

RAMON CONTRERAS

SAN BERNARDINO HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF 1935



"Untitled" (circa 1930)

Ramon Contreras was born in Zacapp, Mexico on January 21, 1917, to Antonio and Senida Contreras. His father, Antonio Contreras, was a blacksmith during the Mexican Revolution and made horseshoes for the soldiers' horses in Pancho Villa's army. The family fled to America after a soldier had told Antonio to take his family and leave, as he would not be paid for his work. Antonio, with his pregnant wife Senida, and Ramon traveled to America and finally settled in San Bernardino, California. Ramon did not return to Mexico until 1937.

Ramon, the oldest of 13, had a passion for drawing. At the age of 10 he set his heart on being a mural artist. In his junior year at San Bernardino High, he took a commercial art class. One of his assignments was to visualize a travel project using colored inks. He produced a picture of Mexican life. His art teacher, Miss. Hester Leaverton, immediately acknowledged Ramon's talent. He had a gift for creative expression that amazed her. Miss. Leaverton mentored Ramon during his remaining school years. He graduated in the winter of 1937 and began his studies at Chouinard Art School in Los Angeles, on a two-year scholarship.

Ramon's art style consisted of the gray and colorful life of Mexico. Ramon had stated, "You know I had never seen Mexico, but I have always painted Mexico, as my people (parents) made me see it in the stories they told me." Titles to such paintings include, "The Country Life in Mexico", "Street Scene in Mexico", "The Poor House", "The Musician",



Photo and details of the mural located inside the San Bernardino High School Performing Arts Center (1936).

"Sunday in Mexico" and "Going to Church", just to name a few. Ramon also worked to help the family income by making window posters for a San Bernardino department store.

In 1935, Ramon entered the National Higgins Ink Drawing Contest with the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There were over 3,000 entries and he took fourth place. The following year on a recent chance visit to San Francisco he heard of a sketch contest being given by business men. He made a five minute sketch on the spot and won first prize. For two years he has represented his school as a one-man exhibit at the annual exhibit of the Pacific Arts Association, the great show of Pacific Coast public school and college art.

In 1936, Ramon painted a mural for San Bernardino High School Library. It measured 70 feet x 4 feet depicting the every day life one would see while traveling through old Mexico. This mural was removed from the library and put into the school's auditorium where it still hangs. During this year, Ramon painted various murals; one at Glenn Ranch, California; the Desert Inn in Palm Springs and the Los Angeles Public Library.

His art continued to be shown in major cities such as San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento, Los Angeles, Laguna Beach and Hollywood. He was the only student ever accepted in major galleries such as Stendahl Galleries of Los Angeles, Laguna Beach Art Gallery, Barker Bros. of Los Angeles and the Desert Inn Gallery.

In 1937, Ramon returned to visit his birth country of Mexico. Alfredo Ramon Martinez, a Hollywood artist and



friend of Ramon's gave him a letter of introduction to Diego Rivera. Upon meeting, Diego Rivera gave Ramon advice on his art. He said "Ramon you must go on as you began, study by yourself, observing and listening to your own." Ramon was very motivated after his visit to Mexico. He had many ideas and work to do.

Ramon was the youngest artist ever invited to attend The San Francisco International Exposition held in 1939 and 1940. He showed his "Going to Church" painting at both Expositions. It took Ramon 9 months to paint "Going to Church" and was the last painting that he did. This painting is of two devoted Mexican worshippers walking reverently with bowed heads. The towers of a large church loom in the background. From the neck of the Mexican woman hangs a black cross. The two are clad in native dress. This painting was nearly destroyed in the fire, which burned the art building at the 1939 Exposition. "Going to Church" received several awards and still remains in the Contreras Family.

In 1939, Ramon was diagnosed with cancer. In June of 1940, Ramon had received the maximum benefit from his x-ray treatment according to Dr. John C. Wilson. A surgical removal of the tumor was now warranted. It was useless to attempt it without sacrificing the entire upper extremity including the shoulder blade and the collarbone. Dr. Wilson stated he would make arrangement for Ramon in Los Angeles, without expense, and he himself would be glad to do the surgery without a fee. Ramon made his choice; if he could not paint he had no life. He passed away at the family home on July 31, 1940. He was 23 years old.