

Art

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Cultural exchanges

The strong artistic relationship shared by Chicago and Mexico is the focus of a new Pilsen exhibition. By Zach Long



Errol Ortiz, *Astronaut Targets*

MORE THAN A century ago, 101 artworks by Mexican artists were shown in Chicago as part of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. In March, two of those pieces—paintings by José María Velasco and José María Jara—will return to the city for the first time in a National Museum of Mexican Art exhibition that explores the creative connection between Chicago and Mexico.

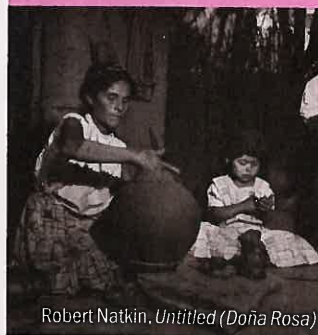
Part of the yearlong Art Design Chicago initiative celebrating the city's creative legacy, "Arte Diseño Xicágo" surveys work created between the exposition and about 1970, when the Civil Rights era ended. "It is important to showcase how the arts from Mexico have been a part of our city since the railroads connected the urban Midwest to the Mexican border," says chief curator Cesáreo Moreno, who sourced pieces by Mexico-based artists who spent time in Chicago and Chicago artists who spent time in Mexico.

Some of the earliest work

included in the collection was made by Mexican immigrants who came to Chicago in the early 1900s to work in union-organized factories. Many were already skilled ceramics producers and metalworkers, and some honed these artisan talents at Little Italy's Hull House, where free arts education and social resources were provided to the working-class neighbors. Several ceramic pieces included in the exhibit were made in Hull House kilns and feature bright colors and decorations that reflect traditional Mexican styles.

Chicago artists who were interested in cultures south of the border are also in the exhibit, such as Robert Natkin, a photographer hired by the Mexican Tourism Bureau in the late 1940s to capture images for a campaign aimed at enticing American travelers. The pictures he brought back—including photos of a

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Robert Natkin, *Untitled (Doña Rosa)*

costume maker and a ceramicist whose works are on display in "Arte Diseño Xicágo"—were ultimately rejected by the bureau but furnish a candid look at the people of Mexico.

The show doesn't neglect the work of contemporary artists, such as Chicago Imagist Errol Ortiz. The bold, vivid imagery of Ortiz's 1965 painting *Astronaut Targets* still looks futuristic today, prefacing the innovations of modern Mexican-American artists.

"It's not one linear history," Moreno says about the show. "It's the experiences of different individuals who are linked together because of their talent and their culture." While it's grounded in two places that are geographically and politically separate, "Arte Diseño Xicágo" argues that creativity knows no borders.

→ "Arte Diseño Xicágo" runs Mar 23–Aug 19 at the National Museum of Mexican Art, 1852 W 19th St (nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org). Free.

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