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Bold Caballeros y Noble Bandidas take on the dead

4:34 PM, November 28, 2008



Día de Los Muertos may have come and gone this year, but the spirit of the holiday lives on at the Autry National Center of the American West as part of the "Bold Caballeros y Noble Bandidas" exhibition -- [which I take a look at in today's Arts & Books section](#).

The exhibit, on display through May 10 and co-presented by the Arizona State University Hispanic Research Center, looks at the effect the Mexican Revolution of 1910 had on relations between the U.S. and Mexico and its role in the evolution of Mexican pop culture that centered on a cast of bandit heroes.

With the revolution's sustained influence on contemporary art and Mexican identity, blending the theme of revolutionary heroes and other outlaws with the Day of the Dead seemed only logical, said chief museum curator Jonathan Spaulding, since the larger-than-life legends surrounding figures such as Emiliano Zapata, Joaquin Murrieta and Francisco "Pancho" Villa continue to commingle with the living, even to this day.

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At the closing stages of the exhibit -- which features film posters, costumes, comic books and children's toys inspired by the era -- the holiday's presence is evident in an altar in a grand arch standing against a cobalt wall. A vine of fake leaves, twinkling lights and orange and yellow paper marigolds swirls around the arch's exterior. The altar features sugar skulls, candles, framed images and liquor; visitors can leave written dedications in the basket resting at the base. And surrounding the arch is group of artworks in which caballeros are substituted with lifelike skeletons.

In "La Pistola y el Corazon (The Pistol and the Heart)," East L.A. native George Yepes illustrates a skeleton bride clutching a pistol, hands crossed, as she stands beside her suitor. (Fun note: Sean Penn and Madonna bought the original painting, which didn't feature a pistol, for a record-breaking sum in 1989 ... only to have it reduced to ashes when their home was engulfed during the Malibu fire of 1993. The painting [pistol added] served as cover art for a 1998 album by Los Lobos, the Grammy Award-winning music group from East Los Angeles.) Yepes has two other artworks in the exhibition, including a skeleton strumming a guitar, inspired by a Woodie Guthrie photo.



Nearby is "Héchale," a silk-screen print by Eduardo Oropeza, depicting mustachioed skeletons in a mariachi band playing guitar-like instruments. Each is wearing a stylized, colorful sombrero.

And if guitar-playing skeletons aren't enough, "Szansa na Sukces (Chance for Success)" shows a sombrero-wearing skeleton with a lit cigarette in hand. The figure is draped in red flames, with an image of a pistol in the foreground.

--Yvonne Villarreal

Photos: George Yepes' "La Pistola y el Corazon" (1991), top; Eduardo Oropeza's "Héchale" (1984), middle; Tomasz Sarnecki and Wayne Healy's "Szansa na Sukces (Chance for Success)" (1999).

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