



Rodolfo Morales

There was a sweetness to Oaxacan artist Rodolfo Morales, a patience and self-effacement that was perhaps unexpected in an artist regarded as one of the most important figures in contemporary Mexican art.

Growing up, he was the outcast, but from that isolation grew a clear vision that his fellow Oaxacan artist Rufino Tamayo recognized early. "His voice, although it is a quiet voice, now begins to be heard, because it has something to say and says it in a convincing way."

Morales's demeanor rarely revealed the determination and commitment that he brought both to his art and the restoration work that Fundación Cultural Rodolfo Morales performed on more than a dozen buildings in the village of his birth, Ocotlán. He maintained a studio in Ocotlán in a restored colonial house. With the morning light pouring in through large second-floor windows, Morales would begin his long days by working on collages before turning to the oil paintings that reconfigure the Mexico he knew into something both recognizable and magically new. Despite the surreal nature of his work, Morales said it came not from his dreams as much as from hard work. "I don't believe much in inspiration," he said. "I believe in discipline."

Morales made that remark a little more than a month before his death in January 2001. His voice was particularly soft that day, but his passion remained strong. He expressed little concern about how others would remember him. But he did hope that his foundation's work would be carried on by the young people who learned restoration techniques through his efforts.

Although a believer in computer technology, Morales lamented the impact that modernization was having on the local culture. He found reason for hope in the women of Oaxaca, one of his favorite artistic subjects. "The most authentic thing about Oaxaca is its primitive quality," he said. "Even though the city has evolved a lot, it still has the women: With their faces, their braids and colored ribbons and embroidered blouses—the ones that you see in the market. They know only how to be Oaxaqueñas."



OPPOSITE: A town meeting in the mayor's office in Ocotlán is enveloped by murals painted by Rodolfo Morales. A Mexican tradition since the revolution, public murals by famous painters belong to and are available for the permanent enjoyment of all the people within the community.

ABOVE: Lost in his work in his studio at the Casa de Cultura in Ocotlán, Morales painted by morning light, surrounded by his tubes of paint and the songs of birds outside his second-story window. His assistants would chat with him as he painted, while he made decisions regarding his exhibitions and the sale of his work.

Mole

As the clock pushed toward eleven, someone at a gathering of Mexicans and visiting Americans finally asked what was for dinner. When he learned that a mole was on the menu, he and the other Mexicans just shook their heads.

"So late for mole," he said. "Her mole is delicious. But in a few hours when you are sleeping, it will explode in your stomach. Then do strange things to your dreams."

Until that odd and ominous statement, the Americans had regarded mole as simply a delicious sauce, albeit one closely linked with Oaxaca and the Day of the Dead. There are seven main varieties of mole (some a combination of twenty or more ingredients) and as many variations as there are cooks. Moles range from the smoky chocolate-brown of *mole negro* to the sweet flavor of golden *mole amarillo*. The sauce is most commonly served over fowl—although the mole itself is always the star.

While mole was likely prepared in pre-Columbian times, modern versions incorporate both native ingredients and items brought to Mexico by the Spaniards. Indigenous chiles are the prime element (*mole negro* is often made with five different kinds) but freshly made chocolate, along with nuts, pumpkin and sesame seeds, and fruits all contribute to the flavor. A pot of cooking mole is both richly fragrant and positively beautiful: a nearly perfect blend of these carefully ground ingredients prepared to the texture of liquid silk.

The whole process, from the selection of ingredients at the market to the hours simmering over a fire, can stretch for days: Mole is as much a ritual as it is a meal. So it was perhaps understandable that the mole served at the gathering arrived just a bit late.

And that night the Mexican gentleman's mole prophecy came true. The next morning the Americans compared dreams of strange flying creatures, like fanciful *alebrijes* (wood carvings), coming to life. Sensations of moving through other dimensions or across time. They would never again think of mole as just another sauce. Or eat it after midnight.



ABOVE: Margarita Mendoza Bautista roasts chiles on a comal for her Day of the Dead mole before daughter-in-law Aura prepares the complicated sauce that simmers for hours.

OPPOSITE: Aura Bautista Lazo places her freshly prepared individual mole offering on the family altar in Teotitlán del Valle.

