

"Last Supper," 11"H by 12"W by 6"D and crafted of low-fired clay in the late 1970s-early '80s, is emblematic of the artwork from Ocumicho, Mexico. The style dates back to the 1950s, when Marcelino Vicente Mulato began making pieces featuring "diablos," or devils. Influenced by his style, local potters started creating outlandish variations on his themes. "This is one of the very first pieces I acquired," says collector Kathleen Vanesian.



Tradition & *Spirit*

A COLLECTION 40 YEARS IN THE MAKING CELEBRATES MEXICO'S CULTURE AND HERITAGE.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID B. MOORE

"EVERY PIECE HAS A STORY," says self-described inveterate collector Kathleen Vanesian.

Curled up on a sofa in her Phoenix home, she is surrounded by memories of 40 years spent traveling throughout Mexico collecting folk art. Her entire house is a shrine to the history, culture and talents found below our Southern border.

Vanesian tells of visiting rural villages and markets and filling baskets and suitcases with masks, tiles and figurines; of knocking on doors in search of elusive artists; of partaking in festivals and

celebrations in such far-flung towns as Janitzio, Tzintzuntán and Oaxaca; and of traversing the backroads of the Mexican countryside long before the region was overrun by cartels.

She laughs as she recalls a particularly hair-raising adventure with the late Bets Nenand, who was a renowned figure in the Valley's art scene. "Bets and I would often take the minivan and drive down past Mexico City. One time, we were about four hours outside of Tepic, in the Sinaloa highlands, and we were on this road that had been elevated about 15 feet," she recalls. "It was just one lane in each direction, and

suddenly I see this truck, trying to pass another truck, coming right at me. I cranked the wheel, and we went flying and landed in a small tree next to stream. I thought we were going to die.

“Apparently, an old man on a bicycle and a kid saw us go over. They went to the nearest town, and 10 minutes later, a group of people arrived to pull our car off the tree and get it across the water and back on the road,” she continues. “They just appeared like magic out of nowhere.”

Vanesian credits her and Nenand’s survival to some special objects stored in the back of the van: effigies of St. Francis and Jesús Malverde, the latter a folklore hero of “narco traficantes,” or drug traffickers. “We were totally convinced that those were the only things that saved us,” she comments.

A native of California, Vanesian has always felt a close affinity to Mexico and its culture. Born and raised in San Diego, she grew up spending time in Tijuana, and she began acquiring pottery, masks and Day of the Dead relics in the 1980s. After she and her husband, Richard, moved to Phoenix in 1992, she became friends with Nenand and joined Friends of Mexican Art, a nonprofit organization designed to encourage and

stimulate interests in Mexican art, culture and heritage. Each year, FOMA would mount a large “mercado,” or market, and Vanesian and Nenand oversaw procurement all of the items to sell, which required numerous buying trips. With each foray, her passion—and her collection—grew.

“When I first started collecting, people weren’t interested in Mexican art, so I was able to get things at very good prices,”

Vanesian remarks. “And Richard was very supportive of me going off on my own and traveling. I think I saw Mexico at its finest.”

Walking into her home is like entering a personal mercado. Every wall and shelf brims with colorful works ranging from rare pre-Columbian ceramics to small figurines hand-carved for the modern tourism industry. “I collect whatever catches my eye,” Vanesian says. Each piece is thoughtfully displayed to showcase its individual beauty or grouped to create vignettes of like or themed items. It’s a look Vanesian chalks up to her years spent owning an art gallery in her home state.

Hundreds of masks, ranging from colorful faces and animals to grotesque forms, line the terra-cotta hued walls. Many were used in dance ceremonies. They’re complemented by “ex-votos,” small offerings to saints painted on tin, and “retablos,” devotional paintings that feature traditional Catholic iconography. Intricate ceramic trees of life share shelf space with minuscule dioramas that depict political scenarios. A vitrine in the foyer is filled with small Day of the Dead offerings and sugar skulls.

One of Vanesian’s favorite pieces is a crudely crafted clay scene of a man, dressed in a suit and tie, floating in a flaming pool. Surrounding him are five devils who are poking at him with hooks and pitchforks. Like much of the country’s folk art, the primary-hued paint and cartoonish figures underscore a dark sense of humor that many Mexicans have toward serious subjects, such as religion. “You’ll always find something that makes you giggle,” Vanesian says.

The simple forms of mold-made “pulque” (a corn liquor) pitchers contrast with extravagantly decorated, green-glazed pineapple jars and figures from the villages of



RIGHT Guests to Vanesian’s Phoenix home are greeted by a vignette of wood saints, ex voto paintings and small milagros. The large Christ figure, which Vanesian purchased from a friend, bears whip markings on his back. In the right niche are works by contemporary artists as well as an 18th-century death portrait. **TOP** Vanesian credits this trio of effigies of St. Francis with helping save her life after driving off the road near Tepic.





LEFT Vanesian relaxes in her home's formal living room, which is filled with masks, figurines and other articles that she collected over a period of 40 years. She made the pillows out of embroideries from Tzintzuntán, Michoacán. The polka-dotted figures on the coffee table are a "cuadrilla," or curing set, from Metepec. **ABOVE** This Tastoanes mask from Tonola is made of hand-carved wood and horse hair. The grotesque figure is part of the "Dance of the Tastoanes," which observes the conquest of indigenous people by the Spaniards. During the festival, the characters dance wildly through the streets while being whipped with quince branches by St. James on horseback.

Patamban and San José de Gracia. There are works in wood, papier-mâché and even sequin appliques. Much of the pottery is crafted of low-fired polychrome terra cotta, which is highly breakable.

"Each state in Mexico has its own specialty," Vanesian explains. "Oaxaca is textiles and masks. There's a village called San Martín Tilcajete where they do wood carvings. Then you can go to Puebla or Guanajuato, where the focus is on ceramics. I pretty much know where every item I have comes from."

In late 2003, Arizona State University Art Museum presented an exhibition of 200 works from Vanesian's collection. It was here that Kevin Pawlak, co-owner of a Tucson-based Mexican art store and gallery, first experienced the breadth and quality of the country's creativity. "It was an unusual show for me, because I had never seen

a lot of that type of art before," he recalls. At the time, Pawlak had been collecting Day of the Dead items. "I remember seeing this monkey-shaped mescal bottle from the 1940s, and it really stuck out to me. I don't know why, but it made me want to get these exotic, unusual things that I don't see in shops nowadays."

Pawlak was also taken by a late 1990s "cuadrilla," or curing set, from Metepec. This grouping of 37 colorfully painted figures is used in healing ceremonies to treat ailments; the special clay from the area is purported to absorb illness or bad energy.

"Kathleen has some really great items," he adds. "The nice thing about her collection is that it includes lowbrow, nickel-and-dime stuff, as well as museum-quality vintage pieces. And she always has great stories about each one."