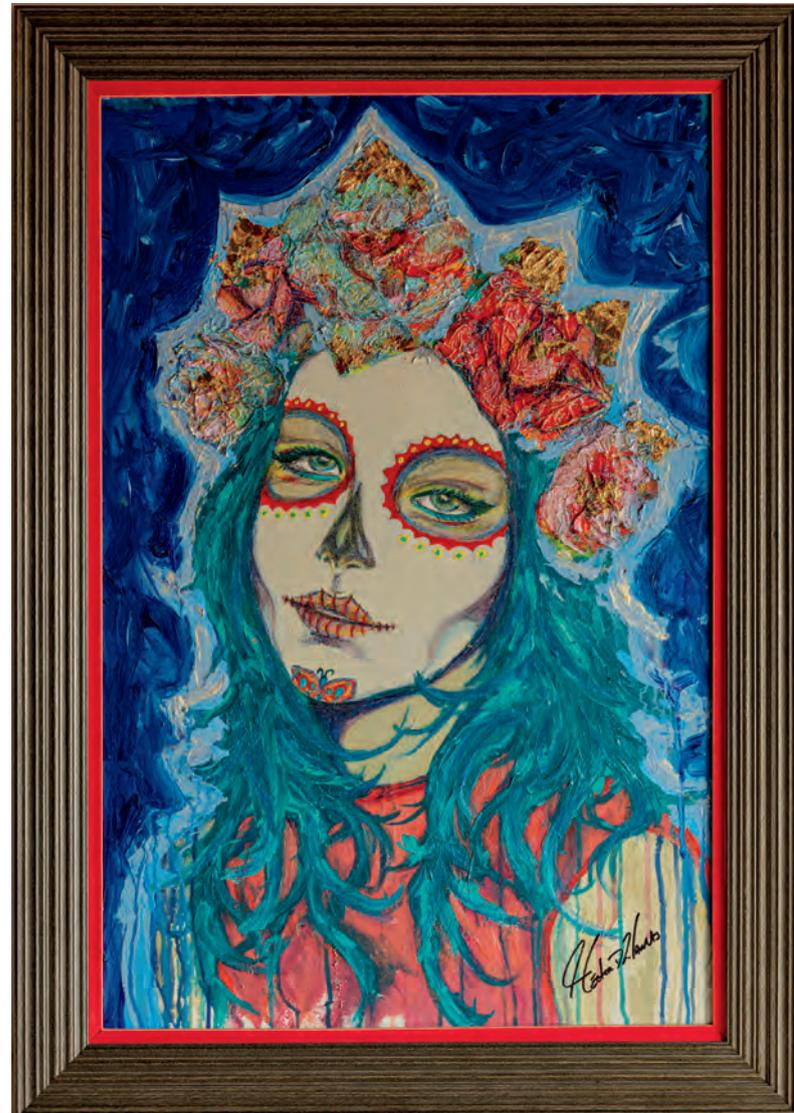


# Ladies' MAN



PAINTER HECTOR D. LLAMAS FINDS BEAUTY AND INSPIRATION IN THE FEMALE FACE.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES PHOTOGRAPHY BY ART HOLEMAN



**AS A CHILD,** Hector D. Llamas never dreamed of becoming an artist. Growing up in San Luis Río Colorado, Mexico, just across the border from Yuma, he was expected to follow in his father's career footsteps. "My dad was a cop," he says. "At that time, farmers had farmer sons, lawyers had lawyer sons, and cops had cop sons. I never heard 'you can be whatever you want to be' until I was in the U.S.—probably when I was in college."

While studying criminal justice and psychology at Arizona Western College, an elective drawing class put a stop to a future in law enforcement. "The professor asked me what I wanted to learn, and I told him that I wanted to draw beautiful women," the artist recalls with a laugh. Working mainly in pencil and charcoal, he began sketching faces, depicting in perfect detail

a curly tendril of hair and the intensity of emotions found in the eyes. "I sought to capture them looking back, to see the wind blowing in their hair, to catch an expression," says Llamas of his subjects. "I wanted them to make me feel something."

The teacher, realizing potential in the young talent, encouraged Llamas to seek an art education at Arizona State University. Soon he was expanding his work to include figures and experimenting with a variety of mediums, including charcoal, pastels, China markers, ink and paint.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, with an emphasis on drawing and print-making, Llamas, ever mindful of his parents' concerns for his financial stability, took a position at a North Scottsdale art and framing gallery, where he worked his way up to

**FROM LEFT TO RIGHT** Artist Hector D. Llamas finds inspiration in fashion and beauty as well as his Mexican heritage. ■ "Dulce Mele"; acrylic, charcoal papier-mâché, oil pastel, and gold and variegated leaf on canvas; 35.5"H by 23.5"W. ■ "Julieta"; acrylic, spray paint, wax pencil and graphite on canvas; 31.5"H by 12"W. ■ "La Joya de la Corona escuchando"; acrylic, charcoal, graphite, spray paint, wax pencil and three types of metal leaf on canvas; 30"H by 18"W.



his current position as store manager. “Every day, I’m influenced by living artists ranging from local to international,” he says. His paintings evolved into graphic abstracts; the colorful, textural works are sold at the gallery.

“I stayed away from faces for quite a while,” Llamas notes. Then, in the mid 2010s, the siren song of La Catrina, the iconic symbol of Mexico’s Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), beckoned. “The first full series of female figures that I completed was for an exhibition at the Museo Regional in my hometown in Mexico, just two blocks from my mother’s house,” he recalls. “Because the show was in October, the theme was going to be Catrinas. But instead of calling them by that title, I decided to make them my own.” With a last name that translates to “flames,” the artist

dubbed his collection “Las Damas de Llamas,” the dames of flames.

Piercing eyes gaze out from beneath colorful sugar skull makeup. Floral crowns decorate flowing locks. Intricately detailed jewelry and dresses rendered in a vivid palette of electric blue, ruby red and lime green reflect customs and beliefs handed down through generations. “They definitely show my roots,” Llamas explains. “My pieces look simple, but they embody the struggle, hard work and splendor that is my heritage. They have that passion in their eyes.”

Fellow artist and *Phoenix Home & Garden* Masters of the Southwest award winner Dyana Hesson met Llamas through his job at the framing gallery. “Hector’s art is a bold breath of fresh air in a gray world, particularly his figurative work,” she notes. “I find that I can’t look away. His paintings are engaging, colorful and a window into his unique cultural background.”

Today, the walls of Llamas’ Mesa home, where he lives with his wife, Claudia, and children, Gia, 8, and Hector III, 6, are filled with the artist’s portraits of exotic and sensual ladies. Some are executed in rich, glorious hues; others, simple pencil and charcoal sketches, display a softer, more subdued tone. “Black and white was one of my first loves. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do,” Llamas says. “Coloring the faces of ‘Las Damas de Llamas’ was fantastic because nobody asked who the women were supposed to be. Now I’m hoping that the work is strong enough that people won’t focus on a specific person but instead will gravitate toward the feeling within.

“It’s taken me a long time to get to where I am with my art, with producing it and letting it talk back to me,” he continues. “I respect it enough to know what risks I can take, and I realize that no matter what I throw at it, it responds well. It does good by me.”

**For more information, see Sources on Page 143.**



**ABOVE** Surrounded by his “damas,” Llamas relaxes in his home studio. “If I can get in a few paint strokes and a cup of coffee in the morning before I go to work, that’s a good day for me,” he says. **FAR RIGHT** “Corona y Zarape”; acrylic, charcoal, spray paint and three types of metal leaf on canvas; 40.5”H by 123.5”W. **RIGHT** “Home Grown”; acrylic, charcoal, graphite and wax pencil on canvas.

