

## A look back at L.A.'s first Mexican-American artists

Staff Reports

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Pioneers in all fields are often forgotten as the decades pass and newcomers take center stage.

But it's not possible to look at the history of art in Southern California — Los Angeles in particular — without acknowledging the work of Mexican-American painters and sculptors who helped push the region's art scene into the modern era.

"Art Along the Hyphen: The Mexican-American Generation," a new exhibit at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles, looks at a generation of artists who made their careers in L.A. between the early 20th century and the rise of the Chicano art movement in the '60s. Six artists, including the "Father of Chicano Art," are spotlighted.

"The show is an exploration of ethnic identity specific to Los Angeles," said the Autry's Amy Scott, who organized the exhibition, which was curated by Chon Noriega, Terezita Romo and Pilar Tompkins Rivas. "These artists combine their sense of Mexican heritage with their surroundings to create something new."

The bulk of the paintings and sculptures come from educational institutions or private collections, and few have ever been shown publicly.

One artist whose work may look familiar is Hernando G. Villa, who was born in 1881. Villa was selected to lead off the exhibition, Scott said, because he was the first Mexican-American to produce a significant body of work.

"Villa is the most traditional and representational here," Scott said. "He was extremely commercially successful. Most of his work depicts this Spanish fantasy past of señoritas strumming guitars and sombrero-wearing Mexicans. The images look clichéd to us today, but they were the popular view of Mexicans as held by Anglos."

Villa's images were heavily imitated until they became commonplace. One of his most popular pieces, however, depicted another culture. He created the long-used advertising images for the Santa Fe Railroad.

While Villa sought mainstream popularity, Alberto Valdés, who was 80 when he died in 1998, painted for personal pleasure, so few of his paintings were ever seen. But his self-taught style, which frequently combined abstractionism with Mexican iconography, has made his popularity among critics grow in recent decades.

The two living artists represented are sculptor Dora De Larios and Roberto Chavez, who, unlike Valdés, voice political views in their work.

De Larios grew up in downtown Los Angeles and was heavily influenced by her neighbors of Japanese heritage. She was deeply affected by many Japanese Americans being removed to detention camps during World War II, and her work contain elements of Japanese Haniwa sculpture and pre-Columbian Mexican clay figures.

Chavez, who was born in 1932, is paired in the exhibition with Edward Carrillo (1937-97). They were among the first Chicano artists to exhibit their work in L.A. during the 1960s. Their shows took place at the now-defunct Ceeje Gallery.

Chavez reinterpreted a photograph of the four men from that first exhibition in a painting titled "The Group Shoe." The title comes from Ceeje co-owner Jerry Jerome, who pronounced the word show as shoe, as in, "It's going to be a big shoe."

Perhaps the most influential of all artists in the show is Domingo Ulloa, who was named the "Father of Chicano Art" in 1993 by the California State Assembly. Born in 1919, Ulloa believed his mission as a social-realist painter was to inform the public about political issues.

One of Ulloa's best-known paintings is "Racism/Incident at Little Rock," which depicts six black students who were part of the 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Ark. The clearly depicted students clash visually with the protesters in the background, who are painted as white demented creatures with no discerning features except huge mouths.

Ulloa, like the other five artists, retained his Mexican influences, while forging a personal voice that included the culture of California. They helped pave the way for the young artists of today, even if many of the new generation don't know it.

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