks. Here the crude is at home with the sublime. Not far from some sophisticated lacquered trays and chests, a rusty blue oil can hangs on the wall, carved into a pig's face with horns and feathery eyelashes.

"I don't gloat over the collection like a Scrooge McDuck, hoarding all the objects I have been able to acquire as if they were trophies whose sole value lies in their uniqueness or in the fact that they are not made any more," she once told Marta Turok. "I am attracted to well-crafted pieces because I know how much work has gone into them – but that is not the point. I want the collection to be useful, to demonstrate this country's many roots."

Lechuga leads me down a narrow hallway and through a door. To my astonishment, even her bedroom is part of the museum. Sitting on her bed, she invites me to sit beside her as she explains the significance of the crafts that cover her walls. Facing her bed, the last thing Lechuga sees before falling asleep are some 50 skulls, each one depicting a variation of anguished grimace or tortured scream. They are death's head masks, made for one of Mexico's most important celebrations, El Día de los Muertos (The Day of the Dead), held on November 2, All Souls' Day. Mexicans have

a matter-of-fact attitude toward death, which is sometimes disquieting to outsiders. They believe that the dead are never far away and deserve an annual celebration in their honour. Lechuga, who has no trouble falling asleep with the masks looking down on her, has absorbed this belief.

"You might think the expressions would be all alike," Lechuga says mildly, staring at the masks. "But when you see them all together there is a big range of expressions. These are all from different regions and different mask makers. Each morning I say, 'Good morning, masks, I'm still alive.'"

Like the culture this elderly Austrian has adopted and lovingly dedicated her life to preserving, Lechuga makes only the slightest of distinctions between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane. Traditional folk arts and crafts in Mexico have often been in danger of dying out, threatened by urbanization, modernism, the market demands of global economies. Here in Lechuga's museum, though, they are very much alive. ■

David Hayes is a Toronto-based journalist and author with an interest in the arts.

DETAILS

- The Ruth D. Lechuga Folk Art Museum is located at Edificio Condesa; Door B, Apt. 6; Col. Condesa. An appointment to visit can be arranged by calling or faxing (52-5) 553-5538.
- The headquarters of Marta Turok's AMACUP – at Río Amazonas 17, Col. Cuauhtémoc – is open to the public by appointment, with a selection of folk arts on display for sale. Telephone or fax either (52-5) 592-7360 or (52-5) 566-6482.
- Bazar Sábado (Saturday Bazaar) at Plaza San Jacinto in the southern suburb of San Ángel features high-quality ceramics, woodwork, textiles and jewellery. Look for the small shop belonging to noted mask collector Jaled Muyaes, who specializes in masks used in ceremonial dances.
- Mexican folk arts are available at four FONART (National Fund for Crafts) outlets in Mexico City. The main store is located at Av. Patriotismo 691, Mixcoac, C.P. 03910; telephone (52-5) 598-1666. Although the crafts tend toward the mainstream, they are all handmade by genuine artisans.



PHOTO: PATRICIA LAGARDE

