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Oral history interview with Peter Rodriguez,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Peter Rodriguez on October 23-24, 2004. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Nora Wagner for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for the interview was provided by the Goldsmith Foundation.

Peter Rodriguez and Nora Wagner have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

NORA WAGNER: We are sitting in Peter Rodriguez's wonderful, wonderful apartment. This is October 23rd. It's a rainy Saturday in San Francisco. My name is Nora Wagner and I have been requested by Peter and also by the Smithsonian Archives of American History [sic] to conduct this interview.

We will begin this interview by giving a little bit of background information. We have with us, too, Jonathan Yorba, who has been involved on many other projects with the Smithsonian, and through his connection with the Smithsonian we were able to start this wonderful project together.

Peter, we're going to start talking about many aspects of your life. And as you know, you have had a tremendous influence on me professionally, but I would say even more so personally. I was the director of education at the Mexican Museum [San Francisco, California] for quite a number of years – 16 actually – and so we were able to work together throughout many of those years. Your contribution to many people personally, and certainly professionally as well as nationally on so many levels, is what we're going to be addressing today.

First of all, I would like to give a flavor of the personality that you are. And so, just in a few words – or however many that you would like, because we will revisit this point later on – what do you consider to be your greatest achievement?

PETER RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think being born [Along with my twin brother, Tony, June 25, 1926] – [laughs] – was quite an achievement. It was a time when there were all sorts of childhood diseases and some people just didn't make it – diphtheria, pneumonia, several things that are now curable. So I think that was very important.

MS. WAGNER: Well, I would certainly consider that to be extremely important. [Laughs.] And after you managed that, what would you say were your outstanding achievements?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think being involved in the arts was a primary thing, and starting the Mexican Museum, the first of its kind outside of Mexico – or the first of its kind in the world, not only outside of Mexico, just all over the world. There wasn't any museum of this nature and I think that was a great achievement.

MS. WAGNER: I think we would all agree, and we will certainly go back to that point in much, much more detail as we go along.

Why don't we, at this point, now that you are born – [laughs] – tell us a little bit more about your background: where you were born, a little bit about your family? What are the important things about growing up that had such an influence on you?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I was born in Stockton, California in 1926 and my parents had come up from Mexico in 1914. And my father [Jesús Rodriguez] stayed in the United States, although he wanted to go back to Mexico, but my mother [Guadalupe García Rodriguez] didn't want to go back. So we stayed and we were all born here. My 14 brothers and sisters were born in the United States. Three of them didn't survive: Peter, the first, and Alicia and Richard was the last born. He didn't survive. So I think that was quite an accomplishment, and I tribute my mother for her great strength. After having that many children she could still keep us well and look out for us. So I think that was important.

MS. WAGNER: It certainly is, and I met her on several occasions, and was a very lovely lady [You told me recently that you are related through her to Prince Rainier of Monaco of the Grimaldi family.].

Peter, tell us a little bit about where your parents came from.

MS. WAGNER: Well, my mother was born in Guadalajara. That's in the state of Jalisco in Mexico, and my father was born in Yurécuaro Michoacán. That's a nearby state. And I was lucky to have visited both places and found

out more about my family at that time. So I think seeing where they lived was important to me.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, when you say that was important to you, can you give us a little bit of the flavor of the times of your parents' lives?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, my father was born during the Porfirio [Díaz] dictatorship, and I think that was in 1892, and my mother was born in January 30th of 1900.

MS. WAGNER: Nineteen-hundred.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: - 1900, and they came to the United States in 1914. My father never went back to Mexico, and my mother did go and visit the family in Guadalajara and Yurécuaro, and even my brothers went. And I was fortunate to go there also, so I remember the Rio Lerma, where my father used to swim. And he was a very good swimmer. I remember him swimming across the river in Stockton and it was amazing that he could swim that far without tiring and get back. It seemed to me like it was two miles but it was quite a long stretch to swim. In fact, I almost drowned there but I didn't tell anybody about it. [Laughs.] I was afraid to. I was behind a boat and I hit a hole and I was going down and then I got up and I saved myself. So I was very happy about that. [Laughs.]

MS. WAGNER: Oh, aren't we all? And, Peter, how is it that your parents decided to come to the United States in 1914?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, there was the revolution going on in Mexico and my uncle had come up in 1905 and established himself, and he was doing pretty well and he went to Mexico and told my grandfather, you know, to leave Mexico and come to the United States. So that's the way they came, and had a few problems in the intervening trip. So they worked in several things. My mother even picked grapes and prunes, and she was a champion at that. She was a very industrious woman who worked very hard to make a living and my grandfather loved her very much. And when she eloped with my father because he wouldn't give them permission to marry, my grandfather was very sad about that and it took him two years to forgive my father before they would accept him [The original name of my mother's father was Antonio Garzens Lucas, however, his name was changed because there was animosity in Mexico against the French so he changed the French "Garzens" to the Spanish "García."].

And my sister Katherine was born in 1919 and she was the oldest, and who is still living in Stockton.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, when your parents first - they were not married at this time but when they first crossed into the United States, you had mentioned to me that they paid - I think it was 10 cents per person to come into the United States?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I think that was the charge at the border in El Paso. And they were held up by Pancho Villa's troops, so when they finally got to the border they didn't have a lot of resources but they did pay the 10 cents per person to get into the United States.

MS. WAGNER: Good. And so when you all came to the United States, you went where in California?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, no, they came.

MS. WAGNER: I'm sorry. Of course you weren't born then. Excuse me. [Laughter.] Where were you born?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I was born in Stockton but in 1926. So they came up in 1914, and then my grandparents decided to go back to Mexico in 1920 and they didn't return to the United States until 1926. And shortly after, my father and my grandfather had contracted pneumonia and they thought that my father wasn't going to live, and fortunately he did but my grandfather died 10 days later. So he died in 1927 and is buried in Jackson, California at the cemetery there.

MS. WAGNER: So, Peter, your parents, when they first arrived in California they were in Jackson and then moved to Stockton from there?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: No. They were in Fowler first in the Fresno area, and I remember that my Aunt Mary was going to school and because she had to wear gym clothes like the rest of the girls, my grandfather frowned on that and he said, "We're going back to Mexico." And they went back but my mother and my father stayed. They were already married. So when they returned it was in 1926 and my grandfather died in 1927 - my mother's father.

MS. WAGNER: And you had mentioned a white house - that you lived in a white house.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, it wasn't in D.C. [Laughter.] It was in Jackson, California. There was a white house that sat on the hill on - I think it was Grove Street. But we lived there, oh, I don't know, a few years until it was purchased by the Van Thiel family, which was originally the Sargent family [Dorothy Sargent married into the

Van Thiel family. Dorothy's father was the judge that I am referring to.]. And he was a judge in Massachusetts, an Eastern state, and he had a drinking problem so my father used to take care of him, and the Sargents were pleased with that and they allowed us - they allowed my father to cut wood on their land where they had many trees, and that's the way my father made a living for quite a while until he went back to the mines, and of all the miners of that time, they all got silicosis that developed into tuberculosis. So it eventually affected my father and he died in 1957 [March 12, 1951].

JONATHAN YORBA: [1951.]

MS. WAGNER: Oh, so 1951. And then in 1933 your family relocated to Jackson Gate, California where you attended the Oneida School. And there's some interesting things about that period.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I'm trying to think of what they are. [Laughs.]

MS. WAGNER: Well, let's see, that's where one of your teachers first recognized your artistic merit.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yes. I think I did a drawing of the *Katzenjammer Kids* and they thought it was very unique, so they - but there weren't any classes - art classes so I really had to develop myself as an artist without any outside help.

MS. WAGNER: I see, and that's a very important part of your career. And then in 1937 your family returns to Stockton and it was there at the Burbank School that you had another teacher that also recognized your artistic talent.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I'm trying to think of the teacher's name now. Was it Harold Majarovich?

MS. WAGNER: Yes. And then -

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, no, that was -

MS. WAGNER: No, that was at Oneida, but you were recognized for your artistic talent in the Burbank school and -

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I was sent to special classes at the Lottie Grunsky School in Stockton, and that was probably the only background I had in art because they did try to instruct you somewhat.

MS. WAGNER: So then after this period of being at the Burbank school and working on your own you started exhibiting, and some of the places that you have exhibited would be interesting for us to know about.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, my first exhibit was in a child art contest in New York, and then following that I exhibited at the World's Fair in San Francisco in 1939, I think it was.

MS. WAGNER: Mm-hmm. Oh, it was the 1940 World's Fair.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, it was 1940? I remember it was '39. [Laughter.] But unfortunately I didn't realize they had an exhibit showing Diego Rivera's work so I never got to see it there, and it was later on that I found out that the exhibition was there.

MS. WAGNER: I see. Then you attended Stockton High School, and did you have any formal education there in the arts?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I had some classes in drawing and perspective but they were very limited; they didn't really teach me very much so I had to really go out on my own and learn what I could.

MS. WAGNER: And what activities did you - where did you go after you finished high school?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, I started working in a ladies fashion store called The Wonder, and there was a wonderful director there named Louise Nock Gray, and she was influential and she was very, very good. After that I went and worked at the Smith and Lang store, which was on the corner of San Joaquin and Main Street. It's no longer there; they destroyed it.

MS. WAGNER: And when you were working in these stores, what were your responsibilities there?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, mostly doing window display, and when I was at Bravo and McKeegan I also did - I did sales in the men's wear department.

MS. WAGNER: Would you say that the window display experience that you had later became very, very valuable

to you?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yes, I think so. I learned quite a few things by doing that.

MS. WAGNER: What motivated your interest in the arts – in the arts in general?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think it started as a child and it continued through high school but I didn't get the right teaching, or I never went to an art school to be taught that way. In fact, we didn't have the money to do that so I had to learn – I think I had inherent knowledge that – it's like I was chosen to do this and instinctively I knew some of the things that I had to do to achieve my goal.

MS. WAGNER: I think that's a very important point, Peter, throughout the many years that I've known you, you have an instinctive sense of art and artists and how to exhibit art. Would you say that any of your travels that you went on in your earlier years had an influence on your artistic development?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yes. I went to Mexico several times, about 20 different trips to Mexico, and then I also traveled to Alaska and presented the first exhibit of Mexican art, and Chicano art in Alaska. And that must have been – I don't remember the year right now but – I'd have to research that [Early 1980s].

MS. WAGNER: Yeah, we can do that.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: All right.

MS. WAGNER: And then I remember you telling me that even before the workshop and exhibit that you prepared for Alaska many, many years prior to that, that you had traveled to Colorado and also to Washington, D.C. This is before you even went to Mexico. What were your experiences in Colorado and Washington?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, in Washington I was appointed to the National Endowment for the Arts and so I was very concerned about what would I do in Washington; what would I say? And so when I got there and met some of the people, they were more concerned about how did you do this and how did you do that? They were very impressed. [Laughs.] So that helped me a great deal.

MS. WAGNER: Good. And even before then, in 1952, before you went to Mexico you had mentioned to me that you traveled by train to Denver to visit the Denver Museum and view their collection of, as it was then called pre-encounter art of Mexico. And what was your impression of that?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think I called it "pre-encounter" because they were probably using some other word that was, to me, kind of racist, so I thought that pre-encounter was a better word to use. And I had some friends living there and so I got to visit with them, and I stayed at my sister Stella's in-laws. And I remember it was – they had a basement bedroom and I went and stayed there and I kept – when I opened my eyes it was still dark so I thought it was still nighttime. I eventually found out I had slept a couple of days – [laughter] –

MS. WAGNER: Oh, my goodness.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: – without getting up, because I didn't know that it was daylight.

MS. WAGNER: !Don Pedrito! Isn't that something?

Well, my goodness, you have two very – among your many, many lives – let's put it that way – I mean, you're very complex and a very accomplished person in so many ways. You have two very distinct, I'll call them careers – you might choose to call them something different – your involvement as an artist and then, secondly, your involvement as a museum founder and director. So I would like to spend some time at this point asking you a little bit more about your development as an artist. When I mentioned your visit to Denver I noticed that very soon after that, in 1954, you had your first one-man exhibit at the Haggin Museum in Stockton.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, I had won a prize and the prize was to exhibit at the museum. So that went very well, then – Earl Rowland was the director then and he liked me, but then when I veered to abstract art, he was disappointed, but I had already left Stockton and had moved to San Francisco, and I started showing in galleries in San Francisco. And one of the first ones was – oh, I can't think of the name right now [Galería de la Raza].

MS. WAGNER: Well, let's see. You co-founded [1955] the Skylight Gallery in Stockton –

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

MS. WAGNER: – and then you had your first exhibit of work in Guadalajara in the Museo del Estado in Jalisco, Mexico and then you also exhibited at the Proteo Gallery in Mexico City. This was in 1960. But going back to your first exhibition at the Haggin in 1954, this was before your first trip to Mexico. Up until that point, what would

you say that – what were the techniques that you were using for your art, or where did you get your inspiration?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I don't quite remember. I think that was something that was inbred, and so I just depended on my instincts to develop my art.

MS. WAGNER: Would you consider your art to be within a certain kind of modality or would you consider that your art career has covered many different kinds of techniques as well as periods?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I think it covered many modalities, techniques and experiences.

MS. WAGNER: Could you be a little bit more specific about what some of these are?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I really liked to do abstract art and I developed that to a great degree. And it was until most recently in the '80s that I started doing portraits of Chicano [and Mexican] artists, and some of them I had exhibited at the Mexican Museum and I had them pose for me, and that included Julia López – well, there were several others. I have written them down, so we can review them later [Rene Yañez].

MS. WAGNER: All right. And what medium did you use for these portraits?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oil on canvas and sometimes acrylic on canvas.

MS. WAGNER: And again, Peter, going back to – I think you've mentioned a very seminal year for you, and that was 1954 when you went to Guadalajara, Jalisco for the first time. Can you tell us something about that period of your life?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think that was a very interesting thing for me because I didn't know very much about Mexico and I saw many of the colonial churches that I thought were just devastatingly beautiful. Then from Guadalajara I went to Mexico City and I was able to see some of the murals of Diego Rivera and work of Frida Kahlo, so I think that was a great influence.

MS. WAGNER: That became a tremendous influence in your life from then on.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, I think so.

MS. WAGNER: Did you return to Mexico?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Many times, around 40 different times. It was important for me to go to Mexico, and as a director of the museum I would go to Mexico and pick out some artwork and then bring it back to the museum and exhibit it and then I would take it back to Mexico on my next trip and get some more artwork and bring it up. We didn't have the proper funding for me to do that so I had to pay some of it with my own funds. But I'm glad I did it. I wouldn't trade anything in the world for it. It was a very good experience.

MS. WAGNER: Can you give us a little bit more detail about your travels in Mexico? I mean, I've read some of your memoirs and I've heard you talk about it. There's just some wonderful adventures that you had with Lauro López and some of the other – and Julia López. Again, just your flavor of the country at that time would be, I think, interesting.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, Mexico was very exciting at that time. They were developing their art, I think. Dr. [José] Vasconcelos was very interested in promoting the arts. In fact, because of his direction in Mexico, the WPA [Works Progress Administration] projects were started in the United States, so it was wonderful meeting some of the artists that were responsible. I have a list of them that – like Chucho Reyes [Jesús (Chucho) Reyes Ferreira] was one of the artists that I met, and in fact I saw him a couple of times, but he was – he came to San Francisco when he was 92 years old, I think, and he died when he was, I think, 96 years old. And he was a very wonderful man and I enjoyed him and I went to his home that his nephew David Reyes lived in, and he still lives there, and it has some of the ideas that Chucho gave to Luis Barragán, the architect, and so it was exciting to see this home where I stayed in and I could see what was retained of the building at that time. And it had a wonderful collection of colonial art, some pre-Hispanic art, and the work of other artists.

But Chucho was an extraordinary man and I always will be happy that I met him.

MS. WAGNER: And you were very taken with the medium that he used. I know that there is one of his works at the collection of the Mexican Museum, which you brought back, the gouache.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: On paper [Chucho Reyes, *Homage Bleu a Matisse*, 20th Century]? Yes, well, I have one here at home that he gave to me – dedicated it to me – and I treasure that quite a bit. And he also influenced many people. He was – let's see, how would I put it? He was kicked out of Guadalajara for being gay, and he was put in prison but all the artists came to his defense and he was released. But he never went back to Guadalajara; he

stayed in Mexico City.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, in your memoirs you mention that he had a very important influence on Luis Barragán, and you mention two points in particular that I think people would be interested in. One was his sense of color and the other his design for a staircase and a fountain. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I think – when they asked Chucho if he could design a fountain for this place and he said – he told one of his students, “Bring a table over here,” and then said, “Bring me a bucket of water,” and he poured the bucket of water over the table and the water dripped around the table, and he said, “There’s your fountain.” And he also said – and for the stairs he took some paper and folded it up like an accordion and then opened it up and said, “There’s your staircase.” So he was a very aesthetic man and very creative.

MS. WAGNER: What strikes me, Peter, as you talk about it – I can see the expression on your face – is you’ve always been very attuned to the creative force in artists and to the innovative spirit of them, and certainly Chucho Reyes is an excellent example of that.

Let’s now move a little bit further in years, and after your travels in Mexico – and I know that there were many and over a long period of time – when did you move to San Francisco, and why?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I thought Stockton was very provincial and racist, and I felt that I would have a better chance to find myself in the art world in San Francisco, so I left Stockton, and that must have been around 1980

MS. WAGNER: 1969.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, 1969. Yes, that’s correct. And so I just started exhibiting my work and that helped me a great deal also.

MS. WAGNER: Would you say – and I don’t want to put words in your mouth – that your travels to Mexico, starting in 1954 and thereafter, how did they influence your artistic production?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think it was very important because I finally realized what my parents had taught me about Mexico. And we never had to say we were Spanish – we were proud of our heritage – and that made me realize why. The buildings and the people were so great when I was there. I enjoyed it very much.

MS. WAGNER: And you mentioned the trip that you went to, of course, and saw the Hospicio [Cabañas] that was painted – the murals that were painted by –

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Orozco [José Clemente Orozco]. Yes, that was a wonderful thing to see. And Orozco unfortunately isn’t appreciated as much as, say, Diego [Rivera] or Siqueiros [David Alfaro Siqueiros], but to me Orozco is a genius of Mexican art, and in the long term he’ll be remembered as the most important artist of that time.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, when you were traveling in Mexico, not only did you purchase and bring back work by contemporary Mexican artists, but did you also collect other things that you brought back?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yes, I collected Santos [wood carvings of saints] and paintings and artifacts and ceramics, as many things as I could possibly carry – there weren’t that many things you could carry in an airplane, so it wasn’t until I traveled by automobile that I could bring more. So it wasn’t an easy task, but fortunately I brought back some things I consider important.

MS. WAGNER: Could you give us some examples?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I took some slides of some of the work that I saw, and they showed me more of the aspects of Mexico. I also met important artists – Rufino Tamayo and his wife Olga, who had asked me to do a tapestry from the mural they saw at Lauro’s home that I had painted, and he said, “If you do a mural – if you do a tapestry from your painting I will buy it from you.” And unfortunately, when the time came he didn’t say anything, and I asked Olga, “Tamayo said that he would purchase this tapestry from me for the museum [Rufino Tamayo Museum].” And she said, “Oh, we’re not buying anything more for the museum.” And after that I just cut them off; I had nothing to do with them. But I called the tapestry – I still have the tapestry and I called it *Tamayo’s Dream*.

MS. WAGNER: [Laughs.]

MR. RODRIGUEZ: He – even though this was never accomplished.

MS. WAGNER: And what are some of the other things that you – I know you discovered markets down there for

the first time, and what were the kinds of things and objects that you purchased in the mercados and the bazaars in Mexico?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, you know, whatever I felt I could carry – ceramics, santos, other artists' work, some that were undiscovered that I thought were good. In fact, I have a lovely painting by this artist [Pedro González Salas, 1980]. I don't know if he – how he developed later on but I still have the painting and I like it very much.

MS. WAGNER: Did you collect folk art?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yes, I collected quite a bit of folk art, from the paper skeletons and so forth, and so many things, whatever I could grab onto – some tin work. There were many, many things.

MS. WAGNER: Well, Peter, at this point we are in the mid-'50s getting into the '60s and by this time you've gone to Mexico several times, you've had several exhibitions, and then a very important thing happened, as you've told me, and that is when you left Stockton in 1969 to go to San Francisco you met Luis Valdéz, and can you tell us a little bit about that?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I don't think I got a very favorable reception from Luis Valdéz. He was too involved with himself and he didn't respond to my attitude – for my desire to create a museum. So I'm sure that's the person you're referring to. So I joined a group [1970], the Galería de la Raza, whose name I gave, and including them were Rupert Garcia, Rene Yañez. There were several artists, and we started the Galería de la Raza on – I think it was 14th Street.

MS. WAGNER: Yes, 14th Street at Fred Hobbs' San Francisco Art Center, and that was 1970.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

MS. WAGNER: And what had started you – how did the idea of starting a museum come to you?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I used to go to museum exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art and I noticed there weren't any Hispanic surnames. I said, well, the only way we're going to turn that around is start our own museum, which really prompted me to do that. And I felt that until we exhibited our own art and the people that we appreciated that we wouldn't be able to get ahead. And when Grace Morley was at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, she was in favor of Mexican artists, but after she left I think Henry Hopkins became the director for quite some time, and he wasn't favorable to Mexican art or Mexican artists, so that increased my desire to go ahead and promote – work on the museum and promote it. Unfortunately, I never had the training for a museum director and I didn't know that much about Mexican art but I knew that it was very important and that something had to be done and that was my desire to create the Mexican Museum and that I would learn as I went, which happened.

The important thing is that when Henry left the museum, the current director now, that is more favorable to the Mexican arts – but I don't remember exactly how he's doing because I have lost touch with that aspect.

MS. WAGNER: Going back to the Galería de la Raza when you were there in the initial stages, did you have an idea at the Galería de la Raza of starting a museum and can you tell us a little about that part?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yes, I was very interested in starting a Mexican museum because our art was neglected, it wasn't appreciated, and so that it was important for me to work on starting this museum. And I met several artists, including Rupert Garcia and – I don't remember the rest of the artists right now.

MS. WAGNER: Oh, that would be Ralph Maradiaga, Rene Yañez, Rodolfo [sic] Castellón.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes – Rolando Castellón.

MS. WAGNER: Rolando Castellón. And, Peter, did you approach that group with wanting to start a museum?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, but they thought it was an elitist idea, so I said – [laughs] – how foolish. I said, now you don't have to work outside but you also get on the inside to develop what you have to do, and that's what I was doing. And the reason I was painting abstract art is to show that Chicanos could also paint abstract art, and pretty well, I might add.

MS. WAGNER: Indeed! [Laughs.]

MR. RODRIGUEZ: So it was an interesting time and I remember when Carmen Lomas Garza came to the museum for an exhibition – in fact, Rene Yañez brought her to the museum and I saw her work. I didn't even ask her for a résumé; I just saw her work and I knew that it was very good work, so I gave her an exhibition.



MS. WAGNER: Peter, how did you start the Mexican Museum?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, it's because I didn't know that it couldn't be done.

MS. WAGNER: [Laughs.]

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I just felt that we needed one, and so I went ahead and worked for it. Probably if I had known that it couldn't be done I might not have done it, but I'm glad I didn't know. And so I went ahead and did it.

MS. WAGNER: And what were the steps that you took to get it off the ground, so to speak?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I contacted some friends like John Weeks, who was in a museum studies at the University of San - no, San Francisco State, and he had some ideas. And so he helped me, you know, get some of the ideas so that I could get people to help with the museum.

But there were other people that were important like Manuel Villamor, who was actually born in Belize but he considered himself of Mexican background because his parents were born in Mexico and they left Mexico because they were - Indians were uprising against them and so they went to Belize to live. And his brother considered himself a British subject and Manuel laughs at that. [Laughs.] He doesn't think that that is quite so.

But there were other times that - and other artists that I found important and I tried to exhibit their works. Ester Hernández, I wasn't familiar with her work at the time. I couldn't show everybody and I couldn't show people from Los Angeles. There were only a few that I knew, and I exhibited them. And there was one photographer from Denver that I showed, but other than that, you know, I had to rely on what was available to me, and it wasn't easy.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter in the - before the museum opened, the steps that you took for it to be created, was there a charter that had to be put together? Did you have to take out the nonprofit papers?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yes, all of that. And it was Governor [Edmund G.] Jerry Brown at the time. And María de Carli also was one of the board members, and she was helpful in getting the museum started. There was also Rosemarie Bordenave, who was also helpful. She worked for Bayview Federal Savings. So these people helped me to get the museum started.

MS. WAGNER: Where did the funding come from?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, we got a grant from the San Francisco Foundation of \$50,000. And that was like peanuts to us. My dreams were I wanted a million to begin with but we worked with \$50,000. And I didn't really have a lot of support at the museum because we didn't have the money to hire the people to do that. We got some through Title VIII and - but then I had problems with one of the board of directors, Barbara Stork, who wanted to run the museum - run my - in fact, she wanted Jesse Aguirre to come and take over, and I wouldn't let her do that. And she disliked me since then. But eventually she died because she was smoking a great deal and developed cancer. I think her son is still involved with the agency that - but I haven't heard from Charles since then.

MS. WAGNER: Let's see, Peter, the year is 1975 and you were notified on July 5th that the grant which had been written initially for \$50,000, that the museum was going to receive \$30,000 of that, and as you mentioned, that was certainly not nearly enough. Where did the museum open?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, it opened on Folsom and 14th Street at the - oh, what's the name of it now?

MS. WAGNER: Oh, the Far West Laboratories.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: The Far West Laboratories. And it was in two galleries. One was in the front section and the other one was on the other side, and in the first section showed Mexican artists and on the other side we showed - oh, and Chicano artists - and on the other side we showed colonial art and the - colonial art and folk art and ceramics. So we developed it from there.

MS. WAGNER: When you think about the year, 1975, when the museum opened - and I mentioned the date of July 5th - what was the date of that year that the museum actually opened?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: It actually opened on November 20th.

MS. WAGNER: And why was that date selected?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Because that was an anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, and that's when I wanted to open the museum.

MS. WAGNER: Did you see a correlation between that anniversary and the opening of the museum?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, I thought it was very significant because I thought the museum was a revolution in this country.

MS. WAGNER: Good. We'll take a short break.

[Break.]

MS. WAGNER: We are resuming our taping after a brief break, and I'm just wanting to make sure that the recorder is functioning, and it is.

Peter, up until this point the interview that we've been conducting has been somewhat in a formal manner, so to speak, as interview and interviewee, but as we both know, the *cariño*, the love that we have for one another and having worked together as colleagues and also as being very good friends, I think would allow us to really go into some aspects of your life that I think are very, very important. So we're changing our modality at this point to that of a *charla*, of a chat, and we will continue in this fashion, at least for the remainder of this portion of the taping.

Just again, as identification, this is Saturday, October 23rd, 2004. I do believe that at the beginning of this taping I neglected to mention the 2004. And we're in Peter's apartment in San Francisco and the address is:

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Sixteen-sixty-seven Green Street, apartment 202, San Francisco, 94123.

MS. WAGNER: All right, thank you, Peter. And can you just describe, for a few minutes, your apartment and the things that are in it, because this has to do so much with you as an artist. I would like to really spend some time on developing the taping in terms of you and your artwork, your personal artwork, and also the artwork that surrounds you.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, the things that I collected were like catch as you can catch because I think I developed a pretty good eye and I wanted to collect these for the museum. Unfortunately, when I left the museum they didn't have any funding to help me so I had to struggle to survive, and I'm still in that situation. I haven't had enough help along the way, so hopefully some day the museum will realize that and purchase my collection, which I believe belongs at the Mexican Museum, but if I have to sell it to survive I'm going to go ahead and sell it.

MS. WAGNER: That would be a shame, Peter, and we certainly all hope that that's not the case.

Peter, you made reference to a "pretty good eye," and I would say that it's an extremely good eye, and we used to tease you at the museum and call you *Don Pedrito del Buen Ojo*.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: [Laughs.]

MS. WAGNER: In Mexico the term "Don" and the use of the diminutive is one of respect and of great *cariño*, of endearment. So, Don Pedrito, would you describe your *buen ojo*, your good eye, and tell us some of the objects that are in your surroundings.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, since I went to Mexico I had experienced many things that I hadn't seen as a child, and I collected work from Chicano artists as well as Mexican artists. One important artist that I'll always treasure is Rodolfo Morales, who I think was a great artist, and he felt that his work was to restore the old monasteries and churches of Oaxaca, and he didn't want any government intervention so he paid for these things as he would sell his paintings and his work gained great notoriety because of his talent. And so he was earning quite a bit of money but he also wanted it to go to his projects. And his architect - oh, I forgot his name - [Alfonso] Maldonado is his last name. I'll have to refer to that later on.

But he was a kind man and he did many wonderful things for his people in Oaxaca, although his neighboring state actually commissioned him. I think it was Vera Cruz that actually gave him help to be able to do this in the beginning. But there were other artists also that were also important to me as an artist, and Alfredo Arreguin, who I exhibited at the Mexican Museum, was influential. I think we influenced each other in many aspects. I remember when I went to Seattle for a conference and he was there and he was - he wasn't dressed to the teeth; he just had a hat on and I think he had pants with suspenders. And he said that, you know, please excuse him for the way he was dressed. I thought, "Alfredo, you are an artist; you don't have to worry about what you're wearing." [Laughter.] And he was very happy that I had said that and we got along famously. I remember being up at the tower of the fair and we were overlooking the city of Seattle, and we became very good friends.

MS. WAGNER: Wonderful, Peter, and then as I sit here I see paintings, I see drawings, I see pre-Hispanic reproductions.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I was very interested in collecting the work that appealed to me that I valued and that I could afford. I didn't have that much money so I couldn't afford everything that I wanted, but I felt that I could be more interested in what was being done then and after, then the early works like Orozco or Rivera or Tamayo, what have you. So I collected things that I liked and with the intention of getting them to the Mexican Museum. And I decided that since they'd never supported me in this manner, that I had to sell them, and if they wanted to buy them they were welcome to them, but I wasn't going to give them to the museum free of charge. I just had a *santo* that was returned to me, which a museum should have, and they didn't buy it. Tere Romo [Curator of Exhibitions] said, "I was not the one who declined to buy the *santo*; it was Susana Macarrón, the museum registrar and Bill Moreno who returned it to Peter. I was not even at the Museum during the time that some of Peter's colonial pieces were bought by the museum and when this all took place."

MS. WAGNER: Let's see, Peter. Can you talk about where your own personal artwork is today?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I have very little at home but I have it in storage in a location on 14th Street. And I will give you that information later. I don't know that I should be publishing it now.

MS. WAGNER: Oh, no, and it was only - I know that your work is in other people's collections. Can you mention some of the collections that your work is in?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, Luis Barragán had one of my works - or a couple if I remember. But there were so many collectors that I don't remember how many have my work. Some people in Texas have my work, and not necessarily Mexican Americans. There were some people in Texas who were Anglo that purchased my work. And I have - their names that I don't remember now.

MS. WAGNER: And we can go back to that, Peter. Let's talk a little bit more about you as an artist and your development as an artist, realizing that whenever you have an exhibition you wrote an artist's statement. I came across one that you gave to me and I would like to read it to you. And I know that this is a moment in time when you wrote this but it might be a good opportunity as a point of departure to talk about how you remember this particular exhibition that it refers to and how your work has developed through time, and also the enormous variety of art forms that you have used and techniques that you have used. And I quote - this is an artist statement by Peter Rodriguez:

"My work is a constant search for new expression and growth. My early concerns in painting, after my formative years, were in the abstract expressionist manner. At the same time I continued working with drawings in pencil and ink, done in a realistic manner. The main body of work is devoted to the events that occur in nature, and recently, images suggesting pre-Hispanic deities have appeared in these paintings. My work could be considered as lyric abstraction but names or classifications do not interest me. I have recently completed a series of portraits of Chicano and Mexican artists in which I combine all my technical abilities and explode with the use of color that is so important in my ancestral heritage."

Would you like to comment about this statement and how you see your work through time? I should mention, for the record - you mentioned that this probably was for an exhibition that you had at the Zara Gallery in 1974.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, who's to know what influences you - but I know the many trips I took to Mexico were an influence. The many artists that I met in Mexico were an influence. The many Chicano artists that I met and appreciated were an interest. There were some who I didn't respect because I thought they were not really based on accomplishments, and that was Rene Yañez. I didn't think that he had the talent of an artist. He was a good promoter but I didn't see him as an important artist. And there were Jesse Aguirre, who wanted to take over the museum and put me in a lesser place, and I didn't allow him to do that. So there were positives and negatives, but I recently saw Jesse, and unfortunately I didn't ask him if he was still painting. [He later told me he had dropped the idea of being an artist a long time ago.]

But I also met again with Ann Rockefeller Roberts, who was inspirational, and she had changed quite a bit from the first time I met her. It took me a while to recognize her, but she was influential because her father Nelson Rockefeller was vice president of the United States and he collected Mexican work and Latin American works. And she told me - I don't know if she did or it was Henry who - Henry [Henry Wangeman, folk art importer] - I can't think of his last name right now - told me this story about Nelson Rockefeller going to collect some artwork in this village, and when the people saw all these limousines coming in they thought they were the federal police and so they all took off. [Laughter.]

[Audio break.]

MS. WAGNER: Today is Sunday, October 24th, 2004. We are again in Peter Rodriguez's wonderful, beautiful apartment, surrounded with his wonderful collection of colonial art, pre-Hispanic art, folk art, Chicano art, Mexican American art, Latino art, art from Mexico, as well as his own wonderful art that he himself has produced, which is extremely varied.

We are recording this for the Archives of American Art for the Smithsonian Institution.

So, Peter, we left off yesterday and again – and let me just mention that this is the beginning of tape two. We were talking about your life, your career as an artist yesterday, and we went on to other topics but I thought it was important, as you did, to return to you as an artist and spend some time with that. Can you – just tell me a little bit about the variety of art forms that you have done.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I've done sculpture, tapestry, oil painting, acrylic painting, portraits of artists – Mexican and Chicano. I did the pen and ink drawings, and that should cover it pretty well.

MS. WAGNER: Isn't that just like you to say that that covers it pretty well? [Laughter.] I know that some of your pen – particularly one of your pen and ink drawings that you did of Chucho Reyes he was very taken with and actually asked to have it in his collection.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, and actually it was used – in Mexico City it was put on the billboards for Chucho's exhibition but they didn't acknowledge me for it, which is typical. You know, they didn't want a Chicano to be, you know, praised. I don't know what the problem was then, and partially it's still now, but I think things are changing as far as the Mexicans go now and we're getting better acceptance. And it's people like Tomás Ybarra-Frausto who's gone there and spoken with them and made them realize how important it was to include Mexican Americans and their contributions.

MS. WAGNER: Exactly, Peter, and that's so important that you're mentioning that.

Another art form that I know that you've had great success with are your niches.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I heard that some artists were doing *nichos*, and I didn't want to copy anybody else's work so what I did was get some great boxes and use them for my *nichos*, and I knew that I wanted mine to be unique so I used things I had on hand to do them, and some of the folk art that I had. And I installed lights in my boxes, which hadn't been done before, so that was a very unique approach. After that people started lighting up their boxes, so I think I was in influence in that regard. [Laughter.] And I was happy that they were doing it. They could see the light. [Laughter.]

MS. WAGNER: ¡Ay que Don Pedrito! [Laughs.]

And what are some of the – I know that some of the boxes you dedicated for certain people.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, there was one that I dedicated to Ralph Maradiaga, who had died, and it was originally one that I had done for Day of the Dead, and that combination worked well. And I'm trying to think of what others might –

MS. WAGNER: You had Frida.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yeah, I did Frida Kahlo but I wasn't one of the "Fridos." [Laughter.] I never entered my work along with the "Fridos." And I was happy – I was unique in that sense. In fact, I still have those here in my home. I think the important thing about that is that people can see that I've retained these boxes and they'll be able to see now what I've done.

MS. WAGNER: And another one that I think you think also is extremely important and very moving is the one that you dedicated to – I believe it's your parents or particularly your mother?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, I did one for my mother, who died in 1988, and also one to my father. It was one that I had done at my Sacramento home when I was living in Sacramento near Broderick [San Francisco, CA], and I think that was pretty successful. And that was shown in Fullerton also as well as my mother's box that I did.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, these boxes that you dedicated to your parents, not only did you dedicate those boxes but you also dedicated the colonial gallery of the museum to your parents.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, I thought that they should be recognized by the museum and I hate to have them change their plans because they can do those things, you know.

MS. WAGNER: Let's see, Peter, I also remember that you had a wonderful collection of chairs that you created, and if you could tell us a little bit about those.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I had seen some artist – I think he was French – working with furniture and I thought that I would like to do something like that but with a Mexican theme. And so I constructed these *nopal* chairs and the sun and the moon chairs, and there were eight different designs that I did: a chili chair, which I think you have one.

MS. WAGNER: I do. I have the barrel cactus that has the flower on the side, and when I sit in the chair it sits right next to me.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: [Laughs.]

MR. WAGNER: Oh, I have the barrel cactus chair that has the flower on the side so when I'm sitting down the flower is on my left, so I feel very coquettish when I'm sitting there.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, you don't have the chili chair?

MS. WAGNER: No, I don't know who has the chili chair. You know, I love bright pink and so I chose the barrel cactus.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I'd love to find out where I have that one. [Laughter.]

So where are we?

MS. WAGNER: Oh, we are now - let's talk a little bit about another art form and that is you've created a performance piece that was commissioned by Prague - I think it was the government of Czechoslovakia.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, that was a very interesting thing. It was a magnificent trip that I was able to go. There was a group of artists from Prague here in San Francisco and I had invited them to my home and they never could come, so I took some slides and showed them to them and they invited me to go to Prague, which was really a great trip for me, and I loved being there, and I was able to see a lot of different things, and I stayed there for a month, which was incredible.

MS. WAGNER: Can you describe your performance piece a little bit?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, that was one that I think I called *De Sangre y Hueso*, which - "blood and bones," and that was - I'm trying to think of what specifically I had in mind.

[Pause for technical adjustments.]

MS. WAGNER: Peter, we left off for a short pause and we were talking about your performance piece that you created for Czechoslovakia that was called *De Sangre y Hueso*, and you were going to give us a little bit of detail about that.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, it was a performance that I'd -

[Pause for technical adjustments.]

MS. WAGNER: We took a brief pause and now we're back with Peter to talk about his performance piece, *De Hueso y Sangre* [sic].

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, this was an idea that I had for doing a performance based on the Mexican culture, and especially Day of the Dead, and while I was in Mexico I purchased 12 rebozos [shawls] because I wanted things to be as authentic as possible, and the rebozos - actually, Lauro [López] purchased them for me and of course I paid him for them. And so that gave it a very interesting look to the performers because these were Czech girls and they weren't - they didn't look dead. [Laughter.] So we did the best we could to give them that appearance, and then after going through this period they came back and there was some Mexican music in the background and they came back full of life and danced, and so it showed the resurrection and their joy to be alive again. And that's principally what the performance was based on.

MS. WAGNER: All right, Peter, and in your commentaries about this performance in your artist statement you made the comment that in a sense you were seeking to reclaim your ancestral heritage and this performance reflected this. What did you mean by that?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think at that time the situation wasn't very good for Mexican Americans here in the United States or in Mexico. The Mexicans didn't give us the credit and the Americans also discriminated against us. So this was to reclaim our heritage, which was of Mexican ancestry.

MS. WAGNER: All right, Peter, I'd like to spend just a few moments, to end this portion, on some of the exhibitions that you had in the early '70s and right around the time when you started the Mexican Museum. And would you like to just tell us a little bit about these?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, in 1975 at the Zara Gallery, I had an exhibit of Chicano and Mexican artists, and this was pretty successful. And then another exhibit was at the state capitol at the invitation of the governor, who was

Governor Jerry Brown at the time. So it was the first time that Mexican American work was shown in the state capitol because of the discrimination we were suffering before. And I think this changed the attitude to some degree. I don't know that it's changed completely to this day, but when I see on television a program where two people are competing for Oklahoma to represent them and it just seems like they're Nazis. They're really so bad. And then President Bush is also – has a very, very strange idea of what Mexican Americans are, and he even went to the pope to get his blessings, and I think the pope just told him to get out of Iraq. So that was very comforting to me.

MS. WAGNER: Well, let's see, Peter – and then I noticed that you also had an exhibition – you were in part of an invitational at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, and then of course at the Ex-Convento del Carmen in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. So my goodness, you've had exhibitions nationally, internationally – certainly all over Mexico, and then with your performance piece in Europe.

In 1992 you were asked to have a retrospective at the Haggin Museum in Stockton. Can you comment on that a little bit?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes. They had already set up the way the paintings were going to be hung, and I didn't like this setup so I had them change it, and they were quite annoyed about that. They didn't understand how the work should be properly displayed, so eventually I got my way but I was able to show my work in the manner that I thought was the right way to show it.

MS. WAGNER: Well, Peter, that's a wonderful lead-in to a very important aspect of who you are in every sense of the word, and that is your just intuitive and innate artistic sense in terms of particularly color and space and how things should be arranged, so to speak, and certainly during the years that I was with you at the Mexican Museum, all the exhibitions that you had there were just a marvel in how they were – in the exhibition design and in your sense of color. Would you like to talk a little bit about that, please?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, it was easy for me. Being an artist I could relate to my artistic background and was able to do things that were really very easy for me to do. There was – let's see, there was –

[Audio break.]

MS. WAGNER: We left off on the last track speaking about the Haggin Museum in Stockton and the retrospective that you had there in 1992. There was an excellent catalogue of your work that was created for this exhibition as well as – it includes of course a wonderful chronology, a very detailed and accurate chronology of your life. So, let's see, Peter, at this point we'll stop with this topic. And then, we were speaking a little bit about the Mexican Museum and the opening of the museum, the fact that you were the founder of it and the reasons for it. Let's go back to the early years of the Mexican Museum and tell us a little bit about what that was like in terms of funding, and exhibition design. You know, these days when you go into many museums and galleries, the walls are all white. However, that was certainly not your signature. So would you like to give us a little bit of background on that?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I just thought that – being an artist I used my artistic ability to create the atmosphere that I wanted for the exhibitions, and I thought color was very important, and I used it in all the galleries that I created, because we had, you know, the colonial art, pre-Hispanic art, the –

MS. WAGNER: Folk art.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, the folk art. And so this gave me an insight on how to use color, being an artist, and I think this changed the way the Chicanos used color in their exhibitions. I noticed that the Galería de la Raza, where I was one of the founders, and I gave it its name, they began to use color, and they still do.

MS. WAGNER: And what are some of the wonderful colors, at least that I remember?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, in my home or – [laughter] –

MS. WAGNER: Everywhere – you were surrounded – at the museum.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I used sort of a beige brown to give the feeling of a desert color, and then I even planted some maguey plants at the entrance so that they'd get the feeling of the Mexican idea of using the plants and the colors in the museum as a focal point for the art that was being shown.

MS. WAGNER: All right, Peter, and then I also remember some of the other colors were – you know, you would have fuchsia and green and just – of course, it would depend on what was being exhibited.

During those years at the Mexican Museum, still at the Folsom Street, you had some very important appointments. Among them were in 1977 –

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, I was appointed an art commissioner for the city of San Francisco, and that was specifically in the art department. Dianne Feinstein appointed me. Unfortunately, Mayor [George] Moscone was assassinated. But it took her a while to realize that I was one of her commissioners, but Ray Tagliafero told her, you know, that she had been forgetting me, so then she recognized that and started acknowledging me.

Then I remember working with Luis Barragán, who was not too well at the time, and I did visit with him, and the National Endowment for the Arts had me go to Mexico so that I would be there and discuss these things with him, and then I also met Tamayo at that time, and like he was a genius that I respected but he didn't have the right attitude for Chicano art, and I was disappointed in that regard. But I'd respect him as an artist but it disappointed me that he didn't know about Chicano artwork.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, so you were art commissioner for the city of San Francisco for nine years, and during that time you secured many commissions for Chicano artists and Mexican artists, and among them one that every traveler was privy to enjoy, and that was the sculpture.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, there was a sculpture that I was able to get Rufino Tamayo to do for the airport, and I had to fight tooth and nail to get him accepted because there were other people that wanted to get this Jewish sculptor and I just insisted that this was an international airport and we needed a prominent artist so we finally got Rufino Tamayo to do the sculpture for the airport.

MS. WAGNER: Good. And then, when you spoke of Luis Barragán I know that you mentioned that Adriana Williams introduced you to him, and Adriana was very much a part of the museum from the very beginning.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, she wasn't really in the museum. She helped me but she never became a board member. She just - we were friends and she would give me some ideas and tell me about important persons to communicate with, and that helped a great deal, so she was very important in that manner. Her father was - her grandfather was Plutarco Calles, that was president around the 19 -

MS. WAGNER: Thirties.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: - 1930s, I think. So that was important.

MS. WAGNER: And she also donated quite a number of pieces to the collection, I believe.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, yes, through Rosa Covarrubias, who wanted to have her collection come to the United States because she felt that in Mexico they would steal it, and so Adriana was instrumental in getting Rosa Covarrubias's collection to the Mexican Museum.

MS. WAGNER: Peter, you had another important appointment, and that was in 1978 for two years, which was to the museum advisory panel for the National Endowment for the Arts, and you mentioned, you know, working with that a little bit. What was your - then you had to travel to Washington. What was your impression of some of the museums and institutions in Washington at that time?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think they were marvelous but they didn't show Hispanic artwork. They neglected it woefully. In fact, when I was at one of the museums I asked the woman who was sitting there, "Where are your Hispanic - where's your Hispanic collection?" "Oh," she says, "We don't show foreigners here." I said, "And I suppose Winston Churchill is an American." And she just turned red and advised me to go to the director. So I talked with him and he wasn't aware of any important Hispanic artists at that time, and he wanted me to send him a list. So I don't remember if I sent him a list or not. I did mention some names, and eventually these artists were recognized.

MS. WAGNER: That was an extremely important encounter and appointment. [Laughs.]

Let's see, Peter, then you also continued during all of this time with those two commissions. Then in 1981 there was a tremendous shift in the history of the museum, and that was the relocation of it to a different area. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, we had tried to get the location in the downtown area for the museum, and fortunately we didn't get it because it really would have been a tremendous burden. So we went to Fort Mason and started the museum there. And so I think it was important that I didn't ask other museum directors to help me, that I felt that we should do it for ourselves and by ourselves to make it more important, that here we as a people we are defending our cultural heritage and exhibiting it through our eyes and not through foreign eyes. So I think that was important.

MS. WAGNER: Extremely important. And who were some of the artists that were shown at that time?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: You mean at the Mexican Museum?

MS. WAGNER: Yes, just to give an example of some of the Mexican artists and some of the Chicano artists that were shown.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, there was – we showed Luis Barragán, we showed Chucho Reyes Ferreira, and José Luis Cuevas, and Lauro López, Rodolfo Morales, Julia López, Alejandro Colunga, Alfredo Cardona Chacón, Francisco Ochoa, Antonio López Sainz, Luis Jaso and Xavier Esqueda, and others. Also, again, it was Alfredo Arreguin and Carmen Lomas Garza, Amalia Mesa-Baines, Rupert Garcia, Gustavo Rivera and Ester Hernández.

MS. WAGNER: Yes, and the artists beginning with Alfredo Arreguin were the Chicano – some of the Chicano artists that were shown.

You also had a tremendous affinity and respect for folk artists, and I know that there were some very famous ones that were shown. Can you give us some examples?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, there was Candelario Medrano, whom I met, and he was quite a jokester, and I had taken down a newspaper article where they talk about him, and he said, “You lied to me.” I said, “What do you mean I lied to you?” He says – [laughs] – now I don’t remember. He said, “Your name was, I think Pedro Rodriguez and it says Peter.” So I think that was the gist of the joke, that he was a very wonderful man. And I had him come up to San Francisco and give a demonstration, and he was very happy to be in San Francisco.

MS. WAGNER: Yes, and then part of the joke was because his name was Pedro and yours is Peter. However, it’s Pedro to him. [Laughs.] And then you also had Pedro Linares, another Peter.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, he was a wonderful maker of skeletons and various things of that nature in papier mâché. And, again, we brought him to San Francisco to the Mexican Museum, and many people came out to see him and visit with him and were influenced by him.

MS. WAGNER: Yes, and in going back to Candelario Medrano, remember that the inaugural poster of the Mexican Museum had one of his roosters on it, and then he was known for his *naguales* [sorcerers], his sort of magical creatures, and Pedro Linares was known for his *alebrijes* [creatures] that are now – he influenced many, many artists. And I know that you had some wonderful pottery. You have a personal collection and also the museum has a wonderful collection of pottery.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, Doña Rosa, who I thought was very important, and Teodora Blanco was another. I still have some of her works. Unfortunately, after I left, some of those works that I had collected for the education department particularly were discarded, and I didn’t feel right about that but there was nothing I could do at that stage.

[Break.]

MS. WAGNER: Peter, we broke for a few minutes and actually had a wonderful, wonderful lunch, and so we’re fortified at this point, and so we’re going to continue with the early years of the Mexican Museum when it was still on Folsom Street, and you made a few comments about the fact that there was – the staff was always small, and would you like to tell us some of the names of the people who were working with you during those years?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, you know, some of them weren’t full-time, but there was [Yolanda Alcorta] Terry Dickey, Miriam de Uriarte, Roberta Fernández, Elisa Borrego, Bea Carrillo, of course you, Nora – Nora Wagner – and Gloria Jaramillo, and Margaret Clark and Alison Wilbur, and Cynthia [Pierce], whose last name I can’t remember.

MS. WAGNER: And we’ll pick that name up. And then some of the board members.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, there was Frank [Campos], who was the accountant and he was very helpful, and there was Gabriel Martín del Campo, who just used the name Martin del Campo, and María de Carli, and Jonathan Yorba – no –

MS. WAGNER: Tomás Ybarra.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: I mean it’s Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Baines.

MS. WAGNER: And of course there were many, many board members during those many, many years. My goodness, Peter, you were director of the museum for nine years and remained connected with the museum for many years thereafter.

Peter, now that we’ve talked a little bit about the early years, let’s go in a little bit more detail to 1981 when the museum moved to Fort Mason.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, that was quite a move. I don’t remember that much about it. [Laughs.] I guess I put it out



of my mind, but I remember getting to Fort Mason and having to fix the space for our galleries and our office space. So we finally got everything taped up and spackled and painted, and we started moving in some of the things that we wanted to exhibit on a more permanent basis, and one of the beautiful things was the *Tree of Life* [ceramic folk art piece].

MS. WAGNER: Oh, yes.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: That was about 12 feet high and we still have it. In fact, when it arrived we couldn't bring it into the building because it was too tall. And so we had the conservators from the Oakland Museum, unpack it for us, and they found that some of it had been broken and they decided to restore it as much as possible. And they didn't restore it completely because they felt it was important to leave it in the manner in which it came. Of course the piece is so wonderful you can't tell unless it is explained to you that this was done. But I have their names of who they were. I have it written down somewhere [John Burke and Michael Bell]. And they did a very nice job. Then we had, I think it was John Spencer from the National Endowment for the Arts who came to the museum, and from there he went to Duke University.

Another person that I liked very much that I met on the - when I served on the endowment was Anne d'Harnoncourt, the director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and daughter of René d'Harnoncourt, who ran the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her father was one of the people who trained people like Chato Castillo and other artisans that were working in Mexico at that time. And she, I think, is still at the Philadelphia Museum. Unfortunately I've lost contact with her.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, I know that there was also the Francisco Zúñiga sculpture that was in the front [*Maternidad*, 1972].

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, that was donated to us by this doctor and his wife [Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Horn], and I'll have to come up with that name also. It's kind of hard to remember all these names. And it was similar to the copy that's in Cuernavaca, Mexico. And I think ours was the second copy, so we were very fortunate to have that. I tried to talk to the artist but he was not interested in relating any more information to me, so we just went on with other matters.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, what about the funding in those years, not only at Folsom Street but then at Fort Mason?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, the San Francisco Foundation was a principle funder at that time and later on we got a grant from the city for a museum that was to help us move to the new museum, which is being constructed now there at garage level. And they hope to raise another \$8 million so that we can continue finishing the project. I'd like to see that we get \$12 million instead of 8 [million] so that we have a little bank to work with.

MS. WAGNER: Indeed, because the move to Fort Mason you always knew was an interim location. You had certainly grown out of the Folsom Street but ultimately your vision was for the Mexican Museum to be in a very, very different spot than it is even at Fort Mason. What was your vision about the museum as it moved from Fort Mason and then with the idea of moving it now to Mission Street?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, it was - I knew that if we were on Mission Street that we could get more funding and that BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] went there, and that children from the Central Valley could come to the museum on BART and from Sacramento and other places. So I thought it would be very beneficial to have it there. And I think then also the critics liked the idea because they were finally recognizing what we had done.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, we have often talked about the educational importance of a museum. We've talked a good bit about the collection and about some of the artists that were shown there. What about the educational aspect?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, we had a brilliant educational department, and you were the head of it, Nora. You brought a lot of interest to the museum, and it was the first time that Mexican Americans could come to a museum and see the culture of their own people and it made them feel very proud. I think that was very important, the way that you, Nora, and Bea Carrillo and Miriam de Uriarte helped - and Terry Dickey helped bring this about. It was something I had dreamed about, the superb educational programs that you and Bea developed - and primarily you. It was a great situation for all people, not just the children.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, the other aspect that I'd like to make some reference to is that it is one thing to have the collection and to have the artists showing and an educational department, but how the work is exhibited makes such a difference. We talked a little bit about your use of color, but I remember at Fort Mason some of the wonderful installations for some of the exhibitions that we had that were designed by you. Can we talk about those a little bit? I think of, for example, the Covarrubias - remember the kitchen?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: The kitchen?

MS. WAGNER: Where you recreated – you actually recreated a traditional Mexican kitchen and then exhibited the Rosa Covarrubias pottery collection on it.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, yes. Well, we were lucky to get that collection and that was through Luis Barragán and Adriana Williams that helped me get it because Rosa wanted to get it out of Mexico. She felt that if it stayed in Mexico some important first lady would steal it. So we were lucky to have it and be able to save it. And there was a little controversy at the beginning but we overcame that and were very happy with the way it turned out.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, there was another exhibition that we were all very, very proud of. It was called “Lo del Corazón.” I guess translated that would be “Of the Heart.” Let’s talk about that a little bit.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I felt that that was an important aspect of our culture, the heart. And I felt that we should have an exhibit expressing that part of our culture, and I remember I went to one of the lectures that Tomás [Ybarra-Frausto] and Amalia [Mesa-Baines] were giving and they seemed to have taken it over without recognizing that I had suggested it and had worked on it. So I called them on it and they really didn’t answer me, but I was really upset about that so I sent them a *nota* [note] that – in fact, I did a drawing of two *cerotes* [zeros]. [Laughs.] I sent one to each one and telling them that I was upset that they didn’t recognize the source of the “Lo del Corazón.”

MS. WAGNER: And the exhibition itself, which was in 1983, was an invitational for Mexican American, Chicano, Latino artists using the theme “of the heart,” but besides the contemporary work you also had colonial work and actually even pre-Hispanic work that made reference to the heart, and of course wonderful folk art. And I remember the colors – you remember the colors of the galleries for that one, all the pinks and reds and –

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I guess this was a time that I could use a lot of color so I took advantage of that and used the bright colors, because the other museums were not using these colors. And it was received favorably.

MS. WAGNER: Oh, yes, and there were various shades of very strong pinks and reds and maroons, and it was quite spectacular. And for that exhibition also we were able to obtain funding for a catalogue, which is a very important catalogue for the record of the Mexican Museum.

Now that we are speaking a little bit about exhibitions and the gift of the Covarrubias, you were extremely instrumental in another very important collection that was donated to the museum, and that is in 1984 you negotiated the gift with the Nelson Rockefeller collection. Should we talk about that a little bit?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: All right. I remember Ann Rockefeller Roberts came to the museum and I think she liked what she saw. And since the collection had duplicates, she decided to give the duplications to the Mexican Museum, and with that we were able to use her name, discreetly I might add, and it brought us funding. So that was very important. Ann was really very nice. In fact, just recently, about two weeks ago, she was in San Francisco again and she came for a fundraiser for the museum, and I think \$15,000 was collected at that time. But I think that she was very aware of our needs and I think she’ll be contributing more to the museum, and her cousin, I think, will also contribute to the museum.

MS. WAGNER: Peter, the first time that she was out to see the museum, I remember that you told us that you invited her to your home and that you cooked for her, because you were a phenomenal cook, and so I remember – [laughs] – it was such fun to listen to you talking about it that we’d love to have it taped.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, she invited me to have breakfast at her hotel, and I said, “Oh, and why don’t you come to my house and we’ll have a Mexican breakfast?” And she said, “Oh, it would be so much trouble.” I said, “No it won’t; I’ll cook one of my mother’s favorite breakfasts with huevos rancheros and black beans with *ypazote* [an herb].” And she said, “What time do you want me there?” [Laughter.] So we had a very enjoyable time. And I sent her a copy of the recipe to her, which she still has, and just recently we talked about it again and she said, “I’ve never had a more wonderful Mexican breakfast than the one I had at your home, and I hope we can repeat it.” I said, “I can’t even use a *molcajete* [mortar and pestle made out of lava rock] anymore; I don’t have the strength.” She said, “Well, I’ll do that.” [Laughter.]

So I think she’ll come back and I will have her over for breakfast, and maybe my sister, Stella, who cooks very much like my mother, would come and help me do a nice breakfast for her.

MS. WAGNER: Well, Peter, it’s just an example of the wonderful host that you are. I mean, I’ve been at several events at your home and it’s always such a pleasure, and your cooking is phenomenal, as I mentioned. [Laughs.] And so, while we were having lunch just a while ago with Jonathan, we were also talking about the fact that it’s over food, in many cases, where some of the most juicy and anecdotal and fun parts of oral history can be conducted, and I think that the *desayuno*, the breakfast that you had with Ann Rockefeller Roberts – I mean,

because she talked to me about it two weeks ago at the fundraiser. She still remembers that.

Peter, what do you see, then, as the next step for the Mexican Museum? Of course it's in the process of raising the money, as you say, the \$8 million, hopefully 12 [million] and the new Mexican Museum, its permanent home. Where will that be located and who is the architect? Can you give us a little bit of detail about that?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, that will be at 3rd and Mission, across from the Moscone Center and next to the Catholic church. And there's a square there and we'll be on the opposite side of the square, and in fact, they're building at the garage level now and soon will start erecting the walls for the museum. The person I wanted to do the museum was Luis Barragán, but unfortunately it came too late for him to do it and his – the person that he had helping him was really not a very good architect. And so, he was hanging onto everything he could and it was hard to do anything with him objecting, so we waited our time and eventually he committed suicide and then we were able to get more information and be able to go on with the construction of the museum. And [Ricardo] Legoretta was one of Luis Barragán's disciples and he even knew Chucho Reyes, and Chucho was very important in giving ideas to both Barragán and Legoretta and I think that was an important part of it.

Ann I think was also very important because she – the daughter of Nelson Rockefeller, the vice president, was very interested in Mexican folk art, and Henry Wangeman, who used to bring folk art to the Mexican Museum was married to Rosa Blum, who was a Mexican lady who – I think her father was English [German] but I'm not sure – and they would select the works of folk art and bring them to San Francisco and then we would make our selections then.

MS. WAGNER: And, Peter, yes, I remember Henry and –

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Rosa.

MS. WAGNER: – and Rosa, and we had a wonderful – the Mexican Museum had a wonderful store called La Tienda, and –

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Which still exists. [Laughs.] And unfortunately the board hasn't seen the – important enough to give them enough funding to expand, so it's like waiting for the day that that can be done.

MS. WAGNER: Exactly, and many years – in the early years of the museum there was a very small *tienda* in the museum. I think it was just one little desk with just a few objects there that Ann Barrios and other volunteers ran, and then at that time there was also the friends of the – Los Amigos – of the Mexican Museum, and I know that in more recent times, and certainly at this time in the history of the museum, the board and staff are trying to galvanize a group of volunteers to assist with the workings of the museum until it moves.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Yes, and I just wish them well. I think they'll do it. They're all very excited that we're going to get our new space and have no doubts about it. I think the Mexican museum will live forever.

MS. WAGNER: Well, I think that's a wonderful thing to say and a wonderful note to end this particular portion of the taping. I did want to mention that another staff person is Theo Dane, who is also – my goodness, she's still there and helps out in the store.

Peter, we've talked about your family, we've talked about you as a child, we've talked about your education and your career in the arts in terms of your art production and exhibitions and collections, and about the Mexican Museum. It's an incredibly rich history that you have. Let me ask you this question to end this portion – and I know it's a very broad question and we may have to revisit this, but what would you consider your legacy to the museum profession and to the Mexican-Chicano-Latino world?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think I opened the eyes to many people about the richness of this culture, especially the Mexican culture. Later on they added the Latino culture, which I thought they should have a separate entity but it hasn't worked that way. But fortunately the Mexican culture is the predominant factor, and that's the way it should be. This was Mexico at one time; it wasn't Chile, it wasn't Argentina, it wasn't Brazil, and it wasn't Ecuador. So we – I think the Mexican culture was important to get people to understand our culture and not discriminate against it. So I hope that's the legacy I'm leaving the museum.

MS. WAGNER: Oh, I think there's no doubt about it.

Peter, who do you see today that is carrying on – when you say opening up the eyes of people to the richness of the Mexican and Mexican American and Chicano culture, who do you see carrying that legacy forward?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think you do it in some cases, and Jonathan Yorba I think is doing an excellent job. He's starting a large complex in Los Angeles that's going to have several acres and over 15 buildings where he'll be able to present all the aspects of the Mexican and Latino cultures for all people to enjoy.

MS. WAGNER: Is there anything else that you would like to add to our taping of today, Peter?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think Ann Rockefeller Roberts was very vital. I think she's on our honorary board of directors. Is that -

MS. WAGNER: She's a member of the advisory -

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Oh, she's on the advisory board.

MS. WAGNER: - as advisory.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: And so is my sister, Lupe Kindel. So I think they will be very helpful. In fact, Lupe brought up some people to do an interview and taping, first at the museum and with some people that were visiting the museum, and they asked them all sorts of questions of the importance of the museum, and then they came to my home and did about a four-hour interview for a promotional video that I think will give the museum a greater impact. And it's going to be here soon within - I hope within the next month. And there will be a lot of - some of my thoughts expressed in it.

MS. WAGNER: Wonderful. And, Peter, when do you think - or what is the date that is being set forth for the opening of the new museum?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Well, I think they said 2007 but I hope it's 2006, or earlier if possible. I hope it's before 2006, even halfway there.

MS. WAGNER: Well, I know that certainly people associated with the museum are very anxious for this to take place but I also know that the greater public and the redevelopment agency that has been a partner all along with the building of the new Mexican Museum, is very anxious for this museum to find its place and to be built and be part of the cultural life of San Francisco.

Well, thank you very much, Peter, and -

MR. RODRIGUEZ: You're welcome, Nora, and I hope those people come through so that we can go ahead.

MS. WAGNER: All right.

[END]

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