

THE RAMOS MARTINEZ MURALS
AT THE CORONADO PUBLIC LIBRARY

By

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Among its many legacies, Coronado is very fortunate to possess the monumental fresco murals by the Mexican painter and art teacher, Alfredo Ramos Martinez. Two of his notable murals are located at the Coronado Public Library, the “El Dia del Mercado” and the “Canasta de Flores,” both painted for the interior decoration of the La Avenida Café, a much loved former restaurant in Coronado. Albert Bram, owner and developer of the La Avenida Café, commissioned Ramos Martinez to paint several murals for his new restaurant during its construction in 1938.

Albert Bram, a native of Switzerland, had chosen to come to Coronado in 1928 to operate the “Island Lunch” café, first located at 1333 Orange Avenue, then at 1335 Orange Avenue. In 1938. He hired Walter Vestal to design and build the La Avenida Cafe at 1301 Orange Avenue in a Spanish-style architecture.

Mr. Bram then commissioned Alfredo Ramos Martinez to paint five fresco murals for the interior of his new restaurant. Senor Ramos Martinez had just completed work for the Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church in La Jolla. He was paid a total cost of \$1,000. The forty-eight foot-long “El Dia del Mercado” was painted in the main dining

room, opposite the front doors. This mural included spaces for three passageways, represented by the three cutouts within the mural's length. "The Canasta de Flores," a 5' x 6' ft. still life fresco was painted in the restaurant's cocktail lounge. These two murals are now located and prominently displayed at the Coronado Public Library.

Two other significant murals were also originally located at the La Avenida Café, including the "Flores de Mexico," a painting of the heads of three native Mexican women carrying baskets of flowers on top of their heads; and the "Los Cacomixtles," a painting of Mexican native foxes. This painting was in the outdoor area above a fireplace. The mural "Flores de Mexico" was located in a separate dining room and was subsequently removed and sold after the restaurant closed. The "Los Cacomixtles" mural was lost during an early remodel. The "Canasta de Flores" mural had been covered by paint and wallpaper in a remodel, while another small mural was also lost. The story of how these murals were removed from the La Avenida Café and restored will follow later in this narrative.

Alfredo Ramos Martinez was born November 12, 1872, in Monterey, Mexico. From early childhood, his keen artistic talents were obvious, and at the age of twelve, his father sent him to begin eight years of study at the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. But art teachers then believed that art should deal with classic subjects, and they tried to teach him to paint Classical and Renaissance subjects. "... they tried to teach me only to paint Grecian, Roman and European figures," Martinez once explained. "They wrote my father that I was wasting my time

painting pictures of Indian workmen, and old women making tortillas. But when I wrote my father and told him I was working hard on the only things I wanted to paint, he told the director to let me do as I pleased and develop my art naturally. Then in 1897, Phoebe Hearst saw his hand-painted designs on menus for a dinner hosted by Mexican President Porfirio Diaz. She was so taken by the work that she offered to sponsor Ramos Martinez in his desire to pursue his art studies in Paris, beginning in 1899. So there he was exposed to the work of various schools of art including the impressionist and post-impressionists, he met artists like Picasso and writers like the Nicaraguan poet, Rubén Darío. He lived in Brittany for a time and painted the harsh scenes of peasant life like Van Gogh. Later, his painting, "La Primavera," was exhibited at the Paris Fall Salon in 1906 and won an art prize. Ramos Martinez would stay in France and Paris eleven years, absorbing but ultimately rejecting the various academic and impressionist schools of art that were prevalent during that period. Although he dedicated himself to indigenous Mexican art themes after his return to Mexico, one can see traces of the influence of Giotto and Gauguin in his work.

In 1910 he returned to Mexico. Ramos Martinez was appointed first to the position of Assistant Director of the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, and subsequently its Director, the national art academy where he had once been a student. It was during his tenure in 1913 at the National Art Academy, first chartered in 1785, that he took the opportunity to launch an art education program that differed from the traditional academic models of that period. It would be called the "Aire Libre," or open air school of painting, with art instruction programs launched around the country;

the first of which he named “Barbizon,” after the village in France where many early impressionist painters worked outdoors, instead of in art studios. The open air schools represented not only a place of art instruction, but also a philosophy of art, emphasizing the encouragement of the pupil’s own artistic visions and individual style of artistic expression. As Ramos Martinez stated, “In this school we are trying to mold a school of action, permitting the students to pursue their own tendencies, leading them to ignore the negative techniques of imitation. Under these conditions, the student’s own efforts and inspirations are appealed to as the center of all activities, respecting in the pupil his personal manner of seeing, thinking, and interpreting his visions.” During his tenure some 11,000 students passed through the program.

Ramos Martinez organized exhibitions of his students’ work, one of which traveled to Paris in 1926. Regarding this exhibition, Pablo Picasso said to Ramos Martinez, “Alfredo, it is impossible to believe those so young could show such genius.”

Among his early students at the open air schools were future muralists, Rufino Tamayo, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. It is not clear where and how Ramos Martinez learned the skills and techniques of the fresco muralist. In Mexico, the work of muralist Roberto Montenegro preceded Ramos Martinez. Certainly the work of Diego Rivera, Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco became famous internationally and made Mexico a world center for the modern mural. In the case of Ramos Martinez, it is likely that he developed his interest in fresco painting from his love of the polychrome paintings on the clay ceramics of the Mayan and Teotihuacán cultures, a technique for working on

clay that is covered with sand and lime and painted before drying. The themes and subjects of Ramos Martinez, both in his mural work and in his easel paintings, showed the simple beauty of the land and the indigenous peoples of Mexico.

In 1928, Ramos Martinez married Maria Sodi Romero, a native of Oaxaca. The following year, a daughter was born to them named Maria, but unfortunately, she had a congenital bone disease. Ramos Martinez sought the best medical treatment that could be found, traveling to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, then to New York, and eventually settling in Los Angeles in 1930.

After he relocated to Los Angeles at the age of 58 years, a late stage in his career, he had to reestablish his reputation in Southern California. He accepted private commissions, painting residential murals for members of the Hollywood film community. Ramos Martinez found work with screenwriter Joe Swerling, actress Beulah Bondi, directors Ernest Lubitsch and Alfred Hitchcock, and costume designer Edith Head. Exhibitions of his paintings were held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Faulkner Memorial Art Gallery in Santa Barbara, and at the Fine Arts Gallery of Balboa Park – later renamed the San Diego Museum of Art. Surviving fresco murals from Ramos Martinez are rare. Beautiful murals at the Chapman Park Hotel Wedding Chapel in Los Angeles, the Yucca Loma Ranch in Apple Valley, and the Normal School Library in Mexico City have been destroyed, along with their buildings.

The surviving examples include the Chapel of the Cemetery of Santa Barbara; the Margaret Fowler Memorial Garden at Scripps College, Claremont; and the works at the Coronado Public Library. A portal done for St. Mary's Star of the Sea Church in La Jolla during 1937 was, unfortunately, damaged by weather and was replaced using the same design in mosaic.

At the age of 74 years, Ramos Martinez began working on a nine-panel, one hundred-foot-long mural for the cloister of the Margaret Fowler Memorial Garden at Scripps College in Claremont during 1945. This monumental task was left uncompleted when Ramos Martinez died of a heart attack at his Hollywood home on November 8, 1946, five days shy of his 75th birthday.

The La Avenida Café murals in Coronado are considered some of Ramos Martinez's major works, executed during his full maturity and using his favored themes and subjects: fruits, flowers, rural Mexico, and young women going to market, depicted at a time now long gone. His style was simple, monumental, and almost hieroglyphic in its procession of Indian maidens. At this stage of his work, his colors were muted and he favored the earth tones of ochre, umber, and sienna, accented by a more limited use of red, yellow, and green. Even his plentiful blue skies were painted using distinct and separate brush strokes of blue over a neutral ground, providing for a rich color, but with a more muted tonal effect. The natural forms of both flora and human figures are outlined in black and are accented by a subtle use of geometric, crisscrossed, or horizontal lines in the background.

The fresco murals of the La Avenida Café were integral parts of the interior walls of the restaurant. Typical of the construction techniques of the time, two-by-four stud walls were covered by “button board,” which formed the substratum on which plaster was trowelled. For the mural surfaces, the trowelled plaster served as a “brown coat.” Over this surface, a smooth fresco plaster, known as the “intonaco” layer was applied. For the La Avenida Café murals, Ramos Martinez used a “fresco secco,” or dry fresco technique, using tempera as his paint.

The La Avenida Café became a popular dining destination for both local residents and Hotel del Coronado visitors. The murals themselves also became a popular attraction. Visiting Hollywood stars such as Errol Flynn and Marilyn Monroe, who were staying at the Del, would frequently dine at the La Avenida Café. One anecdote tells of Chiang Kai-shek of China recruiting aviators for Claire Chennault’s *Flying Tigers* on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. La Avenida was also famous for its “Jack Salad,” a Caesar salad made by matre d’ Jack Clapp, one of the co-inventors of the Caesar salad at Caesar’s Restaurant in Tijuana.

As the decades passed, the heirs of Albert Bram, his grandchildren Dennis Robinson and Joy Pinto ran the restaurant. Eventually, it was sold with developer interest in demolishing the building (including the murals) and building a new, larger hotel on that block. Local preservationists rallied to save the murals. With a weakened

economy, the developers defaulted on their loans, and the property was foreclosed by the new owners, Gus and Barbara Theberge in 1992. The Coronado Historical Association had been advocating for the preservation of the murals, and the new owners were sensitive to the artistic value of the Ramos Martinez murals.

The years had taken their toll on the surviving murals and several restaurant remodels had been made. A fire caused by carpet removal in 1981 blackened a section of the “El Dia del Mercado,” and an attempt to clean the mural probably discolored it. The restaurant closed in 1990, and a hole cut subsequently in the roof eventually allowed rain into the building. The Theberges were faced with the challenge of stopping further damage, repairing some of the damage already done, and safely removing the murals. An art consultant from San Diego, Pierrette van Cleve, was hired by Gus and Barbara Theberge to coordinate the preservation project. The art consultant utilized the services of art conservator and mural expert Nathan Zakheim from Los Angeles to arrange for the preservation and removal of the murals.

Nathan Zakheim brought in a team to do an assessment and initial cleaning of the murals in preparation for moving them. Although the walls were not load bearing, there was no way to remove the plaster without the supporting stud wall structure. Methods were devised to replace the two-foot by four-foot studs with more rigid steel framing, first cutting the nails that joined button board to wood. To fasten the back side of the button board to the new steel framing, fiberglass was laid over the steel and attached to the board. The forty-eight-foot-long “El Dia del Mercado” was cut into five sections that correlated to their separation by doorways, three above-door panels and

two long panels. For transportation purposes, water-soluble glued fabric was attached to the front of the mural to help prevent shattering, in case of an accident in transportation. Each section of the mural had its own protective shipping crate and padding. Each mural section and its industrial crate were then joined and lowered horizontally before the other parts of the crate could be attached. The crates were then moved out of the building and transported out of Coronado.

The "Flores de Mexico" mural was also crated and removed, and it was subsequently sold to notable Hollywood film producer Joel Silver. During interior work at the La Avenida Café, Gus Theberge uncovered the floral still life mural, "La Canasta de Flores." It had been covered in layers of wallpaper and paint. This mural was removed and sent to Nathan Zakheim's studio for restoration. It is not known when the mural was papered over, but is shown in a 1952 photograph of La Avenida Café's manager Walter Suter.

During the early stages of the Theberge takeover of the La Avenida Café project, the idea of donating the "El Dia del Mercado" mural was conceived. During 1992, the Coronado Public Library was initially approached for its interest in accepting the mural. At that time, the Library did not have enough wall space or a suitable location for mounting the forty-eight-foot-long mural. Additionally, plans for expanding the Library, though highly desired, were not yet firm enough to provide any assurances for properly displaying the mural; and so the offer was regrettably declined. Gus and Barbara Theberge then made the decision to donate the mural to the City of Coronado for

possible future use. The Coronado City Council accepted the gift and the mural was placed in storage.

Planning for the Coronado Library Expansion began in earnest during 1995 when the Library Board of Trustees appointed a Library Expansion Planning Committee. In 1996, the M. W. Steele Group was hired to prepare conceptual architectural plans for the Library expansion and remodel. These plans were revised and approved by the City Council, the Library Board, and the Design Review Commission in 1998. The completed design development package was approved by the City Council and the project was bid during September 2002. The San Diego firm of C. E. Wiley Construction was awarded the job. Construction began during January 2003 and the project was completed during June 2005.

From 1998 on, a focal and dedicated space for the “El Dia del Mercado” was considered paramount by Library building program planners. The architects were then able to consider planning an appropriate space for the mural, in conjunction with the Library floor plan and the building’s structural elements. The fragile nature of fresco and plaster also began to be considered from an engineering perspective. The mounting of the mural in the Library would have to be done on a strong structural support, but also one able to safely vibrate in the event of an earthquake. Two additional important steps would have to be taken. First, receiving permission from the Coronado City Council to place the “El Dia del Mercado” at the Coronado Public Library; and second, to obtain funding to restore the mural and to mount it in place.

The design development for the Coronado Public Library expansion and renovation proceeded through the work of M. W. Steele Group architects. Early in the design, it was decided by the planning group, composed of Library Board of Trustees, senior Library staff, City of Coronado Engineering and Project Development staff, and architects to place the “El Dia del Mercado” mural in the new entry lobby, to be located behind the check-out counter. The mural would be placed in front of the older building’s concrete columns that had formerly separated the north exterior courtyard from the Library interiors. This space would become the new lobby, where the mural could be seen by all visitors. It would be illuminated, and the glass curtain wall facing the mural would allow views of it even at night.

With the preliminary plans completed, the Library Board and the Library Director formally asked the Coronado City Council for permission to locate the mural at the renovated Coronado Public Library. On March 20, 2001, the City Council approved the Library’s request to place the mural in its new lobby. Subsequently, the Library Board of Trustees and the City Council also approved a contract for Nathan Zakheim and Associates to restore the crated mural sections and to mount the mural onto specially designed and built structural steel columns and steel frame.

During discussions with art consultant Pierrette van Cleve, the Library Director was informed that the newly restored floral mural, the “Canasta de Flores” from the La Avenida Café, was up for sale by Gus and Barbara Theberge, and was being shown at a gallery in Los Angeles. After many rounds of discussions between the owners,

Library administration, the Library Board, and the Friends of the Library, a course of action was put in place to acquire the mural before it sold to another buyer. After determining financing options and reaching agreement on the terms of the sale, the Friends of the Coronado Public Library purchased the “La Canasta de Flores” on October 22, 2001, and then had the mural relocated to Coronado.

The “El Dia del Mercado” mural, in its five crates, was in turn moved to Los Angeles where Nathan Zakheim and his crew began the extensive restoration process during March 2003. The mural panels were installed in a small aircraft hanger rented for the restoration work on the site of the old Hughes Aircraft Co. at Playa Vista, where the Spruce Goose airplane had been built. After mounting the mural sections together and removing the protective fabric covering, the laborious work of cleaning the fresco began. After an initial surface cleaning, restoration staff began a deeper cleaning, using professional dental picks to clean out carbon and soil, one pore at a time. Once this lengthy task was completed, surface damage was repaired and in-painting was executed, using similar pigments in areas that had suffered color loss. This in-painting was done over a surface sealer, which makes it a “reversible” process should that step ever become necessary. The entire restoration process had taken over a year.

When the mural sections were together, final measurements and installation coordinates were taken. After this work, the steel column and framing support structure could be fabricated and installed in the Library’s new lobby. This support structure itself had gone through several designs using an engineer, with review by architects, the mural restorer, and others involved in the project. Neoprene rubber surrounds the two

murals within their steel frames, protecting them from seismic vibrations.

When the new lobby of the Coronado Public Library was nearly completed, Nathan Zakheim and his crew returned to install the mural sections and to finish the final details. This glorious work of art once again became available for public viewing when the newly renovated and expanded Coronado Public Library opened its doors on June 10, 2005.