

Gregorio Luke brings art history to the masses



Axel Koester, xx

GREAT MURALIST: Gregorio Luke narrates a slide show about Diego Rivera at the John Anson Ford Amphitheater in Hollywood.

The cultural impresario's goal remains the same at John Anson Ford Amphitheatre: introduce high culture to broad audiences.

By Reed Johnson

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Gregorio Luke knows that he can't beat Hollywood. So, in a sense, he's going to join it.

During his years as director of the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, the Mexican-born cultural impresario was forever trying to bring high culture to the broadest possible audience. Perhaps his most notable endeavor was his annual "Murals Under the Stars" presentations, big-screen outdoor multimedia shows that highlighted the giants of 20th century Mexican art, such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

Using enormous projections while he lectured through a microphone, sometimes accompanied by live music, Luke commandeered the museum's parking lot and for a few hours every summer turned it into an impromptu cultural space.

Luke's populist approach fits with his oft-stated belief that audiences are starved for enriching artistic experiences and fed up with a steady diet of pop culture. His show, he said, "appeals to the natural curiosity of people that has been dumbed down too long."

"We can make learning fun again, but we have to get ahead of the technology curve."

As if to illustrate his point, this summer Luke is moving his show close to the heart of Hollywood: the 1,200-seat John Anson Ford Amphitheatre, on the edge of Universal Studios, for three performances. The first, on Sunday, was devoted to Rivera, specifically the great mural paintings that adorn museums and government palaces in Mexico City, Detroit and other metropolises. A July 12 show will pay homage to painter [Rufino Tamayo](#), and the work of painter and caricaturist [Miguel Covarrubias](#) will be examined Aug. 16.

Among those who attended Sunday's spectacle was the artist's daughter, Guadalupe Rivera Marín, an accomplished art historian and author. In an interview before the show, Rivera said she thought that her father would heartily approve of Luke's attempt to make art and art history broadly accessible. After all, she said, that's what her father and his fellow muralists were trying to do by painting monumental wall works that frequently conveyed highly detailed narratives of Mexican history and politics.

"He thought that this was the most practical form to show the world the themes and stories that were most important to the people," Rivera said, speaking in Spanish. "In Mexico, artists form part of the daily life of the people, and the people see themselves in the work of the artists."

The show's L.A. setting also was appropriate, she said, because her father befriended a number of Hollywood stars such as Edward G. Robinson and the Mexican actress [Dolores Del Rio](#), and mixed socially with cinematic authors such as the Mexican cinematographer [Gabriel Figueroa](#) and the Soviet director [Sergei Eisenstein](#). Fascinated by machines, Rivera believed in harnessing technology as an engine of communication.

"It's a magnificent spectacle," Rivera said of Luke's mural series. "All the work that Gregorio does is done with great enthusiasm."

Luke probably would cop to being not merely enthusiastic, but fanatical, in promoting art to a wide populace.

Since he stepped down as MOLAA's director, he has reinvented himself as a radio pundit, discussing immigration reform and a slew of other issues both on Spanish- and English-language radio and television. He lectures widely and has taken his art-show talks, which typically use between 200 and 300 images, as far afield as Italy.

When the subject is culture, politics or most anything else, he speaks in machine-gun cadences, gesticulating and switching instantly from Spanish to English.

"I'm like Pinocchio. He wants to be a real boy. I want to be a real entertainer," Luke said. "I'm also a student of great orators. I used to mimic Martin Luther King speeches and Churchill speeches."

Yet behind Luke's song and dance, there's a serious scholarly intent.

Luke said he got the idea of showing art on a big screen while serving as cultural attache at the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C. in the late 1980s. When protesters succeeded in canceling a scheduled exhibition by photographer [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, supporters of the work got together and screened the banned images on the gallery's outer walls. Luke figured he would try the same thing with Mexican artworks.

For the current series' Covarrubias finale, Luke plans to add Balinese dragons (the artist had a fascination with the Asian island), live jazz and modern dancers from his choreographer-mother's Mexican company, who'll interpret a ballet for which Covarrubias designed the costumes and scenery.

"Forever there's been this stereotype that the audience is stupid, that you have to give the audience the most simple and most processed information," Luke said. Quality, he insists, can be popular as well. "We have to learn the lesson of Bob Dylan."

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